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'Either we do this or we die. There is no alternative.' Learning from struggles for autonomous higher education

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Abstract

This paper begins with a provocation from the African-American sociologist and educator W. E. B. Du Bois, made in 1933, on the importance of constructing radically alternative universities that might enable the 'physical survival…spiritual freedom, and…social growth' of black people in the face of entrenched racial dictatorship in the US at the time. I will offer a few reflections on his militantly optimistic and utopic interpretation of 'no alternative' before introducing a number of other historical cases in which hegemonic definitions, forms, hierarchies, and practices of higher education have been effectively challenged as part of wider struggles for human dignity, economic and cognitive justice, and social change – and in which autonomous institutions and 'infrastructures of resistance and creativity' have been created. I will then consider the extent to which contemporary movements in extreme neoliberal societies to defend the public university, on the one hand, and to create autonomous or parallel alternatives to it, on the other, may be considered part of this broader tradition. As the structural transformation of the university under regimes of neoliberal capitalism is well documented, I will concentrate on explicating the effects of this transformation on conditions of possibility for critiquing, imagining alternatives to, and ultimately building and defending humane and progressive opportunities for democratic higher learning. I will concretise this by discussing some of the major areas of work which are being developed in projects to develop programmes of free, co-operative higher education in the United Kingdom, and conclude with a provocation that divesting in the ideological promises of the neoliberal university, while painful and uncertain, can liberate our desire and will to learn and build better spaces for physical survival, spiritual freedom and social justice. My argument is that those working in universities have plenty of alternatives, but need to learn anew how to understand, cultivate and fight for them.

Introduction

For more than twenty years, academics in societies which have been fundamentally reshaped by capitalist logics of development have been producing critical analyses of the structural transformation of the university and documenting its effects on their intellectual work, educational relationships, political possibilities, identities, bodies and souls. As this transformation has becomes more totalizing and initial forms of resistance and counter-transformation prove demonstrably ineffective against complex formations of neoliberal regulation and hegemony, new lines of radical analysis have begun to exceed the extant limits of analysis which are afforded by the institutional form and the idea of the academic university. At the edges of these borders are exciting frontiers of social movement towards the creation of autonomous and alternative forms of higher education and knowledge production, and at the very edges of these lies a fragile politics of hope which, I argue, has not yet found its analytical foundations.

The purpose of my contribution today is to raise questions about how the concepts of autonomy and alterity are being invoked in this movement, and with what effect, in comparison with their analytical meanings in past educational movements and future economic, social and political imaginaries. This inquiry raises two further questions: first, are these concepts the most appropriate for articulating and enabling the realization of different academic futures; and second, what is required in terms of courage, resources and conditions of possibility to struggle through such radically formative and transformative work. I pursue this through some brief reflections on the meaning of autonomy in a number of historical movements to create radically alterative systems of higher education, all of which were integral parts of wider projects for systemic economic and social change, and some reflections on its meaning in contemporary 'free university' movements, mainly in the UK.

Not 'lifelong learning' but higher education for life

It can be difficult to speak about higher education today – even progressive, critical and radical forms – outside the languages which are normalized by discourses of the 'knowledge economy', the liberal and social-democratic discourses of the 'public' university, or the discourses of traditional academic subjectivity and sensibility. Yet thinking in different registers is a necessary part of making counter-hegemonic, alternative institutions and

practices imaginable, intelligible and ultimately practicable. It is of course impossible to simply divest from one discursive formation and invent another – in present circumstances, given the extent to which neoliberal rationality has suffused our meaning-making resources. One way of enlarging this space of freedom is to understand the logics of other projects which have aimed to establish socially significant practices and institutions of autonomous higher education.

For example, if presented with the words 'life' and 'learning', a likely association in the hegemonic discourses of neoliberal higher education will be with the concept of 'lifelong learning', and this in turn with either economistic discourses of 'employability', 'entrepreneurship', 'flexibility', 'continuing professional development', and so on, or with individualistic and depoliticized discourses of personal growth and self-development. In more radical traditions of higher education, however, these words collocate differently so that learning and knowledge are associated with life, living labour and vitality. This association directs us not towards questions about how individuals might use education for strategic gain or social adaptation, but towards questions like: What does it mean to believe that people's lives – and not simply their professional desires – depend on securing democratic control of a progressive education? In what circumstances are educators willing to struggle intellectually, politically and economically for the creation of public higher education and for the social conditions within this has real human meaning and value? Do such circumstances exist today, and if not, how might it be possible to produce them?

