The Neoliberalisation of Higher Education in England: An Alternatives is Possible

ABSTRACT
In this article, we provide a critical explanation and critique of neoliberal policy. We attempt an innovative focus ranging from the *wider* contemporary political and ideological shifts, to *specific* higher education influences and consequences, of neoliberalism. We do this in three parts that follows a narrative logic where we explore the bigger picture, which we then locate concentrating on specific and particular examples with a long view of class struggle. In the first part, we lay out neoliberalism and explicate its basic principles in abstraction. This is necessary for part two, where we contextualise neoliberalism specifically within the English higher education system with specific reference to the policy agenda of the Government. In the third and final part of the article we suggest an alternative higher education model that simultaneously exists and flourishes with and against the neoliberal hegemony. We conclude by suggesting the possibility of class formation and struggle in this moment of history when neoliberalism is expanding and deepening.

Keyword: Neoliberalism, Thatcher, Higher education, Marxism, ‘An alternative: “student as producer”, Social Science Centre

Introduction

In this article, we provide a critical explanation and critique of neoliberal policy. We attempt an innovative focus ranging from the *wider* contemporary political and ideological shifts, to *specific* higher education influences and consequences, of neoliberalism. We do this in three parts. First, by briefly introducing the genesis of neoliberalism, tracing its development in Chile and subsequent globalisation via Margaret Thatcher’s Prime Ministership in Britain and Ronald Reagan’s Presidency of the USA. This first part is a preamble for the second part of the article, where we go on to focus on the way in which neoliberal principles have informed the structure and practices of Higher Education (HE) in *general*, and the *particular* ways in which the British governments most recent reforms and proposals as part of the Green Paper[1] are likely to impact on public universities and academics. In the third part of the article, we discuss

an alternative to the neoliberal university in England, focusing specifically on the struggle against the neoliberalisation of the university represented by the *Student as Producer* model at the University of Lincoln and the associated Social Science Centre (SSC). Here we explain the SSC as one current and ongoing (despite many struggles) material and flourishing example of an institution that is based on the principle that the university should be a place for learning and teaching as a shared experience, not one where the concern of excellence is determined by spurious metrics. We conclude by suggesting that, while the deepening of neoliberalism constructs a consciousness of there being no alternative, the resurfacing of the argument about the role, purpose, and function of Europe; and the success of the SSC, should be impetus to continue and strengthen the explanation and critique of neoliberalism.

PART ONE:

Neoliberalism and its basic principles

The first experiment in applied neoliberal ideology began on September 11 1973 in Chile when a US-backed military coup resulted in the death of democratically elected socialist Salvador Allende and his replacement by the brutal dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Within a five year period (1970-1975), the Chilean economy shifted from a command economy (the state in control of major industries) to neoliberalism. As Jonathan Barton explains the military junta was crucial in this process, with harsh repression and the banning of trade unions making labour power very flexible with respect to wages and discipline (1999, p. 66, cited in Lawton, 2012). As such, Chile became a haven for multinationals, and wealth disparities between rich and poor increased. As Thomas G. Clark (2012) explains, after the 'success' of the Chilean neoliberal experiment, the instillation and economic support of right-wing military dictatorships to impose neoliberal economic reforms became unofficial US foreign policy. The first of the democratically elected neoliberals were Margaret Thatcher (herself a friend and proponent of Pinochet – in 1999 she thanked him for bringing "democracy to Chile" – BBC 1999[2]) in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, who both set about introducing ideologically driven neoliberal reforms, such as the complete withdrawal of capital controls by UK Tory Chancellor Geoffrey Howe and the deregulation of the US financial markets. By 1989, the ideology of neoliberalism was enshrined as the economic orthodoxy of the world as undemocratic Washington-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[3], the World Bank and the US Treasury Department signed up to a ten point economic plan. This plan epitomized neoliberal ideology, and as such included trade liberalisation, privatisation,

financial sector deregulation and tax cuts for the wealthy (Clark, 2012). As Clark concludes, "this agreement between anti-democratic organisations is misleadingly referred to as "The Washington Consensus" (Clark, 2012). The signing of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1994 gave global neoliberalism a major boost by removing any restrictions and internal government regulations in the area of service delivery that were considered "barriers to trade" (GATS, 1994). The word neoliberal itself however, did not enter the common vocabulary until November 1999 with the momentous protest against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle. As Chris Harman (2008) points out, it is not to be found in earlier works dealing with the same phenomenon, such as David Harvey The Condition of Postmodernity (Harvey, 1989), or Harman's own book Economics of the Madhouse: Capitalism and the Market Today (Harman, 1995). Martinez and García (2000) have identified five defining features of the global phenomenon of neoliberalism:

1. The Rule of The Market

the liberation of "free" or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the state no matter how much social damage this causes;
greater openness to international trade and investment;
the reduction of wages by de-unionizing workers and eliminating workers' rights;
an end to price controls;
total freedom of movement for capital, goods and services.

