

## **Protesting the Neoliberal University: The Danish Student Movement 'A Different University'**

**Bjarke Skærlund Risager & Mikkel Thorup**

### **Abstract**

*Student activism against the neoliberalization of the university has spread and intensified all over the world in recent years. One moment of such activism is the Danish movement, 'A Different University', which in 2014-15 occupied several Danish universities, among other actions. This article focuses on the first and most intense action taken by the group of student activists at Aarhus University in November 2014. The movement was a reaction against two government-initiated neoliberal reforms of the Danish universities but arguably also constituted a wider resistance to the neoliberalization of the university. Based on participant observation, focus groups with participants, and discussions on the literature on neoliberalism, the article fleshes out two imaginaries that we claim are key to understanding the ideological underpinnings of the movement and its relation to the wider politico-economic conjuncture. First, 'the neoliberal university' defined by its pursuit of 'utility' and 'relevance' and by what we call a de-academization of knowledge. Second, 'a different university' is the imaginary articulated, enacted and prefigured by the student movement in question. A different university is a university run by the people who live their everyday lives in it, and it is a university in which obtaining knowledge and education are the sole aims. The two imaginaries, and their expressions in the two reforms and in the student movement, respectively, are unpacked along their spatial and temporal dimensions. The aim of the article is not only to understand and analyse the protests but also to provide a frame and a resource for further thinking through and acting upon the conflicts and possibilities in the struggle between the neoliberal university and a different university.*

**Keywords:** student activism, prefiguration, neoliberalism, university, academia, space, time, imaginaries, occupation, protest

In the fall of 2014, student protests spread across Danish universities under the common name, 'A Different University'.<sup>1</sup> In several universities across the country, with varying support, duration and success, groups within the

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<sup>1</sup> The name in Danish, *Et Andet Universitet*, might also have been translated as 'Another University'. Indeed, the (post)structuralist concept of 'the other' and 'otherness' seemed to inform some of students' thinking about the movement: "The strongest of the three words in *Et Andet Universitet* is 'other'", as one of them put it to much acclaim from the others. However, we use the translation 'A Different University' in this article, as this was how the movement itself at times translated its name.

movement occupied administrative spaces within their respective universities. In the months to come, more actions followed, including other occupations, national and local general assemblies.

The movement was a reaction to two reforms, namely the 'Study Progress Reform' and the 'Dimensioning Plan', that were introduced and heavily debated in 2014. The point of the reforms was to radically downsize a range of university programmes (some have now been altogether shut down) and to put strict limits on how much time students can spend on their degrees. Administering these reform has in turn proved to be yet another financial burden on the universities. In this article, however, we argue that the rise of A Different University, its critique and resistance, is best understood as a reaction to a fundamental and prolonged transformation and restructuring of the university's imaginary. We as well as the student activists call this 'the neoliberal university'. This university imaginary is defined by a narrow, economistic and market-oriented understanding of 'utility' and 'relevance' and by, what we call, a *de-academization of knowledge*. As with other neoliberal processes, the restructuring of the university can be observed on the levels of society, the institution, as well as the individual subject. Thus, the neoliberal university restructures the location of the university in wider societal and politico-economic structures; it restructures the inner structures and logics of the university as institution; and it restructures the person who makes the university on an everyday basis, including the student (the primary focus of this article), the teacher, the secretary and the cleaner.

Resisting the neoliberal university, the student movement in Denmark parallels other instances of resistance that we have seen throughout the world in recent years (Aitchison, 2011; Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Dean, 2015; Espinoza, Gonzáles, & McGinn, 2016; Ibrahim, 2011; Ratcliffe, 2015; Salter & Kay, 2011; Smeltzer & Hearn, 2014; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Somma, 2012; Verkaaik, 2015; Webb, 2015; Zuidhof, 2015). Neoliberal phenomena such as casualization of staff, rising tuition fees and policing of student resistance and a general 'securitization' of university space have in many countries intensified since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 (Smeltzer & Hearn, 2014). These processes have, in turn, been met with resistance from university students, and in some cases staff.<sup>2</sup> Denmark is still a privileged place to study and do research when

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<sup>2</sup> As the citations in this paragraph bear witness, these many instances of student activism have also been the object of study for researchers. Research in student activism, however, is not necessarily exempt from the imperatives of the neoliberal university. Consider, for example, the opening sentences of a recent article abstract:

Active citizenship is a goal in which universities want to invest: student activism has shown to increase students' skills and support positive study atmosphere. The purpose of this study was to analyse university students' motives for participating in student activism in order to find out ways of enhancing the development of active citizenship in students. (Ansala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015, p. 150)

Student activism thus becomes yet another asset for the neoliberal university to invest in through research.

you compare it to other countries. The essence and direction of the transformation of Danish universities, however, echoes those of other nations. And, when you compare the state of Danish universities now to how they were previously, the transformation in Denmark is severe. While it has been claimed that radical student activism has been replaced by moderate and non-disruptive student activism in the US (Winston, 2013; see, however, Solomon & Palmieri, 2011, sec. 3), this is certainly not the case everywhere: in countries such as Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark, student movements are now employing disruptive and militant tactics such as occupation of university spaces, often with radical agendas (Aitchison, 2011; Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Dean, 2015; Ibrahim, 2011; Salter & Kay, 2011; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Verkaaik, 2015; Zuidhof, 2015).

We conceive of the neoliberal university as an imaginary, understood as a set of ideas embedded in discursive and material practices. Based on the discourse and prefigurative resistance of A Different University, we are able to explore an alternative university imaginary, that of 'a different university'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the neoliberal university, a different university is one defined by joy of participating, empowerment and claiming ownership to academia and academic space and time. What we investigate in this article are thus two imaginaries of the university. These conceptions correspond to what Ronald Barnett calls the *ideological* imaginary (the neoliberal university) and the *utopian* imaginary (a different university) (Barnett, 2013). We suggest that the two imaginaries are articulated by the two Danish university reforms and the resistance they provoked via A Different University. The point of giving an account of the two imaginaries here and of conceptualising them as such is to provide the empirical case with a context and to assist in the articulation of a different university.

