

Part 3: What constitutes the good university?

Learning by doing by learning

Reflections on scholar-activism with the Brisbane Free University

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As universities are swept by a near-global tide of capitalist restructuring, myriad forms of resistance are also on the rise. While struggles that grapple directly with universities are vital, different streams of activism aim beyond them, in the form of 'prefigurative' politics—one that works to build a better world 'in the shell of the old'. This paper focuses on 'free universities', prefigurative projects that re-create university-like spaces of learning according to their own radical visions of social justice. Drawing on my own experience as a co-founder and organiser of the Brisbane Free University, as well as research conducted with 25 free universities across North America, I explore the complex tensions involved in working simultaneously within the academy, and engaging in activism beyond it. I show that most free university activists, myself included, see that it is impossible to distinguish between the inside and outside of the university, and that ultimately working across the 'divide' through prefigurative politics offers a robust means to effect substantive change.

Keywords: alternative pedagogies, prefigurative politics, activism, anti-capitalism, commodification, social justice

Introduction

This article tells the story of the Brisbane Free University (BFU), a project that organises free, public discussions, generally taking place in a semi-underground car-park on a busy inner-city street. Its story spills beyond the confines of the modest concrete box it occupies, however. Rather, it draws together threads from throughout the community in which BFU is nested, including many from 'conventional universities' (I use this term to refer to 'establishment' or 'traditional' universities, be they public or private, as opposed to free universities), and weaves them into a broader tapestry of similar movements all over the world.

Free universities form around a praxis of 'prefiguration,' meaning that rather than (or as well as) mobilising directly against the aspects of conventional universities

they oppose, they step outside the university's walls to re-imagine learning on their own terms. This praxis, however, opens up complex political terrain of its own. It is often unclear to those with stakes in the academy – as well as to activists themselves – whether free universities are working to save, destroy, or replace conventional universities, or a messy combination of all three. In this context, how might we make sense of activism that lies both inside and outside of the academy, and mobilises simultaneously for, against, and beyond it?

This article uses these questions to frame my reflections on the myriad and often surprising things I have learned through organising and participating in the Brisbane Free University over three years, whilst simultaneously working 'on the inside' of a conventional university. It draws not only upon my own experiences, but also on research I conducted with around 25 different free

university projects across the United States, Canada and Mexico in 2014. I focus on the tensions inherent to free universities' prefigurative experiments by first laying out the grounds upon which activists oppose conventional universities, including their sweeping capitulation to capitalist reforms, before turning to the complex ways in which free universities move to abandon some aspects of the university but preserve others. Finally, I consider how this might bring us to think differently about options for change, through a sort of activism that seeks to complicate, if not dismantle altogether, the very notion of 'inside versus outside' by proliferating cracks throughout conventional universities' structures in which to collectively build new ways of learning and living.

The Home Front

I would like to begin by telling my own part of the story. After graduating from university as an anthropologist, I worked for a government body before returning to what felt like my 'natural habitat' of academia as a casually-employed, part-time tutor. For me, study had never been about employability; rather, I chose a field that made me come alive with curiosity, and that seemed able to contribute towards some sort of social justice, however ill-defined was my sense of what that might mean. Like many other people, it was primarily during my undergraduate years that I developed the critical political consciousness I have since come to value. It later struck me that teaching could be a valuable way to advance these very ends, through fostering similar forms of critical thinking and political awareness amongst new generations of students. In many ways, this expectation bore fruit, and I found – and continue to find – immense satisfaction in my job.

There were, however, many aspects of university work that, for me, struck discord. The bureaucratic burdens on faculty members seemed too heavy, my own position within the casual labour force too precarious, and the student cohort too preoccupied with readiness for the looming job market rather than the course material at hand — especially given that tuition fees and student debt are rising near-globally. My growing malaise happened to coincide with the eruption of Occupy encampments around the world, and the strange lovechild of these two phenomena was the Brisbane Free University.

The Brisbane Free University (BFU), founded in 2012 by three friends including myself, attempts to challenge universities' near-global 'enclosure of knowledge' (Federici, 2009) by bringing talks and discussions literally into the streets, for free. Our trio had discovered common ground

in our love of some aspects of the learning we experienced at university – such as theory-based social analysis and cultural critique – but were frustrated by other aspects like hierarchical and standardising pedagogies, restrictive access policies, and a heavy focus on learning for grades, rather than for the value inherent to the content itself or the capacity to think critically about the world. Our initial idea seemed simple enough – to open a space to the public, in which anyone could learn about a variety of topics, with a focus on inclusive discussion or workshop-based pedagogies, and without any of the pressures brought by assessment or accreditation. The project has a broader purview that alternates between (or combines) fostering civic engagement with particular socio-political issues and/or voices marginalised by mainstream discourse, and encouraging 'the sheer, simple joy of learning for its own sake', all the while bringing together diverse members of the community in ways that might build solidarity (see <http://brisbanefreeuniversity.org/about>).

