

# Critical Education

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## *Student as Producer and the Politics of Abolition*

### *Making a New Form of Dissident Institution?*

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#### **Abstract**

This paper tells the story of how a group of staff and students set out to establish a subversive teaching and learning project: Student as Producer, within a neoliberal university in England. Faced with the recuperation of its radical practice, the paper recounts how staff and students involved with Student as Producer moved outside of the university to set up a cooperative form of higher education: the Social Science Centre, Lincoln, where students can attain higher education awards without the burden of debt, along with the experience of running a workers' co-operative. This subversive practice is grounded in a Marxist critique of value, underpinned by a politics of abolition based on the work of Thomas Mathiesen (1974). The paper concludes that it is possible and necessary to create new dissident institutions in and against' the organisational forms of capitalist society as the embodiment of revolutionary theory.



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Student as Producer is a model for teaching and learning in higher education, promoting research-engaged teaching as the organising principle for curriculum development at the University of Lincoln, England. Research-engaged teaching means student engagement with research and research-like activities as the default mode of their learning experience and beyond, so that undergraduates become recognised as an integral part of the academic project of their institutions. Although grounded in teaching and learning practice, Student as Producer is more than a curriculum development project, containing within it the possibility for institutional transformation at the level of the university, as well as being part of a transnational social movement against the concept of student as consumer (Boden & Epstein, 2006) and the pedagogy of debt (Williams, 2006).

Student as Producer is an act of resistance to the current policy framework being imposed on Universities in England and around the world; and, as such, is a critical response to attempts by national governments to create and consolidate a consumerist culture and impose high levels of debt among undergraduate students. The context for student as consumer is a system of higher education dominated by marketised and commercial imperatives involving the intensification of academic work as a key economic priority (Shattock, 2012; Brown with Carasso, 2013; McGettigan, 2013). The attempt to consolidate consumerism in English universities forms part of a much broader attempt by governments to reinstate the ideology of market-led social development following the near collapse of the world financial system in 2008 – 2009 (McNally, 2012; Foster & Magdoff, 2009). Student as Producer has emerged from this double crisis: a socio-economic crisis and an associated crisis over the meaning and purpose of higher education (Collini, 2012; Docherty 2011, Holmwood, 2011; Edu-factory Collective 2009), and identifies strongly with the academic and student movement of protests against fees and cuts to funding in higher education and other social and welfare services (Neary, 2012a).

Student as Producer is framed around the practices and principles of critical pedagogy, popular education and Marxist social theory, taking its title from Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* (1934), a classic text of constructivist Marxism (Gough, 2005). Writing in the context of the failed *Spartacus* revolution in Germany in 1919 along with the rise of Hitlerism and the Nazification of Europe, Benjamin asks how do radical intellectuals act in a moment of crisis (Eiland & Jennings, 2014). His answer was that not only should intellectual workers produce revolutionary artefacts, publications and works of art, but they should seek to transform the social relations of production for a communist society (Leslie, 2000). Student as Producer is based on a negative critique of higher education, starting with the dysfunctionality of academic knowledge production, characterised by the divide between teaching and research (Boyer, 1999; Brew, 2006). Student as Producer aims to revolutionise academic knowledge production through the collaborative and democratic process of knowledge making by academics and students (Neary & Winn, 2009). Not all academics at the University of Lincoln are revolutionary Marxists, but Student as Producer provides an intellectual framework in which the future of higher education can be considered *against* the prevalent practices of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and as a *practical-critical* response to the crisis of the capitalist university (Burawoy, 2011).

Student as Producer was established with a Marxist framework of institutional change in mind, utilising Thomas Mathiesen's notion of the politics of abolition and his underpinning concept of the unfinished (Mathiesen, 1974). Following Mathiesen's Marxist sensibility, this negative attitude is reinforced by utilising an interpretation of Marx's social theory that focuses on a critique of value (Larsen, et al 2014; Postone, 1993), understanding capitalist repression as the domination of the labour theory of value and its institutional forms of regulation: money and the state (Clarke, 1991; Postone, 1993). In this way revolutionary

knowledge is understood as something that is constituted through class-struggle, co-operation and radical practice, where the crisis of the capitalist university becomes a field of radical research (Roggero, 2011) to be reconstituted as a form of subversive “living knowledge” (Roggero, 2011, p. 8).

In this paper we assess the impact of Student as Producer following its adoption by the University of Lincoln in 2010, and written up as a core component of the University’s Teaching and Learning Plan 2011 - 2016, based on development work that had been ongoing at Lincoln since 2007 as a collaborative and consultative process among students and staff at all levels (University of Lincoln, 2011; Neary, et al, 2015; Neary, 2014b). This assessment, carried out as a form of participatory action research with a militant tendency, includes reference to relevant documents as well as statements gathered from semi-structured interviews, “good conversations” (Gunn, 1989, p. 12), with twenty colleagues at Lincoln: academics, professional and support staff and senior managers, about their views on the influence of Student as Producer.

The research shows that Student as Producer has had a significant impact on curriculum development at the University of Lincoln, with Student as Producer embedded across the University, setting a standard and attitude for the culture of student involvement and engagement in research to flourish in the institution (Neary et al, 2015; Neary, 2014). Student as Producer has had some influence externally on other higher education providers in the UK and internationally, and has been recognised as a model of “good practice” by the national bodies that promote teaching and learning in higher education in the UK: the Quality Assurance Agency and the Higher Education Academy<sup>1</sup>. In the United States the principles and practices of Student as Producer are considered to be a significant development for the future of higher education (NMC, 2014 p. 15). The model of research-engaged teaching developed at Lincoln has been taken up and adapted by other universities and colleges in the Anglophone world: Newcastle College and the University of Warwick in England, Vanderbilt University in the US and the University of British Columbia in Canada, but all without the overtly Marxist perspective.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite this recognition, the University of Lincoln remains a neoliberal institution, existing within an increasingly marketised system, committed to the way academic values are being defined within the current higher education context. What is more, during the period when Student as Producer has been a core part of the teaching and learning strategy at Lincoln, 2011 - 2016, there has been an intensification of neoliberalism in the higher education sector in England and around the world as national governments struggle to emerge from the Great Recession of 2008 - 2009, the likelihood of which is anything but certain (McNally 2012).

