

Exchange: Apathy and the neoliberal university

The irony of neoliberal higher education

Justin Cruickshank

In a recent article in *Radical Philosophy* (RP 215), Alan Bradshaw and Mikael Andehn argue that:

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that we are now amid a ‘stunning level of student disconnection’ ... Despite enormous investment in the ‘student experience’ – ranging from campus architecture that looks like airport terminals ... to the requirement for all university teachers to be certified by professional associations – the reality is that lecture theatres today are increasingly dysfunctional spaces in which teaching and learning does not, and often cannot, take place. Ironically, despite the chorus of indignation lamenting the rise of the student as consumer, today the student is all too often precisely the person who refuses to consume their education.¹

They go on to propose that students experience ‘flat affect’ in the face of the attempt to manage their affective relationship to education:

Implicit in the all-important UK National Student Survey, for example, is the idea that the ‘student experience’ must be constantly measured and responded to as the engine that will drive university reform towards its predetermined neoliberal endpoint. Student affect, therefore, becomes a form of capital that a university seeks to build. In this regard, the students’ affective response is not just pre-determined (‘the students want more employability content’) but also the key point of legitimisation and the primary alibi for the neoliberal reterritorialisation of the university. The student subjectivity they are expected to inhabit, therefore, is one that is not just pre-determined but also overdetermined, making excessive affective demands. In this context, the withdrawal into flat affect jams the juggernaut, leaving an excruciating absent centre.²

Rather than define such students as passive, Brad-

shaw and Andehn (drawing on Robert Pfaller), suggest that they are engaging in the strategy of interpassivity, which is the strategy of displacement. Students will go through the motions of studying but not engage in the process of learning. They note that Pfaller’s examples of interpassive behaviour

include a student who purposefully spends hours in a library photocopying course literature that they will never read. Or a person recording movies but never watching them. Or a person who watches a comedy show yet never laughs. In each case the pleasure is delegated onto an external object, as though it is the photocopier that studies the texts, the Tivo box that watches the movies and the canned laughter that is amused by the comedy.³

However, while this is a refusal to be co-opted affectively by neoliberalism, ‘flat affect is the final recourse of the profoundly disempowered that carries the risk of self-negation’.⁴ They conclude that:

Interpassive withdrawal is ambivalent because, as Berlant argues, flat affect is the final recourse of the profoundly disempowered that carries the risk of self-negation. As educators, our role must be to comprehend how we might positively respond to student disengagement, accepting its radical potential as a form of anti-ideological behaviour and not just lamenting its destructiveness. We must learn how this can be done because the alternative is to exhaust ourselves reproducing the interactive fetish, or, worse, to allow this ambivalent strategy of interpassivity to lead to mutual self-negation.⁵

The reality of teaching is that of profound disengagement, yet UK universities continue to intensify their commitment to enhancing the student experience and journey based on the management’s bureaucratic fiction of

committed, engaged student-customer.

The problem, though, is becoming worse than the condition of interpassivity, with student disengagement now often leading to mass chronic non-attendance in lectures and seminars. Rather than go through the motions of learning, many students simply do not bother to go through the motions, except to submit essays and often that is done with the assistance of AI. While lectures may also be recorded, the viewing data suggests most are not watched or watched fully, and while the cost of living crisis forces more students into more paid work, universities which recruit many students from affluent backgrounds still experience chronic non-attendance. In response, some UK universities have decided not to force students to attend, fearing making students attend lectures and seminars may reduce the NSS (National Student Survey) scores, by undermining students' experience and journey. This creates the absurd situation that one method to increase student satisfaction with their teaching entails students not turning up to be taught. It would seem as if, on this topic at least, university management were themselves becoming interpassive, by going through the bureaucratic motions and letting the scores concerning teaching satisfaction take the place of actual teaching.

Against the notion that students are customers who need to be satisfied, Collini argued, writing in response to the fee increase to £9000, that unlike a consumption experience, the experience of being a student in higher education should be dissatisfying.⁶ What Collini meant was that the experience of studying at university should produce an unsettling experience of having one's views challenged through immersion into a range of new ideas and values. This would be an uncomfortable experience but one that was positive because of the greater ability it produced to understand and engage meaningfully with new ideas. As students do not have a deep knowledge of a subject before starting their university education, and as that education is one that ought to produce dissatisfaction, the notion of assessing it in terms of student-customers being satisfied with a product they knew about fully beforehand was meaningless. With Collini's vision, a dissatisfying education would be one that helped students become knowledgeable and critically-minded citizens able fully to participate in democratic life, as well as being effective problem-solvers in employment.

