

## **The University in the City: The Campus as a Space of Dependence and Engagement in the Age of Austerity**

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“... [A] schoolmaster is a productive labourer, when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.” - Karl Marx 1867

### **Introduction**

As critiques of the corporate university abound, Marx’s equation of schools with sausage factories has never seemed more apt (Bousquet 2008; Nelson 1997; Newfield 2004, 2011; Washburn 2006; Fabricant and Brier 2016). Corporate methods of managing academic labor and measuring institutional “through-put” – whether in the form of publications, patents, corporate partnerships, or student-commodities themselves – are by now commonplace. Observing these trends well before the current round of intense, global higher-education restructuring sparked by the 2008 economic crisis, the geographer Neil Smith (2000) asked his readers to think seriously about “who rules the sausage factory” – and who should. The privatization of education at every level, Smith observed, was turning many a teacher and professor into exactly the kind of “productive laborer,” Marx warned about. But this need not be the case: there was, he argued, a fight to be had and we had better fight it. Of course, many of us *have* been fighting – and often

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alongside politicized students well aware of their status as branded “sausages.” And yet privatization and corporatization continue apace.

Indeed, the conditions under which academics work as “productive labor” has grown increasingly alarming, especially as university administrators claim their institutions must face up to the new realities of “austerity.”<sup>4</sup> Faculty members and their departments must, as administrators invariably put it, learn to do more with less. Simultaneously, ever-more instrumentalized forms of knowledge production assume pride of place in the imaginations of trustees and chancellors alike, as branding becomes central to university missions, and as franchising (especially in China and the Middle East) seems a logical way to “compete” in what is imagined to be a global higher education marketplace.<sup>5</sup> Given all this, for those of us who work in them, or who study in them, universities can feel an awful lot like a sausage factory – or, perhaps, even the supermarkets that sell the sausages (elite Whole Foods, plebian Walmart, and the whole range in between).

Yet for even the most cynical observers, the university is more than a sausage factory. Not only are universities places that can facilitate real learning, they are also institutions positioned, even now, to promote the public good, to expose social injustice and even promote social struggle, to train civically-minded citizens, and to produce knowledge aimed at advancing public wellbeing. The campus can provide a *space* for experimentation and activism, and *from which* the world can be engaged. For many faculty and students, it is precisely for these reasons that universities remain – despite their increasing corporatization – essential tools in constructing a more just society. If that’s the case, then

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<sup>4</sup> Which somehow never slows the construction of new gyms, stadiums, luxurious dining halls, on-campus multiplexes, and – in icy climates – heated sidewalks.

<sup>5</sup> The necessity of competition for high-fee-paying out-of-state and foreign students is a logical result of the decades-old assault by legislators on public university budgets. For private universities, as tuition skyrockets (to pay for the heated sidewalks) and as another kind of competition – for a “diverse” student body – intensifies and thus requires significant subsidies for some students, increasing foreign student numbers is likewise a necessity.

it is worth examining just what kind of a “space for engagement” the neoliberal university campus is, and perhaps can be.

## I

Some years ago, political geographer Kevin Cox (1998) sought to distinguish between what he called “spaces of dependence” and “spaces of engagement.” He argued that certain spaces – a city neighborhood, for example – were spaces of dependence in the sense that they provided a localized congeries of social relation upon which we come “to depend for the realization of essential interests” and which “define place specific conditions for our sense of well-being.” It is easy to see how, in their development as a specifically modern institution in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, universities became spaces of dependence, performing a set of functions (in Cox’s words) “for which there is no substitute elsewhere” (1998: 2). They developed preeminently as “nation-building” institutions, charged with developing, instilling, and reproducing a national culture (including national predominance in the sciences); many (especially public colleges and universities) were charged with developing the practical knowledge – cocooned within the liberal arts – for supporting the burgeoning agricultural and industrial economy; and they were charged with cultivating the managerial and professional classes suitable for running that economy (Reading 1996). They had an essential role to play in supporting both localized and national-scale capital accumulation, but were not usually themselves directly sites of it. The economy, as well as the polity, depended on the university, in just this sense.

At the same time, they were also spaces of dependence in that they were community centers. In small towns and cities alike, they were places for music, art, public lectures, adult learning, and, of course, sports. Not infrequently they were where community life was centered. Even at private universities, campuses were often considered community, public spaces. As large (sometimes the largest) employers, they were places upon which local economies often depended. And both directly

and indirectly they were supported by public funding precisely because they were depended on for all these functions.

