

## Editorial

# Interdisciplinarity and the ‘new’ university

---

*Is knowledge a social good, a common, which must circulate in order to produce effects? Or is it a commodity, something that can be purchased, an investment that has value only as property? These conflicting understandings of the value of knowledge are conflicts that are embodied in the practices of the university, in its structure.*

- Jason Read, *Edu-Factory Collective*, 2009: 151

What does it mean to say that the University is in ‘crisis’? When did this ‘crisis’ begin? Those in the UK might point to October 2010, when the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance released a report on higher education restructuring, with introduction from Lord Browne (often referred to as the Browne report). Or they may go back farther still, to the mid-1990s and the introduction of higher education fees. Students in the University of California system might point to the most recent ‘global financial crisis,’ as might students in Greece. Others might reach farther back to the post-WWII era to mark the beginnings of the ‘corporate university’ (see Nelson, 1999).

For some, this crisis emphasizes a shift ‘away’ from knowledge as a social good –based on the commons – to knowledge as a commodity, a private possession, as the introductory quote suggests. For others, the idea of knowledge as a social good is a romantic notion ignoring raced,

classed and gendered inequalities inherent to the education system (see Mohanty, 2003; Evans, 2004; Hemmings, 2010), as well as differences in global variances in understandings of ‘the commons,’ and the specific ways in which the effects of Neoliberalism are felt in the education arena (see Dahlström, 2008; Ong, 2009; Rhoades and Torres, 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). As Ong (2009: 40) explains: ‘universalizable technologies... do not produce universalism or uniform planetary conditions, but rather specific [global] assemblages of politics and ethics’ (see also Ong and Collier, 2004).

This issue is the first in a series of two that the GJSS will publish in an attempt to unpack the neoliberal agenda’s ‘specific assemblages of politics and ethics’ (*ibid.*) on various sites in and outside of the university. Arguably, ‘neoliberalism’ (and also ‘crisis’) has been overly and often ambiguously employed as a simplistic catch-all term that replaces and

occludes the crucial labour of specificity required by rigorous academic critique. Nevertheless, it is also true – as Ulrich Beck recently pointed out in analysing the current European ‘crisis’ – that ‘neoliberalism ultimately claims to be the better socialism, because overcoming national and global poverty and creating a more just world is possible only by means of free markets...’ (2011). Thus, as an ideological, political and economic practice that promotes the free-market machinery above all else (and in all spheres of life), neoliberalism remains crucial as a way of conceptualizing broad and inter-linked forces of local, regional and international inequity. And while its scope is broad, its foci are necessarily specific. Bronwyn Davies for instance, has discussed the impact of discursive neoliberal regimes on intellectual work within universities and on the subjectification of our consciousness, arguing that it,

‘coopts research to its own agendas, [it] silences those who ask questions, [it] whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song and passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable’ (2005: 7).

The essays compiled in this volume attest to these various concep-

tions of neoliberalism by describing and analysing mechanisms through which the higher education ‘crisis’ is being produced, not least by exploring some of the particular *marriages of convenience* between capitalism and elitism that keep the system running *as normal*. The accounts included travel between the past and present, the abstract and the particular and the global and the local to assess the widespread impact of such conditions, as well as to describe and offer alternatives created by those very circumstances.

The decision to focus on the university in ‘crisis’ is spurred by our current location as junior scholars, all too aware of its personal and professional implications, as well as our geographical location – much of the editorial team at the GJSS were located within UK institutions when talk of higher education restructuring began but had not yet fully unfolded into the politicized environment of occupation, protest and repression. Since then, and in the wake of public sector cuts and rising tuition fees, important questions have been posed about how academic subjects, degrees and professions are valued and about the actual possibilities of access to higher education for all once the new order is in full swing. Voices of dissent range from those who refuse to give in to the rampant economic justifications being offered for the retention of the social sciences, preferring instead to appeal to the inherent worth of

an ample provision of subjects (see Evans 2010), to those who have resorted to a more pragmatic economic rationalization as a way of strengthening the case for the relevance of the social sciences and for retaining a less elitist (read, less US-centric) university system in the UK (see Hotson 2011).

