

Prospects for co-operative higher education

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The nature of 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. Academic labour, like all labour under capitalism, is therefore a form of capital, that is, an asset whose activation produces more value, which is realised through exchange.

Many academics hark back to a mythical golden age, when they ran their own affairs democratically for the public good, free from the interference of either governments or capitalists. It is doubtful, however, whether such a golden age ever existed. Right from their beginnings in England and France in the 13th century, universities have served either Church or State and, since the ascendancy of capitalism, they have faithfully served the interests of capital. Some universities have been successful in pretending to be democratic (one thinks, for example, of Oxbridge colleges) but the reality has always been that they are ruled by small elites (in the past by senior dons, and these days by 'core executives' answerable to 'boards of governors'). The common belief in the 'autonomy' of universities does not reflect either the historical or contemporary reality of universities as institutions but rather stems from academics' beliefs in their own professional integrity. The actual situation is that governments 'allow' a certain freedom for universities to manage themselves in return for those universities' contribution to the economy and to society (as part of the so-called 'service class').

It is this academic professionalism, based on a myth of a 'community of scholars', which is now said to be under threat or 'assault' (Bailey and Freedman, 2011), producing a 'crisis' for universities (Readings, 1996; Collini, 2011). University governance is seen as increasingly undemocratic, run by unaccountable managerial elites (Deem et al, 2008; Woods, 2011), with increasingly overpaid vice-chancellors (e.g. £466k p.a in the case of Craig Calhoun at the LSE – and, for more critical comment on the social problem of the wealthy, see Sayer, 2014)), governments seem to be increasingly interfering directly in how universities are run (Collini, 2011; Molesworth et al, 2011), and academic labour appears to be increasingly geared towards meeting the more immediate economic needs of capital and the 'market'

(Ciancelli, 2007; Hill, 2009; Hussey and Smith, 2009; Molesworth et al, 2011; McGettigan, 2013; Brown, 2013) rather than contributing to the wider ‘public good’.

The case for cooperative higher education, which is the main focus of this paper, seems to be motivated largely by these perceived threats. First, however, it is necessary to subject these claims to close examination. While acknowledging that universities have become internally more unequal, it is not clear that governments are intent on undermining their ‘autonomy’ or that the nature of academic labour is being changed in any fundamental way. In this paper, therefore, I want to make the case for cooperative higher education on its own merits, not as a way of defending academic privilege against alleged depredations of government and capital.

What is the public good that universities claim to produce or serve? Strictly speaking, higher education is not a public good in the economic sense because, although it is non-rivalrous (one student’s learning does not subtract from that of any other student), it is not non-excludable (basically, universities can and do select their students). Actually, with the proportion of the UK population going to university increasing to 50% (DBIS, 2013), universities have become far more inclusive than they used to be but they are still far from being available to everybody. In economic terms, therefore, higher education is a *club good*, not a pure public good.

If the defence of universities is based on the claim that they serve the public good in an ethical sense (see, for example, Holmwood, 2011), however, one is bound to ask what this public good is, and what exactly universities do to achieve it. At this point, however, the ivory tower becomes shrouded in mist – a university is said to produce good citizens, critical thinkers, problem-solvers, etc, which seems to be all about the advantages gained from membership of the club without any evidence of how the public benefits from this, or to produce ‘knowledge’, whose benefits are not clearly specified. This is not to say that universities do not add value to society in some sense but this could just as well be private as public. It feels strange to talk of universities as providing a ‘public service’, and the reason for this is that it is really not clear what public they serve.

Rather than focusing on the ‘idea’ of a university or on ‘what are universities for?’ (Collini, 2011), which serve only to reintroduce the flawed ideas of Humboldt and Newman, we really need to look more closely at what universities do, what they produce, who are the producers and what are the means of production. There are many different kinds of labour processes within universities, non-academic as well as academic, and university employees operate within a variety of labour markets, but in all cases (except interns!) people hire out their labour power in return for a wage or salary. In this paper, I will consider just one type of labour, namely teaching.

Teaching is a distinctive kind of labour because its product (learning) is produced by students as well as by teachers – learners are both products and co-producers of education (Jones-Devitt and Samiej, 2011: 94; Somerville and Saunders, 2013). In economic terms, learning seems to be a ‘*relational good*’ (Uhlener, 1989) – that is, a good that is produced in the process of relating to someone else. Just to be clear: typically, cooperation is required to

produce private goods but a relational good is conveyed by the relationship itself. In the case of teaching, the relationship conveys learning, which is therefore a relational good (it is also a club good).