2. Cutting Public Expenditure

less spending on social services such as education and health care;
reducing the safety-net for the poor;
reducing expenditure on maintenance, for example, of roads, bridges and water supply.

3. Deregulation: reducing government regulation of everything that could diminish profits

less protection of the environment;
lesser concerns with job safety.

4. Privatization: selling state-owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors, for example:

banks;
key industries;
railroads;
toll highways;
electricity;

schools;
hospitals;
fresh water

5. Eliminating the Concept of 'The Public Good' or "Community"

replacing it with "individual responsibility"; pressuring the poorest people in a society to by themselves find solutions to their lack of health care, education and social security.

PART TWO:

Neoliberalism and HE in England[4]

As David Harvie (2000, p.104) (not to be confused with David Harvey referred to immediately above) points out the integration of HE into the neoliberal capitalist economy has been long recognised by socialist thinkers, both non-Marxist, such as Thorstein Veblen (1918) who referred to universities functioning as business enterprises, operating in competition with each other at the expense of scholarship; and Marxist analyses stressing schools and universities (re)creating labour power (e.g. Tronti, 1973), marketization and the rise of (neo) managerialism (Hill, Lewis, Maisuria, Yarker, and Carr, 2015) and the proletarianisation of academics (ibid.). What is significant about more recent developments is the explication by capitalists and capitalist politicians alike that the main role of universities is to contribute to the economic productivity of the country, which means being, as the Gordon Brown administration encouraged, "business-facing". This policy agenda is openly and explicitly demanding that universities develop specific capacities in the next generation of workers, such as entrepreneurialism and a competitive spirit, to reproduce neoliberal capitalist relations of production, an ideological agenda *for* and *in* education (i.e. "for" education to be a neoliberalism enterprise in its operation and outlook, including the possibility being fully privatisation, and "in" education to prepare workers for neoliberalism) that was not even dared to be interpellated during the Thatcher years – generally viewed to be the most right-wing, anti-public sector and pro-market political moment in history.

Quality Assurance

While the higher education policy agenda is becoming more explicitly neoliberal, the enmeshing of neoliberalism over the last three decades in education has become so deep,

intensive and all-encompassing that it has become almost natural (Harvey, 2007, p.24) in that the neoliberal agenda has normalized the narrative that defines HE. As such the neoliberal model of HE both sways and perverts public opinion as to the purposes, functions and aims of HE. Moreover, trying to identify where and how neoliberal policies have taken root is a difficult task. This point is made eloquently by Blacker (2013, p.6) who notes, neoliberalism "runs smoothest when it's not noticed as such; this state of being taken for granted, being 'assumed,' is where ideology exists at its purest"; but it is to the task of denaturalising neoliberalism that we now turn in this article and we initially do this by articulating the regime of Quality Assurance (QA) in HE, with the most recent policy agenda relating to what will be the historic expansion of markets into higher education. As preamble, it is necessary to say that QA has been historically the responsibility of the State, and it has been promoted by successive British Governments as protocols designed to benchmark, maintain standards, and parity across the HE sector (QAA, 2015). However, during the last three decades, QA has been gradually reconfigured so that it is left to market forces as a consequence of deregulation, and also the purpose of QA has become ambiguous by its synonymisation with "excellence". This reconfiguration can be explicated as part of a sequence of education policy proposals in Britain.

To begin a critique of QA we can look to well-known critic of neoliberalism David Graeber, who describes the necessity for neoliberalism to invent "bullshit jobs" (cited in Semley, 2014). These are what he calls occupational positions that are created "just for the sake of keeping us working" (cited in Semley, 2014). In the higher education sector these are white collar, professional managerial positions that assume ambiguous titles, such as for example quality assurance officer or student experience manager. While these "pointless jobs" do little other than create protocols to justify their own existences, as Graeber puts it, importantly they create pointless practices for academics. The labour that is required in these practices imbibe a moral virtue – *it's for the good of the students*. In other words, neoliberalism has created the conditions that QA managers and protocols are axiomatic and self-evident. These practices involve creating data to produce numerical metrics that are used as proxy for quality and high standards. For critics such as Graeber, QA is almost always reduced to metrics (cited in Semley, 2014). Blunt quantitative measures take precedent over any qualitative experiences, feelings and interactions where personalised, meaningful, rich and transformational journeys cannot be easily captured. Statistics are important as "proof" of the fact of something is worthwhile. This "proof", for the neoliberals, facilitates competition by creating the appearance of choice between varying degrees of "quality" that merely comes down to reputational advantage, which

for the newer institutions is about marketing strategies usually consisting of very expensive PR consultant firms - thus a further sign of the businessification of education. The existence of choice enables people to act as consumers and make decisions about where they want to invest their capital. The notion of investment for personal flourishment is central in the British government's consultation for radical reforms extending and accelerating neoliberalism in the UK higher education system.