Throughout the article, we apply a temporal and spatial analytical perspective in order to flesh out the two university imaginaries. We claim that the conflict around which the two imaginaries unfold have important spatial and temporal dimensions that distinguish them from one another. The university has traditionally been seen as a unique space with its own temporality. The university has been the one place where the peculiar temporal and spatial logic of study and research is observed. We argue that the spatio-temporal imaginary of the 'classical' university is under pressure from the imposition of the neoliberal university. The neoliberal imaginary positions itself against an imaginary of the classical university (and some of the students, though not all, do indeed evoke the latter imaginary in talking about the university they want). On a discursive level this means, among other things, a spatial reframing of the university in the neoliberal imaginary: the university, especially the humanities, is cast as an 'ivory tower', especially by right-wing commentators, pundits and politicians, in which privileged people with no contact with 'reality' conjure up useless theory or interfere in the public debate as representatives of a

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<sup>3</sup> In the following, we will use initial capitals when we refer to the student movement, A Different University, and initial lower case letters when we refer to the imaginary of a different university. However, the point is, of course, that the two are interwoven.

humanistic ‘Salvation Army’. The neoliberal university, furthermore, enforces a temporal reframing: the university, its participants and their activities are shamed for their costly ‘slowness’ which acts as a parasite on society and ‘regular people’. The imaginary of a different university, as was prefigured by the student movement, involves a different spatio-temporality: the university is to be a genuinely democratic space – in its purpose as well as in its everyday functioning – constituted by the people who *do* the university on a day-to-day basis, and the time one spends there is to be structured in an equally democratic and empowering way.

Using these different spatio-temporal imaginaries of the university as analytical frames will allow us to explain some pertinent features of both the university reforms and of the motives and expressions of the student protests. Lastly, the methodology for this study, to which we now turn, is informed by a space-time perspective akin to what we ourselves believe the imaginary of a different university might include: our idea was to make an intervention into the student movement so as to create space and time for reflection. The point was to allow thinking about more general questions related to the university and the movement.

Here, we construe the university imaginaries through a combination of empirical data collection and production (focus groups and participant observation) and a theoretical discussion of the literature on neoliberalism as a restructuring of capitalism on the levels of society, the institution, and the individual. From its formation through its initial stages, we followed closely – and, to some extent, participated in – what proved to be the biggest and most persistent part of A Different University, namely the part of the movement at Aarhus University at which we both do research and teach.

We take our cue from the important imperative in contemporary social movement studies to do research that is relevant to movements and to not reduce these studies to a sociological sub-discipline exempt from wider academic and activist discussion (Barker, Cox, Krinsky, & Nilsen, 2014; Bevington & Dixon, 2005; Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). This imperative informs our study in two ways. First, we aim to provide a narrative of the wider politico-economic and historical context in which the university reforms and the student movement unfolded (Hetland & Goodwin, 2014; Krinsky, 2014). Furthermore, we take the student movement seriously as an actor ‘from below’ in this broader context (Cox & Nilsen, 2014), an actor whose practices and ideas can tell us something important about the politico-economic conjuncture and its struggles.

The second way in which we have sought to make this study movement-relevant is through the collection and production of empirical data. As a way of exploring, as researchers and teachers, the imaginary of a different university, we wanted to do a study that went beyond just discussing these themes among ourselves: we wanted to do research *in and with* a different university (the movement *and* the imaginary). We organized two focus groups that were open for everyone involved in the activist group at Aarhus University. While focus

groups are rarely used in social movement studies, this method offers unique insight into the meanings and norms that underpin, and are in turn formed by, the practices, position, and development of the movement. These meanings and norms are often not accessible through the 'public' material of pamphlets, posters, communiqués, and so on. Furthermore, focus groups offer insight into the formation of these meanings and norms, as discussion and interaction between movement participants are hereby facilitated (della Porta, 2014). However, our aim was not just to access already existing meanings and to gain insight into the process of meaning formation. Rather, we hope that our research intervention could also be beneficial to the participants. In their research with activist groups in Halifax, Canada, Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) found that movement success, broadly understood, is often contingent on the making of *space* and *time* for the movement to deal with the obstacles it faces, internal as well as external. The authors help facilitate this by 'convening' the activist in a series of interviews and discussions. The scope of their research and the activist milieu they researched are different from our study. Nevertheless, we have been inspired by the ideal of convening the social movement, to facilitate the creation of space and time for collective reflection on the imaginary of the movement.

Importantly, this was not based on an assumption of epistemological or strategic privilege but on the assumption, and to some extent observation, that space and time for such reflection is difficult to find (or make) in the everyday life of a movement. Here, resources are mostly invested in tactical and to some extent strategic discussions, e.g. on establishing solidaristic ties to similar groups at other universities, and practical activities, such as painting banners and printing posters. Our first focus group was exploratory as we asked the participants what they saw as the most pressing questions for the movement and how they thought research in and with a different university might mean, that is, what issues they would like further research interventions focus on. Based on this discussion, our second focus group was structured around two questions: what characterizes the university you are resisting, and what characterizes the university you are fighting for? It is the discussions around these two questions that this article centres on. The focus groups, the first with five participants, the second with ten, were made by participants whose involvement in the movement varied from an initiator/spokesperson, students very involved in intellectual and practical activities of the movement, and students mostly participating on the side-lines. Yet, they all shared a wish to discuss their university and the struggle they were involved in.

We are not the first to theoretically interrogate the neoliberal university as the context of contemporary student activism (Zuidhof, 2015) or to organize focus groups to explore students' own analyses and experiences from resisting the neoliberal university (Salter & Kay, 2011). Bringing these two methods together, however, is rare. Furthermore, contributing to construing the imaginary of a different university, as it is our hope to do, will hopefully help to bring the discussion and struggle forward. As P. W. Zuidhof (2015, p. 53) notes, "[t]he

current challenge for the post-neoliberal university is that it desperately needs new imaginaries[.]”

We begin by unpacking the case under question as we first present the two university reforms that were the immediate means of transformation against which A Different University mobilized; we then describe the making and initial unfolding of the student activist group at Aarhus University. The following two sections offer an in-depth articulation of the imaginary of the neoliberal university, the first through a rigorous discussion with the academic literature on neoliberalism, the second by bringing the critical voices and actions of the student activists to the fore. Following this trail, the last main section of the article explores the imaginary of a different university as articulated by the students.

