

An experiment in free, co-operative higher education

The Social Science Centre (SSC) organizes free higher education in Lincoln and is run by its members. The SSC is a co-operative and was formally constituted in May 2011 with help from the local Co-operative Development Agency. There is no fee for learning or teaching, but most members voluntarily contribute to the Centre either financially or with their time. No one at the Centre receives a salary and all contributions are used to run the SSC. When students leave the SSC they will receive an award at higher education level. This award will be recognized and validated by the scholars who make up the SSC, as well as by our associate external members – academics around the world who act as our expert reviewers. The SSC has no formal connection with any higher education institution, but attempts to work closely with like-minded organizations in the city. We currently have twenty-five members and are actively recruiting for this year's programmes.

The energy to create the SSC reached critical mass when we saw the writing on the wall for the funding of the social sciences and the further indenture of people wanting an education. The Browne Review was in full swing, Middlesex had lost its Philosophy department, and we saw an 'urgent need' to build an alternative model of higher education that wasn't subject to the discipline of debt and the market, while at the same time protesting against the Coalition government's actions and fighting for funding to be restored. We also drew inspiration from the network of Social Centres that exist across Europe and the UK and thought that the SSC might be a model for a similar network of centres for higher education. That is still our hope.

In May 2013, we held our second AGM, which marked two years as a formally constituted co-operative for higher education. Over the last year, we've run an entry-level evening class called 'The Social Science Imagination' (after C. Wright Mills's 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*), which is an open course run by and for people who want to develop a critical understanding of the social world through social-scientific inquiry. The class proceeds from scholars' everyday problematics to theoretical

critique. Through this emerging curriculum, we take up Mills's key challenge: how can individuals who appear powerless change and transform wider social structures in ways that are progressive and humanizing? Why does it matter that we learn to make links between our own private troubles and our more collective public issues? And how can we contextualize this work, as Mills suggests we must, as social theory and social history? The wide range of issues that emerged from this were documented, compiled, collectively coded and reorganized to form the basis for the coming year's programme of study.

Underpinning 'The Social Science Imagination' is the SSC's pedagogical approach, which attempts to fix the dysfunctional relationship between teaching and research that constitutes the core of higher education. We want to find ways to reconnect research and teaching, while at the same time removing the distinction between students and academics, seeing them both instead as scholars in the pursuit of creating new knowledge. We decided early on to refer to all members of the Centre as 'scholars' in an attempt to trouble the traditional relations of power between academics and students. Our experience within the SSC has confirmed our belief that teachers and students have much to learn from each other, and that calling these roles into question allows people to become aware of their position of privilege and/or subordination, and thus begins to open up possibilities to build more critically transformative learning relationships.

In addition to the Social Science Imagination course, we also run a photography project called 'Our Place, Our Priorities', which is a collaboration with the residents of the Pathways Centre, Lincoln. The aim of the project is to promote active citizenship by simultaneously celebrating the city and identifying priorities for change within it. We also organize periodic public seminars on themes of critical and radical education and politics, and from September 2013 a monthly public seminar series.

Building and running the SSC is not without its difficulties. We are a social, political project that aims to be inclusive and appeal to those still at school and

school leavers as well as retirees, part-time workers and the unemployed. How we communicate our work to different people and how we negotiate difference and dissent among ourselves are recurring questions. We are based in a small city; while there are fewer existing networks of solidarity than might exist in larger cities, there is also an intimacy and a proximity that provide possibilities for associational networks that might be diffused in larger cities. Most of us work full-time and cannot give the time to the SSC that we would like to. Without the material basis on which to work and study full-time at the SSC, we have to think creatively about the form and nature of education practised within the SSC. Do we have courses, semesters, students, teachers and assessments? What do they look like? How does it all work?

So, from the start, the SSC was a political project that took a particular organizational form. We are not all Marxists; nevertheless some of us have been inspired by Marx's recognition that workers' co-operatives 'attack the groundwork' of capitalism. As 'knowledge workers' in the 'knowledge economy', control over the production of knowledge – and its institutional forms and organizing principles – is what gives the SSC its criticality, allowing for experimentation with different ways of teaching, learning, reflecting on our past, and creating our future. Recognizing ourselves as

social individuals, our organizing principle is that we are producers of knowledge who own and control the means of our own knowledge production.

We also therefore recognize that cooperation can't be sustained in isolation and that developing solidarity with other co-operatives, locally, nationally and internationally, must be part of our long-term vision. We've participated in the first Free University Network meetings and invited the People's Political Economy project from Oxford to share their experience at our second AGM. We've also been in talks with the Co-operative College about developing a model for cooperative higher education.

It was always our intention that the SSC would become international in scope. We imagined that 'associate members' living anywhere in the world would want to join the SSC and carry it forward, helping develop cooperative higher education and acting as peers to the members who run it day to day. Associates might support the SSC financially, but also through offering to assess work, provide specialist advice, and develop the cooperative model itself. As we write, we're trying to reach out for new members to work and study with us. We also hope to inspire thinking about the potential of the SSC as a model for something similar in your local area, which reflects your own scholarly interests.

**Members of the Social Science Centre,
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Benjamin's international reception 18–20 September 2013, Berlin

Gudrun Schwarz, the main organizer of the recent symposium of the Walter Benjamin Archive in the Akademie der Künste, has been thinking about it – she says – for eight years, talking about it for six, and savouring its practical organization for the last four. Cai-Yong Wang from Fudan University, Shanghai, opened by giving a summary of Benjamin's reception in China. The first translation (his own, of the *Artwork* essay) appeared in 1992, selling 3,000 copies in the first two months. Since then Benjamin has become one of the most widely read Western thinkers in China. Wang talked of Benjamin's *Strom* (current), referring both to his rapid academic accreditation and to the thematics of modernity and modernization that constitute the main attraction for the 'Chinese audience'.

In China, as in some other countries, Benjamin tends however, as Wang acknowledged, to be translated from English editions.

Seong Man Choi, from the Ewha University of Seoul, addressed Benjamin's reception in South Korea. Choi, who among others is working on a forthcoming fifteen-volume edition of Benjamin's collected works (eight of which are already available), told us that the Americans brought Benjamin to South Korea after the Korean War: the first translations of the *Artwork* essay date back to the 1970s, when the Frankfurt School also reached Seoul. Whereas subsequent globalization was accompanied by a loss of interest both in the humanities and in Benjamin, the influence of philosophers like Žižek, Agamben and Butler refocused attention