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## *Beyond the Neoliberal University* *The R.O.S.I. Website Project and the Liberation of our* *General Intellect*

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### **Abstract**

*The struggle to liberate our common powers of creation - our 'general intellect' – transcends the university. This struggle requires the development of 'hybrid' (combined online and offline) pedagogical technologies that empower us to democratise or re-common the ownership, means, and the objectives of knowledge production. In this paper, I describe the R.O.S.I. Website Project (Reviving Our Sociological Imaginations) – an experimental pedagogical project run at the University of Warwick in 2016 in which ten undergraduate students were invited to co-design a website that could help its users to cultivate their sociological imaginations – that essential ability to situate our personal problems within their social and historical contexts. This experience leads me to consider the politics of possibility within and beyond the neoliberal university today. Whilst everyday micro-practices of collective freedom can undermine neoliberalism within, our emancipatory objectives may demand macro-practices – the establishment of alternative commons-based institutions beyond the neoliberal university.*



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## Introduction

In this paper, I share the experience of an experimental pedagogical project called the 'R.O.S.I. Website Project' that I designed and initiated at the University of Warwick during a research fellowship in 2015-16.<sup>1</sup> The Project itself was funded and supported by Warwick's own Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL). R.O.S.I. stands for 'Reviving Our Sociological Imagination'. The overarching objective of the R.O.S.I. Website Project was to work alongside Warwick students to co-design a website that could help its users to cultivate their sociological imaginations – that essential ability to situate our personal problems within their social and historical contexts (cf. Mills, 1959).

Before I present the details of the Project and the embryonic model it generated, I begin with a brief outline of the process of neoliberalisation of the contemporary university in the UK (and far beyond). Central to this process of neoliberalisation is the accelerating subsumption of academic labour – here defined as the expenditure of teacher *and* student labour-power in the co-production of knowledge - within the logic and circuits of capital accumulation (Hall, 2014a, b; Winn, 2015a, 2015b).

I go on to argue that the particular nature of the primary commodity produced by academic labour within the university - knowledge - makes the university a central site of struggle for the liberation of what Marx has called our 'general intellect', our collective social powers of creation, powers now so great that they contain the revolutionary *potentia*<sup>2</sup> to 'blow the foundations' of our current system of value - abstract labour - 'sky-high' (Marx 1993, 1518). Since knowledge production is undeniably global, this struggle goes far beyond the university and necessitates the emancipation of our 'mass intellectuality' (Virno, 2001; Lazarus, 2017; Hall & Winn 2017). What are required, then, are the development of pedagogical technologies that facilitate and expedite this emancipation by empowering us to democratise or 're-common' the ownership, the means, and the objectives of knowledge production. Thus, such technologies must also be designed to reconnect academic labourers with community groups in both real world and online spaces. Out of the processes such technologies support may flow not just the revival of our sociological imagination, but the production of *social* knowledge, and the seeds of a new 'knowing society' liberated from the domination of capital through its imposition of value as abstract labour (Neary, 2012). It is with these large revolutionary ideas in mind that I designed the small R.O.S.I. Website Project.

After introducing these theoretical foundations, I next outline the intellectual and practical contributions of Mike Neary whose work at the University of Warwick and, later, at the University of Lincoln and Social Science Centre have constituted attempts at reimagining and reconstituting the organising principle of the university along communal lines. As such, Neary's work has directly inspired R.O.S.I. I then offer an overview of the R.O.S.I. Project, drawing on the R.O.S.I. experience to consider the degree to which the struggle to re-common the social relations of knowledge production can be achieved from within the neoliberal university. Through personal experience I empathise with, but somewhat diverge from, Harney and Moten's (2013) infamous call for 'subversive intellectuals' to retreat to the 'Undercommons' of the institution, being 'in but not of' the university. Instead, I share recent perspectives that seek to transcend more 'arborescent' institutional delimitations in favour of rhizomatic, networked conceptualisations of our current position. Such Deleuze-inspired perspectives emphasize the significance both of the beyond – the whole of society as subject and

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<sup>1</sup>You can see a website showcasing the R.O.S.I Website Project at <https://joellazarus.wixsite.com/rosi>.

<sup>2</sup>Following Farinati and Firth (2017), in this article, I use the Latin word *potentia* for its dual meaning of

<sup>2</sup>Following Farinati and Firth (2017), in this article, I use the Latin word *potentia* for its dual meaning of both 'potential' and 'force/power'.

object of liberation – and of the fact that it is experimental, iterative *micro-practices* of collective freedom that are needed to undermine the process neoliberalisation by transforming our affect and subjectivities. At the same time, I also argue that we need macro-practices – the co-creation of alternative institutions – that serve as the means and ends to our emancipatory objectives.

Though it constitutes a crucial site of our struggle, the goal is *not* the transformation of the university, but the liberation of our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual creativity and freedom as the foundation of a new knowing society. This stance, I conclude, should shape our relations to the neoliberal university.

## **The Neoliberalisation of the University and the Subsumption of Academic Labour**

Many scholars have made important recent contributions to describing, critiquing, and leading resistance to the recent acceleration and intensification of a longer-term process we can identify as the neoliberalisation of the university (e.g. Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Holmwood, 2011; McGettigan, 2013; Collini, 2017; Analogue University, 2017). The main macro-political mechanisms of this process are obvious. The production of national and international policy papers, legislative acts, and regulatory restructurings have forced, in the 1980s and 1990s, the corporatisation and bureaucratisation of the university, the weakening of its internal democracy, the destabilisation of academic life, and, more recently, the commodification and financialisation of higher education.