The final part of the paper looks at how in response to the intensification of neoliberalism in English universities a group of academics at Lincoln took the radical principles that underpin Student as Producer outside of the university to establish an autonomous critical pedagogical project, the Social Science Centre (SSC). The SSC was set up in the city of Lincoln as a co-operative form of higher education where students, for no fee

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<sup>1</sup>Higher Education Academy (<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/themes/students-partners>); Quality Assurance Agency (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/partners/students/student-engagement-at-qa>).

<sup>2</sup>Newcastle College <http://www.ncl-coll.ac.uk/higher-education/student-as-a-producer?v=3028>; University of Warwick [https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/iatl/funding/students](https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/students); Vanderbilt University <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu>; University of British Columbia <http://oaweek.open.ubc.ca/the-student-as-producer/>.

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and without taking on the burden of debt, can attain awards: not degrees, but recognition by SSC scholars of their capacity for intellectual inquiry and higher learning.

The paper considers the extent to which the SSC might be regarded as a new type of dissident institution; or, at least, another way of doing things (Bonnet, 2012), telling the story of a group of staff who were committed to the institution in which they were working, but against the neoliberal policies by which it was being overwhelmed. Like the revolutionary attitude set out in Harney and Moten's concept of the Undercommons, this group sought to "follow the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university" (Harney & Moten, 2013 p. 26); but, unlike Harney and Moten's revolutionary faculty who while always at war with the University are always in hiding (p. 30), those involved directly with Student as Producer sought to carry out their subversion in full view.

### **Marxist Theory of Institutional Change**

Student as Producer was developed with a model of institutional change in mind based on the conceptual framework set out by Thomas Mathiesen in *The Politics of Abolition* (1974). Mathiesen's work is important because it develops a Marxist theory of institutional change, contrary to neoliberal and other management literature (Neary, 2012b). Although developed as a framework to abolish the Scandinavian prison system, Mathiesen's model is set at a high level of conceptual and theoretical abstraction so it is possible to use this programme for radical change as part of a wider academic social movement for the abolition of other capitalist institutions, including the capitalist university (Mathiesen, 2015).

Mathiesen is writing in the tradition of abolition politics, a movement that cultivates "an alternative sense of political time which allows political urgency and revolutionary patience to co-exist" (Amsler, 2015, p. 64). The abolitionist movement includes anti-slavery and racial segregation as well as campaigns against the death penalty and the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 2003). And more than this, not only the abolition of slavery and prisons, "but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society. The object of abolition would then have a resemblance to communism" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 42).

Mathiesen's notion of abolition is based around the concept of "the unfinished - also referred to as "the sketch" or "the alternative" and emerges from within and against the already existing societal systems: a society whose legitimacy is based on the satisfaction of human need" (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 22). For Mathiesen, oppositional political action is based on the notion of competing contradiction, which depends on the ability to expose the insufficiency of being satisfied within the system (p. 14). This is achieved by developing an alternative that is both foreign, based on its own premises rather than that of the current system, and suggested, or, unfinished (p. 17). This is a negative rather than affirmational critique, as an alternative to the existing state of things (p. 16). For Mathiesen the alternative emerges out of a fundamental disagreement with the representatives of the established system - making those who are implicated conscious of the fact that they are "necessarily faced with a dilemma: through the conscious experience of, in fact, having to choose between a continuation of the prevailing order (possibly with minor changes) and a transition to something which is unknown" (p. 25).

How then to create such a state of uncertain minds? Mathiesen outlines two parts to the alternative (1) the message, and (2) its inception and maintenance. Mathiesen argues that the successful implementation of a critical alternative can be achieved through a number of different means, including persuasion, the use of practical examples and performing activities

that unmask the problems with the prevailing system. He is careful to highlight the potential pitfalls of each that can lead to an undermining of the alternative (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 20).

Mathiesen's strategy for institutional reform is based on the longer term revolutionary ambition to abolish the system through the attainment of short term improvements. Key to this is the message, which must be both foreign and unfinished (Mathiesen, 1974, p.14). The message needs to be articulated at the appropriate level within an organisation expressed in a non-confrontation tone so as to be able to affect progressive transformational change. Mathiesen is clear that if the message is not foreign it is already part of the current system and functions merely as "a non-competing agreement, as a sort of a fictitious competition" (p. 15). In addition, the message may not be able to create institutional change because it is finished and, therefore, can be easily dismissed or marginalised for being too radical or of no importance and disregarded as being permanently outside of the system (p. 14). A key issue here is the language that is used, as language is related to power (p. 18) and "is also active in structuring and defining the problem at hand" (p. 19). The problem for Mathiesen is to use language in a way that is not fully formed or to avoid validation through the standards of the current system. Language is the way in which we talk about "that which we cannot talk about", to not "remain silent", speaking in ways that are "vital to express the unfinished" (p. 16).

