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## **Introduction**

There has been extensive critical discussion of the wholesale restructuring, commodification and neoliberalisation of universities (Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Radice, 2013). It has been argued that higher education has been marketised and students have been reinvented as consumers (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010). But this process has also been countered, both through student resistance (Hancox, 2011) and through attempts to reimagine students as producers and radical subjects (Neary & Winn, 2009).

From January 2010 through to January 2012 I worked with a group in Leeds (UK) called the Really Open University (ROU) and engaged in a series of experiments that attempted to blur the lines of pedagogy and protest. 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. As a co-founder and participant in the group until its demise, I was actively working towards both forwarding, and being active in forming the ROU's agenda and realising its goals, working as part of it as it unfolded over a two-year period experimenting with a process of militant ethnography.☐

This paper critically reflects on my experiences attempting to navigate and negate the activist-academic divide through experimentation with forms of militant ethnography and action research that were orientated towards the co-creation of what I term "minor knowledge". Building on the recent discussion of militant research within this journal and geography more broadly (cf Clare, 2017; Russell, 2015, Halvorsen, 2015) it explores lines of tension and contradiction in experimenting with militant ethnography. It is hoped that this discussion will be useful both for those wishing to experiment with forms of engaged and participatory research, as well as militant forms of research more specifically, and those interested in broader debates around marketization of the university and the developing area of critical university studies.

In this journal Russell (2015) argues that militant research involves a disavowal of positivist knowledge and encompasses the production of situated knowledge(s) in its

place. For Russell, and I concur, the much discussed activist/academic problematic should be thought of as a struggle over a certain sort of knowing and knowledge production. Subsequently Russell suggests, and again I am in agreement, that the task is to develop ways of reimagining and reconstituting the university 'as a machine for the production of other worlds' (Russell, 2015: 222). However, despite my general agreement with Russell, I maintain that there are a number of problems that are raised by this approach, and this paper critically engages with several of the points raised in Russell's paper, based on my own research experiences.

Firstly, I discuss the disjuncture between the collaborative and collective co-construction of militant knowledge and its utilization for my individual gain as a Ph.D. student/future academic. Despite agreeing that 'militant research does not take the university as a referent' (Russell, 2015) and I was 'never outside' of the milieu I was engaged with, I was nonetheless entangled within the messy process of producing a Ph.D. and thus very much within the university. ☐

Secondly, I explore what I term the 'academic recuperation machine', and the manner in which forms of 'minor' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986; Thoburn, 2003; Katz, 1996) and outsider knowledges are institutionalised and recuperated through academia, whilst reflecting on the extent to which I became an unwitting agent of this process. As such I suggest that militant ethnography is not as simple as considering oneself in the 'middle' of one's milieu, as Russell does.

I do not view these problems as related to individualised notions of positionality, or of finding interstices within the university to conduct militant inclined research, resource activist campaigns or produce 'accessible' writing aimed at social movements. Instead, I view these as a problematic of the political economy of academia and therefore our reproduction as workers within it.☐

Finally, I take up Halvorsen's (2015) discussion of militant research and utilisation of Holloway's dialectical in-against-beyond approach. I reiterate the importance of this but argue that the ultimate extension of this approach is not just about pushing struggles forward through militant criticism but the negation of ourselves as academic labourers

and the university in its capitalist form and the creation of institutions of the common (Roggero, 2011).

### **Militant ethnography & the edu-factory**

The university is increasingly a space that is enclosed by capital as it commodifies academic research, transforms students into consumers and imposes the law of value on academia through the extensive use of metrics systems that measure academic and student labour and impose market logic (De Angelis & Harvie, 2009; Hall & Stahl, 2015; Harvie, 2007; Harvie, 2000; McGettigan, 2013; Molesworth et al, 2010; Radice, 2013; Winn 2014; Winn, 2015). Some have argued that we are experiencing the real subsumption of the university, as capital reorganises the academy according to its own logic and for its own benefit (Hall, 2015; Hall & Bowles, 2016). This is not an attempt to romanticise the university of old, which, as many have argued, was a space of colonial power, privilege, and exclusion (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilder, 2013). Instead, it is an attempt to understand the political economy of the university and its relationship, some argue centrality, to contemporary capitalism (Edu-Factory, 2009; Roggero, 2010). However, the university does not only produce value, but also forms of struggle as academics and students resist the imposition of measure, alienation, and the colonisation of our lives by the value form (Cowden & Singh, 2013; Harvie, 2005; Harvie, 2006; Pusey, forthcoming).