Marketization

The neoliberal policy of marketization, that demands that universities act like businesses and private sector corporations, is now at the front and centre of the government's agenda and the old rhetoric of social justice has now disappeared to a larger extent. British universities, which are now part of the government department of *Business*, Innovation and Skills (our emphasis), suggests that higher education is subsumed under a broader remit beyond education for education's sake. The British government's consultation Green Paper for higher education reforms entitled *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, marked a significant official policy moment for leaving QA to market forces. At the centre of these reforms is the basic idea that if higher education institutions (HEIs) do not present themselves as delivering high standards, then they will lose customers and therefore revenue, ultimately leading to closure in the competitive market. Interestingly Conservative government under David Cameron removed the student-numbers cap, meaning that universities can now enrol as many students as they can attract. They did this to apparently allow more students entry into HE suggesting it is an act of social justice. However, the real purpose is more likely: i) the expansion of the market to have a greater number of consumers; and linked to this, ii) that individual providers of HE are pitted more directly in competition in a dog-eat-dog environment, where the losers that fail to attract ever increasing numbers of students, in the conditions of reduced government funding, will be susceptible to closure. It is worth noting that more students does not necessarily mean more funding to equally increase resources, such as numbers of teaching staff. In times of public sector funding cut-backs, the reality is a shift in the cost burden of a degree to individual students rather than the State, and tuition fees from more students simply allows HEIs to sustain their operational costs. Hence more students at a university does not mean more money spent on resources for higher quality of provision.

Quality Assurance as "Excellence"

To provide a more specific critique of QA, we now focus on specific proposals in the game-changing 2015 consultation paper. In this, there was a move to refer to quality assurance as "excellence". The semantics being important to denote the highest standards, rather than simply assurance of mediocre or just satisfactory standards. However, "excellence" is at best a problematic and ambiguous term, indeed the Government recognise this and for the first time in documentation attempted to clarify their position, they stated:

> There is no one broadly accepted definition of "teaching excellence". In practice it has many interpretations and there are likely to be different ways of measuring it. The Government does not intend to stifle innovation in the sector or restrict institutions' freedom to choose what is in the best interests of their students. But we do think there is a need to provide greater clarity about what we are looking for and how we intend to measure it in relation to the TEF. Our thinking has been informed by the following principles:
> • excellence must incorporate and reflect the diversity of the sector, disciplines and missions – not all students will achieve their best within the same model of teaching;
> • excellence is the sum of many factors – focussing on metrics gives an overview, but not the whole picture;
> • perceptions of excellence vary between students, institutions and employers;
> • excellence is not something achieved easily or without focus, time, challenge and change.
> (BIS, 2015, p.21)

There are two issues that the then government considered as being at stake i) devising a standardised measure to enable comparability ii) ensuring that this standardisation does not stifle innovation, enterprise and creativity, which are themselves important neoliberal buzzwords. The statement above attempts to provide a remit and parameters for this to happen and to clarify "excellence". However, rather than clarity, the statement seems to further mystify what excellence is and how it is can be maintained, even enhanced. The statement above argues for excellence by defining what it *is not* and how it is a diverse and varying concept. It seems that a muddled articulation was created by the attempt to define how to measure the unmeasurable. Indeed the definition sets out the difficultly of this task by providing a convincing immanent critique: "not all students will achieve their best within the same model of teaching" and excellences measures will not give "the whole picture". Many questions

regarding conceptualisation of "excellence" remain. For example, will benchmarks be framed against some internationally recognised norms or against some criteria, or both? Who and how will this criteria be established? Given that tuition fees levels and the very existence of HEIs will depend on these "excellence" measures, the situation seems critical.

The 2015 consultation paper cited above made it clear that if a HEI does not demonstrate excellence and high standards according to some standardised metrics, then it will be susceptible to "dissolve" out of existence. In what seems like a worrying development, a HEI will also be given the power to "transfer its assets" (BIS, 2015, p.67), encouraging the type of practices seen in the private sector, banking industry, and speculative commodity trading markets, where asset stripping became normal after the 2008 economic crisis. Under the heading "further deregulation" it becomes apparent that higher education is being even more transformed from a public good to a commodity that trades and where market forces determine its ability to survive based on its ability to "respond to business opportunities" (BIS, 2015, p.66). This is major historical and political moment that will see a university change radically and according to Martin Wolf writing in the Financial Times, this will be marked by a shift from being what it should be:

> A special institution: a community of teachers and scholars. Its purpose is to generate and impart understanding, from generation to generation. The university is a glory of our civilisation. It is neither a business nor a training school.

Of all this, Wolf goes on, "the discussion document shows little inkling". "Abusing a label may not matter so much" he concludes, "not recognising the role of universities does" (Wolf, 2016).

