Neoliberalism in the universities

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In 2006 UCU members went on a three month assessment boycott. Despite official support from the National Union of Students (NUS) it suffered from a lack of support amongst ordinary students. The media reported that students were "being subjected to 'disruption and uncertainty' as lecturers continue their action for better pay."1 Reasons behind the UCU action did not tend to go past the demand for a pay increase and the focus was generally on unmarked dissertations. Indeed, students as 'customers' were being short-changed. What the assessment boycott actually represented was a resistance to steady attacks on the structure of higher education institutions in Britain, since Thatcherite policy in the 1980's. These attacks and the need for resistance the subject of Alex Callinicos' pamphlet 'Universities in a Neoliberal World'. It examines how big business and capitalist governments have created a 'knowledge economy' and managed to capture universities to make them profitable. It addresses the changing role of universities and their relationship to the class-divide in a neoliberal economy.

What Callinicos rightly does is place the changing role of universities in a world market context. Addressing the fact that Britain is a capitalist, globalised economy, which means privatisation of public services and therefore exposure to market fluctuations, he provides a thorough Marxist critique of the situation and links the struggle against neo liberal attacks on universities to the struggle against neoliberal attacks everywhere; "According to neoliberalism, private enterprise is best. This is the rationale for the large-scale privatisation of the provision of health services being forced through by New Labour."2 His real success in this pamphlet then, is that he recognises the proletarianisation of university lecturers and academics- "Proletarianisation is the process of being reduced to a wage labourer, dependent on her ability to sell her labour power on the market and subject to managerial power at work. Precarity is the condition of insecurity experienced by increasing numbers of workers and would-be workers in the neoliberal era- of being permanently on the edge of unemployment."3 Callinicos backs up his argument well, being himself a professor at one of the Russell Group universities competing for the big money handouts for research. One of the real strengths in the pamphlet is the light shed on the Research Assessment Exercise initiatives. The RAE, by its own description "is to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. Institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant so that the infrastructure for the top level of research in the UK is protected and developed."4 This would logically fit with the government's plans to subject the university system in England to a kind of Americanisation. After all, the better the university the more it costs the student, so why not the better the university the more money it receives? RAE works on a numerical star rating system. The higher the number the more money per academic. This is all very well except what Callinicos also points out is that universities have been split into research institutions and teaching institutions and if you happen to be the latter then you will not be receiving the 5* rating which means no £30,000 plus handouts. The unsurprising news being that the 'research' institutions tend to be Oxbridge, Manchester, Leeds, UCL, Kings and Imperial (for example) which means the ex-polytechnics like Hertfordshire or Middlesex are missing out. It is at this point, that Callinicos addresses the real issue- "that a hierarchy of institutions helps to reproduce the class inequalities that are already pervasive in the schooling system."5 Privately educated students go to Oxford and their comprehensive counterparts go to Oxford Brookes; thus the class divide is cemented and institutionalised thanks to some research funding system. The problem with Callinicos' pamphlet is that he takes a typically superficial SWP look at capitalism and resistance. Although he offers a developed understanding of governmental attacks on institutions and academics he lacks a real analysis of the effects this will have on the consumers of university education: students. There have been some serious hits made to students since the Thatcher years. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this pamphlet, is that NUS was stripped of its power to fund political actions, under the banner of 'ultra-vires' and every neoliberal
government since (be it Conservative or New Labour) has slashed its power more and more. NUS is effectively a charity that may or may not speak out for students. In regards to the increase in tuition fees and no cap (there is a year on increase in tuition fees, around £70) NUS was unable to do anything apart from show demonstrations. Callinicos, as an SWP member, celebrates the mass demonstrations. In his conclusion he draws comparisons to large scale mass movements such as the fight against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999, the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001, as well as the recent riots and protests against the CPE laws in France. What he misses out in these comparisons is that it was not purely numbers on the street that made them impressive but the potential to organise really radical struggle against the government. If, as he rightly points out, there is a process of proletarianisation taking place amongst academics and students (who will eventually become part of the workforce) then a rank and file student movement to organise action is crucial. There is also a need for a student union that takes militant action alongside trade unions. Although the NUS supported the UCU back in 2006 its lack of any active support meant that the students it ‘represents’ were uninformed about the strike and it was felt that they suffered because of it. In the preface Paul Mackney makes the unashamedly optimistic statement that “the first generation of students to suffer from top-up fees are the very school students who walked out over the war on Iraq, who have engaged with social movements […] I remain convinced that just as they have won the argument for withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, they will find new ways of organising resistance.” A typical pat-on-the-back for the Stop The War Coalition, who maintain that the constant demonstrations in Britain was the primary reason for any troop withdrawals. Unfortunately the leadership of students around the campaigns against top up fees and the introduction of loans instead of grants was weak and indecisive - the NUS was crippled by a lack of militancy caused by bureaucratism and being infested with careerists who have their eyes on jobs as MP’s after university. A series of moderately successful demonstrations against the neo liberal policies gradually diminished until they ceased altogether. Now the NUS is fighting for its life as a democratic organisation as the right wing try and force through the governance review to finally politically neuter the NUS.

By focusing so much on the effects of government policies on institutions and the effects that this will have, he also misses out on inequalities felt by ethnic minorities (who still make up a tiny proportion of the student population) women and students from less privileged backgrounds. The Guardian recently reported that female graduates take, on average, 5 years longer to pay back their student loans, compared to male graduates, thanks to a never ending gender pay gap. Although he has exposed the inequalities in the way that the institutions are funded, he has not gone further to explain the effects this may have on the students who attend these universities. Callinicos’ argument is very true - the only alternative to neoliberalism is resistance. The only alternative to neoliberalism in universities is for those exploited, both students and workers, to organise effective resistance and solidarity against neoliberalism. ‘Universities in a Neoliberal World’ is very well researched and, at times, makes some very complicated capitalist jargon very clear. However, there are occasions that leave the reader none the wiser, for example in the chapter ‘Neoliberalism and the “knowledge economy”’ you are left feeling less clear about the knowledge industry then you were to begin with. That is to say that there are some points which Callinicos over complicates. An important pamphlet, which generally demystifies acronyms and exposes the true intentions of university vice-chancellors. The major weakness of it is the weakness that the SWP has in most of its campaigns, it offers no real strategy to win. In the end we must ask why the massive student movements in Greece and France which rocked their respective countries when they were faced with similar neoliberal reforms have not happened here. The end chapter concludes with “organise yourselves: together we can change things” - a very uplifting sentiment but not clear enough on the methods and strategy of struggle that students and workers must adopt.

ENDNOTES


3. ibid p 24.
4 HEFCE, 'Bout the RAE' 2001

http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/AboutUs/ [2]

5 Callinicos op cit.

6 ibid p 4.

7 Polly Curtis 'Women take longer to repay student loans' in The Guardian 2 January 2008.

8 Callinicos, op cit p 4.

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