

# Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

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BEYOND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE:  
A MODEL FOR CO-OPERATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Krisis 2015, Issue 2: Perspectives for the New University  
[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

There is an alternative

We are witnessing an 'assault' on universities (Bailey and Freedman 2011) and the future of higher education and its institutions is being 'gambled' (McGettigan 2013). For years now, we have been warned that our universities are in 'ruins' (Readings 1997). We campaign for the 'public university' (Holmwood 2011) but in the knowledge that we work for private corporations where the means of knowledge production is being consolidated under the control of an executive. We want the cops off our campus but lack a form of institutional governance that gives academics and students a democratic and constitutional right to the university (Bhandar 2013).

In 2010, following a policy review into higher education in England (Browne 2010), the newly elected Coalition government increased tuition fees three-fold and removed all public funding from the arts, humanities and the social sciences. This was an intensification of neo-liberal government policies which have been ongoing since the 1980s (Shattock 2012). The policy sparked a wave of protests and student occupations against the increase in fees and the introduction of other austerity measures (Palmieri and Solomon 2011). An important debate at the time among the protes-

tors was that there should be democratic alternatives proposed to capitalist and corporate higher education, rather than simply an attempt to defend the public university: getting beyond the public and private models of higher education as currently constituted (Neary 2012). Current approaches to understanding the changes in UK higher education remain tied to deeply-rooted conceptions of public and private (Neary 2012). Ours is not an argument for or against the privatisation of public higher education but an attempt to go beyond these categories through praxis. This praxis means not only free from financial imperatives but real academic freedom (Wintour 2015).

We suggest there is an alternative: co-operative higher education. The framework for a co-operative model of higher education proposed here offers a challenging perspective to the wide-ranging debates about the future of democratic public higher education that 'kicked off' in England in 2010 and around the world (Mason 2011). These debates have re-emerged with renewed intensity during the recent spate of University occupations in the Netherlands and at a number of London University Colleges. We recognise the importance of fighting to maintain free public higher education as well as defending democratic academic values within the current university system, and we want to celebrate the achievements of Rethink UoA and the 'New University Movement' as well as the Free Education campaign in England. At the same time we are aware of the continuing dangers of co-option, recuperation and exhaustion as negotiations for institutional reform progress through the complex labyrinth of university committee structures; as well as the ever-present threat of police violence that hangs over any academic and student protest. In this context it is important to continue with experiments in democratic decision-making in ways that constitute a genuine transfer of power from the current university leadership and management to students, academics and other forms of university labour, including cleaners, porters and catering staff.

We argue that while trade unions are a vital element in this process of democratic worker participation, we should be aware of the international co-operative movement as another aspect of working class history and culture from which much can be learned about collective decision-making, along with the institutional and organisational forms within

which decision-making as well as other participatory and collective activities take place. Already, outside the university, there are institutional examples of co-operative association that attempt to address issues of ownership and control over the means of production through a radical form of democracy among those involved. Co-operatives are constituted on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, autonomy, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In many cases the assets of the co-operative are held under ‘common ownership’, a social form of property that goes beyond the distinction between private and public.

The possibility of this alternative is bringing together scholars, students, and expert members of the co-operative movement to design a viable model for co-operative higher education. Using our experience of running the Social Science Centre, a co-operative for higher education in the city of Lincoln since 2011, we are interrogating our existing constitution and pedagogic practices to develop a theoretically and practically grounded model of a ‘co-operative university’ that activists, educators and the International Co-operative Alliance could take forward.

## The Social Science Centre

The Social Science Centre (SSC) (<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk>) organises co-operative higher education in Lincoln, UK and is run by its members. It was conceived in response to the 2010-2015 Coalition government’s changes to higher education funding in the UK; a time when students were occupying their universities in protest against these changes and the model of public higher education in the UK was undergoing rapid marketisation and financialisation that was undemocratic (McGettigan 2013) and imposing a ‘pedagogy of debt’ (Williams 2009).

