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Neoliberal capitalism and the commodification of social reproduction, from our home to our classroom

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LEAVE A COMMENT



It is official: we are getting ready for another round of industrial action in the UK higher education sector. For those who may be wondering what the current UCU national strike 2021-22 (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11915/University-strikes-begin-after-bosses-refuse-to-budge-on-pensions-pay--working-conditions>) is all about, a short recap may help. Higher education UCU members are striking because of planned pensions cuts that risk pushing academic staff into 'retirement poverty'; to fight against ever-growing labour casualisation in universities; and because of

the growing inequalities of gender, race and class the UK higher education sector has nurtured in the last five decades. Colleagues at Goldsmith – to whom we shall extend all our support – are also fighting against planned mass staff redundancies (<https://goldsmithsucu.org/2021/11/15/goldsmiths-local-ucu-strike-nov-23rd-dec-13th-2021/>).

We – higher education workers and students – were on this picket before, so many times, fighting other policies deepening the process of commodification of education. We were on this picket fighting cuts in real wages (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/feb/09/teacher-pay-down-real-terms-since-2003>) – which education workers are still experiencing. We were on this picket to fight against the trebling of university fees for our BA students (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/jul/12/universities-go-ahead-tuition-fees>). At SOAS, where I work, we were on this picket to fight against cuts to our library (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/oct/26/highereducation.cutsandclosures>), against Prevent (https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sai-englert/preventing-prevent-opposi_b_9209468.html), against the deportation of SOAS cleaners (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/17/soas-cleaners>) on campus ground – an event which remains the darkest chapter of SOAS industrial relations and for which the university has not yet apologised in recognition of the harm caused to the SOAS 9 (<https://freedomnews.org.uk/2021/06/09/12-years-on-soas-justice-for-workers-commemorates-9-cleaning-staff-targeted-in-on-campus-immigration-raid/>) and to all our community. We hope the school will acknowledge the need to do so, so that we can move forward, together.

We were at other demonstrations and on other picket lines, protesting against austerity, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/nov/06/is-capitalism-broken-occupy>), against climate change (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/04/evolution-of-extinction-rebellion-climate-emergency-protest-coronavirus-pandemic>), against racism and in support of Black Lives Matter, (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/hundreds-join-march-to-protest-against-systemic-racism-in-the-uk>) against gender violence (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/reclaim-the-night-women-protest-march-b1965426.html>). The picket really is a sort of archive, which can be consulted backward to reconstruct a history of attacks to our rights – at work, at home, or both.

And if we consult this archive, we can clearly see a pattern emerging in the last decades, a pattern which in fact connects neoliberal Britain with many other places in the world economy, which have also experienced processes of neoliberalisation. All the pickets and demonstrations, become a sort of tracing route; we can reconnect the dots spread across a broader canvas. These dots design a specific pattern; that of a systematic attack to life and life-making sectors, realms and spaces.

Neoliberal capitalism (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>), starting from the 1980s, has promoted a process of systematic de-concentration of resources in public sectors, and particularly in so-called 'socially reproductive sectors (<https://developingeconomics.org/2020/03/09/re-thinking-social-reproduction-crises-contradictions-and-variegations/>)', that is those that regenerate us as people and as workers. This attack has been massively felt in the home, which has become a major battleground for processes of marketization of care and social reproduction (https://www.socialwatch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/en/marketisationofsocial2003_eng.pdf). The withdrawal of the state from welfare provisions, the rise and rise of co-production in services (i.e. the incorporation of citizens' unpaid labour in public service delivery; a practice further cheapening welfare) – and processes of partial or full privatisation of service delivery in healthcare and education have generated massive reproductive gaps (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5014-the-care-crisis-what-caused-it-and-how-can-we-end-it>). These gaps have been filled through outsourcing of life-making (<https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/life-making-or-death-making/>) to

others. Homes have become net users of market-based domestic and care services. The in-sourcing of nannies, au-pairs, and elders carers, from a vast number of countries in the Global south and transition economies have remade the home as a site of production (<https://developingeconomics.org/2021/03/23/hidden-abodes-in-plain-sight-what-the-covid-19-pandemic-has-revealed-and-why-we-need-to-put-social-reproduction-at-the-centre-of-a-more-just-post-covid-world/>) and employment generation, at extremely low costs.

