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# Neoliberalism and Depoliticisation in the Academy: Understanding the 'New Student Rebellions'

Leon Sealey-Huggins and André Pusey

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*Since 2009 there has been an upsurge in political activity in and around the UK, as well as in some European and American universities. These 'new student rebellions' have displayed levels of radicalism and political activism seemingly unprecedented among recent generations of students. Broadly speaking, the intensification of this activity can be understood as being directly related to ongoing neoliberal reforms of education, a process intensified by the global financial crisis.*

*In this article we seek to consider some of the detail of the emergence of these rebellions, and argue that they can be interpreted as part of resistance to the neoliberal tendencies in contemporary social life. As such, we argue that a depoliticised tendency accompanies the introduction of, and resistance to, neoliberal mechanisms in Higher Education (HE). As activists in groups who have adopted more creative and explicitly politically antagonistic forms of activism, we suggest that such forms might be more productive arenas for our energies if we want to challenge the neoliberal and depoliticised root causes of these conflicts.*

**Keywords:** *Post-politics, Neoliberalism, Higher Education, NUS, Student Protest, Creative Resistance.*

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The image of the future is changing for the current generation of young people, haunted by the spectre of the 'graduate with no future' (Mason 2011, 2012; Gillespie and Habermehl 2012). Gone are the aspirational promises of post-university job security and social mobility. Instead, all that can be secured is a position of permanently repro-

duced precarity (Compagna 2013; Southwood 2011; Standing 2011). Young people are not the only ones facing increasingly precarious futures; current government austerity measures appear to have everyone but the very wealthy in their sights. Recent outbreaks of rioting up and down England appear to indicate a growing disquiet (Bauman 2011;

Harvey 2012; Milburn 2012). In this article, however, we focus mainly on the situation in and around Higher Education, as this is the sector in which we work and where we have had the most experience of recent struggles.

There has been much coverage of the 'new student rebellions' (Solomon and Palmeri 2011; Hancox 2011), with commentators focussing on, variously, 'the violence' of some of the demonstrations, or the new communication technologies being deployed by the activists coalescing around this struggle. In this article, we seek to consider some of the detail of the emergence of these rebellions, and argue that they can be interpreted as part of resistance to the neoliberal tendencies in contemporary social life. As such, we argue that a depoliticised tendency accompanies the introduction of, and resistance to, neoliberal mechanisms in higher education.

The processes of neoliberalisation have been widely discussed elsewhere in relation to different spheres of social life (for instance: climate change in Lohmann 2012; development in Motta and Nilsen 2011; and in terms of 'actually existing neoliberalism' rather than simply neoliberal ideology in Brenner and Theodore 2002a, 2002b). For the purposes of this article we align ourselves with David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism as 'a theory

of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005, 3). Thus, it usually entails '[d]eregulation, privatization, and a withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (Harvey 2005, 3).

We begin, therefore, by outlining some of the mechanisms through which the neoliberalisation of UK Higher Education (HE) is occurring, a phenomenon we see as mirroring a wider neoliberalisation and depoliticisation of contemporary social life. We then discuss some of the prominent moments in the aforementioned wave of struggle and look at the role of England's National Union of Students (NUS) and 'student leaders' in furthering depoliticisation. We conclude by exploring some alternative forms of resistance than those which tend to dominate mainstream coverage: those which are based on experiments in trying to bring other forms of education, and society, into being. As participants in groups who have adopted more creative and explicitly politically antagonistic forms of activism, we argue that these might be more productive arenas for our energies if we want to challenge the neoliberal and depoliticised root causes of these conflicts.

### **Depoliticisation and Neoliberalism within the Academy**

The past three years have seen an upsurge in political activity in and around UK universities, and educational institutions more generally. This activity has displayed levels of radicalism and political activism seemingly unprecedented among recent generations of students. Broadly speaking, the intensification of this activity can be understood as being directly related to ongoing neoliberal reforms of education, a process intensified by the global financial crisis.

