

Beyond public and private: the transformation of higher education?

Peter Somerville and Gary Saunders, University of Lincoln

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This paper is an exploration into the nature of higher education in late capitalist society. It analyses the meaning of academic labour and the products of that labour. Rather than lamenting the demise of the university as a ‘public good’, the paper criticises the tendency to dichotomise education as either wholly public or wholly private, seeing both as involving forms of capital accumulation. On the basis of such analysis and criticism, it attempts to re-evaluate the neoliberal project for universities and to consider possible alternatives that attack the groundwork of capitalist social relations, for example, a ‘cooperative university’. From its exploration and analysis it then draws conclusions for what could be an emancipatory project for higher education.

What is higher education?

Higher education is centrally about academic work, that is, the creation and dissemination of new knowledge through scholarly activities - primarily teaching and research but also other work, such as administration, associated with teaching or research. This work takes place within institutions that are mostly known as universities. True, teaching occurs in many other institutions, mainly schools and colleges, and research takes place in a variety of private, public and third sector organisations, but it is the combination of teaching and research that has been perhaps the most distinctive feature of universities. Under capitalism, academic work is subsumed within an academic labour process, in which an academic sells their labour power to a higher education institution in exchange for a (monthly) salary. The academic labour process is therefore part of what Marx called ‘generalised commodity production’, where labour power itself is a commodity that is bought and sold in a market (the labour market) and is then employed in a process that produces more value than it consumes.

In the first section of this paper, we consider the nature of the products of the academic labour process, and specifically the value of these products and how this value is created. Both teaching and research can be said to add value, but their products are characteristically different. Teaching and the duties associated with it can be seen as a service like any other service that is bought and sold as a commodity. Specifically, this service adds value to labour power itself, insofar as it makes students more employable within a capitalist economy. In contrast, the products of research add value to what Marx (2005: 706) called the ‘general intellect’, but this value can be (and is mainly but not entirely) appropriated by individuals and organisations both inside and outside of universities.¹ Both kinds of value are difficult, though not impossible, to measure.

¹ The realisation of this value in forms of capital is an interesting question but beyond the scope of this paper.

So higher education is distinctive in that it creates new knowledge and attempts to combine teaching and research. It is also distinctive in terms of its producers because these include not only teachers and researchers but students themselves. The student is not a mere 'raw material' that the lecturers work on but actively works herself in order to gain a (good) degree. Fundamentally, as in all education, it is mainly the *relationship* between the student and the teacher that produces the added value for the student and thus (potentially) for capital and for society generally. In (higher) education, therefore, the student is both the product and a co-producer of that product. However, although the student contribution is undoubtedly academic *work*, the student is not paid for that work and is not recognised as a contributor to the value of the product. This is perhaps the point at which a Marxist labour process analysis breaks down. Teaching and learning are inextricably intertwined, and both involve work which adds value to the academic product. Yet, in engaging with their tutors, and with learning generally, students are not primarily entering into capital relations (although of course they may well buy books, etc, to assist them with their learning). The student's work of studying is an input into the process that enhances the value of their labour power. In Marxist terms this is part of the sphere of reproduction (rather like the work of the student's parents, for example, which makes the student more able to undertake their academic work) rather than the sphere of production. Teaching and learning, however, are part of a single process of production/reproduction.

Increasingly, academic performance is scrutinised through mechanisms such as the National Student Survey, module evaluations, student attendance, student achievement and research assessment exercises. As employees, academics can be called upon to justify their pay in terms of the value of their performance. Whilst this practice is more widely established outside of universities its implementation indicates the possible future direction of higher education. In further education colleges, for example, there is increasing resistance to the implementation of performance related pay that is linked to student performance and satisfaction (UCU 2013). One of the problems with performance related pay is that it puts pressure on academics to hit increasingly unrealistic targets. Consequently, there have been cases of not only academics, but institutions being accused of fabricating attendance data (Mourant 2009) and, in schools, teachers falsifying marks under pressure from management (British Education Research Association 2011). This then results in a reduction in the value being added to the 'product', which is the opposite of what is intended. The point is that education is not a product that students consume but rather it is students themselves who are the product of education – a point that seems to be widely misunderstood. Whether it is the government that invests in their education or the students themselves who pay for it, the purpose of education under capitalism is to enhance the value of those students, which they can then realise in the labour market (so-called 'employability', though there is much more to it than this).

