

## Strike, occupy, transform! Students, subjectivity and struggle

This article uses student activism to explore the way in which activists are challenging the student as consumer model through a series of experiments that blend pedagogy and protest. Specifically, I suggest that Higher Education is increasingly becoming an arena of the postpolitical, and I argue that one of the ways this student-consumer subjectivity is being (re)produced is through a series of ‘depoliticisation machines’ operating within the university. This article goes on to claim that in order to counter this, some of those resisting the neoliberalisation of higher education have been creating political-pedagogical experiments that act as ‘repoliticisation machines’, and that these experiments countered student-consumer subjectification through the creation of new radical forms of subjectivity. This paper provides an example of this activity through the work of a group called the Really Open University and its experiments at blending, protest, pedagogy and propaganda.

### Introduction

The iconic image of a hooded figure, in a kickboxing stance, putting a boot through the plate glass window of the Conservative Party headquarters during a student demonstration against increased tuition fees represents what John Holloway (2005) might term a ‘scream of refusal’: *ya basta!* – enough!<sup>1</sup> This defining moment of the UK student struggle of late 2010 represented a break from the everyday image of the student, who is often represented as merely apathetic and self-interested.

The more general image of the student as a drunken or thrill-seeking consumer has been, in part, a media construction. However, it can also be seen to be part of a project of social engineering which encourages the (re)production of students as ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1991). This has been carried out, in part, through what the Provisional University (2010) have termed ‘depoliticisation machines’ within the university. This has been in conjunction with a government policy approach which has been based on the model of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: [http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/01760/studentriots-1\\_1760833c.jpg](http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/01760/studentriots-1_1760833c.jpg)

‘student-consumer’: viewing students as largely cut off and disinterested in the ‘project’ of the university (Neary & Hagyard, 2010; Provisional University, 2010).

A little over six months before the invasion and occupation of Milbank Tower by student protestors, on the 10th March 2010, I had been sitting in a meeting room close to the University of Leeds campus, discussing student criticisms of the proposed increase in fees, corporatisation of higher education and issues effecting academia more broadly. I had co-organised the meeting, as part of a group called the Really Open University (ROU), in order to discuss: ‘what a really open university would look like’. This was part of a two stage ‘visioning’ process into establishing participants’ criticisms of the existing education system, and the multitude of positive changes they would make.

This event formed part of my PhD research which utilised a form of ‘militant ethnography’ (see Juris, 2008; Russell 2015 & Halvorsen 2015). I have critically reflected on my experiences attempting to utilise militant ethnography within an academic context extensively elsewhere (see Pusey, 2016a) but I will briefly explain what this meant in practice. I was a co-founder and co-producer of the ROU for the two years it existed (2010-2012) and I was engaged in a diverse range of activities, some more akin to activism than academia, and others more traditionally associated with academia than activism. These activities included everything from painting banners and taking part in demonstrations, through to organising discussion and reading groups, book launches and seminars. Meetings occurred on a regular weekly or twice weekly basis, and I was present at nearly all of them. I discussed proposals, strategies and ideas relating to the activities of the group. I facilitated meetings, or took minutes, and I was part of the collective production of the group’s activities and ideas.

This article argues that the event described above was one of several interventions organised by the ROU aimed at resisting the student-consumer through the creation of three

experiments. These experiments repoliticized students and recomposed the student-consumer subject through the creation of spaces that fostered the construction of new radical subjectivities.

### **Depoliticisation machines, neoliberal subjectivity and the student consumer**

It is increasingly common for critics and commentators to decry the extensive neoliberalisation, marketisation and privatisation of universities, from increasing tuition fees and student debt to metrics mechanisms and the precarity of workers (Caffentzis, 2010; De Angelis & Harvie, 2009; Krause *et al*; Molesworth *et al*, 2011). Some have labelled this situation ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009), while others have suggested for some time that the university is in ‘ruins’ (Readings, 2007) and others still have compared the university with a ‘factory’ (Aronowitz, 2001; Edu-Factory, 2009; Raunig, 2013).

The student as consumer has been discussed extensively as part of this project of restructuring Higher Education (Maringe, 2011; Molesworth *et al*. 2011). Williams (2011) suggests the groundwork for the solidification of students as consumers had been put into place long before the introduction of student fees in the UK in 2010, through a broader range of policies introduced as part of the broader context of marketization of higher education. Although cautious not to reduce the complex and multifaceted causes of the ‘diminishing subjectivity’ of students to the introduction of fees, Williams (2011) discusses the way in which the media (re)produces the student-consumer as an agent principally concerned with ‘value for money’ and their immediate individualistic concerns as they jostle for a future position within a precarious economic world. This, in partnership with an increasing focus on parents as ‘co-consumers’ of higher education infantilises students at the point Williams suggests they should be critically questioning their individual subjectivity (2011, p181). This

apparent reduction of agency is one of the factors the activism this article focuses on was aiming to counter.

