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Co-operation in Action: The Edinburgh Student Housing Co-operative as a Pedagogical Space

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The Edinburgh Student Housing Co-operative Ltd (ESHC) is the only student-run housing co-operative in Edinburgh and the largest in the UK, providing affordable housing to 106 members. Located just a few minutes from Edinburgh University's main campus, the ESHC was established in August 2014 to "fight extortionate rents, exploitative landlords, dodgy letting agencies, and substandard housing" by increasing the amount of "affordable housing for students and creating a sustainable, non-exploitative, community-led housing co-operative as an alternative to the private rental market" (ESHC, 2016). The motivations behind the ESHC challenge the materialist/post-materialist values divide, showing a concern for both survival needs (housing) and symbolic and cultural struggles (participatory democracy, self-expression, and environmental concerns), a common feature of the latest cycles of protest worldwide (Asara, 2016).

The ESHC has an horizontal structure, being run democratically and directly by its tenants/members. At the time of writing, tasks are distributed among four different working groups (Participation, Procedures, Places, People) and several subgroups and task forces, open to all members. Each working group holds a weekly meeting, providing a space for developing a wide range of skills from maintenance to finance. Working groups convene in the broader General Meeting (GM), in which major decisions are taken following consensus decision-making. In the interviews recorded by one of the ESHC members in the video "Democratic Housing in Edinburgh" (2014 — see https://youtu.be/Xsbih_3Rrdo), we observe how co-operative members articulate a number of interrelated discourses to explain their motivations for being part of, as well as their experiences of living in, the ESHC. For instance, the interviewees demonstrate keen awareness of the deleterious effects and precarity associated with trying to secure housing in the private market. Processes of gentrification resulting in displacement of vulnerable people, the emphasis on profit and the resulting exploitative practices of private landlords, and the unscrupulous practices of letting agencies are among the social conditions mentioned by participants as reasons for looking for alternative housing arrangements.

Yet, when referring to their experiences of living in the ESHC, the participants do not simply cite affordability and better housing conditions as chief benefits of living in the co-operative. In fact, participants speak of their experiences as active and ongoing processes of teaching/learning about other ways of living. For instance, experiences of mastering concrete skills such as maintenance and finance are intertwined with experiences of acquiring the capacity to participate in by-consensus and egalitarian decision-making processes that require taking the point of view of other people and be able to take initiative without taking control of the living processes of the co-operative. The need to construct egalitarian living environments with like-minded people that become neighbours of a kind that is different to those found in the private housing market, as well as the desire and commitment to construct mutually-caring relationships with those with whom they live are some of the discourses and practices that, through their contrast to hegemonic individualistic conceptions of the neoliberal subject (Brown, 2009), suggest that the co-operative has the potential of constituting a transformative teaching/learning space.

This understanding of the co-operative as a space of teaching/learning is based on a conception of education that conceives of teaching/learning as mutually sustaining cognitive activities that are in tune with Paulo Freire's conception of popular education (Freire, 1970/2000; 1992/2014). As Freire proposes, education does not just take place in conventional classrooms but also

in quotidian, routine, and dialogical relationships between subjects in which roles of teacher and student become diffused and, at times, fused together. Furthermore, education is not just the transferring of information from someone who has knowledge to someone who does not. Rather, education requires “acts of cognition” that are fundamentally collaborative and in which teachers and students collaborate and engage in constant dialogue in ways that transcend and in many ways unsettle normative differentiations of teacher and student.

The teaching/learning experience becomes as important in popular education as the cognisable object. In fact, Freire stresses that the cognisable object (language, numbers or, in the case of the ESHC, finances or maintenance) is not the end result of education but rather the intermediary of dialogical, horizontal and democratic relationships between teacher and student. This evidences the importance that Freirean education places on education as ongoing and continuous processes of relationship building. To be clear, popular education favours a problem-posing pedagogical method in which teachers and students collaborate and engage in constant dialogue and reflection about the world (Freire, 1970/2000). Freire presents the problem-posing method as an alternative to traditional “banking education” in which teachers transfer information that students must memorise and repeat, and to the Socratic method based on the constant posing of questions and interrogation of students by the teacher (Jarvis, 2006). Popular education, therefore, is founded on similar values to co-operatives because it is predicated on the notion that knowledge is collectively owned and shared, and not the sole property of the teacher as the only ‘true knower’. Being teaching/learning collaborative and dialogical processes also means that the roles of teacher and student can become indistinguishable because the “teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches but one who is himself taught in dialogue with students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1970/2000: 67).

When speaking of their experience in the ESHC, participants continuously refer to the collaborative, egalitarian and communitarian character of co-operative living as significant learning experiences and challenges that give character to their life in the co-operative. Processes of negotiating and manoeuvring diverse points of view, behaviours and lifestyles while remaining committed to co-operative life are presented as integral learning processes of co-operative living. This learning experience is not defined as a conventional process of knowledge transfer. Rather, teaching and learning seem to take place in relational and mutually sustaining processes in which teaching and learning roles become undifferentiated. While formal initiatives such as orientation sessions and general meetings constitute organised forms of knowledge transfer in which the co-operative attempts to ‘teach’ its members how to live co-operatively, as interview participants suggest, learning how to live in community most commonly takes place in their daily relationships with other members and in informal processes such as meal sharing, cleaning, painting, decorating, and maintaining dwellings.

