

The Alternative is at Hand

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Working within the black radical tradition, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney frame a rethink of concepts such as policy and planning, critique and study, debt and credit, and governance and logistics – they invite us to imagine and realise social life otherwise. Stacy Hardy spoke to them about the globalisation and professionalisation of education and the possibility of staging a revolution “with and for” the university.

Black Studies is traditionally seen as a subject within the university. You propose it as a method – a way of working. Can you say more about this methodology?

Lately, we’ve been concerned with articulating a distinction between Black Studies as a mode of regulated, (inter-)disciplined academic endeavour and “black study” as an irregular, anti-disciplinary force of thinking, performance and inhabitation.

Black study is the irreducibly social mode of concern that blackness enacts in its constant, preservative differentiation of and from itself. Laura Harris calls it an aesthetic sociality; RA Judy calls it a poetic sociality. We think of it as a coenobitically monastic kind of thing – a Thelonial, rather than Benedictine, monkishness. The laws it makes are against rule, against the rules. It happens in churches but also in clubs; it happens in cells and in the holds of ships. It persists, under duress, as criticism and celebration.

As knowledge is increasingly privatised and commodified, we’re hearing more and more calls to protect non-state and non-market access to knowledge as a resource for life – the knowledge common or creative commons we all share. What is the difference between the commons and the undercommons you propose?

It is true that American universities, as well as Canadian, Australian and European universities, have taken on a certain look both of capitalist accumulation through expansion and of fortified settlement in invaded territories. But this expansion of higher education is also a good example of the evolution of the comprador classes in many of the places into which they are expanding, and the solidification of a global capitalist class through finance (and property).

We should not expect the university to behave in any other way. It serves this class, even if part of that service is the production of other toiling classes. This expansion should not be viewed from the university’s perspective; that is, it is a waste of time to ask if such expansion is in keeping with the university’s mission, its commitments or even its viability.

Rather, this expansion should be understood as a chance to expand our antagonism through study with others in an expanded field of university labour, and thereby through an expanded antagonism to credit and an embrace of mutual indebtedness.

You draw similar distinctions between study and critique, policy and planning – can you say more about the differences between these terms?

It seems that there is a form of violence that accompanies what Angela Mitropoulos calls the democratisation of sovereignty. We name this violence, or rather its protocols and privileges, “policy”. For an expanded number of people who claim

sovereign or settler status today, policy becomes a way to prove this sovereignty, to assert a violently anti-social self-determination of being against what Denise Ferreira Da Silva would call affectable bodies, beings that open through and onto each other, that flourish through a proximity that is always changing, always unsettling.

Policy operates precisely by diagnosing a lack of self-determination in these other beings, and then, crucially, proscribing a 'remedy' to fix people who are said to have something wrong with them. But we use this term, policy, because we are not just talking about the long history of governmentality or biopolitics organised around experts or institutions, but of a new, self-deputisation among settlers who nominate themselves as sovereigns. The crude face of this is the American "stand your ground" legislation. But more insidious is the widespread proliferation of self-help, developmental, dietary, educational and psychological programmes that begin with the diagnosis that I am normal, or I have overcome affectability, and others are in need of being changed. Another branch of this, more ineffective perhaps, is the proliferation of political bloggers who have policies for everyone else and, more effectively, the proliferation of NGOs, whose premise is that there is something wrong with whole communities or peoples. These 'policy' makers are the equivalent of the knight riders in the Old South in the US – race vigilantes making sovereign law as they terrorise; but the 'democratisation' of these knight riders means they are a peril everywhere.

Against these riders, we start from the premise that there is nothing wrong with people, and this allows us, we think, to be attuned to the ongoing planning, the study already under way, among people; the talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it "study" is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. Most of this goes unrecognised because it does not take the form of 'proper critique', which is to say it is less vulnerable to being perverted into a diagnosis that whatever problems encountered are because something is wrong with those people over there. Such policy will either be effective in changing them or they will be placed in a zone of exclusion.

