



FUL's free work

Committee – The Free University of Liverpool

Introduction

The Free University of Liverpool (FUL) was set up in November 2010 to explore an alternative model of Higher Education. First and foremost conceived as a protest, FUL stands in direct opposition to the radical free market practices implemented by the coalition government in the UK. FUL's protest has been joined by over eighty leading academics and artists who have signed up as 'visiting artists and scholars' (www.thefreeuniversityofliverpool.wordpress.com). FUL is currently running its Foundation Degree in Culture and Performance and will embark on a BA in Cultural Praxis in 2012. At any other university in the UK a BA will cost up to £9,000 a year. At FUL it will cost the student nothing.

The Free University of Liverpool is part of a growing movement of alternative education practices in the UK and helped co-organise a national conference with the Free University Network (or 'FUN' for short) in Oxford earlier this year. (www.sustainingalternatives.wordpress.com/conference/). What seems to characterise this movement so far in the UK, is the enthusiasm participants have to resist the marketisation, instrumentalisation and dehumanisation of mainstream educative practices. People involved are all working 'for free' to protest and establish alternative, sustainable spaces of co-learning.

The practice of free work, therefore, is a key issue. Below, the founders of FUL (the Committee, an anonymous group of three artists and academics) reflect on their own subjective positions in relation to 'free work' and FUL. The text has been divided into three separate voices where each 'voice' expresses a particular aspect of how FUL grapples with free work. In order to emphasise the multivalency, the voices have chosen to present themselves according to the standard typeface settings available with most word processors: 'normal' *'italics'*

and 'bold'. The following attempt to flag up issues with free work is meant to be read more as an artwork than an academic essay. For example, we have deliberately left out contemporary debates regarding notions of 'unproductive labour' (Harvie, 2003) or entrenched neoliberal managerialist notions of 'macroeconomics' and its relation to free work (Blanchard, 2011) in order to leave as much room as possible for the connective interplay between the three voices and what they are seeking to articulate. The first voice cites some academic references by way of offsetting the interpersonal reflections of 'Voice 2' and 'Voice 3', whilst at the same time making sure that FUL locates itself in relation to academic, cultural discourses, some of which are explicitly politicised. In the context of a struggle around 'free work' we feel it is important not just to reference that politicisation but to try to demonstrate it as much as possible. The sometimes contradictory nature of the beliefs of the Committee (and FUL more generally) are not just questions of temporality theory (Hammer, 2011) or productive labour (Harvie, 2003) but also a question of clashing personalities and priorities. The Committee feels it is crucial that those elements are included in a discussion of free work. The net result is, hopefully, a melody, composed of three different octaves that sing a relevant and complex song about the productive but always-already problematic practice of 'free work' in the context of the struggle against the instrumentalisation of higher education in the UK.

The dialogue

Voice 1: 'normal'	Voice 2: 'italics'	Voice 3: 'bold'
<p>'Shifts' and 'Free Time'</p> <p>'Capitalist production therefore drives, by its inherent nature, towards the appropriation of labour throughout the whole 24 hours in the day' (Marx, 1990:367).</p> <p>About a quarter of the way through Volume 1 of <i>Capital</i> Marx is keen to understand what working 'shifts' are. This is in order to understand how surplus value is produced</p>	<p><i>'Whispers about Free Work - reflexive provocation foregrounded through lived experience'</i></p> <p><i>Listen, this is not free work. This is my research day. I am being paid for this. I might not be able to cash in this work in terms of REF 2014 as this work is written under the collective name of The Committee, but I will still benefit. This is me being a critical thinker. This is me being a scholar. This is</i></p>	<p>'On positionalities, free work, utopia and vertigo'</p> <p>The meaning of working for free at FUL shifts depending on the different positions we occupy, so does FUL...</p> <p>I became engaged with FUL while I was working as an hourly paid lecturer</p>

