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ROGIER VAN REEKUM

#THE NEW UNIVERSITY:
A SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Krisis 2015, Issue 2: Perspectives for the New University
www.krisis.eu

This special issue of *Krisis* deals with the future of the university and academic life more broadly. Is a new university possible and if so, what should it look like and how do we work towards it?

The idea and, in fact, the desire for a special issue on this topic was provoked by an event that was at the same time sudden, surprising, wildly effective, deeply affective, long-awaited, strangely evolving, quickly improvised, hopeful, frustrating, maddening, dangerous, violent, multi-sited, unpredictable yet all-too-familiar – an event that, as it took place, quickly became associated with its most prominent locale, the *Maagdenhuis* in Amsterdam. This building, housing the executive board and central administration of the University of Amsterdam in the centre of the capital city, was where a galvanising protest of students and faculty became most eminently visible in the early spring of 2015. After a string of occupations of university buildings throughout the city, most notably the Bungehuis, it was the eventual claiming of the Maagdenhuis that not only skyrocketed the protests into the light of national media platforms but also entailed a direct, material confrontation with a centre of academic power. Being the site of well-known and at times nostalgically memorialised protests of what is now referred to as the ‘sixties generation’, the appropriation of this building by students and the paternalist response by the executive board of

the university, covered live on TV and twitter, turned a longstanding and escalating confrontation between students and faculty on the one hand, concerned about the managerial containment of academic life, and administrators on the other, who claimed to be motivated by ensuring competitiveness and excellence, into a full-fledged insurgency able to garner expanding support among national and international audiences. The protest quickly succeeded in clearing from the table plans for top-down reform and forced the administrators to attend to the protests instead of carrying on business as usual. Moreover, the *Maagdenhuis* protest was rapidly fuelling and being fuelled by remarkably similar protest across European cities, such as Vienna, Warsaw, London and Oslo.

Whereas the great student protests of recent European memory were fights between students and faculty, the former claiming a seat at the table and the latter protecting the corporatist order, this moment of protest was quite different, even if resemblances to past ‘revolutions’ helped to sanctify it with the gloss of progress. Like all successful protest, the events at and around the *Maagdenhuis* had many sources. Much of the mobilisation came from the humanities, where reform after reform increasingly ate away at the idea that the humanities in any real sense of the term could remain a viable part of the university as the central planners were shaping it. Push also came from other directions, such as the more theoretical and detached sections of the natural sciences. Students in many disciplines critiqued the commodification of their time at university into individualised production of human capital, as explicitly aimed for by both university administrations and a string of ministers of education. The fact that the university is both in terms of demographics and in terms of curricula still overwhelmingly white, male and heteronormative was another source of the protests. Yet, what eventually melded together this web of critiques and movements was a forceful antagonism with what was the very basis upon which public institutions were said to function in accepted political discourse: added value.

As in so many liberal democracies, a certain understanding of ‘added value’ became received wisdom in Dutch politics over the past forty years: public institutions could only and would only be financed in so far as they produced ‘goods’ – health, security, housing, applicable knowledge, hu-

man capital, cultural homogeneity, behavioural conformity, etc. – that would enable the ‘growth’ of the financial means of society and the state. It was this ideologically engrained bottom line that eventually gave way when it was shown that extra-parliamentary actions – taking over a public building and performing one's own idea of academic life within it – could not only draw support from faculty and civil society and kick-start a public debate but actually halt the supposedly inevitable reforms that academic managers were implementing. In contradiction to Thatcher's famous line: there were alternatives after all!

The energy of surprise and enthusiasm released by the protests should not be underestimated. The fact that direct and confrontational action ‘worked’, that it was even taken seriously and responded to, is somewhat of an anomaly for Dutch political circumstances and seemed to open up new horizons. Dutch political culture prescribes that all changes in policy follow from restrained and institutionalised negotiations between carefully regulated representative bodies. ‘Wild’ and ‘negative’ protests are to be re-directed to such ritualistic negotiations or simply side-lined as ‘ideological’ and ‘unproductive’. While these familiar attempts at delegitimation were immediately mobilised against the protests leading up to and following the appropriation of the *Maagdenhuis*, they failed to derail the movement, not least because the protesters were outperforming the university's PR machinery on social media and soon also in the traditional media. In fact, such attempts seemed to only affirm the case of the protesters: academic managers are unable to respond to discontent and criticism without managerial domineering. One explanation could be that management appeared to be protecting their own privileges and trying to cover up financial misdeeds. So while university students and faculty could quite easily be dubbed ‘elitist’ in Machiavellian attempts to turn wider publics against those who seemed to exempt themselves from ongoing austerity politics – a strategy that was very effective a few years earlier when budgets for arts and culture were ruthlessly cut – that same discourse of anti-elitism applied even more so to the ‘managerial class’ whose hoarding of public funds were being contested by the protesters.

