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## The Abolition of the University

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## THE ABOLITION OF THE UNIVERSITY

# Towards a University of the Common: Reimagining the University in Order to Abolish It with the Really Open University

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The autumn of 2010, in the UK, was characterised by a series of protests against the proposed tripling of university tuition fees and the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). These protests were set within a broader international background of contestation around universities and higher education reforms. This article focuses on the activities of a group, which emerged within this context, called the Really Open University (ROU), and its efforts to engender a reimagining of the university. Specifically, this article argues that the activities of the ROU were attempts to create new, radical imaginaries of the university and were linked to broader efforts to re-conceptualise knowledge production and pedagogy. The central point is that ultimately the ROU's invitation to 'reimagine the university' was a provocation to abolish the university in its capitalist form, through a process of reimagining the university, exodus from the university machine and the creation of a university of the common.

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## Introduction

In the new year of 2010, inspired in part by the movement of university occupations in California during 2009, a group of undergraduate and postgraduate students, including myself, founded an organisation called the Really Open University (ROU). Using the byline 'strike, occupy, transform!', we engaged in a series of experimental interventions for two years until we disbanded in March 2012.

The ROU formed part of my PhD, for which I was engaged in a process of 'militant research' (Bookchin et al., 2013; *Colectivo Situaciones*, 2003 & 2011; Halvorsen, 2015; Malo, 2004a & 2004b; Russell, 2015; Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007), or more specifically 'militant ethnography' (Juris, 2007 & 2008). Militant research is a multifarious process, which aims to work from within social movements and radical groups in order to create forms of knowledge, which further facilitate the radical transformation of society. There are commonalities between militant research and scholar-activism, which attempts to go beyond the academy and engage in diverse forms of activism, from building more sustainable housing to resisting academic involvement in the arms trade (Chatterton & Featherstone, 2007; Chatterton, Hodkinson, & Pickerill, 2010; Pickerill & Maxey, 2009). I have reflected on my experiences, and some of the challenges of adopting militant forms of research within the university elsewhere (see Pusey [forthcoming]). In short, it involved a plethora of activities, some more akin to activism than traditional academic research, and others more akin to academia than traditional forms of activism.

The focus of this article lies in the efforts the ROU made to engender a reimagining of the university. I argue that these attempts to create new, radical imaginaries of the university were linked to broader efforts to re-conceptualise knowledge production and pedagogy as part of an exodus from the university machine and the construction of a university of the common.

From the outset, the ROU proclaimed 'we don't want to defend the university. We want to transform it!' Boldly stating:

We are not interested in maintaining an institution where our collective capacities are directed towards reproducing an elite or a highly-trained reserve army of labourers. We desire the transformation of the university,

the creation of a common institution that works in the interests of all people in common. (ROU, 2010)

Our desire was not to campaign for a return to some nostalgic vision of the university that never was, nor simply to protest against the tripling of tuition fees, but instead to question the purpose and the possibility of the university as a broader project of social knowing (Neary, 2012). It is possible, therefore, to argue that the ROU was founded in the best traditions of critical pedagogy. Not as a technique by which to reform, democratise or even radicalise an institution within a world of injustice. But instead to use an open and experimental praxis to create protest-events that blend pedagogy and activism. These events posed broader questions not only concerning the university and higher education, but engaging with the means of producing knowledge, and therefore the production of society more broadly. Much like the activists in North America, who stated 'We demand not a free university but a free society', we agreed that 'a free university in the midst of a capitalist society is like a reading room in a prison; it serves only as a distraction from the misery of daily life' (Research and Destroy, 2009).

This article argues that ultimately the ROU's invitation to 'reimagine the university' was a provocation to abolish the university in its capitalist form, through a process of reimagining of the university, exodus from the university machine and the creation of a university of the common.