<p>via the miserable working conditions of employees of the bakery, wallpaper, match and linen industries of the 19th century. It is not rocket science to deduct that the more you exploit your labour force the higher your profits are likely to be. Marx is keen to point out that a very significant factor of this exploitation is the constant cutting away of free time for labourers; at meal times, toilet breaks etc. This means that the labour power - the only commodity the worker can offer to guarantee their own survival - is under constant, unending and relentless pressure. If a balance is not struck between what is demanded of a worker and what that worker is capable of, then the result is, what Japanese companies call, karōshi - death by overwork.</p> <p>David Harvey tells us that, after Marx's insights we might conclude 'there is no such thing as a natural working day just various constructions of it [...] in order to maintain a continuity of flow at all costs.' (Harvey 2010:144).</p> <p>For the capitalist, part of the solution to the</p>	<p><i>about recognition.</i></p> <p><i>Listen, the Committee (of which I am a part) gets to contribute to the debate about Free Work. We have been recognized by the editorial team. We decided that recognition was worth us writing this 'provocation' for free.</i></p> <p><i>Listen, when did we stop being surprised at the fact that academic writing does not pay? Why have we naturalized non-payment for critical thinking/writing? Do we assume that it is scholars in full time employment who usually write the articles, and therefore are already paid for by their institutions?</i></p> <p><i>Listen, I am in full time employment, but I am also an artist-activist. I work overtime, I work all the time. I reckon that most of my labour is for free: the raising of the family, the household duties, the extended family, the social appearances. And, clearly, such free labour blends into life - life becomes labour. It is impossible to keep account of the differences. And some would argue that it is not</i></p>	<p>in HE where I assumed I would eventually win a contract and stay in academia. For diverse reasons I didn't get a contract and I doubt if now I will ever find a way back in; at the moment the level of personal and ideological compromise feels too high, but who knows, the whole point is that our positions shift...</p> <p>Not working in academia but being involved in a protest like FUL that positions itself in opposition to the current HE system in the UK affects the very purpose of working for free at FUL. Free work at FUL is not anymore a form of finding a space to think critically outside what was becoming an oppressive institution. In theory I am already 'free' from it, but to which level do I want that? FUL should be free work done with joy because it is premised on the practice of the transformation of the world. Reality though tells me that the work is hard, not only in terms of time commitment but also emotionally. In addition, in situations of precarity, working or engaging with FUL, can be a double-</p>
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<p>problem of maximising surplus value is to introduce working 'shifts'. This goes as far as any measure might to maintain the constant use of the machines. Time is money or more accurately: the maximisation of the potential of time through the exploitation of labour power results in the highest levels of surplus value for the capitalist. In essence what this delivers for the worker is 'time to rest' or some free time. When the worker has eaten and slept, taken some leisure time, albeit very little, or, in other words, has 'replenished their labour power', they have to get back to work.</p> <p>Adorno, about a century later builds on this basic insight in his work on 'free time', stating that 'organised freedom is compulsory' (Adorno, 1991:164). In other words, the illusion of free time exists as a function of the maximisation of working time. Or to put it yet another way: essentially there is no distinction between working time and free time. All time is at the service of the production of surplus value. Under present conditions we are</p>	<p><i>productive to delineate. Says who, for whom? My full time university work pays me exactly the same every month regardless of the amount of work I give. Does that mean that some 'free labour' is paid for?</i></p> <p><i>Listen, I am now engaged in the Free University of Liverpool. This is my activist work. This is free work, but it is also paid for from time to time. Occasionally the members of the Committee get invited to give talks and get paid £250 or so. Once the members of the Committee got £1000 for facilitating two weekend workshops. I can say that I am in between the two strands, the waged and unwaged work. The world of both waged and unwaged work is flexible and exploitative. At the end of the day, it demands productivity regardless of it being waged or not. We are here, producing, working away, thinking, writing. There's a luxury in paid work, there's also a luxury in deciding not to do paid work.</i></p> <p><i>Listen, this is my big point. I am more concerned with my productivity than with 'free work'. What is it that keeps me going, over and over and</i></p>	<p>edged sword that situates me in the risky position of becoming unemployable at HE institutions.</p> <p>Some questions become more urgent. Who and what benefits mostly from FUL? Students that don't get nationally recognised qualifications? How fragile is this initiative and is it able to support processes of people really searching for an alternative? Would it be more valuable if our effort was mainly geared towards the latter rather than as a protest against the existing HE system? Or on the contrary do we need to fight and get back our right to use knowledge and the structures generated by universities through many hundreds of years, to be able to then imagine and build something new? There is a difficult tension within these sets of operations...</p> <p>Still, working for free at FUL offers a space to question one's own position. Like radical pedagogies, FUL can be a tool to find positions in life that we can live with, psychically and socially. But again, lets not forget</p>