Recognizing that we have been motivated by the current climate – and what we have called the ‘new’ university – this first issue is also about situating the contemporary ‘crisis’ within longer-standing debates about purposes and functions of higher education, as well as making connections between the ways in which marketization impacts higher education and how it influences other areas of society. Given our interest in expanding this discussion, we have provided a further resources section in which the reader can find an extensive list of publications, websites, blogs, and videos on the topic for reference<sup>1</sup>. The resources are widely varied both in terms of specific focus and geographic location; what they have in common is a dedication to the university as a space for new ways of thinking about knowledge production. It also offers a photo gallery with powerful images taken by those involved in various student protests from around the world. And, as all volumes, this one contains three reviews, one of an event mentioned more extensively below, and two of books that address different but nevertheless

pedagogically oriented themes. Coincidentally, both books reviewed were written by educators interested in passing on practical (almost utilitarian) knowledge gained in their respective academic careers.

Finally, as editors of a journal whose mission is to ‘provide examples of and discussions over pluralism in methodology across the social sciences,’ we are most interested in exploring what the current restructuring of higher education priorities might mean for those of us committed to interdisciplinary research and critical intellectual exploration in the social sciences. In this sense, the sobering and sometimes sombre tone employed by the authors of this volume was perhaps to be expected: they convey a deep and common concern and dissatisfaction with the multi-faceted transformation of our university cultures from a stated (even if not always consistently practiced) commitment to critical fields of intellectual inquiry towards something that feels limiting in scope and unreflectively homogeneous, but also silencing and - at times- aggressive.

\*\*\*

This issue begins to explore the various themes outlined above by placing some of the current debates over activities within universities - their purpose, structures and future- into historical perspective. Through the concept of *institutional overstretch* **Olivia Muñoz-Oscars-**

son's provocative essay reminds us that while it may seem unique to our times, many of the tensions experienced by universities today are in fact continuities. She introduces two of the main debates discussed in all of the other pieces: mainly, how universities and their workers are pulled in a number of different directions (sometimes in detrimental fashion but with underlying possibilities for thoughtful reconfigurations and resistances) and how fostering 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge' - or what **Vostal et al.** (this volume) call 'preserving and diffusing the so-called *useless knowledge*' - is disappearing. More specifically, she speaks to the multiple and contradictory roles modern university systems have adopted over time as *overstretch* and offers a historical glance not as a way of providing any facile answers to that complex question but rather as a critical anti-myopic tool that the academic community should use to reflect upon its own responsibilities and collusions with the very systems that so many of its 'custodians' purportedly condemn.

**Adam Kaasa** and **Daniela Tanner Hernández's** contemplative essay is an apt and grounded example of how this *overstretch* unfolds in one of the most ubiquitous academic performances of our times: the speaker event. The authors' philosophical review of 'An Encounter with Judith Butler' (in April 2011) suggests that we pause to think

more carefully about the taken-for-granted qualities and assumptions of knowledge and labour embedded in event performances. Their 'call' is at once simple and profoundly demanding: they argue that the potential of events as critical spaces of productive (mis)understanding<sup>2</sup> lies in their very variable nature which, in turn, offers us a continuous range of possibilities for different forms of thoughtful engagement by, and interactions between, speakers and the audience (whether physically present or not). By resisting the traditional conventions of a review to thoughtfully explore the unquestioned logic of one of the central aspects of our academic undertakings, they highlight our ever-present (if often elapsed) ability to reconfigure the content and context of our exchanges. This possibility was powerfully enacted in a second conference reviewed in this issue (first within book review section) by **Irina Costache**. In that particular event, which also included Judith Butler as one of its keynote speakers, participants broke out of their expected roles in untamed protest to highlight the themes of precariousness, racism and homonationalism that they felt were inscribed, expressed and even reproduced by the very design of the event, rather than just discussed by its presenters as academic knowledge. There, while *undisciplined* elements took hold, frustrating the original conference goals (as an expected form of exchange),

that failure to deliver also arguably produced a different and perhaps more nuanced form of understanding of the issues under question.

**Clare Hemming's** piece, written in *the Aftermath of the Vote to Lift the Cap on HE fees in the UK* (and, it must be added- soon after her own dynamic interventions at LSE's student occupation- see <http://vimeo.com/24869178>) presents a more explicitly gendered lens through which to view the issue of *overstretch* presented earlier. She argues that there will be – and indeed already are- highly biased factors and implications entrenched in the purportedly 'neutral' logic of the market-ideal that will further ingrain systemic gendered inequalities by requiring women to bear a disproportionate brunt of the caring labour that the State is absolving itself of. This has two particularly alarming consequences: not only will there be greater unemployment and low pay, two conditions that women *already* experience in higher numbers, but the political and ideological support for equality, seen as secondary to 'the economic crisis' (rather than one of its pillars), begins to slip between the cracks.