More specifically, we hold (roughly) fortnightly-to-monthly sessions with an attendance of anywhere between 20 and 200 people. Attendees come from all walks of life – from university professors to homeless people, party-goers passing by, long-time activists, mothers with their new babies, strangers and friends. Our 'campus' is a car-park under a bank in the central suburb of West End – a space that is wonderfully accessible and visible, despite its oddly grungy aesthetic – for which we have negotiated free use after business hours. Ironically, given our location, the closest BFU comes to having a 'rule' is that we operate as much as possible without any exchange of cash – no payments, grants, donations, spruiking or marketing. Putting this ideal into practice has involved its own complexities (Thompson, 2016), but we have never had to compromise on providing free entry to our events.

Furthermore, we have always felt it important to ensure that BFU remains open to the ideas and participation of anyone wishing to be involved. As such, whilst many of the sessions are coordinated by the three co-founders, BFU is also used as a platform by other community members, whether individuals or collectives, to organise events that they feel to be of particular interest, often in other spaces or formats. Our content has ranged widely from the practical ('Vocal Workshops: Rhythm and Harmony') to the abstract ('Understanding Ethical Reasoning') to the political ('Indigenous Resistance and the State'); and from the local ('West End's Shrinking Public Realm') to the global ('Gaza in Context').

I was an active organiser with BFU from the time of its inception until I left Brisbane in late 2015. I could

not pretend for a moment that over the course of those three years, my work with BFU was not fraught with strange tensions. I remained employed at a conventional university, and yet would spend my after-hours organising a project designed to draw attention to the more problematic aspects of the academic world in general. I used university printers to run off BFU flyers and posters, I asked faculty members if they would share their research outside the academic paywall – the vast majority of whom were only too happy to do so – and we once held a provocative panel discussion right in the centre of campus. At times, I had to wonder about the ethical defensibility of living with a foot in both camps (or campuses), so to speak, surviving as I was on the university's pay-cheques whilst running a project that contests and scavenges from it.

My position in this sense was far from unique. Although we had not initially realised it, BFU represents but another rivulet in a long and broad stream of projects that seek to subvert the status quo through study, including a good number that remain in operation as of this writing. Driven by curiosity about the world we had unwittingly stepped into, I spent the first six months of 2014 visiting about 25 similar projects across the US, Canada and Mexico, and interviewing approximately 60 organisers of and participants in free universities (shorthand as 'activists' from here). The material I gathered during these conversations, alongside my own experiences with BFU, forms the basis for this article.

Free Universities: Towards an elusive definition

What exactly are free universities? The question is difficult to answer. One of the best descriptions I have found was penned in 1967 to mark the formation of Sydney's Free University (aka Free U), which remained in operation until 1972. As the founders wrote in their manifesto:

The idea of a Free University is this: it is free in spirit, not in cash – it will get no government grants, no scholarship scheme. It grants no degrees and offers no status. It is a small group of students and teachers who come together outside the established university system because they find that system inadequate. It ... extends its interests to issues and subject-matters frozen out of regular university courses. It is based on cooperation instead of competition; it breaks down the formal role-division of student and staff, inferior and superior; and experiments with teaching methods. Ultimately, it stands or falls by the enthusiasm of its members (Cahill *et al.*, 1967. For more on Sydney Free U, see Irving, 2013).

Despite the nearly fifty-year gap between the launch of Sydney Free U and our current moment, this description still holds for today's free universities. Although these go by a range of different names, here I use the term 'free university' to refer to projects of collective learning that are: free to attend, open to anyone, do not offer accreditation, avoid state affiliation, gather in physical spaces (i.e. offline), and include a goal of emancipation, however defined. Not all free universities use political terminology to describe themselves, but some identify as anarchist, and many are organised according to horizontalist modes of consensus-based decision-making. Many favour non-hierarchical or 'free-form' pedagogies that counter traditional teacher-student structures by recognising that everyone can be both teacher and student, and that learning can occur effectively through egalitarian collaboration.