Since the 2008 Crisis, a ‘quickenning transnational pace of higher education restructuring’ has been pursued by the state within transnational ‘associations of capital’ comprised of ‘transnational activist networks’ of ‘academics and thinktanks, policy-makers and administrators, finance capital and venture capital and private equity, educational publishers, and philanthropists’ (Hall, 2015; Marx, 1992; Hall, 2014). Mirroring the continued profit crisis in the productive sectors across the economy (Carchedi & Roberts, 2013), neoliberal universities are increasingly open to venture and private equity capital looking for short-term high returns on technological innovations and commodified services and data (Hall, 2016; McGettigan 2014). This, in return, intensifies the pressure on the higher education sector to become ‘revolutionised as an organisational form for the accumulation of capital be that social, cultural, or commercial/ financial’ (Hall 2014, 826). Consequently, academic labour is now increasingly formally subsumed within the logic and circuits of accumulation. Hall (2014, p. 828) lists the technologies through which this subsumption is achieved:

'Speed-up, impact measures, always-on technologies, performance or lean management, the use of learning analytics or data mining, and so on, in order that the productivity of the academic can be measured against her peers through the socially-necessary labour time that determines what her productivity should be'.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century UK neoliberal university is now a capitalist organisation in its own right: its fundamental 'organizing function' has been restructured as 'the law of market economics' (Neary & Winn 2009, 134). It has become, as Neary (2012, 154) has put it, 'a particular social and institutional form of the capital relation'. This means that the current crisis of higher education is 'part of the much wider crisis of capitalist accumulation and social/ecological reproduction that extends to our whole society' (ibid, 154).

In this process of the university's neoliberalisation, political and institutional *macro*-political punctuations are dependent on the everyday *micro*-practical practices of 'undermining' - the persistent destabilisation of the culture of the public university and its reconstruction along neoliberal lines so that academic *values* have been transformed into academic *value* (Burrows 2012, 368). An 'undermining', as Amsler (2011, 67) points out, involves a persistent digging beneath something so as to make it collapse, a slow excavation performed in often invisible and insidious ways. Such micro-practices are far harder to guard against and resist. The result is the 'hollowing out of the relationships, ideas, and subjectivities that help maintain critical spaces from neoliberal rationality' (ibid, 67). There is little autonomous space left now. Indeed, recent 'third wave' critiques have identified the rise of the 'Data University' - an institution founded not on discipline but a self-regulating regime of control in which academics are themselves inculcated as obsessive and desirous generators of the very data required for the fluctuating performance league tables that control us (Analogue University 2017). It is in this way that I understand Harney and Moten's (2013, 27) concept of the neoliberal university as the 'biopower of the Enlightenment'.

It is clear, then, that we are at an advanced stage of a process of neoliberalisation that began over fifty years ago. Yet, to argue that academic labour is now fully subsumed within the mechanisms and logic of capitalist accumulation is not just to overstate the point; it is to misread fundamentally the nature of academic labour and the source of its revolutionary *potentia*.

### **The General Intellect Within and Beyond the University**

The university is a workplace like any other capitalist workplace – a direct site of valorisation through ever expanding (absolute) and intensifying (relative) exploitation of academic, administrative, and manual labour-power. And yet, there is something profoundly significant about the primary 'commodity' – knowledge – produced within this factory. Here, Marx's concept of the 'general intellect' is crucial in highlighting the revolutionary significance of the struggle over the means of knowledge production within which the university constitutes a central site.

Marx's (1993) 'Fragment on Machines' note in the *Grundrisse* has inspired contemporary theoretical innovations that illuminate evolving relations of knowledge and cultural production (Lazzarato 1991; Virno 2001; Fuchs 2014). In this fragment, Marx (1993, 703-4) focuses our attention on the way in which, '[i]n machinery, the appropriation of living labour by capital achieves a direct reality'. We are invited to consider 'to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production' and 'to what degree...the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it' (ibid, 706). Capital's expansionary drive leads Marx to envisage a point in history at which 'all the sciences have been pressed into the service of capital' and 'invention...becomes a business' (ibid, 704).

Marx's dismal vision is realised in the contemporary neoliberal university. Yet, he also understood that the powers of general social knowledge as a force of production are indeed *ours*; that they are of awesome magnitude; and that their *potentia* actually increases with every expansion and intensification of their exploitation,

'On the one side, then, [capital] calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the gi-

ant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value' (Marx 1993, 706).

Here, then, Marx identifies the emancipatory *potentia* of our general intellect. Capital seeks to code academic labour as a market exchange in which teachers' knowledge is sold to student consumers in a market for higher education (Heaney 2016, 296). In reality, however, it is a *co-productive* exchange (Winn 2015a, 2015b). Furthermore, however 'extreme' the 'regulation' imposed by the neoliberal university (Harney 2009, 319), because of knowledge production's essential imaginative and serendipitous properties, these co-productive exchanges cannot be controlled and overseen by a Taylorism suited to, say, manufacturing or administrative processes of production. Thus, at this historical moment, though abstract labour remains the foundation of value,<sup>3</sup> our immense co-productive powers reveal this as a 'miserable foundation' upon which to base wealth. It is in the very processes of the social combination that produces knowledge – the processes of academic labour at the heart of university life – that we can locate 'the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high' (Marx 1993, 706). This is why academic labour is not and cannot be *fully* subsumed within capitalist rationalities and accumulation circuits. Despite manifold imposed pressures and constraints, the primary space of knowledge production in the university – the classroom – remains a space of (potentially) joyful 'social combination', of transformational *potentia*, 'the most radical space of possibility' (hooks 1994, 12; Wanggren & Milatovic 2014).

From this perspective, then, the struggle for the university is played out not primarily on picket lines or in demonstrations, but in classrooms, for the first are symptomatic of the *general* capital-labour antagonism while the latter constitute the spaces in which the *particular* social relations of academic labour and knowledge production are formed.

To liberate our academic labour is, then, to end value as the foundation of wealth and the driver of endless production for the sake of production. But, as the term 'general intellect' suggests, far beyond the campus, the sites of knowledge production are increasingly global, decentralised, and networked – the engine of the forces of knowledge production is humanity's *mass* intellectuality.