Marketization and Privatization

It is worth remembering, that the Latin term *universitas*, means fuller and wholeness to describe a process that broadens horizons, and this definition gave rise to the modern university's role, function and purpose. In the 2015 consultation Green Paper, the government overtly proposed a redefinition of what a university is. By giving "greater flexibility" and removing "statutory requirements on instrument and articles of government", private sector providers with the stated aim of profit-making were being permitted to install a stark competitive market dynamic to the higher education provision. One way in which this was proposed was through ceasing of the role of both, the Privy Council and the charity commission for universities, which are

historic intuitions designed to regulate the public sector and protect the appropriate use of tax-payers monies, for example against private greed and misuse. This move crucially makes public universities operate with self-regulation, leading to the promotion of self-interest, thus ultimately eroding their primary function as being a public service good. In such a climate, which resembles the dog-eat-dog ruthless ethos in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Hunger Games*, quality assurance and excellence is subsumed into the operation of the market, which assumes that success will enable individualised sustainability and self-flourishing. It is worth remembering that Thatcher in the 1980s similarly instated irreversible de-regulation giving unfettered freedoms to the banks called the *Big Bang* of financial regulation, which ultimately led to the spectacular crash in 2008 after years of speculative trading and casino-style gambling with large sums of capital with disastrous social consequences (Maisuria, 2015). In years to come we may be writing something similar about the education system.

The proposed reforms in 2015 were building on the momentum created by the 2011 Higher Education White Paper called *Putting Students at the Heart of Higher Education*. This policy document stated that it intended to "Enable a wider range of providers to join the sector to offer more choice for students … [and] Promise less regulation and bureaucracy for universities", this was "The … part of the wider government agenda to put more power in the hands of the consumer" (BIS, 2011). The 2011 White Paper reforms were further materialised in the 2015 Green Paper, including more freedom, competition, and marketisation. The deepening of the neoliberalisation agenda in the Green Paper is especially a cause for concern given recent evidence that has come to light suggesting that, rather than enhance universities, the 2011 reforms have created the possibility for a waste of tax-payers money and poor quality provision. The 2011 White Paper crucially allowed private colleges to use public funds to recruit students, thereby competing with established universities. The London School of Science and Technology (LSST) is one of these colleges run by the entrepreneurial Zaidi family, which benefitted by the tune of £6.5m in public money, initially recruiting around 1,500 students with reduced tuition fees by May 2014 (Malik, McGettigan and Domokos, 2014). According to its website, it has recruited a total of 20,000 students since inception in 2003. The website advertises its "quality of teaching", stating that:

> Our course teams contain both academics and practicing professionals. … unlike many other institutions, our tutors maintain high levels of class contact and offer support to

> help ensure you are learning throughout your time at LSST. … we have an intimate and friendly atmosphere and our staff are able to get to know our students personally.
>
> The LSST has expanded with campuses in London, Luton and Birmingham and their degrees are accredited by University of West London, who they claim is “one of the best universities in the UK”, a clear statement of quality. With the 2015 consultation paper, the LSST would be able to expand further and also award its own degrees, for which it would control its own quality and standards (LSST, 2016).

However, in early 2014 it became apparent that the college was engaging in unscrupulous practices using public funds. Academics, including leading critic Andrew Mcgettigan, found that the college was recruiting poorly qualified students, who would then get government funding of up to 11k per annum, and the college would charge them fees 6k (Malik, McGettigan and Domokos, 2014). The college, dubbed as “The ATM” and “Cashpoint College”, seemingly did not always require students to attend classes. Malik, McGettigan and Domokos (2014) report one student who said "If you want to take the [student loan] money and not come in, they [the college] are getting paid, so they don't give a fuck". These revelations prompted a wider official enquiry of private colleges by the National Audit Office who subsequently stated:

> EU students at some alternative providers have claimed or attempted to claim student support they were not entitled to. Between September 2013 and May 2014, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) and the Student Loans Company (SLC) investigated whether 11,191 EU students applying for maintenance support met residency requirements. 5,548 applicants (50%) were either unable or chose not to provide evidence that they were eligible for the support; of these, 83% were applying to just 16 alternative providers. The SLC established that, as at the end of October 2014, 992 ineligible students had already received £5.4 million of support before payments were suspended. (National Audit Office, 2014, p.5).

Despite the £5.4 million of public funds wasted, the government seeks to further relax regulation for private sector colleges to further entrench competition among HEI’s, which will supposedly increase quality of teaching. The laissez faire approach to regulation of who can

successfully apply for student loans will also mean that scandals such as the SLC will be made further possible. Wolf (2016) makes this point strongly:

> The government will fund the fees, regardless [of the level of qualification of the applicant]. If students fail, taxpayers bear the losses. Particularly in the absence of tough minimum standards for entrants to courses or any limit on numbers, such providers would have a powerful incentive to maximise numbers of students, regardless of the outcomes for them.

The Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey

Furthermore, as part of the 2015 consultation, the government were proposing to allow all HEIs to charge higher fees. The surpassing of the current limit of £9k fees would be contingent on demonstration of metrics of excellence, which will be benchmarked as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

One of the three ways that excellence as part of the TEF would be evidenced is student evaluation questionnaires, particularly the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS is (voluntarily) undertaken by all final undergraduates in public universities and the results are then published by UniStats where courses can be compared using Key Information Set (KIS) data such as, employment prospects after the course and satisfaction (see https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/). On the face of it, while it may seem plausible and reasonable to make the connection between teaching quality and standards with tuition fee price, there are several extremely problematic consequences attached to such a move. One consequence could be grade-inflation. The experience of the National Student Survey (NSS) for many academics is that 'awarding' students with 2:1 or first class grades[5] reaps more positive responses on evaluations of student satisfaction and quality. Equally, academics will anecdotally reveal that students who may have had a deeply enriching, interesting and insightful learning will be less likely to be satisfied and more disgruntled (perhaps even considering litigation, see below) if they do not get a 2:1 or a first. As well as the learning *experience* being reduced to *outcomes*, i.e. whether or not a first or 2:1 is the award, evaluations are sometimes more indicative the academic's personality and/or character, than excellence of teaching and learning. Academics who are approachable and flexible (sometimes meaning open to reading several drafts of work and extend deadlines) even entertaining and funny (perhaps rather than insightful, serious and

well-read) are more likely to satisfy students and who would score more higher in judgements of excellence. The point here is that student evaluations, such as the NSS, are at best spurious measures of excellence but seriously concerning given the high stakes introduced to the HE policy agenda in the 2015 Green Paper.

The consumerist attitude in students created, especially in the 2011 the Higher Education White Paper called *Putting Students at the Heart of Higher Education* (discussed earlier) and initiated during the Blair years (see Hill, Greaves, and Maisuria, 2009; Maisuria, 2010, 2014, 2015), has created a classroom ethos that a degree award is the result of an exchange of money not ideas, and anything less than a 2:1 grade or first is "not value for money" – a phrase that appears 26 times in the 2015 Green Paper, and a poor "investment" (16 appearances) rendering it in essence a commodity with poor interest. Students in English universities are no longer reading for a degree, they are buying a degree and this is enshrined to the point of being law. Students in English universities are (financially) protected by the *Competition and Markets Authority* (CMA), which lays out consumer rights in relation to their purchase of a degree, rendering a university learning experience and qualification no different to choosing a supermarket to a buy a product. With these consumer rights comes the possibility for students to file litigation charges against universities (it is unclear how individual lecturers are implicated in such cases). With the policy agenda increasingly commodifying the university learning experience and qualification, universities are becoming concerned with consumer law, that they are training academics on their legal duty as part of the consumer contract. The policy agenda is radically deepening the neoliberalisation of the once public university, and the nature of the learning and teaching experience.

For the second TEF metric introduced in 2015, excellence will be measured on *retention* of students and *continuation* rates (this is assumed to mean the number of students that pass their modules/year/course of study and ultimately complete their programme at the first attempt). Here again, there will be pressure on academics this time to *pass* students rather than award deserving fails. Widening participation universities will be implicated the most. These universities attract non-traditional students who are almost always from working class backgrounds who will not necessarily start university with the academic skills-set needed to progress at the first attempt, plus these students may often have additional personal and private

challenges to deal with that affect their academic performance, for example withstanding with the consequences of austerity (food poverty, homelessness) which may mean that they have to leave university to simply stabilise their life. The point is that the stakes are high for academics who will be pressurised to: i) award higher than deserved grades to more academically able students and, ii) pass academically weaker students; to maximise the potential for a good score on student evaluations of excellence. In this scenario 2:2 classifications will be risky for the academics to award.

In the same way that we have argued that the NSS*,* and *retention* of students and *continuation* are highly problematic indicators of excellence, the Universities and Colleges Union, that protects the professionalism of academics, claims that "manipulation of statistics may be the name of the game, rather than bolstering the student experience" (UCU, 2015). UCU have been involved in industrial action that seeks to put pressure on government to protect and raise funding, which they link to quality and excellence: "We believe properly funding our institutions is what drives quality – not raising tuition fees and pitting providers against each other". Union members will be further concerned by another metric to be used in the demonstration of excellence and subsequent like to raising of the fee – graduate destination.

The third proposed metric that contribute to a TEF is what graduates go on to do after leaving university (graduate *employment* and *destination*). Once again the issue of grade-inflation arises, whereby a graduate with a 2:1 or first is much more likely to get a 'good' job. Like the NSS metric, again, academics will be pressurised to award 2:1 and first class degrees to improve their university's capacity to charge a higher fee and be more marketable to recruit a larger number of students. The TEF will induce grade inflation, which in turn will likely to consequentially test the professional integrity of academics in conditions of employment that bare non-academic and externally derived pressures. The major issue with using employment and destination as indicators of excellence and its high stakes, is that there are multiplicity of factors at play after the student leaves university, and the university has little influence on these factors. For example, the university has little/no influence on the jobs that are available, what processes are part of the application and interview process, and which jobs the individual will apply for, yet these are factors to be used to measure excellence.