Struggles for autonomous higher education: wider perspectives

Ours is not the first period of experimental projects to create 'free universities' that are autonomous from dominant institutions. The history of higher education exceeds the story of the academy, just as the identity of the educator exceeds the role of the academic. Yet the *people's histories* of higher education are only really discernible at the edges of the public university and are unthinkable within the conceptual framework of the 'knowledge economy'. Work to educate democratic sensibilities and capabilities through both learning and participation in alternatively organized social affairs has been concentrated, in the capitalist societies of the global North, most densely in traditions of popular education located outside formal educational institutions. While the term 'popular education' is used to mean many different things, it most encompasses any educative activity that 'is rooted in the

real interests and struggles of ordinary people', which is 'overtly political and critical of the status quo', and which is 'committed to progressive social and political change' (Crowther et al. 1999). This broad definition encompasses a diversity of cultural work which includes autonomous educational associations, anarchistic free and 'supplementary' schools, folk schools, workers' study circles and reading groups, educational settlements and communities and encampments, college extension classes and correspondence courses. During the nineteenth century, popular education ranged from small projects with few students (as in the residential programmes of Ruskin College in Oxford) to the US Chautauqua movement, which recorded approximately 225,000 students and 10,000 reading circles from 1878 to 1894, and whose commercial variants served up to 30 million people attending its courses in the 1920s (Scott 1999, p. 398). The learning which took place in these contexts was about more than knowledge and more than power. It was directed towards creating new ways of thinking and being; new ways of life where the daily challenges and joys of living itself could be articulated and embraced as educative experiences (Pateman, cited in Niemi and Plante 2008, p. 186). While this work yielded 'no quick results or an impressive statistical showing' of achievement, it produced long periods of experimental work in educating autonomy – 'a matter of digging a deep foundation, unostentatiously, patiently, and with a perseverance that is invulnerable to discouragement' (Hogue 1924, p. 68).

While it is the highly experimental, overtly radical, anti-establishment and often relatively ephemeral movements that capture the imagination of many alternative educational activists today, there were also notable projects to 'mainstream' alternative educational institutions and practices. The creation of Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1933, for example, was a direct response to both the repression of critical education in US liberal arts colleges at the time and the desire of a small number of academics to extend John Dewey's philosophies of learning from the school to the university. It was not, unlike many of the higher educational experiments today, an attempt to subvert the system; on the contrary, it was organized and run by some of the most prominent scholars of the day and maintained for more than twenty years through financial benefactors. Some of its aspirations resonate with those of today's more anarchistic and marginalized projects: a desire to '[shed] the heavy hand of upper administration' in higher education, putting 'students in charge of their own learning', re-emphasising the arts and centrality of guided project work, the 'elimination of grades' in exchange for independently evaluated portfolio work, the integration of democracy education into curriculum, and a linking of theoretical and practical knowledge in the interest

of collective social life. Yet while the college intended to assert economic, political and cultural freedom in order to liberate educators and students by 'enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity', it arguably did not do this with the intention of creating wider infrastructures of resistance and social or economic autonomy (Day 2011, p. 113; Dinerstein and Deneulin 2012, p. 597). While the project was informed by theories of what *should be possible* in education and theories of how *humanist and progressive education can and should contribute to the improvement of society more generally*, the college was primarily a project in *educational and professional autonomy* rather than in social or economic alterity.