It is impossible to describe in any detail here how the protests in Amsterdam developed and resonated with similar movements elsewhere. Nor is it

clear at this point what those protests will mean for the future governance of and life at the University of Amsterdam – beyond the impressive immediate achievements of the stepping down of the university's president and the promise of the board to support two independent committees set up by the academic community, with the tasks of investigating the financial situation of the university and of developing proposals for its decentralization and democratization. The aim of our special issue lies in a different direction. We strove to capture some of the imaginative energy that was released by the events this spring. We hope to document, exchange and inject some of the emerging arguments and ideas that are going around about the future of the university. Even if the direct outcomes of the protests will not satisfy on all accounts, the current systems of control over universities have suffered severe damage and will be undergoing far-reaching reconstruction in the coming period. The public debate about this future has just begun. It is in this light that *Krisis* wants to provide a platform for something that should not be forgotten between all of the meetings, policy papers, negotiations, late night emails and planning: thinking out loud.

The university is in dire need of ideas, and they don't come cheap. *Krisis* wants to do its part in creating and spreading new ideas. In preparing this special issue, we were interested both in analyses of protests and the changing governance of universities, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and in projective ideas about the potential future(s) of a new university. The special issue brings together a range of essays and interventions that radiate the concern, anger and passion surrounding these issues while also developing new concepts and imaginaries of what academic life is and could be.

Writing in response to moments of rupture and protest is complicated. Such writing does, at least, three things all at once. First, it commemorates by fixing certain versions of what happened to paper, adding to a collective memory of ‘how we got here’. Second, it thereby inevitably prolongs the very struggle at hand. Analyses, interpretations, accusations and justifications bend the unfolding of the fight further into the future. Protest demands a collapse of the difference between participating in and writing about an event. Writing thus raises the question: ‘where do we stand?’ Thirdly, this means that writing about protest is endemically judgemental.

The genre invites all kinds of claims about what should have happened, what *should have* been done, what *should be* done now. Commemorating, taking a stand and making judgements are all part of the writings in this special issue. In doing these things in different ways and with varying emphases, the contributions provide a wide array of meanings to ‘the university’ and its future. In this sense, the special issue responds directly to and re-affirms the central claim of the *Maagdenhuis* protest: the university ought not be and cannot be an organisation built on the monochrome logic of ‘added value’.

Struggles, diagnoses and futures

Krisis chose to organise the special issue along three points of focus: struggles, diagnoses and futures. Under the heading of struggles, the reader will find contributions that not only describe specific fights taking place but also be able to sense the passion and engagement. We see how the work that people – in this case academics – do, is both deeply personal and overtly political. All of the contributions resist the managerial splitting of this entanglement. Diagnoses deal with the problem at hand. What is actually the problem and how can we grasp it in such a way that we do not argue ourselves into passivity? While some contributions focus more on the way in which universities tend to be organised, others foreground changing conceptions of the university. Finally, there are contributions which explicitly propose future images of the university, both in terms of structure and organisation as well as alternative concepts and callings.

Because this special issue is conceived to respond directly to protest, we start the issue with contributions about struggles. Nguyen Vu Thuc Linh, John-Erik Hansson and Ola Innset provide a sound place to start by analysing the changing circumstances of working in universities under neoliberal reform. They locate struggles emerging in cities such as Amsterdam, London, Toronto and Warsaw in histories of resistance and solidarity in the postwar period. Next, Jonas Staal takes us right into the lively practice of the *Maagdenhuis* protest in his essay on the art of the new university as it was created during the protests. Instead of merely taking artistic expressions, practices and objects as auxiliary to the political moment, Staal seeks

to understand the protest itself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which images, performances, posters and banners are composed. Sina Talachian and Vasileios Koutsogiannis pick apart the *Maagdenhuis* protest by analysing the various student movements that formed its core, showing how different notions of democratisation played out and entertained tense relations between them. On this basis, Talachian and Koutsogiannis develop an argument for sustained radical claims making, which they associate with the decolonising efforts of one of the groups involved, the University of Colour. Silje A. Andresen, Levon Epremian, Thomas S. Jakobsen, Michael Jones, and Hilde Refstie take the fight to Norway in their analysis of changing academic governance and ineffectual forms of participation. Critically discussing existing modes of representation, they show how the fight for democracy in universities can be akin to fighting a fog: the opponent continuously reforms itself in response to attempts to get a hold on it. The section is rounded off with a deeply affective essay by Josef Früchtl and Natalie Scholz, both participants in the protests in Amsterdam. Exploring the registers of political emotions at the heart of the protest and implicating personal experiences and attachment into the analysis, the essay calls for sustained engagement with the aesthetics of anger, rebellion and protest.

