The New Spirit of the University

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In his commentary on the University of Amsterdam occupation, Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel underlines what he sees as the major pitfall of the current protest movement: students and staff appeared to be indulging in "a reactionary defense of privileges without being able to formulate a convincing narrative concerning the public task of the university", a supposedly reactionary stance that hinges on "elitist notions such as Bildung". [1] What the protests lack, according to Schinkel, is a thorough analysis of the university's role in the turn towards "cognitive capitalism". The protests themselves are, in fact, a symptom of the fact that "we are on the brink of a major political-economic transformation that", Schinkel argues, "raises the question of what will remain of what we cherish about the university after that transition is completed".

Although his analysis of contemporary, cognitive capitalism's rationale is accurate (perhaps foremost because it repeats canonical post-autonomist critiques of the phenomenon), Schinkel completely misses the mark in his assessment of the current "discontent" among students and staff in Dutch academia. Moreover, in his criticism of the protest movement, he echoes contemporary capitalism's rationale much more faithfully than he thinks, and significantly more than the students and staff fighting for a "New University". By branding these as "reactionary", Schinkel himself uses the insult of choice used by managers and faculty boards alike: in today's corporate university, those who oppose higher management are inevitably labeled "conservative" and "intransigent". The obvious straw man, the reactionary protester, is intended to validate Schinkel's own analysis of the "profound transformation" cognitive capitalism has in store for us, with the occupation of the Maagdenhuis serving as a mere symptom, albeit a symptom of misunderstanding of what is actually going on. His straw man subsequently allows for Schinkel's conveniently open-ended analysis: that "cognitive capitalism" is so radically new, that it demands a revolution that as yet has no model, and, thus, the protesting academic community in Amsterdam are left unable to fathom the significance of such a revolution.

Not only were the protests that culminated in the occupation of the Maagdenhuis entirely about the transition toward cognitive capitalism – or better still: the protests were concerned with the *consolidation* of the transition process towards cognitive capitalism that, in the Netherlands at least, has been accelerating since the 1990s – these protests also identified and experimented with alternatives to the lack of democracy that characterises contemporary capitalism. This is why the occupation constitutes a landmark event: it was a passionate response to the transformation of the socio-economic and political texture of a Western capitalist-parliamentary democracy insofar as this transformation is expressed in the mutation of the university.

It was not a coincidence that the protesting students and staff immediately turned the administrative headquarters of the university – and even more symbolically: the board

offices – into a de facto "New University" where they operated a seven-week program of lectures, debates, workshops and happenings, none of which ever mentioned the term *Bildung*. [2] They did, however, extensively – and literally – address the role of the university vis-à-vis the major issues of what Boltanski and Chiapello have coined "the new spirit of capitalism": the financialisation of the university, the role of the university in the globalised fluxes of semio-capitalism, precarity in academia, the cannibalistic annexation of the humanities by the creative industries, the (im)possibilities of critical thought in the knowledge economy and the disciplinary force of debt. The students did this not because we are "on the brink" of a transformation towards a new type of capitalist production, but because they and the vast majority of (younger and precarious) scholars *have never known any other type of capitalist production*.

The "transformation" that Schinkel detects is, to a large extent, already behind us: the Maagdenhuis occupation marks the moment of consolidation of the turn towards a post-Fordist, cognitive capitalism (and the concurrent hegemony of neoliberal ideology). Like many of the protests we have witnessed during this crisis and austerity-ridden period, it is a protest *from within* a university system that is profoundly altered by a debt-driven, immaterial, post-democratic, post-bourgeois capitalism. Even the means of the protest, its forms and aesthetics, are derived from the protest strategies used worldwide in the struggle against cognitive capitalism, and rely heavily on post-autonomist theorisations of resistance against cognitive capitalism (the very ones that Schinkel quotes: Virno, Lazzarato, etc). The protesters in Amsterdam effectively used the full post-autonomist arsenal: occupation, the blockade of information and capital flows within the contemporary university and metropolis, horizontal and swarm-like organisation – all of them forms of *offensive retreat* or *creative exodus* from the impetuses of cognitive capitalism. Tellingly, the protesting students and staff were eager to invite anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, the somewhat reluctant mouthpiece of the Occupy movement, to share activist knowledge and explicitly allied themselves with the international "red squares" movement that emerged in Québec several years ago, and which addressed all of the issues Schinkel identifies as pertaining to the "transformation" that he claims they somehow missed.

To maintain that the protests heralded a demand for a form of "democratisation" that is limited to referendums or that merely seeks to join the institutional decision-making process, as Schinkel does, is an obvious misinterpretation because the protesters are attempting to prefigure truly *contemporary* forms of direct democracy while denouncing the vacuity of representative democracy - including its revisionist phantasm of the referendum. This is why the protests are truly antagonistic – and divisive not just within the narrow world of Dutch academia, but in society at large. They simply took the turn toward cognitive capitalism-cum-neoliberalism for granted, and, from there, began to carve their way out. Subsequently, they grasped the *end of political modernity*, the end of the emancipatory project that determined the social struggles of the previous two centuries, and tried to envision forms of protest *after political modernity*. They are intimately aware of the demise of bourgeois capitalism and its institutions such as the university. They are conscious of the fact that the university has been transformed from an institution for the reproduction of relations of production to a *site for the unmediated production of surplus value*. If anything, and unlike Schinkel, they are fully aware of how the rationale of cognitive capitalism – the real subsumption of knowledge, communication and creativity – also signifies a return to the *archè* of capitalism itself: the relentless phagocytosis of society under the law of value.

As Alain Badiou argues: politics is a mode of thought. The thoroughly political protests that have shaken the University of Amsterdam – and Dutch society in general – are also thought events because in the shift toward new political practices, they offer new conceptualisations of a politics that is truly contemporary. As such, they show that the traditional – or should we say traditionalist? – academic critique of Willem Schinkel, a

critique of paradigm shifts, totalities and straw men, is ineffectual to the very "cognitive capitalism" it identifies and bemoans. His critique lacks any power of alternative, and thus lacks any true analytical capacity, since it is entirely the product of the very type of bourgeois capitalism that hinges on the universe of *Bildung* and democracy that has effectively been swept away over the past thirty years and has been defunct for a good quarter of a century. Thus, the radically new that announces itself is not "cognitive capitalism", but the New University.

Editorial Common Knowledge *[www.onlineopen.org/common-knowledge]*

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Footnotes

1. See Willem Schinkel, "Kennis is Markt", *De Groene Amsterdammer,* 26.03.2015, pp. 36–41.
2. Except for one brilliant poster against the modern languages department budget cuts that read: *Bildung? Sorry, I never learned German*.

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