Another condition of popular education is an understanding of education as a deeply political and socially situated activity. As Freire proposes, popular education seeks to create spaces for teachers and learners to reflect and become politically conscious about the social world and social reality. Popular education, in fact, denies conceptions of the subject and of learning as “abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” (Freire, 1970/2000: 62). In the interviews with ESHC members, we observed how the conceptualisation of co-operative living is always contrasted with the precarity and oppression of neoliberal and capitalist regimes. Members consistently refer to co-operative life as an alternative to oppressive and unjust conditions of the market, systems of profit and private enterprises. As one participant indicates, “we (in ESHC) are operating in a system that is more ethical and we are providing more affordable housing than those unscrupulous landlords”, and as another stated “the way to work around capitalism as we know is by creating businesses that co-operate” rather than compete. Evident in these statements is not only a profound awareness of the importance of the housing co-operative, but also of its possibility to transgress and transcend capitalist and neoliberal relations of domination. Furthermore, by defining their experiences of living in the co-operative as an act of resistance against capitalist and neoliberal domination, members are engaging

the kinds of acts of “epistemic disobedience” that, as Mignolo (2009) argues, are fundamental to process of (un)learning. These processes of (un)learning, as authors such as Giroux (2002) and Prádanos (2015) propose, are integral conditions of any process of resistance against the neoliberal emphasis on “commercialisation, privatisation and deregulation” (Giroux, 2002: 426).

Finally, popular education emphasises the role that teaching/learning plays in the very transformation of the learning subject. In fact, Freire argues that a fundamental condition of popular education is its consideration of the subject as unfinished and in-process of becoming (Freire, 1970/2000: 65). This understanding of subjectivity is in tune with a Foucauldian conception of the subject as always:

in process, a work in progress and never finished, producing itself in response to and being produced by the contingent antagonisms and alliances that constitute the social (Schrift, 2000: 155, italics in the original).

Instead of adhering to notions of identity as essential and immobile conditions, this notion of the subject as a work in progress suggests that rather than speaking of identity, we may as well refer to processes of subjectification as ongoing and incomplete processes always taking place within the social world and in dialogical relationships that are in tune with popular education.

In the case of ESHC members, their experiences of living in the co-operative suggests ongoing interrelated and mutually sustaining processes of subjectification taking place in the teaching/learning experience of living in ESHC. For instance, interviewees speak of constantly negotiating their own subjectivity in contrast to normative discourses of neoliberal individuality. As Brown (2009: 40) argues, the ideal neoliberal subject is one that understands him/herself as “rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’”. This subject, which Foucault (1978/2007: 353) calls ‘homo oeconomicus’, understands all actions — own and others — along the lines of cost, benefit, and competition, which become the matrix of social and political relations. As Brown continues, while the homo oeconomicus submits every action to considerations of profitability, equally important is the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefits, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality (p. 40). In sum, the neoliberal regime attempts to apply and transfer capitalist modes of calculation to every aspect of human activity including the very discourses that shape human subjectivity.

Nevertheless, the interviews with ESHC members suggest that something other than, but not completely delinked from, the reaffirmation of the neoliberal subject is taking place in the teaching/learning processes and their related processes of subjectification at play in the life of the co-operative. Participants explain their decision to move to the co-operative using discourses of affordability, alternative home ownership, and ethical profitability suggesting an intentionality to move out of capitalist conceptions of the housing market in order to search for “housing without exploitation”, and homes without landlords. In this search, participants seem to also construct and, in time, learn alternative subjectivity discourses articulated, for instance, through notions of co-operation, consensus decision-making, and practices of participation that while respecting the individual also seek the common good.

Together with these discourses, we witness how participants intentionally move away from self-serving discourses of profitability and towards ideas of collaboration, communal living, mutual caring, and alternative property ownership. As a participant indicates, “the flats always co-operate with materials, equipment and even utensils that we all share” suggesting that individualistic property ownership loses importance when attempting to build a community of “mutual caring and support” with “like-minded people” that share “common political aspirations”.

Nevertheless, the individual does not disappear in these attempts to build community, even if he/she is understood in different ways than those advanced by neoliberal discourses. For instance, interviewees speak of life in the co-operative as a constant process of negotiating collective values and individual interests. As one participant commented, living in the

co-operative is like living in a family of “active, welcoming, warm and loving” people in which you can be alone “when you want to” but you are never lonely or isolated. In this environment, as another participant indicated, they negotiate and balance the need for “time to yourself” with the need of “getting involved” with the conviction that “people [are] looking out for you”. These constant negotiations between collectivity and individuality, getting involved and carving space for oneself is very much an active learning process. As another participant stated “I am learning so many things because by having to run everything, you learn so much and this is very good. We are no longer passive students; we are active students”. This ongoing process of teaching/ learning reflects not only how the co-operative constitutes a radical educational space, but also how that space is one in which subjects constantly negotiate their own sense of self in relation to both the collectivity of the co-operative and the normative conceptions of market, risk, calculability and self-serving individuality professed by neoliberalism.

The construction of a new social imaginary is one of the most critical effects of the teaching/ learning and its related subjectification processes taking place in the co-operative. This imaginary does not only unsettle the idea of an immobile and essential neoliberal individual, but most importantly opens up possibilities for ESHC members to imagine a world otherwise: a world in which the learned fear of a world without capitalism gives way to possibilities to reimagine and resignify the world. As a one of the interviewees argues, we are socialised to believe that without capitalism, “there would be chaos, violence and disorder, and humanity would descend into anarchy. But [the co-operative] is not a chaotic mess, it is a self-managing space ... [It provides] opportunities for liberating and creative work that brings the best of people ... showing that we can do so much better and that we deserve better” than living within the constraints of capitalism and the current power system: “It seems that the descent into anarchy should be welcomed with open arms” if we are “to usher a new era of freedom and solidarity.”

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