However, this conception has for the most part become a normative fiction just as detached from the reality of teaching as the management's bureaucratic fiction of the engaged student. It is argued here that such disengagement is largely a consequence of university management's bureaucratic fiction creating the conditions for its fictional status. In search of increased customer satisfaction, university managers positioned students as consumers of a pleasurable experience and journey. In place of seeking to develop students as independent learners who value dissatisfaction, university management seek to position students as passive *homo economicus* customers who want to be given an emotionally satisfying experience along their journey. Students become positioned as both all-powerful knowledgeable customers who know not so much what a degree ought to entail in terms of dissatisfaction, but rather know what a good experience feels like, whilst at the same time being positioned not just as passive consumers of an experience 'delivered' to them, but as always being vulnerable to a decline in well-being.

Following the publicity around student suicides, universities rightly responded by seeking ways to improve their handling of mental health problems, but mental health became redefined as well-being, which is a far more vague and elastic concept. Under the heading of improving well-being, university managers have sought to increase not just academics' labour in terms of personal tutoring and pastoral time but increase their emotional labour. While the neoliberal approach to managing a population's health redefined 'healthy' as 'pre-illness' and sought to responsabilise individuals to manage their state of 'pre-illness' so they would be more efficient workers,⁷ academics have become responsabilised to manage the well-being of all-powerful but always-vulnerable student-customers, by ensuring their student experience and student journey were always emotionally positive and marked by ubiquitous 'support'. If not the sole cause of disengagement amongst students, this positioning of students has arguably compounded the problem significantly. Students are continually told by universities they are consumers of an experience and a journey whilst the experience itself becomes hollowed out and meaningless.

The problems outlined above are a direct consequence of government policies over the last fourteen years. From the Browne Review on, English universit-

ies have been subject to a plethora of policies designed to marketise higher education. Political contingencies disrupted such policies, with the two main examples being the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition setting what became a fee-norm of £9000 rather than allowing a free market in fees, and the House of Lords breaking the connection between fee increases and the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) level a university or subject was awarded. Yet the most significant disruption to the neo-liberal objectives sought came from the policies themselves being implemented as intended. This is because there was no foresight that the policies imposing marketisation would, ironically, create *homo economicus* behaviours which were predictable but not only antithetical to the objectives sought by government, but detrimental to students, academics, employers and the notion of developing a critically-minded engaged citizenry. Ironically the implementation of neoliberal policies to marketise higher education has resulted in market behaviour, but with managers acting as *homo economicus* agents in ways not anticipated by governments, and students acting as customers passively expecting an experience and journey to be delivered and managed by academics.

Critics argued that the fee increase would successfully nudge students into becoming *homo economicus* consumers to the detriment of appreciating education as a good in itself, developing a critically-engaged democratic citizenry, and the social sciences and humanities.⁸ However when Student Number Controls were lifted university managers acted as *homo economicus* actors increasing recruitment to the cheap-to-teach humanities and social science courses. The £9000 fee created a problem with the RAB charge and increased public debt, meaning that any fee increase would meet hostility not only from students and parents but also the Treasury.⁹ So when inflation massively outpaced the value to universities of the domestic fee, universities further increased recruitment to the cheap-to-teach courses. As universities were in brutal competition for students, they further intensified the focus on the student experience and journey, to ensure they had happy customers, successfully managed through their time at university. Many students responded to this environment in the way people social-

ised as consumers would respond, which was to expect a university campus reminiscent of a shopping mall or airport terminal but with no or limited expectation to engage with becoming independent learners benefitting from dissatisfaction in Collini's terms.

The Green and White Papers paving the way for the TEF held that student-customers should serve the market, rather than the market serve customers, and that they were failing to do this, by failing to purchase the right human capital investments.¹⁰ Yet neoliberal governments created policies that nudged managers to provide more courses the government wanted reduced and to provide a consumption experience over an enabling-dissatisfying higher education experience. The irony of neoliberal higher education is that top-down marketisation created *homo economicus* behaviours that led to the higher education market creating outcomes that have benefitted no-one.