### **University reforms and student resistance**

In late 2014, two proposed reforms of the Danish universities received much attention and became the objects of much debate and student activism. At the time of writing, the reforms have been implemented and the universities – potential students, current students, teachers and researchers, the administrative staff – are beginning to feel their effects. The ‘Study Progress Reform’ forces students to ‘speed-up’ their studies by automatically signing them up for classes and exams, and by contractually committing the universities to shorten students’ study periods. The ‘Dimensioning Plan’ is a downsizing of academic programmes based on arguments about labour-market utility. Academic fields with too high unemployment among new graduates are being downsized by up to 30% and get a ministerially defined and market-dependent cap on their present and future student intake. The latter reform entails a drastic cutback in the intake of primarily (would-be) students of humanistic and social-science programmes. And since the budgets of the universities are increasingly dependent upon the student intake and on them passing their classes on time, this will result in a deep cut in staff. At present, most Danish universities are firing staff and cutting study programmes to adjust to the new reality.

Theoretically grasping the two reforms, we see them as expressions and institutionalizations of a particular spatial and temporal restructuring of the university. In spatial terms, the university is being redescribed as a mere stepping stone or relay station between education and that which lies *outside* the university: the labour market and employment, the ‘real world’. The university is to serve as the smooth transition or conveyor belt between what is, young adults, and what is to become, workers and entrepreneurs. In and of itself, the university is to have no unique spatial features demarking it as something distinct. The shrinking of the humanist educational programmes and in turn research environments resulting from the ‘Dimensioning Plan’ could be seen as an exclusionary shrinking of the space of the university, or as an ‘enclosure’ of the university as a commons (The Edu-factory Collective, 2009).

In temporal terms, the reforms aim to squeeze study time, to optimize learning in fewer time units and to discourage what is now termed ‘detours’.

Consequentially, there is now little, if any, time for ‘bad decisions’ or changing one’s mind regarding one’s course of study, for stays abroad, and for taking on activities and jobs outside of one’s programme. The temporal imperative for the student is to finish on time. The reforms not only limit university time in a quantitative way; they also qualitatively redefine university time: the time a student spends in the university is increasingly merely justified as preparation for what really matters, the time *after* university, the ‘real life’.

The underlying, implicit idea behind the reforms is that university time is only an expense, having no quality on its own merits. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the reforms facilitate a restructuring of the university as a transitional zone that students – as well as staff and administration – are not to view as valuable in and of itself, as self-valorizing. It is only valorized through the spatial and temporal activities outside or after university. Or, put differently, the university is increasingly being subsumed by the general space and time of society it has hitherto been, to some extent, exempt from. The dispossession through enclosure of university space facilitates this. Thus the university is increasingly restructured as yet another field for the predominant neoliberal accumulation strategy (Harvey, 2007). More generally, the two university reforms are symptomatic of wider neoliberal tendencies regarding the space the university takes up in society – tendencies that involve ongoing questioning from outside the university of the ways staff and students spend their time and pressure to make the university conform to the (unknown) demands of the (future) labour market, to make it primarily a reservoir of resources for neoliberal competition strategies at the state level.

Understanding the student protests against the two reforms as part of a broader resistance against the neoliberalization of the university, we are interested in how the student protestors understood and responded to these reforms, their critique of the neoliberal university and their imaginings of a different university.

In November 2014, a group of students from the Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas at Aarhus University called for an open meeting with the aim of planning an occupation of the university. Three overall decisions had already been made prior to the meeting called by the small group of student activists: One, they demanded a roll-back of the two reforms; two, the occupation should not be merely symbolic but should physically disrupt, in a non-violent way, the normal flow of people and things; and three, the occupation should continue until the demands were either met or the occupiers were removed. The meeting was well attended by students from many faculties and departments – not just the ‘usual suspects’. Contrary to the wish of the organizers – but not to their surprise – attendance by non-students was very low.

After some debate and a vote, it was decided that the occupation should be of the rectorate building<sup>4</sup> and a duty roster for the first couple of days was filled out. The rectorate building was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was chosen for logistic and pragmatic reasons: it was simply easier to occupy a local building rather than go to, say, the Ministry of Higher Education in Copenhagen, which also probably was impossible to occupy because of the security measures at the Ministry. There was also talk of occupying the administration wing at the School of Culture and Society, in which many of the students studied. However, some of those students expressed unease with the prospect of having to confront administrative staff, teachers and non-participating co-students, either because they didn't want to damage personal relationships or because they saw these people as allies in the struggle – if not participating allies, then allies in theory. Also, to potential participants not living their everyday day (student) lives in this part of the university, occupying the latter might have been somewhat alienating. The political case for choosing the rectorate building was to put pressure on – or create an opportunity for – the core governing bodies of the university to react more openly to and against the reforms. Many students were, however, of the opinion that the rectorate were part of the problem, not the solution, and this analysis only seemed to gain currency as the occupation and the movement unfolded. The protestors saw the rectorate as the pinnacle of a managerial and undemocratic university leadership buying into the thinking behind the reforms and only half-heartedly, if at all, criticizing the changes to the university. The rectorate building, then, was, and increasingly became, a strong symbol of the neoliberal university.

The occupation was successfully established and for about a week the students controlled the space and time of the rectorate building. At first, the students were welcomed by the administration who, moreover, declared that they sided with the students and were happy to see that they were engaged and cared about the university. Days went by, however, and the staff learned that the students did not tire easily and that the occupation was not purely symbolic – a few times administrative staff were turned down when asking for permission to enter 'just to pick up an important set of keys' etc. The administration insisted that they would not have the police remove the students, which would be an unusual thing to do at a Danish university campus. (Interestingly, the students simultaneously doing a similar occupation at the University of Copenhagen faced threats of arrest and expulsion immediately: Lyngberg, 2014.) After about a week, however, the administration at Aarhus University apparently did not see any other way out, neither. On day seven, the police cleared the occupation.

During the occupation, A Different University prevented the administration from entering and the student activists were in charge of what the building should be used for. For a time, the neoliberal administration could not take place in this space. More than just a negative obstruction of the workings of the university, more than just keeping the administration out, however, the building

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<sup>4</sup> I.e. the building housing the rector (in some countries called the vice-chancellor, chancellor or president) of the university and his staff.



became a joyful space where the students engaged in discussion, ate, slept, played music, watched films, gave interviews, made friends, and where other interested students and sympathetic teachers showed up. In this way, the occupation was also an appropriation of university space and time, a taking control of how to spend one's time in the university space. It was a way to practice a different university. This double nature of the occupation – the negative resistance to the neoliberal reforms and the positive creation of an alternative university space and time – is not unique to the occupation of A Different University. In fact, the mixture of the occupation as 'protest' and as a 'process' is witnessed by observers and participants of other recent student occupations of the neoliberal university (Aitchison, 2011; Salter & Kay, 2011). For example, Guy Aitchison (2011) describes how many students became radicalized as the UCL occupation went on and how the perceived purpose of the occupation shifted from being about demands to being about creating an 'interstitial' space, a crack in the neoliberal university in which an alternative vision of the university was thought and practiced.