Universities are currently facing economic instability, debt and an uncertain future. The once popular 'universal' education model is increasingly being undermined by neoliberal reforms aimed at ensuring that market values are better wedded to the working conditions and learning practices of the university (Molesworth et al. 2010), what some have termed 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1999). Here in the UK, one of the ways this is occurring is through the intensification of metric systems aimed at measuring 'value', including research-auditing exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (De Angelis and Harvie 2009; Harvie 2000, 2004 and 2005; Gillespie et al. 2011). The REF is accompanied by teaching-auditing mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS), which attempts to use metrics to measure 'the student experi-

ence' in order to enable students, as consumers, to choose the best university (and to discipline academics' teaching work). The neoliberal justification for these mechanisms of measurement is that they will 'drive up standards' and 'improve excellence' (Gillespie et al. 2011). Moreover, there are claims that market competition needs to be better unleashed on the HE sector in order to coerce floundering institutions, their 'dead weight' faculty, and unpopular, or rather unprofitable, subjects. Criticisms are also being voiced over the commodification of knowledge, especially though the various metrics systems such as the REF, and the enclosure of research within exclusive and expensive institutional libraries and publications, or behind electronic gateways such as Ingenta or Cambridge Scientific Abstracts.

The trend towards the implementation of neoliberal principles in HE is exacerbated by proposals outlined in the UK government's 2011 *White Paper on Higher Education* (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2011). It aims to force competition in universities, with students remodelled as consumers, and unpopular or 'uncompetitive' courses and universities potentially forced into bankruptcy. Despite being filled with contradictions and inconsistencies, the *White Paper* intends to better entrench the neoliberal model of the academy, and in so doing 'is bound to reinforce existing social inequalities' (Colleni 2011).

The neoliberalisation of HE in the UK, and the rise of managerialism in the public sector in general, can be directly linked to the wider emergence of what has been termed the 'post-political', or 'depoliticised', condition of contemporary social life (Swyngedouw 2010; Žižek 2008). According to this thesis, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the disintegration of the Soviet Eastern Bloc, have resulted in a consensus that takes capitalist liberal democracy for granted as *the* legitimate form of social and political organisation. All this is perhaps best summed up by Francis Fukuyama's (1993) infamous 'end of history' claims. Political and ethical questions about how people should live are displaced in this depoliticised context by technocratic and managerial decisions shorn of their political content. As sociologist Slavoj Žižek writes, post-politics 'claims to leave behind ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration' (Žižek 2008, 34). This serves to deny the existence of antagonistic social relations and different political interests, resulting in a censure of dissensus. Decisions are supposedly made on the claimed universal basis of efficiency and necessity, taking the market and liberal state for granted. A number of authors have explored the notion of the post-political in relation to climate change activism (see, for instance, Pusey and Russell 2010 and Schelmbach et al. 2012), but here we seek to explore

these ideas in relation to activism around UK Higher Education.

Evidence of the post-political or depoliticised condition is apparent in the claims made by all the major UK electoral parties that the budget deficit *must* be reduced, for instance, with the only disagreement centring on the technicalities of how and where the cuts fall. This then filters through to the HE sector where cuts play out in the culling of unprofitable, and often critical, subjects, a process presented as being driven by economic and administrative necessity rather than politics. This logic is not restricted to the challenges to the public university discussed above, but is even evident in those organisations and institutions apparently charged with resisting the neoliberal attack, such as the National Union of Students (NUS), as we explore further below.

### **The (Re)emergence of Student Radicalism: Resisting Neoliberal Reforms**

The squeeze on HE is, like the crisis of capital itself, impacting upon a range of countries internationally. In Europe, for example, the standardisation of HE, known as the Bologna process, is undermining the sector's autonomy. Fortunately, however, the emerging resistance is similarly international. People as far apart as Chile and Italy are challenging the neoliberal model of the university (Do and Roggero 2009; Aguilera 2012; Zibechi 2012), which is increasingly focused on a

cynical notion of 'employability' and the production of 'skilled' workers to be put to use for the reproduction of capital. The double crisis of the economy and the university made some campuses once again sites of resistance, and it has been argued that the 'new student movement can be seen as the main organized response to the global financial crisis' (Caffentzis 2010). There are many examples globally of this resistance including militant protests and occupations in the United States (US), and in particular California; riots, occupations and blockades in Italy; and strikes and protests in Puerto Rico, more recently involving widespread rioting (After the Fall 2009; Do and Roggero 2009; Fritsch 2008).

Here in the UK, the eruption of dissent in and around campuses in late 2010 was directly linked to the publication of the Browne review into HE funding. The Browne review's publication coincided with the incoming Conservative and Liberal Democratic government's 'Corporate Spending Review' of public finances, which was a manifesto for widespread public sector cuts. This meant that Browne's conclusions – that the cap on tuition fees be raised from £3,300 to £9,000, and market competition further extended into HE – were accompanied by substantial, and arguably unsustainable, cuts to universities' teaching budgets. These changes were further compounded by the withdrawal of the Educational

Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for further education (FE) students. Such changes, combined with a number of key events and actions, have been crucial in the emergence of the 'new student rebellions', and it is to a summary of these that we shall now turn.