Although Williams discusses the relative lack of collective action by students in comparison to high points of student struggle such as the 1960s, this has transformed since 2010. Increasingly, universities are not only productive of value, but they also produce struggle (Harvie, 2006). In response to the increased enclosure (Harvie, 2000) and commodification of education, and this apparent ‘assault on the universities’ (Bailey & Freedman, 2011), there has been widespread resistance. This struggle has taken the form of workplace organising, student protest and occupations, and extensive social unrest (Edufactory, 2009; Hancox, 2011; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Zibechi, 2012).

In Quebec during 2012 approximately 75% of students went on strike as part of a mass struggle over a 75% increase in student tuition fees. This movement was characterised by diverse array of ‘repertoires of contention’ (Tilly, 2008), perhaps most prominent was the utilisation of the red square as a symbol of being ‘squarely in the red’ or ‘squarely in debt’ (Spiegel, 2016). Spiegel (2015a) highlights the creative tactics of this movement and the way in which they transform social relations and contribute to what Routledge (2003) has labelled ‘convergence spaces’. According to Spiegel (2015b: 789) at the heart of the movement in Quebec, and I think we can extend this to the anti-tuition fee protests in the UK during 2010, lay the question not only of what sort of education and for whom, but to who would these students’ and other indebted subjects future be beholden to? Thus the struggle against tuition fees is encapsulated within a pedagogy and disciplinary subjectivity of debt (Lazzarato, 2012; Williams, 2006) and its relationship to what Deleuze (1992) termed the societies of control.

Concurrent with this activity *within* and *against* (Holloway, 2002) academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999) there have also been attempts to go *beyond* it and we have witnessed the emergence of a plethora of radical informal learning spaces, from the

*Ecole de la Montagne rouge* in Quebec (Spiegel, 2015c) to the Occupy movement (Neary & Amsler, 2012). Some of these have been operating within what Moten and Harney (2013) term the ‘undercommons’ of the university, and others have operated outside institutional space altogether, creating a ‘critical pedagogy in, against and beyond the university’ (Cowden & Singh, 2013) or on the ‘edge’ (Noterman & Pusey, 2012). We can locate these initiatives within a longer history and broader cartography of free schools/universities, radical reading groups (Mason *et al.* 2015) and pedagogical elements of social movements and loosely label them ‘autonomous education’ (Kanngieser, 2008). This article suggests these autonomous education projects challenge the student-consumer subject and the depoliticisation machines that, in part (re)produce it.

Varman *et al.* (2011) discuss the emergence of neoliberal governmentality as a means of creating market subjectivity in the form of the student as consumer. Foucault (1977) emphasised the importance of discourses as forms of power in society and the role institutions, such as the university, have for channelling these discourses. The university has historically (re)produced certain forms of knowledge, modes of thinking, methodologies for understanding the world, which have in turn fostered certain logics by which society is governed. Today the university is being restructured around neoliberal practices, as it moves from formal to real subsumption (Hall, 2015; Marx, 1990; Slade, 2011). This real subsumption entails a transformation of the organisation of academic labour and the university to capital’s logic, rather than merely the appropriation of academic labour and the university for capital as under formal subsumption (Marx, 1990). However, it is also possible to talk of a ‘real subsumption of subjectivity’ (Read, 2003), as social relations are reorganised to further the valorisation of capital. It is beneficial to investigate the mechanisms that facilitate this within the university and the lifeworlds of students (Habermas, 1985).

Neoliberalisation of higher education can be linked to the broader emergence of what has been termed the ‘post-political’, or ‘depoliticised’, condition of contemporary social life (Swyngedouw 2010; Žižek 2008). The fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Eastern Bloc and the resulting collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’, ushered in a *de-facto* consensus that celebrates liberal democracy as the sole legitimate form of social and political organisation, the so-called ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1993). This erasure of antagonistic social relations and different political interests, results in a censure of dissensus, which Rancière (2010) suggests ushers in the ‘end of politics’. Decisions are thus made on the claimed universal basis of efficiency and necessity, taking the market and liberal state for granted. Relating this back to the HE crisis in the UK, Sealey-Huggins & Pusey (2013, p83) suggest:

Evidence of the post-political or depoliticised condition is apparent in the claims made by all the major UK electoral parties that the budget deficit *must* be reduced, for instance, with the only disagreement centring on the technicalities of how and where the cuts fall. This then filters through to the HE sector where cuts play out in the culling of unprofitable, and often critical, subjects, a process presented as being driven by economic and administrative necessity rather than politics.

