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Lessons Learned: Struggles and Knowledges of Dissent

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On October 20th 2009, even Viennese leftists were surprised as students and staff from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna began to protest, occupying the university. That moment was preceded by self-organized group actions and research on the Bologna Process reforms that were changing the way people were learning and teaching. Several actions, including a series of tours, presenting facts about the reform process collected from self-organized research throughout the classrooms of the Academy, built a foothold for the expansion of a small group of politicized students and staff. As the situation became tighter – less time, availability, resources, flexibility and space for extra-curricular research and self-reflective questioning – stronger alliances began forming between groups at various Viennese universities. The subsequent long-lasting process of self-organization and struggle led to a greater collective understanding and development of the forms of protest and organization to follow.

The Academy occupation resulted from a confrontation with the dean regarding a document called the Development Plan (Entwicklungsplan), a mission statement which bases and develops into the Budgetary Agreement (Leistungsvereinbarung), a legally

binding contract between a given Austrian university and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research, every three years to agree on structural reforms and statistical goals in exchange for a quantity of funding. That year, the dean claimed he would accept suggestions for the draft, which the students and staff viewed as a potential for intervention, believing it increased transparency, in an attempt to change the institution from the bottom-up. Subsequently self-organized drafts circulated, accumulating into one final paper, incorporating all departments and institutes, building awareness along the way. That self-organized draft was then presented to the dean, with the demand it be passed on to the Ministry. After the dean avoided clarifying what he would present to the Ministry, a group of about 250 students and staff occupied the assembly hall and demanded he present his decision. Receiving an ambiguous reply, it was decided to continue the occupation until the demands were met. The occupation remained for months to come, questioning and jeopardizing the gradual privatization of that very representative space, among others that were occasionally rented out for events such as bank corporate identity launch parties, fur fashion shows and the like. Instead, self-organized parties, plena, concerts, performances and lectures filled the space, with all events being decided on by the squatters. As more people became engaged in the process, however, the demands became more abstract, such as the abolition of the privatization of commons – an ideal which would be a somewhat greater leap to satisfy than the original demands intended for the Budgetary Agreement.

> "Overall, the protests have not been limited to de-hierarchization, appropriation of space(s), self-organization and the examination of the conditions of work and study. They have rather been dominated by

> demands, criticism and claims that go beyond the immediate context of education and universities, expanding to the identification of how the neoliberal capitalist market logic has infiltrated all parts of life, commodifying and isolating them through racist and sexist policies of exclusion, deteriorating the very collectivity the protests have aimed to establish. The realization that the fight for an improved educational system cannot be made specific but must instead reflect and depend on changing the very structure and system that produces it, not through homogenizing top-down reforms, but through grassroots democracy, evidences the authenticity of the protests. It's not about asking for a bigger piece of the pie or having the whole pie to yourself – it's about taking over the whole damn bakery."[1]

Two days after the Academy was occupied, a group of students and staff took the protest to the Ministry of Science and Research while the Budgetary Agreement was being negotiated and continued to the other Viennese universities presenting the situation, snowballing as others joined along the way. The protests rapidly expanded to the other Austrian universities and linked to existing protests worldwide, snowballing internationally. The longer term effects of that linkage led to the transnational Bologna Counter-Summit, in March 2010, as a protest against the meeting of the European Ministers of higher education in Vienna for the "opening" of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the purported goal of the Bologna Process. The Counter-Summit lasted for several days with presentations, protest actions and a blockade intended to complicate the arrival of the Ministers to the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, where the Summit was to be held. Protestors from several countries affected by the Bologna Process

reforms announced their statements and demands there, increasingly taking the form of declarations, sabotage and seizure, rather than previous clearly articulated demands.

Privilege, infantilization and self-discipline

The fact that it was possible for Academy students and staff to take the time and space to self-organize and independently research the conditions of their own exploitation before the occupation is noteworthy and telling. The Bologna Process brings with it the homogenization of curricula, transferrable degrees and credits, providing a basis for competitiveness with the clearly outlined exchange value of education units and a more efficient use of time and space. Whether profit is produced from unpaid student labor, exploited internships, few jobs or extensive debt, its accumulation is maximized through the reformed structures, minimizing the time and space available to "waste" on processes that question those structures in a non-profitable way.

