

# For the New University

*Thijs Witty*

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**Blink and you will mistake last year’s UvA marketing campaign for a United Colors of Benetton ad. The posters juxtaposed groups of contemplative students and lecturers with captions such as Curious by Nature, No Guts No Story, and Competent Rebels.**

There are at least three degrees of irony I can point out here. First, the austerity project – the immediate cause of the university occupation – obviously didn’t include this costly PR campaign. Second, that “competent rebels” had been conceived as marketable assets well before (and arguably notwithstanding) excessive numbers of policemen evicted the rebellious elements from the Maagdenhuis on the 11th of April. Third, that while “Ethnic Diversity” was the obvious catchphrase for the entire brand concept, the University of Amsterdam could hardly be more white, both in terms of student population and academic staff, especially considering that its host city is home to 40% non-white people.

While we have a university board that claims to be proud of its new corporate identity and an administration that employs a risk assessment manager, we should also remind ourselves that we are working with thoroughly compromised curricula across the disciplines and a prevailing research ethos that believes a winner-takes-all mentality trumps any pursuit that does not have immediate market value. This list could go on, but the point would remain the same: everything is fucked up, and it’s not just *them* who are ruining the institution and its good name. How can we even start to think about a new university? It is hard to make a right when so much is wrong in such a fundamental sense.

Of course, this kind of a response runs the risk of becoming part of the expected sceptical pose of critical academics, whether they are precarious students or tenured staff. This type of criticism comes with its own arsenal of antagonisms and choice phrasings, its own ways of conducting us into new harmonies of conformism. Such critique slides into cynicism, lubricated by a reactionary doubt about the possibility of changing Big Bad Institutions, and it reduces intellectual life to a kind of debunking, with more and more people thinking about things they don’t want to be doing, rather than what they actually would like to do or think.

So in the midst of what is predominantly still an antagonism about the “ends” of money – universities want more of it, as well as more authority over how it is spent – it is therefore important to look askew and notice that these ends still belong to the gilt-edged margins of academic professionalism. This is why the critical focus on *rendementsdenken* is so ambiguous: while it effectively corners the culprits on the one hand, it has an air of outdated paternalism on the other. Minister of education Jet Bussemaker is against *rendementsdenken*, she even wants to invest significant money for new lecturers in higher education in order to battle it.<sup>1</sup> Bussemaker suggests a return to *Bildung*, that ruin of Western reason, which for her comes down to having future bankers do their internship with bailiffs so they better understand the pains of poverty.<sup>2</sup> So far so miserable.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write that it is pointless to save the university from such

professionalist incentives, since the two are basically the same. tefano<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the new university will not arise out of reform, competence, giving students credit for their activism, not even by funneling in more money. It will emerge out of a general withdrawal from such ends. Of course, the University of Amsterdam would legally still exist even if all the critically-minded teachers were simply to abandon their posts overnight.<sup>4</sup> But well before any institution can ground itself as a legal entity, there has to be a concrete desire from actual individuals or groups; all institutions have these two discrete modes of existence. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci warns us against institutional fetishism, the false belief that institutions have some sort of substantial reality outside the purview of the people who move in them or the economy that moves through both. The sad truth, however, is that far too many believe that the first can simply endure without the latter. This is the crux of the problem raised by the recent occupation and groups like De Nieuwe Universiteit and RethinkUvA: a feeling that the existing governance structure had simply eliminated the academic imagination under the affirmative axe of *rendementsdenken*.

This is why unqualified abandonment can only serve as a limited response to the fact that everything is so fundamentally wrong. Gramsci teaches us that we must limit institutions to our imagination and not the other way around, because then we would succumb to the false belief that we are powerless against the great machinery of some anonymous institutional body. The point is that we also keep on existing, even if the institution no longer acknowledges us. Being ignored does not mean that you cannot imagine things otherwise: acts of creation can always follow the initial logic of abstinence, and this is why the dreams of “freer” academic spaces remain so vital: since the occupation, more and more people are no longer convinced that they are powerless in or against the university. The work of a new university is founded as much in this conviction as it is in the battle for what we falsely imagine and anachronistically retroject as an institution still worth saving.

Over the course of the Bungehuis and Maagdenhuis occupations, academics such as Gloria Wekker and Chandra Frank, as well as organisations such as the University of Colour and Amsterdam United have made it abundantly clear that if the new university wants to be something better than the old one, it must be decolonised.<sup>5</sup> Decolonising entails an integral reshaping of the institutional infrastructure and the public spheres that it creates and maintains, but also of the imagination of its own means and ends, an ongoing work of dismantling the invisibilised forms of privilege and exclusion, ranging from curricula and hiring policies to general accessibility and teaching methods.

This work usually falls on the plate of those already deemed “diverse” by the institution itself. Sara Ahmed’s *On Being Included* (2012) offers an insightful analysis of the nature and functioning of diversity work in higher education. While such diversity work has the explicit aim of transforming institutions, it may also become “what is required, or what we do, when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution”. Ahmed continues:

*Some of us are given diversity as a task – becoming members of equality and diversity committees – because we are perceived as being diversity. When diversity becomes an invitation perhaps what is at stake is not so much who you are but who you are not: not white, not male, not straight, not able-bodied. If you are more than one of these “nots” you might end up on more than one committee! Embodying diversity can thus require additional work; the depletion of the energy of diversity workers is part of the embodied and institutional history of diversity.*<sup>6</sup>

Ahmed suggests such that diversity work is often non-performative: it does *not* bring about what it claims to bring about. And this is how we get from a marketing machine propagating diversity to a reality where a precarious white teaching assistant gets to lecture about Stuart Hall right after a black custodian has just cleaned the seminar room,

leaving it spic and span.

