

'We have decided not to die.'

On taking and leaving the University

Marina Vishmidt

The struggles metastasizing across the public university system in California have been extremely visible in recent months, starting with the September 24, 2009 rallies and walkouts, continuing with the November occupations at UC Berkeley, UC Davis and UC Santa Cruz, mass protests on other campuses, and most recently in the March 4th Day of Action statewide that included the UC Davis highway blockade. The predominantly student movement (though many students subsidize their studies through low-paid, unstable adjunct teaching contracts) has deployed tactics such as occupations, sit-ins, walk-outs, rallies, roadblocks, mass marches and dance parties, to which university management has responded almost uniformly in classic zero-tolerance style (an approach echoed in the UK when the University of Sussex registrar pretended that a small student occupation had taken building staff hostage and called in the riot police, and this was also the means by which a fraudulent High Court injunction was obtained that outlawed all student protests on campus)¹. The trajectory of these struggles has shown features that make for a provocative comparison with the recent student occupation movement in Vienna and condign occupations and strikes elsewhere in Europe, such as the 'Anomalous Wave' in Italy, as well as the current anti-cuts campaign surging forth in the UK higher and further education sector. At the most basic level of analysis, the crisis of state education in California is like a *wunderkammer* version of the crisis of the American state; a scale model which makes legible the effects of financialization on the public sector over the past three or so decades, and how its 'bankruptcy' can become a point of contestation of the whole economy as serviced and modelled by state-funded higher education, as well as a point of secession and re-composition. But further, the spectacular unravelling of the debt-fuelled model of accumulation in the CA university system can be extrapolated to its unravelling system-wide, with the predictably grotesque social consequences (booming tent cities, 20% unemployment, crypto-fascist tenor of mainstream media², 'Tea Parties') of the lack of systemic (or oppositional) capacity to practically question the extant undead model of capitalist relations, kept vertical by the ongoing bailouts as it staggers off a cliff. What has been discussed in various communist quarters as the 'non-reproduction' attendant on the spread of 'fictitious capital'³ plays out almost schematically in the education sphere, long a nominal refuge from and now a test-bed for the ruling-class asset-stripping accelerated by the economic downturn. It is especially dramatic in the case of the UC system, where it has been shown by Bob Meister, among others⁴, that it is students' very inability to afford escalating tuition fees that is shaping profit strategies for universities, which are being structured more and more like hedge funds – tuition fees as CDOs (Collateralized Debt Obligations) for the university's 'capital projects' (showcase facilities that Hoover up what were once teaching posts and courses) and the bucketloads of managerial staff to push them through. But the re-structuring of the state university system has had a consistent alibi: the remorseless slashing of their budgets by the state government, owing to 30 years of 'starve the beast' low-tax policies attendant on the passing of Proposition 13. And the university CEOs could haul out their most cherished our-hands-are-tied valedictions at a time when the state really did seem to be down to its last quarter. The substantive near-bankruptcy of the state of California itself, often cited as

'the eighth largest economy in the world', and not so long ago paying its civil servants and its welfare bills in IOUs, fairly quickly catapulted the turmoil in the universities into the public eye, expanding the struggle to the rest of the social terrain almost by default, when it did not succeed in doing so deliberately. If anything, the behemoth stature of the CA state education system on that social terrain – as employer, health care facilities provider, real-estate developer, etc – poised the student movement, which initially sought simply to counter the 30% tuition fee hike, directly on the terrain of social reproduction, dramatizing that the 'crisis' was to be fought there if it was going to be fought at all.

