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# **Squatting the Crisis - On the current protests in education and perspectives on radical change**

By Lina Dokuzovic and Eduard Freudmann

“We won’t pay for your crisis!” has echoed throughout universities worldwide. The significance of this is that the statement’s momentum has not only spread throughout educational institutions, but has also been present in other areas of society, bringing attention to the general failure of neoliberal capitalism and its appropriation of all spheres of life.

What has been defined as the “crisis in education,” which should be remedied through a wave of reforms, has been dealt with in terms of economic crisis-based measures, with measures for increasing profit. A homogenization in the way of a reform wave has taken place through the Bologna Process for establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Through this regulated norm of educational standards of comparability, Europe aims to enter and be at the forefront of the growing competitive knowledge economy and of research-based profit, through the parallel establishment of the European Research Area (ERA). The systematic removal of democratic structures in universities in Austria has been taking place with the implementation of the Bologna Process. Democratically elected bodies have been degraded to a kind of staff committee, while the dean’s office has been upgraded to a CEO-like singular leading body, which is checked and balanced by a university-external supervisory board, the so-called University Board.

Universities are not only increasingly being run like corporations, but a smooth transition to what much of Anglo-American or international private schools have been subjected to is taking place. They are being run BY corporations. An example of corporate shareholder interest can be seen in the international media corporation, Bertelsmann, having recently sold their shares in Sony, stating they would begin investing into education instead, since it is becoming more profitable than the music industry. Through the reform processes, an education economy with knowledge as a tradable commodity has been created. The result has not only been that education is considered profitable, but that education itself can be measured and sold. This correlates to the principles of the all-embodying privatization and commodification within neoliberal capitalism. In Australia, for example, one of Europe’s major competitors in the international education market, education services ranked as the third largest export industry, behind coal and iron ore, according to 2006–07 figures.

The Academy of Fine Arts Vienna is squatted!

Following the dissatisfaction resulting from a lengthy process of attempts to democratically negotiate the future of the institution, a public meeting was called by the Academy’s students and staff in front of its main building on October 20th, 2009. A statement was read out, which called for the reinstatement of the democratic structures that had been systematically removed in the course of establishing a system of increased competitiveness and commodification of the institution and everything within its walls. A list of precisely articulated demands was then read out to the dean. He was called on to fulfill his duty and represent the position of the institution rather than taking a gamble in his own professional and profitable interests, in the negotiation of the Budgetary Agreement with the Ministry of Science and Research, on the following day. A proclamation of solidarity was then expressed with all the protestors against educational reform around the world, which then included: Bangladesh, Brazil, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Serbia, South Africa, South Korea and the USA. Subsequently, the approximately 250 individuals entered the building and occupied the assembly hall, the most representative space in the institution. The squatters installed a plenum in a grassroots democratic structure, whereupon it was decided that the space would remain occupied until the demands were met.

Two days later, a group of Academy staff and students protested in front of the Ministry of Science and Research, expressing their dissatisfaction and rejection of the Budgetary Agreement, a legally-binding contract that defines the performance of the former in relation to the amount of financing by the latter, which was being negotiated in an entirely non-transparent and non-democratic fashion at that very moment. The demonstrating group continued to several other university auditoria and major spaces presenting the situation, bringing the students and staff present along with them, increasing the group's size, snowballing, until it ended up in Austria's largest lecture hall, where a plenum was held, declaring that space squatted. The representation and size of that space was significant, as it brought immediate media attention, which has focused primarily on the events of that singular space ever since, although over the following days, the protests expanded rapidly to a number of other universities throughout Austria and expanded to or joined those existing across Europe, bringing hundreds of thousands of people into the streets in protest. There are 76 universities in nine countries throughout Europe, with more being continually announced, squatted at this very moment.

#### Emancipatory speech and decentralization

The processes within the context of the protests have taken place through a grassroots democratic structure of collective decision-making, carried out in regular plenums. Tasks and insights are assigned to work groups, which maintain a dynamic fluctuation of participants. The intention of non-hierarchical forms of communication, established through some basic rules, have aimed to encourage all those present to actively contribute to discussions. Since representing the protests is a task which no one person can or should accomplish alone, it is vital that no spokesperson(s) is/are selected, but rather that a consistent rotation of speakers takes place. The consequence is a low rate of NLP (neuro-linguistic programmed) speeches, presenting the demands and expressions of the groups in a manner which is not trained or conditioned. This form of direct communication represents an emancipatory speech act, because existing codes of commodified language and the sale of speech are rejected through the very mechanism of the act of speaking itself.

