
35. Free universities as academic commons

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, growing discontent with the ‘neoliberal turn’ in higher education and controversies over rights to academic freedom have not only sparked protests across university campuses, but also inspired off-campus organizing to build emancipatory spaces of learning and sharing knowledge. This chapter focuses on free universities as a distinct response to the crisis and shows how the praxis of grassroots initiatives contributes to the development of postcapitalist imaginaries in academia.

According to the *Melbourne Free University Guide*, a ‘free university is a space created by a community for the sharing of knowledge . . . [It is] a space in which knowledge and ideas can be freely shared among equals. This space is not given: it has to be established and occupied’ (Westendorf et al. n.d., pp. 4–5). Free universities build on a rich tradition of feminist, anti-racist, and working-class struggles to create spaces of autonomous learning and empowerment. The name ‘free university’ was coined during the 1960s student protests in Berkeley, California with inspiration coming from the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights movement (Draves 1980, pp. 75–85). Challenging the status quo in higher education, activists developed distinct practices of emancipatory learning which were ‘low-cost or cost-free, non-credentialed and voluntarily run, oriented towards radical education for social change, responsive to community needs and organized in accordance with principles of participatory democracy’ (Amsler 2017, p. 10).

Recent years have seen a resurgence of free university initiatives around the world, providing invaluable experiential knowledge (see also Means et al. 2017). In Mexico, for example, Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra) was started in 1999 ‘to support autonomous ways of living’ for Indigenous and poor urban communities in the Oaxaca region (Esteva 2006, p. 12). In Canada, the perceived failure of the University of Saskatchewan to live up to its mission as ‘a university of the people’ led to the founding of the People’s Free University in 2002 (Collins and Woodhouse 2015). The popular education network Universidad Trashumante (2009) in Argentina grew out of a desire for diverse encounters with people and forms of knowledge marginalized by political and economic repression. The Social Science Centre in Lincoln, UK, emerged in 2011 out of a concern that the British ‘system of higher education . . . is increasingly oriented towards satisfying the perceived needs of business and industry, and . . . embraces the short-termist, highly competitive, profit-driven motives of the capitalist market’.¹ Since 2016, politically persecuted ‘Academics for Peace’ in Turkey have collectively organized in Solidarity Academies in an effort to safeguard public access to critical research and learning (Erdem and Akin 2019). As the examples show, free university initiatives differ widely in terms of their conditions of existence and they do not necessarily carry the title of free university in their name. As of January 2019, the ‘Alternative Education Map’ includes 123 entries (primarily from the minority world) of ‘groups that are thinking critically about higher education provision and are attempting to offer alternative models’.² Such diversity

not only allows for a deeper understanding of knowledge as a complex site of struggles over class relations, property rights and social reproduction, but also opens up space for imagining different trajectories for the ‘university of the common’ (Edu-Factory Collective 2009).

The significance of free universities is thus twofold: They articulate a profound critique of the ways in which capitalism has marked academia through the commodification of education, the reorganization of the academic labour process, the enclosure of knowledge, and the financialization of student debt.³ At the same time, they demonstrate how learning can be organized beyond the institutional confines of the public and private university and grounded in the principles of commons, with resources being ‘shared by a community of users/producers, who also define the modes of use and production, distribution and circulation of these resources through democratic and horizontal forms of governance’ (De Angelis and Harvie 2014, p. 280). In what follows, the chapter elaborates on different aspects of the postcapitalist politics of free universities, focusing particularly on their contributions to making knowledge accessible, their practices of ‘doing in common’, their structures of collective organization, and the emergent communities that sustain the academic commons.

ACCESS

One of the critical issues pertaining to commons is the question of how to regulate the access to and use of commons resources (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013; Hess and Ostrom 2007; Stavrides 2010). Free universities share a belief that higher education should be socially inclusive and foster the sharing of knowledge. As such, they embody a threefold critique of the mechanisms through which universities typically regulate access, namely admission criteria, tuition fees and intellectual property rights. First, free universities have largely abandoned restrictive admission criteria to create spaces of learning that are ‘open to all regardless of experience, background, age or qualification’.⁴ Furthermore, the relocation of classes to community-based spaces such as parks, libraries, churches, trade union halls, community centres, cafés, book-stores, galleries, and even a car-park supports the outreach to diverse communities beyond white middle-class students.

The second important contribution of free universities is to reduce economic barriers to higher education through decommodification. Not surprisingly, numerous free universities were sparked by student protests against skyrocketing tuition fees and the undermining of the right to education through market forces. Echoing Marx’s critique of ‘teaching factories’ (1990 [1867], p. 644), Curtis (2001, p. 83) explicates how the non-profit liberal arts college in the United States is a capitalist enterprise that:

produces and sells a specific educational commodity, the academic course . . . The exchange-value of this commodity is tuition. The use-value of the course may include the specific knowledge gained, entertainment, credits toward fulfilling major or general graduation requirements and hence the bachelor’s degree, and any usefulness the course might have in obtaining employment and future success in self- or paid employment.