Within these broad criteria, however, the terrain is complex. Although many are networked with one another, each free university develops organically within its locally-specific context, meaning that no two are alike. As several organisers were quick to point out, a 'free university' is not a franchise. Furthermore, each is internally in a state of flux. As I was told by Joe Kay, an activist with the New York-based free university for fine arts, the Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU), 'It's impossible to represent what happens here... What we do is immaterial in a way, it's hard to graft onto an object or a commodity' (personal communication, May 28, 2014). Free universities are, by definition, semi-improvised, and deliberately avoid calcifying too rigid an agenda or identity – rather, they incorporate a fluid network of spaces, organisers, and participants. This commitment to radical flexibility serves a twofold purpose – it allows projects to incorporate contributions from as many people as possible, while acting as a counterpoint to conventional educational systems' tendencies to rigidly structure learning as a linear process of ascendancy towards a pre-defined target of proficiency (Dyke & Meyerhoff, 2013). Otherwise put, many free university organisers value fluidity not only in terms of organisational dynamics, but as an important way to defend learning for its own sake. As David Brazil, a co-founder and former organiser of the Bay Area Public School, told me: 'What are we actually doing? To some degree we don't know. And it is useful and good that we don't know' (personal communication, 30 January, 2014).

Classes, or as Wes Modes of the Free Skool Santa Cruz joked, 'post-apocalyptic revolutionary logistics training' (personal communication, 27 January, 2014), are sometimes offered by members, but more frequently by non-members of the organising group, and just about span the gamut of

what is humanly possible to teach and learn. I heard of sessions ranging from Marxist feminism to bee-keeping, self-defence, bike mechanics, immigration law, Japanese cinema, performance art, and everything in between. One of Wes Modes' 'classes' was to drive a group of people to the top of a hill at sunset, serve them tea and cookies in the back of his pick-up truck, and play them Alan Watts lectures on the car stereo. Another memorable example was 'The History of the Future', a series of role-play sessions that asked participants to imagine they were sole survivors in a post-apocalyptic world, and experiment with the sorts of socio-economic systems they would develop. As Wes commented, with a chuckle: 'Who's to say that's a class? Who's to say that's not a class?' In other words, free universities seek to broaden not only access to learning but the very ways in which we think about what learning is, and how we value various pedagogies and activities accordingly.

For all the frivolity, however, there is a serious undercurrent. The crucible in which free universities form is one of struggle. Organisers cited inspirations including Francisco Ferrer's anarchist Escuela Moderna of 1900s Spain, the Freedom Schools of the US Civil Rights Movement, Zapatista autonomous schooling, and the Free Speech movement at UC Berkeley in the 1960s, during which the term 'free university' was first coined (Meza-Wilson, 2012). Resistance to conventional institutions and modes of education is a constant thread across these landscapes, and remains so for free universities today.

In love and rage: Against the capitalist university

Activists' concerns about conventional universities were many and varied, but generally sketched out similar lines to those that first gave form to BFU. Many activists remain enamoured of certain ideals with which the university is associated – whether or not it has ever actually realised them – such as democratic participation, the pursuit of knowledge, rigorous research and critical thought. However, they perceive the gap between the feasibility of teaching and learning according to these ideals, and the university's actual day-to-day modes of operation, to be so vast that, as scholar-activist Alex Khasnabish surmised: 'the university is kind of an impossible place' (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

Many activists were careful to avoid over-romanticising the university, and pointed out that universities have

Courses				
MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
August 25, 2014	August 26, 2014	August 27, 2014	August 28, 2014	August 29, 2014
The Public Shul : Reading the Talmud Very, Very Slowly Bay Area	Society of the Spectacle: with Ken Knabb (7pm) Bay Area	Chess Club Bay Area	Cloud-Based Institutional Critique	Empire-Logistics and Global Supply Chains San Francisco
Reading the Bible Very Slowly : Shoftim, שופטים (Judges), Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9 Bay Area	Fem Tech Dialectics Bay Area	Contemporary Art Practices and the Politics of Aesthetics Bay Area	Reading, French : L'Etranger Bay Area	
Chess Club Bay Area		HEGEL FOR COMMUNISTS : Lord & Bondsman Bay Area	Reading Italian : Dante's Purgatorio, Canto I Bay Area	
			Stir It Up! : A Soup Class Bay Area	
			Training Spiritual Warriors : Conversations with Lynice Pinkard Bay Area	