While Hemmings grapples with the neoliberal market system in relation to women's lives and academic futures in the UK, **Rima Brusi** directs her focus to the way in which it has recently been advanced in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico through established and increas-

ingly violently-supported networks of questionable political privilege. In this case, the issue of the public university *as concept* moves centre stage, defended fervently by masses of students through strike actions of long duration and creative scope. Brusi's essay provides a kind of time-lapse narrative of how governmentality and power have combined in the penetrating operations of university governors and other armed police allies to the detriment of students, the educational system, and with ultimate consequences for the island's poor. Like other public and privatising institutions in this U.S. territory, the unsettling administrative manoeuvres witnessed within and around the purviews of its largest and most prestigious university illustrate the extent to which neoliberal regimes are prepared to travel in the name of 'austerity and order'.

Brusi's essay begins to address this volume's concern not only with exploring the effects of the contemporary crisis of the university on knowledge production within academia, but also the ways in which these challenges are being met and contested by students, faculty, and members of civil society. As the Edu-factory Collective (2009) recognizes – this time of crisis also offers possibilities. The two final essays speak critically to the duality of this phenomenon. Like Brusi in Puerto Rico, **Filip Vostal**, **Lorenzo Silvaggi** and **Rosa Vasilaki** are pre-occupied with how the UK is being

used as a laboratory of capitalisms' hegemonic tendencies; that is, how people are being subjectified and instrumentalized to the powers of capital in the economic and symbolic re-orderings of higher education. But instead of focusing on the role of violence, they identify some ways in which academic institutions are being driven by a new ideological discourse of 'grand challenges', supported in turn by a 'one-dimensional economic perspective' that makes alterations to the system appear inevitable. The authors include an important critique of how the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'community engagement' are being deployed amidst a market-driven, solution-seeking ethos to offer us instead a more humanistic and anti-positivist appraisal of how politics and knowledge should interject the current order.

This latter point echoes **Sarah Amsler's** own argument that the challenge posed by the 'deep neo-liberalist' forces of UK academia is to be able to visibilize their mechanisms without reifying them. As the student movements, protests and occupations around the country have been demonstrating, this requires that spaces of alterity and critical dissensus be carved out while current state of affairs gets highlighted. One of the most interesting suggestions to emerge from her insightful discussion (that ranges from the dismantling of the fundamental studies such as social sci-

ences within public education and the underlying threats and attacks on democracy to the range of visual techniques, resources and metaphors being used by activists) is that the new form of student resistance in the UK acts to highlight structures of power and institutional collision without necessarily believing those will do anything more than that; that rather than being goal-driven acts in the traditional political sense of the word, it is the consciously ephemeral performance itself that seeks to alter the dominant paradigms by visibilizing a new form of rationality to the system.

Here, it is important to point out that these efforts are not about 'a wistful nostalgia' (Vernon, 2010a) for a particular time or place, but about 'reimagining.' Indeed, the very concept of a 'pure' public university in the UK has been a rather fallacious one since the nineteenth century when academic institutions began forging alliances to secure funds through private industrial enterprises, post-war military 'research', and (as recently highlighted in the very publicized case of LSE's alliance with Gadaffi's son), undemocratic regimes.<sup>3</sup> The proposed reimaginings, therefore, move us away from gendered, raced and classed inequalities inherent to any romantic notion of the university, and towards the politics of possibilities: 'the awkward, messy, joyful, and risky work of thinking and acting differently in seemingly frozen states of domina-

tion' (Amsler, this issue). Here, we must not forget that within academe and beyond, these analytic and performative possibilities that 'enable citizens to understand what is being done to them, why, and by whom (Finlayson and Curzon Price, 2011: 147) are upheld intellectually by the 'orders of ... imagination, beauty, laughter and wonder' (Vernon *ibid*) encompassed by the humanities, most vulnerable under the current restructurings. Thus, the *politics* of reimagining possibilities is founded both in locating and contesting spaces under threat. Our point here is not to despair under current circumstances as if they signal a paralysis of options and action but rather, as other authors' in this volume eloquently argue, to underscore the transformative capacity made available through the threat of a crisis. In other words, that if we expand our field of vision to capture crucial opening points of inflection across what is in fact a continuum, change that is already underway becomes both evident and possible.

