


The co-operative university: Labour, property and pedagogy

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Abstract

I begin this article by discussing the recent work of academics and activists to identify the advantages and issues relating to co-operative forms of higher education, and then focus on the ‘worker co-operative’ organisational form and its applicability and suitability to the governance of and practices within higher educational institutions. Finally, I align the values and principles of worker co-ops with the critical pedagogic framework of ‘Student as Producer’. Throughout I employ the work of Karl Marx to theorise the role of labour and property in a ‘co-operative university’, drawing particularly on later Marxist writers who argue that Marx’s labour theory of value should be understood as a critique of labour under capitalism, rather than one developed from the *standpoint* of labour.

Keywords

Academic labour, co-operatives, higher education, Marx

Introduction

Co-operation remains the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production. (Marx, 1976: 454)

We recommend to the working men to embark in co-operative production rather than in co-operative stores. The latter touch but the surface of the present economical system, the former attacks its groundwork. (Marx, 1866)

Why should we be interested in reconstituting the university as a co-operative? To put this question another way: when confronted by the neoliberalisation of the university (Canaan and Shumar, 2008), its marketisation (Molesworth et al., 2011), its financialisation

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(McGettigan, 2013), the idea of the university being “gambled” and fallen into “ruins” (Readings, 1997), how should we respond? Writing about the use of injunctions to prohibit student protest, Bhandar concludes:

It is in all our interests to support students, academic and support staff, outsourced cleaners and others in their struggles to reconfigure the ownership of the university, and seize democratic forms of governance the better to create and distribute the social goods that we produce collectively, in spite of current government policies and management strategies. (Bhandar, 2013)

Bhandar recognises that directly confronting the issues of property and worker control of the university is *key* to getting anywhere.

As current as these issues are today in higher education, they have been confronted time and again in other industries. The history of capitalism is also the history of people contesting the organising principle of wage-labour and private property (Wood, 2002). The overriding and overwhelming logic of the capitalist mode of production is to divide and discard labour in the sole pursuit of value; “it promotes over-production, speculation and crises, and leads to the existence of excess capital alongside a surplus-population” (Marx, 1991: 350). Higher education can no longer be understood apart from these outcomes. Today, when the university has assumed the role and form of the factory (Edu-Factory, 2009), its workers are increasingly compelled to seek more radical models upon which to base the idea of the university, the pursuit of knowledge, and determination over their own lives. In a country like the UK where around 50% of young adults are entering higher education (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013a), this is clearly not just a question for university workers and their students, but for society in general. Here I develop the theoretical justification for co-operative higher education, focusing specifically on the political nature of such a project and the relationship between the pedagogical framework and the institutional form.

The discussion is grounded in Marx’s social theory and method: a historical materialist, dialectical and categorical critique of capitalism. Marx’s work is useful here because he developed a rigorous critique of political economy that remains relevant today. He identified co-operation as fundamental to the capitalist mode of production, yet regarded worker co-operatives as the most progressive organisational form, attacking the “groundwork” of capital, i.e. labour and private property, through worker autonomy and democracy. I specifically draw from a reading of Marx’s work which asserts that an adequate critique of capitalist social relations must be undertaken as a critique *of* labour, rather than from the *standpoint* of labour (Postone, 1993; Winn, 2014). Taking this approach, the form that labour takes under capitalism is to be abolished or overcome (*aufheben*), rather than elevated to the status of the revolutionary subject (Starosta, 2004).

Conversion, dissolution, creation

The idea of a ‘co-operative university’ is not new, but neither has it gained much traction until recently¹. A special issue of the *Journal for Co-operative Studies* (44, 3) focused on co-operative education, and a growing number of articles have discussed co-operative education in the UK state school system (Facer et al., 2012; Woodin, 2012). Only a small number of articles and conference items specifically discuss co-operativism and

higher education, broadly focused on three different routes to co-operative higher education.

1. *Conversion*: Constitute existing universities on co-operative values and principles (e.g. Boden et al., 2011, 2012; Cook, 2013; Dilger, 2007; Juby, 2011; Ridley-Duff, 2011; Wright et al., 2011).
2. *Dissolution*: Constitute co-operatives at the level of the department, research group, and curriculum (e.g. James and Neuberger, 1981; Juby, 2011; Ridley-Duff, 2011).
3. *Creation*: Build new co-operative experiments in higher education (e.g. Haubert, 1986; Social Science Centre, 2013; Somerville and Saunders, 2013; van der Veen, 2010; Woodhouse, 2011).