The SSC was not the only attempt to create a ‘free university’ (Bonnett, 2013), but it is the most sustained and lasting of these efforts. One of the reasons for this is because it was given constitutional form as a democratic member-run organisation that is constitutionally the common property of its current 53 members. Recently, the idea of a ‘co-operative university’

has gained traction among educators and scholars in part drawing inspiration from the SSC, the conversion of state schools to co-operatives (Facer et al., 2012; Woodin 2012) and long-term efforts to teach co-operativism within higher education (Winn 2013).

The SSC can be understood through a conceptual framework of ‘in, against and beyond’ the institutional forms in which it was constituted (Holloway 2002). It was conceived by academics who have been developing a progressive pedagogical framework and model of curriculum development called Student as Producer within the constraints of the capitalist university (<http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>). Through this work, we seek to question and reconceive the idea of the university as a social form and work against what it has become (Neary and Winn 2009). We aim to go beyond the conventional paradigms of public and private and constitute in practice a form of higher education grounded in the work of theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1934) and Lev Vygotsky (1997), the social history, values and principles of the international co-operative movement (Yeo 1988), and emerging practices of reciprocity which are constituting a new form of academic commons (Neary and Winn 2012).

## Everyday Life at the SSC

Since it was established in 2011, the SSC has run courses in the Social Sciences, broadly conceived, and taught at the level of higher education (Social Science Centre 2013). These courses have been on The Social Science Imagination; The History of the Co-operative Movement; and Know How: Do It Ourselves Higher Education. We offer awards that are equivalent to university degrees, based on our own peer-assessments with no external accreditation. These courses take place in the evening once a week for two hours in premises marked for public use, e.g., community centres, museums, voluntary organisations, cafes and even the pub. The curriculum is decided by the group, with the teaching duties shared by all members, teachers and students, recognising that we all have much to learn from each other. All members of the co-operative are referred to as ‘scholars’ so there is no formal distinction between teachers and students,

demonstrating our commitment to the principles of equality and democracy. We have a workshop session each year to decide the taught programmes, which are regularly reviewed and refreshed.

The SSC has arranged sessions on social photography and poetry. We have organised a lecture series on matters to do with 'The Secret State', 'Community Football' as well as an international conference on Co-operative Learning. This year we had an event where a range of speakers from the co-operative movement spoke about worker co-operatives, how to set up your own local co-operative, and the history of co-operative education in our city.

As well as the educational sessions we have regular planning meetings to deal with the everyday organisation of the co-operative. The students and teachers tend to be members of the SSC so we all have an equal say in the running of the Centre. We pay a lot of attention to making our events accessible to all, including children. The SSC is a local community project but we would like to find ways of connecting more directly with some of the main issues of local concern and to be able to offer ourselves as a community resource, not only for teaching and learning but also for research. We worry about the extent to which we are a genuine alternative to mainstream higher education, or a space to imagine what that alternative might look like. Sometimes it feels like we are simply replicating the very model of a university outside of the formal structures of higher education. This is something we talk about a great deal, so it never feels as if the project is 'finished' or has realised its full potential. Members of the Centre are committed to the theoretical underpinnings for such a project, but we are also deeply committed to the mundane reality of keeping the SSC alive. The SSC remains experimental in form and an appropriate laboratory for the creation of a co-operative university model.

## Student as Producer: Pedagogy and institutional form

Our overall approach assumes that a new social and institutional form of higher education must be based on a pedagogical framework that offers an

adequate critique of the capitalist university. Through several years of praxis, we have identified sufficient confluences between our pedagogical approach and the theory and practice of worker and social solidarity co-operatives (Conaty 2014; Winn 2015) to believe that a model of co-operative higher education can be developed that is adequate to meeting the current crises.