Relational goods are not ‘consumed’ in any meaningful sense, so it is inappropriate to refer to students as ‘consumers’ of learning. There is a sense, however, in which students can be said to be *customers* (of the university as provider) (Barnett, 2011: 43-5), and they also consume a range of university services other than teaching. Contrary to the opinion of some commentators, however, being a customer is perfectly compatible with being active in the production process – indeed, advanced liberalism seems increasingly to require people to be not only active workers and producers but also active consumers and active citizens (so long as they act in ways deemed to be appropriate by the authorities).

It is important to note that, in Marxist terms, the teacher-learner relationship has both use-value and exchange value. Although it is quite possible for either party to adopt an instrumental approach to the other, using the other as a means to some end other than that of learning, it is equally the case that the relationship can be based on open-ended dialogue and the broadening and deepening of understanding for the benefit of humanity and the planet. To put it crudely, the student may be interested only in getting a good degree (which has exchange value in the labour market), while the lecturer may be interested only in their own career, professional status, etc. Such instrumental concerns can, of course, be detrimental to the quality (or use-value) of the teacher-learner relationship. The problem with academic labour under capitalism then emerges more clearly in terms of increasing instrumentality (or utility, as the economists say) and the devaluing of relational goods (which cannot be exchanged). The use-value of education is becoming increasingly subordinated to the value it can fetch in the market. While already commodified in the labour market, education risks becoming commodified within the learning process itself. In practice, this could mean, for example, that lecturers get paid in proportion to their students’ satisfaction with their teaching (as a measure of the quality of that teaching). This sort of possible future scenario is probably what is most concentrating the minds of academics.

Co-operative higher education so far

As is well known, co-operatives are organisations that are democratically controlled and collectively owned by their members (Somerville, 2007; Woodin et al, 2010; Parnell, 2013). In contrast, at least in the UK, universities are controlled by their (unelected) governing bodies, and it is unclear who owns their assets.

The main attraction of a co-operative form for the governance of universities would appear to be its *autonomy* – co-operatives can protect themselves against both state interference and the depredations of corporate capitalism by means of an asset lock, which ensures that the assets of the organisation cannot be disposed of except to another co-operative. In addition, since co-operation lies at the heart of the learning process, as a relational good, the adoption of a co-operative form makes sound pedagogical sense. Most importantly, however, the co-

operative form, with its emphasis on democratic control by its members, challenges both the capitalist wage form and managerial hierarchy within the organisation.

Recently in the UK, cooperative education has taken off in schools, with over 700 co-operative trust schools and co-operative academies being created over the last few years (see www.co-operativeschools.coop). In a co-operative trust school (or network of schools), the categories of member are staff, parents, pupils and local community, all represented in a 'forum' that appoints trustees who appoint governors. In a co-operative academy, the school is sponsored by, for example, the Co-operative Group. This may sound fine but it does not appear to represent a democratic advance on previous forms of school governance, in which staff, parents and local community are directly represented on the school governing body, with staff and parent representatives being elected to that body. The representation of pupils is welcome, although a number of non-co-operative schools already go beyond this by having pupils elected onto their governing bodies. The main problem, however, is that these are not co-operatives at all. Co-operative academies are like the Co-op Bank, in that they are (loosely) controlled by the Co-operative Group but not by their members; and in co-operative trust schools, the links between the membership and the running of the school are far too tenuous – it is not clear how the governors who result from the cumbersome appointment process can be said to represent the membership at all (see further comments on the trust form below).

A similar trust model has recently been proposed for universities – the idea of a 'trust university' (Boden et al, 2012). Their model is explicitly based on the John Lewis Partnership:

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)

The advantages of this model are that it would protect university autonomy, enshrine in law the social and civic purposes of universities (effectively, converting them into social enterprises), and mandate universities to act towards the benefit of all their employees and students. This sounds all very well but it falls some way short of being a member-controlled organisation. Basically, a trust is not a co-operative because a trust is not a membership body. In this particular model, the university employees and students do not control the trustees and do not decide what is to their own benefit, and the employer/employee relationship form

seems to be retained intact, with the trustees now acting as the employers (the ‘partnership’ in the John Lewis Partnership is a myth). There is no challenge either to the capitalist wage form or to the internal managerial hierarchy. One could add that the concept of a trust derives from philanthropic traditions, not from the cooperative movement. Therefore, this is clearly ‘a sub-optimal model in comparison with a true co-operative’ (Cook, 2013: 36 – and see further criticism in Cook, 2013, fn70: 36-7; see also Winn, 2014: 8-10). The trust proposal seems to arise from a belief that the threats to the academy come entirely from outside when in fact the main threats are internal, particularly from managerial elites.