Building on Marx's initial dialectical insight, Maurizio Lazzarato's (1996) work has powerfully analysed central elements of this *mass* intellectuality, centrally through his concept of 'immaterial labour', defined as 'the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity'. For Lazzarato, the profound restructuring of socio-economic organization since the 1970s has engendered a whole 'new nature of productive activity'; one in which old dichotomies between 'mental and manual labour', 'between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience' are 'simultaneously transcended' (ibid, unpagged). Online, in the 'basin of immaterial labor', processes of economic, cultural, and social (re)production take place that make it 'increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work' (ibid, unpagged).

The concept of immaterial labour captures the evolution of the dialectical contradiction first uncovered by Marx:

'[O]n one hand, [employers] are forced to recognize the autonomy and freedom of labor as the only possible form of cooperation in production, but on the other hand, at the same time, they are obliged (a life-and-death necessity for the capitalist) not to "redistribute" the power that the new quality of labor

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<sup>3</sup>I do increasingly recognise labour-power as the human expression of life energy – the universal source (Moore 2015)

and its organization imply...The subjugation of this form of cooperation and the "use value" of these skills to capitalist logic does not take away the autonomy of the constitution and meaning of immaterial labor. On the contrary, it opens up antagonisms and contradictions that, to use once again a Marxist formula, demand at least a "new form of exposition" (Lazzarato 1996: unpagged).

The more capital's reproduction brings us together in co-operation and co-production (and this is intensified in networked immateriality), the more our general intellect drives capital accumulation, and the more our collective emancipatory *potentia* is harnessed.

The foundation and catalyst of the neoliberal capitalist restructuring of economy, society, culture, and subjectivity from the 1970s has been the relative acceleration of time and compression of space achieved through digital technological innovation (Harvey 1989).<sup>4</sup> This acceleration and compression of time-space expresses itself as an exponential growth in the speed and quantity of information processed, disseminated, and exchanged. The production of knowledge – the generation, analysis, adaptation, and application of information – grows correspondingly. The decentralised, rhizomatic form of the Internet reveals and intensifies the mass and general qualities of our collective intellect. Simultaneously, capital's hierarchical rigidity exposes it as parasite and impediment to freedom. Our freedom, our evolution, information itself perhaps (Wark 2004), demand the liberation of knowledge production from capital's control. The struggle to liberate the production of knowledge and culture becomes a central revolutionary struggle. The university constitutes a crucial site of this struggle. Its traditional role of producer of research has been heightened by the emergence of the 'economic imaginary'/reality of the 'knowledge economy' in which knowledge production itself is seen as vital to capital's profitability and health (Jessop 2010; Sum & Jessop 2013; BIS 2016), but the university is just one site in a global struggle.

### **Student as Producer and the Social Science Centre**

It is, dialectically speaking, unsurprising to find that many of the most radical ideas and practices are being generated by academic labourers in universities. One such radical creator is Mike Neary. Neary's work at Warwick, and later at the University of Lincoln, and the philosophy informing it, has been a major inspiration behind the design and delivery of my own R.O.S.I. Website Project.

#### *Student as Producer*

Between 2004 and 2009, Neary established the 'Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research' with £3.5 million pounds of funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Central to the Reinvention Centre's work was the promotion of research-based teaching; the restructuring of teaching spaces; the funding of undergraduates to conduct research; and the establishment of 'Reinvention: a Journal of Undergraduate Research'. The Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL), which funded my own R.O.S.I. Website Project, can trace its own creation from Neary's Reinvention initiatives.

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<sup>4</sup>It could and should, of course, equally and conversely be stated, that the acceleration of digital technological innovation has been driven by capital's relentless drive for accumulation. 'All that is solid melts into air' (Marx & Engels 1848: 16).

In 2007, Neary moved from Warwick to become Dean of Teaching and Learning at the University of Lincoln. It was there, between 2007 and 2014, that he attempted to lead his most ambitious endeavour – the institutionalisation across the University of the ‘Student as Producer’ ethic and practice he had developed at Warwick. The highs and lows in the story of this adventure can be read in various articles and reports (Neary 2012; Neary et al 2014; Neary 2016; Neary & Saunders 2016). Suffice to say here that, despite significant successes, Neary felt it necessary to step down as Dean in 2014, to return to his sociology professorship, and to channel his creative energies *beyond* the University instead by co-founding the Social Science Centre in Lincoln’s town centre.

Neary’s work constitute a praxis that responds to two central questions, the first of these being: ‘How should radical intellectuals intervene in moments of social crisis and what form [should] that intervention...take?’ (Neary 2012b: 6). Neary found his primary source of intellectual inspiration here in Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Author as Producer’, seizing on Benjamin’s (1998: 90) emphasis on the production of revolutionary knowledge and culture as revolutionary not just in its content, but, crucially, in the collaborative *means* of its production. Neary applied Benjamin’s literary focus to the field of higher education pedagogy: ‘Benjamin is important because of the way in which he presents a revolutionary pedagogy on the basis of the reorganisation of intellectual labour’ (Neary 2012b: 6). In practice, this means that the student must become ‘the subject rather than the object of the teaching and learning process’ (Neary 2012b: 6). In Neary’s projects, students are invited to transform themselves from passive recipients of wisdom to active researchers, co-producers of socially useful knowledge (Neary & Winn 2009: 126). From this follows Neary’s intellectual and practical response to his second question: What is the alternative, revolutionary organising principle for intellectual labour and knowledge production? Here, Neary frames his Student as Producer project thus:

‘By creating alternative models for higher education Student as Producer is experimenting with the history of the idea of university, drawing on the heritage of higher learning. The purpose is to reinvent the contemporary significance of students and the university so as to provide, as Benjamin (1996) might have it, a real time example of the highest metaphysical state of history’ (Neary et al 2014: 6).