Since 2011, over 800 state schools have been constituted on co-operative values and principles (Facer et al., 2012; Wilson, 2013; Woodin, 2012); out of that intense activity the Co-operative College sponsored a report, *Realising the Co-operative University* (Cook, 2013). It discusses how and why universities in the UK might become co-operatives, what might appeal about co-operativism to academics and students, and the extent to which co-operative values and principles are already aligned with what we might think of as academic values and principles. Focusing mainly on the *conversion* of existing universities to co-operative universities, it also raises a number of points that apply across all three routes of *conversion*, *dissolution*, and *creation*. These include the legal title of ‘university’ in the UK; how to define membership; the size and organisational structure of the institution; and the advantages and disadvantages of workplace democracy. In summary, Cook (2013) regards the co-operative university as “an institution *in potentia*” (p.17), and his report suggests a range of practical considerations and further research questions when pursuing the idea of a co-operative university. It builds on work by Juby (2011), Ridley-Duff (2011), and others during and after the UK Co-operative Congress in 2011 and has reinvigorated discussion around the idea of co-operative higher education in a practical way.

However, the emerging literature on co-operative higher education has not adequately discussed the effect that this form of democracy would have on the respective roles and relationships between academics and students; nor has it questioned how the subsequent pedagogical relationship would connect to the meaning and purpose of the university as an institutional form for higher education. Thus the literature does not outline a coherent model of labour, property, and pedagogy as the basis of a co-operative university. In response to this, I focus the rest of this article on the *creation* route to the co-operative university, through discussion of the most radical co-operative model: the worker co-operative. Other types of co-operatives, such as the multi-stakeholder, consumer, and housing co-operative models warrant consideration elsewhere.

The worker co-operative form

The co-operative movement’s identity is expressed through a number of values and principles (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995). The values are the basis for the principles; the principles are the basis for action. All formally constituted co-operatives around the world identify with a statement based on the ‘Rochdale Principles’ of 1844, last revised in 1995 (MacPherson, 2007). The co-operative values are Self-help, Self-responsibility, Democracy, Equality, Equity, and Solidarity. The principles are Voluntary and

Open Membership; Democratic Member Control; Member Economic Participation; Autonomy and Independence; Education, Training and Information; Co-operation among Co-operatives; and Concern for Community.

The World Declaration on Worker Co-operatives (CICOPA, 2005) states that, “Worker cooperatives are committed to being governed by the...Statement on the Cooperative Identity”. The *Declaration*, approved by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 2005, defines the “basic characters” of worker co-operatives in six statements. These are concerned with the dignity of work and the importance of democratic self-management; the free association of workers; that members of the co-operative collectively employ themselves to undertake the work; the distinction of worker co-operatives from wage-labour and individual self-employment; democratic decision-making; and autonomy from the State and other third-parties with respect to management of the co-operative and control over the means of production.

Worker co-operatives, employee ownership, and worker self-management have a long and important history in the international labour movement and have been the subject of numerous theoretical works, case studies, and critical analyses (e.g. Bayat, 1991; Bernstein, 2012; Coates and Topham, 2005; Crouch and Heller, 1983; Erdal, 2011; Jossa, 2014; Mellor et al., 1988; Ness and Azzellini, 2011; Rothschild and Allen Whitt, 1986; Shukaitis, 2010; Vanek, 1977; Wajcman, 1983). In the 20th century, support for worker co-operatives in the UK gradually developed out of individual philanthropic initiatives such as the Scott-Bader Commonwealth (1951), which became the Society for Democratic Integration into Industry (1958) and in 1971 consolidated several firms into the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) (Quarter, 2000). This should be understood within the context of the growing Trade Union movement and the events of 1968 (Bayat, 1991: 20–23), when the socialist Institute for Worker Control (IWC) was formed. The IWC helped establish ICOM and sought to extend the modest achievements of Scott-Bader. The UK at this time saw a growth in worker co-operatives, in particular so-called ‘rescue co-operatives’ – failing firms that were taken over by their employees, often after periods of occupation (Mellor et al., 1988; Tuckman, 2011; Wajcman, 1983). Out of this activity emerged a need to improve legislation relating to employee ownership and ICOM pressed for a change in legislation. The Industrial Common Ownership Act (1976) reinforced and clarified the provision of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act (1965) (Axworthy and Perry, 1989).

Throughout the 1980s, all three major UK political parties advocated co-operatives. Labour viewed them as “a true socialist approach to economic planning and development”, the Liberals as contributing to “a vibrant ‘third sector’ of employee owned enterprises to enrich our economy and society”, and the Conservatives supported them under their policy of returning state-run industries to the private sector (Mellor et al., 1988: 52–53). Political commitment to the growth of co-operatives was consolidated in the Co-operative Development Agency Act (1978), which led to the creation of a national Agency and local Co-operative Development Agencies across the UK, offering practical assistance to individuals wishing to start a co-operative during that period of rising unemployment. In 2001, ICOM merged with the Co-operative Union to form Co-operatives UK, which is a member of the ICA, the trustee of the Co-operative College, and represented on the National Executive Committee of the Co-operative Party, aligned to the Labour Party.

