Odyssean Education Plays the Coronavirus: Ideation and the Immune Institution

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Communist Science Against the Pandemic

Before the coronavirus crisis, academics in higher education were preparing for an intensification of the culture wars, when left-wing academics are denounced by right-wing politicians and their supporters as purveyors of communist propaganda (Dickinson 2020). These attacks are often personal and avoid intellectual engagement with communist science. This threat has not gone away. The misrepresentation of Marxist theory in public debate undermines the capacity of a society to respond effectively to the many global emergencies facing the planet. While Marxist theory is a basis for academic research and teaching in higher education, it rarely gets the opportunity to show the power of its exposition in public debates. In this paper, I want to express the qualities of communist science as part of a contribution to dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, showing how communist science expands our capacity to deal with social dangers. I will do this by engaging with an essay by Dominic Cummings, ‘Some Thoughts on Education and Political Priorities’ (2013), where he sets out his vision for Odyssean Education (OE). Cummings is Boris Johnson’s Chief of Staff. While I disagree with Cummings, his essay contains many significant scientific ideas. I want to use Cummings’ essay to enjoin colleagues in a battle of ideas, acknowledging the power of ideation.

Odyssean education organises its curriculum around finding solutions to the world’s grand challenges. The content of the curriculum is interdisciplinary: mathematics, statistics, computing and quantitative methods, the natural sciences, as well as political economy and philosophy. The epistemological framing is complexity theory, cybernetics and adaptive systems thinking. The key to this way of teaching and learning is to look for integration and connectivity between disciplines for students and politicians to

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gain an understanding of the life-world system as a whole, so that seemingly intractable problems can be solved. OE does not include any meaningful engagement with the social sciences. Cummings essay has been described as ‘part treatise part sprawling set of notes’ (Lambert 2019), as well as ‘semi-scholarly’, and that Cummings’ ‘reputation as a thinker about education... [is]... undeserved’ (Kernohan 2019), while others think the document might be ‘an intellectual tour de force’ (Collini 2020). Cummings frames OE around a review of science and scientists he is interested in, but his methodology does not have the capacity to challenge his own basic assumptions and, therefore, remains at the level of non-science (Popper 2011/1945; Engels 2017/1877). The OE approach has resulted in government funded research programmes that promote ‘blue skies thinking’ and support for basic science, going against the model of funding research that rewards research impact.

The Homeric Odyssey that underpins the idea of Odyssean education has been the subject of much interpretation by political philosophers. Horkheimer and Adorno (1999/1944) describe Odysseus as a proto-capitalist, the personification of instrumental rationality, dominating his ship’s crew (the workers), while attempting to subject nature to his will. Nietzsche, who Cummings favours, sets out what the ancient Greeks admired about the Homeric legend: Odysseus’ propensity to lie, to do whatever he had to do to achieve his ends, his cunning and guile, as well as his deceit and deception (Martin 2006). Boris Johnson, Cummings’ boss, has described himself as Odysseus, charting a course through the dangerous waters of Brexit (ITV News 2019).

Labour May Have Lost the Election but Socialism Has Won the Argument

I want to focus on one aspect of Cummings’ paper with significance for our current coronavirus predicament: his theory of institutional immunity. Cummings is an advocate of science, but recognises its capacity to unleash a deadly threat by accident or design, for instance, a pandemic. To counter this threat, he develops a theory of institutional immunity. Cummings is against the concept of herd immunity, which, he argues, is based on unconvincing assumptions about human behaviour. Instead, he favours a non-linear model of contagion control. With an approach based on evolutionary biology, he suggests institutions can build up a successful immune system: a rapid and reactive decentralised decision-making process, enhanced by machine intelligence, that can respond flexibly to the demands of a novel crisis. His interest in immunity extends to his own function in government. Reports have him shouting at a civil servant ‘you’re the virus I am the immune system’ (Lambert 2019). Cummings argues centralised democratic bureaucratic planning is a failed model of social defence. For Cummings, decision-making is best when organic and self-regulating, responding in the moment to the self-interest of each individual for the benefit of society as a whole. Decisions can be computed as data to build complex systems to future proof institutions, in the manner of the body’s immune system protecting itself against infection. Decision-making resembles a free market, and the free market becomes a law of nature. Political economy and the natural sciences coincide. It was not Charles Darwin but Thomas Malthus, the nineteenth-century political economist and critic of poor law relief, who coined the expression ‘survival of the fittest’ (Foster 2000).

