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# The Abolition of the University

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An introduction to the special collection "The Abolition of the University".

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In 1968, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi called for the abolition of the English department. In their text, they rejected the "primacy of English literature and culture", asking why it should be that their University had an English department, rather than a Department of African Literature and Languages in its place. In this case, abolition was the remedy to a cultural erasure at the hands of colonial thought.[1]

Conversely, in recent years in the Global North, many departments have found themselves "abolished" for another reason: the neoliberal rhetoric of the financial sustainability of education and austerity politics, despite the seeming financial health of these universities more broadly. One might consider, for instance, the devastating and systemic shutdown of modern foreign language departments in universities in the United Kingdom, or the proclaimation of its government that a market environment in Higher Education must emerge through the institutional threat of "market exit" (bankruptcy).[2]

Within these frames we have two types of institutional intervention both framed under the rhetoric of "abolition": the first driven by the desire to liberate education from epistemological and pedagogical domination; the second, it might be claimed, by the neoliberal business model.[3] In recent years, academics, non-academic staff, students and their allies across the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Ireland, Albania, Finland, Colombia, Mexico and elsewhere, have staged protests against such neoliberal reform of universities. There have also been prominent academic critiques. For instance, Wendy Brown argues that the evolution of neoliberalism from a set of economic policies into mode of reason imperils not just liberal institutions but democracy itself.[4] Elsewhere, Zoe Hope Bulaitis argues that if we are to think of the future of the university and the humanities disciplines, we need to "generate an alternative account of value" that can work against a culture of economism.[5]

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[1] See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995).

[2] See Javier Espinoza, '"Let Failing Universities Go to the Wall," Says Minister', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 September 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/11854659/Let-failing-universities-go-to-the-wall-says-minister.html [last accessed 17 November 2017].

[3] We draw a definition of neoliberalism from William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2014), seeing therein a politico-economic rationale that replaces the political with the economic and the financial. We also acknowledge that we may be nearing the period when this regime's authority is on the wane, replaced in recent years by a neo-authoritarianism that distrusts economics.

[4] See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015). This point is also made in *The University in Ruins* by Bill Readings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[5] See Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 241–2.

Amid such frames, we called for a series of articles on the theme of "the abolition of the university". We remained deliberately ambiguous about how such a phrase should be interpreted. Certainly, the term "abolition" carries a heavy history, especially with respect to the legacies and ongoing damage of slavery. Thus, we were interested in de-colonising approaches; in new experiments in higher education; in those who might defend the classical institution and its values; and in those who might ask for a spirit of meliorism in seeking to improve, rather than abolish. We were not disappointed with the results.

This collection presents the articles that were submitted and that made it through a process of double-blind peer review.[6] Predictably, given the national situation of the editors, there is a partial geographic bias towards the United Kingdom in the coverage herein. Nonetheless, the articles in this collection document radical thinking that is happening at the edges of the university, often in the wake of its abolition in traditional form.

For instance, in "Putting Business at the Heart of Higher Education: On Neoliberal Interventionism and Audit Culture in UK Universities", Justin Cruickshank takes aim at recent government policy in the United Kingdom, singling out the ways in which a twofold process of neoliberal subjectivity was first engendered and then used to restructure the very workings of Higher Education. For Cruickshank, though, all is not lost and the continuance of student protest demonstrates that it is possible to resist such subjectifying processes.[7]

Following in this theme, Richard Hall and Keith Smyth turn to the ways that pedagogy is often co-opted as a tool for the production of citizens as economic actors. Seeking a curriculum that is formed through dynamic intra-actions between students, teachers, and knowledge – rather than a defined pre-packaged product of best practices – these authors ask what it would take to have a university that taught "as a means to improve society and the human condition", rather than the employment-oriented outcomes towards which many institutions seem now to orient themselves.[8]

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[6] Peer review is, itself, a problematic institution that carries many challenges for thinking in radical ways. Some might argue, then, that the venue that we chose was inappropriate for truly radical thought, since anything accepted through peer review must, by definition, meet some community consensus. See Martin Paul Eve, 'Before the Law: Open Access, Quality Control and the Future of Peer Review', in *Debating Open Access*, edited by Nigel Vincent and Chris Wickham (London: British Academy, 2013), pp. 68–81; and Samuel Moore and others, 'Excellence R Us: University Research and the Fetishisation of Excellence', *Palgrave Communications*, 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.105.

