

The antagonistic university? A conversation on cuts, conviviality and capitalism.

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Anja: Let me begin by posing three questions. Firstly, it's becoming increasingly apparent that modes of labour are appropriating cognitive, communicational and affective skills. What does this mean to you for the political potential of academic and collaborative work?

Secondly, given that there are massive cuts being proposed to the education sector through a regime of austerity measures, and given that the current labour paradigm is one that produces precarious, alienated, competitive and individualised relations between workers, do you think that the university as an institution (and the kinds of labour it engenders) is a potent site of struggle and strike?

And thirdly, what kinds of collective relations between people and modes of organising do you think are possible for the university struggles, and where do you think we should place our emphasis? How can we negotiate a transversal between micro- and macro- political desires, anxieties, exhaustions, solidarities and hopes? (Please feel free to comment on strategies you think are useful for building more caring and collective common worlds in general as well if you like).

Jamie: Personally, I'm cautious of suggesting to others where to put their energies. There's a certain mode of politics, which involves developing a macro-political analysis, a declaration of the state of the political landscape and suggestions for appropriate actions based on that analysis. Now, this mode of politics can certainly have a role to play. At the same time, I would not want to overestimate it. As Anaïs Nin has been credited with saying, the map is not the terrain. Any analysis of the political landscape is necessarily an abstraction, an invention of the mind. Likewise, it seems to me that what we call the university is also an abstraction for 'it' is only the continuous effect of social relations. These relations may be premised on the assumptions that the university does exist, that it is real, that it's rules must be followed, that it engenders certain kinds of labour. What happens if we relate without letting those assumptions determine our actions, our affect? What happens to what we call the university when relations within it are based on play, mutuality, compassion and listening? Does it become a different place, even if only in particular moments?

There's a little book I like by the Quaker activist and educator Parker J. Palmer called *Let Your Life Speak*. Instead of trying to work out the right thing to do, the right way to live, where one should put their energies, he suggests an introspective listening. "The soul," he says "speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions." It is my experience also that insights arise when the bodymind is quiet, whether through meditation, walking in the woods, gardening, or simply through a certain acceptance of everything as it is. Even the things that hurt or trigger fear. This acceptance can also make space for a very different mode of politics that is not based around the idea of struggle, but on the direct experience of connection. It's like that line from Guattari's *Chaosophy* that you noted in your copy, Anja, something like "we don't need to destroy capitalism but to stop producing it." For what is there to struggle against? What does it mean to struggle against a way of relating to ourselves, each other and the land of which we are a part? For myself, I'm more drawn to methods of relating differently, in ways that may not produce capitalism or other patterns of domination. And to do this effectively, I'm learning to work with where I and others are at rather than to struggle against anything. I'm particularly inspired, here by the practice of nonviolent communication

(NVC) which is based on the radically compassionate assumption that everyone is doing the best thing they can imagine to meet their life serving needs. And so for me, the key to revolutionary change is in nurturing our capacities for imagination, for empathy, so that each of us is able to imagine ways of meeting our needs but also respect those of other beings.

What we call the university is certainly one place to do this! I remember attending a masterclass in the performative social science at Bournemouth University, a space to explore different ways of communicating about research than producing journal articles. It was inspiring in many ways! One painful image, though, that stays with me, is walking through one of those long university corridors with the fluorescent lights and a woman who is doing postgraduate studies saying to me that she has been advised by her supervisor to make sure that any conference paper she gave was "bullet-proof." I immediately think of Foucault's reversal of the famous aphorism in his declaration that "politics is the continuation of war by other means." Politics as war is common in academia -- we might think too of the commonplace discursive violence in peer review or the endemic nature of bullying within universities. Nonviolent communication can take the wind out of these sails by showing understanding and compassion for the needs that underlie the aggression, sarcasm or rigidity of communication. The practice can also help us to connect with the pain, anger, fear or frustration we may feel when spoken to in that way by sensing what we are really wanting in that situation -- perhaps respect and understanding. Pain held on to can stew into resentment, what Nietzsche referred to as the moralising revenge of the powerless, which only serves to further produce relations of disconnection and control. A release of pain or anxiety, on the other hand, may allow for more fluid, convivial relations -- an alternative to politics as war, as struggle.

And this, it seems to me, is where collaboration, whether academic or otherwise, can be immensely powerful. Sure, we can learn to practice meditation or presence or awareness on our own, but it is so much easier and so much more powerful with others. And in collaboration, we can help each to develop our capacity for compassion and imagination so that instead of producing capitalism, we might produce something very different.

