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Students' movement in Amsterdam

From “huis” to “huis” we reclaim the university

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In the last months, student and staff protests have taken the University of Amsterdam by storm. The protest movement against UvA's decade-long neoliberal reforms seems very recent but its foundations were set some time ago.

It started in the summer 2014 when the UvA social sciences were moved by the university administration from the city centre to a new complex outside the centre. Following the move, in September 2014 students and activists occupied the former common room of *Spinhuis*, one of the old locations of social sciences, running it as a bar and activist meeting space. This was the dress rehearsal for the higher-education movement that sprung up this year in Amsterdam and beyond. It was also the first clear indication of the role the UvA management (CvB) has adopted; immediately after the occupation began, the CvB placed 24/7 security – with attack dogs – ready to muscle in if the students strayed further into the building. As hypocritical as the CvB are, while pretending to value ‘dialogue’ with the students, they threatened them with legal action, eventually demanding a –100.000 compensation per student, per day. Eventually the UvA management, with the blessing of the Rector, Dymph van den Boom, initiated and won a court case and evicted the students. Similar events took place at the *Bunghuis*, where the UvA Humanities had been housed until recently. The *Bunghuis* was also occupied by students and forcefully evicted.

These were early steps of what became a general protest movement. The Humanities have been particularly gutted by the neoliberal reforms at the UvA and are threatened with smaller programmes, fewer staff, and integration into other faculties. The university sold the *Bunghuis* to Soho House, an exclusive bourgeois club, an irony that would have been amusing if it were not so offensive.

The groups *De Nieuwe Universiteit* (students) and Humanities Rally (students and staff) began actively protesting against the neoliberal reforms, demanding the democratisation of the UvA and the accountability of the managers. Nonetheless, the UvA managers once again terrorised student activists with threats of major fines. Eventually a violent crackdown by the police, endorsed by university management, resulted in 46 arrested students, but also major media attention. Immediately afterwards in February, during a demonstration, students stormed and occupied *Maagdenhuis*, the main UvA administration building. That has been where the radical movement has been shaped into a democratic, heterogeneous, vehement effort to challenge university reforms and create subversive politics; after all the *Maagdenhuis* is an important political symbol, as it was the site of a major student occupation in 1969 and several more since.

The ride of creating a democratic, just university has been exciting and bumpy. While the debates were developing at the occupied *Maagdenhuis*, several university workers, especially from anthropology, joined the movement as ReThink UvA. During the occupation, the movement flourished; the activist groups formed General Assemblies (a la Occupy) and developed their dialogue based on direct democracy, focusing on what has been going on, what it is we are opposing and how we can change it. Meanwhile, all kinds of activities were organised: a series of lectures (including one by the activist scholar David Graeber), live concerts, art events etc. The occupation was also supported with an online petition, signed by prominent intellectual figures like Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky and David Harvey. Once the voices at the *Maagdenhuis* started weaving ideas together, the challenges of building a radical, political movement became evident. Some demanded the resignation of the CvB, some of its chairwoman Louise Gunning, others opposed targeting specific persons, while others raised voices against going back to a white, old, male, bourgeoisie-dominated university. Especially after the first small victories (the CvB conceding something was wrong and starting a debate series, the *Maagdenhuis* being allowed to be occupied for the moment) several staff members were ready to make concessions. Others however were realising that the struggle was just starting and victory would be both difficult and long-term.

Against the neoliberal university

What everyone agreed that the struggle should be against was the neoliberal, undemocratic character the UvA was rapidly assuming: ‘flexible’, temporary contracts, ‘efficiency’ in output and input, competitiveness, aiming at attracting capital and even real estate speculation (the UvA owns numerous large buildings in Amsterdam’s city centre). The three activist groups began talks with the trade union (FNV), the UvA student council (CSR) and the UvA works council (COR), exchanging views and proceeding with organising. Eventually, after the combined failure of intimidation and empty rhetoric, the UvA management decided to evict the *Maagdenhuis* occupiers as well. The latter had announced that they would be leaving the premises right after a planned Science Festival, but the CvB preemptively mobilised the police on Saturday April 11 who appeared in riot gear, outnumbering the occupiers. The crackdown was once again prompt and brutal, resulting in several arrests. This was the latest act of intimidation endorsed by the UvA management and probably will not be the last. There was a strong public backlash against this obviously unnecessary eviction, students and staff demanded her resignation and the works council issued a vote of no confidence in her leadership - effectively forcing the chairwoman of the CvB, Louise Gunning, to resign a few days later. Surprisingly the following announcements by the CvB and Gunning contained nothing about the reasons why she was stepping down, but only praised her previous work and how important it was that it should continue in the same way. Rector Dymph van den Boom was appointed interim chairwoman.