## **The Capitalist University**

From increasing tuition fees and student debt to metrics mechanisms and the precarity of workers, the higher education landscape appears ravaged and the outlook bleak. The far-reaching neoliberalisation, marketisation, corporatisation and privatisation of universities has been extensively debated and critiqued (Caffentzis, 2010; De Angelis & Harvie, 2009; Motta, 2012a; Molesworth et al., 2010). Some of these critics have suggested we are in the midst of a 'great university gamble' (McGettigan, 2013), and for some time others have argued that the university is in 'ruins' (Readings, 1997). This brave, new world of higher education has been named 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009), and it has become commonplace for the university to be compared to a 'factory' (Aronwitz, 2001; Edu-Factory, 2009; Federici & Caffentzis, 2007; Raunig, 2013). There has been extensive discussion of the way in

which universities and education more broadly are undergoing a process of enclosure (Federici, 2009; Hall, 2013; Harvie, 2000), being commodified (Hall & Stahl, 2012), and academic labour becoming alienated (Harvie, 2000; Hall, 2014). Others have focused on the gendered and patriarchal nature of the university (Motta, 2013) and the 'anti-feminist nature of the neoliberal rationalities now dictating academic life within universities' (Amsler, 2014b: 1).

In response to this perceived 'assault on the universities' (Bailey & Freedman, 2011), there has been widespread resistance (Canaan, Hill & Maisuria, 2013). This has taken the form of workplace organising, student protest and student occupations and extensive social unrest (Hancox, 2011; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Zibechi, 2012). Indeed, some commentators suggested it has been 'kicking off everywhere' (Mason, 2012; Lunghi & Wheeler, 2012). Concurrent with this activity within and against academic capitalism, there have also been attempts to argue for and experiment with alternatives. Some of these have evoked nostalgic visions for a golden age of the university that either never existed or, if it did, was built upon colonialist, white supremacist and heteropatriarchal foundations that continue to guide it (Meyerhoff & Noterman, forthcoming). Others have discussed the need for a 'public university' (Holmwood, 2011). Others still have critiqued the notion of the public and the false public/private binary this rests on (Neary, 2012; Neary & Winn, 2015). Instead, some of these critics suggest there is a need to reconceptualise and restructure the university as a 'form of social knowing' (Neary, 2012), creating pedagogies and spaces of critical hope (Amsler, 2011; Canaan, 2005), and new pedagogies of space and time (Neary & Amsler, 2012). Hall has proposed that this project of reconstituting the university would require the abolition of academic labour (Hall, 2014), suggesting academics need to reimagine their skills and practices and how they might be put to alternative, cooperative and common uses (Hall, 2014: 822). In light of this, there has been a discussion of the potential to democratise higher education (Amsler, 2014a) and the importance of critical pedagogy to such a project (Amsler & Canaan, 2008; Amsler, 2015; Canaan, 2013a; Canaan, 2013b).

Relatedly, activists have long experimented with a plethora of radical informal learning spaces (Haworth & Elmore, 2017; Motta, 2012b). Many of these have been functioning within the 'undercommons' of the university (Moten and Harney, 2004),

while others have operated outside the institutional space, experimenting with forms of critical pedagogy that act 'in, against and beyond the university' (Cowden & Singh, 2013). At one point, many of these initiatives may have operated as what Roggero (2010) critically labels 'happy islands', i.e. utopian experiments that attempt to operate 'outside' of exploitative relationships. Increasingly, however, cognitive capitalism (Vercellone, 2007) relies on these creative, cooperative capacities and there is no longer any outside to capital's domination. These alternative learning spaces, therefore, are not utopias but are instead defined by an antagonism beyond the dialectic between private and public and the refusal of the capture of the common within capital's circuits (Roggero, 2010). The end of this public/private dialectic opens up new challenges and possibilities, forging projects and struggles that create the outside as an emergent property.