[7] See Justin Cruickshank, 'Putting Business at the Heart of Higher Education: On Neoliberal Interventionism and Audit Culture in UK Universities', *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(1) (2016), https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.77.

[8] See Richard Hall and Keith Smyth, 'Dismantling the Curriculum in Higher Education', *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(1) (2016), https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.66.

Cassie Earl takes this thinking further, asking what happens when we move learning beyond the gated communities of universities and into public spaces, as seen in the 2011 Occupy London Movement. In Earl's practical counterpoint to Hall and Smyth's theoretical grounding, it is the inclusion/exclusion binary of spaces of higher education that must be decomposed if we wish to see a truly just system of learning.[9] Such a focus on activism leading to political change is also a prevalent theme in Kristi Carey's "On Cleaning: Student Activism in the Corporate and Imperial University". Carey's patiently redacted documentation of how an institution dealt with student protest yields an inferential logic that adds to our understanding of how protest and dissent are handled more broadly.[10] Critical thinking, that old fallback of an existential rationale for universities, it seems, will often only be tolerated in the theoretical realm, while critical action must be crushed.

Yet practical resistance still emerges. Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani document three alternative institutional sites in Karachi that have pushed the boundaries and shifted the definitions of higher education. Playing also with the form of the academic essay – some might say, abolishing it – their article asks structural questions of the way in which government has policed what they call the academic-military-industrial complex. This stance is echoed in Neary and Winn's article, which likewise imagines new spaces for higher education and its collective governance. Specifically, Neary and Winn outline a framework for cooperative universities, in the formal sense of a worker-owned cooperative.

Taking a literary turn, Lou Dear examines the ways in which authors such as Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o develop an epistemological critique of Westernised education. Situating her argument amid national liberation struggles, Dear highlights the ways in which colonial aspects have seeped into the structures of university education and continue to persist in its present forms. Finally, Andre Pusey writes of the experiments at the Really Open University in the wake of the student protests in 2010, demonstrating how negative resistance can be transformed into constructive practical projects, even when such a call is to abolish the university as it exists.

This collection, then, asks us to rethink the structures that, in higher education, seem to be a given. It asks us to consider the conditions of possibility for universities and what, under different circumstances or with alternative pre-conditions, they might be. It is, therefore, a critique of the university made possible through the language of abolition. For sometimes, the very real existence of a pre-existing global entity, such as a university, makes it difficult to imagine how it ever might have been otherwise. The articles in this collection show us how to think beyond the phenomenon of the university, and in doing so, imagine a different world.

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[9] See Cassie Earl, 'Doing Pedagogy Publicly: Asserting the Right to the City to Rethink the University', *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(2) (2016), https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.95.

[10] Kristi Carey, 'On Cleaning: Student Activism in the Corporate and Imperial University', *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(2) (2016), https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.92.

Although universities perhaps have a tendency always to believe themselves to be in crisis, the challenges that we face at this time are many. The pandemic of the 2019 coronavirus is rewriting the rules of society and of labour, worldwide. Universities may have been core in researching the vaccines that may yet offer us a way out of this crisis, but radical calls to help these institutions weather the financial storm of the virus – or even for fresh, non-marketised funding regimes – have met with political indifference. Geopolitical factors such as Brexit are at once shutting down inter-cultural exchange while also challenging the exploitative financial reliance of UK universities on extractive overseas tuition fees.

Universities, in these times and in the face of these challenges, stagger on. For those, like me, whose livelihood is based in institutions, this can seem preferable to any kind of radical rethink. Melioristic approaches appear less damaging in terms of a human cost. Such approaches, though, often lead to us playing “within the rules”, accepting damaging financial models that individualise education and that divide nations against one another. Our current moment of acute crisis should be used, though, not just to bunker down and to do what we’ve always done. We should use it instead to appraise how we might achieve the university that we want. “Out of the ruins”, as Bob Hanke and Alison Hearn put it, “the university to come”.

## Competing Interests

The author is the CEO of the Open Library of Humanities.

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