Anna: My immediate response to these questions starts in a similar place to Jamie's, so here I'd like to discuss one of the questions he poses: "What happens if we relate without letting those assumptions about the 'rules of university' determine our actions, our affect?" In many ways I think this question guides my academic practice. Or, perhaps more honestly, I am motivated by its converse: 'What happens if I follow those assumptions?' My answers to this leads back to Anja's questions -- If I buy into those assumptions I am left feeling both self-destructively competitive and alienated from the politics and people I care most about. The subjects of my work and partners of my collaborations are turned into objects; they are instrumentalised, they are what stand between me and the next publication, post, promotion. I feel angry and overworked. The aspects of academia that originally provided passion and promise (collective knowledge production, researching subjugated histories) are obscured behind the race to the top of the ivory tower. While I am more reticent than Jamie to speak of this in terms of nonviolence and spirituality, I find it difficult not to bring the bodymind into it because it is my health, my wellness that is at stake if I play by those assumptions. Playing by the assumed rules breeds bitterness. Bitterness runs so deep through the veins of academia, poisoning its lungs, making it harder and harder for us to breath. I have already watched so much brilliance, so much creative energy fall prey to bitterness. When I catch myself falling, I try to remember this question like a mantra: How else can I relate? What else can I make?

Practically speaking this generally involves strategies of avoidance. Avoid, at all cost, academics, conferences, competitions and committees that will fill me with rage and bitterness. These are usually quite easy to identify in advance. The wording of CFPs, the list of topics and speakers, the entry costs and requirements are all signs of the politics and goals of a space, project or process. If admission is £250 with no reduced rate, it's a sign that accessibility is not a major concern. This matters and will be reflected in other aspects of the event. Other times you may not know a place, process or project is poisonous until you are already in the throes of it. Here, if you are lucky, you band together with other miscreants and form an alliance, a temporary autonomous zone of 'I hate this conference/process/project.' The friendships that form in the TAZ of capitalist academia can last days or lifetimes. They are the pop-up spaces where academic solidarity is built. On less fortunate occasions I find myself retreating into my overpriced hotel room, opting for 'alienated with minibar' over 'alienated and still at the table without any alternative dietary triangle sandwiches'. At other times I have elected to pull out of events, projects and applications at late stages. While I am often left feeling guilty for leaving others hanging, it is sometimes necessary for my mindbody health to get out. As Marilyn Frye writes about the politics of separation, the act of saying no can be agential and affirmative. The more I learn what not to get into, the less I find myself having to politely retract participation.

Of course, deciding what not to participate in is only one part—though a crucial and under-discussed part—of adhering to the mantra: How else can I relate? What else can I make? Strategies of avoidance are perhaps most important because of what they produce, the mindbody energy I need to relate and make differently, to build nourishing collaborations and focus my energy on projects that embody those reasons I became an academic: working with others to produce collective knowledge about histories of resistance that are too often left forgotten or untold. It is this bringing to life both in my subjects and in my working relationships with colleagues and students that keeps me here. At moments like this, when the present and future of our resistance as educators takes on a heightened significance, the university becomes a site of increased potential where the knowledge we make in the classroom can transform our students' perception of themselves as active political participants.

Anja: Thank you both for being so open to conversing in ways that are conducive to dialogue and generosity - to assembling vocabularies that are open to different ways of thought and relation. When I was considering the kinds of questions to propose here I wanted to find trajectories that could engender movement between different political scales, to address governance strategies, reforms and labour conditions as well as how to experiment with more convivial and caring modes of relating and collaborating. I find this to be a thread through both of your responses, so this is what I would like to continue with.

In a recent text 'The university is a factory; let's treat it as one', the commune analyse the labour and social conditions of the contemporary university as an institution synthesising intellectual and capital production. They pick up on the trend that has appeared over the past few years of locating the university as a site of labour in a way that could be described as a 21st century cognitive factory (which is not to negate the existence of material factory modes of production), and the researcher/ scholar as the 'cognitariat', seen for instance during the Middlesex occupations and in the university occupations and strikes in the US. While I find this kind of translation problematic, it does serve a dramatic purpose, that is to say it highlights the exploitative and precarious environment that the university is productive of. Since the advent of the latest financial crisis, there has been growing fears about scarcity