The evaluation of academic labour is, therefore, a complex issue. The value added, for example, by the production of a university degree has a number of components: there is not only the contribution of the academic staff (that is, academic labour) but also that of the students themselves, and the precise value of each of these may be impossible to determine

separately. In addition, following Bourdieu (1986), a university degree itself counts as cultural capital, which brings with it its own cycle of self-expanding value. The value added by research is at least as difficult to quantify, because of the uncertainties associated with the realisation of that value: for example, the length of time it can take for research products to be translated into saleable commodities.

To clarify the issue, we need to recognise the contradictory character of the products of academic labour, as both use-value and exchange value (to use Marx's terms). Use-value here refers to the quality of experience of the student (with regard to teaching) or the quality of the knowledge produced by research. Exchange value, however, is expressed through, for example, a graduate's enhanced salary. Under capitalism, use-value is subordinated to exchange value, which means that educational quality is, to some extent, made instrumental to the demands of capital. Part of the value added to the products of higher education by academic labour (including the student's own work) is therefore appropriated by the organisations for whom graduates and researchers work and is realised through a wide variety of production processes, both within and outside of universities.

Higher education therefore has distinctive producers, processes and products. Its students are active participants in their own learning, which is a distinctive structured process, and its researchers produce knowledge that has value in its own right and/or may add value to other processes and products. The products of capitalist higher education are both enhanced labour power and enhanced knowledge, which take the form of commodities that can be valorised through capitalist markets.

Under capitalism, higher education is institutionalised overwhelmingly in universities, as either 'public' or 'private'. In the former case, it is seen as a public good, mainly publicly funded (by government) as a form of public investment for the future prestige and prosperity of the nation. In the latter case, it is seen as a private good, supported largely by private funds, and serving the interests of those who pay for it. This paper will argue that this dichotomisation of higher education misses the significance of academic labour, which is much the same whether the institution in which it occurs is private or public, and therefore mis-diagnoses the problems that universities currently face. Essentially, academic labour, whether in a private or public institution, has to be seen as a form of *capital*, an asset in which resources are invested to produce more value, which is realised through exchange. In contrast, we envisage a form of higher education that challenges the groundwork of capitalist social relations and sees academic work as taking the form of collective practices undertaken by 'scholars' (academic workers) who will be both teaching and learning, with the value of higher education being realised socially, for the benefit of the participants and of society generally. As explained in the next section, one possible model for such education is a co-operative university, which could serve as a stepping stone towards a post-capitalist society.

The idea of a cooperative university

Inevitably, under capitalism, universities, like other public sector bodies, are vulnerable to so-called 'neoliberal threats', for example, from global corporations (see, for example,

Ciancanelli, 2007), clientilist relationships with business leaders at senior management levels (Tuchman, 2009), and what used to be called ‘New Public Management’ (involving a shift from democratic or quasi-democratic collegial governance to control by managerial elites – Deem et al, 2008) (for a useful summary, see Neary and Morris, 2012). At the same time, neoliberal governments (in particular the UK) have attempted to shift the burden of funding universities from the public to the private sector, through reduced direct allocation and increased student fees (although the latter are still funded by government in the form of loans, which the student has to repay only if and when their salary rises above a certain level).²

The main threat posed by these changes is that academics may lose whatever control they have left over their own labour – what and how they teach, what and how they research, what and how they publish. Boden et al (2012: 17) mention two other hazards: ‘the wholesale private appropriation of public resources without concomitant public benefit’ and an allocation of resources biased towards narrowly focused business interests and commercial projects – making money rather than meeting need. As noted in the previous section, however, the university is already an institution for converting socialised academic work into private property, whether this be the credentials gained by its students, the salaries of its teachers or the intellectual property created by its researchers. Rather than the neoliberal threat being external to the university (basically, viewed as the privatisation of a public university), it already exists within the university by virtue of the nature of academic labour.