In 2013, there were 497 worker co-operatives operating in the UK with a 27.5% share of turnover of all co-operatives (Co-operatives UK, 2013). Globally, the International Organisation of Industrial, Artisanal and Service Producers’ Cooperatives (CICOPA)

represents worker co-operatives. It is a sectoral organisation of the ICA with 45 members in 31 countries, including Co-operatives UK. In 2010 there were 111,200 worker, social, artisan, and worker-owned co-operatives worldwide (3725 classified as 'education'), with 83% in Europe and 12% in South America, estimated to employ up to four million people (CICOPA, 2010). Within this global context, there exists a single worker co-operative university, located in the Basque region of Spain.

Mondragon University

Mondragon University is part of the largest federation of worker co-operatives in the world (Erdal, 2011; Kasmir, 1996; Whyte and Whyte, 1988). Established in the 1950s, the Mondragon Corporation is a federated co-operative of 110 co-operatives and 147 subsidiary companies with over 83,000 workers (Mondragon Annual Report, 2012). The university itself is a 'co-op of co-ops', consisting of four autonomous co-operative faculties (Engineering, Business, Humanities and Education, and Gastronomic Sciences) with around 400 staff and 3700 students on six campuses. The Engineering Faculty dates from 1943, Business from 1960, Education from 1976, and in 1997 they were consolidated into a single university, with the Faculty of Gastronomic Sciences added in 2011. A range of degree programmes are offered (12 undergraduate and 10 Masters level), some in collaboration with other universities, and also doctoral research. It recently established Mondragon International Education (MIE), which "aims to transfer the University's model to higher education institutions in other countries", with a current focus on South America (Mondragon Annual Report, 2012: 48–49). In addition to the university, there are 15 technology centres and R&D units within the Mondragon Corporation, employing over 2000 researchers. In their field visit report, Wright et al. (2011) describe the university as "run according to a profit-oriented business logic but always following the premise of being a not-for-profit entity" (2011: 46).

Although referred to as a 'worker co-operative', there are three types of membership: workers (academics and professional staff), users (other co-operatives, businesses, and the local community) and students; it thus resembles a multi-stakeholder co-operative. Each membership category is a source of finance for the university. Worker members must invest around €15,000 in the university, which can optionally be taken from their social security payments over a 2-year period and "thus, they materially revoke a social contract with the state, in favour of one with their co-workers" (Wright et al., 2011: 45). Workers receive a share of the organisation's surplus as salary, which is distributed in anticipation of the year's financial results, and may go up or down. The personal investment each worker has in the university is "crucial to creating a genuine understanding of what it is to be an owner. Workers become personally but collectively involved in making decisions" (p.45). The collective drive towards individual gain is "mitigated" by constant discussion of the co-operative's values and aims. The university maintains a governing structure similar to that of a conventional university, subject to the oversight of a Faculty General Assembly comprised of one-third each of workers, users, and students; "this is where the final decisions are taken on the basis of one-member, one-vote" (p.48).

Student members of Mondragon broadly consist of individuals on conventional degree programmes, and workers being up-skilled for new tasks elsewhere in the corporation. As a private university, it does not receive the substantial state subsidies provided to public institutions, and charges students two-thirds of the full fees of €9000 a year, with the

remaining third subsidized by consultancy and short courses. The university has established a co-operative to employ students, who earn money to pay for their tuition fees while studying (Wright et al., 2011: 46). Wright and colleagues argue that Mondragon offers a real alternative to the neoliberal university in a number of ways: (1) the employee/employer relationship is replaced by direct worker ownership of the university, arguably overcoming exploitation through the wage relationship, and students are not regarded as mere consumers; (2) the number of administrators, reconceptualised as 'facilitators', is significantly reduced; (3) responsibility for the running of the university, from its pedagogical approaches to its financial strategy, is shared and undertaken collaboratively; (4) the importance of "structural arrangements and processual rules" are key to the successful governance of the university; and (5) a "shared ethos of solidarity and co-operation" is essential (Wright et al., 2011: 54).

This model raises the important question of 'what is a university for?' At Mondragon, interviewees repeatedly emphasised that "the purpose of MU is to gear education, research and knowledge exchange to support the future development of companies or local institutions" (Wright et al., 2011: 53). The institutional form of the university has been consolidated around this business-driven objective, and Wright et al. recognise that this may not be desirable if we regard the role of universities to be the "'critic and conscience' of society" (Wright et al., 2011: 54). Mondragon University's mission appears largely functional, the training and research arm of the Mondragon Corporation and local businesses; the Vice Chancellor has stated, "there is no ground for research that has no return" (Matthews, 2013). Whether Mondragon represents a radical departure from the 'entrepreneurial university' model advocated in recent years is questionable. Further ethnographic study could explore its unique character as the only current worker co-operative university.