Drawing on Foucault and Deleuze, the Provisional University (2010) conceptualise the university as an apparatus made up of various machines (instruction machines, knowledge machines and so forth). Each machine has a specific function and is loosely coordinated by the apparatus. For example, the classroom machine is linked to the examinations machine which forms part of a broader instructional machine. However, this process is never total, there is always the possibility for disruption to the everyday rituals, practice and discourse of the machine. One of the important machines within the university apparatus discussed by the Provisional University is the ‘depoliticisation machine’. They use the image of student life,

depicted at the beginning of this article, to illustrate the ways in which the University and the Student Union promote an image of the student as an ‘alcohol loving, sex-seeking, free-wheeler’. This student is seen to be largely disinterested in learning and this, along with a plethora of other practises, aids the (re)production of students as consumers and depoliticised subjects. These depoliticisation machines are therefore an important mechanism within the (re)production of the student-consumer subject, and are one part of a broader process in which the neoliberal university creates techniques and machines of subjectification, ultimately leading to depoliticisation of university space (Sealey Huggins & Pusey, 2013). Thus, furthering Williams’ (2011) deliberations on the diminished subjectivity of students associated with the rise of the student-consumer we can identify a broader assemblage of phenomena that contributes to this reduced subjectivity.

As Varman *et al.* discuss in a paper investigating market subjectivity in higher education, Deleuze (1988) suggests the subject is always an unfolding and incomplete process:

Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, a subject and subjectivity should be understood not as a stable constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, or experiences residing within an individual, but as a totality of subject positions that a person enacts in a given time and space (Varman *et al.*, 2011, p1166).

The university is an increasingly important site for the (re)production of neoliberal forms of subjectivity – the student-consumer and ultimately homo-economicus, the ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Foucault, 2010; Lazzarato, 2012; Read, 2009a), or ‘the entrepreneuriat’ (Pusey & Russell, 2012). However, this process of subjectification is always emerging, incomplete and contested, and the university is also an increasingly important site of struggle over the formation and disciplining of the neoliberal subject.

Strategies with which to challenge market subjectivity, however, have been less discussed. For Hall, the emergence of free educational aspects of social movements carry the ‘pedagogic practices of the University into other social forms’ (2015, p12). These pedagogical struggles open up spaces for the collective questioning of the existent and a reimagining about the possible (Hall, 2015). This can be linked to Neary & Hagyard’s (2011) conceptualisation of a ‘pedagogy of excess’, through which to transcend the limits of what it is to be a student within the marketised university. That is, against the generalised subordination of life to work and capital and for a radical subjectivity yet to emerge. These projects therefore carry some potential for the challenging of the neoliberal subject through the creation of new forms of radical subjectivity.

The activity this paper focusses on is the creation of three experiments that I suggest counter the depoliticisation machines of the neoliberal university through acting as *re-politicisation machines*, facilitating the creation of new forms of radical subjectivity and the return of dissensus and the political. They exist within a broader struggle around the neoliberalisation of HE that enable new spaces for collective questioning, reimagining and subjectivity to emerge: lines of flight from the university in order to create new forms of education, and the university as a form of social knowing (Neary, 2012).

The first of these experiments this article discusses is the meeting described briefly above, which asked participants to firstly imagine ‘what a really open university would look like’ and then engage in active planning of how one might be constructed. The second experiment was a three day conference of varied talks, workshops and other activities, around the theme of ‘reimagining the university’, which was timed to coincide with a large demonstration against the Browne Review, which saw the occupation of a lecture theatre on the University of Leeds campus. And finally, the third experiment was the establishment of an autonomous education project in the centre of Leeds, called the Space Project which



operated for six months. Before moving on to a discussion of these three experiments in the next section of this paper I briefly contextualise them within the emergence and activity of the Really Open University group.

### **Strike, occupy, transform: experimenting with the Really Open University**

The ROU had been formed by a small group of students and non-student activists concerned with Higher Education reforms in January 2010 as a means to both protest against budget cuts and the increase in tuition fees, but also against the further instrumentalisation and neoliberalisation of Higher Education more generally (Pusey & Sealey-Huggins, 2013; Sealey-Huggins & Pusey, 2013). The ROU's byline 'strike, occupy, transform!' embodied the group's desire to merge a praxis based on political antagonism and resistance with a transformative and affirmative politics of desire. The ROU was a forerunner to the UK student protests that erupted in the autumn/winter of 2010 and the group participated in this emergent movement (See: Aitchison, 2011; Amsler, 2010; Brown, 2013; Burton, 2013; Hancox *et al*, 2011; Hopkins *et al*, 2012; Ibrahim, 2011; Rheingans & Holland, 2013; Robinson, 2013; Salter & Kay, 2011; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011). But in addition to turning up to local and national protests about issues facing Higher Education, many of the activities organised by the ROU attempted to blur the lines between events-as-protests, and protests-as-events (Lamond & Spracken, 2014). An incomplete list of the group's activities range from constructing a *papier maché* costume depicting the 'general intellect' and storming a live television debate about the tripling of student fees to the production of an irregular free newsletter called the *Sausage Factory*, taking its name from Marx's *Capital*. The ROU disbanded at the end of the Space Project in the new year of 2012.