Mathiesen is very conscious of the dangers of absorption into the mainstream institutional discourse through incorporation: where the new is allowed to exist but in a reduced form, and initiation: where rebellion is undermined by including the antagonistic subject as part of the operational structures of the system as a whole, by giving them managerial responsibilities for which they are held responsible (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 20). Mathiesen does think it is possible to initiate revolutionary change independently by moving outside of the system, which he calls carrying the message into effect (p. 20), to establish a new system beyond the boundaries of the established institution. The danger here is that the establishment might be able to avoid competition with an external non-member. However, he acknowledges that working outside of the system does provide the opportunity for groups "to perform raids into the territory of the establishment" (p. 21) so as to expose or unmask problems with the dominant structures, keeping the relationship between reform and revolution open through planning and coordination in ways that do not allow the message to be either avoided as beyond the mainstream: revolutionary, or not challenging enough: reformist.

It is only when the message is both foreign and unfinished that the opportunity to break with the established order and to be confronted with the moment of facing "unbuilt ground" is realized. He refers to this as "the moment of freedom" in which freedom is defined as "the anxiety or pleasure involved in entering a field which is unsettled or empty" (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 25). Mathiesen is interested in the practical moments of inception that give the possibility of freedom: the unfinished, "the chance to appear" and in factors that contribute to the maintenance of the long term goals (p. 25). These practical moments might take the form of experimental programmes ongoing inside an institution, whose revolutionary capacity is maintained by a commitment to the principle of the "alternative society", the way in which "the old social order is being fundamentally changed" (p. 25).

And all of this is only the beginning. For Mathiesen the project is never finished: the unfinished becomes realised through the dissatisfaction with what has been achieved and the desire for a more "total protest" or "totalisation" (p. 34). As he puts it: "I have gradually acquired the belief that the alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing. The "finished alternative" is "finished" in the double sense of the word" (p.13).

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So that, “the point is a continually rotating transition to the uncompleted. I experience this as a process of life itself” (p. 28): as a vitalising process (p. 34), derived naturalistically as the researcher beginning “all over again as an ordinary human being” (p. 32).

Mathiesen regards this work as a type of action research, or the relationship between “the disclosure of new knowledge and practical action” (Mathisen, 1974, p. 28), in which research is understood as “the systematic gathering of information” to inform political activity as a way of realising “given practical and political values” (p. 30). These practical and political values are grounded in moral choices “to support the cause I believe is right” (p. 34). For Mathiesen the criteria for success is based on loyalty towards the action rather than the sociological theory on which the action is based, as is the case with what he calls traditional research, where loyalty is to sociological theory, amounting to a closed system of dogmatic thinking (p. 28-29); and, through this approach to action research, the boundaries between research and politics are removed: “research being liberated by politics and politics by research” (p. 36).

Mathiesen is not anti-theory and fully recognises the importance of the relationship between theory and action, but his theoretical formulation in *The Politics of Abolition* (1974) is underdeveloped. He provides a more complete theoretical framework in *Law, Society and Political Action* (1980) setting out comprehensively his Marxist credentials. Mathiesen’s Marxism is based solidly within the theorisations of Louis Althusser (1918 - 1990) and Nicholas Poulantzas (1936 - 79) and their concept of structural determinations based on a very particular materialist understanding of Marx’s mode of production: “a complex total structure consisting of four levels: the economic, the political, the ideological and the theoretical” in which the economic is determining, but only in the last instance (Mathiesen, 1980, p. 166).

The strength of Mathiesen’s work is its Marxist starting point, recognising the fundamental problem as the capitalist mode of production (Mathisen, 1980, p. 17). However, the main theoretical weakness is its inability to distance itself from the fundamental theoretical presuppositions of liberal social science which characterise this Althusserian and Poulantzian interpretation of Marx’s work (Clarke, 1980; Meiksins Wood, 1998; Ranciere, 2011), undermining abolitionism’s negative credentials.

Althusserian Marxism, together with its Poulantzian variations, repeats the structural functionalism of bourgeois sociology and is, therefore, neither competing nor contradictory as a theoretical framework (Clarke, 1980). This lack of contradictory methodology is a major problem for an approach to transformation based on an approach that claims to be grounded in negativity. Structural functionalism is characterised not by competition and contradiction, but by the way in which constituent elements go towards the proper functioning of a system as a whole (Clarke, 1980). For instance, a key feature of the structural effects of Poulantzian Marxism is that the political level is relatively autonomous from the economic level, so that while the economic level is determinate in the last instance, it cannot be fundamentally transformed by revolutionary political action (Meiksins Wood, 1998, pp. 26-31). Indeed, economic injustice in this arrangement is regarded as a problem of distribution rather than exploitation, so that transformation can be achieved through the establishment of various forms of strategic allegiances as well as more democratic arrangements (Meiksins Wood, 1998). In this scenario conflict and contradiction are understood as the outcome of analytical complexity rather than any dialectical struggles that have emerged from any principle of organisation. Althusserian and Poulantzian Marxism are made up of the complex interaction of structural effects rather than unity of many determinations or the expressive totality that forms the hallmark of Marx’s methodology (Clarke, 1980; Marx, 1990, 1992, 1993). What

this implies is that matters can be ultimately resolved as part of a non-antagonistic process of institutional reform (Meiksins Wood, 1998).

This structural functionalism is compounded by a naturalisation and ahistorical version of social relations where Mathiesen presents the dialectic as life itself (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 28), in which action research is starting again as “an ordinary human being” (p. 32), and where an idealist romantic version of love is used as an exemplar for the most principled political interventions, with the unfinished becoming a concept of eternal representation in which “in the end you never finish anything” (p. 35). This naturalisation extends to the concept of society, which is described in structuralist terms, as a process of differentiation and integration, so that “no final condition of terminated abolition can be expected” (p. 22).