The Government at the time claimed that the three metrics critiqued above (NSS, retention and continuation, and graduate destination) have been developed "[a]fter informal discussions with the sector" (BIS, 2015, p.33) though it was never made clear who had been involved in these discussions. It is very concerning that the 2015 Green Paper went on to state that:

> As TEF develops we will incorporate new common metrics on engagement with study (including teaching intensity) and learning gain, once they are sufficiently robust and available on a comparable basis. We are also conscious that there are other possible proxies of teaching excellence. Metrics proposed by the sector and others so far include:
>
> • Student commitment to learning – including appropriate pedagogical approaches
>
> • Training and employment of staff – measures might include proportion of staff on permanent contracts
>
> • Teaching intensity – measures might include time spent studying, as measured in the UK Engagement Surveys, proportion of total staff time spent on teaching

The concern is that the 2015 Conservative government seemed intent to not even to entertain the idea that i) metrics could be problematic and damaging the purpose of universities ii) metrics like the ones proposed in the TEF may be spurious measures of excellence, which is in itself is a highly ambiguous term (as argued above). There is no space allowed to even evaluate the impact of the metrics proposals in *2015* Green Paper before going on to introduce "new" ones based on the presupposition that of the effectiveness and appropriateness of metrics and concept of excellence. Extrapolating from the critique that we have provided in this part of the article, a foresight we have is that TEF metrics, or something like it, will be included as part of the performance reviews of individual academics. It seems inevitable that questions about how individual academics contribute to NSS, retention/continuation, and employment/destination will become more explicitly a judgement of the performance of individuals, this will be despite institutional/sectoral/structural limitations, such as resources. The final blow that will mark a significant moment for the neoliberalisation of the university will be when the TEF-type benchmarks are linked to the pay of academics. Performance related pay is already part of teaching contracts in schools and colleges, and if this becomes the case in HE then grade inflation will become an inevitability. The proposals in the 2015 consultation paper present a worrying trend, historically and also geographically, but there have been moves to counter the neoliberalisation agenda.

PART THREE:

Envisaging an Alternative to Neoliberalising Higher Education: The Student as Producer

In other writing we have both looked at systems and models of progressive Higher Education in other countries: Cole in Venezuela (e.g. McLaren and Cole, 2015); and Maisuria in Sweden (Maisuria, 2016) and Cuba (Maisuria, 2017). In this section of the article, we now report a descriptive analysis of an alternative model and approach to higher education in Britain, which is in stark contrast to and actively and openly subversive of the neoliberal model and the agenda in successive education policy papers since Thatcher as discussed in the sections above.

The 'Student as Producer' model of HE at the University of Lincoln was adopted by the University in 2010, and written up as a core component of the University's Teaching and Learning Plan 2011-2016. As one of the founders of the project, Professor Mike Neary, writing with Lecturer and PhD student in alternative education Gary Saunders put it, "Student as Producer" is an act of resistance to the current policy framework being imposed on universities in England and around the world; and, as such, is a critical response to attempts by national governments to create and consolidate a consumerist culture and impose high levels of debt among undergraduate students' (Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 2). "Student as Producer", they go on, "emerged from this double crisis: a socio-economic crisis and an associated crisis over the meaning and purpose of higher education", and "identifies strongly with the academic and student movement of protests against fees and cuts to funding in higher education and other social and welfare services" (ibid. p. 2).

Countering the increasingly dominant hegemony of the neoliberal modelling of the university, 'Student as Producer', taking its title from Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer*, in which he argues that not only should intellectual authors produce revolutionary publications, they should also seek to transform the social relations of production for a communist society[6], 'is framed around the practices and principles of critical pedagogy, popular education and Marxist theory'. With respect to Marxist theory, in addition to the inspiration deriving from Benjamin, Neary and Saunders (2016, p. 2) refer to Thomas Mathiesen's notion of the 'politics of abolition' and his underpinning concept of 'the unfinished' (Mathiesen, 1974, cite in Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 3). This negative attitude understands capitalist repression as related to

the domination of the labour theory of value (it is the labour of the worker that creates value, and surplus value is appropriated from workers by capitalists in the act of production: hence capitalism is inherently exploitative), and its institutional forms of regulation: money and the State (Clarke, 1991; Postone, 1993, cited in Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 3). In this way, 'revolutionary knowledge is understood as something that is constituted through class-struggle, co-operation and radical practice, where the crisis of the capitalist university becomes a field of radical research to be reconstituted as a form of subversive 'living knowledge' (Roggero, 2011, p. 8, cited in Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 3).

Neary and Saunders do not offer explanations of what they mean by either "critical pedagogy" or "popular education". Our understanding of the former has been recently articulated by Peter McLaren, arguably its leading exponent. For McLaren (2015, p. 27), critical pedagogy:

> locates the production of critical knowledges leading to praxis in its social, spatial and geopolitical contexts, and reveals the workings of the production process and how it operates intertextually alongside and upon other discourses, but it does so with a particular political project in mind – an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-sexist and pro-democratic and emancipatory struggle.