In her critical study, prior to the consolidation of the university in its current form, Kasmir (1996) pointed to the "myth" of co-operative, worker democracy in the Mondragon Corporation, a myth derived from the views of managerial staff rather than general workers. Her study, from the point of view of the worker rather than the manager, found that the "worker owners are not shielded from the forces of the world market" and that "workplace democracy does not ameliorate [the] daily pressures" of having to operate in a competitive market-economy that ceaselessly requires improvements in productivity and efficiency (Kasmir, 1996: 194). She notes an emphasis on the co-operative as a business form, rather than a political form, which "seems to generate commitment and activism among managers" while "workers do not make effective use of the democratic and participatory structures available to them" (p.195).

Surprisingly, Kasmir also found that Mondragon co-operative workers "do not consider the firms *theirs* in any meaningful way", concluding that "property itself does not transform workers, though ideologies of worker ownership and cooperation do remake working classes in other ways" (Kasmir, 1996: 197). Indeed, a "central finding" of her study is that co-operativism "can divide working classes" as it transforms the consciousness of a segment of the class in contrast to other workers (p.198). This suggests the need to critique the concept of 'workplace democracy'. She suggests that the practice of democracy is more successful when it is grounded in daily politics and linked to activism; "If workplace democracy is to be genuine, it seems it must be premised on activism" (p.199), which recognises that co-operation and co-operatives are "political and ideological constructs" that serve a variety of political interests (p.200).

Theory and method for the co-operative university

Universities in the UK are increasingly discussed in the language of productivism, in terms of economic growth and the reproduction and integration of the labour market (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013b; Universities UK, 2014). They are regulated by and receive funding from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. Within the higher education industry, universities can be conceived as a ‘means of production’, i.e. as “the instruments and the object of labour” which, when combined with purposeful human activity, becomes a “productive force” (Marx, 1976: 284–287). In considering the university as a means of production, we refer to the configuration of its “instruments” (e.g. technology, buildings, etc.), and the “object on which that work is performed” (e.g. prior knowledge). In other words, the ‘means of production’ refers to the university’s structural, technological, and bureaucratic configuration as a form of capital for the production of knowledge. The university incorporates prior knowledge into its production process, and the knowledge it produces is offered as the ‘subject of labour’ elsewhere, resulting in capital accumulation (i.e. ‘growth’). The academic and student are brought together by this configuration in order to produce new knowledge through their labour. Knowledge is commodified in various ways, such as patents, research articles, consultancy, etc., and most importantly in the student’s primary commodity of labour-power, which they sell in the labour market (Winn, 2014).

There is a danger that by advocating the worker co-operative form we reinforce and reproduce the university as a means of capitalist production. Although worker co-operatives are often established in opposition to the imperatives of the capitalist mode of production, they cannot simply choose to exist outside its totalising trajectory. Despite the possibility and emancipatory potential of reproducing social life in the interstices or ‘cracks’ of capitalism (Holloway, 2010), a fundamental premise of a historical materialist understanding of human life is that our collective ability to act in the world is conditioned by the material conditions of production and the way in which labour is actually constituted (Marx and Engels, 1975: 31–32). This does not deny that individuals are able to speculate and imagine circumstances different to what materially exists, but posits that consciousness is an outcome of historical, material conditions and that our ability to actually *act* upon our ideas and *change* the course of history requires a rigorous understanding of the conditions of social life (Marx and Engels, 1975: 37).

Much has been written about the relationship between the co-operative movement and capitalism, including work focused on worker co-operatives as anti-capitalist or post-capitalist social forms (e.g. Egan, 1990; Jossa, 2014; Vieta, 2010). I share the view of Shukaitis that worker co-operatives should be understood as the practice of an “immanent critique” (Shukaitis, 2010: 63) of the capitalist mode of production and its configuration of waged labour, agreeing that “at its best such a project becomes a laboratory for the creation of forms of social cooperation and subjectivities that arguably would form the basis of a post-capitalist world”. With further clarification, I also share Shukaitis’ view that worker co-operatives might also be a “model of prefigurative politics” (p.62). In the political context, ‘prefigurative’ and ‘immanent’ represent two forms of praxis.

On one hand, prefigurative practices are the “embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1977: 100). This is a *positive* standpoint that affirms the possibility of agency while acknowledging its historical and material limits. To the extent that worker co-operatives are prefigurative, this positive approach

undialectically reifies the standpoint of the worker in the co-operative as embodying its own emancipatory kernel. This affirmation of labour has been the standpoint of almost all worker struggle of the 20th century, and as both a theoretical and strategic position it must urgently be questioned (Kurz, 2014; Postone, 1993).