This approach by Mathiesen leaves the space for a radical ideology to emerge, which is, as in the case of liberal sociology, the privileged site through which real transformation is meant to be effected. This power of the ideological depends on the emergence of the “scholar hero” (Clarke, 1980 p. 38) to educate the subordinate classes through appropriate pedagogical and institutional political forms, what Ranciere describes as a philosophy of recuperation (Ranciere, 2011, p.118). This role is very much brought to the fore in Mathiesens work where he argues for the importance of revolutionary conscious raising as a non-futile moralistic political method and a strategy for the politics of abolition (Mathiesen, 1980 p.183). Mathiesen does, to his credit, recognise that this cannot be achieved at the level of individual practice, but requires the need for “concrete organising in common” (p. 247) in a form that is other than the political party (p. 250).

### **Student as Producer - In and Against the University**

Mathiesen’s model has great merit as a framework for considering institutional change, but its claim for negativity needs to be grounded on more foundational Marxist principles.

Student as Producer is based on a different interpretation of Marx derived from a reappraisal of his critical thinking that emerged in Germany in the 1960s in the work Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) (2012), that has come to be known variously as a critique of value (Larsen et al, 2014; Kurz, 2014; Jappe, 2014), a new reading of Marx (Heinrich, 2004) capital relation theory (Clarke, 1991; Moore, 2015), Open Marxism (Bonefeld, et al., 1992, 1992, 1995; Bonefeld, 2014) and Communitisation (Endnotes, 2010; Noys, 2011). This militant Marxism finds its own version of competing contradiction in forms of political resistance that emerge from the dichotomy inherent in the commodity form, expressed as two forms of value: use value and exchange value, by which the capitalist commodity is constituted. In capitalist society exchange value overwhelms use value so that the logic of surplus value dominates the natural and the social world. In a communist society the latent potential of use value would be realised against the determination of exchange value, ushering in a new version of social wealth (Postone, 1993). This new form of social wealth (abundance) is already implied in the productive capacity of capitalist society, which needs to be unfettered from the limits of capitalist marketised exchange (Harvey, 2007). A core characteristic of the critique of value is the refusal to privilege the working class as the revolutionary subject within capitalist social relations (Larsen et al, 2014; Holloway, 2002; Postone, 1993). For Marxism based on a critique of value: “A subject capable of overcoming modern capitalism... cannot arise from the affirmation of the category of worker, but only from the crisis, the crisis of value” (Larsen et al, 2014: xxxi). What this means is that the radical subject cannot now be regarded as the working class as if it were a sociological category, because the working class is a category of capital. Rather, the newly emerging forms of

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revolutionary subjectivity are derived from antagonisms to capitalist work and non-work inside and outside of the capitalist factory and other forms of repressive institutional life, including the university (Edu-factory, 2009; Roggero, 2011). Therefore, the revolutionary subject is not only industrial workers at work, but also domestic workers, the unemployed, migrants and others struggling against the politics of poverty and scarcity that characterise capitalist life; and, of course, students and academics inside the edu-factory (Edu-factory Collective, 2009).

An attempt to put these theoretical formulations into practice was carried out by a group of Marxist academics, activists and public sector workers, *The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group* (1980) in the late 1970s, who were looking to find ways to counteract attempts by the Government to dismantle the Welfare state in a theoretical framework based on a critique of value, later elaborated as Open Marxism (1992, 1992, 1995) and capital relation theory (Clarke, 1991b). The slogan for their activities was in and against the state. They sought to provide everyday examples of practical resistance by public sector workers grounded in the context of a theoretical conceptualisation of the capitalist state as a form of the capital relation. *The Edinburgh Weekend Return Group* (1980) identified a number of strategies of resistance to counter the power of the capitalist state while working inside its institutional forms, these include defining the problem of work in political rather than merely economic terms as well as developing alternative forms of organisation to overcome individualisation, and to define social problems in the manner of the progressive logic of the lessons learnt from other working class struggles.

The significance of this account for a reconstituted notion of the university is that it suggest the possibility of institutional and social transformation lies in the hands of those working inside the university: students and academics on whose labour the university relies, as a “social world of making and sharing knowledge” where both academics and students cooperate in the “production, circulation, and realisation of... knowledge” (Moten & Harney, 1999 p. 26). This highly collaborative model of academic work includes students as co-workers and collaborators: *student as producer* (Harney & Moten, 1998, p. 172), in fact, in the making of knowledge as part of the teaching and research process. Harney and Moten argue that any strategy where academics work alongside students for radical social change based on a critique of capitalist society must recognize students as co-workers as well as the material conditions of capitalist production. Following this critique of value, academics and students, as well as professional and support staff, can be understood as a form of academic labour constituted through processes of institutional domination as antagonistic subjects (Winn 2015; Neary & Winn, 2015; Neary, 2015).

It now becomes possible to conceive of the university as a particular social and institutional form of the capital relation derived out of the social relations of capitalist production and is, therefore, susceptible to further progressive transformations through class struggle (Winn 2015). In this way we can extend the analysis of struggle in and against the university to include intellectual work and academic labour, grounding the concept of Student as Producer theoretically and practically as an insurgent form of higher education.

Taken together, Mathiesen’s abolitionist framework, underpinned by the concept of the unfinished, and the practice of in and against the university, grounded in Marx’s labour theory of value, offer a powerful set of tools through which to practice subversion inside capitalist institutions.