Meanwhile in Europe, the student mobilizations signal a resistance to the so-called 'Bologna Process' which aims to 'harmonize' education systems in EU-member countries along curricular and managerial lines dictated by quasi-market bureaucratic stasis, where the UK has sat for some time. As always, the UK is squarely in the middle rung of the death spiral of the neoliberal state, neither as far gone as the US nor as wedded to an actual or phantasmic benevolent state as other parts of Europe. UK student activists too are not able to draw on the recent memory of a nurturing welfare state in order to go beyond it unlike the militant students in Austria and Germany can, nor on the resources of social combativeness evident in Greece or Italy. The UK occupations and strikes so far – most visibly at Sussex, King's College, Tower Hamlets College in further education and ESOL, and Leeds – have been very encouraging but, in light of the other places mentioned so far, and perhaps inevitably at this stage, limited. The discourse of the movement seems, understandably, perplexed at a situation where the universities are being hounded into being run more like businesses and face serious funding cuts, yet exhibit no discernible economic rationality in their predicament, unless crafting a spurious corporate culture is the economic rationality of our day – sacking staff left and right, eliminating departments in order to fund top managers' salaries and a US-cum-Abu Dhabi menu of 'capital projects' (strike-hit King's College London just bought Somerset House, the Inland Revenue's former neo-classical residence on The Strand...). The production of subjectivity in California, in Europe and in the UK in the student movement seems particularly at issue with regard to the potential political outcomes of this manifestation of unrest, seeing as its symptoms are both shared and not shared along the 'crisis' as such. Published analysis discloses a gamut ranging from social democratic outrage and a 'take it back' attitude, to the heady prose of the communiqués issuing forth from the 'insurrectionist' or 'communisation' wings of the California movement⁵; as well as, more interestingly, the continuum and alternations between these polarities. There is a recognition that the university as currently constituted is not the desired goal, that the economic and social bankruptcy of its standard operating procedure is both specific and general, that students both are and are not workers and what implications this could have. Although literature around the 'corporatisation of the university' has been steadily proliferating in recent years – with Marc Bousquet's book *How The University Works* and blog⁶ among the most salient, and *edu-factory* making serious inroads into the activist/autonomist side of things – it seems as if the understanding hard-won from the analysis and the constant brutal experience of the university as an institution

whose 'core business' is not the production of autonomous thinking subjects (a pernicious myth enough in its day, and positively radioactive now) but the maximisation of speculative claims on value and the production of scarcity and fear under conditions of diminishing possibility for everyone, has generated a marked dis-identification with certain antinomies of liberalism (US-style) for many of the student activists and the adoption of a materialist standpoint that fully embraces, and even paradoxically 'leverages', the waste product status that the current subjects of hedge-fund higher education have been assigned. The link between the 'fictitious capital' that sustains the state university model in CA and the fictitious employment prospects students graduate with in the present conjuncture may have a lot more to it than mere analogy.

The following interview was conducted over a process of several weeks with a professor and a graduate student/instructor who have been observing and involved in the UC movement (in Berkeley and Santa Cruz). Indicators rather than fully-formed questions were given – short points on 'financialization', 'composition', and 'what next' – as it was these vectors that seemed to be urgent, not only for the praxis of the nascent student and union campaigns in the UK, but for getting an assessment of the larger revolutionary potential of the (relatively) mass struggles in California state education.

Marina Vishmidt: What is the role of financialization, both in the transformation of the CA state university system, and in the political agenda of resistance to it? How broad is the linking of the struggles around tuition hikes to the 'crisis' more generally, whether at state, national or systemic level? How do these links register, or not register, in the organisation and rhetoric of movements? For example, what has a higher profile in the demands, that the state raise levels of funding or that the university revise its financial operating model (e.g. Bob Meister's 'They Pledged Your Tuition' and other analyses of CA state universities operating 'like hedge funds' with students/staff/teachers congregating near the bottom of the priority list for spending, in large part because their debt needs to grow in order to be collateralised for the University's prime spending commitments, i.e. capital projects, property development, or even Board of Regents members' business interests in student-loan banking...)?

Iain Boal: Nothing of what has happened can be understood unless you go back to the Orange County homeowners' revolt in the 1970s led by Howard Jarvis. The result was Proposition 13 which stopped the property tax revenue stream in its tracks. It also blew a big hole in the idea of universality of provision. It prefigured a withdrawal to a gated privatized world ready for neoliberalism. It set the scene for the current spectacle of 'gotcha capitalism' – the chase for fees, fines and penalties on the fiscal side of things. Of course, ideologically Reagan launched his attack on Berkeley and public higher education in his bid for governor as far back as 1966. He said notoriously that if the blood had to run on Telegraph Ave. so be it.

You really must mention the slide from number 1 in the nation to number 49 or thereabouts in terms of public provision for education. It's been a long slow throttling process – a frog boiler really – noticed first in the lower echelons of public education and now hitting the tertiary level. But the choking of money post-Proposition 13 was

very visible to us parents in the halls and toilets and playing fields of the public schools, and the gutting of programs started many years ago. The Californian political class had mostly withdrawn to private schools at the primary and secondary level (except in wealthy suburbs) and did not resist, indeed were responsible for allowing, the defunding. They continued to fund UC as long as it was a white affair for their own children – right up to the '70s really. In the same way, in Britain in the '60s only circa 7% of each annual cohort went on to university – free but for the few.