On the other hand, worker co-operatives can be understood as establishing a *negative* standpoint, as a practised immanent critique. Such a critique is what Postone conceives as a reflexive attempt to critically confront “both the reality and the ideals of capitalist society, indicating the historically determinate character of both” (Postone, 1993: 89). Thus, as a negative critique this particular co-operative constitution of labour points to what *is*, and therefore what *is not* (but *could be*). Understood as *both* positively prefigurative and as negative, immanent critical practice, we can argue that the labour of a worker co-operative “is not undertaken on the basis of what is but of what could be, as a potential immanent to the existent society” (p.90).

Egan offers a thoughtful discussion of worker co-operatives understood as a dialectical response to capital, and argues that “the importance of connecting worker management with class struggle lies in providing a measure of safe space in which labor-managed firms can challenge this class imposed limit [on efficiency]” (Egan, 1990: 81). He makes a compelling argument for the worker co-operative form on its own terms, concluding that the “potential for degeneration [of worker co-ops into capitalist firms] must be seen to lie not within the co-operative form of organisation itself, but in the contradiction between it and its capitalist environment. Degeneration is not, however, determined by this contradiction” (p.81). Such a position accords with the dialectical practice of worker co-operatives as being both an immanent critique of the *is*, and prefigurative of the *ought*. In order to develop this dialectical form of critical praxis, grounded as it must be in theoretical categories adequate to capitalist society, we might begin by examining the central category of the commodity form.

Work in the worker co-operative university

The commodity form was a fundamental category in Marx’s critique of political economy (Marx, 1976, 1978). A commodity is comprised of ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’; use-value being the utility of something and exchange-value being the expression of the thing’s ‘value’. Marx discovered that the commodity form is derived from the particular character of labour in capitalism, which takes on a two-fold concrete and abstract social form. ‘Concrete labour’ refers to the specific effort that produces the thing of utility (i.e. the use-value) and ‘abstract labour’ refers to the social reduction of labour to an undifferentiated, homogenous form. As such, abstract labour is the qualitative, commensurable ‘substance’ of a commodity’s value, which is quantified retrospectively by the labour time that is socially (i.e. on average) necessary to produce the use-value.

Marx showed that the ‘value-form’ of a commodity can be analysed on four levels, ranging from the most abstract ‘simple form’, to the ‘expanded’ and the ‘general’, and finally most concentrated, concrete, ‘money form’. The simple form expresses “the secret of the entire value form” (Marx, 1978: 134) and consists of the ‘relative value form’ and the ‘equivalent form’. When two commodities are brought together for exchange they represent “two poles of the expression of value”, which are “inseparable” (p.135). Marx discussed the simple form in terms of the relationship between commodity A (linen) and commodity B (coats), showing how in the exchange process, x amount of linen takes on the relative value form of y number of coats; therefore the social measure of labour contained in the coats is deemed equivalent to

a given amount of linen. The relationship can be analysed inversely from the point of view of the coats being relative to the equivalent amount of linen. With dialectical rigour, Marx demonstrates how this *abstract* simple form actually operates in society through the *concrete* use of money, which acts as a universal equivalent for all commodities.

In this way, the commodity is the “economic cell form” (Marx, 1976: 90) from which we can dialectically analyse the capitalist mode of production and its apparent determination of social life. The value-form of the commodity is the social form through which we actually relate to one another in society, as consumers, producers, and as legal subjects (Pashukanis, 1989). Marx argued that an individual’s primary commodity is his or her own labour-power, or capacity to labour, which is sold for money. Thus we possess commodities that take on the reciprocally relative and equivalent poles of the value form in relation to money and to one another (Marx, 1993: 700–701). This is what Marx meant when he referred to ‘indirect labour’, which is mediated by the exchange relationship found in the value form. Its emancipatory opposite, ‘direct labour’, requires exchange value (i.e. value) to be abolished, and with it also the whole system of equivalence instituted by capitalism (Hudis, 2013; Marx and Engels, 1975; Postone, 1993).

What is key here is that in a normal employer–employee relationship the exchange of money for labour-power is actually not equivalent at all. Although the wage relation at first *appears* equivalent because the wage paid is the market value of labour-power (Marx, 1977), labour is unique in that it can be exploited in order to create surplus-value (i.e. profit) for the capitalist; this is achieved by either extending the working day or increasing productivity (Marx, 1976: 427). If labour-power was not exploited in these ways, the capitalist could not create a surplus and the whole mode of production would crumble. This is the fundamental antagonism within the capitalist mode of production, which worker co-operatives attempt to overcome by abolishing the employer–employee relationship and therefore the exploitation of labour-power. By doing so, it is intended that relations between worker-owners of the co-operative are not mediated through value (although their relations with people elsewhere still are), and they are in a stronger position to institute democracy in the workplace and address the division of labour and ownership of property.