In a paper focusing on the author's experiences of being engaged in militant research with the Occupy movement, Halvorsen (2015) notes that John Holloway's notion of in-against-and-beyond has been used by militant researchers in relation to the neoliberal university. For Halvorsen, developing this dialectical understanding of researchers' relationships with the university 'is helpful because it demonstrates the contradictory and antagonistic relationships that many researchers develop with the institutions that both support and undermine their work' (2015: 470). Importantly, however, the antagonistic relationship radical academics experience with the university goes beyond the mere bureaucratic and institutional challenges they may face, such as the issues with university ethics committees Halvorsen experienced. Instead, this antagonism is predicated on the relations of knowledge production within the university as it moves from the formal to real subsumption of labour (Hall, 2015; Hall & Bowles, 2016; Marx, 1990). This is a process of reorganising academic labour according to capital's logic, as opposed to merely appropriating the fruits of academe.

Relatedly, Halvorsen suggests that:

Creating new institutions of militant research, however, "counter" or "autonomous" they may be, risks creating a form "that would contain or detain" (Holloway, 2002: 242) the movement of militant research that seeks to

push struggles forward. Whether these institutions take the form of protest camps (Halvorsen, forthcoming), autonomous pedagogic spaces (Noterman and Pusey, 2012), reading groups on the edge of the university (Mason, et al., 2015), or the example of ORC presented here, militant research needs to constantly negate its form in order to move beyond it. (Halvorsen, 2015: 470)

However, despite the real challenges activists face in resisting the solidification of creative and rebellious activities, there is no reason to believe that the creation of autonomous projects needs to contain flows of rupture and doing (Holloway, 2002). Indeed, these processes of institutionalisation already exist. For example, in resisting to become more formalised organisations, autonomous activists do not evade processes of institutionalisation, but, rather, can often informally institutionalise codified and repetitive forms of activity. Therefore, to be against institutions is not necessarily to guard against repeated patterns and expectations of behaviour or to be open to the dialectical process of negating one form in order to go beyond it.

For the University of Utopia there is another way of thinking about this problematic of the university:

There is another way of thinking about universities, not as institutional forms, with a specific function, but as *social forms*, or determinate abstraction. No less empirical and no less real than the University of Leeds, etc., but a reality that is in need of further elaboration if we are to understand their real nature and how that nature might be transformed. (University of Utopia, 2010, emphasis in original)

The University of Utopia defines this 'social form' of the university thus:

As a social form the university is the limit of what we know about ourselves as a society, knowledge at the level of society, with the capacity to expand what we know: as science – natural and social, humanities, arts and culture: and to do this exponentially, limited only by our own capacity and our need to know. (University of Utopia, 2010)



However, this social form of the university is beyond widening participation in the university in its historically specific form: 'As intellectual workers we refuse the fetishised concept of widening participation and engage with teaching, learning and research only so far as we are able to dissolve the institutional boundaries of the university' (University of Utopia, 2010).

This is not a matter of capturing a wider demographic within the university machine, but instead a process of destroying the institution in its existing form. This is a process of going in-against-and-beyond the university. This raises the question: how do we reconstitute the university so that it is not based on the liberal myth of the public university or the entrepreneurialism of the neoliberal university? This is one of the questions the Really Open University was grappling with. How do we liberate the general intellect<sup>1</sup> from its current position, appropriated by capital, where it is used against us as creators of knowledge and social wealth? This is not a process of mass education – which was associated with the rise of the mass university after the struggles of 1968 – but of mass intellectuality – the generalisation of knowledge production across society (Hall, 2014; Lazzarato, 1996; Virno, 2007). It is not the sharing of its results but the sharing of its production and the subsequent reaping of its benefits. As the University of Utopia states:

This reconstituted university should be based not on academic freedom: freedom for academics, but on mass intellectuality: knowledge production is something that anyone can do (to paraphrase the students in Paris in 1968). How do we do this? (University of Utopia, 2010)

I argue that the ROU was experimenting with answering this question through the creation of a university of the common. In agreement with Roggero (2011), this article argues that the autonomous projects of the ROU were not attempts of creating utopias, away from the increasingly marketised and corporatised space of

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<sup>1</sup> In *Grundrisse*, in the section commonly referred to as the 'fragment on machines', Marx uses the term 'general intellect' to refer to the general 'social knowledge' of a society, what could be described as its collective intelligence, or perhaps the limits of what we know about ourselves at any given period (Marx, 1993: 690–712).

the university, but a call to arms against the capitalist university itself. Through the praxis of occupation and reimagination, the ROU wished to abolish the university and to transform it, so that it would work for the common good. Contra Halvorsen, this article argues that the autonomous pedagogic forms of the ROU did not 'contain or detain' the process of pushing struggles forward, but instead engaged in a process of open experimentation to create institutions of the common that are open and ephemeral.