The commodification of education thus turns students into customers who purchase academic credentials and knowledge, albeit at the risk of incurring high levels of debt (Federici 2009). For free universities, in contrast, lecturers and students ‘are not merchants and buyers of education but partners in a common project’ (Fatsis et al. 2018). Courses are offered either free

of charge or at a very moderate fee, with a focus on the intrinsic motivation of participants to acquire and share knowledge. Hence, exams, grades and the awarding of degrees are anathema for most initiatives. Exceptions include Free University Brighton's 'freegree' or the alternative diploma awarded by Unitierra, which sends a strong political message about poor and indigenous communities' struggles for the right to education in Mexico (Esteva 2006, p. 15).

The third point of critique aims at the role of universities in restricting access to knowledge. Notwithstanding efforts to promote cultures of sharing through open-access publications, online courses, research networks and collegial traditions in university departments (Harvie 2004), increased reliance on corporate partnerships to conduct academic research is turning knowledge into private property, protected through intellectual property rights. In a sense, Marx's (1993 [1953]) critique of the appropriation of societal knowledge – which he referred to as the 'general intellect' – through capital can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary debate on the 'enclosure of academic commons'. As Bollier (2002, p. 19) points out, there are serious concerns over whether core academic values such as serving the public good, independence and integrity can 'be adequately protected as more scholarly arenas are reconceptualized as market resources, to be treated as holdings in an investment portfolio whose primary goal is return on investment'. Enclosure also occurs at the point of publication, as the 'dependence on the private sector for scholarly journals essentially compels universities to finance research, give it away to for-profit publishers for free, and then buy it back at astronomical prices' for university libraries (Kranich 2007, p. 88). Free universities, on the other hand, enact their commitment to the free circulation of knowledge by the nurturing of intentional communities of sharing, for instance, through the creative use of social media, the compilation of online resources, the use of collaborative learning formats and community outreach.

COMMONING PRACTICES

Commoning, or 'doing in common', refers to processes of social labour undertaken by a community to produce and sustain its shared resources. The verb form 'commoning' highlights the processual character of this effort alongside its collaborative nature (De Angelis 2017, p. 121).

Critical pedagogy, understood as a peer-based social relation of labour (Neary and Winn 2017), lies at the heart of commoning in free universities. Inspired by the work of educational theorists such as Paulo Freire and committed to education as a socially transformative praxis, free university activists critically scrutinize the conditions under which academic knowledge is produced and circulated, explore different epistemological perspectives and work together to develop participatory methods of learning. Put differently, 'knowledge is a common good . . . because it is produced and reproduced by living labour and social cooperation' (Edu-Factory Collective 2007). One activist reflects on the experience of critical pedagogy as follows:

I was drawn to the Melbourne Free University because it offers a generative, transformative space: informed, challenging conversations are held, drawing on a variety of 'ways of knowing', bringing together rigorous intellectual thinking with a diversity of lived experiences, deeply held ethical positions and intuitive reflections. Spaces such as this are transformative as they destabilise hegemonic, disempowering ideas about 'expertise', and open up, deepen and challenge our thinking. (Westendorf et al. n.d., p. 11)

The quote goes to show that ‘the common is always organized in translation’ (Roggero 2010, p. 368). In other words, commoning extends to the labour of developing a shared language that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and knowledge that participants bring to the commoned space. In effect, this is akin to the emphasis put on recognizing the multiplicity of people’s (often informal, autodidactic) skills in the context of community economies (Cameron and Gibson 2001).

Commoning practices also include the administrative and logistical work of scheduling and advertising academic events, coordinating lecturers, finding adequate venues and technical equipment, custodial duties, community outreach, the documentation and evaluation of events, and management of websites and social media accounts. While the existence of free universities critically depends on this kind of collective (and mostly unpaid) labour, it may turn out to be less than straightforward to establish a fair division of labour that does not replicate the hierarchies based on gender and academic status, commonly found in mainstream academia (Erdem and Akin 2019).

COLLECTIVE SELF-MANAGEMENT

Commoning also includes processes of collective decision-making such as the establishing of ‘rules or protocols for access and use . . . caring of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being of others’ (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016, p. 195). While free universities share a critique of hierarchical university structures and consensus-based forms of decision-making are a common feature, their concrete modes of organization vary widely depending on the political context as well as the theories informing their vision, such as Marxism, Anarchism, Workerism or the Cooperative movement. The institutional set-up can thus range from formally incorporated cooperatives to informal networks (Saunders 2017, p. 162; Thompsett 2017, p. 27).

The Social Science Centre in Lincoln, for instance, exemplifies the not-for-profit cooperative model, operating ‘on the basis of democratic, non-hierarchical principles’ and consensus-based decision making. Until its closure in early 2019,⁵ members owned and controlled the cooperative, serving on committees, supporting the everyday running of the Centre, and contributing to research and curriculum development (Neary and Winn 2017). However, as activists with Kocaeli Solidarity Academy in Turkey (organized as a non-profit association) report, unlearning the academic habitus of status-based hierarchical interaction continues to pose a challenge even after peer-based structures of deliberation have formally been put in place (Erdem and Akin 2019, p. 154).

