

7 April 2016

Radical Education Inside and Outside Universities
Notes from BSA- Activism in Sociology Fringe Meeting

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It is seemingly impossible to be an intellectual worker in the neoliberal capitalist university and most other working spaces today. Many of us have experienced frustrations with the many moments of resistance in education. These range from the need to find credible and realistic strategies that allow us to resist the neoliberal university in here and now, but also the need to create a space to think and practice more freely how we may move beyond it. Furthermore, from the fact that we do not just want to restate our respective dissatisfactions to each other all the time emerges a need to work in alliances or in an orchestrated fashion. At the same time, this appears to be frustrated by a need to build capacities in our own separate ways – as well as recognising that genuine disagreements are necessary for strengthening social movements.

With this in mind, the BSA [Activism in Sociology Forum](#) has successfully held its second fringe event which engaged with local communities and activists in the evening of Thursday 7th April, at the same time the annual British Sociological Association conference 2016 was held at Aston University in Birmingham. The [free-to-attend event](#) was co-hosted by [Birmingham Radical Education](#) and Birmingham Autonomous University and was held at B4 Bar, at Aston University, Birmingham. Attended by a full house of activists, academics and students belonging to 13 different local organisations who were involved in various struggles, the meeting addressed the impossibility of intellectual – especially critical and political – work in universities worldwide, and British universities in particular.

As hosts, our hope was that the analyses of movements run ahead of those of concerned academics. Our desire was to attract an equal share of academic activists, people and friends involved in struggle. Therefore, the aim of the evening was to think and share our respective practices on what is to be done about education. The meeting started by two provocations followed by small group discussions formed by seven to eight participants in each group. The evening was dedicated to common and diverging ground on the issues as stated above.

Provocations

The meeting joined by 36 participants kicked off by a provocation by Joyce Canaan who offered a glimpse to an alternative. Joyce presented on the movement of landless workers in Brazil. She called for “Producing solidarity by acting in solidarity”, and asked us to learn with Brazilian education and other social movement activists. Brazilian activists engaged in a process of re-imagining/re-constructing the circumstances under which they live and from which they are moving beyond. She told us how for them being illiterate means being denied life as a subject, that it is a matter of dehumanisation. Therefore, this movement stresses the importance of dialogue, action and reflection in what is otherwise a very risky form of resistance in which entire families risk their lives. If asked about what makes them take such a risk, these activists would say that being in a movement that makes people feel like a collective subject that makes history gives them the strength to move forwards.

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Pedagogy also features at the heart of this movement. This is a realisation to which its members came when realising that 'cutting the wire' or re-appropriating land alone was not enough to enact revolutionary social change. Instead, new barriers were found, such as capital and ignorance, which had to be fought anew through education. For this movement, then, pedagogy is a revolutionary strategy of survival.

Joyce's provocation was followed by Martin Bradbury from Birmingham Autonomous University, who presented on the impoverishment of the concept of poverty and the political implications of this for our struggles. Martin recounted his time in the student movement, when through protests and occupations, networks of solidarity and mutual aid became a dialectic of theory and practice: developing new skills, points of leverage, and mutual recognition. He then showed how at the same time, in the process of making demands, anti-austerity struggles have posed too many limits on our imagination of what poverty is: faced with an economic argument rather than their needs, people are reduced to the logic of capital and prevented from going beyond limits through which they could see themselves as having an ability to develop oneself beyond capitalism. He speaks about how balancing the budget is like listening to U2 or Coldplay: always the same. Social movement activists are forced to use the language of the bourgeois establishment. Martin asks, is there more creativity and originality elsewhere in the world? For Martin, capitalism is poverty - the synthesised denial of our human potential.

Discussion and debate: Poverty of What?

Following the two provocations the forum split into five small groups, facilitated by five organisers, where participants discussed and debated on the related issues. It was agreed by the small groups that the 'model to alternative' presented by Joyce Canaan is a good model to follow. Joyce's model advocates for dialogical and collective struggle, and using pedagogy for overcoming oppression, poverty and illiteracy. The groups agreed that we should think about how the landless people's praxis includes reflection on the process of continuing to overcome oppression, exclusion and the fatalism that those producing these factors seek to nurture and on the efficacy of their efforts to create solidarity. Almost all small group participants agreed with Joyce that "If it is impossible to be an intellectual worker in the university today, perhaps those of us who are education activists here should think and do education activism with strategies developed by education and other activists elsewhere".ⁱⁱ