The next section of this article introduces the ROU and the context it emerged within, before proceeding to discuss the interventions organised by the group and the way in which they interrupted the capitalist university and reimagined the university as a social form.

### **Strike // Occupy // Transform! Contextualising the Really Open University**

In January 2010, after a series of informal discussions between friends in the kitchens of housing cooperatives and the meeting space of an autonomous self-managed social centre, a plan was developed for what was initially envisaged to be a temporary autonomous university in an occupied building: the Really Open University was formed. The increasing resistance to education cuts and fee increases gained greater public attention in the UK after the occupation of the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank in London during the winter of 2010. This action was followed by a series of demonstrations and university occupations across the country that became notable for the protesters' militancy and creative forms of disobedience in diverging from official march routes and attempting to evade police efforts to contain them using controversial 'kettles' (Sealey-Huggins & Pusey, 2013; Soloman & Plamieri, 2011).

It was not only students in the UK who were taking action. In the US, and particularly in California, university campuses formed the backdrop to scenes of militant protests and occupations during 2009 (After the Fall, 2010; Fritsch, 2010; Inoperative Committee, 2009; Research and Destroy, 2009). Student struggles also joined up with the Occupy movement and began acting under the banner 'occupy student debt' in the US (Caffentzis, 2010). While in the UK, the Occupy St Paul's protest developed several self-organised autonomous education spaces (Walker, 2012).

In Italy during 2010, there were widespread protests that included occupations of prominent buildings and attempts to blockade key points of infrastructure. A recurring slogan was: 'If they block our future, we'll block the city!' This perhaps indicates the students' tacit understanding of the metropolis as the key site of biopolitical production (Pittavino, 2010) and what Hardt and Negri termed the 'factory of the common' (2009). This resistance was building on an established struggle against the Bologna Process, which had already given birth to other important struggles, such as the 'Anomalous Wave' in late 2008 (Do & Roggero, 2009).

The ROU was active within the context of this upturn in struggle but was formed before and continued to be active after the student protests of 2010 waned.

The ROU stated in its founding statement, published online:

Instigated by students and staff of higher education institutions in the city of Leeds (UK), the ROU is non-hierarchical and open to anyone who wishes to see an end to the commodification of knowledge and the creation of a free and empowering education system where creative and critical thought is fostered.

The Really Open University is an ongoing process of transformation by those with a desire to challenge the higher education system and its role in society. (ROU, 2010a)

Neither wanting to be limited to being a student activist group nor wanting to lose the productive antagonisms that engaging in resistance engendered, the ROU tried to remain fluid and unfinished, resisting easy codification. Over the next two years, the ROU engaged in a series of interventions that traversed protest and pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> It is my contention in this article that these interventions constituted an exodus from the capitalist university and an experimentation to create an 'institution of the common' (Roggero, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> I have discussed several of these experiments elsewhere (see Pusey [2016]).

## Reimagining and Reconstituting the University

The ROU was an experiment to reimagine the idea of the university. The ROU was not interested in preserving the public university in the face of encroaching privatisation because we understood the public-private binary as representing two sides of capital (Neary, 2012; Negri, 2008a; Negri, 2008b). Instead, we wanted to break the idea of the university away from this false opposition and see what it would be like if the university was acting for the good of society. This was a process of reimagining the university in order to abolish it in its capitalist form and to transform it into a university of the common. There are four ways in which the ROU engaged in this process of radical reimagining.