The only example of a co-operative university in the world seems to be that of the University of Mondragón, which is jointly owned by its academic and administrative staff, governed by a general assembly composed of one-third staff, one-third students and one-third outside supporters (mainly other co-operatives in the Mondragón Corporation) (Wright et al, 2011; Matthews, 2013; Cook, 2013: 25). Mondragón Corporation, however, is unique, being part of a social movement of Basque nationalism, and, although it claims to be a federated co-operative of workers’ co-operatives, it is not clear how far it challenges the hierarchical relationship between managers and workers (Kasimir, 1986; Whyte and Whyte, 1988). The University itself, while appearing to be more democratically controlled, is geared to serving the needs of industry and government in the Basque region (Wright et al, 2011) – that is, it seems to be an integral part of a corporate capitalist regime. There are doubts, therefore, about what can be learned from the Mondragón experience. As with nationalist movements elsewhere in the world, such as Peronism in Argentina, there may be a ‘political legacy of authoritarianism’ (Restakis, 2010: 212), which corrupts and co-opts organisations such as trade unions and co-operatives to a nationalist agenda. Nevertheless, research by Dan Cook (2013: 24) has shown that the Mondragón model of three equal categories of membership (staff, students and supporters) is the most popular one for a co-operative university. ‘Supporters’ here could include a wide variety of interested groups: alumni, businesses, the general public, other educational organisations, other co-operatives, local authorities, NGOs, and so on. I would add that nationalism accounts for the strength, viability and durability of the Mondragón Corporation, as well as its weakness, because it provides the culture and community within which its co-operatives flourish and thrive.

In a review of the literature on co-operative higher education, Winn (2014) identifies three different routes towards this goal: conversion, dissolution and creation. Briefly, conversion is about changing existing universities into co-operatives (see in particular Cook, 2013), dissolution is about embedding co-operativism within different parts of the university such as faculties, schools, research centres, degree programmes, modules, and so on (Juby, 2011; Ridley-Duff, 2011), and creation is about starting new higher education co-operatives from scratch – these latter are growing in number and seem to fall under the heading of ‘experiments’, relying on volunteers. Given the lack of substantive success so far, it seems sensible to keep an open mind with regard to which route to follow, though personally I find it difficult to see how partial efforts (dissolution) can hold sway within an established university or how experiments that depend on unpaid work (creation) can make a significant difference to how existing universities are run. Maybe the time has come to consider the

possibility of creating higher education co-operatives that involve paid work, even if the payments come from government or from students.

The future for co-operative higher education

Restakis (2010) has provided a vivid demonstration of how co-operatives around the world succeed only if they are embedded within wider co-operative cultures and movements – what he calls ‘an autonomous co-operative culture’ (Restakis, 2010: 51). He notes, for example, the remarkable growth of worker co-operatives in Italy since 1971:

The answer seems to lie within the ethic and social capital relations among co-operatives themselves once a critical mass of enterprises has been reached. Italian co-operatives mastered the art of mobilizing common interests. In addition, the presence of co-ordinating umbrella institutions capable of forging new partnerships, discerning long-term strategic opportunities at industry levels and mediating the establishment and mobilization of sector-wide resources has been a key factor in the Italian case.

(Restakis, 2010: 70)

He illustrates this with the case of the construction sector, in which small worker co-operatives were formed from the early 1900s, which then, over the years, joined together in consortia of co-operatives across the region of Emilia Romagna. The breakthrough came in 1978 with the merger of these consortia into a single regional consortium, facilitating a large expansion of operations, and finally in 1990 incorporation into a national consortium of building supplies co-operatives, becoming Italy’s leading construction enterprise (Restakis, 2010: 71). The power to create consortia would therefore appear to be key to the expansion of the co-operative model. But first there has to be movement from the workers themselves, a groundswell of opinion in favour of this particular model.

Restakis argues that co-operatives can have a highly positive effect on living in a capitalist system:

What co-operation can do is humanize a capitalist economy. It can foster and sustain economies of small enterprises that are rooted in community and yet can survive in a global marketplace. It can mitigate the catastrophic effects of large-scale, nomadic production systems and their impacts on the environment, the community and the character of work. Co-operation can provide a viable alternative to de-localization and the dehumanizing effects of work devoid of skill. It can cultivate a sense of shared purpose, a collective concern for the success of all enterprises, including one’s competitors, and an understanding that the success of one firm may be intimately connected to the success of all. The success of one enterprise does not require the failure of another.