Cummings puts great store on empirical evidence and ‘what works’ as social policy. What can we learn from the Conservative government’s response to the coronavirus crisis where he has played a central role? The UK has one of the highest rates of death from coronavirus in the world. The government has been criticised for its response to the crisis. The failure can be traced to the government’s favoured model of political economy: free market economics. The lack of readiness is the result of a long-term project to undermine the National Health Service (NHS), starving it of funds and introducing market principles to enable its sale to private providers. Infection control at the start of the pandemic was left to individuals: hand washing and social distancing—a consumer choice model of public health policy.

As a result of the economic damage caused by the coronavirus crisis, parts of the UK university system appear to be on the point of collapse, requesting emergency government funding to avoid the failure of its student loans-based system (Jarvis 2020). The funding model is derived from the liberal marketised debt-driven approach to social development. The student loans model in England is more vulnerable to the economic repercussions of the coronavirus crisis than publicly funded higher education models across Europe. The government’s response to the emergency funding request, advancing already allocated funding but offering no new monies, along with a preparedness to see universities fail, is disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), using the coronavirus crisis to intensify a free market-based logic of regulation on higher education.

This government response recklessly avoids the reality that the coronavirus crisis has been a disaster for free market ideology. Labour may have lost the 2019 general election but socialism has won the argument. The coronavirus pandemic has revealed the inability of free market economics to sustain human health, life and well-being in difficult times. The emergency response by the Conservative government to protect jobs, businesses and the NHS has been to nationalise the economy and promise the NHS whatever it needs. The press report that it was Cummings who objected to the herd immunity approach and argued for the partial lockdown (Crace 2020). So much for the market. Bring back the state.

Towards a University Immune from Own Delusions

Communist science is against the state. The state is the avoidance of communism. I will say that again. Communist science is against the state. The state is the avoidance of communism. Socialism and trade unions mitigate the worst effects of capitalism, but, like capitalism, they perpetuate an approach to life and living that is disabled by myths about the sanctity of labour and the work ethic (Marx 2003/1891). So what is communist science?

Communist science does not proceed by indoctrination but by scientific method: the rigorous critique of everything that exists, including labour and the state. While Odyssean education searches for integration and connectivity in a world of complexity, communist science knows that everything is already connected through the matrix of generalised commodity exchange under the law of money enforced by the state. Money is not only a means of exchange and store of value but the supreme form of social power (Clarke 1988). Cummings has nothing fundamental to say about money and the state despite their centrality for regulating capitalist civilisation (Marx 1991/1867).

Cummings does not mention capitalism. He must think we live in an undetermined social universe. Cummings does not mention colonialism. De-colonialism requires a critique of capitalism.

The problematic identified by OE has already been established in a more critical and comprehensive fashion by communist science (Marx and Engels 1996/1848). Marx did not set the natural and social sciences against each other but sought their reconciliation: as one science for the benefit of humanity and the natural world (Marx 1992). OE seeks to protect a society based on a market-led model of social development from external threats, like a pandemic. For communist science, the market and its logic of instrumental rationality is a threat to human civilisation: the threat is endogenous not exogenous. Capitalism is already a catastrophe. That is why capitalism must be overcome. This is not as unrealistic as it might sound. The free market has, in response to the pandemic, been suspended.

Ideas matter. Not fixed or dogmatic ideas, but ideas worked on through a process of strong ideation. Critical practical reflexivity on the nature of things—including the conceptual ideas on which the process of reflexivity is based (Gunn 1989)—to facilitate health, well-being and peace of mind; finding ways to live with the coronavirus and respond effectively to other contagions and global emergencies. Universities have a key role to play. Under great duress, they are contributing to the efforts to contain and live with coronavirus, creating a vaccine, researching the effects of the pandemic, making protective clothing and much more.

University staff and students and their unions continue to struggle for funding and to protect jobs and working conditions. Following communist science, universities can be organised around the democratic common ownership of the means of socially useful production of knowledge and exchange, with a curriculum based not around complexity and interdisciplinarity but on the unity of the natural and social sciences, articulated, aestheticized and politicized through literature and the arts (Neary and Winn 2017). Disaster communism (Solnit 2007). The modern university returns to its radical roots: a revolutionary epistemology to challenge its own scientific assumptions, with its institutional form yet to be decided (Neary 2020)—an institution immune from its own delusions.

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