## Participatory Action Research, with a Militant Tendency

Student as Producer, as an act of collaboration between students and academics in the making of *practical-critical* knowledge, can be seen as a form of ongoing participatory action research, with a militant tendency. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an umbrella term covering a variety of participatory approaches to action-orientated research (Kindon et al 2007). Fundamentally, PAR is an approach to social inquiry that attempts to create change (practical, institutional or social) through collective, self-reflective practices within which researchers and participants undertake co-research so they can understand and improve the situations they find themselves in, encouraging group members to learn and become proficient in conducting research and reflecting on their own action (Baum et al, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2000; Wadsworth, 1998). The strength of PAR is the focus on subjectivity and critical self-reflection as way of achieving historical consciousness through the practice of praxis. However, a limitation of the PAR approach is its transhistorical formulation of the concept of subjectivity or human agency and, therefore, is limited by either an instrumentalist, on one side, or voluntarist, on the other side, theory of action (Winn 2015). The danger with this way of doing research is that it “perpetuates the approach it is intending to critique...replicating and repeating struggles in more fragmentary forms without positing a fundamental challenge” (Neary & Amsler, 2012 p. 119). The theoretical underpinning of Student as Producer grounds subjectivity within an historical materialist paradigm, featuring academic labour as a form of work that includes students as workers (Neary & Winn, 2009; Harney & Moten, 1998) based on a critique of the relations of capitalist production, where institutional transformation is in and against the social forms through which capitalist life is constituted, including the capitalist university. The significance of this approach is that it situates critique in a materialist rather than Mathiesen’s moral and ethical ideological conceptualisation, providing a substantive framework on which to assess the relationship between reform and revolution, and how future-orientated long term goals can be derived out of the concrete struggles against current institutional working practices. The main issue becomes not a review of the possibilities between reform or revolution, but the dissolution of the capital relation out of which this dichotomous relationship is formed (Holloway 2002), or a real negative dialectics (Adorno 1973). This is the essence of Student as Producer’s militant tendency.

The PAR at Lincoln was based on a model to provide opportunities for staff and students at all levels to engage with the implementation of Student as Producer. The process started in 2007 by making contact with marginalised and disenfranchised academic workers, students and university staff, to celebrate their radical pedagogic practices that were not being recognised by the more risk averse practices of the university’s quality assurance protocols. Harney and Moten refer to this group as the Undercommons:

Maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed down film programmes, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists and feminist engineers. And what will the university say of them? It will say they are unprofessional. How do those who exceed the profession, who exceed and by exceeding escape, how do those maroons problematize themselves, problematize the university, force the university to consider them a problem, a danger? The Undercommons ... are always at war, always in hiding. (Harney & Moten, 2013 p. 30).

The work done with this group and other academics and students formed the basis for a series of papers that were written for University of Lincoln committees. One of the main instigators of Student as Producer and co-author of this paper, the Dean of Teaching and Learning at Lincoln, was able to influence the senior management agenda as part of a conscious strategy to democratise decision-making processes across the university, working closely with the Student's Union. The result was that Student as Producer, based on a radical politicised interpretation of research-engaged teaching, was adopted by the University in 2010 and written up as the basis of its teaching and learning strategy in 2011. This collaborative groundwork was used to gain funding from the Higher Education Academy, a government sponsored organisation that promotes teaching and learning, to develop the initiative across the institution from 2010 -2013, providing external credibility for the work and support to establish an ever more systematic process of formal evaluation.

The evaluation framework was adapted from an already existing model: Theory of Change (Levy et al, 2007) with an open invitation to all students and staff to get involved, facilitated by an external adviser in 2010. Theory of Change was a form of action planning and evaluation to review goals against achievements and unintended consequences with staff and students involved with Student as Producer. This convivial research and evaluation tool was substantiated by a radical theoretical approach based on academic scholarship around the concept of Student as Producer (Neary & Winn, 2009; Neary & Haggard, 2011; Neary 2012a, 2012b; Neary & Amsler, 2012). The framework was regularly reviewed in workshops and project management meetings to ensure its durability, manage risks as well being used as a device to enhance critical reflection and future planning between 2010-2013. One key feature of this continuous critical review was an annual self-assessment reporting process where faculty rated their own engagement with Student as Producer against the core principles of Student as Producer set out in the quality assurance protocols. The core principles provided a challenge and an invitation for academics, Student as Producer was never compulsory, to consider ways to deal with the negative consequences in their teaching arising from the dysfunctionality of teaching and research in higher education. Following Readings (1997), the principles were designed to promote a culture of dissensus within the practice of formulating quality assurance and enhancement processes across the university. The practices to ensure quality provision in UK, Canada and US universities are well known for their managerialist risk averse conformism (Newstadt, 2013). The Student as Producer core principles include the extent to which undergraduate research is a key component of the undergraduate curriculum at Lincoln, the ways in which students are involved in the design and delivery of teaching programmes, a call for ideas so that technology can be used to hack the university (Winn & Lockwood 2013), a prompt to use the physical teaching environment to construct democratic learning landscapes, and how to think of student life after graduation beyond employability, so that students come to recognise themselves in a world of own design.

This process of ongoing critical reflexive review was further enhanced by interviews with colleagues at all levels in 2013 that form the basis for statements made by staff in this paper. New initiatives that emerged out this process included extending Student as Producer from undergraduate to taught Masters provision as well as making Student as Producer the organising principle for Lincoln's student engagement policy, where Student as Producer is not restricted to matters of curriculum development, but where students are involved in producing the whole university (University of Lincoln, 2012; Neary et al, 2015). Another important initiative led by the Graduate School was running intensive programmes with doctoral students from all disciplines, not only to promote interdisciplinarity, but to create the conditions for the establishment of revolutionary/communist science, what Marx refers to as

*one* science: the coming together of the natural and the social science as a form of revolutionary practical critical activity (Marx, 2000; Neary, 2012; Bellamy Foster, 2000). This includes a recognition that science and technology developed as a factor of capitalist production must now be appropriated as a form of non-alienated knowledge for a higher (communist) society (Neary, 2012b; Postone, 1993).