As early as World War II, however, some of these aspects of the university's *raison d'être* began to erode. In the West (if not so much in newly-independent countries) "nation-building" lost some of its political urgency (especially as the pace of globalization quickened after the 1970s economic crises), undermining a key rationale for the liberal arts. The democratization of the university delivered another blow as students (and eventually faculty) questioned all manner of canonical learning and its relevance to newly diverse student bodies. Simultaneously, the sort of practical training that "land-grant" universities in the U.S. and their global equivalents (like Britain's polytechnics) had excelled at (agricultural specialists, mechanical engineers, etc.) began to seem outmoded.<sup>6</sup> Universities were facing a crisis of legitimacy.

They also faced an economic crisis. As the social-democratic compromises of the postwar era have been blown apart, mindless "austerity," has emerged to fill the void. Indeed, "austerity" is perhaps all that is left of a neoliberalism that – bereft of any remaining justification – is what Neil Smith once described as "dominant but dead" (Smith 2008: 155).<sup>7</sup> In this context, universities have realized they are a quite different kind of space of dependence. If communities are dependent on them, they are themselves decreasingly dependent on skeptical legislators, and increasingly dependent on students able to pony up large tuition payments, as well as on the good will of corporate and individual donors. The embrace of corporatization, privatization, the globalization of the higher education "market," and the instrumentalization of knowledge by administrators, politicians, bureaucrats, and not a few faculty members,

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<sup>6</sup> In the U.S. the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act authorized the selling of federal land to finance state universities and colleges; "land-grant" universities were mandated to support agricultural development in their states.

<sup>7</sup> At the dawn of the 2008 economic crisis, Neil Smith (2008) was already arguing that neoliberalism was "dominant but dead." The ensuing years have proved him correct. Neoliberalism is now bereft of its guiding ideology; all it can now muster is a weak faith in "austerity" (in public budgets), without even by now even trying to justify that faith.

is thus symptomatic of the university's lost legitimacy, its unclear role in restructured capitalist economies, and the rapid shift from state-funding to tuition- and donation-based budgets. In this landscape, becoming a site for capital accumulation (not just a site for the support of it) has – in the eyes of many – not only lent the university a new legitimacy but has opened up potential new revenue streams.<sup>8</sup>

The much-hyped MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and new, perhaps innovative partnerships, like that between Starbucks and Arizona State University, are evidence of the shifting sands of dependence that mark the university and its place in wider society (Adams 2014).<sup>9</sup> So too is the increasing competition for research dollars that faces every research-oriented campus, the rise of a star-system for faculty (and its adjunct, the sinking of adjuncts into penury), the pandering for corporate contracts and willingness to undertake proprietary research, and the ever-expanding, ever-more global search for fee-paying students. In many instances, increasing competition among and within universities has been precisely the goal for policymakers and trustees, perhaps most clearly exemplified in the UK by the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (now the Research Excellence Framework 2014) and the transfer of higher education oversight and funding to the Department of Business Innovation and Skills.

Such shifts in the conditions of dependence are quite evident on university campuses themselves. As universities devote more money and

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<sup>8</sup> Many universities are, for example, creating their own in-house venture funds to “incentivize” directly commercially-applicable research that they can benefit from. They are also encouraging, and being encouraged, to allow corporations to locate on campus for significant tax breaks as long as they hire a few interns and plow a bit of their profit back into the universities’ budgets. For one example see: Don Mitchell (2011) “The Entrepreneurial University and Its Discontents: Or, Why the University is No Longer a Public Space (If It Ever Was)”

<sup>9</sup> If MOOCs are the “disrupters” their cheerleaders claim they are, then one thing they will disrupt will be the *cultural* function of the university *as a campus* – as a place for the gathering of students and communities alike.

space to securing or shoring up “market share,” new fitness centers, climbing walls, library coffee-shops, resort-like swimming lagoons, stadiums and training complexes, and palatial dorms sprout like mushrooms (often funded through complex borrowing and bond schemes) (Freedman 2014). Universities now sponsor (with planning as well as money) the wholesale redevelopment of surrounding commercial districts to assure pleasing and presumably safer edges to their campuses, and just as frequently create their own police forces to patrol them. The transformation of the university in the post-national, neoliberal era has meant the transformation of the campus itself. As a space of dependence, in other words, the university is now a quite different place than it used to be even as tree-lined malls and grassy quads are preserved as key selling points.

## II

But what about the university, and especially the campus, as a “space of engagement”? As Kevin Cox wrote, “People, firms, state agencies, etc. organize in order to secure the conditions for the continued existence of their spaces of dependence but in doing so they have to engage with other centers of social power: local government, the national press, perhaps the international press, for example. In doing so they construct a different form of space ... a space of engagement” (Cox 1998: 2). Attempts to reconstruct the university’s legitimacy as well as to rebuild a secure financial foundation have entailed remaking campuses into new kinds of spaces of engagement, as much of the above discussion has indicated.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is worth thinking about this literally – about just what kind of “space of engagement,” the university campus is.