Figure 1: Example of a weekly calendar of free 'classes' offered at the Bay Area Public School, Oakland, USA. Retrieved from <http://tbepublicschool.org/bay-area>

always served to reinforce problematic power relations just as much – if not more so – as to challenge them (see also Readings, 1996; Harney & Moten, 2013). As such, their more recent history does not represent the desertion of a formerly pure moral pedigree, but merely the capitulation to a new dominant power: capitalism. Although it is impossible to generalise about universities across the board – particularly given the fact that they have always been contested spaces subject to conflicting powers and possibilities – critical theorists such as Silvia Federici have nonetheless argued that over the last few decades, we have witnessed a global 'enclosure of knowledge', in which universities play a key gatekeeper role (2009). Importantly, universities do not only reflect shifts towards capitalism; they drive them by commodifying education, marketising research, and reframing students as consumers (Haiven 2014a, p.135). As scholar-activist Max Haiven told me, we need to recognise the university 'as a means by which capitalist social and economic relations are reproduced, by which capitalist values are stitched into the fabric of society' (personal communication, June 5, 2014).

Granted, internal resistances to these shifts are manifold – ranging from strikes and union actions to subtler, 'everyday' acts like using radical pedagogies in the classroom – and effective on many fronts. However, while power struggles 'on the inside' of conventional universities are critically important, many activists have also highlighted the potentials in engaging less traditional forms of resistance 'on the outside'. Marc Bousquet argues that struggles within the university must adopt a political inversion that drives them beyond, given that:

the traditional hope for the University as refuge is to see it as a universal point from which to leverage anything else you want to do... Yet ... we need the fulcrum point to be someplace outside in order to leverage what's f***ed up within the University (in Bousquet, Harney & Moten 2009, p.167).

The idea of an external fulcrum point corresponds to the praxis of prefiguration – a political orientation which, rather than aiming to overthrow or reclaim dominant structures, focuses energy on building alternatives in their interstices, or 'building the new world in the shell of the old' (Khasnabish & Haiven 2012). This is the political terrain of free universities – projects that radically re-imagine learning outside the university walls and, more ambitiously, work to foster cracks within the stronghold of capitalism more broadly. However, this praxis raises complex questions of its own. In acting outside of the university walls, are free universities moving to abandon or to preserve the university? Where do activists draw the line between the inside and the outside of the university, and how do those with a foot in both camps, like myself, navigate those tensions?

Activism on the Möbius Strip: Beyond the inside/outside divide

Many of the activists with whom I spoke had become involved in free universities because they saw scant potential in conventional universities for the sorts of teaching and learning they value. Ryan Mitchell, speaking about Toronto's Anarchist Free University (AFU), told me: 'it was [founded] in reaction to the neoliberal university, which is so bloody and instrumental. It's run like a business, where education, or somebody actually learning something, is really quite incidental or secondary to it... We like these ideas, we like teaching, and the university is maybe not the best place for it' (personal communication, 12 June, 2014).

How, then, to think about the conventional university? At times during my research, it seemed that activists' prognoses were terminal. Consider, for example, the Edu-Factory Collective, a global network of scholar-activists that operated, until their recent disbandment, under the slogan: 'What was once the factory is now the university.' In the introduction to their inaugural journal, they proclaimed: 'The state university is in ruins, the mass

university is in ruins, and the university as a privileged place of national culture ... is in ruins. We're not suffering from nostalgia. Quite the contrary, we vindicate the university's destruction' (The Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 1). Similarly, Max Haiven, formerly a member of the Edu-Factory collective, admitted to me: 'I don't hold out any hope whatsoever that the university is going to be 'cured' within the present socioeconomic system... The task now when it comes to education is to abolish the university as we know it' (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

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Although these statements appear hard-line in calling for us to abandon ship, more often than not, they were followed by far more nuanced political positioning. Like myself, the majority of activists I interviewed were

drawn to free university projects because they continue to value certain ideals still represented by university education. Max Haiven, for instance, followed on by cautioning:

If we're going to abandon the university, we do need to think really critically both in the present and in the future about how to recreate [it]. There needs to be a space in any society for rigorous research, to take time with problems and really think through how the world works. And I don't think the university is necessarily the best place for that to happen ..., but it's worth preserving that ideal at least, in some way (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

In fact, many activists argued that it was not only counter-productive but fundamentally false to think about universities in terms of an inside/outside binary. Far from the 'ivory tower' analogy, universities are so thoroughly permeated by interests and investments from the 'external' world, and vice versa, that we cannot realistically draw a line separating them from the rest of society. To offer an illustration by way of an anecdote, I recently attended UNIKE, a 2015 gathering in Auckland of scholar-activists from around the world, who shared a critical perspective on universities' shifts under neoliberal capitalism. In the closing exercise, a facilitator asked us to form small groups and write on a piece of paper some keywords to characterise today's universities. Instead of writing anything, our group twisted our piece of paper into a Möbius strip to symbolise our collective conclusion – that it is ultimately impossible to conceptualise of 'the university' as a monolithic institution distinct from the world outside it.