For Neary, Student as Producer is the ultimately articulation of revolutionary aims:

‘The aim of Student as Producer is to “dissolve” (Holloway 2010) or better still “detonate” (Lefebvre 1991) the social relation of capital out of which the current version of the university is derived (Neary 2012a), so as to recreate the university as a new form of social institution, what Giggi Roggero calls an “institution of the common” (Roggero 2011)’ (Neary 2012b: 3).

Neary’s dialectical perspective identifies academic labourers as ‘category of capital’, ‘knowledge as commodity’, and the ‘crisis of value that our burgeoning powers of general intellect create and reveal’. His work points the way to a ‘reconstituted notion of the university’ that ‘lies in the hands of those working inside the university’ themselves (Neary & Saunders 2016: 8).

## *The Social Science Centre*

The production of knowledge, and consequently our struggle to liberate our general intellect, takes place far beyond the university in both ‘real world’ and online spaces. The liberation of our general intellect necessitates the participatory and democratic practices of co-production of knowledge and culture across society. This understanding, coupled with the pained frustrations of seeking to transform the neoliberal university from within, led Mike Neary, Joss Winn, Sarah Amsler and other scholars at Lincoln University to co-found the Social Science Centre (SSC) in the heart of the city of Lincoln in 2010. In its founders’ own words, the SSC:

‘...offers opportunities to engage in a co-operative experience of higher education. Run as a not-for-profit co-operative, the SSC is organised on the basis of democratic, non-hierarchical principles, with all members having equal involvement in the life and work of the SSC’.<sup>5</sup>

The establishment of the Social Science Science – a response to the state’s ‘mythic’ violent assaults on higher education since 2010 - constitutes a ‘withdrawal’ from the university as an experimental form of its ‘negation’ and ‘subversion’ and an attempt to reimagine the university as ‘institution of the common’ (Neary 2015: 5). The R.O.S.I. Website Project shared this external orientation, but also optimistically envisaged transforming the organising principle of knowledge production from within the university. Throughout its articulation, I aimed to create a pedagogical model connecting academic labour with local community and wider online connection and collaboration.

### **The R.O.S.I Website Project**

#### *‘Reviving Our Sociological Imagination’*

‘The purpose of the ROSI website’, as I wrote in my IATL funding application form, ‘is to encourage and help a general, non-academic audience to use philosophy and social theory in order to deepen their understanding...of the issues they face in their own individual and collective lives.’ Since the Project clearly needed a narrower focus on which participants could concentrate their efforts, I invited the participating students to explore the specific question: ‘What is money?’ Thus, the website would invite users specifically to explore the nature of money.

The Project had other goals too. I sought to invite students from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds into a *transdisciplinary* process of genuine dialogue, mutual teaching and learning, and knowledge co-production; to offer them an opportunity to engage with and generate more diverse forms of knowledge far beyond the dominant ideologies and logocentrism of most academic study; to give vent to their creativity to empower them to produce not just knowledge, but culture; and to give them the chance to develop technical filmmaking and website design/construction skills. Not only did I want to enable the students to collaborate on genuinely cutting-edge pedagogical and social research, I sought to offer them the opportunity to work on a project with the potential at least to contribute toward social transformation.

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<sup>5</sup>See <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/about/>. Accessed September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## *The Project's Methodology*

In the following description of the Project, I intersperse my description of the Project's methodology with images from the Project and quotes from participating students.

In December 2015, I publicised the Project across the humanities and social sciences departments. I received thirty expressions of interest, but, ultimately, began the Project with thirteen students. Thirteen soon became ten, but those ten students stuck with the process till the end, meeting for two hours each week for nine weeks.

In delivering the R.O.S.I. Website Project, I aimed to create a truly inclusive, participatory, and democratic learning space in which each student felt safe to teach and to learn. I also aimed to apply practically my belief in what Jacques Ranciere (1991: 41) has called an 'equality of intelligence' – an assertion that, though they may have different strengths and approaches, all human beings make meaning of and in the world in similar ways. Consequently, instead of detailing a preset course for student participants to follow, this Project presented them only with a broad task to complete – the design of a website - and a loose and fluid framework for action, thereby offering them the space and freedom for creativity and emergence.

In order to cultivate a process of genuine transdisciplinarity among a new group of scholars from diverse backgrounds, disciplinary perspectives, and ideological orientations, I began the process by spending time on establishing a common language for effective dialogue. This meant building solid foundations of mutual respect and friendship. A vital part of this process was to start by bringing the scientific question we planned to explore – what is money? - back to a more primal emotional and experiential level. Consequently, participants spent the first two weeks of the Project building democratic foundations through the cultivation of practices of deep listening and empathy. In Week Two, we used art materials to explore our personal relationships with and feelings towards money, going deeper into biographical territory.



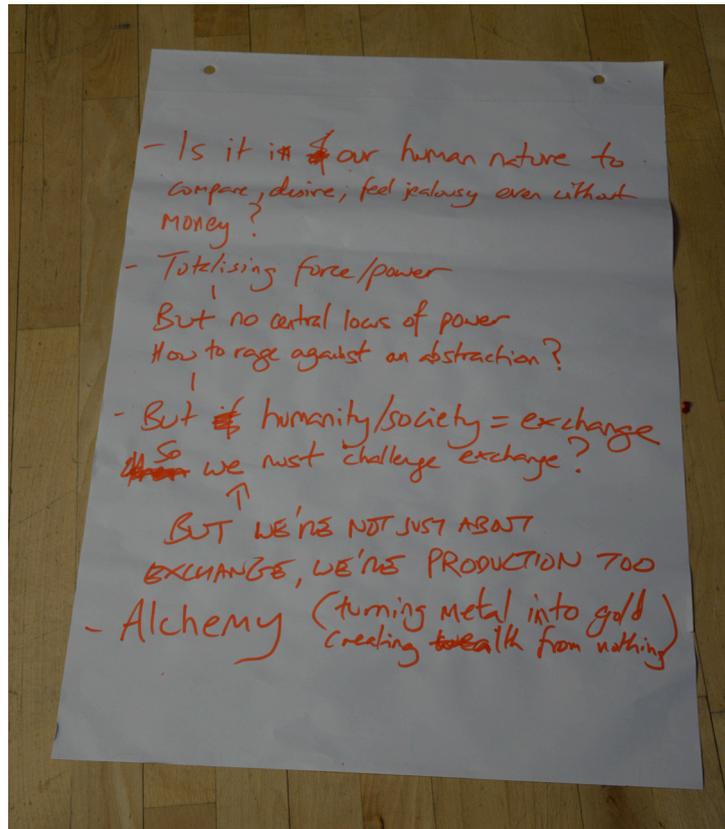
'I think, for me, the most interesting bit was getting to know other people's views. It was about different departments, but it was as much about different cultures.'