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Notes

1. Bradshaw and Andehn, 'Interpassive students in interactive classrooms', *Radical Philosophy* 215 (2023), 16.
2. Ibid., 21.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. 'Interpassive Students', 21.
5. Ibid., 21–22.
6. Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).
7. David Armstrong, 'The Rise of Surveillance Medicine', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 17:3 (1995), 393–404.
8. See, for instance, John Holmwood, ed., *A Manifesto for the Public University* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
9. Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education* (London: Pluto, 2013).
10. Justin Cruickshank, 'Economic Freedom and the Harm of Adaptation: On Gadamer, Authoritarian Technocracy and the Re-Engineering of English Higher Education', in Cruickshank and Ross Abbinnett eds., *The Social Production of Knowledge in a Neoliberal Age: Debating the Challenges Facing Higher Education* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 271–298.

The racket university

Nathaniel Barron

The world is so possessed by the power of what is and the efforts of adjustment to it, that the adolescent's rebellion, which once fought the father because his practices contradicted his own ideology, can no longer crop up.

Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason'¹¹

Of all the crises gripping UK higher education (HE), the learning spaces certainly abound with all the hallmarks of apathy. This withering of interest in learning routinely on display by large numbers of degree students is not the fault of those students themselves, however.¹² Neither is it explicable solely by a new generational attention economy nor by the expansion of customer sovereignty. One might be tempted to paint this reticence as an equivocal sign of resistance in a conjuncture where HE learning spaces are subjected to injunctions of technological interactivity and pedagogic optimisation. In a refrain of *Bartleby's* 'I'd prefer not to', the refusal to engage would arise from an ambiguous resistance hedging its bets on a strange passivity, as in Alan Bradshaw and Mikael Andehm's analysis in *RP* 215. If the student revolt at Milbank in 2010 'challenged the stereotype of apathetic youth',¹³ then well over a decade later, apathetic passivity returns with a disobedient sheen.

But given the objectively pessimistic terrain of today's university, this framing seems much too sanguine. Can this reticence to actively participate in learning really be a student 'escape' from, and a potential 'antidote' to, the neoliberal capture of higher education?¹⁴ Could it not be instead that this 'mass phenomenon of disengagement' speaks to an increasing erasure of student individuality ('self-negation') which has already travelled a fair distance within the contemporary university?¹⁵ Instead of 'anti-ideological behaviour' resisting attempts to interpellate students into a techno-paradigm of hyper-interactivity,¹⁶ one could explore student disengagement as an expression of a sector whose logic is more like a racket.

The Frankfurt School's fragmentary theory of the racket – an 'unfinished torso' – began during its Amer-

ican exile and principally at Horkheimer's instigation.¹⁷ The members of the Institute for Social Research were attempting to come to terms theoretically with capitalism's 'monopoly-fascist phase' and were obligated to discard Marxist economism.¹⁸ A debate ensued within the Institute concerning the state-capital relation during this classical stage of European fascism which was generally premised on the growing primacy of the political, as nineteenth-century *laissez faire* capitalism gave way to giant monopolies.¹⁹ Importantly, the debate extended beyond the German context and was seen to be reflective of the American society that had welcomed the exiled Institute. The racket theory therefore identified a movement from private to state capitalism among 'very different political forms'.²⁰ Insofar as the theory named the return of political domination in light of capitalism's internal tendencies towards monopolism, it signalled the restoration of protection as domination's archetypical expression, domination's 'true nature'.²¹ For a racket is the means by which protecting clients allows for their very exploitation. The 'political era' of monopolies,²² or political capitalism, of which fascism was the most worthy example, is notably back on the agenda today.²³

In Horkheimer's estimation, the racket model, as he sometimes called it, had indeed come to define all modern societal organisation: 'The racket ... as was typical for the relationship of rulers and ruled', Horkheimer wrote, 'is now representative of all human relationships'.²⁴ Horkheimer's desire was thus to extensively apply the theory, since a 'study of such border phenomena as racketeering may offer useful parallels for understanding certain developmental tendencies in modern society'.²⁵ Although wide-ranging applications of the racket theory never took place, Horkheimer commented on education from its general spirit:

With the decline of the ego and its reflective reason, human relationships tend to a point wherein the rule of economy over all personal relationships, the universal control of commodities over the totality of life, turns into a new and naked form of command and obedience.