Now the resistance is surely bound to pick up dramatically from the parents' perspective because of the massive fee hikes *and* into the bargain no classes available so their kids taking longer and longer to graduate. Not to mention no jobs, but see Doug Henwood [sent separately]. Very helpful charts. Bob Meister's analysis of the Regents' moves at UC is being circulated widely hereabouts – beyond the bay? Dunno. I'm sure the lesson applies elsewhere. The new pieces in the *Anderson Valley Advertiser* are essential reading on the nexus of looting here in California *vis a vis* UC. But it's only symptomatic.⁷ Also, for the first time there will be a serious audit at Berkeley. Demanded by a legislator. This should be interesting.

Evan Calder Williams: Across the full range of those involved in actions here, the emphasis on such a linkage varies widely: to be sure, there are many vocal opponents of the recent hikes and cuts who see such a state of affairs as one that is an internal problem of bad administration, as well as the culmination of a crisis in how public education is 'valued' (as a *social* institution under attack via the tendency toward privatization and the further dismantling of what's left of a welfare state). But insofar as we're talking of the more directly anti-capitalist current of these struggles (the current taken to be ultra-left, communist, anarchist, and various other designations along those lines), such a linkage can't be underestimated. While those involved have rejected the false logic of a budgetary 'state of emergency' (given that this won't just be 'a couple bad years' and that the emergency measures taken in fact perpetuate the tendencies largely responsible for this supposed shortfall), it isn't in favor of a flat understanding of bureaucratic or corporate greed. Rather, there's been an insistence that the 'crisis of the university' can't be separated from the broader crisis of capitalist profitability, because the public university is an institution that a) plays a crucial role in the reproduction of capitalist social relations (granting of degrees, training of future workers, etc.), b) participates in the circulation and accumulation of capital (the enormous flows of money involved, not to mention those employed by the UC system), and c) is necessarily affected by broader shifts in the organization of the economy, especially in terms of its ongoing slowdown (involving here the turn toward increased financial leveraging of student tuition and restructuring of university 'priorities'). All this is to say: we're also concerned with the crisis in the 'value' of the university, but we insist that such a crisis in 'social' value needs to be understood in terms of a larger scale crisis of how capitalism reproduces surplus-value. Not because such a social lens is unimportant, but because it is incoherent without another narrative of what's been happening – i.e. slowdown of manufacturing profitability, supplemented by speculative bubbles – for at least the past 30 years.

Obviously this is an oversimplified account: there's been a lot of work done in trying to provide



fully fleshed-out models of how these flows of capital, finance, debt, and construction work. And more importantly, to grasp what's at stake, both for the continued function of the university and for the prospect of elaborating modes of resistance, disruption, and mutual aid not centered around the university as such but rather the lived catastrophe of contemporary capitalism. That's to say, we're interested in the value of education but in a different way.

The specificity of the more 'anti-capitalist' current hasn't just been a greater emphasis on this analysis linking the wider crisis to the particular issues faced in the struggle around public education. It's also been an attempt to explicitly make that linkage part of the rhetoric: not just in communiqués, statements, and banners, but also in the kind of conversations we've had, particularly with those who haven't been involved as activists. I think we've seen that what have perhaps in the past seemed like topics to avoid (i.e. Marxists talking about 'Marxist things' such as long-term economic trends) have become some of the most crucial points around which to organize. That's to say that while we still need to insist against falling into older notions of 'consciousness raising' (or a fantasy that learning about how things will continue to go badly for global capitalism automatically radicalizes people), the immediate landscape we face is one in which what these questions of finance and profitability, job loss and default are not abstract questions. They're the ones with which Californians are preoccupied, about which they're worried, and which are part of the basic experience of the present now: the anxiety, anger, and uncertainty.

MV: Could you discuss the composition of the student movements? I'm interested in how the movements relate to the situations or the demands of on-campus service workers (it seems to be a big issue at the University of Washington, for example, but hard to tell in the CA case)? How do students perceive their own current status as part- or full-time wage-workers in relation to their organizing as students? Is there a connection between the 'students as immaterial workers/edu-factory' perspective and that of students as actual wage workers? Does it change depending on the status of the employment, whether it's on or off-campus, teaching or service, or both (people with multiple jobs, etc.)? What is the role of the unions? What other political or para-political groups are influential? What's the role of faculty, administrators, other workers? What kinds of strategies are being proposed around these questions of composition?