Another significant element, resonating throughout the protests on all levels, has been decentralization. It has derived from the very process, which has taken place over recent years, of the de-democratization of universities within which all democratically-legitimized regulating bodies have been degraded to a pseudo-democratic facade, and thereby entirely disabled. The fact that the protests have not been led by individuals elected through procedures of representative democracy and have not been associated with parliamentary parties, left politicians, such as deans or the Minister of Science and Research perplexed, not knowing how to handle the protests. The decentralization not only refers to the aforementioned fluctuation, but also refers to direct actions, such as the temporary squatting of the vice dean's office at the Academy of Fine Arts, squatting the cafeteria at the Ministry of Science and Research or taking over the stage during a play at the Burgtheater, Vienna's most renowned theater.

#### Taking over the whole damn bakery

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.

Strategies of appropriation by related political players began two weeks later. They culminated into absurd declarations of solidarity, consisting of groups such as the Burgenland State Government. Such groups, as well as the deans and representatives of various universities, began instrumentalizing the impetus of the protest for their own aims, such as additional budgetary policies and agreements. Even the Minister of Science and Research thanked the protestors as they improved his position within the budgetary negotiations with the Minister of Finance. However, the violent repressive measures taken in the U.S. and Germany against the peaceful protests stand in contradistinction to the reformed measures of appropriation or non-hostile takeover.

The rebellions and protests of the 1968 movement (lagging by several years in Austria) left behind an understanding of how to strategically deal with future protests, resulting in repressive measures becoming counter-productive. The instrumentalization of protests enables the neutralization of all subversion. The appropriative strategies then progressed into the developing neoliberalized system, in which many people from the 1968 generation now hold key power positions. Beyond appropriation, there have been strategies of infantilization, which could be seen as being rather well-meaning. This is inherent to the very structure of traditional education, with the learned master gaining control of the unlearned one through structures of stultification, strategically imparting knowledge when seen fit. Based on their own Marx-to-market-biographies, the system representatives accept a certain dose of rebellion, as they understand it to be an educational process in which their assumed successors are being taught political skills and strategies that are fundamental for successfully fulfilling their future functions and handling their future task area – turning the education protests into educationalized protests.

Art and art schools as a paradigm for neoliberal capitalism

The fact that the protests in education in Austria were initiated within an artistic institution is not to be disregarded. As the logic of (neo-)liberalism is based on the freedom of the individual, the artist and his/her artistic liberty perfectly fills its shoes. In fact, not only does the desire and trend of bringing artistic institutions closer to marketable creative industries exist, rather art and the art school can be seen as a paradigm for neoliberal capitalism, with the artist and the cultural producer as role models for an increasingly neoliberalized job market. The flexibility and infinite creativity, teamed with self-discipline and precarious work relations lie at the core of the artist's profession.

The implementation of Bologna Process-related reforms at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, such as the replacement of the old master class system with the B.A./M.A. structure, was delayed due to a peculiar alliance between the individuals of the older tradition and the more progressive ones, keeping the developments in limbo. Many of the former felt threatened by the reforms, due to their orientation towards science and scientific models, an academic sphere which threatened both their knowledge and their refuge in the autonomy of art. The more progressive generation, however, did not believe in the autonomy of art; but subject to precarious labor conditions and the economized market logic, they opposed the reforms. Thus, a dubious symbiosis stalled the new system.

The story of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, by Goethe, begins with an old master sorcerer leaving his apprentice to do his chores in his workshop. Tired of the tedious task, he makes his water-fetching more efficient by enchanting a broom. Not being skilled enough to control the enchanted broom, he tries to destroy it with an axe, splintering it to pieces. Nevertheless, all of the pieces become new brooms, continuing the tasks, out of control. The progressive brooms turn against their new master. The story ends, however, with the spell being broken as the old master returns, the brooms disenchanting and all restored to their old order. Neither the system of the old nor the new master could retain stability without a bit of magic, but the old master's method managed to direct the brooms correctly for the time being.