On the other hand, the home has always been a site of exploitation (<https://libcom.org/library/colonization-housewifization-maria-mies>), albeit of wageless labouring services, as women have shouldered life-making at zero costs for a very long time. Yet, their entry into paid labour markets have not been gender liberating, as it has reproduced the gendered division of labour by embedding it in a number of other divides, like the one between the Global North and the Global South. Middle class women have not learnt how to withdraw from unpaid reproductive labour. They have learnt how to outsource the reproductive question towards other women, often racialised and migrant women, and/or members of subaltern groups in the society in question. These transformations have been systematic in Britain and across the world economy.

If this sort of transformations has seen a process of privatisation of reproductive work such as domestic and care activities which has centred households as producers and consumers of housework services, a similar trend has hit life-making sectors (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3555-mapping-social-reproduction-theory>), if on a larger scale. These sectors, such as health and education, have endured privatisation in ways that have also generated the massive rise of global care chains (<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2018/a-global-crisis-in-care/>). The NHS is a case in point here. Despite remaining technically publicly provided, the NHS has seen many of its services going through processes of privatisation (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ournhs/three-quarters-of-uk-public-worried-more-nhs-privatisation-will-damage-care/>), and the massive entry of public private partnerships (PPPs). Nursing jobs have been outsourced systematically (https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/worlrevipoliecon.3.3.0354#metadata_info_tab_contents), and recruitment agencies have targeted nursing markets in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. This has produced a process of reproductive brain drain from these regions, which has resulted in weakening their healthcare systems. At the same time, it has ensured a downward pressure on wages in nursing sectors in the UK. So this work, celebrated as essential – we clapped, didn't we? (<https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/coronavirus/clap-for-heroes-nurses-say-they-do-not-want-return-of-applause-07-01-2021/>) – has been regenerated as precarious, gendered, racialised (<https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2017/may/16/progress-nhs-workforce-diversity>), and in fact it has helped dragging down wages for all nurses. To be clear, it is not migrant care labour which is dragging down wages. It is the processes of privatised outsourcing which turns this work into a cheap devalued service.

Now, we know that these processes kill (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/13/black-nurses-in-uk-didnt-start-with-windrush-covid-19-deaths>). In fact, as COVID-19 hit, areas characterised by private health systems or privatised services have experienced astonishingly high death rates. This is the case for the US, obviously, but also for the UK, unsurprisingly ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(21\)00029-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(21)00029-X/fulltext)). Privatised services come with a reordering of main objectives, away from areas considered less marketable. We learnt that with the paucity of ICU bed, didn't we? Again, these trends can also be spotted across the world economy (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09614524.2021.1938513>); in Peru for instance, (<https://theconversation.com/how-peru-became-the-country-with-the-highest-covid-death-rate-in-the-world-169779>) a high growth rate economy, healthcare system characterised by PPPs have not been able to cope and eventually this turned into a high death toll. In Italy too, the rich north has experienced far more deaths than the under-developed south for similar reasons. Northern

regions, despite their healthcare poles of excellence has been unable to cope with the demands placed by COVID-19 infection rates ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30074-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30074-8/fulltext)), as its semi-privatised model has shifted priorities away from emergency medicine.

Now let's continue our analysis from our homes, onto our classrooms. The commodification of social reproduction mounted in the 1980s has been ferocious against our education systems. It has hit our nurseries, our schools, our universities. In fact, the same processes of privatisation of social reproduction have gained pace across the schooling and educational system. Today, these key spaces of socialisation have increasingly become attuned to the logics of profit-making. First, PPPs also increasingly dominate across education (<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620720/bp-world-bank-education-ppps-090419-en.pdf>). In some segments of the educational system, then, private provision has taken centre stage. In nurseries and early years provisions, colleagues from the University of East London and UCL have highlighted the massive entry of giant private providers (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/14/parents-carillion-childcare-collapse-nursery-provider>). These providers are often linked to transnational capital. So the nursery, of all places has become a site of financial capital (<https://thesociologicalreview.org/magazine/february-2022/covid-refigurations/nurture-versus-capitalism/?fbclid=IwAR1ujnnS8hgOFPzJDLmdFk53vOgDttkB68gWPOOUNImCKNkrqLHDPlkknc>). (Penn and Mezzadri, 2022). Indeed, the financial grammar of mergers and acquisitions is the new 'Language of Childcare' (<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-new-language-of-childcare-Main-report.pdf>) (Simon et al, forthcoming). According to a forthcoming report, most formal childcare in the UK – over 80% of all places – is provided by the private sector, ranging from small private operators to multi-million-pound international businesses. 53% of all childcare places are provided by big companies. The for-profit childcare market in the UK is worth an estimated £5.5 billion pounds, of which £3.6 billion goes to big companies. The largest three chains, between them providing over 60,000 places, are owned by foreign investors, with financial head offices located in Singapore, France and the USA. Further changes in the sector seem likely, most notably increased penetration by large chains, and increased foreign investment (Simon et al, forthcoming). Similar trends take place in the US and Canada (<https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Risky-business-main%20report.pdf>).