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<sup>10</sup> The line between dependence and engagement is blurry. One could interpret a university concert series, for example, as either or both. It helps make the university a space of dependence (in the first sense above) by creating an essential campus-based good perhaps not available elsewhere in town. But it is also a means to draw onto campus external publics, to position a university as a cultural good within a larger state bringing to it either prestige or legislative goodwill, and to engage in a larger world of the arts, breaking down a parochialism that might undermine relations of dependence.

Campuses have long been places within which students, faculty, and others organize and engage with external worlds near and far. Agricultural extension services, university-sponsored settlement houses and urban missions, and laboratory schools represent examples from earlier eras. The development of schools of citizenship and public policy, like schools of education, was rooted in a pragmatic politics of outreach, of social reformation from *within* the campus. And campuses provide space (and gather together people) for political organization. After all, as a Denver student activist put it in an interview with us in 2010, “You have thousands of people all in one place with not a lot to do, and that tends to lend itself well to activism.” This is not an inconsiderable purpose for the university – a central way in which it is a space of engagement – and it is perhaps something that sets itself apart, at least a bit, from other “sausage factories.”

To give a paradigmatic example: The Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 was, among many other things, a fight over how students should or could engage with political movements and social upheavals in the Bay Area and beyond. As University of California President Clark Kerr emblematically put: “A few of the ‘non-conformists’ have another kind of revolt [than one against the university] in mind. They seek instead to turn the university, on the Latin American or Japanese models, into fortresses from which they can sally forth with impunity to make their attacks on society” (Draper 1966: 266). For student activists, the campus was a place for organizing from which they could then strike out into the world.

If, however, the waning of sixties activism and the neoliberalization of the university led to a generation (or two) of political quiescence, the question of controlling student (and faculty) politics on campus never disappeared. Indeed, it burst into a new visibility in the wake of the economic crisis, the official austerity response, and the (worldwide) student organizing these spawned. The crisis and response certainly seemed to crystalize the question of controlling student and

faculty protest, and thus the nature of the campus as a space of engagement in many administrators' minds.

For example, in October 2010, we found ourselves in the Oakland office of a lawyer representing faculty unions in a number of California community college districts. To spark the conversation, the lawyer showed us a large stack of documents that he explained were resolutions pushed by the Community College League of California and being passed by districts up and down the state which redefined college campuses as "non-public forums." In legal-speak, this means that these campuses were being turned into a kind of property on which, though it was publicly-owned, there was no *a priori* right to protest. One of the resolutions, he noted, while pulling a file from atop the stack, was for the Peralta Community College District covering Berkeley and Oakland.<sup>11</sup> The proximate cause of the District Board's consideration of the resolution was the appearance at Laney College of a militant anti-abortion group whose march through campus upset a number of faculty and students.

The district now planned to create "free speech zones" outside which leafletting, speechmaking, and protesting would be banned. This was, the lawyer argued, "inconsistent" with the goals of higher education, since, he noted, colleges and universities had "long been recognized as ... marketplaces of ideas." For him, the "educational environment [was] supposed to be a place where people talk, and think, and confront ideas," and not a place where such ideas were confined to some remote "speaker's corner." The resolution facing the Peralta district was especially extreme in that it included a provision permanently banning individuals from political activity on district campuses after violating the free speech policies just once. As a veteran of the Free Speech Movement, the lawyer was genuinely perplexed by this statewide effort to restrict the speech and political activities of students on community college campuses, given their important role in educating working class and

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<sup>11</sup> The Peralta District is perhaps most famous for being home to Merritt College where the Black Panthers was founded.



immigrant students. And he was perplexed as to why this push was happening *then*, and offered two theories as to what was at stake. One theory saw the push for free speech zones as a response to *predicted* student unrest over austerity. He argued that administrators “were sold on doing this because they feared students would be protesting ... the coming budget cuts and increases in tuition that were recognized a couple of years ago.” His second theory saw the push for free speech zones as related to the corporatization of higher education.

“It is very interesting that that [the speech zone controversy] has erupted at this time. One might say it’s because of all the conflict in society, that there are people in administration who prefer a more orderly campus, a more businesslike campus. Of course, colleges are not businesses. A lot of people don’t want to hear that, but they’re not. They’re educational institutions, and you can’t decide if they’re profitable just by the amount of dollars that they earn in a particular year. These policies that we have here are really very important. Even if they’re unconstitutional, they’re sending a message to people” (Interview with authors, October 11, 2010).