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'Now in my life I try to sit down and just listen rather than contribute...So I think I learned how to sit down and just listen which was good.'

In Week Three, I invited the students to begin to think more intellectually about money, critically reflecting on what the disciplines they studied said or did not say about money. In Weeks Four and Six, I invited first Mike Neary and then Brett Scott, an anthropologist of money, to challenge the students' preconceptions of the nature and future of money. Their interventions generated a wonderfully high level of intellectual imagination, debate, and eloquence among so many students.



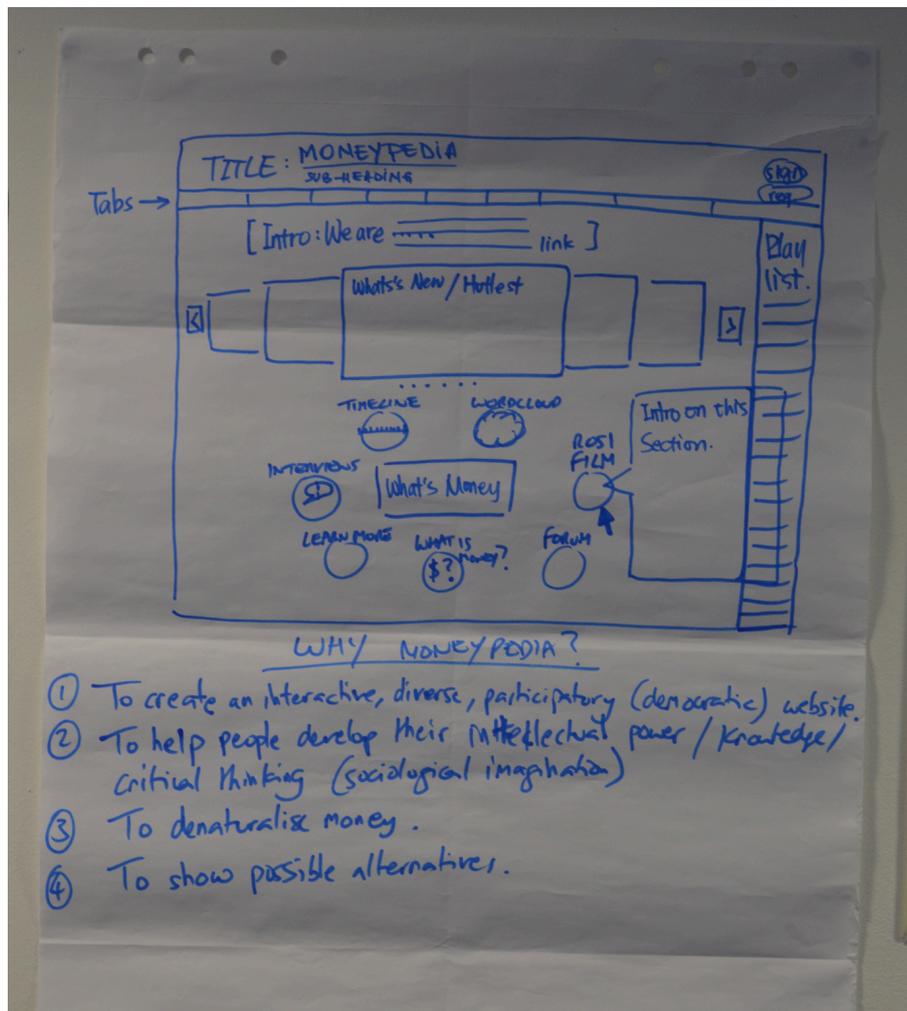


'I definitely think that linking this macro perspective to more personal issues is something I've never really bothered to do...probably something very subconscious. So, this process has definitely made me highlight what could be thought of as small aspects of money, but actually are probably more important than these original ideas...We discussed a lot about how money relates to our labour-power and, for me, this year I've managed to get a job, support myself through uni, and it definitely made me reevaluate what I bought for myself with my money...and how I viewed my place within this general labour force.'

The remainder of the Project sessions were dedicated to developing the students' design for the R.O.S.I. Website. The strong bonds of familiarity and cohesion and powerful practices of dialogue and democracy established by the group in earlier sessions enabled and empowered the students to tap into their creativity and sketch out some exceptionally exciting ideas – ideas that would bring unforeseen dimensions of participation and co-creation into the website. In the final three weeks of the Project, we devoted ourselves to developing what Warwick's IT Department called a 'lo-fi prototype' of our website, essentially a brief video describing the nature and content of the website.

In Week Eight, we came up with and consensually agreed upon a name for our website – 'Moneypedia'. In the final session, Week Nine, we finalised our website design, produced our lo-fi prototype video, and also filmed our final interviews. We took turns to inter-

view each other, asking each other two questions: 'What have you learned from this process?' and 'What do you think money is now?'



'I've always thought that my best ideas always came out from feeling as if I was under pressure. So...I used to think that debating and a very charged atmosphere was how I come up with ideas. But, actually, this process was so different. You spend two hours in a room, doing whatever you want, half of it you're just playing around, half of it is actually discussing creatively and I realise that that's still a better atmosphere to think about ideas; that's so much more collaborative, open, trusting, and I think you have more of a chance of looking from the whole perspective and actually thinking things through rather than what I used to do which was sort of demand someone to challenge my ideas and demand that I have to respond to them within the first five seconds of hearing something. So, for me, that's been really, really new.'