Our approach is theoretically grounded in the concept of the Student as Producer (Neary and Winn 2009; Neary 2010). The theoretical basis for Student as Producer is Marx's labour theory of value (Marx 1976). Student as Producer recognises that both academics and students are involved as academic workers in the production of critical-practical knowledge (Moten and Harney 2004). Student as Producer was conceived inside the University of Lincoln (UK), eventually becoming the teaching and learning strategy for the whole institution. While Student as Producer revealed some of the negative consequences of higher education policy and developed some radical alternatives to 'academic capitalism', it is becoming recuperated by the capitalist university and subsumed with the consumerist principles of 'student engagement' and 'student as partners' (Neary et al. 2015).

Yet Student as Producer was always based on a radical, negative critique of the capitalist university as constituted on the basis of worker exploitation. Originally conceived to operate inside and against the capitalist university, it is now being re-functioned as a pedagogical framework outside of the capitalist university. This re-functioning is based on the values of sharing and commoning, already core academic values, against the exploitative money-based values which characterise the capitalist business. This is achieved not through theoretical novelty, but by connecting theory to an actually existing organisational form: the co-operative university. Student as Producer, as the pedagogical framework of a co-operative university, seeks to reconstitute the ownership of the means of production so that academic workers, including students, own the means of production of the enterprises in which they are working.

Through the specific historical innovations of worker co-operatives and 'common ownership', a co-operative model of higher education seems

most appropriate to align with a pedagogical framework that recognises academic labour and the academic commons as the organising principle for the production of knowledge. In this way Student as Producer is central to our consideration of a new social form of higher education, having far-reaching social, political and epistemological implications.

## The Research Project

The Social Science Centre has recently been funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) to develop a model for co-operative higher education. We have designed an integrated series of workshops inviting academics and students from the social sciences, co-operative business and management, and humanities to work with us. We are also involving historians of the co-operative movement, legal specialists, worker-members of co-operatives, and individuals who have been involved in the free university movement in the UK and elsewhere. We are supplementing these activities with a range of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys so as to understand how the different models of co-operative organisation might be applied to higher education and the production of knowledge.

Run as a critical participatory action research project (Kemmis 2008) within the SSC, we aim to ensure that all participants feel able to contribute to the design and outcomes of the research. Based on ‘collective deliberation aimed at collective self-understanding’ (*ibid* 135) of our own co-operative, participants will seek to contribute, through praxis, to the development of a common model for a ‘co-operative university’. As with our pedagogical approach, our overall methodological perspective is informed by a critique of the contradictory relationship between labour and capital and the emancipatory potential inherent in the capital relation. From this viewpoint, labour is understood dialectically as both socially constituted and mediating (Postone 1993) and the methods of our research are understood to be constituted by our immanent social conditions but also prefigurative of the emancipatory potential of our collective work.

The research is taking place over 12 months (May 2015 to April 2016) consisting of a timetable of actions (workshops, focus groups, etc.). The underlying process of action research is co-designed by the research group i.e. members of the Social Science Centre, and co-ordinated through a regular timetable of information meetings, study seminars and research design workshops. The sessions are aimed at creating a ‘safe space’ that builds solidarity within the immediate group and with visiting guests. The researchers produce frequent blog posts on activities and matters as they arise which are published on the SSC website for public comment.

By the end of the research period, we intend to produce a coherent model for a co-operative university, including a proposed pedagogical framework, business plan, model constitutional rules for the co-operative and a proposed model for federation among co-operative universities. Long-term, we envisage that this work will contribute to the growing literature on co-operative higher education (Winn 2013) as well as inform discussions about its development within the co-operative movement and among alternative and free universities worldwide. We believe that it will stimulate discussion and action within Co-operatives UK and within the International Co-operative Alliance.

In 2016, the Social Science Centre will have been running for five years and it is likely that the outcomes of this research will be formally adopted by its members. The reconstitution of the SSC will mark a second stage in its short history, providing a relatively mature example of an alternative form of higher education for educators and students to draw inspiration from and to continue to develop in, against and beyond the ‘pedagogy of debt’ and the ‘ruins’ of the capitalist university.

We invite you to contact us if you wish to contribute to this work.

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