So why were so many people surprised that a wave of protests came from an art school? At the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, a 3-day entry exam determines admission. Professional artists then judge and establish the applicant's satisfaction or lack of "genius". If an applicant is accepted, their stature as an artist – level of "genius", academic title, professional standing – is set. The risk of failure during one's studies is minimal, with an unlimited quantity of years available to prime one's skills, fulfill academic requirements and find a position in the art market, thus reducing the performance anxiety typical at universities, eventually leaving the graduated artist to the devices of the market. However, a reduction of space, time and resources dramatically alters that situation. The politicization that built before the protests was only possible

because the resources for doing so existed. Protest itself could even be integrated into one's studies and/or artistic production.

The Bologna Process reforms have been implemented through varying national modes of structural adjustment preparation, for example, the widespread notion of "autonomy" – a neoliberal trojan horse as a vocabulary term – introduced in the 1990s in Austria in a proactive way, although markedly reactive in nature. More and more, "autonomy" is offered and implemented to cool the flames of discontent when demands for less top-down restructuring are made. What sounds like an answer to demands can in fact be typified in the story this analysis opened with, of the Academy negotiations for the Budgetary Agreement. "Autonomy" denotes an increasing absence of Ministerial financial responsibility for educational institutions, i.e. the state leaving universities to the "freedom" of the shark pool of the open market for funding. Therefore, private investment that dramatically restructures departments and curricula to fit its needs, tuition hikes, greater differentiation for non-residential students and staff, mobility projects to increase the profitable turnover of non-residents, etc. have been typical results of this "autonomy". As the protests and their vocabulary have been appropriated by politicians and deans, demands twisted into perverse reflections of their intentions, the process of taking reforms into one's own hands have become somewhat incarcerating, neutralizing subversion.

The instrumentalization of the "crazy artist" dreaming in their "autonomy of art" perfectly provided a basis for infantilization of the protestors, simultaneously allowing a certain level of tolerance in which to not be taken as a threat, with little consideration of how that privilege is constructed. In fact, with all of the appropriation and instrumentalization that followed the demands that were made to take the reform of one's teaching and learning

into one's own hands simply aided a maximally efficient, unpaid form of optimized self-discipline. We created the perfect recipe to pacify our own discontent, reproducing the entire machinery around us.

We want everything,[2] we demand nothing![3]

On March 4th 2010, the then new Minister of Science and Research, Beatrix Karl, visited the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and invited several senior "experts" and student union representatives for an open discussion about the protests, to see what all the hullabaloo was about, and find a way in her newly-elected post, to settle the whole mess. After an extensive period of ambiguous statements by Karl, critique from the audience, increasing frustration from the student union representatives, one Academy representative stated that she saw no reason to continue with Karl about the so-called "university dialog," the negotiation that began with the Ministry as a result of the protests, as she did not believe it could resort to anything useful. She then declared an "end to the dialog." With no reaction prepared for that situation, followed by long awkward pauses, Karl became less and less crafty in dealing with the increasing boos and insults shouted from the audience.

> "Without a particular demand, no mediation can be made to pacify them; 'not' having a demand is not a lack of anything, but a contradictory assertion of one's power *and* one's weakness. Too weak to even try and get something from those who dominate proletarian life, and simultaneously strong enough to try and accomplish the direct appropriation of one's life, time and activity apart from mediation."

“Demands become the means of their own suffocation.” The above two quotes from “We Demand Nothing,” by Johann Kaspar, support his claim that the demand itself defines the condition under which resistance should end, as the very expiration date for struggle.[4] His analysis examines the increasing recent trend of making no demands at all, trying to legitimize such ambiguous forms of struggle as the only modus left in the current sociopolitical structures of oppression, appropriation and instrumentalization. Kaspar states: “As the conditions of exploitation develop, so do the struggles themselves change, expressed not by demands but by the content of the activity itself.” Occupation has been the clearest mode of breaking this symbiosis between demand and profitable appropriation of resistance, by reclaiming time, space, the social, the commons. Occupation asks for nothing; it simply takes and holds on to everything it can get.

Mobility or immobilizing a movement

What happens when protest and occupation become refined, abandoning all demands, exposing the conditions of exploitation in a knowledge economy or blockading the flow of private commodities? Can we begin to view the demand in relation to supply-and-demand within neoliberal structures of appropriation?