Firstly, during March 2010, two participatory meetings were organised by the ROU that were integral to building a planned, occupied, autonomous university. The first meeting was called 'What is a Really Open University?', and it was aimed at engaging people in a reflection on the existing institution, and their potential discontent, as well as envisioning potential alternatives. Two weeks later, a second meeting was planned, called 'How do we make a Really Open University?'. The aim of this meeting was to implement some of the ideas from the first meeting.

Both meetings were key ways in which the ROU strived to engage a wider student population as processes of militant inquiry. Both meetings were established to explore students' existing relationships with the university and their studies, critically engaging with their role as students and the model of the student-consumer, and also engaging in a discussion about the values motivating them, or which ones they wished to be motivating the university. This discussion became part of a constituent process of producing new subjectivities and new rebellious subjects, many months before we saw this mobilised on the streets across the UK at the student protests that winter (Pusey, 2016).

Secondly, in October 2010 the ROU produced a document that aimed to counter the reforms being discussed by the coalition government with our own (Browne, 2010). The *Three Reforms for a Different Future* reimagined the university through a series of 'reforms', which called for the abolition of measure through metrics, the

abolition of student fees and the institution of a living wage, and finally the refusal of the pedagogy of debt (Williams, 2006) through a jubilee for all past students. Although deliberately proposed in the relatively tame language of 'reforms', if realised they would have involved the radical restructuring of the higher education landscape. The ROU was not expecting these reforms to be granted from above through a change of government policy, but through a social struggle for the reappropriation and reinvention of the university as a social form: a powerful reimagination of the future as a provocation to the present. As we stated at the time:

These reforms are the first step in transforming the university into something it has never been – an educational institution in the hands of society, that focuses teaching and research on improving human and ecological welfare rather than bolstering private profits and reproducing elite and commercial values. These reforms should be understood as the opening of a new trajectory for the university system, and at the same time to provoke wider questions about the principles according to which our society is run. (ROU, 2010b)

Thirdly, in November 2010 we organised a three-day protest-event that invited participants to radically reconceptualise the university. The event was held in Leeds and involved three days of workshops, talks and interventions, prompting questions such as: 'How could we transform the university?'; 'How could students and lecturers learn differently through more creative, critical and empowering processes?'; 'Is it even possible to transform the university without transforming the society in which it is embedded?' (ROU, 2010).

The Reimagine the University event was similar to an academic conference in some ways. There were talks, workshops, and discussions on a range of topics. However, it also went beyond traditional academic conferences, both in the participatory forms of organisation that planned it and in the utilisation of forms of protest as part of the event. The first day of Reimagine the University was timed to coincide with a national call for demonstrations against the scrapping of the Education

Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and then proposed the tripling of university tuition fees. There was a large demonstration in Leeds, which ended with the occupation of the Rupert Beckett lecture theatre at the University of Leeds. This occupation was one of a larger number of high profile university occupations across the country, which were notable for their desire to reconfigure and reimagine universities as spaces of 'pedagogic resistance' (Hall, 2011). After the Reimagine the University event, the ROU was invited to co-edit a special issue of a student-led journal called *Roundhouse*. The edition was titled 'Reimagining the University' and was seen as a way of continuing the discussions that began at the ROU event. Many of those who had participated in Reimagine the University contributed to this special issue, either through organising talks and workshops or through attendance.

Both the Reimagine the University event and the subsequent special issue of the *Roundhouse* journal involved a collective process of reimagining the university. The Reimagining the University edition of the *Roundhouse* journal continued the discussions we had begun. When the journal came out, the ROU organised a launch party in a disused retail unit at an indoor shopping centre in Leeds. The retail unit was temporarily being used by a group called Art in Unusual Spaces, and they allowed the ROU to use the space for that evening. This was an example of the way in which the ROU attempted to remain open to experimenting with new formats and the utilisation of reimagined spaces.