The occupation at Aarhus University attracted quite a lot of media attention in comparison with other protest activities in the same period. During and after the occupation, the students continued to meet locally in their General Assembly in order to plan more actions; they put up posters, painted red squares (the symbol of the movement), and dropped banners from the university buildings. A national General Assembly with participants from the other Danish universities was organized, and ties to student movements abroad were made, e.g. to the groups 'Humanities Rally' and 'The New University' at the University of Amsterdam (see Verkaaik, 2015; Zuidhof, 2015).

On November 26, a government-initiated 'Quality Commission', primarily staffed with economists and CEOs from the private sector, was to present a report on how to restructure higher education, basically arguing for further neoliberal integration of the university. A Different University blockaded the event, preventing people from entering the building in which the presentation was to take place. At the request of Aarhus University, the students were forcibly removed by the police and several students were charged with intrusion. Two days later, the University, after critique from the students and others, withdrew their complaint and no charges were pressed against the students. On December 18 (and again two months later, on February 23), A Different University tried to obstruct a meeting of the University Board and protested the fact that the majority of the board members were from outside the university. The student activists lay on the floor with paper with footprints printed on them on their bodies and with duct tape over their mouths, signaling their experiences of being trampled and of not having a voice. During this time, the university administration was increasingly seen as part of the problem by the students, not least after they had twice called the police during the students' actions, despite initial assurances to the contrary. On January 13, A Different University disrupted a meeting at Aarhus City Hall where the Minister for Education and Science, Sofie Carsten Nielsen, the engineer behind the two university reforms, was speaking. The students cut her off and gave a speech of their own. On April

16, a coordinated occupation took place at three Danish universities. At Aarhus University the new occupation was initially of the rectorate building, as with the first one. This time around, however, the rectorate called the police after one and a half hours and the building was cleared, with no one being arrested or charged. The students moved the occupation to a hall on the opposite side of the road from the rectorate building. This occupation went on for a week before the students left of their own will. During the occupation, as was also the case in the first occupation, political and social activities made the space a vibrant milieu of student activism.

Approaching the end of the spring semester, and thus deadlines for essays and exams, the level of activity declined for A Different University and it never seemed to increase again. Beyond the end-of-semester stress and the following holiday-mode – which the movement somewhat surprisingly survived in December 2014 – the reasons for this were probably a combination of a loss of energy of core activists, so-called ‘burnout’ (Pines, 1994), and a shift in political focus to other kinds of activism. A general election was called for June 28 and some students mobilized for Left parties while a substantial part of the core activists organized in a group advocating for people not to vote. Since then, many of the students have been involved in the organization of Leftist study groups, in feminist activism, and in initiating an anti-capitalist activist platform. Moreover, as the so-called ‘Refugee Crisis’ took off in Denmark and other European countries in September 2015, many students became involved in refugee solidarity activism. While this might seem like a bleak ending for A Different University, it seems clear to us that these other movement initiatives have been strengthened by, and some might even have been contingent on, the personal ties and activist experience generated in A Different University. Moreover, at the time of writing, major cuts in staff have been announced at most universities, which has spurred another round of mobilization of students and staff at the Danish universities.

### **The neoliberal university**

The primary grievances that spurred the students to occupy the rectorate building were, as mentioned above, two specific university reforms. From the beginning of their action, their two demands were, one, for the two reforms to be rolled back and, two, for knowledge and education rather than relevance to the labour market to be the aim of the university. While the first demand was quite specific, the other was rather abstract; both, of course, went beyond what the students thought realistic to achieve with this particular action. Contrary to the UCL case described by Aitchinson (2011), the two demands set forth by A Different University continued to be central throughout the occupation (and beyond). We believe this had to do with the nature of A Different University’s two demands. While demands directed at the university or the government in student movements are often equated with a reformist position (Aitchinson, 2011; Gill & DeFronzo, 2009), demands can indeed be radical. Following Agnes Heller, Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen argues that what makes needs –

and, we could add, demands – radical is “the transformative preconditions for and consequences of their satisfaction” (2014, p. 43). The demands of A Different University, especially the second one of letting education and knowledge and not labour-market relevance be the aim of the university, can be seen as radical in the context of the neoliberal university as their satisfaction would involve a break with this context. The choice of these two particular demands were clever as they allowed for both student radicals, whose ultimate aim was a large-scale transformation of the university and the rest of society, and students for whom the scale of their grievances was more narrowly centred on the two reforms, to rally behind the demands. It created an alliance in which the students did not necessarily have to agree ideologically and strategically but only on a very minimal set of demands and tactics.

While the students’ opposition to the two reforms was undoubtedly genuine and heartfelt, it can also be seen as the last (neoliberal) straw – albeit “a large straw” as one participant put it – and as a tactic in a struggle with larger and more long-term objectives. As another student told us, “the reforms were indeed the last straw but at the same time it gave us something concrete to resist. From these reforms, it was very easy to see and to explain to people how it was all connected.” A student expressed the larger struggle in terms of bringing the “culture from Humboldt” back into the university, by which he referred to a university based on strong autonomy and a close connection between research and teaching. He further called for “politicizing” the university, which he described as “a totally apathetic institution”, on the level of students as well as of the administration, with the sole aim of acting as an “administrative unit” that produces workers capable of meeting the demands of the labour market. Others even saw the action as the first step towards a wider societal organization and transformation. While recognizing that the struggle for some students went beyond the walls of the university, and for others perhaps had to do more narrowly with the two reforms, we concur with the students in naming the primary antagonist in this struggle the neoliberal university.

We now turn to unpacking our understanding of the neoliberal university in theoretical terms. It is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the contemporary university, but merely a sketch with which we summarize some general transformations and try to explicate some of the developments experienced by and reacted to by the student activists.

An impressive and empirically-grounded body of research engages in what is variously called ‘the entrepreneurial university’ (Clark, 1998; Shattock, 2009), ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), ‘the corporate university’ (Phelan, 2016) or ‘the neoliberal university’ (Larner & Le Heron, 2005; Peter, 2011). Disregarding the specific differences of these terms and their analytical definitions in empirical studies, we aim here for a general understanding of the imaginary of the neoliberal university that the two Danish reforms can be seen as particular instances and intensifications of.