In the case of the Academy, the cooperation between the old master class system supporters and the more progressive individuals functions, while the uncontrollable enchantment of the new neoliberalized system brings things out of order — not because it is necessarily the worse system, but because those who have depended on the old structure for a long time adapt any progressiveness to their own model. The irony, however, is that this inclination towards artistic “autonomy” tends very closely to the artistic “liberty” that allows the artist to create the perfect neo-liberal mold. The whole logic begins rotating at that point — like a dog chasing its own tail.

A profession greatly based on individualization, image and uniqueness has come to its own crisis, where the striking students and teachers have stopped training each other and themselves in how to continue a greater individualization of themselves, at the moment when they joined to collectively resist the structure. After running in circles for years, and being seriously endangered by vertigo-induced collapse, it marks a point where the protagonists finally caught what they were chasing, which made them realize that it was in fact their own tails that they had been chasing for years. Art and education serving capital and serving as models for capital had been exposed. However, one must not remain in the celebration of that moment, but rather continue to challenge and question this as a moment of transition, instead of utilizing collectivism as a training ground for one’s future career as a unique, innovative persona. The structure which has been ruptured and challenged must not support a cycling back to the same structure. In fact, the great irony of the situation is not that the current wave of international protests was sparked in a country like Austria, which is dominated by a tradition of “social partnership.” It lies in the fact that the art school, being just another tool in the machinery of the production of neoliberalized individuals surfaced, exposing the paradox of the entire system that was constructed around them.

The “crisis in education” and the capitalist crisis

How can this transition be utilized in a constructive way in order to continue these occupations and resistance, and more importantly to restructure the problematic apparatuses of education and related structures, such as the arts, from the bottom-up for the future? Some protestors have referred to creating an “infinite scenario” model of protest, in which the spaces that were reclaimed and appropriated remain self-organized without compromise. In fact, after the long-lasting history of neoliberal reforms, the deepest point of de-politicization may have been reached, and the worldwide education protests could mark the turning point for a re-politicization to follow. In this regard, it is necessary to view the current “crisis” in education in direct proportion to the economic crisis. This correlation very visibly shows the attempts of making education a new frontier for the capitalist crisis to invest its dwindling assets into, and therefore we repeat... WE WILL NOT PAY FOR YOUR CRISIS!

An economic crisis, which in fact reflects the very failure of capitalism itself — a system fundamentally rooted in inequality, exclusion and the creation of the “other,” actually leading to the death of the “other” for profit — shows a very extreme level of general social crisis. This must be taken into account while battling all related crises, the one in education as well. If this is not taken into consideration, then an undeniable repetition and reproduction of the all-embodying capitalist reality will result.

Residence rights and the freedom of movement for everyone

During plenums, interviews, presentations and speeches, people with no prior speaking ability took the stage. This has two potentialities, as aforementioned — that of educating better managers and that of creating a decentralized structure of democratic discussion and representation. The benefit to those who are incapable of speaking well by being given a chance to speak is a start. But what needs to be looked at is the difference to those who are incapable of speaking at all, because they are either not allowed to speak (women being sexistically slandered and assaulted, Muslims being booed off of stages, migrants being ignored, etc.), and the difference to those who cannot afford to be present. Here,

we mean those who are forced to work precarious illegal or semi-legal jobs at all hours of the day and night as they are subjected to racist immigration laws and the racist University Law, while having to uphold the best grades and attain a maximal level of productivity in their studies in order to legally remain in the given country. To return to the metaphor of biting one's own tail rather than chasing it: those who spend their time searching for food cannot afford to occupy themselves playing with their tails. The central demand of the protestors, "free education for everyone!" can only be approached and granted if the freedom of movement for everyone exists beyond national or supranational borders.