Many free universities choose to operate in an informal way to retain their autonomy, with a core team of activists taking responsibility for the academic commons and sharing decision-making power with a larger group of participants. The platform cooperativist model of Antiuniversity Now is unique insofar as it connects people interested in organizing local activities of knowledge sharing across Britain. It remains to be seen whether the decentred network managed by a small team of facilitators with ‘no permanent base, no regular staff or a list of students and no desire to start a new institution’ will turn into a distinctly new trend in commoning knowledge (Antiuniversity Now and Shalmy, 2016).

COMMUNITY

From the 1960s onwards, ‘many free universities became alternative knowledge communities in which relations between the self and others, knowledge, learning institutions and society were fundamentally reimagined. . . . Free universities also served to regenerate “a sense of community” where communities had been destroyed’ (Amsler 2017, p. 12). Indeed, the significance of community-building for the resilience of academic commons cannot be overestimated. As Gudeman (2001, p. 27) has famously stated, ‘without a commons, there is no community; without a community, there is no commons’. Nurturing a community of learning that shares a sense of belonging and commitment to the free university project requires enormous amounts of affective labour expended towards ‘being-in-common’ (Gibson-Graham 2006). This includes the time and effort spent on developing a consensus that reflects the ‘set of interrelated meanings and values that are shared, understandable, performable or evocative – in short, some common ground’ (De Angelis 2017, p. 126). Case studies suggest that values and ethical principles such as equality, reciprocity, trust, localness, conviviality and social justice inform free universities (Esteva 2006; Thompsett 2017). For the Solidarity Academies, the collective experiences of state repression and the willingness to serve as anchors of peace-building and democratic resistance in Turkey have also been crucial factors in community-building (Erdem and Akin 2019, pp. 154–6).

Without implying a hierarchy of values, let us conclude with a focus on freedom, as the value enshrined in the name ‘free university’, and explore how it succeeds in serving as common ground despite the different connotations it has, or perhaps exactly because of the multiplicity of meanings it allows for. First of all, freedom implies the right to partake in education. As elaborated above, open admission policies and decommodification allow people to freely pursue their learning interests. Contra Hardin (1968), however, free access has not resulted in a ‘tragedy of the commons’. Melbourne Free University, for example, has been operating according to the principle ‘no money in, no money out’ since 2010, relying exclusively on volunteer work and donated resources (Westendorf et al. n.d., p. 28). Here, freedom signifies a shift from market exchange to gift economies in the field of education.

An equally profound meaning of freedom is the struggle for institutional autonomy from the state and the higher education system. In the United States, the old free university motto ‘anyone can teach and anyone can learn’ has been variously associated with free enterprise as well as the First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression (Draves 1980, pp. 18, 55). The desire of free universities is to be ‘free in spirit’,⁶ that is, to engage in critical thinking, to experiment with emancipatory formats of pedagogy and collective organization without hindrance from bureaucratic mechanisms of control. This should not be mistaken for arbitrariness though. Antiuniversity Now, for example, combines a radical openness with a firm commitment and ‘collective desire to create and sustain safe autonomous spaces for radical learning that follow, nurture and enact anti-capitalist, anarchist, feminist, anti-racist, de-colonial, anti-fascist, queer, trans and sex worker inclusive values through conversation and direct action’.⁷ Academic commons, and hence the right to knowledge, are thus always enshrined in a broader set of collective freedom rights. This multifaceted nature of the signifier freedom has perhaps been described most succinctly in the definition provided by the Free University of Berkeley as early as 1970 (quoted in Draves 1980, p. 82):

FREE U IS

FREE form . . .	YOU can teach
FREE space . . .	YOU can attend
FREE thought . . .	YOU can participate
FREE forum . . .	YOU can initiate
FREE the people.	

YOU

NOTES

1. <https://socialsciencecentre.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 18 May 2019).
2. <https://socialsciencecentre.wordpress.com/alternative-education/> (accessed 18 May 2019). For a list of free universities that existed in North America in the 1970s, see the appendix in Draves (1980).
3. While a detailed analysis of universities from a diverse economies perspective remains beyond the scope of this chapter, a cautionary note on the problematic nature of capitalocentric critiques of higher education seems warranted (Aoki 2018).
4. <http://www.antiuniversity.org/About> (accessed 18 May 2019).
5. <https://socialsciencecentre.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 18 May 2019). Note that the SSC was discontinued in early 2019, as activists felt that they had exhausted the possibilities to be explored in this organizational form. Another prominent example of the cooperative model is Mondragon University (Spain), which is run as a private, fee-charging university (Wright et al. 2011).
6. Quoted from the 1967 manifesto of the now defunct Sydney Free University; see Thompsett (2016, p. 61).
7. <http://www.antiuniversity.org/About> (accessed 18 May 2019).

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