Historically, the extent to which universities have been bastions of ‘professional autonomy’ (Boden et al, 2012: 17) or ‘academic freedom’ (Wolff, 2000: 198) is unclear. Universities were created in pre-capitalist societies primarily as clerical institutions for the clarification and justification of religious doctrine (hence the term ‘scholasticism’), and the growth of scientific knowledge from the 16th to the 19th centuries took place largely outside of universities. When new, so-called ‘red brick’ or ‘civic’ universities were founded towards the end of the 19th century, it was with the explicit purpose that they would serve the needs of ‘industry’, not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and they focused more on teaching than on research. In the 1960s, when a further litter of universities was born, it was to assist and perhaps lead in ‘the white heat of the scientific revolution’ (Harold Wilson, 1963) at that time, which was again intended to make Britain more globally competitive in the new technology-based industries. The idea of a free-thinking community of scholars has therefore probably never quite matched the reality of university life.

Boden et al (2012) focus on the important issue of university governance. They point out, rightly, that the university has no clear legal owners, whether public or private. They argue,

² Interestingly, this appears to reflect the fact that the value added in the university is realised only later on, making the arrangement seem fair for the student and for society generally. Actually, however, it means that, in the long term, the individual student may bear the entire burden, while society gets off scot free – the social value of higher education gets lost, being entirely reduced to a series of financial exchanges. Rather than a shared responsibility for funding higher education between the student and their fellow citizens (e.g. as taxpayers), each student is made entirely responsible for funding his or her own higher education.

however, that, with the shift towards greater control by largely unaccountable managerial elites and greater interference by government in the running of universities, the question of ownership requires closer attention. In Marxist terms, the university constitutes means of production, so it is perhaps surprising that this has not been a significant focus of attention before now. If academics could collectively own and control these means of production, then would that not be a step forward from the current situation? So, following Gibson-Graham (2006), Boden et al (2012: 20) propose a ‘hybrid, radical alternative’ to ‘the binary divide between public and private forms of ownership’, which is basically the model of a *trust*, like the John Lewis Partnership (JLP). According to this model:

Ownership would be clarified by placing each university’s assets in a non-revocable trust, which would hold the formal legal title to the organisation’s assets. This would also create clear governance responsibilities under trust law and prevent the privatisation of publicly funded assets. All current employees (academics and those in other roles) and students would be designated as trust beneficiaries, entitled to utilise university assets and resources... The trust deed, echoing that of JLP, would designate the purpose of the university as facilitating socially, culturally and economically beneficial scholarship, through the work of all employees and students, whether in research, teaching and learning, or public debate. This would affirm the university’s status as a community social asset and an element of the knowledge commons. By virtue of this legal strategy, Trust Universities would be beyond the predation of managers, markets or state interests. (Boden et al, 2012: 21)

This sounds all very well but this model, or one very like it, was implemented by US universities in the 19th century. Universities as different as Cornell, Wisconsin and Texas were run by boards of trustees, who were supposed to hold the assets in trust for the benefit of the university as a whole, for wider society and for future generations. Some of these trustees, however, were businessmen (there were no women), who saw the university as a means to further their business interests. For them, the benefit for wider society could be interpreted as benefit for capital. For Trust Universities, therefore, a key question is: who are the trustees and how can they be made accountable to the trust beneficiaries? Boden et al (2012) recognise the existence of this problem (as one of ‘capture by powerful vested interests’ – p21) and suggest attempting to solve it through compacts between the university and surrounding society, and through the enforcement of trust law and regulatory standards. Arguably, however, this law-based approach is not enough, unless the university were established and run on more democratic lines (e.g. a managerial elite could still prevail). Even then, the whole process would still be based on value production within capitalist social relations, creating quasi-objective structures of domination. The governance structure must ensure that the trustees who are appointed will work to transform these social relations. This reasoning then leads to the idea of a truly cooperative university.