Numbers involved in the group fluctuated over time, with around ten participants involved for the whole two years, around 20 involved regularly but whom were engaged for the first or second year of the project, and a larger group that became active in the group for specific projects, such as the Space Project. There was consistently a combination of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and PhD students involved in the group, as well as a smaller number of activists not directly engaged in academia.

It is within this creative-resistive environment, and within the broader context of increased struggles around higher education that the three experiments this paper focussed on were conceived. This article will now move on to discuss the three experiments I suggest acted as ‘repoliticisation machines’ and challenged the student-consumer subject.

### ***Experiment 1 - What would a really open university look like?***

During March 2010, the ROU organized two meetings that asked participants to reflect on what a ‘really open university’ would look like and ‘how we might create one’. These meetings demonstrate the ways in which the group provided space for the production of new subjectivities through a process of collective ‘reimagining’ of the university. These meetings not only allowed participants to express their anger at existing university systems and its restructuring, but also to explore their desires for an alternative.

The first of these meetings was called, ‘What is a Really Open University?’ It was aimed at engaging people in reflecting on the existing institution and envisioning potential alternatives. Two weeks later there was a second meeting organised, which was called, ‘How do we make a Really Open University?’ The aim of this second meeting was to implement some of the ideas from the first meeting. Both were key ways in which the group engaged a wider student demographic in the production of new radical imaginaries of the university as a social project.

The first meeting was attended by upwards of fifty people and involved them in a number of activities that aimed to engage them in a critical and reflective process. The first activity of the evening involved asking everyone to write down ideas for what a 'really open university' would entail. Participants were given sticky notes and told to write one idea per note and stick them around the room. After this, people were given time to circulate and look at all the different ideas the group had come up with.

A number of recurrent themes arose from this first exercise which it is important to reflect on. These included: free access to education; a rejection of corporate involvement in education, a desire to reduce the focus on 'employability', and a strong favouring of open access to knowledge, whether virtually through the internet or more concretely through university libraries. Additional themes included: a desire to 'break down barriers', both between lecturer/student and to create meaningful interdisciplinarity, and an emphasis on extending student participation in construction of courses and teaching methodologies.

The first theme, free access to education, later became a battleground for large scale student protests only a few months after this meeting was held. The tripling of university fees and removal of Education Maintenance Allowance arguably increased the perception of education being a commodity that can be bought and sold and increased disparity between those who can afford a formal education and those who cannot. It seems clear that from the recurrence of this theme within this meeting, as well as the large scale student protests that followed several months later, that there is a widespread perception of education as being fundamentally based on values other than market values.

The second theme brought up through this meeting, the rejection of corporate involvement in education, can be linked to long-running contestation around increased corporatisation of education. The rejection of this would seem to indicate a rejection of

market values within the academy. Related to this is the third theme, a desire to reduce the increasing focus on ‘employability’.

For the second activity, participants were divided into six smaller groups and asked to come up with ideas for what they considered to be essential aspects or characteristics of a really open university. As one would expect, many of these were similar to those discussed above, and this exercise was attempting to reduce the initial collections of everyone’s thoughts into something representing the key themes most important to the group. The theme of the university being ‘free and open to all’ was present in all the groups. An emphasis on ‘participation’ was also ranked highly, as was a desire to break with traditional hierarchical university structures and opening up the university for broader participation.

The third and final exercise involved creating eight new small groups and devising a ‘vision statement’ within each group. I include the eight vision statements produced by the groups in full:

1. The Really Open University is a process of challenging education and society as we know it. We imagine a world in which there are no students and teachers, but instead everyone shares knowledge and skills equally. We aim for it to be accessible to all by making it free socially, financially and personally.
2. We envision an open university to be aimed at unlearning our preconceptions surrounding education, promoting a continuous and organic form of learning that engages with communities and their knowledge. That is multi-layered and non-hierarchical in terms of skills, organization and participation. We believe in a collaborative knowledge production that is not subordinated to the false logic of competition. We want to be a network that confirms an egalitarian status for everyone in order to avoid elites forming due to prior conditioning and experience. We will constantly look to open more and more doors, where before we had not even begun to see the existence of a doorway.
3. We believe that it should be free and open. As such, it should be without borders between us and the wider world. Not fixed to a particular location (geographical or ideological), but

committed to allow critical thought for the purposes of transforming ourselves and society. Most of all, this will be fun. So don't worry about it!

4. Freedom of knowledge is both a principle and a mechanism. Knowledge wants to be free and by freeing knowledge, we want to free people. Rather than closed journals, locked classrooms and guarded libraries, we envisage knowledge created and held in common. Freeing knowledge means including as many voices as possible in its creation, making our common knowledge richer in the process.

5. We want to make education and knowledge accessible to all who wish to access it. Recognising that currently a variety of factors exclude people from education. In response to this we want to share free, open source information, without barriers of language, finance and ideology.