'I think that from this whole process the most important thing is how the process goes on. It means that when we're getting a new topic it's much more like debating...when we get a new topic it's very vague and we don't know what to do with it. But, from this process, we learned how to break a topic down and approach it little by little...Actually, this module provided a very full version

of how to teach yourself about a whole new project or whole new notation. I think that's a really good way for learning...'

In the final two weeks, I began to notice the amazing degree to which I was no longer the clear leader of this Project. I played my role in facilitating our activities, but the students themselves were working happily and productively on their own steam. There was an undeniably natural and playful, but serious and productive, atmosphere and energy within the group that was a joy to be part of. In Week Nine, we produced our lo-fi prototype and discussed the way forward, making a plan to collectively develop the website in the Summer Term.



'This is probably the most creative process I've been part of since I came to university....Group projects are always a bit of a joke, but this i've actually wanted to be there and volunteer and everyone has really thrown themselves into it.'

'When I first joined I wasn't sure what it was going to be, but that's part of it, I guess. It's whatever we create together as a group.'

'This is what uni should be like!'



The Moneypedia website design offered potentially great opportunities for all users to contribute their own knowledge and to engage in dialogue that can generate further knowledge on the subject of money. In this way, the site could continue to grow, flourish, even evolve as users continue to contribute to it. The site design also offered a list of resources for users to learn more about and get involved locally in money-related issues. We ended the Project with a sense of satisfaction – that we had come up with exciting ideas for a website called 'Moneypedia' that truly had the potential to help people develop their understanding of money and cultivate their sociological imagination – and a willingness to continue our work together the following term to bring our ideas to fruition. Unfortunately, however, the end of this story is not so happy. The students returned to University after Easter understandably focussed entirely on their exams. Despite huge enthusiasm, an overworked I.T. Department was unable to give the help I needed to turn the students' Moneypedia design into an actual website. Undeterred, I applied alongside Project participant and colleague Erzsebet Strausz to IATL for further 'strategic funding' for a further two years. We sought both to turn R.O.S.I. into an accredited module for students to take as part of their undergraduate degrees and to institutionalise the R.O.S.I. model right across the university. As part of our application here we quoted the University's own 'Core Learning and Teaching Strategy' document to show how R.O.S.I. could spread and institutionalise the University's own declared pedagogical objectives. Unfortunately, our application for funding was rejected.

That was eighteen months ago. The design and model lie dormant. I have managed only to put all the resources produced onto a basic Wix website. I have not worked in another university since and am unable to find the place and the people to make Moneypedia a reality and to develop R.O.S.I. or similar models further.

## **The R.O.S.I. Model and the Politics of Possibility within the Neoliberal University**

In this section, I will first consider the prospects of R.O.S.I. as a technology and model for contributing to the liberation of our general intellect. Next, I will reflect on the R.O.S.I. experience to contribute to current debates around the politics of possibility within the neoliberal university itself.

### *The R.O.S.I. Model*

The Moneypedia website is the specific creative output of a particular group of R.O.S.I. Project participants – one founding example of what could readily be developed into a general pedagogical model, a technology, for application within and far beyond the university. In the model, a group of engaged individuals (ideally, academics, students, and community partners) come together to explore an issue of central material concern for their lives with the aim of generating knowledge and culture that helps them respond to this issue. In the process, they create a website that does not just publicly display and disseminate the knowledge and culture they have produced, but invites others, near and far, to further contribute their own knowledge and culture.

In this way, the R.O.S.I. model could serve as one practical, powerful way to empower individuals and communities within and beyond the university to become sociologically imaginative intellectuals, active knowledge producers, and engaged, politically active citizens. It could help to reconnect the university both with local communities and the wider world. Finally, since central to the R.O.S.I. model is the re-commoning of the ownership, the means, and the objectives of knowledge production, I believe that it is precisely technologies like R.O.S.I. that we need to develop in our struggle to liberate our general intellect. What I hope for is the emergence of a more concretely articulated R.O.S.I. model through successive iterations and its consequent, continued decentralised evolution.

Can participating in R.O.S.I. revive our sociological imagination? I make no strong claims based on a first iteration of a pilot project. Nonetheless, the students' quotes above and the Moneypedia design they generated suggest a potential worth pursuing. Following as it does the well established methods and principles of critical pedagogy, there is nothing special about R.O.S.I. in this regard that should surprise.

As for more fundamentally revolutionary aims, Mike Neary (2012a: 163) has insisted that:

‘A really progressive project must attempt to reclaim knowledge at the level of society for the social individuals that produced it and, in so doing, dissolve the contemporary corporate university and reconstitute the university in another more progressive form. This means deconstructing the knowledge economy and replacing it with the idea of a knowing society.’

I do believe that the R.O.S.I. model seeks to do just this. The revolutionary principles and potential of R.O.S.I. lie in its commitment to and facilitation of the commoning of the ownership, means, and objectives of knowledge production. Concerning ownership, I envisage the ownership of knowledge produced on R.O.S.I. as commonly owned and open to all but those who seek to make private gains from its usage – a ‘copy far left’ legal approach (Kleiner 2010). As for the commoning of the means of knowledge production, R.O.S.I. centres on a practice of dialogical collaboration both face-to-face *and* online – a ‘hybrid’ tech-

nology (Stommel 2013). As for the commoning of objectives, R.O.S.I. groups commit themselves to the generation of knowledge and culture for social benefit (use value) rather than private benefit and gain (exchange value). In all these ways, R.O.S.I. offers a practical model that promotes the idea and practice of social knowledge and a ‘knowing society’.