The people the message was being sent to, he implied, were not only on the Peralta campuses, but also on the nearby UC Berkeley campus. Or perhaps, the message to the Peralta District was *received* from Berkeley. In 2009, Berkeley students staged a series of mass protests and building occupations to protest soaring tuition costs and to demand greater state funding. These protests were linked to earlier (2007) and subsequent (2010) protests contesting UC Berkeley’s decision to team up with British Petroleum to construct a new building for mostly proprietary research.

For the Oakland attorney, the sudden wave of campus resolutions restricting free speech was hardly a coincidence. Free speech zones and other efforts to limit campus activism were appearing at exactly the moment when student dissent was most needed and precisely when the corporate assault on universities seemed primed to speed up.

Of course, for even some of the most apolitical observers, free speech zones are dangerous because they undermine the idea of college campuses as a “marketplace of ideas” – a space of engagement in that sense. For progressive observers like the lawyer, however, they were dangerous because they threatened a more radical potential of universities, which persists even despite their rapid restructuring as a space of dependence – a potential for a form of *radical* community engagement.

### III

To see what this might mean, we travelled to Scotland, where in 2011 student activists had taken over the Hetherington building on the Glasgow University campus. The “Free Hetherington” movement was one of many “anti-cuts” actions that swept Britain beginning in 2010 (of which university occupations were just one part). Over the course of the Hetherington occupation, the building became central to community-based political organizing as well as the site of an alternative university that boasted free lectures, workshops and classes. Although the space remained relatively free of the sort of sectarian power struggles that marked other occupations around the UK, it was not an entirely comfortable space (for some – especially female activists – it could be quite intimidating). And yet few could deny that the Free Hetherington movement had created a space on the Glasgow University campus – a classic “university on a hill” – that was uniquely open to the wider community. From within occupied Hetherington, students worked hard to link up with – and invite in – other local struggles, like ongoing actions against police brutality in working class and immigrant neighborhoods and campaigns against displacement from redevelopment associated with the upcoming 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Free Hetherington was a space of engagement: by creating a space on campus in which students, faculty, and community members could meet and collaborate, and learn from one another, Free Hetherington offered a notable example of what might be understood as

radical community engagement. By turning Hetherington into an incubator for local political organizing, this was a form of engagement that, in fact, questioned the traditional boundaries of the university itself, which is not necessarily a new project (there is a long history of free universities, of course), but one that takes on added salience as the whole question of the university – its status as a space of dependence – has been reopened by the legitimacy and economic crises that now beset it.

“Community engagement” usually has far less radical connotations.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is often a way of corralling political passions and making them “productive.” More typical than Free Hetherington-type engagement on campuses are the community engagement initiatives at places like Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) and Salford University in Manchester, both former polytechnics. GCU sponsors an impressive array of community engagement initiatives ranging from public forums and community volunteer days to initiatives like the Caledonian Club (a mentorship program that connects students with primary school children in underserved communities) and working with Mohammad Yunis to develop microloan programs for nearby housing estates. Such initiatives are designed to open the campus to outside publics as well as push students off campus to engage the world beyond its borders. For GCU administrators, such efforts have an economic logic: “In order to survive,” an official told us, GCU had to differentiate itself from its competitors. Community engagement was a marketing device that allowed GCU to stand out in the competitive market for higher education.

At Salford, community engagement was increasingly incorporated into the university’s “brand,” administrators told us. Administrators positioned community engagement as a vital resource the university could offer students to build their resumes as they confront a highly competitive job market. According to the community engagement officer, enrolling at Salford would allow students to burnish their CVs with marketable skills, learned through community engagement

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<sup>12</sup> For a typical discussion see Kingma 2011

incentivized by course credit. That this sort of engagement was highly instrumentalized was not lost on students. As a student at nearby University of Manchester commented in relation to its University Leadership Program: “They find a project, they drive you to the project, and there are people who tell you what to do on a project, and you do what they tell you. And then they put you on a bus and take you back home.”

Sometimes these efforts are nakedly self-interested. As the community engagement officer at Salford told us, the university had to sponsor programs in surrounding communities because those communities were beset by “wicked problems” and if these problems were not addressed then the campus would be perceived as unsafe and Salford would have more trouble attracting fee-paying international students. The contradictions that arise, and the university’s confusion over how to manage them, are readily apparent on campus. At Salford we were repeatedly told about how the university was building bridges to surrounding (mostly working class) neighborhoods. Administrators positioned the campus itself as a community asset. Yet every entrance is marked by big, permanent signs declaring, in all caps, the campus of Salford University – a public university – to be private property. And waving from standards along many of the walks were banners announcing not Salford’s “excellence” or celebrating its diverse student body, but reminding students to “Keep all valuables out of sight,” and that “1 in 10 students will become a victim of crime.”