Neoliberalism has made competition the organising principle of society. Government cuts to universities mean departments, staff and institutes are increasingly competing for resources in order to survive. There is an atmosphere of envy – a focus on status and thinking in hierarchies, in combination with the wish to be part of a trend – that is characteristic of the academy. How is it possible to escape embracing the competitive model of neoliberalism and still survive within the current cut-throat academic environment?

We tend to see neoliberalism in a different way – not as the imposition but rather as the suppression of competition. This manifests not only in the oligarchical, monopolistic drive that animates neoliberal political and economic policies, but also in brutally exclusionary forms of 'inclusion' and 'democratisation', in which the imposition of interests on those whose rightful attitude toward the already existing order is antagonistic, is meant to establish a general submission to policy. Neoliberalism accentuates and more aggressively administers the unfreedom that has always characterised the 'free market' in theory and practice. But in this respect it is a philosophy of policing relations, in which the regulation of impoverishment is imagined and enacted. Certainly, this kind of regulation shows up in and as the dispersion of all kinds of sad, egocentric peculiarities. But this is a secondary phenomenon that responds to the insurgent forms of sharing engaged in by the poor in spirit who are, as you know, blessed in their refusal of the proper. This blessing is the fugitive drive and turn we've been trying to extend. The escape plan, the flight of fantasy, is its own resource and reward. We try to honour the history of those who consent to it. We're interested in how people keep on remaking the world in self-defence. We are interested in this because insofar as we have no interests we are interested in revolution. In this regard, Huey P Newton's understanding of the necessary relation between self-defence and revolution, which moved in conjunction with his rigorous analysis of neoliberal empire, is of the utmost importance to us.

The premium on profitable knowledge links the university with the state, companies, and CEO s and wealthy donors. How, as an academic, does one escape simply serving these masters?

This question reminds us of how we started working together – by examining the university as a workplace, as a place where

people labour – and no one more so than the student, whose labour is also the most disposable and discounted, whose labour is given credit and then tossed away, and whose credit is calibrated to massive debt. So the first thing to say might be that the academic, and the student, and anyone labouring in the university, ought to develop an antagonism toward credit, ought to be for the abolition of credit and the embrace of debt. Here it is important to step back from the dominant way debt is understood today, and the ‘jubilee’ politics that comes from this understanding – an economic understanding, and therefore at the most basic level, a capitalist understanding of debt. It rips apart social forms of dependence, responsibility, inheritance and futurity, extracting the economic from the social and thereby degrading the totality of social indebtedness, our greatest wealth.

When we think about the debt we owe to parents, or to community leaders, to musicians, painters or poets, to co-workers, or those who built roads and bridges, planted trees and grew crops, we devalue these debts because they cannot be paid, and valorise forms of debt that can be paid, can be the source of a credit-debt balance sheet that instigates work without end. It is necessary to see economic debt as a bourgeois abstraction from this real social debt, and credit as its weapon; to reject this and call for further mutual indebtedness, absorbing the economic back into social indebtedness, into debt that cannot be paid or credited, debt that no one would want paid back fully, or want to pay back fully, debt that expands our imagination of the social power we draw from history and from each other. For an antagonism to credit and a cultivation of debt! This does not serve the masters.

Universities are increasingly engaging the non-academic world and communities through the guise of civil society initiatives and NGOs – who themselves fund many research programmes. What are the dangers of this?

Non-governmental organisations, at least mainstream NGOs, are best understood as laboratories for governance. We use the term governance distinctly from either governmentality or government, though it has elements of these, and it has surely not replaced these entirely. But governance is emerging as a form of biopolitical control with some novel features.

Of course it is a mechanism for expanded comparison in the capitalist sense. Those who claim to have mastered the art of governance can move from running universities to running NGOs to running corporations to running states. But that is not its most interesting feature. Governance relies neither on expert knowledge (which can’t expand enough) nor legal and property categories, nor ideological categories. In other words, it operates not as governmentality, not government, not even as nation, race or hetero-normative patriarchy, though it is often placed in the service of all these. Governance operates without a ground, and in this sense shares an ambition with global capital that these other operations of productive control do not. In governance, people are not organised around a pre-defined interest but are supposed to bring their interests to the table, disinterestedly, in order to prove they understand governance as having no interest other than effectiveness and efficiency.