These processes take place in a context of hyper-precarisation of employment (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/28/nursery-staff-work-covid-crisis-early-years-support>), and huge turnover of labour. As I left my child in his private nursery for almost two years, not knowing if he will find his usual keyworker, I soon realised the nursery was owned by the private insurance company down the road. I have no idea which broader financial circuit that agency is linked to. In these privatised spaces, children are socialised as workers of tomorrow (https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1700&context=gc_pubs), standardised as their care needs. Already from a very young age, ideas of developmental targets and compliance are mainstreamed as ideal value for parents (and these tiny little children) to internalise.

The move to the public schooling system – to public provision – once children turn three, provide some respite, but up to a point. In the context of the millions cuts (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/18/englands-state-schools-suffering-biggest-fall-in-funding-since-1980s-says-ifs>) exercised by the UK government in these last decades, primary schools struggle to remain anchored to a caring narrative. The curriculum is based on an obsession with targets and categorisation. Kids as young as 5 are placed into different areas of achievement, from low to high, and if they are lucky this system may change daily. In some schools it is structural, and small children must struggle their way out of low achievement grouping – a sort of school-based version of the *Hunger Games*. A few weeks ago *The Guardian* featured an article titled Children harmed by school streaming into lower ability groups, UK study shows

(<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/26/children-harmed-by-school-streaming-into-lower-ability-groups-uk-study-shows>). The study shows that primary school children who are placed in the bottom ability group in their class go on to show increased levels of hyperactivity and emotional problems throughout childhood and early adolescence. This is supposedly groundbreaking new research, but all parents know this. Now: these new findings, published in the *Child Development* (<https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cdev.13674>) journal, have prompted researchers to call for children in lower ability groups to be monitored closely by their teachers to ensure their wellbeing is not being compromised. So, the recommendation of the study is actually NOT to abolish this form of social segregation, which is often classed and racialised. It is instead for these kids to be 'othered' further and 'monitored closely'.

On the other hand, the abusive practices that monitoring and surveillance systems involve have also been widely discussed with reference to secondary education. Here, the massive use of detention as a tool to enforce discipline has also come under fire, pre-pandemic. An article appearing in *The Guardian* compared schools to prisons, and highlighted how the massive abuse of exclusion (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/30/whats-behind-the-rise-in-english-school-exclusions>) was perpetuating gaps in terms of race, class, and neurodiversity. Have you watched last year the series of short movies directed by Steve McQueen – *Small Axe*? You should, it is brilliant. One of the episodes, titled *Education*, (<https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/small-axe-education-steve-mcqueen-amazon-prime-video-1107542/>) dwells on the racist and neurophobe shortcomings of the British schooling system. Although the characters in *Education* are fictional, the film is based on real-life events of the 1970s, when some London councils followed an unofficial policy of transferring disproportionate numbers of black children from mainstream education to schools for the so-called 'educationally subnormal'. The practice was exposed by educationalist Bernard Coard (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Coard) in his 1971 pamphlet where he explained how West Indian children were manufactured into unschoolable subjects by the so-called 'normal' schooling system. Thankfully, those practices are gone, yet patterns of exclusion from school remain highly racialised, gendered, and based on disabilities. This is particularly the case in poor postcode areas (<https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2020/08/19/child-poverty-education-and-the-postcode-lottery/>), whereas richer neighbourhood can benefit from the hidden processes of privatisation of education, as they have access to better public schools, often located in streets with very expensive housing, whose value is maintained by access to this type of schooling, which in turn keeps real estate prices high, and so on and so forth.