This may be contrasted, I would argue, to other forms of alternative higher education that were developing at this time. One centres around the work of William Du Bois, an American sociologist and educator writing about the politics of educational change and democratization and in the early twentieth century. In a 1935 essay entitled 'The form and function of the Negro college', he outlined the racist status quo in the US and explained the role that the university played in both institutionalizing inequality *and* in furthering what he predicted would be a very long and difficult struggle for economic, social and political justice. Despite the constitutional abolition of slavery in 1865, brutal structures of racial violence and segregation in labour, law, politics, education, and intimate life permeated even the most basic institutions of collective governance and social life in the country.[1] The economic, judicial, and cultural efforts exerted by white supremacists to diminish possibilities for black people to access education and produce legitimate knowledge assured the unequal privileges of liberal democracy through the preservation of a racial dictatorship in which democracy was only democratic so long as it was white (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 66). The universities that had been established to reproduce this status quo – what Du Bois referred to as 'dead' educational organizations – were not fit for human purpose. Real education, he argued, referred to a kind of learning that 'reaches down to the mass of universal men and makes the life of normal men the object of its training'.

In this context, Du Bois argued that not only alternative schools, but autonomous universities for black men and women, were desperately needed. When an entire population is structurally denied opportunities for learning, labour, and legitimate recourse to social goods and participation, there can be no meaningful movement for justice within a society and no rigorous quest for understanding. Yet knowing this did not resolve the practical problem of

whether the most appropriate politico-educative project in this context was to create new knowledge, subjectivities and institutions for transforming the systems of knowledge production from within, or to build alternatives that might open onto new, not-yet imagined infrastructures of possibility.

Du Bois drew inspiration from his experiences of study at Fisk University, which he argued was a 'rooted' establishment. In our own context, it might be regarded as a small cohort of twenty-five male and female students undertaking

> 'a scheme of education [that] was a thing of breadth and enthusiasm with an unusual unity of aim' – a project to 'transform the world by giving proof of our own ability, by teaching our less fortunate fellows so that they could follow the same path, by proclaiming to the world our belief in American democracy, and the place which Negroes would surely take in it' (Du Bois 1935, p. 413).

This experience in educating democracy informed Du Bois' later aspirations to expand the American Negro University, an institution whose curriculum began from the needs of communities and then asked, 'how shall these young men and women be trained to earn a living and live a life under the circumstances in which they find themselves or with such changing of those circumstances as time and work and determination will permit'? (Du Bois 1935, p. 417) There was no guarantee of success in this work; as he pointed out, the southern US was by then in some ways more segregated than it had been five decades earlier. But in the face of an urgent need to transform the 'brute fact' of caste segregation through cultural, economic and political struggle, guarantees were irrelevant. 'It is not ours to argue whether we will be segregated or whether we ought to be a caste,' he wrote.

> 'Our problem is: How far and in what way can we consciously and scientifically guide our future so as to insure our physical survival, our spiritual freedom, and our social growth? Either we do this or we die. There is no alternative.' (Du Bois 1935, p. 421)

This non-alternative, a kind of 'counter-TINA', referred to the impossibility of *not* attempting to name the conditions, not throwing oneself into movement for radical change, and not reflecting on the active part that one was playing, and might play, in its advance. While Du did not speak the language of prefiguration or transformation, his social research and educational activism were underpinned by a 'radical applied theory of social transformation that emphasizes building alternative political, economic, and cultural infrastructures within

existing oppressive contexts' whilst simultaneously working to abolish or transform them and establishing more suitable alternatives (Luchies 2012, p. 112).

At around the same time, a similar project was being pursued in a different way by Anna Julia Cooper – a teacher, school leader, social reformer, pioneer of the American 'community college' movement, and director of an early free university for black men and women in Washington, DC.[2] While like Du Bois she believed that higher education could empower people by enabling them to participate in the dominant institutions of industrial capitalist society, she was particularly concerned with the education of dignity, integrity, and self-determination amongst people whose struggles articulated in complex ways at the intersections of racism, patriarchy, and class. Like others advocating for radical social reconstruction in the face of implausible circumstances, she found no ready answers and no self-evident conditions of possibility to be seized upon for a start. Her strategy was to rather generate hope.