## **Conclusion**

Whatever the contradictions, community engagement programs like those at GCU and Salford which seek to integrate campuses and surrounding neighborhoods in new ways (as part of an exercise in brand differentiation) both affirm the sausage factory-like reality of contemporary higher education (a particular brand of university churning out a particular brand of student) and the fact that universities are and always must be more than mere factories: they remain, as they

were in the nation-building era, institutions of citizen-formation, even under conditions of neoliberalization and financial austerity. Community engagement GCU and Salford-style seeks to create citizens geared for a neoliberal world, turning students (and for that matter faculty) into “academic entrepreneurs,” as one prominent analysis of community engagement approvingly calls them (Kingma 2011).

To the degree that community engagement initiatives hew to what is essentially a corporate ethos, there is a very real danger they will serve the same function as free speech zones – namely to redirect political involvement away from potentially radical engagement into safer, officially sanctioned channels. Against this, occupations like Free Hetherington are hardly surprising; they mark an active resistance to engagement shaped from above and emptied of oppositional force. They mark out one end of what remaking the campus as a space of engagement might look like at its best, and it is a prospect, obviously, that many trustees, administrators, and corporate sponsors do not find attractive. At the other end of the spectrum, officially-sanctioned community engagement might end up helping prove Clark Kerr right. Writing before the Free Speech Movement, he argued that the new university – the “multiversity” – was charged with producing “new men,” who would be the managers of a world that was significantly post-political, where revolts would only ever be “little bureaucratic revolts that can be handled piecemeal” (Kerr et al. 1960, 295; Draper 1964; Kerr 2001[1963]). Changed conditions of dependence and experiments with new forms of engagement would remake the campus as a space of containment, a space (potentially) as carefully controlled as the shop floor of a sausage factory.

For Neil Smith, implicit in his question, “Who rules the sausage factory?” was the belief that universities – as institutions and as city-spaces – were worth fighting for. As the neoliberalization of the university continues apace, the prospects seem stark. At the bleeding edge of that neoliberalism, we find not only an ever-expanding army of austerity’s adjuncts, but an increasingly indebted student body worried

about its future (for which instrumental versions of community engagement thus make eminent sense). Simultaneously, the instrumentalization of research is entrenched through audits like the REF and legislative demands that research pay immediate dividends, and through funding secured by (now university-sponsored) venture capital. To put it in Marxist terms, university labor is becoming more like typically capitalist abstract labor, valuable only to the degree it produces readily measured surplus value. Such trends make the fight for the university – the fight to rule the sausage factory – all the more important.

There are, in fact, some reasons to be optimistic that the fight is hardly over despite all the depressing news. It is increasingly clear, for example, that those currently charged with administering the university – trustees, presidents, higher education consultants – have little idea how to manage the contradictions and competing pressures corporatization, neoliberalism, and austerity have wrought. How else does one square the desperate rush towards online classes and the use of adjuncts with the simultaneous emphasis on “student experience”? Similarly, how does one reconcile the persistent emphasis on critical thinking – however diffuse a concept – with the turn towards “learning outcomes” and other instrumental modes of knowledge transfer? In this context, the university is up for grabs. The kind of space of engagement it is going to be is hardly settled; the sort of space of dependence it is, is in flux.

Another way of phrasing Marx’s pithy comment equating schoolhouses with sausage factories is to ask: just what kind of use value is the university? Is it something like a public forum (as the Oakland lawyer suggests), something like a space for community struggle and development (as with Free Hetherington), or a training ground (as with instrumentalized versions of community engagement)? Is it a place for critical inquiry, or only for research directly relevant to “stakeholders” like corporations, donors, foundations, or militaries? Or more accurately, what ought the balance between these be? Within the city, what kind of space of dependence and what sort of space for engagement can the university be imagined to be? These are far from settled questions.

Of course the struggle for the university will necessarily involve much more than reclaiming the campus for politics or reimagining community engagement. Of course, neither the campus nor community engagement initiatives are neutral or disconnected from the broader forces of neoliberalization, corporatization and austerity, shaping the contemporary capitalist city. In this regard, it is worth remembering, and worth fighting to preserve, the fact that universities are *not* – or not only – sausage factories. They are, necessarily, spaces deeply dependent on their surroundings, which in turn depend on them, and they are, crucially, spaces of intense engagement, the contours of which are never fully decided, but always a scene of ongoing debate and struggle.

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