6. Spatial accessibility starts with the physical environment. There should be no boundaries to local persons in accessing education. Learning environments should be mobile, and knowledge should not be bound by any walls of the classroom. Spatial accessibility extends to other scales. Knowledge should be accessible virtually and education should use collaborative and open media forms.

7. The really open university is a process of challenging society through the unlearning of norms. We aim to do this in a collaborative fashion through participation and a deconstruction of hierarchy. We would like to create an environment where knowledge is shared. The really open university is a process of challenging education and society as we know it.

8. Education has become a factory dictated by the rules of profit. The ROU seeks to create free participatory, critical, non-hierarchical, mobile university that interacts with the community and society as a whole.

All eight of these small group statements clearly indicate the desire for a different form of university, and some form of critical pedagogical vision that would require a break from the student-consumer model. They represent a start of creating a new educational imaginary, without the enclosure of knowledge and with a breakdown of the separation between teacher/taught. They indicate a desire to transform education as a starting point for challenging the way the rest of society is organised.

The idea of these exercises was to engage people in a collective process of discussion and reimagining of the university. There was no pressure to create any kind of synthesis at the end of the process. There was therefore no need for either a potentially painful consensus process, or anyone to feel excluded because their voice had been overshadowed by the majority, except perhaps within each of the eight small groups. As such the process was aimed to be a prefigurative one, focussed on the process as much as the outcomes, the means as much as the ends. The process of engaging in this participative process of critique and collective discussion of alternatives helped forge radical new student subjectivities that exist in excess of the limited and limiting subjectivities of the student as consumer and individualised neoliberal subject.

This does not mean that the ROU believed that ‘participation’ or ‘openness’ was necessarily automatically antagonistic to neoliberal processes. Many in the group understood that neoliberalism is increasingly utilising participatory forms of management (see: Lazzarato, 1996; Kamola and Meyerhoff, 2009 & Terranova and Bousquet, 2004). However, the participative and prefigurative nature of these events were deemed to be in contrast to the meetings held by other more traditional leftist groups on campus, who were mainly focussed on funding cuts and tended to be dominated by the Marxist-Leninist groups on campus, which some found alienating.

The second meeting was more focussed and asked participants to discuss how we might create a really open university. For a number of reasons this meeting was less well attended, and one activist told me in an interview that there were ‘problems moving from visualisation to implementation’ in these discussions (interview with author). Irrespective of these issues, participants in this meeting grappled with some of the difficulties in creating a ‘really open’ university that would go on to inform the second ROU experiment this paper discusses, a conference called ‘Reimagine the University’. As with the first meeting there

were a number of activities with people broken into smaller groups to discuss the practicalities of creating an actually existing experiment in an alternative form of university. This time the venue for the meeting meant food was also able to be served, which added an important convivial atmosphere to the event. By the end of the meeting ‘working groups’ were formed to take some of the ideas forward, however, it was close to the end of the university semester (2010) and energy dissipated before any events could be organised. Despite this, the groundwork laid in these meetings went on to inspire another ROU project in the new academic year.

### ***Experiment 2 – Reimagining the university in order to transform it!***

Between the 24th and 26th of November 2010, the ROU organised an event called ‘Reimagine the University’ (RTU). The event was held in Leeds and with three days of workshops, talks and interventions, prompting questions such as: ‘How could we transform the university?’; ‘How could students and lecturers learn differently through more creative, critical and empowering processes?’; ‘Is it even possible to transform the university without transforming the society in which it is embedded?’ (RTU, 2010).

The conceptualisation of the event was discussed by the ROU in our weekly meetings during September 2010. This process was then opened up to a much wider group of people through a series of publicly advertised planning meetings during October.

The first public meeting for RTU was held in a room on the Leeds University Student Union building and the format for the meeting was designed by a small ROU working group. A series of activities had been organized, which in many ways were reminiscent of the ‘what would a really open university look like’ meeting discussed above. The basic concept for the event was introduced by the ROU, and then participants were encouraged to use sticky notes to post ideas for workshops and other interventions that could form part of the event. We then

took time to circulate around the room looking at all the ideas we had generated. After this we began to group ideas together, either where they were repeated, or where a common theme emerged. We then formed groups around each idea and discussed how we might take them forward. The ideas were then reduced by ascertaining if there was enough motivation and capacity in the room to take them forward, and by the end of the meeting we had a list of workshops/themes with names and email addresses of those that said they were happy to take these ideas forward. This initial meeting was then followed up by two further public meetings. During these meetings, attendees were encouraged to take part in the process of creating the event; be it taking on organising a workshop, helping with publicity, or something else entirely.