If one thinks about the NGO, governance is its real ethos today. The NGO no longer purports to speak for those who need fixing, but to enable those who need fixing to speak for themselves (as a first step to being fixed) and by speaking for themselves they articulate and define their interests and put those interests on the table, disinterestedly.

At a moment when capital is mining, we might say bio-prospecting, for more and more of our social capacities and affective and creative resonances, this volunteering of interests through governance is a way for capital to bring to the surface, bring into view, such capacities and resonances and put them to work. In this sense the NGO is a mobile laboratory for the university but also an advance on the university, which is still limited by expertise, at least in this domain of governance.

One of the products of the professionalisation of the university is the higher institute – research units and programmes largely dedicated to high-calibre research that operate inside the university but independently of it. It’s easy to see the seduction of these programmes. Some of the language they use could easily come from your book and yet they’re firmly entrenched in the capitalist agenda of the neoliberal university. How does one escape that seduction?

Sometimes it seems as if the kinds of institutes you describe are driven by the idea that it is necessary to sequester study or, more precisely, to protect study from students. For faculty, this results in the eternal quest for the golden fellowship; but

now, the desire for professional advancement and approbation, combined with the sense that one's real work can only be accomplished when it is protected from the incursion of students, from their demands for time and contact, is evilly compounded by a paradoxically anti-social ethos of teamwork and problem-solving, which is designed to add value to academic work by rendering it useful for capital. We think of this trend as anti-social because egocentrism is accentuated rather than attenuated in this regime. We continue to believe that authentic social and intellectual life, in all of its incalculable internal difference and complexity, occurs much more often than not in the unregulated relations of the institutes, which is another way of saying the undercommons, where escape is, quite literally, of the essence.

Interdisciplinarity is a buzzword in academic research today. Many universities are establishing new interdisciplinary units as new needs and professions emerge. How is your idea of collaboration, solidarity, connection and insurrection different from interdisciplinarity?

We tend to think of interdisciplinarity as a modality of the disciplinary structure of the human sciences. It extends that which it is supposed to oppose and the managers of the corporate university understand this perfectly, hence their enthusiasm for it. Folks who are trying to think in (which is to say, to think their way out of) the university have to move through the openings that exist between the rock of interdisciplinarity and the counter-reactionary hard place that is being built and settled by people who think the humanities can be saved by returning to the disciplines. This pseudo-conflict is none of our business. Black study is complicit and toward the general antagonism. It critiques the objects and methods of the sciences of man even as it continually creates its own richly differentiated aim. One of the reasons we distinguish black study from Black Studies is so that we can more effectively articulate the history of thinking, which the conflict/mixture of the faculties seeks to regulate.

We can observe a rise in the significance of certified expert knowledge bearing academic institutions' seal of approval – BA s/MAs/PhDs, Clusters of Excellence and Collaborative Research Centers, all of which seem to erect barriers against social advancement from the margins, against that which is self-made, is built on improvisation and situational knowledge. How does one bring informal knowledge into the university under the current conditions?

The university is and always has been infused with and animated by informal knowledge, which it exploits and tries to regulate. We think the question, now, might be how to extricate informal knowledge from the university and reconnect it to the informal knowledge that has always existed outside the university. Maybe the university is best understood as a temporary refuge for a certain modality of thinking. At best it is a hole in the wall. In this regard, it makes no sense to be for or against it; rather, we are enjoined to figure out how to be with and for its expansion, all the way up to the point of its disappearance. Some of us are lucky enough to have access to the space and time, and company that are gathered there; some of us have begun to think that open access to it is an absolute imperative; and some of us are now thinking that open access to the university is its righteous and desirable demise. The proliferation of lines of flight to and from the university will have enacted an absolute permeability, which is a consummation devoutly to be wished. At that point, the actuality of a special place for study will be nowhere and everywhere.