Nevertheless, activists have complex relationships to the notion of an inside/outside division. Many saw that whilst the dividing line is indeed a fiction, it remains a useful conceptual tool by which to sketch out strategic lines of struggle. Fred Moten, for example, articulated his position thus:

I'm completely committed to a certain notion of the outside. But I guess it would be an outside which is not only not opposed to, but actually quite often manifests itself within, the inside... I'm wary of the opposition but at the same time, I'm now much more committed to the value of both terms (Bousquet, Harney & Moten 2009, p. 168).

Building on these lines of reasoning, Alex Khasnabish argued that it would be foolish to simply abandon the conventional university, given that:

The space itself is just this accumulation of knowledge and resources and people and stuff... Why not take it back and do other things with it? ... [You can] happily subvert the kind of increasing neoliberalisation of [the university] in small ways, usually, but nevertheless important ways... I think setting up too strict a binary between the inside and outside – well, it's empirically wrong, ... but also it ... denigrates spaces that are inside that could be reclaimed and have all kinds of interesting things done with them (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

Most of my interviewees told a similar story to my own, of having 'a foot in both camps', or what Dyke and Meyerhoff have described as an 'ambivalent educational self – ambivalent between taking critical, resistant perspectives on the education system and seeing one's life and work as bound up with the status quo' (2013, p. 268). Far from being hypocritical or politically questionable, however, this position was more often described as strategic, from which activists can leverage change in important ways. As Max Haiven told me:

I've always considered it to be one of my responsibilities to take the unjustly accumulated resources of the university and redistribute them into other spheres, and also to bring other voices and forms of knowledge – which are traditionally devalued – from outside the university into the university space, to problematise the types of knowledge valorised therein (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

The more I spoke with free university activists, the less it made sense to think in inside/outside terms, whether in the context of material or immaterial realms of struggle. As to the former, conventional universities have an incontrovertibly real, material presence that should not be overlooked, in that they amass resources and capital, and exert substantive effects on people's lived realities.

On the one hand, working to change the university on the inside – or perhaps more accurately, to erode the 'enclosures' that the university continues to uphold – remains a critically important axis of struggle. Free university activists chip away at universities' enclosures by repurposing campus spaces to foster ideals otherwise seen as problematically absent, such as critical thinking around social justice struggles, or examining the morally questionable commercial ties held by universities themselves (see Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012; Lyons, 2014). Meanwhile, they redistribute resources beyond universities' paywalls by freely sharing knowledge and research with the broader community.

On the other hand, we can think of universities as bundles of largely immaterial practices, values and ideals that we can pull apart and sort through – some of which we discard, others we keep, others still we re-mould anew. In this sense, free universities' grounds of struggle are not only materially combative but symbolically so, in that they seek to point out how the conventional university as an institution is failing us, and to make spaces in which its spectral ideals might yet be preserved. These spaces are not intended as replacements, or sovereign utopian islands to be defended, but as hatcheries or harbours in which we can collectively re-imagine ourselves in relation to learning. Such processes of re-imagination are never confined to the spaces in which they are catalysed – such as BFU's 'car-park campus' – but remain embedded in broader feedback loops that can surge back into mainstream structures – like conventional universities – to effect change in various, and often more robust, ways (Haiven 2014a). This can range from gaining knowledge about how the conventional university functions within capitalism, to experimenting with alternative pedagogies. Enda Brophy, who had been a member of the Edu-Factory Collective and active with Toronto's AFU, explained:

My approach is that it should be a both/and. We should fight for change within the university, but we should also set up projects in which we try and imagine the kind of university that we would like to have outside the university... The distinction between reformism and revolution is outdated. We articulated our position as radical reform (personal communication, 7 March, 2014).

To this end, many argue that the autonomous, 'external' nature of free universities allows us to be more radically creative and daring in how we re-imagine what a university, or what learning, could be (Kanngieser 2007; DeLeon, 2008; Noterman & Pusey 2012).