(Restakis, 2010: 86)

Restakis thus recognises that successful co-operatives emerge from particular local and regional communities of co-operation, and these communities arise in different ways in different places. He notes that these communities include private enterprises as well as co-operatives and that the two types of organisation benefit from one another. This is what I

have called ‘community enterprise’ (Somerville and McElwee, 2011), a term that includes a variety of enterprises within a community that work closely together; only some of them may be democratically run but, taken together, they serve the community as a whole; those of them that are member-owned I have called ‘community co-operatives’ (Frith et al, 2009).

What Restakis calls ‘social co-operatives’ are health and social care co-operatives where workers or care-givers and care recipients or their families share control as members. This situation seems to come closest to that which exists in higher education where ‘relationships between care givers and users are paramount in determining the quality of care that is received’ (Restakis, 2010: 101 – compare teachers with care givers, students with users, and learning with care). Specifically, in both cases it is a question primarily of relational goods. Restakis (2010: 103) takes a strong line in arguing that: ‘Neither state bureaucracies, which depersonalize social service recipients, nor private sector firms, which instrumentalize recipients as a source of profit, can ever be suited to the provision of relational goods.’ That only leaves co-operatives but also, of course, family and informal care. It is not clear, however, why public provision has to be depersonalizing or, for that matter, why private provision is bound to be instrumentalizing. If they are, then it could be argued that they are not providing the quality of service required – an issue to be addressed by service commissioners and regulators! Problems with budget constraints can arise whatever the type of provider – why would it be any different for co-operatives?

Restakis (2010: 106) does actually admit that in both health and social care services, ‘the co-operative model has been most effective when it is developed as a complement to, not a substitute for, public services.’ He also appears to concede that social co-operatives will continue to need substantial government funding in order to be viable. He envisages a ‘social market’ in which government funding goes first to social co-operatives, then directly to care recipients who choose the services they need from these co-operatives, as well as to independent consumer co-operatives to help care recipients and their families use this system (Restakis, 2010: 113). If these ideas were now applied to higher education, it would mean that government funding would go directly to students, who choose the services they need from the providers (currently universities, which could be turned into co-operatives), and to student unions (for example) who provide support of this kind. In other words, this is basically the system we already have, except that the students receive a loan rather than a grant and the cost of the service provided bears little relation to what they pay for it!

The problem with Restakis’ arguments is that they do not directly address the issue of the internal organisation of the service itself and they ignore the problems that can arise from the dismantling of public services just to satisfy what is, in effect, a co-operativist ideology. This is important because it (unwittingly) highlights serious shortcomings in an approach that sees co-operativism as the answer to all our economic and social questions. Caring relationships, for example (and similarly for learning), are not fundamentally about exchange or reciprocity, although exchanges are certainly involved – rather, they are about encounter, shared experience, connection (on the same wavelength), and commitment (which can be conditional, i.e. dependent on reciprocation, but can also be unconditional, with no strings attached). One could ask what happens to those who cannot reciprocate and who have no

family to help them? They will need advocates on their behalf but who will appoint these advocates, pay their salaries and supervise them? This is what we expect public services to do, and what reason do we have to think that co-operatives would do it better than any other type of organisation?

I suspect that the social co-operatives in Italy are so successful because of the way they have emerged from, and continue to be embedded in, local and regional networks of co-operation. This is the same lesson we learn from Restakis' other examples such as the sex worker co-operative in Calcutta, the Small Organic Farmers' Association in Sri Lanka, the UCIRI co-operative in Mexico, Co-operativa Sin Frontera in Costa Rica, the recovered factories movement in Argentina, and so on – everywhere the 'good' co-ops are those that are rooted in community, while the 'bad' ones are those that are driven from the top, invariably by authoritarian national socialist governments (e.g. in Sri Lanka and in Argentina under Perón; one could also add the old USSR, Tanzania under Nyerere, Yugoslavia under Tito, etc – see Melnyk, 1985). Each successful example seems to function independently, but also occurs within a wider movement of working classes, small farmers and social entrepreneurs.

In the case of co-operative higher education, we seem to be a long way away from establishing such community roots but at least we can see that it is reasonable to start at a local level, e.g. with one's own university and try to build links with like-minded people in other localities/universities. To what extent, for example, might communities be supportive of moves to convert their local university into a co-operative? Where there already exist co-operatives in the area, particularly worker co-operatives, what relationships do they have with the university, and how can these be built upon? And so on.