within educational institutions that play out co-incidental terrains of knowledge, pedagogy and labour: the decimation of non/ lower-earning (less conducive to vocational outcomes or industry linkages) departments and courses, fee increases, redundancies of staff (academic, administrative and service), casualised contracts, lower qualities of teaching, greater demands on outputs, new managerial and measurement systems. The dream of the passionate scholar, the sage, the public intellectual, engaging students in slow and considered process of learning and teaching has transformed into the reality of the adjunct lecturer struggling to write job applications and journal publications, attend conferences and prepare lectures on poor remuneration, good faith, and the idealistic hope of a tenured position one day in the future. This is nothing new. And nor is it necessarily as dialectic. But speaking about the university as a factory allows us to delineate a field of struggle through polemics. Such polemics serve the function of calling attention to the economic and political conditions through which the university as an institution is performed.

At the same time, to stay within this economic and ideological discourse is to neglect that, as Jamie pointed out, capital is also a social relation, as is the university. We need to stop producing it, as Guattari puts it. The way that we engage with one another as colleagues, teachers, students – our relations, affects, our compassions and solidarities, as much as our jealousies and insecurities – are reiterative of the ways of being and acting that constitutes the university, as much as its institutional and economic structure is. This is something picked up by Anna when she discusses the ways in which academics at times treat one another, how collaborations and collective work can become instrumentalised and alienated. This also has to do with fear, and with scarcity. Anna offers a strategy of avoidance to deal with this, and Jamie calls for nonviolent methods of communication. To add to this, I would like to appeal to notions of conviviality, friendship, care and solidarity. What seems to me to be lacking from many of these situations is a deep awareness and reassurance of others as allies rather than as competitors. From relatively early on in the university we are pitched in competition with one another. This plays out quite ferociously when one reaches the postgraduate level, having to run the gauntlet of criticism from peers and superiors as a rite of passage. At post-doctoral level, this competition extends into the job market, publications and networks. Time and time again we find ourselves in a position to sell ideas that are collaboratively and dialogically developed as individual property. This is part of the regime of intellectual property. At the same time, we are encouraged to make tactical 'links' with other institutions and bodies. It is hardly surprising that such an ecology breeds anxiety and conflict.

What we might try to practice in order to deal with these imperatives are ways of listening and responding that are caring. I think that it is important to acknowledge panic and collectively try to reassure it, without denying it. We cannot pretend that the economic market does not affect how we relate, as friends and as colleagues. But this does not need to be the sum of our capacities to reflect and to act. Correlative to Jamie's call for listening I'd like also to call for articulation, to finding ways to articulate our desires and our needs to one another. To share and be open about our vulnerabilities and our psychic and somatic wellbeing, to collectively address our common situations, to being considerate in finding pathways for re-appropriation that are not only individualised and to finding the means to negotiate and to meet these needs. This might also engender ways of dealing with alienation. By being empathetic and convivial we might find it easier to be reassuring and respectful of the capacities and needs we have of ourselves and of each other, which can lead to ethical and political practices of knowledge production that depart from those endemic to capital.

By relating through solidarity rather than competition we open space for refusing the structures upon which the university is founded. This may be terrifying. It may mean delving into territories that feel more uncertain than we currently inhabit. Are they really, though? Capitalism fuels itself on fantasies such as that of those countless others ready to take over whatever work you may have if you are unwilling, if you refuse. If we collaborate with one another to collectively organise our working conditions, to determine our own agendas, do we run this risk? Perhaps. But at the same time we make space for alternatives. And what we definitely create are different ways of relating to one another that are the foundations for acting in solidarity. Bifo Berardi, in *Precarious Rhapsody*, proposes that what is necessary is the creation of a '*recombinant function*, a function of subjectivity capable of spanning the various domains of social production, and recombining them within a paradigmatic frame that is not dependent on profit but social utility'. This is something that can transverse the university and beyond, to engender common ways of being and collaborating that are not confined to the imperatives of competition and intellectual capital.

Jamie: Since we began this interview over a month ago, massive cuts in education and other public services have been proposed by the national government and protests have begun. Yesterday, the 24th November, I joined the demonstration in Bournemouth. Afterwards, I find myself reflecting on your invitation, Anja, to consider the importance not only of listening but also of articulation. This event had little of either, following a fairly standard formula of gathering, walking with police escorts, pre-printed Socialist Worker placards and sporadic and half-hearted chanting directed at Tories and bankers. (In other words, I ached for a sense of connection, of imagination, of meaning!) To be fair, I did meet a woman working at a university who is very excited about the idea of a social centre for Bournemouth and I had a beautiful walk on a sunny day with a friend of mine who has just moved to town. I'm sure there were probably other forms of listening and articulation occurring throughout the march and after of which I was not aware. So, in no way do I wish to diminish the significance of this event. In many ways, it was wonderful. My question: what might be even more wonderful?