In addition to worker democracy in a co-operative university, the exchange relationship between paid teachers (producers) and paying students (consumers) must be overcome so that the value-form of the knowledge commodity ceases to determine the character of the co-operative. In the first instance, the distinction and divide between teachers and students must be addressed through a reconfiguration of the division of labour so as to ensure that individuals in both roles contribute according to their individual capacity and need in the process of knowledge production, rather than a system of equivalence that is resolved in the form of money. Whereas in a conventional, capitalist university, there is a great *diversity of roles* and their respective contractual responsibilities, this division of labour ensures that the *diversity of work* within any given role is constrained. In a worker co-operative university as conceived here, there is a singular role of ‘scholar’, but a greater diversity of work and significantly less division of labour. According to the individual’s capacity, the teacher is also a student, an administrator, a cleaner, etc., and a co-operative university need not do everything that a conventional university aims to do. Labour among members is not divided but is instead *direct*, based on a positive acknowledgement that abilities and needs differ, instead of an *indirect* exchange of teaching and learning labour, compensated and mediated by money so as to achieve a form of equivalent value.

An academic commons

The division of labour was recognised by Marx and Engels as contributing towards the alienation of labour from its product and reinforcing the institution of private property (Marx and Engels, 1975: 32). Many worker co-operatives aim to overcome the division of labour through the rotation and sharing of roles, and co-operation between co-operatives. As discussed, Marx understood divided labour as 'indirect' labour mediated through the value-form in the exchange process, such that the labour-power of divided individuals, and their product, assume the roles of relative and equivalent commodities. Worker co-operatives can be understood as a form of instituted praxis attempting to replace indirect labour with 'direct', non-mediated, and therefore non-alienated labour. Such a form of labour requires that the property of the co-operative becomes 'social property', an alternative to the paradigms of private and public property. The legal basis for this in the UK is the Industrial Common Ownership Act (1976). Thus, in a co-operative university, where the labour of both students and academics is not divided into contractual roles but according to capacity and need, the property of the co-operative becomes the social property of all member-scholars. This form of property is also known as a 'commons'. Co-operatives UK's model constitution for worker co-operatives (Co-operatives UK, n.d.), includes the option of 'common ownership', which is given legal form in the 1976 Act.

In a university constituted on this basis, its scholars would *collectively* 'own' the means of knowledge production. Implicit in this model of a worker co-operative is that 'common ownership' is not private property shared among a designated group of people, but rather their status is more like 'membership', where workers produce and manage shared assets for individual, collective, and long-term social benefit. Axworthy and Perry (1989) regard this form of property as the antithesis of "the right of free alienability" which distinguishes capitalist private property. They point to the co-operative's defining characteristic of "non-distribution upon dissolution" (Axworthy and Perry, 1989: 660) as ensuring that this form of property is particularly durable. It gives property a peculiar social life of its own, which is not simply a temporary composite owned by a collective of individuals seeking personal gain. The role of the member-worker in such a co-operative amounts to a social role of steward, thus differing from the more conventional roles of Trustee or Share-holder, neither of whom are required to be workers in the enterprise, as well as differing from an individual equity model. Marx recognised that such co-operatives are not *public*, but neither are they *private* in the way a joint-stock company represents "the abolition of capital as private property within the confines of the capitalist mode of production itself" (Marx, 1991: 567). A 'Common Ownership Enterprise' fulfils Marx's expectations regarding the property relations of joint-stock companies being a "necessary point of transition" in the overcoming of capitalism. Common ownership is not simply the property of associated producers but truly a form of "directly social property". It extends beyond "the transformation of all functions formerly bound up with capital ownership in the reproduction process" by decisively breaking that link (p.568). Whereas the joint-stock company is "private production unchecked by private ownership" (p.569), a workers' co-operative is social production governed by a legal form of social or common stewardship. Common ownership of the means of knowledge production among scholar-members of a co-operative university would therefore be a significant step towards an institutional form of academic labour that is not alienated from its product in the way that private property enforces.