Unlike classical liberalism, which advocated laissez-faire market rule and a major retrenchment of the state, the neoliberalism that developed in the post-

WW2 period and that came to power and prominence from the 1970s onwards centres on a radical restructuring of state and people (Davies, 2014; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). Classical liberalism had a static, zero-sum view of the state and market, where one agent could only grow at the expense of the other and where their basic principles remained unchangeable. Neoliberalism sported a dynamic view of both market and state. Starting with economic competition as a master narrative, neoliberalism uses the state to create a generalized competition between and within all social units, from the state to the individual herself.

In clear opposition to classical liberalism, neoliberalism does not really care if everything *is* a market as long as everyone behaves *as* on a market, or as Michel Foucault stated:

Basically, [neoliberal governmentality] has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of society by the market. (Foucault, 2008, p. 145)

It is not that contemporary neoliberals do not favour privatizations and liberalizations. However, we should not look singly or primarily for the effects of neoliberalism in the retrenchment of the state but rather in the restructuring of the state as part of the competitive order. Described by Jamie Peck (2010, p. xii) as “politically assisted market rule”, neoliberalization is the attempt to impose the market model on any social organization of collective or private life. The state as a whole, the institutions of society, and the individual are all restructured as competitive units, in competition with other units and with themselves, globalization is the master narrative at all three levels.

The state, along with its offices, departments, and institutions, is divided into ‘self-governing’ units competing with each other, legitimized by fiscal restraints, global competition, and the idea that only life-and-death-competition makes you creative, adaptive, and flexible. The individual is redescribed as capital. ‘Entrepreneur of self’ is the generalized individual as capital, investing in him- or herself, constantly optimizing, moving, learning, in one word: innovating. One is not only in competition with others but with oneself; the self that one is right now competes with the self that is needed in the near but uncertain future. A constant temporal splitting of the self is thus installed, forever threatened by the prospect of one’s self becoming obsolete, unmarketable, dead capital. This temporal splitting is exactly what drives the thinning of university time as a time distinct. That is, one cannot be allowed to ‘waste time’, to do what does not project one into the future, what is of interest primarily for the here and now. That understanding of time, when viewed through the lens of competition and capital, can only be seen as waste. This thinking – and the pressure it puts on students – was illustrated by a poster put up everywhere at Aarhus University when the fall semester of 2015 started. The poster stated: “Kickstart your career

before it starts. Studying a semester abroad gives you a head start on the job market!”

Once redescribed as capital, individuals are now portrayed as potentiality either lying dormant and non-circulating, or invested and circulating. The role of the reconstructed neoliberal competition state (Pedersen, 2011) is to ensure the free circulation of capital – in all its forms – and to optimize the connectivity and capitalization of all capital, human and otherwise. This helps us understand ‘the neoliberal university’ as one space, one particular locale, for neoliberal reconstruction of the state (Brown, 2015, pp. 175–200). Every neoliberalization of a particular locale or domain must contend with the forces, rules and traditions of that place. The university is a special case due to a long tradition and self-understanding of autonomy and free research. Until recently, strong interests had to some extent protected the university and its knowledge production from pure marketization. Academic knowledge was thought of as something special, in need of distinct institutional forms shielded from direct commercial or political interests. But, as famously documented by Jean-François Lyotard in the 1970s, at the onset of neoliberalism as a political project, knowledge has become ‘useful’, meaning that the academic knowledge production has gradually been redescribed in productivist terms. New concepts have substituted ‘free research’ and ‘research-based teaching’ as the dominant expressions of the ideal university, namely ones of ‘utility’, ‘employability’ and ‘marketable skills’ (Baker & Brown, 2007).

The utilization of knowledge is at the core of the neoliberalization of the university. The latter has of course been subjected to other restructurings as well: commercialization, introduction of private interests, weakening of university democracy, strengthening of the management level, focus on students as customers, use of competition as an internal organizational principle, target measures and performance indices as politico-strategic control etc. But what strikes us as most important in this context is the transformed view of knowledge. We want to suggest that a *de-academization of knowledge* has taken place and that the two Danish university reforms are some of its most prominent institutional and ideological expressions. Why? Because academic knowledge production is the unique feature of university and the foremost obstacle for the neoliberalization of the university, making it a privileged site of policy change and academic protest.

We have coined the concept of de-academization of knowledge to highlight the processes by which academic knowledge production has become deskilled as just any other knowledge production located in or outside the university. This has also been called a shift from modus 1 to modus 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994) or a shift to post-academic science (Ziman, 2000). It is part of the redescription of universities and their function as supplying the private market with ideas and students to succeed nationally in the global competition. The de-academization of knowledge expresses the view that academic knowledge production should look less like a classical university and more like a private business. What does de-academization look like in the real-

life processes of neoliberalization? On the most basic level, it is the redescription of knowledge as useful: we have to shorten the road “from research to invoice”, as the then-Minister of Science, Technology and Development in Denmark summarized the rationale in 2001. More generally, we understand the neoliberal university as one where a de-academization of knowledge has transformed the university spatially into a production facility for knowledge indistinct from non-academic facilities. On a more practical level, it is about priming students to choose programmes, subjects, courses and extra-curricular activities based on their future career plans. It is about introducing entrepreneurship, innovation, application exercises in all courses at all levels. It is about measuring the output of staff, pushing for ‘real world’ connections, promoting university-business cooperation and inviting business leaders onto university boards, mobilizing the university as a pool of resources in the global competition, subjecting it to endless accreditations and external evaluations, promoting elites and excellence as well as expanding the term ‘university’ to include institutions for vocational training and sector research, making it indistinct as *the* university (Kristensen, Nørreklit, & Raffnsøe-Møller, 2011; Rowlands, 2013; The Edu-factory Collective, 2009). The boundaries of the university are furthermore blurred physically as the sharing of premises and buildings with private companies increasingly becomes the norm. A spatial de-differentiation is at work, thinning the university as a particular locale with its own internal logic.

