

It's a struggle

'For a New Europe: University Struggles Against Austerity', École des hautes études en sciences sociales/Université Paris VIII, February 2011

This three-day meeting, hosted by the Italian activist collective Edu-factory, attracted 300–400 university students, faculty, community leaders and activists from across Europe, as well as from Tunisia, Russia, Ukraine, Canada, the United States and Chile. It sought to provide a forum for groups to meet and share strategies of resistance against the current sweep of pan-European austerity measures, with particular attention paid to the attacks on the public university. Although the meeting was in one sense a great success, bringing together disparate groups and networking activists across the globe, it was also plagued with a kind of identity crisis that affects many anti-hierarchically organized meetings. Unsure themselves of how much power they should wield, Edu-factory organizers

attempted as best they could to navigate the tricky role of being in charge of an event where no one was supposed to be in charge.

Scheduled for an intense five-hour period, the first session of the weekend was a highlight of the meeting. During this opening event, attendees from around the world introduced themselves and shared their respective stories of organizing against government austerity measures. This forum demonstrated the fascinating landscape of global activism against cuts to education, arts and culture. Rallying cries, reports from revolts in Tunisia, and messages of solidarity animated the early part of the afternoon. Halfway through the session we received a message from outside informing us that Mubarak had left Egypt. The meeting erupted in celebration; the air was thick with hope.

Although several contributors to this first session attempted to make concrete proposals for actions, networks and future meetings, the conversation was dominated by lengthy contributions from groups and individuals keen to share details about their activist successes. Certainly, sharing experience and tactics at meetings like this is vitally important for formulating collective struggle, especially when groups do not have other platforms. It was a salutary reminder that we students and activists who are constantly plugged in to the web privilege the Internet as the primary locus for network building. However, lacking a chairperson responsible for focusing the discussion, the session exemplified a persistent problem: a confusion or conflation of hierarchy with organization. After five hours of diverse contributions with no clear goal, agenda, or decision-making process stipulated, only a smattering of attendees were left in the once-packed lecture theatre.

On the second day chairs were appointed to the various sessions, on topics such as 'free schools' and 'precarity', but they continued to play an undefined role. Of course, avoiding hierarchical organization was an intentional move. In an effort to be as open as possible and to have meeting participants decide



collectively on the meeting agenda, workshop sessions, and overall goals of the weekend, Edu-factory organizers wanted to help facilitate dialogue rather than manage it. But with no collective conversation about organization we failed to make the arrangements that would have helped us facilitate dialogue as well as make collective decisions. In the end, the sessions were a series of undirected soliloquies that spoke at cross-purposes. With long lists of speakers and no prioritizing of action points, sessions quickly ran short of time with no decisions made.

The meeting was also plagued by a second form of identity crisis – an ideological one. Of course, among the many participants there was a wide array of political leanings from Marxist-autonomists to anarchists. However, one of the most consistently troubling aspects of the meeting was the persistence of a naive autonomism set on an absolute disengagement with the idea of the public university, sometimes heralding the ‘Napster Moment’ as a pedagogical model for our current struggle. Similar to the ‘devastating blow’ that Napster had on the music industry in 1999, ‘Education’s Napster Moment’ is intended to utilize virtual networks and online tools to strike at the heart of the university. These Napster revolutionaries want to ‘declare the death’ of the university by forcing it into crisis. In an attempt to accelerate what they see as the all-too-slowly-unfolding demise of the public institution, they give directions for us to expedite the crisis:

torrent your syllabus, duplicate your id cards and give them to strangers, scan your entire library and post it on AAARG, distribute maps of your university online, relocate your seminars to a space outside of the institution. Invalidate the universities existence, so that together we can begin to build fresh foundations on its grave.

No doubt it is crucial to draw attention to the increasingly anti-arts and anti-humanities landscape of the university, as well as its tightly woven relations with the medical, prison and military-industrial complex. But this cyber-manifesto resounds uncomfortably loudly with proposals being circulated by Tory-supporting university vice chancellors similarly interested in making the university ‘virtual’, by moving lecturing, marking, student consultation and assignments online. What better way to cut down on costs than to close the campus entirely and set up shop online?

This anarchist impatience is connected to the Invisible Committee’s call to insurrection. As they declared

in 2009: ‘To no longer wait is, in one way or another, to enter into the logic of insurrection.’ But are we really ready to accept the logic of these acceleration-based manifestos? Must any hesitancy be, as the Invisible Committee has it, a reactive response of deferral and containment – a too familiar practice by the Left over the last sixty years. In fact no discussion about the meaning of ‘autonomy’ was had, leaving some of us with a sense of a deep communicative failure between advocates of the potentials of the cyber-revolution and those who regarded them as hopelessly naive.

This discussion did not happen for two reasons. First, the entire meeting was self-organized by groups and individuals who chose to host a workshop, and none chose to arrange a session on this topic. Second, though it could have become part of discussions in other sessions, such as the workshop on free schools, the problem of weak organization actually prevented these direct discussions from taking place. Chairs were committed to following a speaker’s list prioritizing contributions relevant to particular issues. Again, the potential to build on topics or respond directly to proposals and action points was lost. This is not to downplay the successes of the meeting, nor belittle the incredible amount of work that Edu-factory and other individuals and organizers put into it. But we need to face these criticism so we can better plan, organize and resist.

Despite the meeting’s identity crises, it was hugely successful in bringing together disparate individuals and groups. The most significant decision of the meeting was the designation of 24–26 March as pan-European days of action against austerity measures, cuts to education, and the increasing precarity of workers. As a result, on 23 March individuals from the Paris meeting held a press conference in Brussels announcing the programme of action under the newly adopted group name Knowledge Liberation Front (KLF). In addition, the meeting resulted in the construction of an online communication network between attendees, and plans are under way for more meetings in London and Tunisia in the near future. Documents created by KLF have been translated into many languages and are now widely shared across national and linguistic borders. Certainly, the Paris meeting was an important step in a pan-national struggle ‘against banks, debt system and austerity measures, for free education and free circulation of people and knowledge’. But imagine what could have been achieved with a little more focus...

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