The dissolution of inside/outside dichotomies leads us to an important point, in that activists recognise

that universities' crises are not contained within their campuses, but are symptomatic of far broader shifts. As Alex Khasnabish elaborated:

The university is one institution in the centre of this crisis maelstrom that we find ourselves in. [We need] to understand that the crisis is internal to the system that we live within – this capitalist, patriarchal, racist, colonialist system – that needs to be transformed, and so the university along with it (personal communication, 5 June, 2014).

Ultimately, the real struggle for universities lies beyond the university itself, such that by imagining universities differently, we invariably find ourselves re-imagining a different society altogether, again evoking the image of the Möbius strip (Haiven, 2014b). With a nod to the 'In Love and Rage' section of this article, activists acknowledge that their struggles must take aim at the heart of the capitalist hydra, of which the 'neoliberal university' is but one head. Few have articulated this intersection as poetically as in 'Communiqué from an Absent Future', a collectively-written statement from the student-led occupation of California state university campuses in 2009: 'We demand not a free university but a free society... All of our futures are linked, and so our movement will have to join with these others, breaching the walls of the university compounds and spilling into the streets' (Anonymous, 2009). While it is impossible to do them justice within the scope of this article, free university activists attempt to fray the broader fabric of capitalism on many fronts and in diverse ways, which form the bases for explorations elsewhere (see Kanngieser, 2007; Shantz, 2010;Thompsett, 2016).

Conclusion

I have learned a great many things through my involvement with the Brisbane Free University. I have learned about local Aboriginal politics, competing discourses around refugee rights, and vocal technique. I have also learned how to fit the greatest number of stackable chairs into the back of my station wagon, and how to organise a project in a way that remains open to the shifting desires of diverse participants. However, one of the most significant things I have learned is how I would like to learn.

In contrast to the commodified modes of education increasingly (though not always) marketed by conventional universities, I have learned that people take responsibility for their own learning if given the opportunity, and that critical enquiry can be linked, in very real ways, to ongoing

social justice struggles. More importantly, I have been able to experiment with alternative pedagogies directly, as part of the shifting collective of curious-minded community members that compose BFU – overall, a sort of learning by doing by learning. This constitutes an example of something that has, for me, breached the inside/outside bounds between conventional and free universities by surging from the car-park campus of BFU back into the 'formal' classrooms in which I still teach.

This leads me to my second reflection – aside from re-learning how to learn, I have changed how I think about change. As John Holloway writes in *Crack Capitalism*, 'The only way to think of changing the world radically is as a multiplicity of interstitial movements running from the particular' (2010, p. 11) for which he proposes 'the method of the crack, ... a dialectic of misfitting' (2010, p. 9). Increasingly, I envision possibilities for change within conventional universities along similar (interstitial) lines. Indeed, in a context without borders or frontlines, as we are used to thinking about them, perhaps the 'crack' becomes the most fitting metaphor for change. Where once I might have strung my radical horizon along the lines of a full structural overhaul, I have learned that we must not underestimate the potential to act in the here-and-now, in a variety of ways, and often on a smaller scale.

Free universities will probably never pose a serious challenge to the ways in which conventional universities operate. In the majority of cases, it is not their aim to do so. They can, however, function as microcosms for developing alternative modes of learning and relating to one another, in ways that spill beyond their immediate parameters. Since organising with BFU, I have developed a habit of seeing 'the crack in everything', to evoke Leonard Cohen, and of recognising that the potential to subvert, reclaim and reform the status quo is more present than we might otherwise assume. Often this shift of perspective takes, like anything else, an everyday, unglamorous routine of practice, similar to what James Scott has called an 'anarchist calisthenics' (Scott, 2012). Furthermore, I have come to attribute greater meaning to seemingly small acts – for example, rethinking classroom pedagogy, or linking university-based learning with real social struggles, whether they involve university students and/or workers, or take place in the world beyond. If these appear to fall short of revolutionary imaginaries, perhaps this is because we are so attuned to looking for the revolutionary forest that we tend to miss the revolutionary trees.

To be clear, I am in no way arguing that we should forsake large-scale struggle to content ourselves with more piecemeal, immediate forms of change. Nor do

I believe that we should attempt to direct our energy entirely within the university's structures, or divert it altogether outside of them, especially given the illusory nature of the inside/outside binary to begin with. Rather, my point is that if we are serious about change, we will need it all – the revolutionary and the reformist, the radical and the reactionary, the internal, external, and everything in between. In this sense, free universities are not the answer to universities' crises – no single thing can be – but they might be one important, if oddly-shaped, piece of the puzzle.

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