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## Co-production: towards a utopian approach

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### ABSTRACT

This article outlines how co-production might be understood as a utopian method, which both attends to and works against dominant inequalities. It suggests that it might be positioned ‘within, against, and beyond’ current configurations of power in academia and society more broadly. It develops this argument by drawing on recent research funded through the UK’s Connected Communities programme, led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council; and by attending to arguments from the field of Utopian Studies. It explores particular issues of power and control within the field of co-production, acknowledging that neoliberalism both constrains and co-opts such practice; and explores methodological and infrastructural issues such that its utopian potential might be realised.

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## Introduction

Co-production has an important role to play in rethinking and remaking the world for the better. The recent ‘turn’ to co-production in UK academia offers possibilities to academics and communities interested in working together to further the aims of social justice (Facer & Enright, 2016). However, it can also be captured by forces hostile to such ends. Taking seriously Levitas’ (2013) contention that social scientists should engage more closely with utopianism, here we outline a utopian approach to co-production which operates *within*, *against* and *beyond* our present in order that its potential might be protected, realised and expanded.

We offer this argument as academic workers who were involved in ‘Imagine’, a large-scale, ESRC funded Connected Communities project based in the UK that created partnerships between academics, artists and community organisations to explore the social, historical, cultural and democratic contexts of civic engagement, with an explicit remit to imagine better futures and make them happen. One of us (Kate) was the project’s Principle Investigator, the other (David) a Research Associate. Additionally, we draw on experience from Connected Communities funded projects that Kate has been involved in: Communication Wisdom, Co-Producing Legacy, Ways of Knowing, and Making Meaning Differently. These brought together partners from within and outside academia, including artists, youth workers, young people, practitioners in educational contexts, researchers from community contexts and researchers within universities (we refer to all partners – academic and non-academic, as ‘co-producers’ throughout, with modifiers where necessary). We combine these first-hand experiences

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with readings of published accounts of other co-produced research projects and works from the field of utopian studies.

Against colloquial understandings of utopianism as an unsophisticated mode of practice in pursuit of perfection, we do not provide a blueprint for ‘ideal’ co-production; nor naively assume that co-production always and already provides a utopian space. Rather, our approach pays a certain fidelity to the claims made for the transformative powers of co-production and thinks through what might be necessary to realise these. This is an approach that demands constant attention to shifting relations of power and domination.

Our focus is primarily on the potential (and dangers) of co-production’s utopian power to transform academia, although at times this necessarily involves an engagement with its potential to expand the capacities of non-academic co-producers to affect the worlds they inhabit. As such, we do not provide an account of how the concept of utopia – and methods from utopian studies might be developed as methods for use in co-production; although such a task would certainly be of considerable use. We begin by describing the context of co-production and of our work.

## Context

### *The turn to co-production and the utopian potential of its methods*

The origins of co-production as a term can be traced to the use of participatory methods in the fields of town and regional planning; and the provision of public services (Barker, 2010; Ostrom, 1990). However, over the last five years in UK academia it has come to function as an umbrella term covering processes of knowledge production in far more diverse contexts. The Arts and Humanities Research Council led ‘Connected Communities’ programme is perhaps the most well-known but by no means the only example: interest in and promotion of such methods can be evidenced by Higher Education Research Council policies, strategy documents, reports and funding calls; University research strategy documents (Campbell et al., 2016); high-profile blogs and media reports (Hayman, 2012; Lauder, 2014; Orr & Bennett, 2012); and a number of conferences and workshops encouraging, exemplifying or interrogating co-production.

This ‘turn’ to co-production draws on a number of approaches and methods, including various forms of Action Research and Participatory Action Research, which privilege the collective production of knowledge in the midst of ‘action’ (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This may be undertaken through the formation of a ‘community of practice’ (Hart et al., 2013) or a space of ‘dialogic co-inquiry’ (Banks et al., 2014), in which measures are introduced to mitigate the (often invisible) hierarchies between academic and non-academic partners. Methods utilized may be drawn from dialogic, social, collaborative and ecological art practices (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Kagan, 2014; Kester, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2007); film-making and photography (Kindon, 2003; McIntyre, 2000) and participatory action research involving theatre (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). There is also a growing interest in the potentials and problems of co-producing research with non- and more-than-human subjects (Bastian, 2013).