The Reimagine the University event and subsequent special issue of the *Roundhouse* journal reimagined the university through a series of interventions that were dispersed across occupied/institutional spaces, pub rooms and in the forms of workshops, texts, talks and student-led peer research seminars. This event began with a protest and the occupation of a university building and ended with a journal launch in a refashioned empty retail unit, which was an example of reimagining the use of space itself – and perhaps claiming in a small way the 'right to the city' through its reimagination (Lefebvre, 1995). To refuse the capitalist university and the capture of our doing is to proclaim a 'right to the university' (Bhandar, 2013). This is not a right within the liberal framework of state-granted legislation, but a right

that is produced through the refusal of the capture of the common. These processes therefore reimagined the university and began to experiment with reinventing it.

The fourth way in which the ROU engaged in a reimagining of the university was through a six-month autonomous education initiative called the Space Project (Pusey, 2017). The Space Project ran from October 2011–March 2012 and reimagined the university through deconstructing and relocating the space of pedagogy, but also the process and aim of producing knowledge.

The Space Project was located in a former industrial building close to Leeds city centre. It contributed to Leeds' infrastructure of autonomous spaces and was situated above a DIY bike workshop, called the Pedallers' Arms, and within walking distance of a cooperatively run bar and music venue, called Wharf Chambers.

The ROU gained funding from an organisation called Change Makers to rent the facility and buy things necessary to run it as a self-managed educational space. Once the group had successfully negotiated a contract with the landlord and decorated the space, it was open and home to a wide variety of talks, workshops and public meetings. Two of the most successful initiatives run from the space were a two-month course called 'crashing through capital: an introduction to economics' and a reading group, called the 'really open course on crisis'. With the creation of courses such as these, the Space Project and the ROU were developing ongoing forms of autonomous education that went beyond our previous less sustained efforts, such as the concept meetings and Reimagine the University event.

In many ways, the Space Project developed from the traditions of social centres, squatted spaces and anarchist free schools (Chatterton, 2010; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006; Montagna, 2006; Pusey, 2010; Shantz, 2012). But the ROU also self-consciously sought to go beyond what many participants viewed as the limitations of these spaces. For example, the aim of the project was not to create a space solely so that groups could use it as a venue for their own projects and meetings, but instead the Space Project aimed for what it termed 'cross contamination' between groups. This was intended to foster discussion, debate and learning beyond the sometimes invisible barriers of activist dogmas and ideology.

This kind of cross contamination is what I term a pedagogy of the common(s): not just the creation of education commons (the Space Project and Reimagine the University), but a pedagogy of the common as a process of social production. The university is the site of the production of the common (as well as the site of academic commons), but as many have noted, this production is increasingly caught within capital's matrix of measure – alienating us not just from the products but even from the processes and the purpose of our research and teaching. Thus, the use value of our research-teaching becomes the exchange value of our research-teaching, both to our employers and to ourselves as increasingly precarious cognitive entrepreneurs. The Space Project reimagined this in order to subvert it – decommodifying and reimagining the space, purpose and means of knowledge production and exchange.

These experiments broke with the rule of academic-capitalism: they were not about higher grades, or 'REfability' or cynical networking, they were organised and engaged with on the basis of a genuine desire to resist academic-capitalism and open up spaces for other forms of unalienated doing. One of the reasons we all put so much effort into the ROU for so long was because of the sheer collective joy in engaging in these projects. Because the challenge of self-management and messy co-production created a space where we could engage: not as fellow-students or Undergraduate-Postgraduate or lecturer-lectured, nor as competitors in academic-capitalism, but as *co-conspirators in the university of the common*.