During this period academics involved with Student as Producer were writing research papers and other publications, organising conferences and seminars at Lincoln<sup>3</sup> as well as giving invited keynotes at teaching and learning conferences, and publishing in the national press (Neary & Winn, 2011; Neary, 2011). This material worked as a reference point for staff and students who wished to engage more fully in the intellectual ideas that underpinned the project. Care was taken with internal publicity material, e.g., posters and flyers and other documentation (University of Lincoln, 2011) so that it conveyed Student as Producer's subversive sensibility but in ways that would not alienate students and staff. For example, the poster contained phrases from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, promoting conditions where students 'can recognise themselves in a world of their own design' based on Marx's early writings (Debord, 1970, p. 55; Marx, 2000, p. 329).<sup>4</sup>

In Mathiesen's terms, this enabled Student as Producer to present itself with a solid and sustained critical message and in a language that was foreign but not finished, pitched at a level that seemed to be in line with government strategy to find ways to engage with students: "putting students at the heart of the system" (BIS, 2011), while, at the same time, seeking to subvert the process of capitalist knowledge production. Working with this contradiction was not an anathema to Student as Producer but constituted the essence of its dynamic methodology, as an expression of the use value/exchange value contradiction that lies at the core of the commodity form.

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<sup>3</sup>The University of Utopia - <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/events/the-university-of-utopia-radicalising-higher-education/index-18507.html>; Doing and Undoing Academic Labour - <http://blogs.ubc.ca/workplace/2012/05/conference-doing-and-undoing-academic-labour/>; Student as Producer conference - <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/events/student-as-producer-conference-2013/>

<sup>4</sup> For more on the aesthetics of the poster see <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/2010/10/10/art-and-design-after-epsteins-rockdrill/>

# student as producer

STUDENTASPRODUCER.LINCOLN.AC.UK

THIS IS A FLYER

**MANIFESTO**

- **STUDENT AS PRODUCER RESTATES THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION BY RECONNECTING THE CORE ACTIVITIES OF UNIVERSITIES, I.E., RESEARCH AND TEACHING, IN A WAY THAT CONSOLIDATES AND SUBSTANTIATES THE VALUES OF ACADEMIC LIFE**
- **THE CORE VALUES OF ACADEMIC LIFE ARE REFLECTED IN THE QUALITY OF STUDENTS THAT THE UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN AIMS TO PRODUCE**
- **STUDENT AS PRODUCER EMPHASISES THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT AS COLLABORATOR IN THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE**
- **THE CAPACITY FOR STUDENT AS PRODUCER IS GROUNDED IN THE HUMAN ATTRIBUTES OF CREATIVITY AND DESIRE, SO THAT STUDENTS CAN RECOGNISE THEMSELVES IN A WORLD OF THEIR OWN DESIGN**

**WHAT IS STUDENT AS PRODUCER?**  
Student as producer is a development of the University of Lincoln's Teaching and Learning strategy, previously based on the principle of *research-informed* teaching, to an approach grounded in the notion of *research-engaged* teaching. Research-engaged teaching involves more research and research-like activities at the core of the undergraduate curriculum. Student as Producer will make research-engaged teaching an institutional priority, across all faculties and subject areas. In this way students become part of the academic project of the University and collaborators with academics in the production of knowledge and meaning. Research-engaged teaching is grounded in the intellectual history and tradition of the modern University.

**WHO IS STUDENT AS PRODUCER?**  
The focus of Student as Producer is the undergraduate student, working in collaboration with other students and academics. Undergraduate students will work alongside staff in the design and delivery of their teaching and learning programmes, and in the production of work of academic content and value. Students will be supported by student services and professional staff so they can take greater responsibility not only for their own teaching and learning, but for the way in which they manage the experience of being a student at the University of Lincoln.

**WHERE IS STUDENT AS PRODUCER?**  
Student as Producer is now the organising principle for the learning landscapes at the University of Lincoln. At the core of learning landscapes lies an awareness of the importance of space and spatiality to promote the social dimensions of teaching and learning. The most compelling pedagogic spaces in higher education are those that seek to connect research and teaching. Based at the University of Lincoln the Student as Producer project involves other universities from across the sector.

**WHEN IS STUDENT AS PRODUCER?**  
Student as Producer will be introduced across the University over the next three to five years. This will be done by formally acknowledging pedagogic practices that are already imbued with the spirit of Student as Producer, by a teacher education programme to enable staff to engage with the principles and practices of Student as Producer, and through the University's normal quality and validation procedures. This work will be supported with funding from the Higher Education Academy from 2010 to 2013.

For further information see: [studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk](http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk)

UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN

The fact that the title for the project was derived from *The Author as Producer* (1934), a classic text of militant Marxism, seemed like an important triumph at a time when

university procedures were written up in a form of business language dominated by managementese (Docherty, 2015, p. 54).

### **Academic Voices**

Following on from Mathiesen's formulations, a key issue that emerged from the interviews with staff was the extent to which Student as Producer was competing and contradictory or had been assimilated into the norms of academic life, so that its antagonism became a sort of fictitious competition.

There was clear recognition and support by staff for the radical political intellectual project that underpinned Student as Producer: "... and its attempt to overpower the conformism that lies behind the notion that there is no alternative" (Coley et al, 2012) as well as its usefulness as "a radical intellectual response with which to critique the structures and role of the university as a social institution" (Academic A). This was backed up by an understanding of the way in which Student as Producer is in "a real conflict with the university as a business model" (Academic B).

The politics of Student as Producer extended beyond the transformation of the institution to the relationships between staff and students so as to develop research collaborations "not only as reflexive historians, but as people" (Academic C). Former students involved in the occupation movement against fees and cuts, now employed by the university, recognised the merit of Student as Producer in providing "a theoretical framework that influenced our actions and strategies, as well as a rhetoric, not only in terms of the occupation, but for what we wanted... Higher Education to become" (Student Support staff member); and as a pedagogical process that was established "not in fear of the quality assurance inspections ... [but as] slow cultural change ... with insights into Higher Education I don't believe I would have received anywhere else" (Student Union Officer).