Geographers have long debated these issues, from critiquing metrics systems and their harmful effect on academic work (Castree, 2002; Castree, 2011), to debating how to make a positive difference inside and outside the academy through forms of scholar-activism (Blomley, 1994; Castree, 1999; Castree 2000; Castree, 2006; Chatterton & Featherstone, 2006; Chatterton, Hodkinson & Pickerill, 2010; Maxey, 1999; Routledge, 1996).

For militant researchers, the aim is not to attempt to understand these conditions of subjugation and immiseration as social scientists ensconced within the 'positivist unconscious' (Steinmetz, 2005) or as 'critical' scholars hoping to expose power relations and injustice. Instead, militant researchers are anti-capitalist militants, as Gigi Roggero (2014: 515) states: 'it is immediately clear that the aim of co-research is entirely a political one. It is the organization of the struggles'. However, this is not to suggest that

militant researchers, like scholar-activists, simply engage in forms of activism inside/outside the university as part of their research (see: Chatterton & Featherstone, 2006; North, 2007; Routledge, 2003). Instead, it is an attempt to collapse the separation of theory/practice, theorist/activist and academic/non-academic and the dualism of theory and action maintained in both bourgeois theory and orthodox forms of Marxism (Bonefeld, Gunn, Holloway & Psychopedis, 1995).

Throughout my research and engagement with the ROU, I aimed to work in, against and beyond what Guattari (2008) describes as the 'systems of production of the dominant subjectivity'. Like others engaging in a militant research 'orientation' (Russell, 2015), and influenced by feminist scholarship (Harraway, 1988), I maintain a position where I have no interest in claims of objectivity or maintaining a remote distance from my research (Juris, 2007). Instead, I searched for alliances and formed connectivities with others struggling in order to challenge systems of domination and engage in creative-resistive practices that might contribute towards the production of new subjectivities (Pusey, 2016).

As such I would argue that any project of radical or militant intent should aim to create a militant form of knowledge that can be put to use towards the destruction of domination. This would constitute a departure from the *status quo*, in which academics as specialists and professionals become the *bone fide* opinion holders, taking away the right of movements to speak for themselves. This is often an unintentional, hierarchical process of domination where one form of knowing is placed in higher regard than those who create living, partisan knowledge of their lived experiences. Instead of understanding academics as holding privileged access to truth-claims radical academics should instead see them as active *producers* of knowledge (Chesters, 2012).

I didn't choose to undertake militant research because it appealed to me when reading a book on methodology, or because I covered it in a methods module in a university, but because I was already a militant in the midst of social struggles, activist groups, and movements. Through my research-participation I attempted to contribute towards a struggle in and against the existent as part of a collective effort to map out a cartography of the possible.

## **Conducting militant ethnography with the Really Open University**

During 2010, the UK experienced a series of student protests and university occupations. These protests became increasingly militant and culminated in a large demonstration outside Parliament on the day MPs voted to triple undergraduate tuition fees. Ostensibly these protests were about cuts to higher education, the scrapping of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the raising of tuition fees. However, tendencies within this broader movement were beginning to develop their concerns beyond the immediate implications of Coalition government policy and make a broader critique of the contemporary university.

Between January 2010 and March 2012, I was engaged with a group called the Really Open University (ROU) who brazenly stated: 'we don't want to defend the university. We want to transform it!'. The ROU was formed as a means to both protest against budget cuts and the increase in tuition fees, but also against the further instrumentalisation and neoliberalisation of Higher Education more generally. The ROU's byline 'strike, occupy, transform!' embodied the groups desire to merge a praxis based on political antagonism and resistance with a transformative and affirmative politics of desire. The ROU was a forerunner to the UK student protests that erupted in the autumn/winter of 2010 and the group participated in this emergent movement (See: Amsler, 2010; Brown, 2013; Burton, 2013; Hancox et al., 2011; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011). In addition to attending local and national protests about issues facing Higher Education, many of the activities organised by the ROU attempted to blur the lines between events-as-protests, and protests-as-events (Lamond & Spracklen, 2014). An incomplete list of the group's activities ranged from constructing a *papier mache* costume depicting the 'general intellect' and storming a live television debate about the tripling of student fees and the production of an irregular free newsletter called the *Sausage Factory* (taking its name from Marx's *Capital*). A three-day conference of varied talks, workshops and other activities, around the theme of 'reimagining the university', was timed to coincide with a large demonstration which saw the occupation of a lecture theatre on the University of Leeds campus. And lastly, the establishment of a six-month initiative called the 'Space Project', which formed an example of a temporary autonomous radical education space close to the centre of Leeds (Pusey, 2017).