The notion of a knowledge area defines a space in which capital that supports a flow of knowledge – human, cognitive, goods – is able to flow freely within a fortified area. The World Systems Theory describes a neocolonial global division of the world in terms of periphery, semi-periphery and center in which profit and capital are allowed and encouraged to move freely within the center, whereas the semi-periphery suffers filtered restriction and the periphery acts as a zone of exception. The European Union

typifies such a supranational center, with Eastern Europe forming the semi-periphery and Africa, for example, forming a periphery. [5] The European Higher Education Area signifies the knowledge area of the EU's center. One of the major aims of the Bologna Process is maximal mobility of teachers and students in the EHEA. What sounds like it breaks oppressive border policies, establishes two classes of movement: migration, which is punishable by law and mobility, which is protected by it. With the stick of "autonomy", comes the carrot of "mobility". A maximal turnover of investment increases profitability with restricted, racist residence permission and significantly higher tuition for non-EU residents for the duration of their "visit". Ben Rosenzweig refers to the students that suffer those restrictions within knowledge areas as "guest consumers"[6], while the notion is even defined in economic terms as an "educational export".

The reforms structuring the EHEA are the result of a dwindling capitalist system that constantly seeks new resources as crisis reaches the point where appropriation and oppression take on more frequent and creative forms in the comfortable classes of the "First World". The EHEA's borders do not define the borders of struggle. Structural Adjustment Policies have implemented privatizing educational reforms for decades throughout the Global South, providing a testing ground for the reforms in the center. The protests against them have lasted just as long as the reforms with a wealth of knowledge from lessons learned and experiences accumulated from oppression. So what does it mean to reject "freedom" if it is defined as the free movement of goods, services, capital and citizens in the First World, fortifying the borders around it? And how can we understand the significance of transnationally united resistance in a space that supports that very movement within that very space? Is that struggle answered with

the removal of all freedom of movement whatsoever as it is in the peripheries?

On the night of June 27th 2010, two garbage bins outside the unoccupied Employment Office (AMS) of Redergasse, Vienna were set ablaze. The action was filmed and placed online with text, part of which claims: “The job market is to be safeguarded through disciplinary enterprises, such as the Employment Office (AMS), one of capitalism’s central bodies.”[7] On July 6th 2010, police raided three apartments in Vienna, taking three individuals into custody. Doors were broken down, locks busted, computers and hard disks confiscated. The cultural locale, Kaleidoskop, was also raided with the assumption that it was politically aligned with the arson.[8] A fourth person was arrested on July 20th. The detainment of the individuals goes above and beyond the typical consequences for destroying garbage bins. No charges have yet been defined nor is it clear how long they will remain in custody before reaching trial, if they receive one at all.

On May 21st 2008, police raided 23 homes of animal rights activists in Vienna. They had been under police surveillance since at least 1997. Thirteen people were arrested and held in custody for 105 days until they were finally sent to trial and charged with the newly-established “mafia article”, §278a, a year and a half after their arrest.[9] The suspects are still on trial. The results of this process are unknown, however, they have already paid with extensive time, space, resources and accumulated debt. It is speculated that an associated article, §278b, will be used against the suspects of the AMS action, condemning their collective organization as being a terrorist organization. The extremity of those charges would substantiate the atypical arrest. Three of the suspects, A., B. and J., are some of the main protagonists of the education protest movement in Vienna.[10]

Knowledges of dissent, self-education

Oppression and immobilization symbolize a certain fragility that needs to be safeguarded by desperate measures. Desperate times of crisis seek desperate measures and the knowledge economy provides a wealth of resources in a dwindling global economy. As the crisis has slowly crept into middle class living in the "First World," so too have the forms of discipline that used to fortify their very security.

Oppressive police intervention and brutality has been widespread from the "First" to the "Third" Worlds during the university protests. It has, however, incited unforeseen reactions. In multiple cases, such as the extreme case of police brutality at the University of Florida,[11] unexpected protest actions, occupations and blockades were organized. Most recently, on July 26th 2010, a protest consisting mostly of non-residential students against Value Added Tax (VAT) and tuition fee hikes began in Bangladesh, with Chittagong University declaring indefinite strike. Authorities filed criminal cases against 32 activists so far, consequently giving the movement more vigor. It is currently spreading from the university campus across the whole city with other institutions in Chittagong joining the movement and thousands of people occupying the four major streets of the city.[12] More and more cases arise in which appropriation of struggles and police oppression are not silencing resistance. Lessons are learned. More creative and aggressive modes of protest are developing.