ECW: As becomes clear in the range of positions articulated in various writings and in the physical presence of those who have occupied buildings, blocked campuses and highways, met and argued

endlessly, and pushed ahead without a clear sense of what sort of 'we' they are, a brief description of the 'composition' of student movements will end up flattening the quite heterogeneous scope. Furthermore, any talk of how the movements articulate the situations of students as workers and relate to the situations of on-campus workers has to be case-by-case. But I'll offer a few rather general observations and one particular example. It's a real fact that increasing number of students are having to work more hours to pay for school, particularly when facing these severe tuition hikes. As such, fewer students have access to the experience of college as a time of 'work-free' experimentation, an experience which has long been a fantasy for the majority of students. (Nevertheless, we are seeing further pressure put onto the cultural figure of college as that time of experimentation and ivory tower good years before going into the 'real world': especially as the 'real world' has distinctly fewer 'real jobs' for graduates now.) In addition, whether or not we consider the number of students working more hours to pay for more expensive education, there is a different emerging sense of students as immaterial workers: not because they participate in the infamous knowledge economy, or because they spend more or less time on social networking sites, but because their tuition, often borrowed at high interest rates, is 'put to work' through complex financial instruments that allow for the institution to borrow at a lower rate. Immaterial work, indeed, but predicated upon a more and more precarious future proposition: once you enter the real world, you'll pay back what you borrowed...

As for how students relate to the concerns of 'workers' (i.e. who are not students), concerns ranging from lay-offs and furloughs to unsafe job conditions and increased work loads, I think it's crucial to reject any idea of a flat egalitarianism, any notion that we're in it together in the same way, that we have the same stake in struggles, that there is automatically a consonance between situations, even when they are affected by the same larger structures. Something interesting happened here in Santa Cruz on March 4th 2010, the day of the statewide strike. Unionized workers were unable to strike, given that their contracts essentially limit strikes to times of contract negotiations, and workers would be at a great risk for censure or firing for supporting the strike. What happened? Students blocked not only the main roads to campus, but the other access points as well. They made it 'unsafe' for workers to enter, to cross a line of bodies, in order for the workers to strike with them. It's a rather funny moment: solidarity means getting in the way of those with whom you're in solidarity. Or to follow an older anarchist slogan that's been circulating once more, 'solidarity means attack'. That's to say, there is no general principle of equivalency and

solidarity beyond the particularity of actions, and actions that do not wait for conditions to be right. Solidarity is nothing if not a process and an act, and the difficult attempts to fight back here have meant not leveling to what is 'common' but recognizing the distinct, and at times irreconcilable, positions we're in, and moving from there, not to stand for a together we already represent but to build collectives out of those uncommon acts of standing together, however uncertainly.

What we've learned – and are continuing to learn – is that nearly all of our inherited ideas about who our allies and enemies are have become, if not irrelevant, then certainly scrambled. Each action that happens redraws the map, and our ideas about the kind of 'radicals' we are (and the kind of actions we do, or with whom we collaborate) keep getting undercut. Do we work with unions? Unionized workers but not through the official channels of the union? Non-students? What about faculty? The case keeps shifting, and we're at times surprised by those sudden moments not of collaboration but mutual action. At other times, we're disappointed to find that certain assumed barriers between 'sectors' persist and foreclose the possibility of those rare moments – such as the strike – when collectives emerge. I think this kind of 'not knowing' is ultimately productive, insofar as it means that you don't rest on stale notions about the kind of things you do, but it requires an enormous amount of thinking and, above all, a commitment to not hold to set axioms or frozen principles.

MV: Is there a perspective beyond 'saving public education'? How strong/diverse is it? Is there a coherent alternative being voiced to the bottom-line 'reformist' agenda, or is the 'reformist' agenda viewed as a pragmatic and flexible one to be articulated with more 'political' ones? Is the current education model being practically questioned on anything but economic/social democratic grounds, outside of the 'communiques'?

IB: I don't see much evidence of a wider critique outside certain small circles, even here in the Bay Area, let alone in Orange County. But really I don't know – I don't read blogs or the *New York Times* or ever watch television. Of course, the survivalists in the backcountry are home schoolers and the religious among them hate secular humanist education anyway.