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<p>always working.</p> <p>In this light, from the 19th century to today, what the labour movement, unions and collective bargaining have won for workers is the right to continue working at all times. Perversely what we are entitled to at the moment is access to the conditions that allow us to never stop working.</p> <p>At FUL this right is acknowledged, negotiated, cursed and carried out. There is an understanding amongst The Committee that our capitalistic subjectivities are developed to such a degree that we organise our lives into 'shifts'. This way everything gets done between the three of us, within the working day. The machines are never switched off and the production line is always moving.</p> <p>This is done in order to maximise something. But given that we are alter-capitalist anarchists, against the production of surplus value that involves exploitation of others or ourselves, what is that 'something'? Marx, Adorno and Harvey's insights have helped, but there's</p>	<p><i>over again? Productivity is even more apparent in so called 'free work' than with 'paid work'. See, paid work brings in money, it soothes me and my family. It sedates, it helps, it gets things ticking over. There is less concern about it; it is routine. 'Free work' is dangerous and risky. It is uncomfortable and compromising. It is validating. It is about recognition. It can also be about social change</i></p> <p><i>Listen, it's Sunday 7pm and here I am playing with words, composing my thoughts, restructuring my mind, making my processes more articulate, edited for you. For the moment, I conclude: there is free thinking, but this writing is labour-some. It is yet to be reviewed by the members of the Committee and the editorial team, and the readers. It is for someone else.</i></p> <p><i>[deletion of three sections:</i></p> <p><i>always productive, always saying 'yes', always eager to be heard...</i></p> <p><i>free to answer, free to provoke, free to listen...</i></p> <p><i>stop work, stop email, stop</i></p>	<p>that FUL is a protest, and it is very different to protest from a safe financial position than from one of precarity. For some it might improve their psychic and intellectual position, so they find freedom and a way of dissenting without having to give up a job that satisfies their economic needs. Others, like myself, are looking to find not only how to improve their psychic and intellectual position but also how to find a sustainable economic position.</p> <p>The opposing forces generated by people's positionalities are operating everywhere, including any HE Institution. There is a radical difference though in a space that acknowledges that and explores it critically and openly and a space that uses hierarchies in the classroom to naturalize or even neutralize it. But once again, for the ones that are not already in stable financial positions studying/teaching at FUL pushes them further to find ways of being that might not be financially safe at least for the</p>
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<p>something missing.</p> <p>For us the existence of FUL is the best guarantor of conditions within which we are able to engage in the processes of humanisation with each other as Committee members (and other participants) in relation to higher education and knowledge production. Our 'surplus value', the thing to which everything at FUL is directed, is our own humanisation, as fully as possible, in an increasingly dehumanising knowledge industry, replete with managerialism, worker exploitation and the maximisation of surplus value in financial terms. FUL's methods are to protest wherever and whenever it can. To this end we put in long, long shifts at FUL, even at the risk of committing small acts of karōshi.</p>	<p>commands... live.]</p> <p><i>Listen, this is my final note. I estimate that it took me some three hours to write this up - with edits and deletions and re-writes and hesitations. It took me twenty-one days of thinking as well. There are supposed to be 700 words here. There are three of us in the Committee; each one is supposed to write 700. Too many words as it stands (803). Let me get rid of the overflow, delete the surplus and set them free...</i></p>	<p>forseeable future.</p> <p>So yes, on the one hand free work at FUL can be the means of accessing a new world, or of creating a space to imagine one when the current state of affairs around us does not allow it. On the other hand, it seems, that in times of real transition, when somehow an alternative has to be found if one is to survive, and going back to old models is not so easy anymore, some people might get lost ... it feels like a vertiginous process and I suffer from a fear of heights...</p>
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references

Adorno T. (1991) 'Free time', in *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. London: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2010) *A companion to Marx's Capital*. London: Verso.

Marx, K. (1990) *Capital*. London: Penguin.

the authors

The Free University of Liverpool is run by a collective of artists and activists (aka The Committee) devoted to the idea and practice of a free education for anyone who wants or needs it.

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