One of the aims of the initiative was to engage a diverse group of students and academic staff in organising the event, and this the ROU accomplished despite the limited amount of time between the callout for the first open meeting and RTU. A large number of sessions for the RTU event were organised and a website and other forms of publicity were designed. The process of organising the event was therefore viewed as of similar importance to the event itself, because it was a constituent process, a radical *détournement* of the 'student experience'. Students were 'producers' rather than 'consumers' in the RTU (Neary & Winn, 2009).

The public RTU meetings were used to form the bulk of the content and feel of the event and to gain consensus about issues of importance. It was agreed that outside of these meetings the ROU would take on the work that others did not feel they had the skills, knowledge or time to do, although ROU meetings were also open for others to attend. This work included booking rooms for events, or contacting sympathetic staff to book rooms where we could not; designing and producing publicity, including flyer design and printing, web design and purchasing web space and internet URLs.



The first day of the Reimagine the University (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2010) coincided with a national student walkout, which involved demonstrations across the UK, including Leeds. The ROU participated in the Leeds demonstration and made a number of banners, including one that read 'Learn the three R's: Reimagine, Rebel, Revolt'. Another simply stated, 'Don't be a sausage', a reference to Marx's description of schools as 'sausage factories' (Marx, 1867/1990), from which the ROU's newsletter *The Sausage Factory* also took its name. Another banner read, 'Reimagine the University' and included the logo for the event: a figure in a suit with a net chasing a brain on legs, used to represent capital's attempts to capture the 'general intellect'. The ROU joined the assembly point at the University of Leeds, where large numbers were already gathering, and a mobile sound system attached to a bike was being ridden around campus.

When the march reached its destination point at the front of the Leeds City Art Gallery, the group persuaded the Student Union, in charge of the personal address system, to give the ROU an opportunity to address the assembled crowd. An ROUer then used the opportunity to promote the Reimagine the University event. Soon a breakaway group of demonstrators were moving away from the art gallery and back up towards the universities, and an occupation of a lecture theatre at the University of Leeds was initiated spontaneously by a diverse crowd of hundreds. Demonstrations and occupations had been happening up and down the country as part of a national day of action and the ROU had been both receiving and sending messages over social media about what was happening.

The demonstration and resulting occupation meant that some of the workshops planned for the next two days could be moved to the newly occupied space. Even though the ROU was not formally involved with the occupation, individuals from the group participated in it to differing extents. A large demonstration and successful occupation was deemed to be a powerful way to begin re-imagining and recomposing the space and time of the university

(Hall, 2011; Meyerhoff *et al.* 2011). Occupation had been a formative concept within the founding of the ROU, taking inspiration from the New School occupation in NYC in 2008 and the Californian student occupation movement of 2009 (See *After the Fall*, 2009). Both of these events had mobilised a radical rhetoric as part of their actions, and elements of the latter mobilisation particularly had analysed their occupations through the conceptual lens of ‘communisation’ (see de Mattis, 2011 & Noys, 2011). Although not directly inspired by communisation theory, the ROU did have an analysis of occupation as a practice that went beyond merely disrupting the everyday business and tools of the university:

[O]ccupation is the appropriation of these tools. It is to learn how to use a saw as a violin, a screwdriver as a spindle, a hammer as a paintbrush. Occupation is the discovery of the potentials of a tool, the putting to work of a tool in ways you never possibly imagined. Whether the classroom, the city centre or your own body – you don’t know what a tool can do until you try to do the impossible with it (ROU, 2010a).

The workshops for day one of RTU included a discussion about rethinking effective unionism within education, facilitated by a member of the radical anarchist union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and a workshop on alternatives to commodified education. On day two, Mike Neary, from the University of Lincoln, introduced the ‘Student as Producer’ project, which he had initiated there (Neary & Winn, 2009). With this model in mind there were student-led workshops organized as part of Reimagine the University in which students could discuss their work in a supportive environment, receiving comments from other students as well as staff. This demonstrated a desire for students to be far more critically engaged in their work as a form of intellectual inquiry and research, rather than simply being about attaining better grades, and connected them to the broader social project of the university. The third day began with a presentation in the occupied lecture theatre by

three students from Italy (studying at Leeds University) discussing the struggle against education reforms in their home country. This was especially pertinent since the Leaning Tower of Pisa had been occupied by protestors that very week. After lunch there was discussion and reflection on the nature of occupied space, in an event titled, ‘the Logic of Occupation’, which covered everything from the carnivalesque nature of occupation in the praxis of Reclaim the Streets (Grindon, 2004), to the application of Lefebvre’s ideas on the production of space at university occupations (Lefebvre, 1991). Importantly, it provided a space for some of those involved in the ongoing occupation at Leeds to critically reflect on the experience they were going through, including the various power dynamics at work within the space.<sup>2</sup>