### **Millbank and the Rupturing of Student Apathy**

In anticipation of the aforementioned cuts and tuition fee rises, on 10 November 2010 the NUS, jointly with the University and College Union (UCU), held a national demonstration, entitled 'DEMOLition'. The 'Millbank riot', as it was later referred to by some, has been pinpointed by many commentators as a pivotal moment in the re-emergence of radical student protest within the UK (Hansen 2010).

The demonstration had the potential to be just another A-B march in London, and for many, due to a police cordon around Parliament Square, it was. In the event, however, neither the NUS nor UCU were prepared for the scale of either the turnout or militancy on the day. Both of the latter meant that the protests received international coverage, a situation unlikely to have been achieved by a student march alone. A significant number of demonstrators diverged from the official route, ignored NUS stewards and made their way to Millbank Towers, where the Conservative Party headquarters is located. A series of iconic



images were repeated throughout corporate and alternative media outlets, depicting young people dancing and smashing windows, sometimes simultaneously. Hence the 10 November 2010 became infamous for the occupation and smashing up of the Millbank building. Perhaps though, this event at Millbank should be considered pivotal not for the broken windows, but for the apparent rupturing of student apathy, of which the broken plate glass was just a potent symbol.

Important to note is that almost as soon as protesters had entered the Millbank building, the then president of the NUS, Aaron Porter, had condemned them in no uncertain terms, describing the thousands that went to Millbank as 'rogue protesters' (NUS 2010). Although elements of the UCU leadership also criticised protesters – for example, General Secretary Sally Hunt stated that 'the actions of a mindless and totally unrepresentative minority should not distract from today's message' (UCU 2010) – others were supportive, with academics publishing letters in national newspapers supporting the students.<sup>1</sup>

Previous to the DEMOlition demonstration, left-led groups, such as National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC)<sup>2</sup>, had already called for a follow up day of action on 24 November 2010 in order to maintain momentum. Post-Millbank, however, the NUS refused to endorse this demonstration. Despite

this, and undeterred by the criminalisation and demonisation of student protesters, 25,000 people still turned out on the 24 November to participate in simultaneous protests in a number of cities across the country. Of particular significance were the walkouts staged by thousands of sixth form and FE college students, many of whom risked direct financial penalty for protesting through the removal of their EMA for that week. The participation of this new wave of young people positively shifted the dynamics of struggle, as had happened with the anti-war protests a decade earlier.

A demonstration was also called for 9 December 2010. It was dubbed Day X by some, as it was the day of the parliamentary vote on increasing university fees. Many of the twenty-seven university occupations were still ongoing, and a massive demonstration in London took place. Despite this, a 'yes' vote for increasing fees was returned in parliament; meanwhile, outside the police were 'kettling' demonstrators and charging them on horses.<sup>3</sup>

In considering the prospects and potential for the development of these rebellions against the further entrenchment of neoliberalism, it is crucial to consider the institutions that surround them, and in some instances, the attempts to contain them. Among those who might stand to benefit from the image of the student movement as a phenomenon limited to struggles about fees and

cuts, rather than about concerns with the form of education more generally, and whose actions partly serve to try and restrict it to such, are the NUS.

### **The NUS as a Depoliticised Institution**

As we have already discussed above, Aaron Porter and the NUS leadership condemned the protesters at Millbank voraciously and this was met with a barrage of personal criticism of Porter, and the NUS more generally. The slogan 'Aaron Porter you don't represent me' began to circulate, and a campaign to remove him as the head of the NUS was begun. Porter made things worse when he made the statement in a *Guardian* newspaper interview that 'while I disagree with tuition fees, they are not the biggest evil in society' (Aitkenhead 2011), thus showing a distinct lack of empathy with the student struggle, a struggle that he was supposed to be heading as president of the NUS! It is hard to imagine the head of another Trade Union making a similar statement about redundancies or a decline in working conditions within its sector at any time during their leadership, let alone at a high point in struggle.

