

The University as a Space of Resistance (2007)
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Karl Marx is famous for his dialectical argument that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction [1]. Due to the exploitation inherent in capitalism, in which the majority of people are forced to work for the financial benefit of a small ruling class, Marx says that the workers will unite against their oppressors and replace capitalism with a system based on egalitarian, socialist principles. This dialectical argument is important to keep in mind when considering whether meaningful social justice can be won in the present capitalist system. As a student activist, I am particularly interested in how this analysis applies to the formal education system.

One can see how formal education is dialectically both a tool of the capitalist system and a space of resistance. Formal education is a tool of the capitalist system in that the education system is responsible for replenishing the necessary pool of educated workers needed to sustain the post-industrial economies of countries such as Canada and for conditioning workers to believe in and support the capitalist system. In contrast, education at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels is also a space of resistance where students can collectively learn to question the world around them, develop criticisms, and consider possible alternatives to the status quo.

In this paper, I focus on the university as a site for social justice struggles, in which these struggles form the potential basis of a more democratic alternative to the current state of affairs. I begin this essay by providing some context in terms of the current climate at my institution, the University of Toronto (UofT) in 2007. Afterwards, I suggest that reaching a more democratic university is possible by analyzing some major themes in the history of student activism and student organizing currently happening on campus.

CLIMATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Neoliberal [2] policies from the federal and Ontario provincial government have resulted in the chronic underfunding of colleges and universities while tuition fees and debt loads have skyrocketed and reliance on private donors has increased dramatically. These neoliberal conditions have resulted in a dangerous process of *corporatization*: the restructuring of research, education, services, and the physical space of the university according to profit-driven business models [3]. More broadly, corporatization refers to any reconfiguration of public institutions according to private sector principles.

A quick scan of recent developments on the UofT St. George campus demonstrates the active force of corporatization: Second Cup was permitted to expand by taking over half of the student outreach space in Sidney Smith Hall without any student consultation [4]; the campus radio station (CIUT) and Sexual Education Centre (SEC) are being displaced for a \$92 million expansion of the Rotman School of Management [5]; and the Association of Part-time Undergraduate Students (APUS) is being evicted to make way for a \$53 million Centre for High Performance Sport (CHPS) for elite athletes that all students will be asked to pay the operating costs for [6]. Students have responded by

launching various student space campaigns. The Arts and Science Students' Union (ASSU) held an open forum on corporatization to discuss how these developments were connected, the University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) handed out free organic coffee across from the Second Cup to promote their upcoming referendum for students to pay to build their own student centre, and APUS has launched a campaign to prevent their eviction and stop the construction of the CHPS.

At the same time, UofT President David Naylor recently launched his *Towards 2030* [7] planning process by asking hand-picked task forces to respond to his 50-page discussion document that strongly endorses the corporate university model. The document advocates for further commercialization of research and deregulation of all tuition fees in order to reach "new levels of excellence" [8]. However, academic excellence is less attainable when research priorities are geared towards commercial needs and academic freedom is undermined by reliance on private donors; when financial inaccessibility prevents many capable students from attending university; when those fortunate enough to attend have to focus on getting a job that can pay off their student loans as opposed to learning and being critical thinkers; when more and more part-time and temporary instructors are hired at low wages with little job security or benefits; and when the university threatens to contract out essential student services. In response, a coalition of student and campus labour unions has formed under the name of JUSSTIS – Joint Union of Staff and Students Together In Solidarity – to put forward an alternative plan.

Most recently, the university administration caught flack from student groups for sending two undercover security guards – without any prior notice – to an event that it deemed to be controversial and mailing a \$440 bill for security to the event organizers the following week [9]. The event in question was a November 15, 2007, lecture by Professor Salim Vally on "Apartheid: From South Africa to Palestine" organized by Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA), an action group of the student-levy receiving Ontario Public Interest Research Group – Toronto (OPIRG). Supporters quickly pointed out that the imposition of exorbitant security fees is an attack on freedom of speech by making it prohibitively expensive to organize events on "controversial" topics. This practice directly contradicts UofT's *Statement of Institutional Purpose* adopted in 1992:

PURPOSE OF THE UNIVERSITY [10]

The University of Toronto is dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself.