> 'Since emancipation the movement has been at times confused and stormy, so that we could not always tell whether we were going forward or groping in a circle. We hardly knew what we ought to emphasize, whether education or wealth, or civil freedom and recognition. We were utterly destitute. Possessing no homes, nor the knowledge of how to make them, no money nor the habit of acquiring it, no education, no political status, no influence, what could we do?' (Cooper 1894)

Cooper regarded higher education as a fundamentally consequential element of 'black people's struggles to improvise agency out of conditions they were not expected to survive' (Bonnick 2007, p. 179). After retiring from teaching at Wilberforce University and running a large, elite high school in Washington, DC in 1930, she ten spent twenty years directing and developing pedagogies for adult education at the Frelinghuysen University Group of Schools for Colored Persons in Washington. This was a free university which had been established to 'enable men and women who cannot make their leisure time fit into the schedule of…a college or university to pursue…higher and broader education…as seem suited to their…capacities and aspirations'.[3] Although there had been a surge in adult education programmes around the country, few of these were open to black people. As a result, a parallel system of adult education institutions was created by communities, schools, churches, and civil rights organizations.

Cooper militated for an education that 'gives direction of thought-power, power of appreciation, power of willing the right…and to the divine possibilities in all human

development;' a social and political activity that cultivated new democratic subjectivities and new communities (Cooper in Johnson 2009, pp. 53–54). Her concern was for the creation of accessible, experientially-grounded curricula for 'the lowest down, the intentionally forgotten man, untaught and unprovided [*sic*] for either in public schools…or the colleges and universities' (Cooper cited in Johnson 2009, p. 53). Like others involved in the American progressive education movement at this time, she deplored 'mass production and factory methods in education' and those which encouraged 'lock-step tests and measurements,' not only because they were pedagogically ineffective but because they 'work disastrously for any segregated people' who had experienced 'intellectual isolation' (Cooper in Johnson 2009, p. 54; Crocco, Munro, and Weiler 2009). Her insistence on the cultivation of humanist relationships between teachers and students in school and her methods of encouraging students to read the world critically, critique hegemonic knowledge, and link individual experience with social conditions, has been described as antecedent to later developments in feminist pedagogy, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, and more contemporary 'decolonizing' pedagogies (May 2012, p. 51).

Two specific things interest me here. One is the way Cooper re-read her reality in order to disclose its possibilities differently. Her essay 'What are we worth?, for example, proposed radically different criteria for judging the value of social practices and institutions on the basis of what sort of people they produced, what sort of communities they fostered, and whether they contributed to or diminished the 'stature of the fullness of a man [or woman]' (Cooper 1892, p. 284). The second point of interest in this essay is Cooper's final line. '[Our] great "problem," she wrote, 'after all is to be solved not by brooding over it, and orating about it, but by *living into it*'. She, like Du Bois, advocated the use of a 'participating reason' which takes things 'as they go, and therefore also as they could go better' (Bloch 1995, p. 4).

I invoke Du Bois' and Cooper's work in autonomous and alternative universities in order to highlight that the history of higher education – and particularly the history of higher education from and for the bottom-up, and through and for democratization – contains within itself an alternative history and spirit of non-alterity: rather than accepting no alternative but to submit to the 'prevailing modes of thought' and organization of social life as they are constructed by power, here the analysis is that there is no alternative but to question, resist and overhaul them (Horkheimer 2002, p. 218). For Du Bois, who advocated the practice of what he called 'abolition democracy', it was not only possible to call for the reform of

existing circumstances but to 'take a radical stance … announcing [the] obsolescence' of a particular state of affairs and organization of social life, and the necessity of creating another. Educational reform and the creation of any alternative educational system was only meaningful as part of wider struggles for economic, political, social and cultural justice in both redistributive and recognitive forms.

I draw attention to these examples because it seems to me that while many contemporary experiments in alternative higher education reproduce historical forms of anarchistic self-education that serve important purposes for any marginalized and excluded people, academic analyses of and professional responses to the crisis of the corporatized and managerialist university *read* like abolitionist papers, advocating the abolition of this regime and the establishment of another for purposes of social justice, but *act* like defences of the liberal arts college, seeking space and autonomy to teach in ways that are presumed to be more liberating and humanly useful for everyone – but often ways that also retain hegemonic definitions of legitimate knowledge, privileged academic identities and positions, and a clear boundary between 'higher' and 'popular' education, and intellectual and political work.