The NUS leadership seemed to have miscalculated the levels of anger and militancy among the constituent they supposedly represent. Perhaps this is itself suggestive of the fact that there are a consider-

able number of students who do not want to be represented by such an institution, or who merely see the NUS as largely irrelevant.

Failure to realise the capacity of one's own membership could be perceived as the NUS simply failing as an organisation in its relationship to the grassroots. However, there is a more deep rooted problem, with the NUS having been criticised from some quarters as being too close to the Labour party, and hence reluctant to organise any demonstrations against the implementation of fees when Labour were in office. Indeed, the 'DEMOLition' march was the first protest the NUS had organised against fees at any point in its history. Moreover, no national demonstrations were organised by the NUS after DEMOLition, showing a failure to build on the momentum of numbers and the energy of the day.

Apparently, then, the NUS aims to mobilise students to be politically active only up to a certain point, but not beyond that. Standing for student executive positions in elections and taking part in debates about issues affecting students and the world at large are to be encouraged. Hot topics on campus can range from whether bottled water / The Sun / Nestle products should be sold in Union shops, through to more self-interested concerns such as access to cheap laptops and cheaper drinks. However, as has been demonstrated by Aaron Porter's condemnation of militant



students, the NUS power structure is undermined if a self-organised, mobilised and militant student body is willing, able and empowered to take action outside of its limited and limiting parameters.

In an analysis echoing the aforementioned account of the depoliticised dimensions of neoliberal capitalist society, a Dublin-based group, the Provisional University (2010), have described students' unions as part of the university 'depoliticisation machine':

The Students' Unions monopolise politics within the universities leading to a general disgust with politics among students. The election campaigns for the unions are parodies of general elections; the candidates present the most depoliticised, technocratic image of politics possible. This administrative vision of politics reduces politics to a series of petty goals (open the library for 5 min longer etc). When they're finished trivialising politics through these petty demands, they organise (again U.S. style) discounts for students with 'leading brands' like Topman and Burger King.

This 'depoliticisation machine' can go further and actively undermine struggles on campus. Here at our own institution, the University of Leeds, the Leeds University Students' Union ran a campaign in early 2010 erroneously titled

'Education First', which encouraged students to email their tutors to apply pressure on them not to strike. This was all done with the aim of defending a narrowly defined 'student experience', which appeared to limit the interests of students to the largely exaggerated effects of strike action on students undergoing assessments that year, rather than the wider effects of cuts and restructuring on the long-term 'student experience' (for a contemporary report on this campaign from activists, see Eastman 2010).

The Trade Union Council (TUC) 'March for the Alternative' demonstration in March 2011, which included a large constituent of protesters who had been involved in the 'new student rebellions', was arguably another example of this depoliticisation. Reacting against the sterilised, anti-antagonistic imagery of the demo, the 'Deterritorial Support Group', who produce propaganda around anti-cuts themes, remarked that 'when creating their images for the march, the TUC chose to use imagery that was non-confrontational, apolitical and middle-of-the-road. The result was painful – two hands, palms outstretched in cynical, politically neutral colours, looking like a mugging victim desperately trying to defend their face' (Nesbit 2010). In response, the DSG produced their own amended imagery with much more confrontational slogans including 'strike for the alternative', 'occupy for the alternative', and

'kick off for the alternative'. These images went viral as people began to use them as profile pictures on

Facebook and other social networking sites.



Source:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:March\\_For\\_The\\_Alternative\\_logo.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:March_For_The_Alternative_logo.png)



Source:

<http://deterritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com/page/4/>

All of this is indicative of what we think is a broader, more widespread disillusionment with the depoliticising effects of neoliberalism on those organisations and institutions which claim to represent people. It can be argued that this sense of disillusionment goes beyond reformist organisations such as the NUS and extends to self-proclaimed radical and revolutionary organisations on the left. Commentator Laurie Penny hints at this in her comments that 'the old organisational structures of revolution – far-left parties, unions and splinter groups – are increasingly irrelevant to the movement that is building across Europe' (Penny quoted in Nesbit 2010). So too does BBC's *Newsnight* economics editor, Paul Mason (2011), who states that 'horizontalism has become endemic because technology makes it easy: it kills vertical hierarchies spontaneously, whereas before – and the quintessential experience of the 20th century – was the killing of dissent within movements, the channelling of movements and their bureaucratisation'.