To McLaren's project, we would add discrimination related to the other equality issues of age, disability, religion and belief, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, sexual orientation and gender reassignment. As McLaren (2015, pp. 27-28) goes on, critical pedagogy works against what Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis (2000) call the "coloniality of power". Hence 'a critical pedagogy serves to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar'. Finally 'it attempts to bring out the pedagogical dimensions of the political and political dimensions of the pedagogical and to convert these activities to a larger, more sustained and focused project of building alternative and oppositional forms of sustainable environments, of learning environments, of revolutionary political environments.'

Important to critical pedagogy is develop "popular education". With respect to "popular education", we believe that in order to move forward, it is necessary to look to the past, and we would argue that the essence of popular education is exemplified in Richard Johnson's (1979) analysis of four of its aspects enacted in the UK in the period, 1790-1848, a time when at least sections of the working class were engaged in radical educational pursuits. For the radicals of

the time, the primary purpose of knowledge was its "use value" to the working class to build class organisation for resistance, rather than exploited labour for surplus value for the ruling class. The four aspects: *a critique of the existing system*; *alternative educational goals*; *education to change the world*; and *education for all* seem broadly aligned to what we understand is the purpose and practice in the "Student as Producer" model at Lincoln University.

Eighteenth/nineteenth century radicals first conducted a running critique of all forms of "provided" education, which included the whole gamut of schools from clerically dominated Anglican Sunday schools to State-aided (usually Anglican) day schools (Johnson, 1979, p. 76). Second, they were involved in the development of alternative educational goals, entailing notions of how "educational utopias" could actually be achieved and a definition of 'really useful knowledge', incorporating a radical content – a sense of what it was really important to know for class formation to build class struggle. This included "a theory of economic exploitation, a theory of the class character of the state, and a theory of social and cultural domination" (Johnson, 1979, p. 88). Third radicalism incorporated and important internal debate about education as a political strategy as a means of changing the world. Finally, radical movements developed a vigorous and varied educational practice, which was concerned with informing comprehensive understandings of the education of all citizens as members of a more just social order (Johnson, 1979, pp. 76-77).

"Student as Producer" is based on Marx's early writings promoting conditions where students can recognise themselves in a world of their own design (Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 11). However, as Neary and Saunders (2016, pp. 3-4) stress, despite the recognition of "Student as Producer" by the University of Lincoln, that university remains a neoliberal institution, "existing within an increasingly marketised system, committed to the way academic values are being defined with the current higher education context." This is in the context of the intensification of neoliberalism, which, as we shall shortly see, led to a group of academics at Lincoln taking the radical principles that underpin Student as Producer outside the university to establish an autonomous critical pedagogical project, the Social Science Centre (SSC), which is part of a broader "popular education" movement.

"Student as Producer" is existing both *in* and *against* the university, and also *in* and *against* the neoliberal State, and one major way in which it differs from the popular education outlined by

Johnson is its refusal to privilege the working class as *the only* revolutionary agents of change within capitalist social relations (Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 7; see also Postone, 1993; Holloway, 2002; Larsen et al, 2014). As they put it, "forms of revolutionary subjectivity are derived from antagonisms to capitalist work and non-work inside and outside of the capitalist factory and other forms of repressive institutional life, including the university" (Neary and Saunders, 2016, p.8). Therefore revolutionaries consist not only of industrial workers at work, but also domestic workers, the unemployed, migrants and others who are struggling against exploitation and alienation in capitalism. Importantly this includes students and academics inside the edu-factory, who are being forced to commodify learning and build the university in the mould of an exchangeable commodity (Edu-factory Collective, 2009, cited in Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 8), all of which we argue above is part of the political agenda. The potentially revolutionary working class include a wider range of workers. The working class is defined as a large proportion of people who need to work and produce value in the neoliberal mode of production, if they did not work they would struggle to survive, live, and have little possibility to flourish. Therefore, even highly paid workers, perhaps in professional positions such as academics, *are still* workers, albeit with a greater share of expendable income than traditional blue-collar and service sector workers. This definition of the working class also includes those who are out of, or in flexible, employment – they need to work, and when they do not, they serve the function of a reserve army of labour. The reserve army of labour are those people who are surviving precariously, and used by the neoliberals, implicitly and explicitly, to threaten all those in those work to acquiesce to their demands (usually more for less) or be replaced.

Working class consciousness and class struggle ought to be part of an educative experience, and Student as Producer can be seen as "an act of collaboration between students and academics in the making of *practical-critical* knowledge" (Neary and Saunders, 2016, p. 9). It could be described as a form of ongoing participatory action research with a militant tendency, which started in 2007 when marginalised and disenfranchised academic workers, students and staff were contacted to celebrate radical pedagogical practices (ibid. p. 9). However by 2011, Neary and Saunders (2016, p. 14) felt that the processes set to maintain the dissensual incorporation of "Student as Producer" "appeared to have turned into just another bureaucratic management procedure", and faced with what appeared to be defeat, in that year a group of Lincoln University staff set-up the Social Science Centre, Lincoln (ibid. p. 15), which has no formal relationship with the university.