"As long as §278a exists, there will be protests! As long as there is oppression, there will be resistance! For a combative movement! Some of us are affected – all of us are implied."[13] The broader interlinkage of local implications of oppression and struggle

describes what Bobby Subhabrata Banerjee terms “translocality”. Translocality takes the understanding of one’s own involvement in global processes into resistant actions, understanding the entanglement of state and capital on a local level.[14] Struggle cannot ignore the complicity of one’s privilege in the oppression of another. Struggle and collectivity must not fracture at class, racist, sexist or other constructed social divisions and borders, whether they define bodies or the land between them. These divisions must be abolished.

The education protests have aimed to show the transgressive logic of capital’s appropriation of all spheres of life, which increased as the notion of demands was abandoned. Art and education provided the perfect model for infantilization, appropriation and the flexible worker in a neoliberal economy. However, the moment that the collective action which had formed through art and self-education was reacted to with oppression that transcended the boundaries of that very infantilization and appropriation, something else became clear. The borders that exist in a purportedly “autonomous” and “mobile” educational system and society were exposed. The abandonment of demands, seizure and occupation laid down the foundation for a model of a different kind of self-organized (art) education, which could be empowering and perforate the seams of a fortified knowledge system.

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[1] Lina Dokuzović and Eduard Freudmann: “Squatting the Crisis: On the Current Protests in Education and Perspectives on Radical Change”, *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, Vienna, 11/2009; http://eipcp.net/n/1260352849

[2] Protest claims began echoing the Zapatista Liberation Movement's statements made against NAFTA on the day it came into force, 16 Feb 1994: "We will demand what is right and right for everyone: freedom, justice, democracy, everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves!"

[3] Johann Kaspar, "We Demand Nothing: On the Practical Necessity of Demanding Nothing", *Fire to the Prisons,* Issue 7, Fall 2009; http://zinelibrary.info/files/wedamandnothing-read.pdf

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] For a detailed analysis in regard to Higher Education Areas, see: Lina Dokuzović and Eduard Freudmann, "Fortified Knowledge: From Supranational Governance to Translocal Resistance", *The Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, Volume 3, Dossier 2: *On Europe, Education, Global Capitalism and Ideology*, Ed. Marina Gržinić, Duke University: Jul 2010; http://trinity.duke.edu/globalstudies/volume-3-dossier-2-on-europe-education-global-capitalism-and-ideology

[6] Ben Rosenzweig, "International Student Struggles: Transnational Economies, Guest Consumers and Processes of Restructuring", *Mutiny*, no. 48, 2010, http://jura.org.au/files/jura/Mutiny%2048%20WebV3.pdf

[7] Translated by author; "BRANDZEICHEN SETZEN! - Direkte Aktion beim Arbeitsmarktservice Redergasse in Wien", 29 Jun 2010; http://linksunten.indymedia.org/de/node/22143; retrieved 1 Jul 2010.

[8] See, in German: "Anti-Repressionsdemo in Wien, 12. Jul 2010 – Solidarität mit den drei U-Häftlingen...", 12 Jul 2010, http://

fm5ottensheim.blogspot.com/2010/07/anti-repressionsdemo-in-wien-12-juli.html; retrieved 14 Jul 2010.

[9] See, in German: "Was bisher geschah", *Gemeint sind wir alle! Solidarität mit den von §278a betroffenen AktivistInnen,* http://antirep2008.org/?page_id=886; retrieved 14 Jul 2010.

[10] Statement and petition in German "Offener Brief zu den Verhaftungen von Studierenden", 29 Jul 2010, http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20100729_OTS0145/offener-brief-zu-den-verhaftungen-von-studierenden

[11] Andrew Stanfill, "UF Student was Shot in Head by Police", 2 Mar 2010; http://www.gainesville.com/article/20100303/ARTICLES/100309832?p=1&tc=pg; retrieved 5 Jun 2010.

[12] "Chittagong University on Indefinite Strike", 31 Jul 2010, http://occupyca.wordpress.com/2010/07/31/chittagong-university-on-indefinite-strike/ ; retrieved 1 Aug 2010.

[13] The solidarity statement for the arrested animal rights activists, translated by author: "Solange es §278a gibt, wird es Proteste geben! Solange es Unterdrückung gibt, wird es Widerstand geben! Für eine kämpferische Bewegung! Getroffen sind einige – Gemeint sind wir alle".

[14] "The translocal emerges at the intersection of political society and civil society where groups of people comprising the political society in different parts of the globe are fighting similar battles over resources against market and state actors." Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "Histories of Oppression and Voices of Resistance: Towards a Theory of the Translocal", *Reartikulacija*, no. 9, Ljubljana, 2009; http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=612