In a cooperative, the enterprise is democratically controlled by its members, that is, on the basis of one member one vote (Somerville, 2007; see also Woodin et al, 2010). In detail this means that:

At the very least the people setting the overall direction and the most important policies of the enterprise are appointed by and are responsible to the membership. Also, all really significant decisions about the purpose, objectives and the constitution of the organisation are made only by the members constituted in a general meeting open to all members; and the majority of the persons directing the affairs of the enterprise are appointed by and from the membership. (Parnell, 2013)

The other key characteristic of a cooperative is beneficial and mutual ownership, meaning that:

The current members have use of the assets of the enterprise and benefit from their use. However, current members are in effect trustees, jointly holding the assets on behalf of both current and future members. The principle is typically implemented through inserting two clauses in a company's memorandum of association, or an Industrial and Provident Society's rules [This could also apply to community benefit societies under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies and Credit Unions Act 2010.]. The first provides that the assets shall be applied solely in furtherance of its objectives and may not be divided among the members or trustees. The second provides for 'altruistic dissolution', whereby if the enterprise is wound up, remaining assets exceeding liabilities shall not be divided among the members but shall be transferred to another enterprise with similar aims or to charity. (Parnell, 2013)

A cooperative therefore includes an element of trusteeship but it is a special kind of trust because the trustees are themselves members of the cooperative and all members of the cooperative are trustees. The risk of 'capture' by managerial elites is eliminated by the adoption of a democratic constitution, which guarantees that all managers must themselves be members and must be chosen by the membership as a whole. This arrangement then ensures that the enterprise (the means of production) is genuinely owned and controlled by its members, and is used to benefit not only the membership but society generally. Arguably, this is a necessary step towards transforming capitalist social relations generally.

In applying this model to universities, the first question to consider is the nature of the membership. Possible members of a university cooperative include teachers, students, researchers, and what could broadly be called 'supporters' or 'support staff' (who would include administrators, cleaners, catering staff, estate workers, student support, and so on). The simplest form of a cooperative is where there is just one category of member, e.g. a worker cooperative, in which the enterprise is owned and controlled entirely by its workforce, or a tenant management cooperative, in which the enterprise is controlled by its tenants. In practice, however, some cooperatives have a plurality of membership categories (e.g. workers, consumers, and investors), with different degrees of control associated with different categories. It is often argued, for example, that workers should have the most control because they have the greatest 'stake' in the enterprise, and that investors (those who lend or donate money or assets to the enterprise) should have least control. The degree of control to be specified is a matter for debate in each case when drawing up the constitution.

In the case of universities, there do appear to be distinct categories of possible membership, based on the status of relationships within existing capitalist universities as analysed in the first section of this paper. These categories are determined by their relationship to the means of production and are: ‘worker’, ‘student’ and ‘other beneficiary’. ‘Worker’ denotes a position of employee, whose labour power is bought by an employer and set to work to produce value for that employer. Within this category, therefore, fall not only academic labourers but all other employees of the university and, by extension, contract workers whose labour power is purchased solely for the performance of a contract. ‘Student’, of course, refers to all those who are studying on university courses. Their relationship to the means of production is different from that of the workers because the process of higher education adds value to them (or at least to their labour power) as well as them contributing to that added value. They are both producers and consumers of higher education, but these are special kinds of both production and consumption: the production is a joint enterprise between student and tutor, and the consumption is what Marx called productive consumption, namely consumption that directly adds value in the production process (the product here being more valuable labour power). Although governments have tried to change the student’s relationship to the university towards a more simplistic consumerist model, with students shopping around universities and spending their fees at the one that suits them best, this can never be more than a quasi-market because the relationship between student and university cannot be reduced to a set of market transactions - one simply cannot buy a degree in the way that one can buy a car, for example. Finally, ‘other beneficiary’ designates those who do not contribute directly to the university at all but who are substantively affected by it, for example, because they live in the vicinity of the university or stand to benefit in some way from its activities. If the university is set up as a community benefit society, then its constitution should stipulate the groups whom it intends to benefit. Following the experience of US universities, ‘other beneficiary’ should not include those who donate to the university – that is, gifts, loans and other investments (particularly from government³) should not be allowed if there are strings attached to them.