A reconstructed temporality is another important dimension of the neoliberal university and the de-academization of knowledge. There is a new finitude to academic time. It has an end: the endless drive to do more, publish more, teach more, apply more often for funds, all in a shorter period of time. At the same time, the university is de-emphasized as a special time for students:

The ideal of a step into the university fostering emancipation from patriarchy, family, school and rural communities presumes that the subjects also want, plan and take this step. Yet the tendency seems to be that the step from the institutions of school and family to the university no longer takes place as a break, but rather as a seamless transition. (Raunig, 2013, p. 44)

A seamless transition from family, school, university, work. When education is turned into job preparation and research is turned into applications for external funding, university time as a special temporality is dismantled. Students and staff are subjected to a de-sequential time where the past, experience, knowledge, academia are rapidly devalued in favour of the horizon, potentiality, the flow, the future.

At its most general level, de-academization of knowledge minimizes the differences between universities and society, between students as studying and as working, between academic knowledge and applied knowledge, between academic value and market value. “The ‘withdrawal’ of the state”, Gerald Raunig

writes, “is not in fact a withdrawal at all, but is actualized in the steering and controlling of the process of the economization of the universities” (2013, p. 38). It is about the denial of universities as some place distinct. The neoliberalization instantiates a disenchantment of academia and knowledge in favour of the free flow of information and resources.

### **The students’ critique of the neoliberal university**

After this theoretical unpacking of the imaginary of the neoliberal university, we turn now to the lived experience and critique of this university as articulated by the student activists in the focus groups. In line with the definition of neoliberalism above, we will explore the students’ critique of the neoliberal university at the level of society, the institution and the individual. As we will show, the contrast between the idea of the university as something distinct and valuable, as some specific spatial and temporal frame, on the one hand, and the university as is, on the other, guides a lot of the critique on all three levels. The idea of the university as an academic institution devoted to the pursuit of knowledge is a strong and unquestioned value among the student protestors. And they clearly sense that on all three levels this idea is rapidly losing ground in favour of visions of de-academized knowledge, relevance to the labour market and a shortening of any distance, temporal, spatial, organizational and personal, between the university and ‘the market’.

Most of the students’ critique of the neoliberal university pertains to the university as institution and their own lived experiences as university students. However, many of the students linked this critique to a broader critique of society. For some students, such an analysis was no doubt already in place prior to their participation in the movement; for others, their movement participation involved a learning process that made it possible for them to make such analytical links. As one student told us:

When I joined A Different University, I didn’t have a clear image of what the university was like and what it could be. It was more a feeling that there was something in society that I would like to be different and that I could recognize... It was the same irritation that I had about the university without knowing it.

For the students we spoke to, and for the movement as a whole, the reforms that triggered the protests are not seen as unique or aberrations. Rather, as one student put it, the reforms are seen as

part of a larger trend to think of the university as a place meant to produce wage labourers and to produce people for the labour market – that is what the purpose of the university is. A lot of the things happening at the university are

caused by various administrations using university politics in a highly ideological way.

Such a critique of neoliberalism was not always as explicitly economic as in the quote above. The students' critique, at the societal level, was mostly directed at politicians and the government. But also these critiques were underpinned by a focus on neoliberalism as economy and ideology. The students' analysis echoed in that sense Peck's notion of neoliberalism as 'politically assisted market rule', mentioned above.

Moving on to the critique aimed at the university as institution, the frustrations are high. Spatial indistinctions and de-sequencing of time are observed between high school and university, between labour market and university, between the growing marketization and the traditional university ethos: "The universities are increasingly becoming like the university colleges [for vocational training], the university colleges like the universities, and then it all ends in one big uniform mush", as one student put it. Echoing the experience of the staff, the university bureaucracy is described as "extremely alienating, like a secret machinery. Coupled with the lack of university democracy, this creates a perception of the university as an institution one is not really part of." The university has become just another bureaucracy churning out commandments and requirements, not for the benefit of students (or staff) but for the benefit of outside interests.

What above all mobilizes the student protestors is the sense that the university is no longer anything particular, that the time they spend at the university is not different from the rest of their lives, that their activities there are similar to those of their later work life, and that the university and its staff are nothing other than 'knowledge workers' indistinct from the rest. The disappointment of entering university as it proves to be no real beginning at all, as campus proves to be just another commercialized venue, and student life only a preparation for 'the real life' runs through the commentaries and protests: "It was a huge disappointment to experience how things functioned, when I started at the university, to experience the lack of freedom and contemplation that you had been promised." The same student later elaborated on her experiences from the initial meeting with university:

This disappointment of beginning university with the expectation that perhaps now, here there is a small crack, a small part of society with space for free reflection, thoughtfulness as well as new ideas and solutions; that someone was sitting there thinking 'how do we do this better?', radically and alternatively, and came up with something new and innovative; and then it wasn't like that at all.

The university as just any other place, the spatial and temporal undifferentiation of the university from all other institutions and activities, is what connects the neoliberal university at a societal and institutional level.



The market way of thinking is also evident at the personal level, in the self-descriptions and personal experiences of the students. What comes out quite clearly in our material is the force of a neoliberal subjectivation process. They are no longer ‘students supposed to study’ but increasingly feel like ‘students supposed to graduate’, discouraging them from gaining any special attachment to the university or their subject matter. This has created a somewhat diffuse dissatisfaction not only with the university but also with themselves. While opposed to the marketized logic of useful knowledge and relevance to the labour market, a number of our informants expressed how the force of that narrative, coming from politicians, media, the university, and family had been internalized, not as a value in any strict sense, but as a self-questioning and self-disciplining. A CV approach to student life has established itself not as the only, possibly not even as the predominant value, but as a constant active point of reference. That is the kind of student activity that is recognized by the university system, by the Minister and politicians, and by friends and family inquiring into the usefulness of the students’ studies. “It is very weird”, one student told us, “to be met with a question of what relevance I have.”

The CV approach is one way to align student life with the outside world and its demands, to align the present with the future. In our discussions, a sense of conformity was expressed: one way to ease the outside pressure is to increase the CV (and grade) pressure. A student life form was easily identified that conformed to these marketized demands, the linearity and singularity of that life was explicitly evident in the two reforms, accelerating university time and downsizing supposedly less relevant programmes. The ‘student supposed to graduate’, that is the student supposed to view university as a transitional space and the time spent in the university as increasingly compressed and finalized time, as a sphere and an activity of no inherent value, has produced subjective effects:

Among my fellow students I can feel a creeping lack of academic pride as they begin to believe what they are being told about not being good for anything. And they begin to talk about having to become orientated towards the market because they would like to be relevant for something.

This sentiment was also very much expressed by the student protesters as a personal experience. A number of them talked about feeling “a sneaking passivity about all these changes” and about “feeling I was becoming indifferent” – prior to their involvement in A Different University, that is.

