

# Antipode

**Responses to the Participatory Geographies Research Group's 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security', September 2012**

**Towards Much Fuller, More Politically Engaged Geographies: Some Thoughts on the Communifesto of the Participatory Geographies Research Group**

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The recent 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies' of the Participatory Geography Research Group (PyGyRG) is a most welcome initiative to promote discussion on the state of academic working conditions, at least relative to some places. It is a positive development that some people in the academic world are looking for ways to resist current institutional dynamics and "to explore possible spaces for mutual aid and to share strategies for securing our own and geography's relevance and futures". But there are certain fundamental problems and contradictions that should also be borne in mind when attempting to forge such spaces and strategies. They have wider political implications as well. I will here discuss only three, which should be regarded as inter-related problems: (1) the universalisation of the particular; (2) a narrow view of the context of struggle; and (3) a relative isolation from existing organising efforts within even academic geography. There are additional critiques that should be discussed (see below), but these would make for too lengthy an intervention.

**1.**

One reading I would like to offer is that this conjuncture of so-called corporatisation in university systems relates largely to some European and European-descended settler colonial contexts (henceforth 'Euro-academia'). It is a reading that might in some respects challenge

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the received views implicit in efforts expressed by such groups as PyGyRG. This is because there are actually much wider and deeper processes to be considered that call into question much more than what most Euro-academia seem willing to confront. For example, PyGyRG claim, as many do, that “we find ourselves at a critical moment of increasingly uneven geographies: economic and environmental ‘crises’, poverty, social inequality, and disconnection between dominant political (and geopolitical) discourses and everyday lived lives”. Such a statement is certainly understandable in the context from which it is being made, but it unfortunately reinforces certain assumptions that belie the experiences of the vast majority of academics on this planet. Besides economic and environmental crises, poverty and social inequality being intrinsic to a capitalist mode of production, there is the universalising assumption of there being presently a critical moment, as if the vast majority of academic workers (in the world, not Euro-academia) had previously enjoyed much better conditions. This is not even the case for many European contexts, such as Italy, where precarity has been the order of the day for decades. The critical moment in this case can be argued to have been the early 1980s. In the case of Chile, corporatisation has been the militarily-enforced norm since the early 1970s. The assumption anyway certainly flies in the face of most academics’ reality, who even now resort to migrating to Euro-academic institutions (also from within Euro-academia) to gain not only economic security (or even mere employment), but also at times to avoid being assassinated. If there are critical moments to be considered here, one may want to start in the 1960s and 1970s or even earlier (e.g., with respect to political assassinations of intellectuals and/or livelihood distress) or in the early 1990s (or arguably even earlier) with the increasing criminalisation of immigrants (see also Federici 2012, for another critical appraisal).

Of course, it is easy to critique, as I am doing here, but widening the breadth of analysis has practical implications. For instance, PyGyRG’s first two strategies of resisting individualisation and monetisation presume that such processes are preponderant. It may be in some Euro-academic contexts, but the notion contradicts what I have experienced in organising outside and inside academic contexts, where a collective spirit and mutual aid practices are much more common than assumed. From such existing practices, one could learn about and further develop strategies for even more collective and effective forms of

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resistance in socially backward places where atomisation pressures reign, as in the UK and US. This would also be a means through which to operationalise one of the tactics promoted by PyGyRG, which is to “[c]ompile and share an open-source list of subversion strategies and tactics which we have used to work in, against and beyond the neoliberalisation of the university”.

In a related fashion, one must also be cognizant of the fact that the very infrastructure of Euro-academic universities and other privileged educational centres worldwide is predicated on the ransacking of life-sustaining resources throughout the world. This means that resistance to current policies must also be reconciled, for example, with struggles (not always far away) against mass dislocation and/or mass murders to pave the way for oil and mineral extraction that also serves university infrastructure. One way of reconciling these aspects of universities is to make mutually constructive linkages beyond local trade unions and other communities, as specified in the eighth tactic (this is by no means easy and language barriers are just some of the difficulties to face), starting by additionally creating trauma and emigration support for persecuted egalitarianistic intellectuals and activists generally. This sort of effort already exists, so it is a matter of seeking contacts with those already involved in such activities.

## 2.

In other words, the Communifesto suffers from too narrow a view about current struggles in universities (see, in contrast, Aronowitz 2000; Bourdieu 1988; Caffentizs 2008; Goodman 2010; Purcell 2008). Recent capitalist processes undermine much of what should be viewed as rather modest political openings that universities offered in the past and then only in some places. This past should not be idealised or assumed as universal. The university is a site of ideological reproduction for a capitalist mode of production that is arguably, by its very characteristics, patriarchal, racist, selectively genocidal, and heteronormative, among other processes whereby human bodily diversity is used simultaneously to foster violent repression and associated selective social cohesion (e.g., consumerism, settler colonialism, nationalism). In this respect, the university must be understood as a site specialised in the reinforcement of dominant truth regimes (or hegemonic ideologies) and the production of knowledge useful to

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the predominant ruling class fractions of the day, who, depending on context, may be more or less repressive.