The obsessions with targets and testing, in contexts of profoundly unequal social provisions, is a system that can be spotted also in many other countries. It dominates in the US, in South Korea, in China, and in India. In the US, as highlighted by the work of Cindi Katz, this system produced a characterisation of childhood and youth as either accumulation or waste (<https://www.raco.cat/index.php/DocumentsAnalisi/article/download/241950/324541>), depending on how the kids in question perform –and arguably 'produce and consume' (see Ferguson, 2017) – their childhood and youth, if along the lines deemed as successful by the monitoring and testing system or not. Of course, processes of childhood as accumulation return to the home, in ways in which parents foster their children as little investment projects for the future – as epitomised by practices chillingly summarised, Katz (2021) recently explained, by memoirs like 'Battle Hymns of a Tiger Mother', by Amy Chua.

So, after coming for our homes, our hospitals and clinics, and our nurseries and primary and secondary classrooms, the commodification of social reproduction lands in our university settings. Here, it continues its work of divide and rule, in processes of intensification of testing (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/27/anxiety-mental-breakdowns-depression-uk-students>). However, mostly, it manifests in the deepening of regimes of surveillance (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jun/11/nottingham-university-secret-films-students>) and in shaping the entry of young adults into relations of debt

(<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/25/largest-debt-amassed-by-student-in-england-is-189700>), against a background of deterioration of working rights (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jan/28/academics-must-stop-uk-universities-sweatshops>) for teaching staff. In fact, in many ways, universities represent a microcosm speaking to all the distinct processes of commodification of social reproduction unveiled so far. They are sites of global care chains, as cleaning and caring services are decentralised and outsourced to agencies, a process that the Justice for Workers (<https://www.justice4workers.org/>) campaign fought across UK campuses, inspiring us all. It is a site of financial capital and privatised housing. One of the most haunting images of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on university life last year has been that of students at the University of Manchester clashing with private security personnel (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/nov/05/security-fence-manchester-university-student-flats>) hired by universities to keep them inside halls of residence. They should have not been there in the first place, but Universities, which have become landlords, lied to house hundreds of thousands of students and capture rent money. These rents and skyrocketing fees are the reasons why student debt has ballooned since the onset of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, exhausted by testing and surveillance as children, young adults finally arrive in the neoliberal university as expert consumers of largely privatised or at the very least individualised educational ‘products’, overexposed to what Paulo Freire criticised as the banking approach to education (http://puente2014.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/87465079/freire_banking_concept.pdf). There they are ready to become financial subject – subjects of debt and processes of indebtedness. In their book *A Feminist Reading of Debt*, (<https://femrev.wordpress.com/tag/debt/>) NiUnaMenos theorists and activists Veronica Gago and Luci Caballero spell out the linkages between debt, social reproduction, and deeply rooted social and economic inequalities running across households and communities.

As students mount this debt, staff salaries and working conditions have been at the same time systematically eroded by the neoliberal universities. A massive producer of what David Graeber called ‘bullshit jobs’ (<https://www.vox.com/2018/5/8/17308744/bullshit-jobs-book-david-graeber-occupy-wall-street-karl-marx>) – whose primary scope is often in fact management and control – the asphyxiating walls of the neoliberal universities are fabricated by processes of casualisation of staff, the reproduction of racial, gender and class gaps (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/23/universities-must-tackle-the-big-ethnicity-pay-gap>), and declining income share even for the so-called labour aristocracy of permanent academic workers, like myself. Or indeed cuts in pensions (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/30/uk-universities-hit-by-strike-action-over-pay-and-pensions>).

As you can see, we are circling back to the reasons we are striking this academic year, which is where my reflections started. We have connected all dots, through the archive of the picket line, and we have rehearsed all the processes that have placed and will place us here, on the picket, today and tomorrow. In December, I felt extremely honoured and privileged to stand on this picket line, with so many comrades, colleagues and students – in fact delivering an early version of these same reflections as a teach-out. Across London, teach-outs have been marvellous, and hundreds of students attended. We do not strike to avoid teaching. We strike to demand social change, and to teach solidarity through collective struggles. The picket line becomes our classroom, so that it can be, in the words of the late bell hooks (<https://academictrap.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bell-hooks-teaching-to-transgress.pdf>), ‘the most radical space of possibility in the academy’. In this space we can teach that all struggles are connected, set against the processes of commodification of social reproduction and life we have endured. On our picket, on this archive of knowledge of past and present fights we wage and must continue waging, from the home to the classroom, against neoliberal attacks to our

common forces of social reproduction (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/abs/forces-of-reproduction/BE9B0DBDC89593F3284FE3F51D3B0418>), united we will always stand. Solidarity to us all, for the days that are coming.

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Photo: [Socialist Appeal](https://www.flickr.com/photos/135433887@N02/) (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/135433887@N02/>).