It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.

I chose to quote the entire section from the *Statement* on the “Purpose of the University” because it speaks to not only how freedom of speech is being violated, but also to the fact that the broader purpose of the university with its commitment to “equal opportunity, equity, and justice” is being failed by corporatization. As illustrated by the imposition of prohibitive security fees, the business-oriented *Towards 2030* plan, and losses of student space, corporatization is an aggressive threat to the fight for social justice on campus. However, given this threat students and their allies are increasingly being made aware of the need to take action and mobilize together for systemic change.

FIGHTING FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC UNIVERSITY

To what extent meaningful social justice can be won in a university is tied to the larger question of to what extent meaningful social justice can be won in the capitalist system. The reality of living under capitalism is that many students have to work while in school and during the summer, leaving little time to deeply engage with course material and get involved with activities outside of their classroom. Large debt loads and the emphasis on grades – needed to secure a job in order to eventually repay debt – are powerful influences that promote conformity with the current system. Therefore, while students constitute an overwhelming majority of the university population, with many potential allies among support staff, faculty, alumni, and concerned members of the wider community, there is still a large power imbalance in favour of a very small number of senior administrators. Yet historically students and their allies have always been active in challenging the university and society as whole, winning many victories in the continuing struggle for social justice and providing a number of lessons to learn for the future. By focusing on some of the broad and interrelated issues that have consistently been raised by student activists, I will draw on examples from past and present organizing to illustrate how a more democratic university is possible.

EDUCATION AS A RIGHT: FREE EDUCATION

“Education is a right” [11] is a popular slogan for accessible, publicly-funded post-secondary education used by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) and its member student unions who have organized actions like the February 7 National Day of Action to Stop Tuition Fee Hikes in 2007. To say that post-secondary education is a right is to say that it should be made equally available to all qualified persons without discrimination on grounds such as socioeconomic status. For instance, the *Ontario Education Act* which applies to elementary and high schools, states that any “resident pupil” including “persons unlawfully in Canada” [12] has “the right, without payment of a fee, to attend a school...in which the person is qualified to be a resident pupil.” [13] Requiring payment of a fee would make exercising this right to education subject to financial status. In other words, it would apply limits to this right and it would no longer be available to all

qualified persons without discrimination. Similarly, even if all students were able to receive loans to cover the full cost of their education, the system would still be discriminatory in that marginalized students would have to be willing and able to take on the long-term financial burden of paying half or twice as much more with interest than those who can afford to pay upfront. Such an approach has more to do with shifting the costs of education from the state to the individual than making education more accessible. Therefore, under the surface of the innocuous slogan “education is a right” lies a much more provocative and inspiring idea that free education is necessary in order to uphold education as a right.

Even if abolition of tuition fees were an unpublicized long-term strategy, the discourse of freezing or reducing tuition fails to raise fundamental questions about whether education should have a fee at all and what type of education we are participating in when it is treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Free education broadens the debate to include these challenges to the neoliberal private “user fee” model and many more. In 2003, major campus groups including APUS, ASSU, CUPE 3902, GSU, OPIRG, SAC (now UTSU), and the Women’s Centre (now the Centre for Women and Trans People) formed a Coalition for Free Education and organized a Free Education Week from February 10-14 in order to encourage discussion and have students, staff, faculty, and community members realize the “possibility and need for free education in Canada” [14]. Also included in their analysis was the broad interpretation of “free” to mean more than just without a cost, “Free education means free minds, freedom from physical and cultural barriers, freedom from corporate agendas, and freedom from oppression.” [15] Using a similar analysis but taking a much more grassroots approach, in 1999 students, staff, faculty, and community members created the Free UofT in order to tangibly work towards the goal of an “open, accessible, inclusive, non-corporate, no-fees UofT.” [16] In the summer of 2000, Free UofT offered 50 facilitated courses ranging from participatory action research in Kensington Market to African studies to street theatre.