In a sense, the explicitness of the two reforms allowed for an explication of the student experience as a common fate – and as a provocation. The Minister in charge of the reforms, Sofie Carsten Nielsen from the Social-Liberal Party, was very explicit about her view on being useful and this provoked the students. The debate on the reforms allowed for a counter-narrative to develop. A Different University latched onto the reforms as symbolic of broader trends but also as

radicalizations of personal student experiences provoking a defiant attitude of 'We are not useless'. A lot of the people getting involved in A Different University felt provoked by the ministerial rhetoric,

because you feel personally attacked and become really angry. What do they think? That I spent at least five years of my life with constant stress, really depressing examinations and constant performance anxiety, and then I do not want a job?

As the last section of this article will deal with, participation in A Different University is on the contrary described as a subjectivation that mobilizes and enacts a true student identity.

### **A different university imagined and prefigured**

While the student activism was first and foremost a struggle against the neoliberal university, it was at the same time a struggle for a different university as is clear from the name of movement. In this last section of the article, we will sketch out the imaginary of a different university as it was articulated in words as well as in the actions of A Different University.

During our focus groups, we asked the participants to reflect on what kind of university they were fighting for, how they imagined a *different* university. A primary observation to make from this conversation is, perhaps not surprisingly, that this was a task more difficult than that of criticizing the (neoliberal) university as is. As the students pointed out themselves, the idea of a different university was often articulated as the inverse of the disliked features of the existing university. Warming to the subject, however, the students had many interesting positive thoughts on the idea of a different university. These thoughts included explicit articulations of what the students imagined a different university might look like. In the students' critique of the neoliberal university, it was striking how these positive articulations transgress a narrow thinking about the university as something unrelated to the surrounding society and as a mere container for the people being there. Not an ivory tower, the university is indeed seen as part of society, as an active agent in society. And students and staff do not just frequent the university, they *do* the university, they *are* the university, and the university is in turn an important institution for the making of personal identity. As an important setting for their everyday lives, for many students and employees, the university is a central, if not the primary, mediator between the level of the individual and that of society.

Many student activists saw the problems of the university reforms as connected not only to a more extensive neoliberalization of the university but to elements of neoliberal society. In turn, some of them saw the struggle for a different university as connected to struggles of a different society. "We're a student movement but I think that we're the beginning of something bigger, that we'll

see many upheavals all around.” This prediction was voiced during a discussion in a focus group about whether A Different University had been exclusionary in the discourses employed, thereby alienating potential allies within but also from outside the university. The student continued: “Because of this, I think it is a shame if we isolate ourselves and exclusively make this a student movement. This is a risk if too many people don’t understand what we are saying.”

While the students were critical of a university conforming to the demands of the labour market, the idea of the university as an ivory tower had no place in the imaginary of a different university. The students we talked to all seemed to agree that a positive relation between the university and society should exist. The problem is, as one student put it, that in the public and political debate, society is equated with the labour market. If the university is not concerned with the demands of the labour market and with commodifying knowledge and skills as wage labour, it is seen as a self-centred bubble shutting itself away:

Of course the university shouldn’t be a bubble, but engagement in the surrounding world comes from science itself, it has to come from within. Maybe I’m naïve, but I’m convinced that if you left the university to itself, to the criteria laid down by its respective disciplines, then it would, of its own accord, find out what was relevant for it to be occupied with.

An independent university, contrary to the entrepreneurial vision of the political and administrative level, is not a return to the ivory tower or a desire to be left alone. For the students, it is a re-academization of the university, a re-creation of a time and space devoted to knowledge. One explained the interface between university and society like this: “The university should in some way be a model for society because it in my mind is something that comes before society. It is in the university that new ideas are hatched and begun.” Another like this: “You have to go back to the roots of what the university was thought as, that is, a free institution that works for the sake of knowledge and for the sake of humanity.”

The imaginary of a different university, however, was not merely articulated in the abstract. During our conversations with the student activists, it became clear that they had experienced participating in the movement activities in and of itself as a contrast to their everyday experiences of being students in the (neoliberal) university. Indeed, the movement A Different University can thus be conceived as a *prefiguration* of the imaginary of a different university. Prefigurative politics can be traced back to the African-American Civil Rights Movement and to the New Left in the 1960s: “by ‘prefiguring’ within the current practices of the movement the values of freedom, equality, and community that they wanted on a grand scale, activists were helping bringing them about” (Polletta, 2002, p. 6). Since then, prefigurative politics have been a defining characteristic of the Feminist Movement and the Alter-Globalization Movement, among others. In its purest form, it refers to a praxis in which “the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present” (Maackelbergh 2011,

4). The aim of the movement is not displaced outside of itself and not projected into the future. In practice, this most often means a focus on participatory and direct democracy, consensus decision-making and horizontal structures (Polletta, 2002). In our case, this means that A Different University has, to some extent, in its practices modelled the imaginary of the university it wants to inhabit, of a different university. While this has been less of an explicit strategy and not part of the way the movement has represented itself, from speaking to the student activists, the movement clearly offered a prefigurative experience.

One of the key organizers and initiators of the movement told us during a focus group that he, from a strategic point of view, was in general reluctant to embark on grand, programmatic discussions because of their potentially destructive effects on the movement itself: “To begin to talk about these things is a sure way to split a movement, because you’ll then disagree on principal things that otherwise don’t have any real significance for the concrete practice you otherwise agree on.” This echoes one of the observations of Haiven and Khasnabish, namely that “differences of imagination represent the most important and divisive fractures in and barriers to solidarity” (2014, 241). The student continued:

Moreover, it is in principle wrong to think about changes to the university – or to society in general – that you can articulate an ideal image of how it could work and then work your way towards that. It has to grow out of that which already exists, as a break with the injustices that already exist.

After clarifying this position, he did, however, speak in favour of a range of markers of a different university that he described as deliberately vague: “More democracy in the university, more freedom, the construction of free intellectual communities, changes ‘from below’, and so on.”

The demands for genuine university democracy and subaltern agency were not only repeated throughout our conversations with the students, they were also at the core of the students’ experiences of participating in the movement. Indeed, as Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) also stress, imagination is never detached from strategy and tactics. Another student likewise mentioned the movement’s focus on internal democracy as an example of how the movement was an edifying project and not just negative. “The very crux of the edification is that it should be built from below. The very point is that the university should decide for itself, so who would we, as a group, be to say how it should be”, she said. She proceeded to argue how, for example, that the people in a specific department should decide for themselves how they wanted to run their programmes and scientific communities. If the movement was to practice what it preached, so was her point, it should recognize its particularity and not attempt to articulate concrete guidelines for how the university should be run.