Pedagogy and institutional form

As discussed, her critical study of the Mondragon Corporation led Kasmir to conclude that we must “be sceptical of models that make business forms rather than people the agents of social change” (Kasmir, 1996: 199–200). In contrast to the historical materialist view, she makes an analytical distinction between human social relations and the institutional forms those relations take. This distinction can be resolved if we adopt the dialectical immanent/prefigurative position discussed above, recognising the antinomy inherent in the relation between capital and wage labour, and instead conceiving human agency as dialectically opposed to the agency of “objectified forms that become quasi-independent of, and exert a form of abstract social domination over, the individuals who constitute them” (Postone, 1993: 31). This approach suggests that in working towards an emancipatory form of education, the organisational form is itself an expression of the struggle between individuals and the objective conditions of capital which dominate us. As such, the constitution of a different organisational form (e.g. a co-operative) can be conceived as a political act against the agency of capital’s “determinate quasi-objective constraints” (Postone, 1993: 80).

In the context of higher education, the institutional form expresses the relationship between research and teaching (Brew, 2006). Reconstituting this relationship is one of the core activities of a project I have been involved with since 2008 called ‘Student as Producer’. In this section, I want to offer a brief survey of recent work on Student as Producer (Neary and Winn, 2009; Neary, 2010; Neary and Hagyard, 2010; Neary, 2012a; Neary, 2012b; Neary and Amsler, 2012; Neary et al., 2014), and propose it as a pedagogical framework for a new form of co-operative higher education; one which attacks the groundwork of the neoliberal university.

Student as Producer is concerned with “re-engineering” the university so as to redress the “dysfunctional” relationship between teacher and student, which reflects the dysfunctional relationship between research and teaching in the modern university (Neary and Winn, 2009). It is both a theoretical and practical political project, a form of praxis being worked on in, against, and beyond the university. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Author as Producer’ (Benjamin, 1934), Student as Producer emphasises not only the qualitative nature of the product (i.e. knowledge), but also on the process and means of knowledge production in the creation of social relations that are antithetical to the organising principles of capitalist social relations (i.e. private property and waged labour).

Neary and Hagyard (2010) argue that a radical pedagogical framework, adequate to the challenges facing humanity, must be grounded in the politics of production rather than distribution and consumption. They argue that higher education must be politicised, or rather, the politics of higher education must be made apparent, and this requires the reorganisation of intellectual and manual labour, rather than its continued division. The authors argue that the purpose of higher education is not the production of students for wage labour, but rather the production of knowledge appropriate to the needs of humanity. Research is demystified as “work anyone can do” and should be informed by its own radical history. This does not simply apply to the Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities, but also the theoretical and applied sciences which have their own radical history (e.g. Moore, 2013; Wisnioski, 2012). One way to connect, or rather dissolve, traditional disciplines is through their shared radical histories.

As well as Benjamin, Neary (2010) also draws upon the work of Lev Vygotsky (1997), arguing that the basis for transforming institutions of higher education is the transformation of the role of the student. For Vygotsky, the student becomes the student-worker. The role

of the student is not simply a ‘collaborator’, or the learner of skills, but an active contributor to the labour process of the university (i.e. the production of knowledge), within which they find their own purpose and meaning. The division of intellectual and manual labour is overcome through the recognition of education as a form of productive labour itself. By revealing the organising principle of knowledge production, the university becomes grounded in the productivity of its students. The student becomes the subject rather than object of history – they make history – and humanity becomes the project rather than the resource. Teaching begins from the student’s experience in a particular social context; the students teach themselves and are no longer alienated from the production of knowledge: they “recognise themselves in a world of their own design” (Neary and Hagyard, 2010: 8). Therefore, Student as Producer and indeed the *idea* of the university is fundamentally a political project, directly engaged with its existing productivist form. Political subjectivity is “the essential objective reality out of which practical, critical knowledge is derived” (Neary, 2012b: 3). The institutional form itself should be partisan, supporting this political project.

Student as Producer exists *for* knowledge and *against* the ‘knowledge worker’ (Neary, 2012b), using the language and protocols of the university subversively (i.e. as a way to ‘interoperate’ with the neoliberal university, the State, markets, etc.) without taking on its form. It recognises that “the production of knowledge is immediately the production of subjectivity and the construction of organisation” (Roggero, 2011: 138). The institutional form is therefore constructed from the subjectivity of its members, formed through the co-operative production of knowledge, attempting to overcome labour in its capitalist form which is a “fabrication” of the social relations of capitalist production. With this pedagogical framework, the issue for the worker co-operative is to discover a way to practice non-alienated, non-abstract, direct labour. This is at the heart of the university’s research project: the discovery of a new form of social being. Can the co-operative university be conceived and constituted existentially and ontologically? How can we *become* the university in the form of ‘mass intellectuality’, rather than ‘go to university’? (Neary and Winn, 2009).