None of the authors collected in this volume give any easy answers or resolutions to what is taking place in relation to higher education. Instead, they present us with a range of difficult circumstances and identify pockets of opportunities for thoughtful consideration, change or action. There is an underlying call for us to move beyond the adversary model that sets up the circumstances as an 'us versus

them' boundary scenario, in order to retain a truly critical stance on new and emerging forms of deep neoliberalism. As a collective expression of affective disappointment and concern, the essays made us wonder: Is there something unique about the 'new university' and what it is turning into that presents us with missed but also open opportunities to – as Kaasa and Tanner precise – 'think anew'?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This list is certainly not exhaustive and contributions to it are welcomed at [gjss.editors@lse.ac.uk](mailto:gjss.editors@lse.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> We have used parenthesis here to allude to one of the author's ideas that there is productive potential not just in the designed space of exchange that events present us with, but also in the unintended but often common misunderstandings that take place.

<sup>3</sup> For some relevant news coverage about this story, see: <http://thebeaveronline.co.uk/2010/01/12/gaddafigives-1-5mil-to-lse/> ; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/mar/03/lse-director-resigns-gaddafi-scandal>; <http://www.opendemocracy.net/david-held/dealing-with-saif-gaddafi-naivety-complicity-or-cautious-engagement>

<sup>4</sup> This need has been rendered even clearer in the days leading up to publication, with the emerging story of a UK 'New College for the Humanities' : a university that offers access (and publicizes itself upon such an oppor-

tunity) to fields currently under threat (thereby acknowledging the problem being faced by the current environment of cuts) while, at the same time, operating as a private institution founded on a profit-making model that privileges an elitist outlook towards who that access is available to. See: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/maeve-mckeown/new-college-for-humanities-emperors-new-clothes>; <http://infinitehought.cinestatic.com/index.php/5686/>.

## References

- Beck, Ulrich. 2011. 'Cooperate or Fail! The Way out of the Euro Crisis'. *Social Europe Journal*. Available at: <http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/02/cooperate-or-fail-the-way-out-of-the-euro-crisis/>
- Dahlström, Lars. 2008. *Critical Intellectual work – an endangered tradition under neoliberal regimes*. Prepared for Meeting Global Challenges in Research Cooperation – A human rights perspective, Uppsala, Sweden, 27-29 May 2008. Available at: <http://www.teacher-solidarity.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/educational-work-in-danger.doc>
- Davies, Bronwyn. 2005. 'The (Im)possibility of Intellectual Work in Neoliberal Regimes' *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*. 26(1), pp. 1-14.
- Edu-Factory Collective. 2009. *Towards a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Evans, Mary. 2010. 'The LSE and the fanciful freedoms suggested by the word *private*', *Guardian*. 27 October 2010. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentis-free/2010/oct/27/london-school-economics-privatisation>
- 2004. *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities*. Continuum.
- Finlayson, Alan and Tony Curzon Price. 2011. 'Britain, greet the age of privatised Higher Education – an argument and a debate' in Anthony Barnett and Dan Halcox (eds), *Fight Back! A Reader on the Winter of Protest*. OpenDemocracy. Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/ourkingdom/fight-back-reader-on-winter-of-protest>
- Hotson, Howard. 2011. 'Don't Look to the Ivy League', *London Review of Books*. 33 (10), pp. 20-22.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Nelson, Cary. 1999. 'The Corporate University' in Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (Routledge). Available at: <http://www.cary-nelson.org/nelson/corpuniv.html>
- Ong, Aihwa. 2009. Global Assemblages vs. Universalism. In *Edu-Fac-*

*tory Collective. Towards a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory.* New York: Autonomedia.

*Open Democracy.* Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/james-vernon/facts-on-fees-and-fallacies-of-%E2%80%98fairness%E2%80%99%E2%80%98fairness%E2%80%99>

Ong, Aihwa and Stephen Collier (eds). 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems.* New York: Blackwell.

Read, Jason. 2009. University Experience: Neoliberalism Against the Commons. In *Edu-Factory Collective. Towards a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory.* New York: Autonomedia.

Rhoades, Robert and Carlos Alberto Torres (eds.). 2006. *The University, State and Market: The Political Economy of Globalization in the Americas.* Stanford University Press.

Slaughter, Sheila and Gary Rhoades. 2004. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education.* The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vernon, James. 2010. *The End of the Public University in England.* *GlobalHigherEd.* October 2010. Available at: <http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2010/10/26/the-end-of-the-public-university-in-england/>

2010b. Facts on fees and the fallacies of 'fairness'. December 2010.