Finally, Restakis sees a cooperative economy as an end in itself (a sort of moral economy, reminiscent of Adam Smith) but Marxists have argued that we need to go beyond this. Marx expressed this position as follows:

The co-operative factories of the labourers themselves represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new, although they naturally reproduce, and must reproduce, everywhere in their actual organisation all the shortcomings of the prevailing system. But the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome within them, if at first only by way of making the associated labourers into their own capitalist, i.e. by enabling them to use the means of production for the employment of their own labour. They show how a new mode of production naturally grows out of an old one, when the development of the material forces of production and of the corresponding forms of social production have reached a particular stage. (Marx, 1972: 440)

Here Marx clearly recognises that a worker co-operative is a significant advance within capitalism because it overcomes the division between capital and labour – essentially, workers become their own employers. The experience of running such a co-operative, therefore, provides an insight into what it could be like to work in a different mode of production, namely socialist production. However, the co-operative continues to function as a capitalist enterprise, with the workers being employed by the co-operative and the co-

operative itself acting in the market like any other enterprise. Collectively, the co-operative can decide how to distribute any surplus it may produce but this is tantamount to a power to decide, within certain limits, the rate of exploitation of its members. By the same token, the co-operative can decide what the wage levels of its individual members should be, but the wage form itself remains as an expression of the value of the collective labour power of the co-operative. Just like any other capitalist enterprise, the co-operative has to decide the balance of payments among wages, reinvestment, and loans, and the price its products are likely to fetch in the market.

Higher education, of course, is different from Marx's co-operative factory in a number of ways. It produces relational goods, whose value cannot be easily measured. It contains different categories of worker, e.g. academic, administrative, manual, who would have equal membership rights in a co-operative. And it includes students, who do not currently count as workers at all but who, on the Mondragón model, would collectively have equal rights with workers. Students are, in effect, the raw material for academic production, but the value of that material is not priced and would be very difficult to determine. Students, as graduates, are also the product of academic labour, and again this product is not priced, and the value added by the process of producing it is difficult to calculate. These values are not impossible to establish but I would question whether it is worthwhile doing so because I think the labour theory of value breaks down when it comes to the issue of distinguishing between the value contributed by students and that contributed by workers. Given that the production process involves relationship between the two, it seems to me that it cannot be divided into two separate value contributions. The only solution seems to be to dissolve the distinction between worker and student (Winn, ?) but that gives rise to further, more practical problems such as who pays whom and for what? Again these problems are not impossible to solve but very difficult. I would tentatively suggest that, while dissolving the distinction as much as possible within the labour process, payment should be made to workers in terms of the value of their work whereas students are rewarded in terms of the value that has been added to them by the process – in other words, the status quo!

It is difficult to see how this process can move beyond the co-operative form. Consider first what Marx (1972: 440) calls 'the development of the material forces of production'. In the case of the relational good that is learning, such development can only mean whatever contributes to the quality or value of learning – of the relationship between learner and teacher and of the resources deployed to support that relationship. In practice, however, a balance has to be struck between, on the one hand, the value that can be added through interaction between an individual teacher and a group of learners and, on the other hand, the value that can be added by a relationship between an individual teacher and an individual learner. This is basically a balance between efficiency and effectiveness: a lecture can reach a large number of students at the same time (so is more efficient), but the 'reach' to the student is uncertain and the contribution of the student to the learning process is small (so less effective); in contrast, a one-to-one tutorial can be tailored to the needs of the individual student and involve significant contribution from the student (so more effective), but uses up far more of the tutor's time per student (so less efficient). All of this is of course well known,

but my point is that both types of teaching method can develop the productive forces: lectures can be given to increasing numbers of students (and it is not clear where the limits lie), with increasing use of assistive technology, while tutorials can be conducted with increasing intensity, be more rigorously structured, and be based on a more holistic understanding of students' learning needs. The former increases the aggregate value of learning, while the latter increases the value of learning to each individual student. Both types of method therefore develop the productive forces of learning, though in different ways. At no point, however, can we see a new mode of production emerging. Even if the university is a co-operative (meaning that it has 'forms of social production' that correspond with the co-operative relationship between learner and teacher), and even if the formal distinction between worker and student is dissolved, the roles of learner and teacher continue – they do not magically transform into something else.

To conclude, I would suggest that the common pedagogical relationship in higher education already is a co-operative one and does not need to be transformed. What needs to be transformed are the unequal relationships within universities, not only between workers and managers but also between different categories of worker. A co-operative form seems the most sensible and practical way of achieving this. In order to establish such a form, however, there is a need for strong community support and for the development of consortia or federations of co-operative universities across regions, countries and perhaps internationally. Embeddedness of higher education in community then maybe could offer prospects for wider transformation into a co-operative, non-capitalist society.

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