Through engagement with these activities, I thus embarked on a two-year process of militant ethnography with the ROU.<sup>2</sup>

The question of what a militant ethnographer does is hard to answer. When asked to say more in my Ph.D. thesis of what I *actually* did in my research I hesitated, stalled and on occasion wondered if I had actually *done* much research at all or at least worried if I had done “enough” “proper research”, whatever that might equate to. Where were the “suitcases of data” that people expected of me? Which “parts” of my involvement with the ROU were contributing towards the thesis and which were superfluous? All these questions and more added to my anxiety and muddied the waters of an already messy process. I can now reflect, as Russell (2015) has done, that this was perhaps because they were entirely the wrong questions to be asking of militant research, and that by attempting to answer them, or at least rationalise them, I was simply engaging in an externally imposed (and often self-imposed) and entirely inadequate framework, more suited to traditional forms of social science research than that which I had undertaken. Halvorsen (2015: 468) experienced similar difficulties, for example, the Research Ethics Committee of his university presented a barrier to his militant research with Occupy London, effectively expecting him to engage in behaviour considered highly unethical by social movements in order to meet the ethical criteria of the university. Again, similarly to Russell, I can understand how this might be a vexing response to what appears a straightforward question. Despite these reflections and reservations and with the proviso that a full discussion of my research is outside the scope of this paper, I will attempt to give a flavour of the work I was engaged in.

As a co-founder and participant in the ROU until its demise, I was actively working towards forwarding and forming the group’s agenda and realising its goals. This sometimes meant engaging in activities traditionally associated with activism, such as banner painting and occupying lecture theatres. But it sometimes meant engaging in activities closer to academia, such as helping to devise discussion groups, writing for publications and attending events/conferences. Indeed, part of the intentions of the ROU were to blur this boundary between academia and activism, to exist ‘inside, outside and on the edge’ (Noterman & Pusey, 2012).

Meetings occurred weekly and meetings between meetings were not uncommon: I was present at nearly all of them. Communication over email occurred on a daily basis, with discussions informally between members of the group also a daily occurrence, either in person over coffee or online. I took part in these discussions, took sides and discussed proposals, strategies, and ideas relating to the activities of the group. I sometimes planned and facilitated meetings, or took minutes. I helped produce propaganda and was part of the collective production of the group's activities, ideas, and writings. I engaged in these everyday practices because they were deemed necessary for the aims and objectives of the group, in a different context something else entirely may have been more appropriate.

### **The trials and tribulations of becoming a militant researcher**

Russell (2015) suggests that militant research does not take the university as its referent and that the 'academic' component is largely 'irrelevant'. I wish to suggest there are a number of problems when adopting militant research methods from within an academic setting, and that however 'irrelevant' the 'academic component' might *appear* at times to those of us acting within whatever 'cracks' (Holloway, 2010) still remain within the university, the 'academic' component is indeed still of relevance. Not least this remains of relevance to those we conspire with as part of militant research who are not involved in academia, as Halvorsen indicates (2015: 468). In this section, I identify two challenges I grappled with in the course of my militant research engagement. It is hoped that they can contribute towards an ongoing discussion about militant forms of research initiated from within the university, and perhaps develop collective ways to mitigate or overcome problems such as these. ☐

#### **Individual scholarship versus the co-creation of commons**

The first challenge is the contradiction between the collective process of co-creation of knowledge and the common(s) I was a constituent part of with the ROU, in contrast to the largely individualised process of producing my Ph.D. thesis and academic writing. ☐

The ROU were actively producing new forms of commons, whilst also fighting against the further enclosure of the 'actually existing' edu-commons (Pusey & Chatterton, 2016; Harvie, 2000 & 2004). These commons-based activities took a variety of forms. One example of these was the self-managed and collectively run Space Project, which in

many ways acted as a Temporary Autonomous University, and represented a form of edu-common. Another example might be the way in which the group utilised participatory and horizontal techniques in order to engage a wider group of people within the co-construction of its projects, such as the three-day 'Reimagine the University' event the group organised. Yet another might be the discussions about creating an online 'knowledge commons' of liberated knowledge previously enclosed behind expensive academic gateways, reaping large rewards for the companies involved (Harvie *et al*, 2013). These tentative experiments attempted to go beyond protest and resistance towards the co-creation of prefigurative alternatives within the 'cracks' of 'academic capitalism' (Holloway, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009) and formed part of a wider project of collective knowledge production and 'anti-capitalist commoning' (Kamola & Meyerhoff, 2009).