Neary and Amsler (2012) conceive the neoliberal university as a peculiar expression of commodified space-time, an “abstract space” ruled by the logic of abstract labour, whereby the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student is configured for the production of value. An opposing organisational form would seek to overcome the power of these abstractions by re-configuring the pedagogical relationship so as to abolish knowledge in its commodity form. Education “cannot be separated from ‘life’ in institutions” (Neary and Amsler, 2012: 109) and so all aspects of the institution must be understood to be educational or pedagogical. If we “have rather lost control over the form, structure and function of academic knowledge” (p.116), might worker co-operatives be a conscious attempt to *assert* control, *constitute* an organisational form, and *define* a different (e.g. democratic, horizontal, consensus-based) social structure for the production of academic knowledge? If “the space of the university is mobilised for the purposes of production through its commodification, abstracting, converting into exchange value, fetishizing and modularising” (Lefebvre, 2008: 338), might the worker co-operative form resist these imperatives? Is it simply a “diversion” that will inevitably degenerate, or an appropriation of a different space and time, which through struggle as a form of immanent critique can aid the *transition* to post-capitalism? Must a worker co-operative for higher education *possess* a physical space in time, or can a new space-time be *constituted* through its social form?

Student as Producer is the institutional strategy for teaching and learning at the University of Lincoln (<http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>). Within that context, it

should be understood as a large-scale project operating *inside* and across the university, grounded in social theory that is *against* what the university has become. It offers a framework to students and academics for the *conversion* of the university into an institution grounded in a theory of co-operative knowledge production, and which recognises that the organising principle of wage work and private property exists at the heart of the modern university. More than this, in its most subversive moments, Student as Producer has been an attempt by some of us to *dissolve* the university into a different institutional form, based on a social, co-operative endeavour between academics and students. We have used the bureaucratic structures of the university to support and safeguard this process. In every programme and module validation, academics and students are asked to consider how their work could incorporate greater co-operation between students and teachers through the principle of *research-engaged teaching and learning* so that students discover for themselves the processes of knowledge production, within which they will find their own place and meaning. In this way, Student as Producer is an intervention into the curriculum design process, aiming “to promote research-engaged teaching as the organising principle for teaching and learning across all subjects and all levels of taught provision at Lincoln” (Neary et al., 2014: 5).

The extent to which it is possible to achieve our revolutionary ambitions within the structures of an existing university is of course questionable; although the project’s impact, inside and outside the institution, is tangible (Neary et al., 2014). However, over time the subversive, radical language of avant-garde Marxists such as Benjamin is easily subverted and expressed in the more familiar language of consumption. Thus across the sector it is now common to hear of ‘Students as Partners’ (Higher Education Academy, n.d.) or ‘Change Agents’ (JISC, 2013). Although informed by Student as Producer, such initiatives are more aligned with the marketing principles of ‘Service Dominant Logic’, the ‘co-creation of value’, and ‘prosumption’ (Naidoo et al., 2011: 1151) rather than, as Benjamin insisted on, a deep reflection on the conditions of present-day production.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how the worker co-operative form might be suitable for a new kind of university, in the light of how the international co-operative movement defines the ‘character’ of worker co-operatives, and the re-conceptualisation of academic labour that this organisational form would imply. I have asserted that, as it exists today, the university is a means of production employed by capital, with academic labour, to reproduce labour in the form of students, and value in the commodity form of knowledge. A worker-owned and managed co-operative university would therefore control the means of knowledge production and potentially produce a new form of social knowledge. I highlighted the emphasis among worker co-operatives on ‘common ownership’, a form of property relations that overcomes the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ to produce an ‘academic commons’, such that all members of the university become stewards for the social good. Finally, I suggested that the distinction between teacher and student would necessarily be dissolved through a mutual political project, and with it the division of labour, too. To achieve this, a radically different method of curriculum development and pedagogy would be required. Responding to Kasmir’s strictures on the dangers of models that make business forms rather than people the agents of social change, I argued that the organisational form of a ‘co-operative university’ should itself be derived from the pedagogical relationship between

teacher-student-scholar-members, i.e. ‘scholars’, and suggested that the basis of this pedagogical relationship might be Student as Producer. The curricula for a co-operative university remain to be determined by its scholar-members, no doubt informed by its own radical political tradition (Facer et al., 2012: 331; Woodin, 2011).

Against the objective constraints of capital, the institutional form should not determine the design of curricula or the pedagogic relationship between teacher and student, but rather it should be an expression of it, arrived at through a dialectic of political struggle against capital and therefore against the capitalist form of labour. What is required is the emergence of an institutional form which adequately expresses the radical aspirations of academics and students who see themselves as subjects rather than objects of history: the worker co-operative, perhaps? This article has aimed to contribute towards the process of creating pedagogic space to reflect on, discuss, and question the idea of what higher education might be, and could be.

Note

1. Readers may wish to refer to a bibliography that I have compiled, of work specifically discussing co-operative higher education: <http://joss Winn.org/2013/11/co-operative-universities-a-bibliography/>

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