

Difference and indifference. Part one: hierarchy and equality.

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How to consider forms of hierarchisation, submission, intolerance, meekness and domination that obtain in the university without deferring to either the dream of a universality or, what is the same thing, the nightmare of a total mobilisation, which is to say, the absolute hierarchy of the general equivalent and its political variants? Another way of putting the same question, and which the second part of this contribution to the discussion turns to: how to give sense to the commons such that it is complicated by the undercommons and the irreconcilably uncommon; or, how to approach the shared uncommonalities of precariousness without aspiring toward a common figure as the lever of a hoped-for political normalisation?

These, and other questions, cannot I think be answered by theoretical discussions. They remain questions for practical experimentation with forms of organisation and relation, connection and disconnection and preferably without being folded back into the mutually constitutive reiterations of hierarchy and equality echoing as the false choices between vertical or horizontal, public or private, collective or individual, subject or citizen [1]. Capitalism, after all, exists on both sides of the oscillation between these 'poles', quite literally organises their 'polarity', and in no way as epochal or temporal shifts. In any case, it seems to me that stakes here are far less cognitive than they are affective, not Cartesian but proprioceptive.

All of which raises the question of movement, which should by no means be restricted to its conventional political or sociological definitions. So, what are the borders of the university, in the convoluted meshing of their geopolitical, economic and intimate expressions? What does it mean to pose the question as one of limits and, as noted in statement for this round of the edu-factory discussions, the struggles surrounding access to the university? If hierarchy is conceived as the functioning of a limit, does this concept serve the unlimited operations of an axiomatic equality, the expansion of the general equivalent, an indifference? If the question of access is put as a question of the limits to entry, does it also imply that the university should encompass everything or, more precisely, what might pass for everything of value? Why is access considered to be a good thing, on what basis, and for whom? The question of skill, its recognition, estimation of worth, and credentialisation has been, for the most part, answered by a clambering for relative advantage and meritocratic qualification, issued as if merit was established as consequence of university instruction and not the structural presupposition that, in the gambling-house regimen of capitalism, there will always be those deemed to be with value and those without winners, losers and, what is worse, those who do not ever make it to the table. If the university cultivates, as I think it increasingly does, an entrepreneurial subjectivity, then how to delve into the question of access under these conditions?

Over the last ten years or so in Australia, and likely elsewhere, nursing shifted from hospital- to university-based training and authorisation. It brought with it some modicum of an increase in pay and conditions for what continues to be a lower-end and female-dominated occupation. But this also meant that some of the tasks previously done by nurses, reckoned to be incapable of accruing any status, dirty and onerous and therefore dispensed with in the university's re-arranging of occupational skill sets were taken up by an increasing layer of poorly-paid, mostly migrant, often female workers, labouring in circumstances of sub-contracting and an acute precariousness. These shifts have been supplemented by the proliferation of 'home care' work outside the ostensibly public institutional nexus of the hospital-university, sometimes but not always paid, and oftentimes assuming the form of indentured labour organised through migration policing systems. These to borrow a phrase from Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's contribution interlinked systems of labor extraction multiply in that engagement with the university and through it.

Such interlocking arrangements of exploitation are not as one might be tempted to suppose if hierarchy and uneven access were regarded as the archaic frustration of tendencies toward the universal or global embrace of equality arranged as a dialectical schema which might be unfolded in any temporal sense. The paradox of hierarchy and equality, of the incessant production of hierarchy by the tendency toward the equalisation of labours, is continually resolved in spatial terms, as the delineation and ramification of private and public realms, in the geographies of an extra-territorialised linguistic ascendancy and its borders (already discussed by Jon Solomon), in the myriad classifications and decisions of migration policing.

This is also to say that I think it would be a mistake to suppose that quality, in the sense of the university as an instrument of absolute qualification of worth (and superfluity) does not continue to bear down, made sharper as the university's relation to labour market segmentations and the dim possibility of moving through them becomes more pronounced and, more importantly, becomes all the more deeply internalised as the affective landscape of an individuated reckoning of success and failure. The ascendancy of entrepreneurial subjectivity proceeds by way of the command to participate as the condition of subjectivity as such. The marked increase in the proportions of students combining study and work has been necessitated by privatisation and the decline in student incomes, but it is also driven and underwritten by this terror of being without any value whatsoever. It becomes possible, affectively and perhaps only for a time, to sustain the actually-interminable encounter with low-paying jobs in retail, 'hospitality' and similar through access to the university, even though, for most, this access will be short, self-funded, and result in an indebtedness that,

for many, prolongs that engagement with the kinds of work they hope to escape.