A third participant reflected on the occupational tactic:

I think it was a cool form of action because it in some way symbolized what we wanted to do: We wanted to draw attention to the fact that this is our place and now we'll grab it and take it back in some way.

The occupation was thus perceived as a re-temporalization and re-spatialization of 'our place', that is, the movement lay claim to the university as a distinctive place with a particular temporal logic.

Yet another student said, echoing the discussion above about the experienced discrepancy between the idea and the reality of university life:

I think the reason A Different University mobilized so many people right from the beginning was that it was something 'different'. We're not talking about reforming the university. We're talking about a whole new way of looking at the university, namely as that which one expects when enrolling. You're expecting something completely different [than the existing university].

The prefigurative dimension of A Different University also became clear when we asked the students to what extent they consider the movement's initial occupations successful. Although the movement's official and explicitly stated demands have not been met, the occupations were in other ways experienced as successes. "In my experience", a student told us, "these actions have been internally successful. Those participating have had the feeling that we are capable of something. I don't think that's half bad." Others likewise expressed this raised consciousness of collective agency as a form of success. A student told us how she arrived alone and before anyone else to the planned occupation of the presentation by the Government-initiated Quality Committee delivering a report calling for further marketization of the universities. Here, she was refused admittance to the meeting as she had not signed up beforehand. She toed the line and walked away feeling cowed. When she later returned with her friends and carried out the occupation, it was with a diametrically opposed sensation of collective agency: "There is indeed a force or power in community. When we come together as a group, we are the ones making the rules. And that is great!"

Engagement in the student protest activities has become one way to regain an identity as student. Some of the students spoke to us about using a lot of time on the protest activities, some even about the fear of getting arrested and getting a criminal record, but the main sentiment was one of productive alignment between protest and study, in defiance against the 'useful student' on behalf of the 'good student':

On a personal level, participating means choosing not to hand in one's essays on time, you know that whole product-oriented 'I have to graduate on time so I can enter the labour market'. You're in a sense provoked to put that on hold to be

able to act for society rather than for yourself. And that's actually quite beautiful.

The same student told us how she, through participating in the movement, had experienced a form of “relinquishing of herself” in favour of the collective movement, of acting on a societal level, a relinquishing of herself as the neoliberal university's entrepreneurial subject who validates any activity according to whether or not it may benefit her (future) career. She described it as a transgressive experience, to let go of her normal focus on taking credit for her work and making sure it appeared on her CV:

When you join a movement like this one, you have to in some way relinquish a part of yourself. When we are making flyers or planning an event, it is different from our usual, ‘I made this, I have to get credit for it, and it goes on my CV’. All of a sudden, it is just something you did and it goes into a pool, without you ever getting any personal recognition for it. And I think we're a generation of people for whom it is really difficult not to get personal recognition. It has, anyhow, been a transgressive experience for me.

Also on the level of the individual, participating in A Different University was a prefigurative experience of a different university, of a different student life. For many of the students, participation meant postponing their studies and being unproductive in the eyes of politicians and the university administration. Participation, however, freed them of the bad conscience many of them would otherwise have felt as they felt they contributed to something grander, to building a different university.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we presented a local case of what appears to be a global and increasing phenomenon of students protesting university reforms and cutbacks. We focused on the student movement, A Different University, in Aarhus, Denmark, and its university occupations and other actions in 2014-15. We situated our discussion of this movement within the politico-economic context of a neoliberal restructuring of the university that aims to subsume the university into a national competition strategy in the global, capitalist economy. For a long time, the university has been an institution that, at least to some extent, was exempt from the logic of the market and was structured as a particular space and time for the students and staff who ‘made’ the university on an everyday basis. Through engagement with literature on neoliberalism, focus groups with student movement participants, and participant observation, we argued that the result of the restructuring is a neoliberal university de-differentiated from other sites of work and production and increasingly defined by the spatial and temporal logics of capital and market. We investigated and

demonstrated how the movement and its participants construed the imaginary of the neoliberal university, how they situated themselves within it, and how they resisted it. Furthermore, we fleshed out how the student movement simultaneously involved the articulation, enactment and prefiguring of a different university as an alternative university imaginary. This imaginary is of a university that is unique in its spatial and temporal dimensions and run by the people who live their everyday lives in it, and it is a university in which obtaining knowledge and education are the sole aims.

As it was unfolding, A Different University, as a movement but also as an imaginary, succeeded in creating awareness of the harm of the neoliberal restructuring, in contributing to politicizing a new generation of students, and in initiating an important discussion and practice of what the university ought to be. While the movement (for the time being?) has stopped organizing meetings and actions, we believe that the identified and enacted antagonism between the neoliberal university and the imaginary of a different university could serve as a strong rallying point for student activists in the future, with potential resonance among other students and university staff. It is our hope that this article can serve as a resource for further thinking through and acting upon the conflicts and possibilities in the struggle between the neoliberal university and a different university.

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## **About the authors**

Bjarke Skærlund Risager (b. 1983) is a PhD Fellow in the Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas at Aarhus University, Denmark and a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the CUNY Graduate Center, USA. He is a member of the editorial board and book review editor of *Interface* and co-editor of the journal *Slagmark: Tidsskrift for idéhistorie*. He is the founder and chair of the research network "Social Movements and Political Protest" under CESAU (Centre for Sociological Studies, Aarhus University). His thesis is about the spatial production of social movements, primarily in the context of the ongoing economic crisis and crisis management in Europe. He is part of the research project "Contested Property Claims". He has several publications forthcoming on the Occupy movement, the Egyptian uprising, and the anti-austerity Blockupy coalition. His work can be followed on [au.academia.edu/BjarkeRisager](http://au.academia.edu/BjarkeRisager), he tweets @bjarkerisager, and he can be contacted at [bjarkerisager AT gmail.com](mailto:bjarkerisager@gmail.com).

Mikkel Thorup (b. 1973) is a Professor with Special Responsibilities in the history of political and economic thought in the School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark. He has recently published *The Total Enemy* (2015) and *Pro Bono. Critiques of philanthropic capitalism* (2015). He directs the research project "Contested Property Claims". Email address: [idemt AT cas.au.dk](mailto:idemt@cas.au.dk)