However, alongside this sense of radical antagonism there was another response which reflected Mathiesen's non-competing agreement or fictitious competition. Student as Producer was seen by other staff in a more limited sense as an opportunity for the university to "rebadge everything...giving a framework to validate and value what they are doing" (Academic D), and, if there has been any cultural shift, it is in the direction of student as consumer rather than producer, with one senior manager saying "I think you would be hard pressed to find academic staff who did not think that students were at the centre of the institution; and, if we have done that, I think that is an enormous shift. (Senior Management Team member). There was also a sense of disappointment that the radical potential seemed to have been reduced to yet another bureaucratic management initiative: "I believe in the ideology, but didn't enjoy the way in which it was implemented. It seemed to go from a small group of believers to a management roll out, so by the time it got to me, it was a series of bullet points I had to match up to. I found this very disappointing (Academic E). And, rather than promote dissensus, it had become the new conformity: "We have not encountered resistance, not recently, there might have been a little at first, but not now. I think everyone is fully engaged. (Quality Assurance Officer). The idea to extend Student as Producer to matters beyond the curriculum was recuperated under the more instrumental notion of student engagement: a type of super-consumerism where students are encouraged to give their opinions about various aspects of the student experience. These formal student engagement mechanisms, now common in all English universities, do not challenge the neo-liberal status quo, leaving "out other possibilities about ways of living and being" (Freeman, 2014, p. 232). A Senior Manager used the idea of unfinished, not in a Mathiesen sense, but to support the concept of student engagement: "Student as Producer is a forever project. It is never finished.

## 14 *Critical Education*

The main thing that we have achieved is that people know it is not going away. The students have bought into it. People are relaxing and starting to allow students to influence what they do” (Senior Management Team member).

It is clear from the interviews that for some staff Student as Producer has been, to follow Mathiesen’s formulation, a real practical example of what freedom might look like “the anxiety or pleasure involved in entering a field which is unsettled or empty” (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 25) pointing to an alternative radical form of higher education. This had been marked at the inception of the project, not only when the university had formally accepted Student as Producer as the basis for its teaching and learning strategy in 2010, but informally at a party to launch the project, where Student as Producer was presented as an act of resistance to the concept of the capitalist university.<sup>5</sup>

However, for other staff, Student as Producer could be accommodated within already ongoing teaching and learning activities within the university, endorsing the concept of student as consumer. The processes set out to maintain the dissensual incorporation of Student as Producer appeared to have turned into just another bureaucratic management procedure. And again, within the terms set out by Mathiesen, it felt like rebellion was being undermined by incorporating the antagonistic subjects as part of the operational structures of the system as a whole, and by the pressure of other neoliberal managerial responsibilities for which they were responsible (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 20). The Dean of Teaching and Learning and co-author of this paper gave up the role of Dean in 2014 and reverted to the position of Professor of Sociology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at Lincoln.

Whatever, Student as Producer had achieved by way of radicalising the mainstream (Neary, 2013), the University of Lincoln was still a neoliberal university, and, what is more, since the inception of Student as Producer the neoliberalisation of the English university has gone into overdrive. In 2011 the government legislated to remove public funding from teaching in the arts, humanities, the social sciences as well as business and law. Money would now follow the students, with subject teaching provision determined by student choice, with the students now required to pay a massively increased fee, up from £3k to £9k.

Maybe Harney and Moten are right, it is not possible to engage in real critical intellectual activity in mainstream higher education. They argue that to be a critical academic inside a capitalist university means “recognising the university and being recognized by it as an assertion of the university’s impeccable liberal credentials and the academic’s bourgeois individuality” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 31). In this way critical education gets to perfect higher education in its current form, as “professional education ... a counterinsurgency, coming for the discredited, for those who refuse to write of or write up the undercommons” (p. 32). Critical educators in this context are regarded as “harmless intellectuals, malleable, perhaps capable of some modest intervention in the so-called public sphere” (p. 32).

And yet, Mathiesen suggests another way of doing things, in a process where the moment of the unfinished is never finished. He proposes going outside of the institution: carrying into effect externally the movement of resistance, as a way to challenge the establishment, notwithstanding the dangers of being avoided by those who remain within the institution. Faced with what appeared to be a defeat of their radical project, and without knowing what form their actions would take, students and staff decided to set up an

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/2010/11/09/successful-launch-student-as-producer/>

alternative higher education provision outside of the university. What made the move outside of the institution different from that suggested by Mathiesen was that the academics and other staff and students did not give up their membership of the University of Lincoln, even if there was no formal link between the university and the new unfinished arrangement. This capacity to radically relocate is contained in Harney and Moten's notion of study (Harney & Moten 2012), as a way of establishing a common intellectual practice outside of the oppressive educational institution, although not set out as systematically as in Mathiesen's formulation.

### **Carrying into Effect: The Social Science Centre, Lincoln**

In 2011, a group of university staff, including academics and administrators, as well as students, set up the Social Science Centre, Lincoln. It took two years before the Centre was fully established as a co-operative providing higher education in the city of Lincoln, where students can attain awards: not degrees, at level of university qualifications, validated by academic and students involved with the Centre. The current membership of the Centre stands at around fifty, including associate members not responsible for the day-to-day running of the Centre or teaching, but who act as external reviewers for academic work that is produced. The co-operative is supported by subscriptions based on what members can afford and other payments in kind, but with no salaries paid. The Centre is managed through regular monthly planning meetings based on democratic and consensual decision-making. The courses are designed collaboratively and in a way that ensures all members get the chance to learn and to teach. Academics and students are referred to as scholars, in a Freirian flourish, that recognises both groups have much to learn from each other. The range of courses include: Social Science Imagination, Co-operative History of Education, Do it Ourselves Higher Education, as well as documentary photography and poetry programmes. The Centre makes use of downtown locations, e.g., the public library, cafes, community centres, pubs and museums, as a nomadic facility that occupies the city (Neary, 2014a). The Centre has an online presence but no online teaching programme at present (<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/>).