Although neither the Coalition for Free Education or Free UofT were able to be sustained over a long period of time, both provide very informative lessons to the ongoing fight for social justice at the university. The consciousness-raising awareness week approach taken by the Coalition for Free Education is effective for discussing issues which truthfully may require some engagement with the ideas before one is convinced. And while I am unsure about how active the various campus groups were in the coalition, even the fact that they all endorsed is a major accomplishment in coalition-building. In terms of the Free UofT, the do-it-yourself approach to free education and the scale that it reached is what I find most inspiring. Above all, though, the broad analysis of the “free” in free education shared by both initiatives is a powerful tool for uniting to challenge the wide range of attacks students experience as a result of neoliberalism. This analysis opens up space to challenge corporatization by collectively advancing specific concerns such as ableism faced by students with disabilities and the barriers faced by undocumented students in addition to shared concerns around skyrocketing tuition and debt loads.

THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE: IT TAKES A SIT-IN TO MAKE UofT LISTEN

It has followed that the right to education is not just the right to have a seat in a classroom and receive information, but also the right to actively participate in one's education from individual courses to decision-making at the departmental and university-wide level. As a result of growing class sizes and alienation, developments occurred in the late 1960s with the formation of student-led course unions such as the History Students' Union in 1967 [17]. Course unions sought to gain meaningful student involvement through parity with faculty in decision-making over areas such as tenure decisions and setting curriculum. Course evaluations were implemented as one way of creating change in courses. ASSU, formed in 1972 to serve as an umbrella organization for course unions, states on its website that while representation increased dramatically, "nowhere was parity achieved" and "in most areas, students have succeeded only in token participation." [18]

This generalization holds true for the Governing Council, the highest decision-making body at UofT, created in 1971 with the passage of the new UofT Act [19]. Students had no input in the pre-existing structure, but turned down an offer for token seats and called for a detailed study of university governance structures. The 1968 Commission on University Government (CUG), with four elected student members out of a total membership of 12, held 145 meetings and delivered the recommendation that a new single-tier body be created – previously there was a Board of Governors for financial matters and a Senate for academic matters – in which students and faculty had parity [20]. Students fought hard for equal representation but were met with resistance from faculty. The eventual composition approved by the provincial legislature was a 50 member body that included the President, Chancellor, 2 presidential appointees, 16 government appointees, 12 faculty, 8 students, 2 support staff and 8 alumni [21]. In the end, the relation between the number of faculty and students seems insignificant with so many government appointees. Today, as has been the tradition for as far back as I am aware, the Governing Council is dominated by elites and primarily serves as a rubber-stamping body for decisions made by senior administrators. A review of the biographies of the governors shows that there are two former provincial premiers and a high concentration of presidents of corporations, chairmen, executives, and lawyers [22]. As a result, student participation remains tokenistic rather than meaningful.

That is why, most unfortunately, it has been consistently proven that students need to go to extraordinary lengths such as sit-ins in order to have their voices listened to. There are numerous historic examples where, after exhausting all other avenues, activists have resorted to direct action in order to force UofT into doing the right thing. Examples given in UofT's own official history book, Martin Friedland's *The University of Toronto: A History*, include students in 1967 stopping napalm-manufacturer Dow Chemical's recruiting efforts by blocking the entrance to the recruiting centre [23]; students in 1970 occupying an unused building and later the central administrative building, Simcoe Hall, in order to get the UofT President to commit to funding a daycare facility on campus [24]; and students in 1972 holding a sit-in in Simcoe Hall, being evicted by the police, and responding with another occupation of more than 500 people in order to allow full access for undergraduates to the not-yet-opened Robarts Library [25]. Other notable

examples include a sit-in as part of the campaign that ended the men-only policy at Hart House in 1972 [26]; a successful camp-out held in 1986 to secure space for the Women's Centre [27]; sit-ins, protests and disruptions that pushed UofT to divest from Apartheid South Africa in 1988 [28]; and an 11 day occupation of the President's office in 2000 by Students Against Sweatshops that resulted in UofT being the first Canadian university to introduce an anti-sweatshop policy for university clothing [29]. Although all of the resolutions to these issues may seem like common sense now, they were major battles during their time, sometimes fought over the course of several years or decades due to the intense opposition of the university administration and supporters of the status quo.