In contrast, for example, the 'Living Learning' project of shack-dwellers in Abahlali baseMjondolo prioritizes 'a politics of those who do not count', which is 'carried out where people live, at the times when they are free and in the languages they speak' (Figlan et al. 2009, p. 78). This learning is a radicalizing mode of learning to mobilize individual and collective action against oppressive exercises or conditions of power; to enable people to reflect critically on and redefine their social identities; to transform fundamental subjectivities and conceptual frameworks about the world; to unlearn hegemonic common sense and develop transformative 'good sense'; to construct a critical understanding of the forces of closure and possibility in one's life; to produce knowledge which enables social and political participation; to learn how to resist being governed or dominated; to become aware of and practise non-authoritarian and non-oppressive ways of being with others; to produce knowledge which informs particular social actions; to produce indigenous knowledge about matters of concrete concern to people who are oppressed; to create space for reflection, dialogue and public debate; to create space for democratic models of encounter with difference and multiplicity; to construct new languages and structures of feeling around life activities; to challenge invisibility and silencing, and to create space for self-affirmation and dignity; to enable people to imagine and articulate empowering and clarifying visions for the

future; or to simply ‘live well’ (Chatterton 2006; Figlan et al. 2009; Hall 2012; Hall et al. 2011, 2012; Sceimeczi 2010; Steinklammer 2012; Torres 2011; von Kotze 2012). These activities demand new ways of knowing, feeling and being, and give rise to a new politics of knowledge in which ‘knowledge creation and political transformation’ are interdependent, and in which the knowledge that matters is that which people create together through the processes of their own social, economic, political and spiritual emancipation – that which enables them to understand the world critically, to ‘take back control collectively and develop their autonomy’; that incubates insubordination (Motta 2011, p. 193). The authority and relevance of official knowledge, dominant knowledge – what members of the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement call ‘university knowledge’ – is decentred; neither categorically rejected nor taken at face value, but subordinated to knowledge created by and for the oppressed and those in struggle against oppression (Figlan et al. 2009).

Here, institutional autonomy is legitimized because it is seen as socially necessary. There is in fact a saying from the collective ‘there is a difference when the poor say another world is necessary and civil society says another world is possible’ (Figlan et al. 2009, p. 87). The question is, who, if anyone, *needs* an autonomous, alternative system of general higher education today, one that is worth fighting to create – perhaps at the risk of abandoning ‘the academy’ as we wish it would be – and which has a chance of survival within, against and beyond the organizing principles of global capitalism?

The ‘free university movement’

The free university movement in the UK is an interesting site for asking these questions, as it is made up of people (mainly educators and sometimes students) who dedicate considerable time and energy to creating specifically educational alternatives in response to experiences of limitation, repression, values schizophrenia and the foreclosure of possibility within their own places of work (mainly universities). In one way, the movement represents the deterritorialization of the excess of living knowledge, and the desire to produce living knowledge, that cannot be captured by the dominant logics of the corporate university. In other ways, it is a proving ground for some of the newest and most imaginative thinking about what higher education is, should be for, and might become. It is a movement in very slow motion. Many independent projects emerged in response to the complete defunding of arts, humanities and social science education in the UK and the trebling of student tuition fees

there in 2010. A number of these worked vigorously in campaigning for public higher education and offering free-of-cost university courses, activities and politico-intellectual spaces for several years before closing, mainly due to the unsustainable amount of volunteer labour they required, and due to difficulties in articulating their wider, and indeed public or common, social value and purpose. While they were autonomous in *certain* senses -- primarily in the sense of *philosophical and subjective* autonomy to think and work and act as they pleased, outside a heteronomous logic of capital – the condition of possibility for their volunteer labour was their subordination in other times and places to the law of the market through which they were able to survive. Where they were autonomous from the state in certain ways, they could not automatically be recognized as having value outside the dominant logic of the neoliberal state and market, in which valuable knowledge is credentialed for exchange in the labour market. We have learned that simply making knowledge available and making education free does not necessarily undo the 'enclosure of knowledge', which has not been accomplished solely by charging for it but by reducing it to a value defined 'according to its profitability, rather than its contribution to social improvement' – and this new common sense exerts a powerful form of discipline on what kind of educational activities are regarded as worthwhile (Federici 2009). As argued by the authors from the transnational EduFactory collective in 2009, 'exodus does not naturally coincide with autonomy' but rather must conquer autonomous organization by organizing its own institutions' (p. 11).