However, despite a strong co-operative and collaborative effort within the ROU, the majority of my engagement in the production of academic forms of knowledge was individual. Even when engaging in forms of co-authorship or co-presentation with fellow ROUers my position was qualitatively different to my co-author/presenter. Because the ROU formed the basis of my Ph.D. research, it was something I could "legitimately" dedicate more of my time to. But for my co-authors/presenters it was a distraction from their research/jobs. This is ironic given that this extra time I could spend on the ROU also helped develop many of the group's projects. Indeed, Derickson & Routledge (2014) have suggested 'resourcing' activist activity, in part through use of our time, being one of the contributions scholar-activists can make to groups we work with. ☐

Related to this has been a process of reflection and questioning as to whether I was acting as militant or as academic when I was writing or presenting at academic events? Or perhaps (hopefully?) I was acting as a militant academic? Developing this line of self-inquiry further, was I working for purely individual gain through publishing, or towards a wider communication of the perspectives and goals of the ROU, and therefore collective, common endeavour? Despite posing these problems as distinct binaries, I do not believe they can be reduced so easily to simplistic cases of good/bad behaviour.

Another element of this has been my early commitment to publishing in open access journals (cf Pusey & Sealey-Huggins 2013; Sealey-Huggins & Pusey, 2013). This is something that I think is in keeping with the ethics and values of the commons and my research and was also in line with the perspective of the ROU, who were critical of neoliberal metrics systems such as the REF. However, this meant publishing in places that are often considered marginal to academia, or non "REFable" in many UK universities.

These reflections are not intended to form an individualised strategy for coping with the lived reality of academic metrics, or a self-flagellating reflection about conceding to the academic-metrics-machine. Instead, we should understand this as part of a broader critique of the political economy of academia. This is part of the lived everyday reality of all of us as we are compelled to endure an existence that is mediated through the tyranny of abstract labour and the value form and their continued encroachment on the university.

The issues I have discussed here would appear in many ways to contradict the scholarly and militant ethic of the ROU and raise important questions about the utility and possibility of the use of militant methods within the existing academic context.

As a means of mitigating these issues Russell makes reference to publishing pieces, which are widely disseminated over activist networks, but this begs the question, why are we debating militant research in this journal? Because the political economy of academia means we should publish in certain places over others. Therefore, is it not a case that *some* writing will be aimed at broader dissemination and others will be aimed at other audiences, whether that is examiners or other academics? This would indicate that the university is not 'irrelevant', as Russell argues, even if it is not the primary orientation of one's work. The university is of relevance as part of a struggle against and beyond its existing form, against and beyond academic labour.

### **The academic-recuperation-machine**

The second challenge is to the co-option of marginal or 'minor' forms of knowledge, through what I term the 'academic-recuperation-machine'.

The Provisional University suggest the university is a made up of a series of machines (Provisional University, 2010). For example, the depoliticisation machine is comprised

of various ritualised techniques, logics and discourses that lead to an apathetic and depoliticised student subject.<sup>1</sup> Going further, we can extend the idea of these university machines and apply it to analyse the way academia can be viewed as commodifying and recuperating radical and marginal knowledge/s. ☐

Both the university 'depoliticisation machine' and the tendency for academic assimilation of rebellious knowledge through the 'academic-recuperation-machine' have implications for discussion of methodology. I would suggest that militant ethnography is a means of *political struggle* over the deployment of different values within the university machine. But as Shukaitis (2009) reminds us, if the Autonomist Marxist analysis teaches us anything, it is that capital can integrate this rebelliousness into its circuits.

Returning to the ROU, these issues have important implications for autonomous learning projects, and the development of what I term 'minor knowledges'. This term takes forward Thoburn's (2003) reworking of Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) concept of 'minor literature' to discuss the development of what Thoburn calls 'minor politics'. For Thoburn:

The minor political questions are not 'are we communicating enough?', or 'are we all heard?', but are of a different order, concerned with how we are composed and how we create in fashions that deterritorialize dominant or major forms (Thoburn, 2003, p20).