Candidates for the student left did not fare well in union elections, yet students are taking part in politics though demonstrations on wider issues. All of this suggests that there is indeed a disconnect between the political sentiments of many students, and the depoliticised form which student unions can take. Indeed, this resurgence in student activism has had impacts

elsewhere. The aforementioned TUC 'March for the Alternative' contained a sizeable student contingent, for instance. It is also hard to imagine the actions of the popular anti-cuts group UK Uncut as having such a high resonance among wider publics had the skirmishes of the 'student movement' not taken place previously. Indeed, outside of the confines of depoliticised institutions, many students and other activists are taking part in creative, self-directed activities, both widening the parameters of the political debate *and* engaging in the co-creation of alternatives which attempt to bring other forms of education, and society, into being. It is to these experiments that we shall now turn our attention, considering whether their more explicitly political character might serve as an antidote to the depoliticised, depoliticising and disconnected institutions mentioned previously.

### **Creative Resistance and Experiments in Alternatives**

Building on the rich history of radical pedagogical perspectives, experiments and practices (Freire 1996; Giroux 2011; Haworth 2012; hooks 1994; Illich 1995; Ranciere 1991; Rose 2010; Suisa 2010), and in contrast to the depoliticised approaches taken by the NUS, there are an increasing number of projects which display quite different ambitions. These are often aimed at challenging the underlying logics

of neoliberalism themselves (for example, Meyerhoff 2011; Motta 2011; Shantz 2009, 2011). In Leeds, for example, we have both been involved in a project called the 'Really Open University' (or ROU). The ROU both partly pre-empted, and emerged in response to, the attacks on public education outlined above. Hence the ROU was established simultaneously to resist cuts, critique the neoliberal model of education and engage in experiments in critical and participatory education (ROU 2010). One of the central aims of the ROU when it was established was to make the university a site of political antagonism once again. All of these aims expand well beyond those of institutional actors such as the NUS.

In addition to campaigning on campus, the ROU distributed critical analyses in the form of a newsletter entitled the *Sausage Factory*, kept a blog which drew together information about education struggles alongside analysis and critique, and facilitated events where participants were invited to critically question the forms education takes. The ROU was an attempt to break with the insularity of the university and student politics more generally. In asking 'what can a university do?', it therefore involved a more creative politics than the mere reactive position of being 'anti-cuts'. The group's by-line 'strike, occupy, transform!' represented the desire for direct action taken not to preserve the existent,

but to act within the crisis to *transform* the existent (for a fuller analysis see Noterman and Pusey 2012; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, forthcoming), to experiment with alternative educational forms to transform the ways in which education is conducted. One of the ways it did this was through the organisation of a three-day event entitled 'Reimagine the University', which combined a range of workshops and seminars held across both Leeds Metropolitan University and Leeds University on topics as diverse as 'gainful unemployment', academic metrics systems and student struggles in Italy. Another example was the Space Project, a six-month long project to take the pedagogical aims of the group outside the university, supported by funding gained by someone involved with the ROU to establish an educational space close to the city centre. The project incorporated a radical library; a collaboration with the Leeds International Film Festival running a fringe event showing radical films; and a wide range of talks and workshops, including the Marxist theorist John Holloway discussing his book *Crack Capitalism* (2010), an Egyptian anarchist journalist, Jano Charbell, talking about the Arab Spring, and Dave Douglass, a National Union of Minors delegate and participant in the 1984–5 miners' strike reflecting on his experiences of that struggle. There were also several on-going study and reading groups on eco-

conomic crises, radical pedagogy and a number of activists groups using the space for their own meetings, including Leeds Occupy.

Elsewhere, there are an encouragingly wide range of similar and related experiments with alternative forms of protest and education. These can be seen to coalesce around a deeper critique over the role and form universities and Higher Education take. This is apparent in the radical street theatre and reclaiming of space, or '*dé-tournement*', of the University of Strategic Optimism (USO), who have held lectures decrying the marketisation of Higher Education in places as diverse as banks and supermarkets. It was also apparent in the occupied spaces of the Really Free Skool in London, who gained notoriety in the right-wing press for squatting some high profile empty exclusive properties – most notably one of film director Guy Ritchie's houses – turning them over to self-organised pedagogical projects (BBC 2011). Meanwhile, in Dublin the Provisional University have begun a campaign to have disused property, which is under government ownership, turned over for use in a common educational project. Elsewhere, in Lincoln, a group have established a Social Science Centre, to be run along co-operative lines, describing it as 'a new model for higher and co-operative education' (Neary 2010; 2011a). Interesting things are also happen-