I would have loved to have heard directly from more of the people present. How were the various university students, school students, lecturers and others feeling about the proposed cuts? What were they wanting out of education? How do they feel about the institutions of which they are co-creators (including when that co-creation takes the form of enacting subjugation and more or less conforming to disciplinary norms)? What would they value? What would they like to see nurtured or transformed? What would they like to see destroyed (or perhaps composted or released) to make space, to free energy, for something new? And what would I like? Learning to articulate one's desires is, as Anja notes, crucial to autonomy. I would still, however, place the emphasis on listening; what can one meaningfully articulate without first listening carefully to oneself? I cannot speak my desires until I know what they are. Sure, I can say the things that pop into my head, but unless I am listening deeply, these are rarely as profoundly true as they might be. For myself, these thoughts are more likely to be very intellectualised, very protective and very self-conscious of how I'm perceived by others unless I've given myself quiet space in which to listen to myself. My impression is that this is also true for others. Of course, I leave it to the authority of your own experience to say whether or not this is true for you.

And so, I echo what Anja says about the importance of empathy and suggest that it might begin with oneself. In the nonviolent communication training I did in Edinburgh, we were invited to imagine that we each had empathy tanks; our capacity to give empathy to others depended on how much we needed empathy ourselves. Stopping and listening with empathy

and without judgement (or with a release of judgement) to our own feelings, our own desires, can give us a greater capacity to empathise with others. It can clear bitterness from the heart, the lungs. Or rather, this is my experience and what I've heard from others of theirs. Saying no, as you suggest, Anna, can be a way of stopping, of taking time away from what is painful or emotionally overwhelming. Listening for the yes behind the no, the desire behind the strategy of avoidance might also be very helpful in these situations. What is it that you're wanting that you not getting in a particular moment? How might you ask for it? How might you accept the pain of not having it?

I'm less comfortable using words like allies and comrades because that, to me, implies enemies; it suggests that particular conflicts over strategy are inherent and nearly essential. As though some of us really were, in the truth of ourselves, Marxists or anarchists or feminists and others really are, in the truth of themselves, capitalists or statists or patriarchs. I can be dominating, competitive. And those I might label my enemy can be deeply caring and cooperative. What violence might I do by drawing a line between us and declaring myself on the "right" side? For me, nonviolence or perhaps gentleness is based on the insight that we are all fundamentally interdependent. Even further, I would say that we are all part of the same thing, made of the same "soul-stuff" as Voltairine de Cleyre put it in her rejection of a punitive "justice" system. I do appreciate this in a spiritual sense, for example in the radical equality of Quakers and other non-hierarchical spiritual traditions, which recognise a divine light in each of us. For those less comfortable with talk of spirituality, we might see it in purely physical terms. We are all part of an ecosystem. Our bodyminds are not separate beings; we are all interbeing, interbecoming. We are made of the same physical stuff: carbon and oxygen and more from the food and air, which comes through bodies of beings past and present. To compete, either with colleagues or with ideologies, is, it seems to me, to imagine a separation, which is not real. It is a product of the mind, an abstraction projected on to the world. In this, I like Jiddu Krishnamurti's reminder that "Relationship is direct, not through an image." Direct relationship, direct action, direct democracy: they are all linked for me. So, rather than attempting to communicate with one's image of a person as friend or enemy, comrade or competitor, what would it mean, what would it feel like, to perceive the other directly and with compassion? What relationships, what forms of organisation, become possible only when we let go of idea of who the other is, of who we really are and of how we want others to imagine us?

So, I'm not entirely in agreement with the phrase "we cannot pretend that the economic market does not affect how we relate." I might say instead that we might acknowledge the ways in which we find our fears of poverty or loneliness or death leading us into strategies of doing work which is not our passion, not our desire, in order to get money or the esteem of those whose opinions we are encouraged to believe really matter. If this is accurate, in order to stop producing capitalism we might each need to learn to notice these fears arising, to notice the strategies we are drawn to out of these fears, to allow the fear to be there without letting it push us into the strategies which do not deeply sustain us. What we call capitalism does meet some of our needs, or else it wouldn't exist. What might be even more effective, more sustaining, more sustainable? Or, as Anna asks, how else can we relate? What else can we create? I sense that we are much more likely to find out when we are present with our emotions, our desires and each other.

