From a Liberal Arts Student

taken from *Toward a Global Autonomous University*,
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by: Erik Forman
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I was excited to hear about the experiments in Italy and Argentina, as they are very similar to what we are doing at my college. I also wanted to chime in to put my own perspective out there as a student at a (self-proclaimed) “elite” US liberal arts college — by definition a rare position to be in. In the discourse of neoliberalism, liberal arts colleges are often looked upon as the “last bastion” of substantive education in an increasingly instrumentalized global “Edu-factory.” I would like to interrogate this view of the liberal arts by looking critically at recent events at my own college, and poking tentatively toward a notion of education truly in opposition to neocolonialism and neoliberalism. At the end I will also describe a few of the projects students have initiated on my campus in reaction to the moves of the college administration toward greater elitism and exclusion.

Class repolarization and the Liberal Arts

Education has long occupied a special place in the mythology of the US middle class. In the post-war era, access to education was seen as a hallmark of the classless society that was the American Dream. By selling education as a ticket out of the working class, capital effectively harnessed the power of exodus to reproduce class society. But if Keynesian economic systems prided themselves on the number of students they produced, neoliberalism has reversed this by turning exclusion itself into a measure of “excellence.” My college is a textbook example of this transition.

In the mid-1990s the college I attend was given a huge philanthropic gift by the publisher of Readers’ Digest (one of the hallmark “successes” of capitalist globalization). This money was used to transform a good regional college into a powerhouse of “academic excellence” and “global citizenship.” With new resources at its fingertips, the college embarked on an ambitious plan to scale the heights of the US News and World Report rankings (this is a major capitalist news magazine in the US that publishes a popular college ranking guide). This scale has redefined the college’s development plans far into the future. The distribution of resources on campus has been shifted away from financial aid, and toward programs embracing the rhetoric of “academic excellence” and “global citizenship.” Private colleges have always served an elite, but rarely I think has the culture of these places been so blatantly supportive of class hierarchy. There isn’t even a pretense to “accessibility” any more. Evidently, “global citizenship” isn’t for everyone. The transformation has manifested itself most baldly in the college’s marketing efforts to attract more of a specific kind of applicants. The college markets itself (look at the website http://www.maclester.edu) as that most precious commodity on the market today — a community. College has become a place people flock to and then flee. It is the “place of refuge” in postmodern culture, the simulacrum of community. People hate being there, but most people stay. All the students are stressed out, many are worried about grad school and their careers, and many others feel immobilized to fight the system by the “privilege” they have been given. Some students certainly thrive on self-exploitation, and become successful yuppies. But it is recognized by most students on the left that we will end up working for nonprofits doing things we don’t believe in, or will go to grad school for lack of a better idea. We feel condemned to become a sick appendage of a class we want no part of. A malaise hangs over the student body; everyone is always on the brink of dropping out, but few have the courage.

Maybe because of this, campus dissidents have until recently taken a purely conservative stand against the overt use of our campus as a training camp for global elites. This has created phenomenal tensions, with several students expelled for politically-motivated vandalism. In 2004, my first year on campus, the Board of Trustees proclaimed a “financial crisis” (sound familiar?) and voted to begin considering the ability of students to pay tuition as a criteria for admission (called “Need-Aware”). Tuition is now over $40,000 per year. Students and a small group of faculty and alumni mounted a campaign to “Defend Need-Blind Admissions at Macalester.” We lost when they held the vote over Winter break. About 200 students (1/9th of the school) walked out of class early in the Spring semester, but didn’t take over any buildings. On some level we accepted the legitimacy of their decision and did not feel that we could reverse it. Because the discourse of “excellence” has legitimacy, we felt that the college would have no trouble branding us as irrational and bringing in the cops to beat us down.

EXCO and Tent State

A bunch of other projects gained impetus from this failure, none of which have yet actually been able to build political power to change the college’s agenda. In Spring 2006 students began planning to set up an Experimental College, a system through which anyone and everyone can teach or take a
class for free. We were inspired by similar projects that came into existence around 1970 all over the US.

EXCO (http://www.exco.or.org) came to fruition in Fall 2006. Classes on everything from Anarchism to the History of New York are now being attended by over 100 people. After flirting with campaigning for official course credit from my college for participation, EXCO is now attempting instead to generalize itself in the Twin Cities, escaping the student ghetto it was founded in. We hold classes all over the city, and are seeking to foster more community involvement. Of course, this involves running into the reality of class privilege which allows some people to attend EXCO classes, and not others, so our alternative needs to be connected to a political project to gain space in which most people can organize their own lives and educations. We return to the class basis of liberal education, and return to anticapitalist politics. That’s where our latest project comes in.

From an EXCO class on Anarchist Anthropology last fall, a small group formed which began planning a mobilization for this Spring called “Tent State.” This is basically a more oppositional form of EXCO. We are occupying the “Commons” (ha ha) of our campus as well as two other colleges in the area next week to offer teach-ins and hold discussions on themes affecting students. We are networked with Tent States across the US (and one in the UK). You can look at our website here: http://www.tentstatemn.org. We want to be expansive, creating encounters between people who wouldn’t normally meet. I hope that this begins to form a new student subjectivity, one which actually transcends the limitations of the liberal arts campus and reflects the transformations of higher education over the last forty years that have destroyed the base of student movements in the US. I want to help build a new student body, a cyborg perhaps, that is inclusive of all those who learn for their entire lives to keep themselves on the market. We need to build solidarity across all the layers of exclusion that stratify the working class. I think that this is very similar to the idea of multitude if we think of this concept as building a heterogeneous political body to surpass the transformations of the technical composition of the working class wrought by capital after the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For this, I think we need some new kind of student syndicate organization. This will be a challenging task.

What common threads emerge in all this?

In all our projects at my college (and now in our city), we are seeking to basically steal as much as possible from the university (thank you Brian Holmes for this awesome concept), while using the space and resources as a launching pad to construct our own alternatives with our own values, with as many different kinds of people as possible. In a limited sense we are rejecting the best that capitalism has to offer: the liberal arts. Admittedly, almost everyone keeps one foot in the rat race, but with the other we seek a path out of the enclosures of capital. Instead of a degree that grants “success” and in doing so perpetuates class society, we want an autonomously self-directed education that produces incommensurable subjectivities and allows us to send the arc of our own life trajectories beyond the options granted by the market.

I could go on and on about how EXCO and Tent State don’t quite fill this role, and what we are thinking about doing to change this (better anti-racist work and more explicit anti-capitalism are two ideas), but this chapter is already long enough. I just wanted everyone to know that even at elite liberal arts colleges in the belly of the beast, there are those who would rather get the hell out than sell out. As long as we can pay off our loans.