The importance of having a mass movement using an activist pedagogy was discussed with emphasis by one of the small groups, facilitated by Spyros Themelis. The question is why don't we have big grassroots/organic movements? It was agreed that the barriers to the movements need to be explored. The alienating language of academia (e.g. Bob Jessop) is one such barrier. In terms of economic poverty and austerity, one point was that the massification of HE has led to a drop in unemployment figures. Another question is why the student activists take distance from academia: are they not part of it? Participants said that they were sold this idea that with the degree is part of basic education, like secondary education was in the post-WWII time. The group members then reflected on the word "poverty" that Martin Bradbury used in his provocation. Question is poverty of what? Apart from material poverty, is there a poverty in believing in alternatives?

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What can be done to the state of the Left in Britain?

A group led by Tom Vickers had a wide ranging discussion about the state of the Left in Britain today and what can be done. We face a situation of escalating racism, war and poverty for large sections of the population, yet a very low level of resistance. Particular points that were made during this discussion include:

- There are serious limitations on what we can achieve within the neoliberal university, and our organising and educational activities need to go beyond it
- People need information and understanding in order to fight back and so education can help to enable activism
- The Prevent programme represents both an attack on Muslim students and a wider threat to anybody in university who questions ruling ideas – this could be an important area for united resistance and action is already being taken by the NUT and NUS
- Language is important for organising and for considering different ways of thinking.
- We need to build networks for mutual support – both political and material
- Reading groups can play a useful role, and is something we can do now, in a period where there is little activity and we have very little resources – this can help prepare the ground for larger scale resistance in the future
- There is a problem of endemic sexism in the left, or to look at it another way a neglect of the interests of working class women – but members of the group were critical of those who refuse any contact with left organisations on these grounds.

Is there a way to gain academic freedom?

One small group discussion, facilitated by Elio and Rumana, had members from Academics for Peace in Turkey and secularists from Bangladesh who were put on death lists. The group discussed with them how to address the topic of academic freedom. These academics simply called for the Government to return to its policy commitment towards the peace process, and were deemed to be terrorists for it from the highest authorities. Furthermore, their names were found because published by fascist news platforms. In the face of this tragedy and the general difficulty of doing politics and having freedom of expression, we discussed the uses and misuses of social media vis-a-vis radical education. Some felt that there was a generational gap in the way in which ICTs are utilised, and it was felt that education could do something to address this.

However, it was also once again noted that education is not a mere appendage that can be attached to the movement. Rather, the creation of a commons of knowledge on our own terms, much like social media platforms, but also safer, are a matter of necessity for the reproduction of current social movements that strive for human dignity. It was then discussed how ICTs have proved instrumental in the capacity to develop more or less deep-rooted links of international solidarity, but also how safety from increasing surveillance has become a prerogative in this regard.

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Towards A Cooperative University: A possible solution?

Finally, the small groups had come together to form a large group for reflection on the issues that were discussed in the small groups. We intermittently fed back from each small group discussion. A debate was had on the strengths and weaknesses of social media. Our experiences of using these platforms from resistance have taught us how different people are wanted in different ways for different things by contemporary surveillance regimes. Another topic of discussion was alternative institutional forms for education. The co-operative university was mentioned, and it was highlighted how the fact that universities have dominated the post-16 education landscape for some time means that a cooperative university would have a long way to go to become comprehensive. Unfortunately, we do not have any further notes on this discussion.

The session ran over time as participants were passionate to find answers to important questions raised in the meeting. At the end of the dialogical and interactive discussion, participants have left the meeting room with an urge to continue this dialogue. The convenors of BSA-Activism in Sociology Forum made a commitment that the Forum will hold a follow up meeting either in the same format or a modified and formal form with a wider group of activists and academics in future at a location that is commonly accessible. We remain committed to organise further event on these and more contemporary issues to discuss and to work with community activists and students in near future.

ⁱ This report compiles notes from several of us including BSA-ASF convenors and the facilitators of small groups; however, we were unable to collect notes from all participants. There were many more threads and interconnected issues that were addressed by participants in the meeting which could have been added to this report. We are, therefore, interested in hearing from colleagues and participants who may have better notes which can be used to facilitate future discussion on the issues.

ⁱⁱ The clauses within inverted commas are exact words of participants, in this case Joyce Canaan, who made the points at the first place.