I see R.O.S.I. as founded directly on a critique of value that understands the establishment of communism to mean the reappropriation of the human *potentia* currently alienated from us and expressed through the value form of abstract labour (Postone 1993; Winn 2015a, 2015b; Neary 2012a, 2012b, 2016). Consequently, R.O.S.I. contributes, in its own *very small* way, to technologies for this reappropriation through the commoning of the ownership, means, and objectives of the process of knowledge production.

### *The Politics of Possibility Within the Neoliberal University*

Building on J. K. Gibson-Graham’s conceptualisation, Sarah Amsler (2011b: 94) defines the ‘politics of possibility’ as an ‘emergent political imaginary’ that begins with an understanding of the ‘limit-situations’ of neoliberal life as ‘the conditions of politics itself’ and aspires to ‘build a politics that acts in the moment, not to create something in the future but to build in the present’ a ‘politics of the here and now’. Additionally, Amsler describes the politics of possibility as ‘an attitude toward being that struggles to expand and resignify space and time while inhabiting them with others’ (ibid: 94). This definition and vision resonates with Harney and Moten’s (2013: 27), understanding of ‘study’ as constituting ‘a thinking through the skin of teaching toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization’. Both of these articulations of envisioning resonate profoundly not just with my understanding of the concept and practice of R.O.S.I., but of how R.O.S.I. *felt* to me and, I believe, to my fellow participants.

To me, the R.O.S.I. Project experience also felt like an example of Kelvin Mason and Mark Purcell’s (2014: 92) concept of *scholé* – a concept that combines Aristotle’s original political vision of self-actualisation with Marx’s notion of ‘really free working’ – ‘an intense effort that people undertake both to understand the conditions of their own existence and to reappropriate control over those conditions’(Marx in Mason & Purcell 2014: 92). Again, there is nothing original here. The autonomous intellectual pursuits of oppressed and silenced peoples worldwide offer countless examples of *scholé*. What prospects then for the development and institutionalisation of the R.O.S.I. model within a university? At this juncture, I cannot respond hopefully to this question.

In April 2016, I was en route from Oxford to Roskilde University, Copenhagen to present a paper on R.O.S.I. to participants of the Critical Edge Conference. I planned to conclude my paper with an invitation to participants to consider the politics of possibility of transformation within the neoliberal university. Before that journey, my own response to that question was more hopeful, awaiting as I was IATL’s response to my application for funding to develop R.O.S.I. as an accredited module and pedagogical model. It was literally on the train from the airport to the conference that I learned by email that my application was unsuccessful. Understandably, I ended my paper that day on a more pessimistic note than previously intended!

The story of this rejection is merely one anecdotal episode. Yet, my broader experience, coupled with the experience of other scholars in other UK universities, led me to conclude that the neoliberal university is not likely to support the institutionalisation of R.O.S.I. or other such initiatives. My pessimism is widely shared. Hall and Stahl (2015: 89) argue that:

‘...academics inside the University have little room for manoeuvre in resisting the enclosing logic of competition and in arguing for a socialised role for higher education, given the ideological, political drive towards, for instance, indentured study and debt, internationalisation, privatisation and outsourcing. As a result, the internal logic of the University is increasingly prescribed by the rule of money, which forecloses on the possibility of creating transformative social relationships as against fetishised products and processes of valorisation.

Amsler’s own optimism of the will is checked by her own intellectual pessimism. She too sees a ‘bleak’ future in which the best we can hope within the university for is to ‘become intellectual automatons, perform loyalty to the corporation and carve out cramped spaces of freedom for teaching and serious intellectual work’ (2011a: 80).

What, then, of Harney and Moten’s (2013: 34) infamous provocation that ‘the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one’? The authors of *The Undercommons* insist that a commitment to critical education by ‘subversive intellectuals’ only results in unintentionally advancing the dynamic of ‘professionalization’ that defines the modern university (ibid: 31). Instead, they assert that radical scholars can only and must retreat to the ‘Undercommons’ of the institution, ‘to abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of’. As I sat on my train en route to Roskilde, I recalled Harney and Moten’s maxim, shrugged my shoulders, and conceded.

Recent articles demonstrate a flourishing of heterodox, participatory, experimental pedagogical projects taking place within universities today across the globe.<sup>6</sup> Institutional and political conditions may be more conducive in, say, Canada or Scandinavia than the UK or US. However, such initiatives predominantly remain if not just in the Undercommons, but certainly on the margins. And, yes, perhaps they do in some way sustain the institution by perfecting its professionalism, rendering its critical proponents ‘harmless intellectuals, malleable, perhaps capable of some modest intervention in the so-called public sphere’ (ibid: 31, 32). And yet, not too long after the raw emotion of that rejection had subsided, I found myself agreeing with Neary’s suggestion that Harney and Moten’s thought here might be overlooking as it does the dialectical nature of relations of knowledge production within the university. To cite Postone (2006: 108), perhaps such a position is in danger of ‘reify[ing] both the system of domination and the idea of agency’ in such a way that leaves us unable to ‘grasp [our] own conditions of possibility; that is, to grasp the dynamic historical context of which [we are] a part’. As Neary emphasises, the goal must be more than just a ‘positive affirmation of worker solidarity’; what is required is a practised negative critique that seeks to subvert ‘the nature of work itself’.