There is no readily available guide for the new university to “practice” or “impose” diversity, as much as it is an imperative to maintain and secure the numerous pockets of agency. Decolonisation, Gloria Wekker suggests, often begins with acknowledgement and naming things for what they are. It often begins by insisting on the contradictions that the university attempts to hide or delete, to insist that structures of privilege are built on structures of racism, that the things that must be repaired are irreparable.<sup>7</sup>

But when the going gets tough, it must also become more pleasurable. Pleasure, in fact, has to be a maxim for the new university, in whatever permutation we end up inhabiting it. This is Moten and Harney’s suggestion in *The Undercommons*: to find ways for regaining the pleasure in the kinds of study that the university has eliminated. But how to attain this when our first acknowledgement remains: this place is so fucked up? Possible paths can be found in what Moten and Harney call the “undercommons”. They write: “the critical academic questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. But in the undercommons it is “no questions asked.” It is unconditional – the door swings open for those seeking refuge even it ends up letting in police officers and destruction. The questions are superfluous in the undercommons. If you don’t know, why ask?”<sup>8</sup> As such, the undercommons have no essential relation to the university, they are neither held nor contained within it: in fact, they are all too often aggressively excluded from it. It does not refer to rebellion and critique either, or to a place where we “take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them”.<sup>9</sup> The undercommons, as Jack Halberstam suggests, is instead a space and time that is always already here: “Our goal – and the ‘we’ is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed.”<sup>10</sup> Moten and Harney refuse to think of refusal as something inert, or as a hindrance to “real” politics or social change. Since “the undercommons in some ways tries to escape from critique and its degradation as university-consciousness”, they might be understood as wary of critique, but committed to the collectivity of its future all the same, “the collectivity that may come to be its future”.<sup>11</sup>

This is the work done by what Moten and Harney refer to as “fugitive planners”, those who “refuse to ask for recognition and instead want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls”.<sup>12</sup> Moten and Harney write that to refuse professionalisation is to be against the university, and that the university can never recognise this disavowal, since that professionalisation is shaped precisely by what it cannot acknowledge. “Against this wayward labor it sends the critical, sends its claim that what is left beyond the critical is waste”.<sup>13</sup> But if the critical academic is merely a professional, they ask, why speak of them in the first place?

*Here one comes face to face with the roots of professional and critical commitment to negligence, to the depths of the impulse to deny the thought of the internal outside among critical intellectuals, and the necessity for professionals to question without question. Whatever else they do, critical intellectuals who have found space in the university are always already performing the denial of the new society when they deny the undercommons, when they find that space on the surface of the university, and when they join the conquest denial by improving that space.*<sup>14</sup>

During the occupations, both the press and the administration only managed to come up with two mutually exclusive categories of the student: the overly apathetic, on the one hand, and the blindly wilful on the other. There seemed to be possibility for a middle ground. Yet, the sheer joy experienced by the dreamers of a new university that moved through the nebulous zones of their not-yet-not-quite alternatives, from putting together a

public program to learning about new things in the midst of a walk or a drink, has proven that another kind of study is not only possible, but is already there.

Prominent among the numerous occupational pleasures was the sheer enthusiasm for collective study. You could sense it everywhere: in the occupied buildings, on blogs, in conversations with folks you had never met before. This is not to say that everything was interesting all the time; many of the talks and discussions were in fact quite tedious. But the point would be that this is exactly *no longer* the point; from each according to one's ability, to each according to one's need, on the condition that we quit believing there is anything remotely helpful about being a "critical academic" if this only means professional competence.

The trick for Moten and Harney is not to suffer the painful contradictions of the contemporary university, but rather to *work for* the undercommons. This means, simply, to study. Study is a mode of thinking together with others that is completely unlike the kind of thinking that the university requires of you. For Moten, study "allows you to spend less time antagonized and antagonizing".<sup>15</sup> So, while research agendas should indeed be decentralised over various departments, *rendementsdenken* fought with razor sharp alternative concepts of output value, structural internal funding increased for individual research projects and teaching programs, if this only results in catering to careerists, then the new university shall be nothing but the death mask of its own conception. As Moten and Harney remind us: "before there are grants, research, conferences, books, and journals there is the experience of being taught and of teaching".<sup>16</sup> The new university can be wherever there is study. And, in times when real estate frenzy mainly fetishises the place of the institution, the new university will abandon its fancy rooms, go adrift and sprout its local forms of study everywhere.

Editorial Common Knowledge [[onlineopen.org/common-knowledge](https://onlineopen.org/common-knowledge)]

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## Footnotes

1. This money is supposed to come from the abolished bursary system and can therefore easily be seen as a cheap way to consolidate her own social credit system.
2. See [www.nrc.nl](http://www.nrc.nl).
3. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, Minor Compositions, [www.minorcompositions.info](http://www.minorcompositions.info) (2013), p. 31.
4. Or have their semester contracts discontinued, which is currently more likely the case.
5. See [www.universityofcolour.com](http://www.universityofcolour.com) and [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).
6. [www.feministkilljoys.com](http://www.feministkilljoys.com).
7. Gloria Wekker's lecture in the then still-occupied Maagdenhuis on 18 March can be listened to here: [www.soundcloud.com](http://www.soundcloud.com).
8. Ibid. p. 38.
9. Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons", in *The Undercommons*, p. 9.
10. Ibid. p. 9.
11. Moten and Harney, p. 38.
12. Ibid. p. 6.
13. Ibid. p. 32.
14. Ibid. p. 41.
15. Halberstam, p. 11.
16. Moten and Harney, p. 27.

## Crosslinks

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## Tags

Activism, Capitalism, Commons, Democracy

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