Following this, 'minor knowledge' attempts not just to posit a radical subject, or content, as a way in which to integrate radical ideas from "outside" the university, or even in order to traverse the inside/outside of the institution through scholar activism (Castree, 1999). Instead it seeks to create forms of knowing that unsettle, and challenge dominant forms of knowledge, militant forms of research certainly have an important place in this. However, there is a danger that attempts to utilise the space and resources of the academy, in order to engage in transgressive acts of minor-knowledge creation, could simply end up being captured in the university's academic-recuperation-machine, institutionalised and made available as another 'tool in the toolbox'.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere (Pusey, 2016) I have argued that the ROU was an example of a 'repoliticisation machine'.

A related concern is that perhaps those of us in the ROU (or others engaged in similar militant research efforts) with one foot in the academy, attempting to steady our footing on a future career ladder, are playing an unwitting role in facilitating recuperation? If so, what was the role of militant research in that? We can relate these concerns to what critical geographer Duncan Fuller called "going academic" (Fuller 1999: 223-225), a term inverting the traditional concern with a researcher, especially an ethnographer, identifying too closely with the researched and "going native", something Russell rightly rejects (2014). Instead, Fuller's term indicates a process of academic subjectification, whereby the researcher, perhaps with radical intentions, becomes too associated too closely with the academy and the *performance* of the academic. This is perhaps a particular risk for inexperienced researchers such as graduate students and early career academics, because we are attempting to both gain/ maintain the trust of our research participants, often in the face of cynicism and criticisms of academics and the university, yet also trying to "prove" ourselves as "good" academics to our colleagues or potential future employers. It is my contention that these tensions persist even with the use of militant methodologies.

Fundamentally these challenges I have identified are struggles against commodification of our research (as 'outputs') and against our subjectification as entrepreneurial academic subjects, and therefore against the encroachment of the law of value within academic work.

### **Towards the institution of the common?**

Finally, I wish to briefly take up Halvorsen's (2015) discussion of militant research and utilisation of Holloway's dialectical in-against-beyond approach. I concur that this is important, but argue that the ultimate extension of this approach is not just about pushing struggles forward through militant criticism, but the negation of ourselves as academic labourers and the university in its capitalist form. Correspondingly the 'autonomous' or 'counter' institutions Halvorsen (2015: 470) mentions are more than mere alternatives, or what Roggero (2010: 369) calls 'happy islands'. Instead, following Roggero, they form examples of the resistance of living labor/knowledge against capitalist capture and are engaged in the production of 'common norms' (*ibid*: 369).

They emerge within the crisis of the university, and as Roggero (2011: 29) states: ‘the purpose is to turn the crisis of the university into a field of radical research in order to investigate and produce living knowledge: the institution of the common’. A full discussion of what form these institutions of the common take, and to what extent they contain or detain, or conversely facilitate a radical openness is, as Halvorsen states, outside the limit of this article.

## **Conclusion**

Militant research contributes to broader debates around the neoliberalisation of the university and the utilization of more participatory and engaged forms of research, but is not reducible to this, as Roggero (2014: 516) attests: ‘co-research is completely irreducible to a matter of methodology: the object of the study, the capitalist social relationship, is the object of hate’. As such militant research does not only offer critical solidarity with social movements, but is a ‘process of subjectivation, organisation and rupture’ (*ibid*). The production of knowledge, therefore is also the production of struggle.

This paper has reflected on my experiences attempting to utilize a form of militant ethnography and uncovered a number of challenges that I wrestled with during the process of my research. Specifically, I have argued that contra Russell (2015) the university does have an effect on militant research when the research is conducted from within an institutional context which is increasingly guided by the law of value. The political economy of academic publishing and the contrast with collective forms of commons-based knowledge creation is an increasing challenge for those of us caught within the snare of metrics systems and academic measure. Secondly, this article argued that the academic-recuperation-machine has the potential ability to assimilate, what I have termed ‘minor knowledge’, within its increasingly marketised logic, recuperating and commodifying militant research as another academic means of generating ‘outputs’. Relatedly, there is a risk about the processes of academic subjectification and ‘going academic’ as we struggle not only to be in-against-beyond the university but ‘in but not of’ the university machine’.

Correspondingly, this article has illustrated the necessarily contingent, messy and unfinished process of militant forms of research. Researchers engaged in similar forms of work will no doubt continue to uncover their own obstacles in the process of navigating these waters. Engaging not only in a reflexive process of identifying and challenging issues of power within their research but of producing living / minor knowledge and challenging its capture.

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