Within each category, all members should be treated equally (to satisfy the principle of democratic control) but looking across categories it seems clear that workers should have more say than students, and students should have more say than other beneficiaries. We say this only because of the different degrees of input into the labour process contributed by workers, students and others. Exactly how much say each category should have, however, is not clear at all. Much further work and debate is required in order to be able to decide on what form of constitution would be appropriate for the governance of a truly cooperative university.

The size of a typical university means that representation is needed in order for decisions to be made democratically. Each category of member will therefore elect representatives to the

³ This should have the effect of putting an end to the unbelievably bureaucratic and virtually value-free Research Excellence Framework.

university's general meeting in accordance with its vote share. University managers will be appointed through committees composed of members from the appropriate category. And so on. It gradually becomes clear how a cooperative university could work and can be made to work. It is unlikely, however, that cooperative universities will be able to survive in isolation (see Galor, 2008, for a comprehensive account of how cooperatives can be demutualised), and therefore it is also important to build federations of cooperative universities across regions and beyond ('Cooperatives that are members of active and strong federations are more protected and more likely to resist demutualization' – Galor, 2008: 54).

Transformation – or emancipation?

So far, we have considered the possibility of and prospects for a cooperative university within capitalism. This challenges but does not change the capitalist nature of the university. Workers are still employed by the (cooperative) university (even though this looks like a form of collective self-employment), and their labour adds value within a process that produces commodities (i.e. a capitalist labour process), even if only very indirectly. Above all, there remains a contradiction between use-value and exchange value in which, for example, the enhancement of the value of labour power (for the workers as well as the students) may take precedence over providing a quality student experience – although there is a degree of overlap between these, which hints at the complexity involved here. Finally, at least part of the value added by cooperative higher education, whether through teaching or research, continues to be privately appropriated, as the products from these processes are valorised in capitalist markets (either labour markets or the so-called 'knowledge economy').

Neary (2012: 163) suggests that it may indeed be possible 'to see the university not as a particular institutional form of the capital relation, the university of knowledge, but as a new social form at the level of the general and the social'. The possible nature of this 'new social form', however, is unclear. It could be a new form of commons that has no boundaries but the materiality of this commons remains somewhat mysterious. Let us therefore attempt to sketch some possible parameters for what this new social form might be.

First, the nature of the relationship between student and tutor needs to be transformed. Students need to be seen neither as consumers nor producers but in some sense as 'expert citizens', who are active participants in their own learning and in the governance of that learning. And their learning has to have social purpose, such as emancipation from the capital-labour relation, not merely one of increased preparedness for future employment.

Second, the democratisation of the workforce is likely to have considerable effects on working relationships but it is difficult to predict what these will be. For example, it might or might not result in increased student-centredness, and it might or might not enhance the quality of research. It will probably help to protect the product of higher education from private appropriation, but transformation of that product (e.g. from market-readiness to self-organised emancipation, or from the 'knowledge economy' to what Neary, 2012: 164, calls the 'knowing society') will require much more than this. The idea is that the co-operative form, by allowing people collectively to own and control the means of production, will

enable them to see more clearly the contradictions inherent in capitalism. This will then act as a stepping stone beyond the false dichotomy of public and private forms of capitalist accumulation towards the transformation of capitalism into a society where wealth is not measured in terms of the value nexus.

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