ECW: Is there a perspective beyond the 'reformist' agenda of 'saving public education'? Definitely. Is it coherent? No. Is the 'saving public education' agenda coherent? No. Without giving a bad caricature of an agenda focused on asking for more money or restructuring the bureaucratic and financial order of the university, I think it's important to stress – practically, in terms of planning how to act and in talking with those who perhaps don't share that same perspective – a gap between means of action and the imagined consequences of those actions. There's been an assumed opposition between more disruptive actions (occupations, blockades, etc.) and some of those goals concerned with 'saving' public education. Two things about this should be untangled, based at least on what I've seen over the past six months. First, even if one's primary emphasis is on the budget, I think it's naive to imagine that enough pressure could be put on those making executive decisions without disruptive action that far exceeds what we've seen so far. If one of the shared points of understanding across the movement has been that responsible decision making has fallen victim to calculations of how to keep business as usual, then it follows pretty obviously that what will impel a re-evaluation of that would be the increasing impossibility of doing business as usual. Second, while there's of course a breakdown between the 'agendas' involved in common actions, I think that many of the 'reforms' called for would obviously be definite improvements. To speak of 'demanding nothing' isn't to say that there isn't anything

worth getting along the way. Where I think the 'save public education' agenda is often incoherent – and where I think the biggest difference has shown itself to be – is where it sees the possibility of these reforms as decoupled from massive structural changes, in economic order and social relations, far beyond the university. As such, should those of us with quite different agendas work 'together'? Of course, but only if we recognize – not in conversation but in how we act, write, talk, and organize – that even small changes will require a push toward horizons that aren't limited in perspective from the start to such small changes.

Marina Vishmidt is a London-based writer who pursues her interest in art and political economy. She is a PhD candidate at Queen Mary, University of London doing her thesis on 'speculation as a mode of production'. She has 18 years of experience of the U.S. public and private education system and 3 of higher education in the UK.

Iain Boal is a social historian of science and technics and a member of the Retort collective. He is author of the forthcoming book *The Long Theft: Episodes in the History of Enclosure*. He is currently acting director of the Environmental Politics Colloquium at the University of California, Berkeley, and also teaches there in the Department of Geography.

Evan Calder Williams is a theorist and graduate student in Santa Cruz, California. His book, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, will be published by Zero Books in fall 2010. His blog is <http://socialismandorbarbarism.blogspot.com>. The first part of his analysis of the CA student movement, 'Painting the Glass House Black,' can be read on Mute http://www.metamute.org/en/content/painting_the_glass_house_black and the second part will appear imminently on his blog.

Notes

- 1 See the Defend Sussex blog at <http://defendsussex.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/high-court-injunction-leaked/>
- 2 This tendency is not confined to Fox News or monopolized by talk radio; racist incidents – lynching nooses in the library, mock-ghetto parties, casual abuse – have been proliferating lately on University of California campuses like San Diego and elsewhere. See http://www.democracynow.org/2010/3/1/following_string_of_racist_incidents_uc
- 3 The inability of capital to capture value in sufficient quantities to make good the claims rendered on it, leads to a running-down of productive resources – plant, people, infrastructure, state services, 'nature' – in a desperate grab for existing wealth when none is being produced, in a vicious, counter-metabolic cycle or 'cannibal orgy'. The strategy of exploitation that rests on capitalizing on impoverishment created through earlier and ongoing financialization – that is, the farming of debt – is contrasted with models of exploitation created through the capture of surplus-value from labour in production, and, as such, moves immediately to the terrain of 'reproduction' – education, welfare, health, housing – since these pre-conditions to the performance of capitalist work become a running performance of indebtedness where financialized capital extracts most of its profit, such as it is.
- 4 See the open letter from Bob Meister, the President of the UC Council of Faculty Associations, to the students of UC, 'They Pledged Your Tuition to Wall Street', at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/meister211109.html> as well as Bob Samuels, 'Student Loans: The New Big Bubble' at his blog Changing Universities and at The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-samuels/student-loans-the-new-big_b_475125.html
- 5 For instance: <http://libcom.org/library/communique-absent-future>
- 6 <http://howtheuniversityworks.com/wordpress>
- 7 Iain is referring to the 'Disaster Capitalist University' series of articles by Will Parrish and Darwin Bond-Graham, available in five parts at <http://theava.com/archives/3874>, <http://theava.com/archives/4337>, <http://theava.com/archives/4678>, <http://theava.com/archives/5104>, and <http://theava.com/archives/5298>