Participation in university bodies is an important component to these victories and it is often here that changes are formalized, but it is only one approach which must be understood in relation to other strategies such as outreaching to students to raise awareness, contacting media, creating propaganda, coalition-building, mobilizing students and allies for protests, organizing direct actions, and creating our own alternatives. In order to fight for a more democratic university, it is important to recognize the role of structures such as the Governing Council: how they were imposed on students without their consent, how they provide students with only a token voice in decision-making, and why this necessitates activism through other channels in order to create change. At the same time, we can see that alternative student-run structures such as the network of nearly 40 ASSU course unions have huge potential in terms of democratic organizing for changes to the current system and developing new possibilities.

GLOBAL JUSTICE: DECOLONIZING THE UNIVERSITY

At a rally against the war in Iraq in 2003, a speaker from the Canadian Federation of Students was quoted as saying, "Students have been a big part of these actions and students have always been at the forefront of every movement for social change." [30] From the snake march through campus organized by Students Against Sanctions and War in Iraq (SASWI) before heading over to that 2003 anti-war rally [31] to a faculty and student teach-in on Vietnam in 1965 that was attended by 5,000 people – so many that they had to move the event from Convocation Hall to Varsity Arena [32] – it is true that students have historically played a major role in many global justice movements. In part, this activism has focused on making connections between global justice issues and the complicity of the university itself. This includes the Anti-Apartheid campaign in the 1980s that sought to force the university to divest from companies doing business in South Africa – UofT was among the last to do so in 1988 – and the present day campaign by Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA) to get the university to divest from Israel and partake in an academic boycott of Israeli academic institutions.

However, the complicity of the university in wars, occupations, and massive human rights violations must not only be understood in terms of issues abroad. Like the entire Canadian state, UofT is on land stolen from the Indigenous inhabitants. The Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation are said to have fished at Taddle Creek, since filled-in, although Philosopher's Walk is said to follow its original path. In addition to this very real aspect of large-scale physical displacement through the occupation of land, UofT is

also complicit in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples through its function as a site of knowledge creation. With the exception of some pockets within the institution, this history of colonization has largely been erased and is taught uncritically and even glorified from the colonizer's perspective. Alan Sears has pointed out that part of corporatization is the attempt to eliminate counter-hegemonic discourses, essentially any "non-market" alternatives or ideas that question market-based approaches such as the enterprises of colonialism and neo-colonialism [33]. As part of the struggle against corporatization, groups such as the Critical Area Studies Collective (CASC) have undertaken to challenge the university on its Eurocentrism and marginalization of critical subject matter. Endeavours like these are really crucial because they make strong links between global justice issues and the university's complicity in these issues, recognizing the relation between the fight for social justice at a particular university and the wider struggle for social justice in the capitalist system.

CONCLUSION

The observation that "students have always been at the forefront of every movement for social change" is a testament to the university as a space of resistance, where despite the university's role as a tool of the capitalist system, students have a long legacy of fighting for social justice in the university and society as a whole. There are many possibilities for a more democratic university, whether they materialize is dependent on students learning from their past and continuing to exercise their agency by organizing together for meaningful social justice: with broad, inclusive demands, participation through direct action and alternative structures, and an understanding of the relation between the fight for social justice in the university and globally.

"The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The Classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom."

- bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom

ENDNOTES

- [1] Marx, K. 1847. "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League." <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>.
- [2] Neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology based upon imposing the rule of the market. It is a revision of the "classical liberalism" of 18th century economist Adam Smith who sought to minimize government interference in the economy. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has been synonymous with world leaders such as Pinochet, Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney cutting public expenditures for social services, aggressively pursuing deregulation and privatization, and eliminating the concept of the "public good" and "community" in favour of "individual responsibility".
- [3] Hayes, R. 2007. "Second Cup forced down students' throats." *The Varsity*, September 20, <http://thevarsity.ca/article/414>.
- [4] Hayes, R. "Second Cup."
- [5] Ali Husein, N. and Bovee-Begun, A. 2007. "Rotman Shuts up CIUT." *The Varsity*, September 20, <http://thevarsity.ca/article/406>.
- [6] Ali Husein, N. 2007. "APUS out, again." *The Varsity*, July 16, <http://thevarsity.ca/article/94>.
- [7] Towards 2030. 2007. "Planning for UofT's Future." <http://www.towards2030.utoronto.ca>.
- [8] Naylor, D. 2007. "Message from the President." <http://www.towards2030.utoronto.ca/president.html>.
- [9] Bovee-Begun, A. "Why free speech ain't free." *The Varsity*, December 5, <http://thevarsity.ca/article/1379>.
- [10] University of Toronto Governing Council. 1992. *Statement of Institutional Purpose*. <http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/mission.html>.
- [11] Canadian Federation of Students. 2007. "1.2 Education is a Right." *Strategy for Change: Money Does Matter*: pg. 1. http://www.cfsadmin.org/quickftp/Strategy_for_Change_2007.pdf.
- [12] Ministry of Education and Training. 1990. "Subsection 49.1: Persons unlawfully in Canada." *Ontario Education Act*. http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e02_e.htm#BK59
- [13] Ministry of Education and Training. 1990. "Subsection 32.1: Resident pupil right to attend school." *Ontario Education Act*.

http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e02_e.htm#BK59

[14] Coalition for Free Education. 2003.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20030213091814/http://freeeducationact.org/>

[15] *ibid.*

[16] Free UofT. 2000.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20001003093659/www.utoronto.ca/acc/freeu/>

[17] Arts and Science Students' Union. 2007. "ASSU History."

<http://69.89.31.122/~assuca/pages/assu/history.php>.

[18] *ibid.*

[19] Nikolaevsky, T. 2002. "The 1960s." *SAC 101: One Hundred and One Years of Serving Students*: pg. 27.

[20] *ibid.*, pg. 26

[21] *ibid.*, pg. 27

[22] University of Toronto Governing Council. 2007. "2007-08 Members of the Governing Council."

<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=3878>.

[23] Friedland, M. 2002. "Student Activism." *The University of Toronto: A History*: pg. 527

[24] *ibid.*, pg. 535

[25] *ibid.*, pg. 537

[26] Graduate Students' Union. 2006. "Activism: Victories."

<http://www.gsu.utoronto.ca/activism/victories.html>.

[27] *ibid.*

[28] *ibid.*

[29] Lenskyj, H. 2004. "Funding Canadian University Sport Facilities: The University of Toronto Stadium Referendum." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 28.4: pg. 381.

[30] March, J. 2003. "Toronto youth march against war on Iraq." *The Strand*, March 12, <http://media.www.thestrand.ca/media/storage/paper404/news/2003/03/12/News/Toronto.Youth.March.Against.War.On.Iraq-391358.shtml>

[31] *ibid.*

[32] Friedland, M. *University of Toronto*: pg. 527.

[33] UofT's relationship with philanthropists such as Peter Munk, the billionaire founder and chairman of Barrick Gold, a corporation widely criticized for its mining practices that have resulted in the decimation of Indigenous peoples' lands across the world, has made many people concerned about the protection of academic freedom. Following a \$6 million donation from Munk in 1997, the university named the Munk Centre for International Studies after him and soon after awarded Barrick senior advisor and former US President George Bush an honorary PhD.