We've seen widespread protest at universities around the world and yet the mobilisation hasn't had an effect on government policy. Do you see any hope for protest or riots as a way to change things?

We want a new complaint; we want to keep on pushing the old-new poetics of complaint in profligate, riotous forms of singing with and dancing for. There's always a riot going on, which is cool. How could we be against that? We refuse to be against what we are. We want to enjoy ourselves and, in any case, this is an absolute imperative precisely because we want to keep on becoming, keep on making, what we are. Revolution in (poetic) language is part of that, certainly. We live a long history of the sentimental complaint; we don't have the right, and in any case there is no need, to relinquish a single thing, a single word, a single riotous raising of our fists or feet or voices. We just have to keep trying to complain better, to feel better, way beyond the point of having got to where, or what, we think we want.

You refuse to be for or against the university, or the critical academic as the player who holds the "for and against" logic in place. At the same time you call for revolution to dismantle the oppressive structure. Can you say more about this concept of a revolution that isn't for or against, but which is what you describe

as “with and for”?

Let’s return to Newton and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The Panthers were revolutionaries and they were for self-defence. Now if you think about this you realise you are in the presence of a new kind of revolutionary thinking, but based within the long tradition of black radical thought. Revolutionary thought for Robespierre, if not Toussaint, and for Lenin, if not Cabral, has tended to involve the production of a new revolutionary man, and sometimes woman, as well as the destruction of the old, as with Fanon.

But with the Panthers, self-defence is the revolution, that is to say the effort to preserve and extend a way of black life against violent occupation and segregation, and in this sense the Civil Rights Movement as a whole could be understood as a movement for self-defence. This is what it would mean to be for and with, with the people, as the Panthers would say, as well as for their self-defence.

The destruction and newness of the antagonistic world prevent the development of actually existing (black) social life. Now, the critical academic cannot be part of this. He or she brings this for and against logic into the revolution, and starts critiquing actually existing social life, or sorting it between what he or she is for and what he or she is against. It may be that study requires self-defence, but it follows that study is a form of self-defence too, and that to the extent that study persists in the university, a form of self-defence persists in the university, and this would be a reason to stay, not to fix the university, but to prevent the university from trying to fix us.

What does it mean to critically disengage ourselves from positions of power, while simultaneously engaging power in order to exploit positions of influence in the service of anticolonial and decolonising struggles?

The romance languages offer us a distinction between types of power that English can’t quite afford. The distinction that Foucault makes between *pouvoir* and *puissance*, to which [Giorgio] Agamben corresponds when he distinguishes *potere* from *potenza*, helps us to think and live the difference between the necessary degeneracy of sovereignty, whose intensification-in-dispersal means it cannot even protect itself, and the irreducible generativity of insurgency, in which self-defence and auto-dispossession are all bound up with one another. To think and live that difference – to make a preferential option for the insurgent, the poor, the one in whom sovereign power is exhausted, in favour of a whole other breath and song – is to move independently of the false alternatives of engaging with and disengaging from sovereignty. Critical disengagement from positions of power implies a kind of voluntarism that would affirm what it opposes if it were possible (which it isn’t). We don’t know what it would mean to disengage from sovereignty’s brutalities, whose traces we will always bear. At the same time, we already are irreducibly irreducible to those brutalities and anticoloniality is continually given, continually refreshed and transformed, in our performance of what we are, in our refusal of the influence we are under.

The alternative is at hand.



This conversation features in the August 2013 edition of the *Chronic*. [Available here in print or as a PDF.](#)

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Ben V February 14, 2015 at 1:51 pm #

Paul Gilroy paraphrasing CLR James: "Black Studies is an alternative account of human civilisation." in *Absent from the Academy* (<http://vimeo.com/76725812>)

Plus CLR's essay, *Black Studies and the Contemporary Student*:
<http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/james.pdf>

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- RT @Writivism: Introducing: the #Writivism2016 East African Community of speakers, from Rwanda, Kenya and elsewhere. (Aug 22 - 28) <https://t.co/w9M8SoJdMm>, Aug 12

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