In its own words, and drawing basic socialist principles, the "Social Science Centre 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. Staff and students at the centre study themes that draw on the core subjects in social science: sociology, politics and philosophy, as well as psychology, economics, journalism and photography. The Centre organises study and research at all levels including undergraduate, Masters and Doctorates in Philosophy".

The co-operative principles that guide the organisation of the SSC also extend to the ways in which they design and run their courses. All classes are participative and collaborative in order to ground inquiry in the experiences and knowledges of the participants. Student-scholars and teacher-scholars have opportunities to design courses together, and those new to teaching and independent learning are offered generous support from others. All members are able to work with academics and other experienced researchers on research projects, and to publish their own writings through the SSC. One key guiding principle of the Centre is that 'teachers' and 'students' have much to learn from each other (The Social Science Centre, Lincoln, 2016)".

Whereas the Government's agenda is aggressively dismantling the public university that once had a common good ethos, into a privatised investment for personal self-interest as discussed earlier, the SSC is an antidote to neoliberalisation. The SSC is working *within* a neoliberal dominant hegemony, this in respect to both i) existing legally within a neoliberal government and opposed the very nature of what they stand for and impose ii) existing alongside the neoliberal University of Lincoln, with which there are informal relationships. But in addition to working and existing and thriving *within* neoliberalism, crucially it is *against* that neoliberalism system and demonstrates the possibility and actuality of an alternative being feasible.

Conclusion

In this article, we began by outlining a brief history and defining characteristics of neoliberalism. We went on to look at neoliberalism and HE in England, focusing on an

extensive critique of the specific proposals set-out in the British Government's consultation Green Paper for HE, *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.* We argued that this paper represents a general deepening and extending of neoliberalism in British universities with significant consequences for the university as a public service for the common good. We concluded with a discussion of an actually existing alternative model of HE, practicing some Marxist and democratic socialist principles which openly challenges neoliberalism while working within it.

Anti-neoliberal centre-Left journalist, Will Hutton (2006, p. 40) has argued that, despite its significant financial resource, the Right (both in the UK and the elsewhere) is in deepening crisis. In the UK, he evidences a refusal to let the steel industry further disappear to "market forces" (so transparently rigged) a lack of belief that trusts in off-shore tax havens can be "private matters" and a lack of willingness to connive in lowering the living standards of the disabled to drive up those of the upper middle class. If Hutton is right that "the 30-year rise of the Right is over", then could it be that alternatives like "Student as Producer" may not be just feasible possibilities but actually proliferating in reality and begin to mount a serious challenge to the neoliberal university, and more generally, along with progressive forces, both, within and outside a Left-led Labour Party. Could we be at a moment in history where a class formation coalesces and builds the impetus to struggle against neoliberalism itself?

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Notes

[1]A Green Paper is *consultation* document produced by the Government with the aim of getting feedback to finalise future policy that is subsequently released as a White Paper.

[2] Thatcher's meeting with Pinochet in 1999 was broadcast live and was watched by one of us (Cole). A particularly chilling moment was when the former announced that she was now going to have a private meeting with the general. Goodness knows what was discussed behind closed doors.

[3] The highest decision-making body of the IMF, the Board of Governors, consists of one governor and one alternate governor for each member country. The governor is appointed by the member country and is usually the minister of finance or the head of the central bank.

[4] We specify England because the nations of the United Kingdom have devolved political powers to legislate, including education policy.

[5] In the British State system, undergraduate degrees are classified as either: first class, upper second (2:1), lower second (2:2), third or fail. A first and 2:1 is the normal prerequisite for a degree level job.

[6] Benjamin (((1934)) [1970], p. 5) gives photography as an analogy to clarify what he means by 'the author as producer'. *The World is Beautiful*, published in 1928, he points out, is the title of a famous book of photographs by Renger-Patsch, which typified 'new objectivity' of the time, the purpose of which was 'to bring to the masses elements which they could not previously enjoy—spring, movie stars, foreign countries—by reworking them according to the current fashion'. It is 'the political function of photography', he goes on, 'to renew the world as it actually is from within, in other words, according to the current fashion'. 'Here we have a drastic example', Benjamin concludes, 'of what it means to pass on an apparatus of production without transforming it'. 'What we should demand from photography', he argues, 'is the capacity of giving a print a caption which would tear it away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use value', since 'the only way to make this production politically useful is to master the competencies in the process of intellectual production which, according to the bourgeois notion, constitutes their hierarchy; and more exactly, the barriers which were erected to separate the skills of both productive forces must be simultaneously broken down'. When the author experiences 'solidarity with the proletariat, the author as producer also experiences directly a solidarity with certain other producers' in whom the author earlier was not much interest.

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