The ROU made the decision to disband at a meeting early in 2012. There had been tensions around issues of university/non-university participation for some time. Many ROU participants, myself included, had been under pressure to finish their PhDs and this meant stopping any form of time-consuming and distracting engagement with activism. Indeed, some people had already pulled out their engagement with the group before the Space Project, in part because of time constraints and the pressure of work. The strain of managing the Space Project, which was time-consuming, also took its toll on the group, creating its own tensions between those with differing levels of time and energy they could devote to the project. The messy reality of the ROU was that it had always lurched between different projects



attempting, ultimately unsuccessfully, to resolve its internal tensions and contractions. The mixed composition of the group, undergraduates, MA students, Ph.D. students precarious academics and a smaller number of activists from outside the university, was what gave the ROU an edge. But it also created tensions around everything from academic language, different emphases on activism/analysis and different analyses within the group. The lack of a clear definition of what the politics and purpose of the ROU were, was in many ways a productive tension at its best, preventing it from becoming too academic or too activist in inclination. However, this lack of clarity also caused anxiety for others, who preferred a more conclusive definition of what they were contributing their efforts to.

### **Exodus from the University Machine**

The ROU created a space that enabled all participants to engage in practices of resistive-learning and knowledge production that was in-against-beyond the university. This space enabled a collaborative form of 'doing' that was operating in a 'cramped space' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) that was simultaneously 'in, against and on the edge' of the university (Noterman & Pusey, 2012). The ROU formed a crack in (academic) capitalism (Holloway, 2010; Pusey, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009).

It can, therefore, be argued that the 'doing' (non-alienated social activity) of the ROU was a response to the alienating classroom-life experience (abstract labour)<sup>3</sup>. And this response encompassed both resistance and creation. Rejecting the false dialectic of defend or destroy, offered by some in the Californian student occupation movement of 2009, which formed an early influence on many in the group, the

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<sup>3</sup> In *Capital*, Marx identifies and analyses what he terms the two-fold character of labour. This two-fold character refers to the distinction between abstract labour on the one hand and useful (or concrete) labour on the other (Marx, 1990: 131–7). Useful, or concrete, labour produces use-values and exists in any society, it is the usefulness of a thing. However, in capitalist societies these use-values and concrete labour, what Holloway terms 'doing', are abstracted from its specificities (Holloway, 2010: 83–100). It is then quantified and measured against other activities in the exchange of commodities, it is labour that produces value. This abstraction encompasses a process of alienation of our doing, so something that might be done for enjoyment or collective satisfaction becomes something we need to do in order to earn a living to survive. Thus, the exodus of the ROU was an attempt to resist the abstraction of our doing, the alienation of research, teaching, and learning.

ROU sought instead to start from a position both within and against the university: creating liminal spaces or “cracks” which could help form a tentative “beyond” neoliberal academia. The work of John Holloway was a strong inspiration on the ROU and has had a significant influence on social movements since the rise of the alterglobalisation movement during the mid-1990s. This was furthered when Holloway became a visiting professor at the University of Leeds, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and participated in several ROU events.

This, then, was a process of ‘exodus’, of creating what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call ‘lines of flight’. Not in order to flee, but in order to produce. To produce an actually existing ‘really open university’ through the prefigurative praxis of our various projects, of the everyday doing of our lives. This doing attempted to resist its subjugation as abstract labour and become concrete. To exceed abstract labour and become doing.

The refusal articulated by the ROU – against the alienating classroom experience and the neoliberalisation and commodification of the university, against its enclosure as a social project – was part of a wider antagonism and refusal that spread across the UK during 2010. All around the UK, lecture theatres stopped being sites of domination and instrumentalisation and began being spaces of collective doing, simultaneously creative and resistive spaces, cracks in academic capitalism (Holloway, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). The streets became places of creative-resistance, and these activities exceeded the stultifying confines of ‘official’ protest, they exceeded the movement of abstract labour of the NUS and UCU and became a movement of living knowledge against dead knowledge (Holloway, 2010; Roggero, 2011). Protestors did not willingly enter kettles and cordons, but instead, the collective knowledge soon learned and adapted its tactics – running through the streets of London, not keeping to official routes, attacking prominent buildings and the police. Shields were fashioned in the design of book covers. Mobile phone apps were created to help protestors avoid large groups of police.<sup>4</sup> Tactics of

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<sup>4</sup> Demonstrators developed an app called ‘sukey’. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukey> and <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/02/inside-anti-kettling-hq> (Last accessed 2 July 2017).

resistance began to go beyond the sole property of activists and became *common* forms of knowledge.