In reality, of course, very few can materially afford to ‘abandon the university as a social project altogether’ (Amsler 2011a: 80) even if they wanted to. What, then, can we do? Recent constructive perspectives, emerging from students and academics alike, have emerged that help us transcend any ‘in and against or beyond’ binary. Withers and Wardrop (2014: 8) identify themselves and very many others as ‘para-academics’ functioning within an ‘alter-university’ that exists ‘simultaneously inside, outside, and alongside the conventional academy’. Similarly, Gary Rolfe (2014: 3) finds strategic optimism in a Deleuzian analysis that sees the university as an arborescent, inflexible structure to which he contrasts a ‘para-university’, existing both inside and outside the university, whose form is of ‘a rhizome, an un-

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<sup>6</sup>I have found the journal *Conjunctions* to be a particularly rich home for such articles. See, for instance, Aaen & Norgard (2015), Mariani & Ackermann (2016), and Toft Norgard & Berggreen Paaskesen (2016).

derground, tangled root structure in which, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, any point can be connected to anything other, and must be'. Para-academics 'often occupy their positions through force of circumstance, choice or an ambivalent mixture of both' (Withers & Wardrop 2014: 8). Consequently, Rolfe (2014: 3) impels us to become 'the little para-academic machine, ...to connect with anything other, to plug in, to become entangled with as many people and projects as possible'. Echoing Harney and Moten's *Undercommons* in a more positive chord, Rolfe (2014: 1) identifies 'communit[ies] of dissensus' within the paraversity – the hubs perhaps in our growing rhizomatic networks.

It is through these emergent communities of dissensus that we are pursuing 'continually re-articulated and reclaimed' processes of knowledge and cultural production in which we might 'ground our everyday practices of freedom' (Withers & Wardrop 2014: 8; Amsler 2011a: 80). What we are describing here are *micro*-practices - 'cautious experimental modifications of our specific forms of subjectivity' (Tully in Amsler 2011a: 80) - that can help us not just to survive, but, step by step, to reenvision, recreate, and *heal*. Withers and Wardrop (2014: 7) suggest that, understanding the collaborative nature of knowledge production as we do, we para-academics are the best and necessary agents of this healing:

'Armed with the skills that years of university training and experience have afforded them, they absolve precisely "to heal", "to reappropriate", "to learn/teach again", "to struggle", to "become able to restore life where it was poisoned" because they understand deeply that knowledge, learning and thinking emerge from collective practices, despite all seeming evidence to the contrary.'

A healing is, indeed, needed and it suggests that just as the neoliberalisation of the university entailed a transformation toward a competitive subjectivity and an angst-ridden affect that has left us scared and scarred, so our emancipation is achieved by and through a subjectivity of solidarity and an affect of healing, care, and love. In Withers and Wardrop's own words, we must possess a 'streak of militancy' grounded in a 'care of the possible' (ibid: 8).

Henfrey (2014: 121), however, reframes the weak, marginalised positionality of the *Undercommons* to identify para-academics as 'liminal agents' working 'across university-community boundaries'. He utilises a permacultural perspective to insist on the hugely fertile nature of liminal, borderland spaces, offering a 'vision of resisting the spread of toxic monocultures by cultivating diverse, verdant forest gardens' (ibid: 136). This can be pursued by 'promoting responsible practice within established institutions, or through building and maintaining links with more radical organisations' as well as 'active [support] for engaged academics within universities' and 'for' refugees from academia needing to undertake their own rehabilitation' (ibid: 135-6).

And yet, though these rhizomatic reimaginings of space, time, and culture, achieved through iterative and creative *micro*-practices, are most fruitful, we cannot deny that they require risk, courage, sacrifice and are so hard to sustain and expand within the neoliberal university (Amsler 2017). What, then, of beyond? Henfrey (2014: 135) also calls upon 'para-academics' to become 'co-creators of the new institutions against which to compare established powers, supporting them by channelling resources and expertise'. Following the Social Science Centre, then, as well as other UK examples like the Really Open University, Ragged University, or Free University of Brighton, surely the most fruitful terrain for pursuing our goals is beyond the neoliberal university and, in particular, in the establishment of an alternative, co-operative university. The most hopeful and ambitious moves in this direction in the

UK are being taken by Mike Neary, Joss Winn, with the support and expertise of the Co-operative College and wider Co-operative movement (Neary & Winn 2017).

A conceptualisation of our existence within a rhizomatic para-versity clearly resonates with and supports a conceptualisation of the liberation our general intellect as a social struggle. Consequently, I propose a strategy based on both micro- and macro-practices of collective work taking place both within and beyond the university, both crucially based within a culture of solidarity, care, and love.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have presented the R.O.S.I Website Project, and an embryonic R.O.S.I. model for its deployment, that I believe is the kind of hybrid technology we need to develop to facilitate and support processes not just of self and collective actualisation, but of the liberation from capital of the ownership, means, and objectives of social knowledge production or our 'general intellect'. Though I do believe in R.O.S.I.'s potential, I seek only to make a modest contribution to this collective praxis.

The emancipatory, revolutionary aim provokes a question of strategy: where best to focus our efforts – in, against, or beyond the neoliberal university? I have argued that, first, since the production of knowledge and culture takes place *everywhere* in the total social factory, the liberation of the general intellect is not an academic, but a social objective. Second, beyond any retreat to the Undercommons, I have utilised alternative perspectives that highlight the inherent liminality of radical academics or 'para-academics' to navigate, connect, and transcend university and community institutions and spaces - a potentially fruitful, but still hugely challenging, positionality.

We need, then, to think small and big. Small thinking recognises that, just as neoliberalisation is a process of undermining through micro-practices, so too is its resistance and counter-transformation. From this perspective, we can continue to create spaces for everyday practices of freedom and articulations of emancipation. I feel that R.O.S.I. was just such a space and practice. Big thinking involves our own collective attempts to establish alternative, radical higher education institutions that 'can emerge in any number of sustainable and life enhancing forms' (Neary 2012a: 164).

As Mason and Purcell (2014: 94) insist, '[t]he point is always the active, difficult and joyous project of scholē. We only need the university if it is useful for scholē...It is such schools of our own—not the public university—that should be our long-term vision'. Our strategy must be guided not by institutional forms, but by the principled commitment to the revolutionary transformation of the social relations of how we work together to produce knowledge and culture. In the case of the prospective co-operative university, for example, it begins with a democratisation of hierarchical relations of pedagogy. It is through these means that we achieve our ends: the liberation of our general intellect from capital and its establishment as the creator of common, social wealth. It is in this spirit that I present R.O.S.I. and welcome any offers of collaboration in taking it or similar technologies forward.

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