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Recreating Universities for the Public Good: Pathways to a Better World

This special issue focuses on universities run by and for the benefit of students, academics and the public. Three contributions cover existing initiatives from ‘free’ universities to other long-established institutions that are fee-free and where students and faculty are central to their operations and governance.¹ Two contributions focus on using tried and tested participatory organisational structures to create alternatives to the deteriorating state of universities. One sets out ways universities could be run by ‘beneficial owners’ and the other reports on a project to design cooperative universities.

This special issue is an example of *LATISS*’s focus on using academic research not just to critique the present but to think concretely about future solutions. Critiques of contemporary universities abound and have been covered in *LATISS*. A few recent books not only analyse the causes of disastrous changes in universities but focus on how to remake them (for example, Levin and Greenwood 2016; Newfield 2016). We need fewer Jeremiahs and more builders of better future universities; so this special issue focuses practical attention on divergent and innovative institutional designs.

The papers grew out of ‘Universities in the Knowledge Economy’, a four-year collaborative project to research dynamic relationships between universities and knowledge economies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific Rim (unike.au.dk).² Several contributions were generated by a session on ‘Alternative Ways of Thinking the University’ organised by UNIKE PhD fellow, Catherine Butcher, at the conference held at the University of Auckland in February, 2015. At the final conference in Copenhagen at the Danish School of Education (Aarhus University) in June 2016, a group formed to (re)create universities based on a renewed educational and public mandate, participatory systems of ownership and governance and revived relationships with society. This group has mounted a project on ResearchGate for those interested

in pursuing these ideas: <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Recreating-public-universities-and-restoring-democracy> . An allied group has formulated the principles on which to base such a university, published as the ‘Auckland Declaration’ <http://unike.au.dk/the-auckland-declaration/>.

This issue starts with two papers that analyse the ‘free universities’ that seek to operate independently from the state and create spaces for critical, non-capitalist and democratic learning in the U.K., Australia, and the U.S.A. Sarah Amsler reviews some current experiments to create ‘critically autonomous’ educational projects in the U.K. She traces their inspiration to nineteenth century ‘experimental colleges’ in the U.S.A. and reformers ‘insane with the courage’ to open the transformative power of education to working class and black people. Similar aspirations motivated ‘free universities’ and critical spaces within universities in the U.S.A. and Europe from the 1960s onwards. Many were closed down during the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, but she now sees a revival. Amsler argues for recuperating histories of these struggles to gain the insights and courage to advance contemporary movements.

Fern Thompsett’s article analyses educational challenges faced by free universities in Australia and the U.S.A. She starts with her experience as an instigator of the Brisbane Free University, raising questions about how to generate radical ‘modes of study’. The aim is to equip people to dissect repressive power relations, resist them, and, through non-hierarchical pedagogies, prefigure better ways to live. In an extensive tour of free universities in the Americas, she engaged a wide range of activists in discussing the difficulties in developing these pedagogies. The activists try to avoid co-optation by the capitalism they are resisting by developing an organisational ‘praxis of non-determinacy’. Thompsett reveals the ‘layers of learning’ involved in such processes.

Wright and Greenwood’s article focuses on how to organise a participatory university and emphasizes ‘what is to be done’. They point out how neoliberal reforms of universities have

resulted in a new elite of university managers who often speak *as* the university. They appropriate 'their' university's resources through high salaries, and legal protection against a vice chancellor 'buying out' and privatising his or her university seems very weak. Indeed the U.K. has witnessed the first purchase by a financial asset company of a university originally set up with a charter from the crown. 'Who should own the university?' is the question and their answer is to put the assets in an irrevocable trust, with all the university's employees and students as 'beneficial owners'. They identify problems inherent to current forms of 'neo-Taylorist' organisation and counter these with actual cases of how 'beneficial owners' are organised through effective forms of participatory decision making and matrix organisation. Finally, they discuss ways to organise relations between the university and society. They argue current organisational concepts like 'stakeholders' and 'lay persons' are too vague to be operationalised and propose more practical ways of generating conversations about the public role of universities that lead to change.

Catherine Butcher reports on field visits to two U.S. liberal arts colleges – Berea and Deep Springs. Founded in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively, Butcher explains their forms of governance, financing, organisation and pedagogy, and how these transform the experience and prospects of poor white and African American students. While the models developed by these colleges cannot be replicated directly elsewhere, Butcher draws out six 'resources of hope' for the development of higher education institutions.

Mike Neary and Joss Winn report on a U.K. project to develop a framework for co-operative higher education. Through workshops, on-line focus groups and individual interviews, they engaged researchers, worker-members of cooperatives, historians, legal specialists, online educators and academics and students involved in the free university movement in 'self-reflective inquiry'. The results are detailed discussions and proposals about pedagogies for cooperative

higher education, its governance, regulation and business models, and solidarity with other aspects of the co-operative movement. This supports their continuing work to establish cooperative forms of governance and management in higher education.

The issue concludes with two book reviews. Barbara Grant reviews positively Nielsen's *Figuration Work: Student Participation, Democracy and University Reform in a Global Knowledge Economy*. She highlights the strengths of this ethnography and how it provokes readers to reflect on their own educational practices. Penny Welch reviews Alvesson's *The Triumph of Emptiness: Consumption, Higher Education and Work Organisation*. She found this study of grandiosity, competition and impression management in higher education thought-provoking and making sense of many negative features of universities as organisations.

We know from these real examples that truly 'public' universities are possible. We also know that creating them and retaking the territory lost to the neo-liberal educational coup will be a long struggle. A first step is to show that there are better, practical alternatives.

Susan Wright and Davydd J. Greenwood

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Notes

1 These complement a report on the Mondragón cooperative university (Wright, Greenwood and Boden 2011)

2 This 'Initial Training Network' project was funded by the EU Marie Skłodowska Curie programme from 2013-2017, grant number FP7-PEOPLE-2012-ITN-317452.