In the afternoon there were parallel workshops – one called Pedagogies of Resistance, run by Sara Motta, an academic from the University of Nottingham. This focused on learning from radical pedagogies deployed by social movements in Latin America, such as the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de Solano (MTD Solano) of Argentina, the Comite de Tierra Urbana (CTU), of Venezuela and the Movimento de Sem Terra, (MST), of Brazil (see Motta, 2009), and the other focused on the University of Utopia, an initiative which aimed to contribute towards inventing a form of radicality that overcomes the challenges that ‘continue to undermine the progressive development of the post-capitalist world’ and imagine a radical future for higher education (University of Utopia, nd). The final sessions were on ‘counter mapping’ and reflections and resistance to neoliberal metrics within universities, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The counter mapping workshops consisted of a presentation by a member of the Queen Mary’s University counter mapping group about a map and game they had collectively created that traced issues relating

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of these tensions see Pusey 2016a

to international students and the university as border (QMCM, nd). The rest of the workshop consisted of generating ideas of how and what we could map relating to the wider crisis here in Leeds, and generated a Leeds counter mapping group.

The final session of the three days, 'Off with the REF', explored the way in which metric systems have been responsible for creating a condition of 'academic unfreedom', where teaching and research have come to be dominated by market mechanisms (see De Angelis & Harvie, 2009; Harvie, 2000). At first this would appear like a topic that would only attract academics and perhaps PhD students, but the room was full of a variety of people, including academic staff, PhD and masters students, as well as undergraduates. A panel of three academics introduced the various measuring mechanisms, such as the REF, within the broader context of the neoliberal academy, and from the perspective of individual staff and the effects on them and their research. Most of the 2010 HE protests in the UK had focused on undergraduate issues, principally the rising costs of fees, and many students remained unaware of issues facing academic staff. This helped to break down the sometimes invisible barriers between academic staff and students and enabled students to understand some of the pressures the contemporary university places on academic staff within a context of the political economy of higher education.

There were a number of smaller activities organised by the ROU after the RTU event ranging from contributing to demonstrations to organising radical discussion groups. However, the next big project was the establishment of a dedicated space for continuation of the group's initiatives.

### ***Experiment 3 – The Space Project***

To survive and flourish we have to build creative alternatives (ROU 2010b)

It is the goal of ROU to carve out a slice of space and time in which to experiment and find something new. Everything is up for reinvention. We are rejecting prescriptive dogma so that we can promote innovation and creativity, and build the future into the present. Only by constructing alternatives can we make them feel normal. (ROU, 2010c)

Over the summer of 2011, the ROU evolved to focus on a new development: the Space Project. The Space Project was conceived of as a temporary experiment. Its aim was to put some of ROU's pedagogical ambitions into practice and as a way of moving *beyond* the university. The Space Project ran from October 2011 until the end of March 2012. The Space Project was a self-managed and horizontal space which provided an example of a 'crack' in academic capitalism (Pusey, 2016b).

Having successfully obtained funding from an organisation called 'Change Makers', the ROU rented an empty ex-industrial space above a DIY non-profit bike workshop close to the centre of Leeds. The ROU decorated the building, sourced furniture, bought a video projector through the rest of the funding and built a new website to promote the space.

During the six months the Space Project existed it hosted a wide range of events, from a film festival about Italian workerism (as part of a fringe for the Leeds International Film Festival), to visiting speakers talking about a range of topics, including the revolution in Egypt, 1984-85 UK miners' strike and the eviction of travellers from Dale Farm in Essex. It gave birth to a local radical history group and, briefly, a radical pedagogy study group. The space was also used by other activist groups, such as No Borders, and was home to an anti-fascist film festival. By far the best attended events were a public lecture by John Holloway (December 2011) and the 'really open course on crisis' (January 2012). This featured a variety of talks and discussions including one on 'radical economics', which aimed to explain the current financial crisis to a non-specialist audience, from a radical perspective.

The Space Project was an interesting experiment drawing on the social centres and free school and free universities traditions as well as the surge of struggle around higher education. Running concurrently were similar projects emerging from this context with links to these traditions, such as the Social Science Centre in Lincoln (Neary, 2014; Neary, 2015; Neary & Saunders, 2016; Neary & Winn, 2015) and the Tent City University which emerged from the Occupy St Pauls protest (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012; Walker, 2012). These illustrate the desire of elements of the students' and broader movements around higher education to exceed being protest-based movements and develop into broader experiments with autonomous education that embody the radical and antagonistic nature of critical pedagogy.

Despite being influenced by these trajectories the ROU wanted to attempt to go beyond them. The hope was that the different groups using the Space Project would interact with one another, creating what the group termed 'cross contamination'. The desire for this came out of a discussion about frustrations based on experiences at some social centres where different groups and projects used the space as a resource, but never interacted with one another's campaigns or political perspectives. The group attempted to communicate this via the Space Project website, even going as far as to suggest that Space Project may not be the best place for you, if you were not interested in cross fertilisation, or 'contamination' of ideas:

We want the Space to be a meeting space; meetings of thought, of practice, of people, of ideas. We see it as a place of critical engagement with ideas and practices of transforming the world and ourselves within it.