The last Lisbon Agreement proposed that the coming agreement (December 2009) amend education as the fifth freedom of the EU, along with capital, services, goods and citizens, in order to strengthen the grounds of the EHEA. The structure should allow maximal mobility of people throughout the EHEA, supported by the Bologna Process. The profitable goals of creating a European Higher Education Area, which should supposedly bring about the "new Renaissance" in Europe, would begin to crumble if the reality between mobility and migration were confronted.

Accordingly, we would like to amend the statements and demands made until now, stating that until the mentioned social reality is confronted, democracy as such cannot truly function. We, therefore, propose that as a first step, the 34 million euro that was recently "awarded" as an emergency measure to the universities by the Ministry be used to create a basic platform for financing and supporting that EVERYONE "taking those subjected to oppressive racist and sexist policies into consideration" can participate in the protests, so the real protest can in fact begin. In addition, the next measure must be that future moneys be used for the creation and maintenance of a platform which would ensure that democratic participation. Only then can we continue to articulate our demands and direct our attention to the changes within the university structures for planning the investment of future moneys. Successful progress, which does not reproduce discriminating forms of unequal advantage and disadvantage, is only possible if precisely each structure of oppression that was consciously addressed in the protest, is directly and primarily confronted and fought against. Insofar as these struggles are isolated from one another, they inevitably become part of the capitalist appropriation of all spheres of life. The only way to truly achieve radical change is to link the various struggles which are a part of it.

25 November 2009

Foot notes:

- i. See: <http://www.wallstreet-online.de/nachrichten/nachricht/2488718.html>;  
[http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2126f740-631b-11dd-9fd0-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2126f740-631b-11dd-9fd0-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1)
- ii. See: According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics,  
<http://www.isana.org.au/files/AEI%20March%20sshot%20expt%20income.pdf>
- iii. [www.tinyurl.com/squatted-universities](http://www.tinyurl.com/squatted-universities); retrieved on 25 November 2009
- iv. See, for example: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOI512\\_RghQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOI512_RghQ); <http://ow.ly/Ehjx>,  
<http://twitpic.com/qb6qu>; <http://tinyurl.com/yglzurr>;  
<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/US/11/22/california.student.protest/index.html>;  
<http://www.bildungsstreik-hd.de/2009/11/22/gewaltsamer-polizeieinsatz-gegen-landesweite-bildungsstreik-demonstration-in-stuttgart/>
- v. The "educationalization of capital" is a phrase coined by Stewart Martin in "Pedagogy of Human Capital," see: <http://www.metamute.org/en/Pedagogy-of-Human-Capital>
- vi. See, for example: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en>
- vii. A cooperative relationship between the trade union and the Austrian Chamber of Commerce with the goal of extinguishing social and political conflicts through policies of consensual agreement, therefore, leading to the impossibility of radicality, protest or antagonism.
- viii. "Necropolitics and necroeconomics, as practices of accumulation in colonial contexts by specific economic actors" "multinational corporations for example" that involve dispossession, death, torture,

suicide, slavery, destruction of livelihoods and the general management of violence. See Subhabrata Bobby Banarjee, "Live and Let Die: Colonial Sovereignties and the Death Worlds of Necrocapitalism," *Borderlands eJournal*, Volume 5, Number 1, 2006.

ix. In Austria, a non-EU/EEC citizen must provide proof of possessing at least €6,210 per year, along with other evidence of successful study, minimal course completion, clean legal record, etc. in order to receive approved or extended legal residence under a student resident permit. However, this quantity is not possible to obtain through legal work as income is strictly regulated and limited to under €300 a month.

x. Although often being referred to as "abolished," tuition fees in Austria are still active. The amendment of the University Law in 2008 merely disburdens selected groups of students, the largest one is Austrian or EU-citizens studying within the prescribed study term, whereas non-EU citizens still pay as if nothing ever happened.

xi. See the European Commission's report: "Preparing Europe for a New Renaissance" A Strategic View of the European Research Area: [ec.europa.eu/research/erab/publications\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/research/erab/publications_en.html). For an analysis of the colonial roots of the Renaissance, see Walter D. Mignolo "The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Colonization and the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition" *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol 45, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 808-828.

xii. This amount, just a drop in the bucket for all Austrian universities on all levels, was granted after having been removed in recent budget cuts. It has been retained as the "Minister's reserve" for disciplinary measures.