No longer buttressed by small scale property, the school and the home are losing their educational function of preparing men [sic] for life in society.²⁶

The suggestion that the contemporary university is one institution in which ‘the practices and mores of the Mob have permeated’²⁷ is not, of course, to directly compare it and German fascism, nor to suggest that (the threat of) violence is an organising logic of the university. Defining the racket society just by reference to the use of violence to vouchsafe political domination discounts Otto Kirchheimer’s more generalised notion of the racket, which

... expresses the idea that within the organizational framework of our society attainment of a given position is out of proportion to abilities and efforts which have gone into that endeavor. It infers that a person’s status in society is conditional upon the presence or absence of a combination of luck, chance, and good connections, a

combination systematically exploited and fortified with all available expedients inherent in the notion of private property.²⁸

The mass student disengagement within HE is explicable by the atrophy of universality within society that the racket university reflects and compounds. Capitalism’s monopoly phase ensures the death of classical liberalism’s purported universalist rule of law, as well as the work ethic that was said to be required to fully reap the fruits of the marketplace. In the racket society those who command maintain the allegiance of those who obey not by ideology but simply ‘by trading protection for obedience, abandoning any pretense to represent general interests or universal principles’.²⁹ This is why within a racket society, alongside ‘the weakening of mediating universal ideologies went the erosion of an autonomous self who is capable of surviving outside the protective



cocoon of the racket.³⁰ The student's ability to resist the 'father' is severely curtailed if, despite their evident cloaking of classed, gendered and racialised oppression and exploitation, the universalist principles which allowed a critical subject to emerge to take the measure of the social landscape have absconded, such as they are doing today. The dialectical traction of such universals has concretely expressed itself in previous conjunctures of the university's pre-neoliberal phase,³¹ but this traction is eroding, stalling the process of resistance. Even a work like Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron's *Reproduction* acknowledged that despite the university being a key node through which 'cultural capital across generations' is transmitted, its institutional role of stamping 'pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital' still relied on 'a meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the *title* (credential).'³² Although a 'fetish of ability',³³ the universal of meritocracy could be levelled as a contradiction against the continuing importance of group affiliation.³⁴ However, in a racket society

Privileges that depend on distinctions in individual ability become increasingly rare. In acquiring and maintaining social positions it is not so much special skill that matters; what matters is that one gets the chance to find access to, and be accepted by, one of the organizations that dispose of the technical apparatus to which the individual has scant possibility of access.³⁵

Society in its current state has rendered it reasonable on the students' part not to participate in the learning spaces, for that is no longer the name of the game to conform to.³⁶ In the social sciences, at least, it is increasingly difficult for students to fail, and the successful deregulation of assessment processes at the eleventh hour by university management in order to bypass the University and College Union's grassroots Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) compounds this trend, and is an indication that being merely enrolled on a degree is becoming increasingly more definitive than substantive participation itself. The university stakes much on 'student experience' but it sucks the life out of them by its very logic of being a 'naked clique system' that the students must learn to resemble.³⁷ The deformation of even illusory or unfulfilled universals like meritocracy thus ensures the increasing impossibility of fashioning critical subjectivity within the learning spaces of a racket uni-

versity. As Adorno wrote, such universals 'have become so attenuated that they declare themselves to be lies in order to show those who believe them how impotent they really are.'³⁸

The reticent student, then, is not to be understood as a subject that rejects alienation even by leaning on a vague notion of a better-universal such as meritocracy. Rather they suspect that they are beholden to a racket in which 'ultimately, every reference to universality ... is lost.'³⁹ It is but an expression of the 'association by sufferance' that a university degree is becoming.⁴⁰ The majority of students begin to suspect that the contemporary university protects them from the very thing that the university helps to create – a radical disenchantment stacking shelves.⁴¹ Indeed, 'the archetypal form of racket is ... the protection racket in which the racketeers extort payment for protection from a threat which they themselves pose.'⁴² The university is thereby increasingly coming to resemble a 'forced community', 'a modern *Vergemeinschaftung*.'⁴³ As Kirchheimer wrote:

The term *racket* ... reflects on a society in which social position has increasingly come to depend on a relation of participation, on the primordial effect of whether an individual succeeded or failed to 'arrive'. Racket connotes a society in which individuals have lost the belief that compensation for their individual efforts will result from the mere functioning of impersonal market agencies. ... It is the experience of an associational practice which implies that neither the individual's choice of an association nor the aims that the latter pursues are the result of conscious acts belonging to the realm of human freedom.⁴⁴

We are in a worse world than that painted by students' reticence being an ambiguous counter-offensive against alienation, which the educator can partner and shape towards better ends. More than good teaching practice will be required to turn the tide.⁴⁵ The untruth and internal tendencies of the market mechanism have produced a racket university in which students' participation is reduced to being merely present, to having 'arrived' at that place, to being on the 'inside'. Any attempt to ideologically bind students to a particularist interest that represents itself as universal is itself jettisoned in the racket university and replaced with increasingly unmediated compulsion that knows its own name. The idea that the contemporary university remains a potential

space of liberation, despite, or precisely because of, the alienation it exudes, might then itself be vain hope.

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Notes

11. Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9:3 (1941), 381.
12. Alan Bradshaw and Mikael Andehn, 'Interpassive students in interactive classrooms', *Radical Philosophy* 215 (2023), 16–22.
13. Matt Myers, *Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 30, cf. 152–3.
14. 'Interpassive students', 19–21.
15. *Ibid.*, 16, 21.
16. *Ibid.*, 22.
17. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its Theories, History and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1994), 319; see Gerhard Scheit, 'Rackets', trans. Lars Fischer, in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, eds. Beverly Best et al. (London: Sage, 2018), 1551–66.
18. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 318.
19. Gerhard Scheit, 'Rackets', 1560.
20. Thorsten Fuchshuber, 'Saving Mediation: The Topicality of Max Horkheimer's Post-Liberal Concept of the Political', accessed 19 February 2024, <https://www.telospress.com/saving-mediation-the-topicality-of-max-horkheimers-post-liberal-concept-of-the-political/>
21. Max Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', 374.
22. Frederick Pollock, 'State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1985), 78.
23. Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner, 'Seven Theses on American Politics', *New Left Review*, 138 (Nov/Dec 2022).
24. Horkheimer quoted in Martin Jay, 'The Age of Rackets? Trump, Scorsese and the Frankfurt School', in *Immanent Critiques: The Frankfurt School Under Pressure* (London: Verso, 2023), 122.
25. Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', 375. Jay suggests that 'college admissions offices' are an instance in which the racket model realises itself in the contemporary university, but this is not elaborated upon. Jay, 'Rackets?', p. 127.
26. Horkheimer, 'The End of Reason', 379.
27. Jay, 'Rackets?', 115–133.
28. Otto Kirchheimer, 'In Quest of Sovereignty', *The Journal of Politics*, 6:2 (May 1944), 160.
29. Jay, 'Rackets?', 122–3.
30. *Ibid.*, 123.
31. Alberto Toscano, 'The University as a Political Space', in Michael Bailey and Des Freedman, eds., *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 61.
32. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1990), ix–x.
33. Theodor W. Adorno and Hellmut Becker, 'Education for maturity and responsibility', trans. Robert French et al., *History of Human Sciences*, 12:3 (1999), 23.
34. John Holmwood, 'Race and the Neoliberal University: Lessons From the Public University', in Gurminder K. Bhambra et al., eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 44.
35. Kirchheimer, 'Sovereignty', 161.
36. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reflections on Class Theory', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 97.
37. Adorno, 'Reflections', 102.
38. Adorno, 'Reflections', 96.
39. Thorsten Fuchshuber, 'Saving Mediation'. On the significance of overseas students for understanding a shift in meritocracy's conception within higher education, see Holmwood, 'Race', 47.
40. Kirchheimer, 'Sovereignty', 139–176.
41. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley: Zero Books, 2009), 21–6.
42. Peter M. R. Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester & Wheatsheaf, 1992), 209.
43. Fuchshuber, 'Saving Mediation'.
44. Kirchheimer, 'Sovereignty', 161.
45. See Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets, and the Future of Higher Education* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).



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