The section on diagnoses is opened by Rutger Claassen and Marcus Düwell, who lay out a triple democratic deficit in university governance, which will have to be dealt with. The relations between academic communities, society and university administration will have to be reinvented at all three sides, they argue, in order to make genuine progress in efforts to democratise universities. P. W. Zuidhof allows us to more fully understand questions of neoliberal reform in universities by providing a careful dissection of its tendencies and mechanisms, while also highlighting some specificities of the Dutch context. Out of an admission of complicity, Zuidhof seeks to look beyond to a post-neoliberal future. Approaching the problem from a different angle, Kati Röttger offers her perspective on how and why we should begin to recognise anew the usefulness of what is so often rejected as useless, academic knowledge. In an essay adapted from a lecture held at the *Maagdenhuis* as part of the academic life of the appropriated building, Röttger argues that it is the unconditional creation and exchange of knowledge that has been progressively squandered in contemporary universities. Paul Benneworth sees in the protest an opportunity to

redress longstanding tensions in the relations within universities and those between universities and their environments. Applying the notion of soft-coupling, which is opposed to top-down modes of governance based on distrust, he advocates a rethinking of universities on three levels: political structures, within universities themselves and between academic generations. As somewhat of a bridge to the section on futures, Mieke Bal enacts the power of imagination in an essay, focusing in particular on the role of the humanities in contemporary universities. Tying together multiple philosophical and literary sources, from Flaubert to Benveniste and Spinoza to Zola, she argues for the work of ‘versioning’ in the humanities, implying the constant production of multiple visions of the world.

Even if all contributions to this special issue foreshadow new forms of academic life out of the rubbles of the past, the section on futures features contributions that aim to imagine and describe the future in more explicit ways. The section is provocatively opened by Willem Schinkel who argues both for the need to protest against the current state of academic affairs, yet also claims that pleas for a return to past privileges, idealized autonomy or fixation on democratic governance are but regressive moves in a fight that must articulate its own affirmative idea of the university’s place in the world. Schinkel lists what he dubs ‘the public tasks of the university.’ Such affirmative ideas for a new university are presented in three subsequent interventions. The first, by Kirsten Kalkman, opposes two attitudes toward academic study – Alcibiades’ *erômenos* and Socrates’ *erastês* – in favor of the latter and draws connections between this source of inspiration and the launch of *De Bildung Academie*, referring to Humboldtian ideals of academic cultivation, which she and other students are involved in. A second proposal comes from Amos and Machiel Keestra, who work out a ‘circulation model’ of university education. Identifying key shortcomings of the current education model, their intervention describes multiple ways to keep things moving: ‘circulation between research and education, between insights of teachers and of students, between disciplines, between disciplinary and experiential knowledge, between doing research and (meta-)reflection upon research, and so on.’ While much of the protest and discussion focuses on the embattled position of the humanities, Wessel Reijers provides some much need insight into how ideas for a new university might be used to reshape education and curricula at tech-

nical universities training future engineers. His proposal revolves around a new image: ‘the virtuous engineer’. On a more conceptual terrain, Rogier van Reekum argues that although ties between academic work and the outside world must be multiplied, current visions of academic worth do not allow us to imagine those connections in adequate ways. Van Reekum proposes a vision of experimental activism as an alternative to current fixations on the knowledge economy and the production of factual evidence. Finally, Mike Neary and Joss Winn describe their ongoing efforts to build and proliferate cooperative practices and organisations of academic work in higher education. Not merely concerned with labour conditions or educational forms, cooperation extends all the way into research methodologies. Thus, Neary and Winn offer a concrete example of the new university in the making.

The Krisis editorial collective hopes that this special issue – involving contributions from students, PhD researchers and faculty members – will not only contribute to and open up necessary discussions about ‘the new university’ but, in its moderate way, exemplifies some of the insurgent and collaborative spirit that drives the struggle for it.

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