Toby Miller wrote about how the costs of university education have been shifted from governments to students, and it is important to underscore his point about the extent to which this is not only a question of policy, economy and public restructurings, that students are increasingly consumers who must manage their own lives, and invest in their own human capital. This is, above all and most importantly, a process of subject-formation, the articulation of a self-managed labour-power made profoundly intimate, personal and private. In this sense, the university is far less a public institution as the putative staging-ground of a public intellectuality it has been eclipsed by other forms of public and semi-private expression than it is the machinery that, along with others, privatises responsibility for one's oftentimes (but not always) public circulation as a commodity deemed of some value.

In other words, one can only answer the question of why access is a good thing largely from an individuated perspective it might lead to a higher income, may result in less difficult work, could result in a better life, for some individuals. There is, of course, no point in dismissing this effort. Yet, it would be an error to imagine that access to the university, as the quantification and qualification of value, is not weighted toward a normative and individualising process or, where it has been a matter of occupational and not simply individual mobility, is a protectionist gambit premised on the simultaneous reorganisation of geographic and spatial systems of exploitation (through migration policy, in the delegation of certain kinds of work to 'private', privatised or domestic spaces, etc).

One of the question I have, then, is to what extent posing the problem as one of access forecloses the possibility of asking why value should be graded, compared, accredited and recognised. Moreover, does the question of access, conceived as a question of the barriers to university entry, implicitly confirm the affectively normative landscape in which inclusion is seen as the mark of merit, deservedness, self-worth or, more miserably, a never-quite sustainable self-respect; or does it transform it by taking a distance from the very notion of merit, its authorisation, comparison and measure?

What are the possibilities of subtraction and escape here? Undoubtedly, it is possible to draw some kind of analogy between the vague prospect of mobility that the university offers and the mobility of labour undertaken in migration, at least insofar as both can incline toward assuming individual responsibility for the striving for a better life. But, if I might press the analogy, without for a moment succumbing to homology: if the subversiveness of migration consists in the disregard for or evasion of authorised movement and, hence, value, then the overarching question is no longer one of ensuring greater access to the university, just as it cannot be one of maintaining the legitimacy of border controls as such. Isn't it a case, rather, of defending an unauthorised intellectuality that proceeds without being granted or asking for any right to do so?

It is not necessary to enter into a discussion of the internets and their complex manifestations, nor perhaps the many reasons why they should not be considered as outside the conjunctures of self-managed exploitation or, indeed, without any connection to the university, not to mention other industries such as music companies, studios, etc. The point, it seems to me, is that collaborative research is already taking place at some distance from the university, and despite various attempts by the university to assert a role in the legitimation of its expressions. In some cases, the hierarchies within universities and between them are being resituated by the encounter with the internets, peer-to-peer production and distribution, open publishing and so on. But, the problem of gatekeeping, here, is not one of access to the university but, on the contrary, the attempts by the university to maintain and impose a semblance of intellectual authorisation. Long-standing disputes over the weight and meaning of 'professional' and 'amateur', of the attempts to stamp 'academic' blogging with greater value, attest to as much though mostly as signs of crisis and nostalgia.

It is not, therefore, required for anyone to declare the emergence of what might be called an autonomous university or a global university, let alone grant it recognition from the standpoint of the university, though claims of propriety abound. In a sense, it is already being shaped, and there is by no means one. The internets, too, are riven by conflicts over how value might be recognised, compared and measured. They are complicated by questions of access, of right and authorship, of the relation between hierarchy and equality, of intelligibility and translation, enclosure and confrontations with it. [2] They have not provided a resolution to any of these questions, but they are the forms of escape and subtraction as these exist in the present moment. And they are forms of escape that have amplified the tensions that reside under the heading of precariousness, of the indistinction between life and labour and, hence, of public and private and the consequences of this, for better and worse.

1. On horizontality, see Rodrigo Nunes' 'Nothing Is What Democracy Looks Like: Openness, Horizontality and the Movement of Movements'.

2. For some discussion of 'social software', net-work and rights see 'The Social Softwar', at <http://www.metamute.org/en/The-Social-SoftWar>

[Part two to follow shortly]