But these protests, and especially the protest-events of the ROU, were also in excess of being a mere response against the tripling of fees and the removal of the EMA. They became part of a desiring project to create something else, to exit academic capitalism and the university machine. The ROU was *fleeing* the university enclosures in order to abolish the capitalist university and *produce* the university of the common.

The ROU involved an exit from the capitalist university, but also from our assigned identities (categorisation) as students, activists, and academics (the negation of separation). This, then, was an exodus from our identities in order to uncover what lies behind what Holloway terms the 'character masks' that compose our identities (Holloway, 2010: 216). But behind our masks, there is no authentic self, no pure being, so perhaps it would be better to talk in terms of taking off the character masks and creating something new; the creation of new forms of radical subjectivity. Thus, this exodus, the process of fleeing in order to produce, to create what the Space Project reading group termed 'new weapons', was part of a process of reimagination and reinvention – of creating new forms of social activity, new forms of radical social institution and ultimately new forms of humanity.

### **Towards a University of the Common**

This reimagination of the idea of the university was a reimagining of the university as a social project: not just against the cuts or for more academic freedom, for fairer pay, but a defence of the university only as far as to dissolve it in its current form and reinvent it. These interventions that reimagined the university engaged in experimenting with creating radical new forms of social institution. We cannot wish away capitalist social relations or pretend we are somehow 'outside' of them. Therefore, it would be beneficial to think about ways in which to create institutions of the 'common', in which we can experiment with new forms of open and experimental organisation and management of our social reproduction, whilst constituting new radical values that *produce the outside* (Roggero, 2011).

The ROU was engaged in the production of the common and the refusal of its capture, creating an institution of the common. For Roggero:

Since the common has become the base and central resource of production, political composition needs to be rethought today starting from the organization of the common and from the construction of autonomous institutions. (Roggero, 2010)

Roggero suggests, ‘the core issue is to institute a new temporal relation between event and sedimentation, between crisis and decision, between constituent process and concrete political forms, between rupture and organisation’ (Roggero, 2009). This is the ‘openness’ that the ROU was attempting to articulate, a process of continuously being open to our own reinvention and to the unfolding of the common. This is the ‘in between’ space that I have already noted, the ‘bottleneck’ and ‘choked passages’ that Deleuze and Guattari (1986) discuss. Thus, the institution of the common is neither its capture by capital nor within bureaucratic forms of organisation that ‘contain and detain’ it as argued by Halvorsen following Holloway. Instead, it is the institutionalisation of what becomes – not to stop the free flowing of doing and production of the common, but to prevent its capture, to continue its reproduction, to circulate and accelerate the cracks in capital.

For Roggero, and I concur:

The self-education courses and the construction of experimental, autonomous and “nomadic” universities, which are spreading out in Italy and at a transnational level for some years, are not simply a way to diffuse antagonistic messages, but a flight line and a form of exodus from the crisis of academy, in its state and corporate forms. They are an attempt to organize an oppositional university not in the far future but in the present. (Roggero, 2007)

The ROU was an autonomous institution of the common that was engaged in the production of new values and new subjectivities (excess) – and the attempted organisation of this excess. The ROU was an experiment for creating a radical new form of

social institution. The ROU went beyond self-organised seminars, courses and lectures, even when this was the focus of its activity: the point was not the event, the space, the *Sausage Factory*, but the productive antagonisms they engendered and the production of the common, and the refusal of its capture: of the creation of new values, new subjectivities and the refusal of their capture. Of the process of doing as an antagonistic process of negation and creation (of the common and the outside) and of the organisation of excess.

The institution of the university creates institutionalised subjects. The institution of the common creates powerful and radical subjectivities that challenge the subjectivity that the university creates. Hardt and Negri (2009) suggest the metropolis is the 'factory of the common' – perhaps we can think of the university as a microcosm of that. Thus, the university is a factory – but a really open university is a *factory of the common*.

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