ing *within* the University of Lincoln. A project called 'Student as Producer' is being rolled out across the whole institution. The project transforms the undergraduate curriculum to be modelled on research-based and 'research-like' teaching, engaging students in collaborative learning with other students and academics (Neary and Winn 2009; Neary 2011b). In addition, the Occupy Wall Street protests that spread beyond the US included a strong pedagogical element, which was perhaps most explicit with the development of the 'Tent City University' at the St Pauls Cathedral camp in London (Occupy LSX). This temporary autonomous 'university' included talks from both activists and scholars, including Doreen Massey, John Holloway and Massimo De Angelis. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that this aspect of the protest was 'one of the most remarkable aspects of Occupy London' (Walker 2012). After the camp was evicted, this project continued to take new forms through projects such as the 'Bank of Ideas', involving the occupation of an empty Union Banks of Switzerland (UBS) office complex in the London borough of Hackney, and its transformation into an autonomous educational space.

Much of the frenetic activity taking place around university struggles in 2010 and Occupy protests of 2011 has subsided to some extent, at least within the UK. However, there has been a resurgence of

activity at the time of writing, with an eight-week occupation at the University of Sussex over privatisation and outsourcing. The occupation was evicted by a combination of over 100 police officers, private security and bailiffs (Jamieson and Malik 2012).

The key point to take from this is that there are people who recognise that the current institutionalised forms of education are severely limited by their competitiveness, and the individualisation, elitism, and inequality they reproduce. With the recent increase of fees here in the UK, the neoliberal model of the university, which produces at once 'skilled' and proletarianized workers to be employed in the reproduction of capital, needs to be challenged more than ever. For some of the reasons outlined above, organisations such as the NUS both seem too limited in their capacity and scope to be able to respond to these challenges.

Importantly, what many of the attempts at creative resistance and the creation of alternative pedagogical spaces have in common is their recognition of the systemic nature of the crises facing not just students, universities or the public sector in general, but the very 'commons' upon which life depends, and the failure of existing, depoliticised, institutions to combat this (see Springer 2011 for more on these kinds of activities). There is, therefore, a growing recognition

that the same neoliberal 'logics' which demand that education serve the needs of markets are fuelling socio-ecological degradation, precipitating global financial crises and excluding the majority of the world's population from participation in how the world is run. This kind of substantive analysis contrasts starkly with the depoliticised and top-down approaches of the NUS and others.

It is worth pointing out that we are not suggesting that taking part in organising demonstrations and strikes and resistance in the workplace is not important, but we do feel that critical questions must be asked of the role played by organisations such as students' unions, and the modes of struggle advocated by them. We would argue that tactics developed in industrial contexts need to be carefully re-examined in the context of post-industrial workplaces if they are going to be met with success (see ROU 2011).

### **Towards New Institutions?**

In sum, we have seen how decisions and statements made by the NUS have perhaps aided the disillusionment of students with existing institutions that supposedly act in their favour. We therefore contend that the NUS has acted to delimit the possibilities for escalating the struggle in such a way as to constitute genuine challenges to both the more immediate issues of the introduction of fees and the removal of the EMA, and a wider struggle over



austerity measures, let alone a more anti-systemic challenge to the neo-liberal university. We also saw how this delimitation of struggle by students' unions is part of the university 'depoliticisation machine', reflecting a wider depoliticised context where politics is stripped of antagonism.

Our exploration of some of the groups seeking to experiment with alternative forms of education discussed some of the ways the critiques implicit within these groups are manifested through their practice. Moreover, many of these projects are engaging not just in a critique of the existing institutions we have, in particular the university, but are, arguably, engaged in the beginnings of the co-creation of new forms of institution, what some have labelled an 'institution of the common' (Neary 2012; Roggero 2011).

This project is fragmented, but it seems that the current crisis of education is producing movements *against* education cuts and increasing fees, *and* a desire to move beyond the current neoliberal model of the university; indeed Swain (2013) has gone as far as asking 'could the free university movement be the great new hope for education?', because, as the Provisional University (2010) state, 'we're not *at* the university, we *are* the university'.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See <http://teneleventen.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/sign-the-unity-state-ment/>.
- <sup>2</sup> See <http://anticuts.com/>.
- <sup>3</sup> For more on police tactic of 'kettling' in this context, see Rowan (2010). For a fuller overview and analysis of these events, see Ibrahim (2011).

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