Anna: Before we end this discussion, I'd like to pick up on Jamie's final thoughts as they interconnect with my feelings about the current student protests and university cuts. First, I am moved and inspired by the energy, imagination and courage that characterize much of the

current protest movement. I am also happy to see pockets of support from parents, faculty and staff that highlight many of the problems and challenges Anja astutely raises here. Yet, I also find myself feeling a bit saddened and I have been trying to locate where this sadness sprouts from. Jamie's reiteration of my comments helps clarify this for me. I am sad because I do not want the university to go back to the same way it was. I do not want to fight only for what needs to stop, nor do I want to preserve the system we already have. A demand for 'free education' must be about far more than student fees. While I am not in complete agreement with the tenants of the Really Open University's 3 Reforms, I find inspiration in their linkage of abolishing student fees with proscriptive for alternative means of funding and an abolition of the Research Excellence Framework and National Student Survey. As Anja says, the micro and macro dynamics of university life must be analysed in relation to each other. To add a few more final questions then: How can workable, sustainable alternatives be imagined alongside critiques of the university? How do we make both micro and macro demands as part of an 'anti-cuts' movement that is also centred on the wellbeing of our mindbodies and environments? How do we negotiate our desires—as students and teachers--to be accepted by (or into) the academe, with our deep understanding that its system of recognition is both the product and source of competition and precarity?

Anja: As a final point, I would also like to mention that what has been building in London since November 10 are waves of protests and occupations illustrating an active movement across constituencies. From strikes by tube workers and firefighters to the storming of the Lewisham Town Hall meeting to meetings and marches at Millbank and Whitehall made up of not only thousands of university students and staff but also teenagers and pensioners, solidarities are developing across often divided terrains. While these are in their incipient stages – they are fragile and temporal – they have the potential to grow and spread. In conversation at these actions desires for a general strike are being articulated, desires for a continuation of dissent and alternative ways of being and relating that are being lived out in various sites across the country. Here it is not so much about the university returning to how it was, but the university becoming something else (as The Really Open University's Three Reforms addresses), something not prescribed by the state, not only in economic terms but also about opening spaces for different practices of learning and exchanging knowledge in the present.

What such moments and spaces are engendering are common acts of politicisation, of ways of organising and collaborating. This is rife with antagonism and contestation, as well as sharing and generosity. It is easy to reduce the current dissatisfaction to a consumeristic attitude of students, but this ignores deeper, further reaching conflicts. What is happening now is a process that shows that things can be done otherwise, it shapes dialogue about cuts and fee increases through practices that are very rarely asserted or encouraged in the education system. And this can spark off and inspire momentum. At the same time, there is an awakening cognisance about labour, class compositions and struggles, about privilege and differential inclusion, in the university and beyond that usually tends toward obfuscation in student politics. The university is more widely being contextualised as a site of exploitation and casualised labour, from the cleaning and service staff, to administration and general staff, to sessional lecturers and some academics. The corporatisation of the university is being spoken about, as are the logistics of knowledge (re)production. The conditions of international students, their economisation and mobility, are being thematised. Such cognisance is imperative if a general strike is to occur and points of dissent are to connect. We are also seeing a diversity of tactics: direct action, playful cat and mouse swarming, non-

violent occupations, marches, outreach to community and schools. Every day collective desires are becoming more visible.

As Anna and Jamie indicate, what we might consider is how we are to make this sustainable. What happens when energy flags, when we become disheartened, when we are kettled, cold, tired, frustrated and hungry? How do we translate these moments into ongoing conversations and negotiations? How do we take care of each other, with one another? How do we involve more workers (within and beyond the university) to solidarity and participation? What common vocabularies and languages can we find to work together and how do we embrace untranslatability, incoherence, awkwardness and strife? How do we find silence and respite, how do we listen when everyone is shouting? How do we understand processes of subjectivation that are not only relative to reform, to winning, to numbers and percentages, but also to affects, friendships and enmities? And how, most importantly, do we collaboratively determine the worlds we want to live into our many futures? We don't have to have all the answers, the wish to ask and to listen is already something.

Jamie: I'm delighted to have had this opportunity to practice relating differently. Thank you, Anja and Anna, for this conversation intertwined with innumerable other acts around the world that demonstrate again and again that the dominant stories of how the world is or how we have to play the game are only stories. We need not believe them.

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