Members of the Centre work hard to maintain and develop a message that is foreign but unfinished, through word of mouth, social media, speaking in public at conferences and other events and by writing academic papers and articles for other publications. The message is further substantiated by research done by academics and students not directly involved in the Centre (Earl, 2015; Pusey & Russell, 2012) and by journalists writing about the Centre in the national press. The Times Higher Education has described the SSC as a new form of dissident institution and another way of doing things; as well as in terms of which Mathiesen would approve: something new in freedom (Bonnett 2011, 2013).

The cooperative model is important for the SSC as it grounds the work strongly in terms of transforming the social relations of capitalist production as a move toward a communist society. This fundamental productivist principle of the cooperation was articulated by nineteenth century founders of the co-operative movement: "Communism only differs from... Association ... in this, that is a more enlarged and comprehensive form of cooperative life" (Holyoake in Gurney, 1988, p. 55). Co-operatives were supported by Marx for whom: "the value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated" (Marx, 1864). This attachment to the practice and principle of worker cooperatives is with the strong understanding that workers co-operatives need to be connected to other social movements that emerge from out of the working class struggle to create revolutionary transformation (Egan, 1900, pp. 74-75). The Centre has close networked links with groups doing similar work nationally, e.g., Ragged University, Free University of Brighton, the IF Project and

internationally, Enlivened Learning, all as part of a global “silent revolution in higher education.”<sup>6</sup> The Centre has established relationships with the International Cooperative Association, the Co-operative College and the UK Co-operative Party, that has twenty four Members of Parliament, affiliated with the Labour Party, in the British House of Commons.

The Social Science Centre has no formal relationship with the University of Lincoln. In 2011, at its moment of the Centre’s inception, the University was faced with a dilemma in terms of how to respond to the SSC, which in Mathiesen’s terms appeared to be making unbuilt ground. The University chose to be not against what the SSC was doing but did not provide any material support. Although detached from the University, the work of the SSC is starting to feed back into the University in ways imagined by Mathiesen’s notion of carrying external initiatives into effect back inside the establishment institution. Members of the Centre have submitted a paper: *Collegiality and Cooperation: a new model for higher education*, as part of the University’s consultation process about its new strategic plan (Neary, Amsler & Winn, 2015). The paper is based on what has been learned from ongoing activities at the SSC since 2011 and more recent research carried out by the SSC with regard to establishing a co-operative university as part of a funded research project (Neary and Winn, 2015). The paper suggests the University of Lincoln moves towards becoming a co-operative university based on its already strong connections with Lincolnshire co-operative association, by supporting the growing number of co-operative schools in the region and by connecting to the international co-operative movement. The paper proposes that the University replace the current neoliberal metrics for measuring academic performance with a model that favours academic judgement and values that underpin the democratic production of knowledge based on the principles of cooperation, the commons and commonwealth. And so, in this way, the project that began as Student as Producer inside the university is brought together with its external variation: the finished is by no means finished, but has reached a moment when a vision of the unfinished alternative is more clearly defined.

### **Conclusion - Another Way of Doing Things**

The paper has set out the way in which a group of academics and students attempted to implement a radical pedagogic strategy within a neoliberal university. It shows that given a sustained intellectual output through writings and presentations, as well as support from academics, administrators, students and senior staff in key institutional positions, and by being able to tap into the critical and radical capacity that remains latent inside universities, as well as keeping close links with the student movement and other social movements, it is possible to develop a radical programme for teaching and research. However, these subversions, as Mathiesen and Harney and Moten argue, are very likely to be recuperated within the imperatives of the capitalist university, raising an important question about the extent to which it is possible to be a subversive intellectual operating within an English University, overwhelmed by the principles of neoliberalism. However, as the SSC has shown, there are ways of going outside the capitalist university, without losing the capacity to influence its strategic intentions.

The success of any institutional wide programme does not rely simply on the situation within the institution; rather, the impact of the project is dependent on the political context within which the institution is operating. Student as Producer emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Economic Crash 2008-2009, and rode the wave of the student protests; but,

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: Ragged University <http://www.ragged-online.com/>; Free University of Brighton - <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/>; IF Project <http://www.ifproject.co.uk/> and Enlivened learning - <http://enlivenedlearning.com/>.

as the student movement began to subside and was crushed by police and the law courts, and through the efforts of politicians and uncritical media to present the semblance of a normalised state of affairs, the critical energy for the project began to subside. However, the history of the radical student movement (Edelman- Boren, 2001), means that it is likely to reappear in new and more dynamic forms, as evidenced by New Amsterdam University in Holland and the Free University of London (Krisis 2015). Moreover, the capacity for capital to escape the crisis is far from assured, in a moment when the potential for capitalist valorisation on a global scale may well now be exhausted (Kurz, 2014; Rifkin 2014; Mason, 2015); and where any attempt to sustain the production of surplus value continues to have devastatingly negative consequences beyond the human imagination. It is, therefore, important to continue to struggle for the abolition of capitalist institutions, against the neoliberal theories and ideas on which they are currently based, so that new forms of dissident social institutions can be created to show that there really is another way of doing things, as the physical embodiment of revolutionary theory (Foot, 2015, p. 52).

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