We are trying, awkwardly, imperfectly, to create a space where everything overlaps and influences each other. So instead of separate groups putting on events in isolation we want to encourage collaboration, cross-contamination.

This isn't to grow a singular project but to hopefully move us all a little bit, in personal and political transformation.

We WANT to create a MONSTER!

How will this work in practice?

A practical example might be how the Leeds Turned Upside Down walk on Nov 5th is part of the Film Festival, but will cross-contaminate the local radical History series too, so this one event is a meeting of both programmes of events, and also therefore of ideas, of people, of thought, of practice.

We want people using the space to think about how their event, activity or group can work with each other things going on in the Space, so all projects become more than the sum total of themselves. We ask you to not just use the physical space to host your own but look at the other events, contact us and/or other event organisers to see what collaborative projects can be grown.

Someone asked 'But what if I want to contaminate people with my ideas but don't want to be contaminated with theirs?'

In this situation perhaps the Space isn't for you..... (Space Project, 2011)

The Space Project was not only an example of an autonomous education project, but it also attempted to go beyond some of the limitations of activist 'free schools' (e.g. bike repairs and campaigns) (Shantz, 2012). Although it grew out of the tradition of self-managed social centres, it also attempted to go beyond their limitations. These attempts to supersede previous activist praxis were in order to create 'cramped spaces' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) where new social relations and new subjectivities could be forged through a messy politics of 'cross contamination' and creativity.

## **Conclusion: building re-politicisation machines**

Jason Read suggests that the university is a vehicle for the production of neoliberal subjectivity (Read, 2009b, p152). In contrast, I have argued in this article that what we see in the experiments created by the ROU is the production of forms of radical subjectivity. In one of the earliest public statements by the ROU, in response to the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds' call for the campus not to become a battleground<sup>3</sup>, the ROU proclaimed 'towards a battleground' – creating the university as a space of struggle – countering the university 'depoliticisation machine' with a '*repoliticisation* machine', the return of dissensus and the political.

Our subjectivity was being reduced through the neoliberal form of the university and the subjectivity of student-consumer, neoliberal-academic, the entrepreneuriat (Pusey & Russell, 2012). Our subjectivity was expanded when we collectively engaged in concrete projects that reimagined and experimented with recomposing the space, roles, content and form of knowledge production and learning.

The protest-events we organized as the ROU created messy in-between spaces, interstices or 'cracks' (Holloway, 2010) in 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) filled with self-organised acts of negation and becoming. Spaces where new imaginaries could be discussed and debated, not as a means of utopian daydreaming, but in order to break with neoliberal logics that suggest there is no alternative. New subjectivities were forged in these spaces, not just through utilizing critical/radical pedagogical methods, but through a critical/radical

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/strike-threat-as-job-cut-talks-break-down-at-leeds/410292.article?sectioncode=26&storycode=410292&c=2>



pedagogy put to work as part of a wider project of antagonism and refusal. A process of movement building and movement in a broader sense of creation was begun.

Through asking questions such as 'what would a really open university look like?', the ROU engaged participants in a process of critical deconstruction of their present working conditions - and themselves as both the student-consumers of neoliberalised Higher Education system, and as student-producers (Neary & Winn, 2009).

Processes of 'reimagining the university' through active discussion and debate were concurrently part of a wider process of actively constructing what these new imagined pedagogical spaces, both directly in the workshops during the RTU and the event more generally, but more importantly perhaps, as part of a wider movement that was in the midst of emerging. Tentatively pushing this movement to go beyond cuts, fees and the immediate struggle around the increase in university fees and the removal of Education Maintenance Allowance, towards a realisation of collective power, both to negate the actually-existing university (without hankering after a non-existent golden age) and to create something new.

The ROU disbanded in March 2012, and those involved moved on to a variety of other forms of activism, initiating other projects, in some cases away from Leeds where the ROU had been based. However, the aim of the ROU had never been to maintain the longevity of the group, but instead to 'change the expectations that people have of higher education, and by extension, the rest of our lives' (ROU, 2010d). The ROU had not been a traditional leftist organisation, but an 'ongoing process of transformation by those with a desire to challenge the higher education system and its role in society' (*ibid*). The power and importance of the ROU had been in the punctuation of the postpolitical, depoliticised consensus of the university, of the disruption of the student as consumer subjectivity and the forging of new forms of subjectivity.

The institution of the university creates depoliticised subjects. This article has argued that the experiments of the ROU create repoliticisation machines that allow powerful and radical subjectivities to emerge that challenge the subjectivity that the university is creating and the student-consumer model.

### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I would like to thank all those involved in the ROU for an inspirational two years, without which this article would not exist. I would also like to extend my thanks to the two anonymous reviewers and associate editor for their helpful comments and suggestions for improving this article, and to Leon Sealey-Huggins for reading an early draft.

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