All those free university projects that have sustained throughout the full five years are now working at this limit, which is the limit of the *idea* of the university in a particular form, of the attachment to particular ways of knowing and educating as part of a particular way of life, of the separation of university politics from the politics of living struggles for dignity and social justice, and of the *desire* for a form of autonomy that may in fact be impossible.

In thinking through this problem, I draw on the definition of autonomy offered by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, who combines the term's philosophical meaning as 'self-legislation' (particularly in the sense of being able to formulate and act according to moral principles independently of any dominating power) with its political meaning as collective self-governance, and frames both within a context of mutual aid and collective social life. In particular, she argues that the political spirit of autonomy implies three things: (1) autonomy from capital, manifested in worker self-government and self-valorization as well as in autonomy from the capital relation altogether; (2) autonomy from the state, rather than its

attempted seizure and re-organization; and (3) autonomy from all forms of 'colonial domination and developmental dependency (p. 11). Applied to the case of counter-neoliberal institution building, this might mean that autonomous higher education projects would be *collectively self-sustaining* rather than voluntarily maintained; able to articulate a meaningful social role for their work that does not depend on exchanging learning for benefits in the state or the market *and* which contributes to the liberation of people in their everyday lives. Following a critique of a certain tendency in contemporary anarchist politics, it sometimes happens in the free university movement that 'building free spaces and/or creating disorder are regarded as the movement itself rather than components of one [and] the necessary, difficult, slow and inspiring process of building movements…falls through the cracks between sabotage and the autonomous zone' (Olsen 2009, p. 41) – even if only because this immediate work is so hard. Yet we must be committed to more than 'infoshops and insurrections' and cultivate commitments to deep structural, cultural and subjective transformation and to the construction of the material conditions necessary to sustain this work.

The movement for alternative educational futures, in other words, is necessarily an economic, political and cultural movement as well as an intellectual one. The autonomy that is required to *create other institutions* is a material and embodied autonomy, which demands actual disengagement and disinvestment from the very systems of labour, security, recognition and purpose that give academics' lives meaning and shape (but which are, in the manner of a wounded attachment, also the source of their exploitation, disempowerment and despair). What is particularly interesting now is the development of prefigurative projects which work with a 'radical applied theory of social transformation that emphasizes building alternative political, economic, and cultural infrastructures within existing oppressive contexts' whilst simultaneously working to abolish or transform them and establishing more suitable alternatives (Luchies 2012, p. 112).

This work to be and become autonomous subjects is fortunately enabled by the very kind of autonomy that is cherished and whose erosion is mourned: the autonomy of thought; in this case, the ability and courage to dissociate the political promise of higher education from the historically specific forms of the university, the educator and the student, in order to experiment with new forms and to critically learn 'how far and in what way can we consciously and scientifically guide our future so as to insure our physical survival, our

spiritual freedom, and our social growth' – particularly in circumstances where there *may* be alternatives, and where one of these alternatives is to contribute to the construction of a future which forecloses other possible futures.

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Notes

[1] Du Bois (1935, p. 727) For example, the Co-operative Education Association of Virginia, which was organized in 1904 and dedicated to 'the building of an adequate public-school system and the training of what has been well denominated "the forgotten man"' and defined as an exercise in 'rebuilding the life of the South, through the growth of community consciousness and the development of public education,' was only for whites (Guy 1923). In 1912, the Negro Organization Society was founded to pursue similar aims for black children's education in Virginia (McClure 2013).

[2] For additional writings and resources on Cooper's life and work, visit the Cooper Project at Wake Forest University (http://cooperproject.org/category/anna-julia-cooper/).

[3] Cooper became president of Frelinghuysen University in 1930, aged 71, having completed her PhD at the Sorbonne five years before. She remained in this position until she was 91 years old. (Cooper cited in Johnson 2009, p. 49)