This is one possible understanding of academia and its social role, but one worth at least considering in the development of strategies/tactics. It also means that the second strategy proposed in the Communifesto might need some rethinking. In a capitalist context, universities simply cannot be expected to become socially just. They are institutions of (negative forms of) power, where intellectual hierarchies and worldviews are forged and diffused (sometimes even by force) to maintain or intensify, as well as legitimise, the rule and control by the few. If one finds this to be a correct interpretation of the university, the struggle should then not be focused on the university, but on much wider social relations. Education, as a way of producing knowledge and as part of social reproduction, is a social, not a particular institutional process.

The strategies to be developed should then be quite different and aim for social, not institutional transformation. This means eventually undermining the very basis not only of economic differences between capitalists and workers (and I mean here workers as understood by materialist ecofeminists and others as anyone within and outside wage relations, see, e.g., Mies 1986), but also between workers, including between academics and other workers. It remains an open question whether this is a consequence towards which relatively privileged workers called academics (or ‘professionals’) are willing to struggle. However, a principal strategy that PyGyRG and others should then consider is to organise for the rechanneling of university resources towards establishing parallel education institutions that are open to all, that integrate institutionalised with non-academic knowledge in mutually beneficial ways, and that are firmly based on building an egalitarian society (returning universities to some original charter, as in tactic five, may be useful in this, even if insufficient).

After all, education is, among other things, an inter-generational transfer of worldviews and technical expertise and it is actually put into practice beyond schooling systems anyway, often by people - most often women - outside the wage relation, doing care work (see, for example, the special issue of *The Commoner*, [“Care work” and the commons](#)). One may call it ‘tradition’, ‘acculturation’, ‘socialisation’, or ‘informal education’, which

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may be separate from institutionalised education, but one still finds it in the classroom as - in a more socially constructive version - Indigenous ways of relating to people and environments, or as - in the more deleterious form - common-sense racism. Put otherwise, can one really expect a factory to be socially just? The task should then not be to continue to uphold universities and to better them, but to go beyond them, using the resources at one's disposal, as under any factory regime, so as to subvert an entire social system.

### 3.

This process of breaking the institutional barriers of the education process and integrating it with existing and wider knowledge production and worldview reproduction processes is something that some are already doing and that has been practised in many instances in the past (for example, the anarchist Modern School movement). Within academic geography, for example, there have been similar efforts under the banner of the [Activist Geographers Grouping](#) and more recently through the Sub-Conferences at Association of American Geographers meetings (on this, more generally, see also Blomley 1994). There are also publications that could help in the actualisation of the tactics proposed, such as an alternative academic evaluation index that could be used precisely to “[s]uggest alternative forms of measurement [but why not mount pressures instead of suggest?]” (see CGC 2011).

Radical geographers have also been involved in actions outside academic settings that can indicate ways of subverting the system that universities represent, such as [Class War University](#) and the [Free University](#) actions organised through faculty and students at the City University of New York. One might also wish to exit the geography shell and venture into the universe of collectives like [UniNomade](#) and [Edu-Factory](#), who have contributed brilliant analyses of and have organised actions against fiscal theft and worsening work conditions imposed on students and faculty alike. There are also other initiatives worth following like the [Social Science Centre](#) and [Mess Hall](#) in Chicago, as well as lessons to learn from the experiences of the [Toronto School of Creativity and Inquiry](#). There are many other examples of existing radical alternatives helpful in further developing praxis for ‘mutual security’, but also to go beyond the rather limited and limiting, guild-centred formulation implicit in the Communifesto.

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As intimated above, there are additional critiques that could be raised and that should be discussed. Three others that come to mind are about (4) the Communifesto's egregious silence with respect to student movements (a grave strategic error), (5) the thought-practice dichotomy implied in the strategy-tactic differentiation (rather than seeing the two as aspects of a single praxis), and (6) the curious exclusion of physical geography. Nevertheless, what PyGyRG have embarked upon has the potential to create more systematic avenues of information sharing and coordination of actions even at the international level and, if agreeable to all concerned, to work towards the end of this mode of production and therefore the end of the university, at least as presently conceived and practised even among the most critical of academics. To this hopefully shared end, PyGyRG and others similarly engaged could learn from past and current radical education movements and seek out existing groups whose efforts complement, overlap, or contradict those proposed in the Communifesto so as to work on broadening affinities and coordinating with existing movements within and outside academia. In this light, the above critiques are meant also as iterative (self-)critiques, on the basis of which one can find ways to sabotage relations of domination within and outside the university in a context largely not of one's making.

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