Meanwhile, the assemblies that took place at the *Maagdenhuis* culminated in a demand to form two independent committees to look into UvA’s finances and ways to democratise the university decision-making structures. This demand has been accepted by the CvB, and most importantly the activist groups will hold the majority in the committees; the latter are currently forming. The movement is still going forward and, if not growing, it is definitely keeping its momentum. Students and staff are both active, with some seething anger now that the dust has settled after the *Maagdenhuis* eviction. On Labour Day some of the groups’ members participated in the protests, and all the sister organisations of the movement had a picnic in front of the UvA Law Faculty (Oudemanhuispoort). The following Sunday, May 3, De Nieuwe Universiteit organised a Science Festival at Felix Meritis in Amsterdam, with attendance of more than 1000 people. At the same time, ReThink members are active within the faculties, pushing for better conditions, democratisation and accountability of (eventually elected) decision-makers. The struggle has spread throughout the country, providing fertile ground for other ReThink and ‘Nieuwe’ movements to emerge elsewhere, and even inspiring students in Canada and the UK to resist neoliberalism in their universities.

How a movement moves

People in the Netherlands are angry. While capitalism has been in crisis for several years now, the political response to it has been outright reactionary, and the UvA is no exception. When the ties between the Dutch state and universities were seriously weakened in the 1990s, the UvA started borrowing from banks, hired managers and began playing the financial capitalist. The words of the day became ‘efficiency’, ‘excellence’ and ‘competitiveness’, concepts the UvA management tries to make universally binding on the universities, but many of its activities involve speculation and very costly administration. After all, UvA’s story is not a happy one as the university is indebted for hundreds of millions of Euro by now. The shift has been violent, crude and very obvious, leading to many people involved, students and staff, looking for alternatives. Ironically, certain actions by the management produced the very mechanisms that are opposing the neoliberal model of the UvA: first, after moving to the new Roeterseiland complex in the summer of 2014, all the Social Science faculties came together, their proximity facilitating radical organising. Second, the whole moving process was never discussed democratically, it was decided as an economic alternative as the old buildings were ‘too expensive to maintain’; these historical buildings, characteristic of the UvA and intimate to many staff-members and students, became items of speculation for the market, but also symbols around which the movement anchored itself.

There are clear contradictions in the attempts to create the new brand of the ‘University’, let alone the ‘competitive’, ‘excellent’ and ‘efficient’ University. First, the whole idea of the university as an encompassing institution is too abstract. Although the UvA is being centralised into a pyramid of programmes, schools and faculties, and the overseeing managers at the top, in reality academic research and tertiary education resemble fragmented groups based on different disciplines and interests, which in content have little in common. The role of developing a single entity, called the ‘University’, is an attempt to create and manage a centralised, corporatised organisation.

Second, the majority of those affected by the reforms are the students and the precarious staff. Being overworked is for both categories the norm nowadays and Academia is nothing like the exclusive realm for the privileged anymore. The examples from other national education and academic research systems show what the neoliberal educational project’s future looks like; in the USA the student debt is beyond imagining (one trillion dollars), in the UK academic research is outsourced to freelancers. The mantras are ‘be happy because you do what you love’, and ‘research costs money, education brings money’. Other times, the government’s slogans are ‘education is expensive’, ‘it is taxpayers money we are spending’ in order to justify austerity and the implementation of market mechanisms. The right-wing politicians that support such measures appear protective of public money, pretending as if they will use it for the improvement of society, while the resources are basically channeled as quickly as possible into the market.

Of course it is not higher education alone that is under attack. The neoliberal project promotes the commodification of all kinds of public goods, such as healthcare and housing, while attacking worker rights all around. Many activists at the UvA are aware of this and from early on at the *Maagdenhuis* assemblies, a lot of voices called for uniting with other groups and organisations to extend the struggle. Even striking was put on the table, something uncommon for Dutch academics to say the least. It is encouraging that many acknowledged the importance of seeing ourselves as wage labourers and not as category which is denied such status simply by the grace of pleasant and creative work. Moreover, it was high time that we start addressing the skewed representation within the UvA, a heavily white institution in a multi-coloured city, an effort taken on by the ‘University of Colour’ initiative. The diversity of voices within the movement has been prevalent and has caused conflict more than once. Views have varied greatly, from radical actions and demands (i.e. to prosecute the managers for the UvA’s finances) to, contrary, praising the former chairwoman for her work or considering every small step a victory (i.e. the CvB holding a series of debates with staff and students).

Looking ahead

Two things seem rather evident. This has been an unexpected unfolding of events. For instance, although activists involved in the recent movement had organised a meeting on the effects of neoliberalism on higher education in May 2014, proving that there is substantial interest in the issue, nobody predicted such a dramatic turn of events. Such meetings and the actions before the occupation of the *Maagdenhuis* did cultivate and educate people and groups who have since been using that experience to play a central role in the movement. Which brings me to the second thing: this seems to be a historic opportunity for resistance and radicalisation in the Netherlands. The momentum of the movement does not seem to be subsiding soon, as the number of radicals, young and old, appears to be increasing. Simultaneously there are similar phenomena in Canada, the UK, the US, Chile and Spain, inspiring, and being inspired by, what is happening here. Despite our long ‘silences’ and often longer conversations, academics can be eloquent, rational and strategic when organising. The development of the movement has been extraordinarily fast, considering that from having little momentum in the autumn of 2014, there is now a movement affecting UvA politics and having channels to parliamentary parties. Intellectuals have often been supportive of conservative politics, but as the intellectual proletariat has massively increased and the universities are liberalised, the higher education realm has become like any other working space of struggle and potential radicalisation.