Such approaches and methods recognise that research does not access a pre-existing reality but is active in the creation of reality (Law, 2004). They tease out forms of knowledge extant within communities that are often overlooked or undervalued by more traditional forms of academic research, including embodied, emotional and tacit ways of knowing and representing the world (Coessens, Crispin, & Douglas, 2009; Harding, 2015; Ravetz & Ravetz, 2016). These forms of knowledge are often produced and privileged by marginalised and oppressed subject positions (Bhopal & Preston, 2012; Genest, 2016; Phipps, 2014). Accordingly, many co-productive methods draw on (and seek to enact) the insights of a variety of critical theories, including marxisms, anarchisms, critical race theories, feminisms, queer theories and critical disability theories (Beebejaun, Durose, Rees, Richardson, & Richardson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Openjuru, Jaitli, Tandon, & Hall, 2015; Preser, 2016). ‘Scholar activism’ utilizes co-productive methods to produce knowledge of value for existing social struggles, in which academic co-producers themselves are embedded (Autonomous Geographies

Research Collective, 2010; London Tenants Federation, Loretta Less, Just Space & Southwark Notes Archive Group, 2014; Taylor, 2014).

'Imagine' drew on Campbell and Lassiter's collaborative ethnographic work (Campbell & Lassier, 2015) and the critical race theorist Sivanandan's concept of 'lived theory' (Gordon, 2014) to utilize poetry and creative writing as means for women to negotiate recent collective trauma whilst re-positioning themselves as meaning makers. Communicating Wisdom: Fishing and Youth Work, meanwhile, engaged co-producers through a shared research question: 'How can Fishing Make Life Better?'. It addressed this by valuing young people's knowledges of fishing and the Marxist utopian philosopher Bloch's understanding of how hopeful actions open up space for alternative ways of living within, against and beyond 'the darkness of the lived moment' (Bloch, 1986, p. 1178).

There are clear overlaps with arguments made by scholars of the utopian here. The knowledge that reality is subject to contestation and transformation is an essential component for any utopian orientation to the world (Bloch, 1986; Moylan, 2008). Whilst utopianism has all too-often been the preserve of whiteness, patriarchy and colonialism, there is a long counter-history of utopian visions and practices that counter such forms of power. Indeed, much contemporary utopian struggle, fiction and study explicitly centres the agency of those marginalized by these forms (Brodsky & Nalebuff, 2015; Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2006; Moylan, 2014; Muñoz, 2009; Nirta, 2016; Sargisson, 1996). There is also a growing interest on the agency of the body within utopian studies (Bell, 2017; Grosz, 2001; Ko, 2005). We now turn to the more vexed question of the relationship between co-production and neoliberalism – how can they co-exist?

### ***Co-production and neoliberalism***

Co-production destabilizes academia as a privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge. It understands that useful and critical knowledge is dispersed throughout society and seeks to activate, expand and apply this knowledge to effect change. Its methods can empower co-producers to shape the world in which they live; and its challenges to academic modes of knowledge dissemination aims to share this knowledge more widely. It has particular resonance for subjects whose forms of knowledge have traditionally been excluded from academic research. It can be seen as an entirely necessary response to the demands of (overly-) research (ed) subjects: 'nothing about us without us' and 'research with, not on' (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2008; Charlton, 2000; International Sex Worker Harm Reduction Caucus, 2008; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015). The 'turn' to co-production thus presents an opportunity for those interested in remaking the world according to principles of social justice.

Yet this turn has not arisen in a vacuum, and we argue that it must be seen in relationship to the ideology and programme of neoliberalism as it affects the field of higher education. As Hall notes in the context of academic teaching and learning, neoliberalism can 'portend to be more open than an old, basically aristocratic system'. Parasitic upon collective demands, it is capable of 'win[ning] over many people who are attached to the democratization of higher education and of research institutions because it seems to be a way of bringing air into a closed system' (de Peuter & Hall, 2007, p. 110). It is important to be alive to neoliberalism's attempts to capture and domesticate co-production's utopian potential; and to the harms this will cause academia and the communities from which co-producers are drawn. We describe this phenomena in further detail below.

### ***Defining neoliberalism***

We understand neoliberalism as both an ideology and a political programme of capitalism (Gilbert, 2013). Its precise operation varies across space and time (Davies, 2016; Hall, 2011, p. 12). It promotes the (supposed) efficiency and efficacy of 'the market' as the 'natural' and best form of organization at every conceivable level (Davies, 2014; Oksala, 2013). It thus draws on populist mistrust of the state and hegemonically constructed 'common sense' (Hall & O'Shea, 2013) regarding the primacy of

the self-interested, competitive individual in political organization. In practice, neoliberalism seeks to construct market-like conditions, utilizing the (sometimes violent) power of the militarized and bureaucratic state to do so (Mirowski, 2014, pp. 53, 54). It differs significantly from classical liberalism in depth and intensity and in the role of the state.

Whilst the self-interested, competitive individual remains the key subject of neoliberal ideology (even as neoliberalism as programme erodes the stability of the individual [Mirowski, 2014, pp. 58–60]), in the UK (as elsewhere) recent years have seen an ideological and programmatic shift away from an absolutist individualism to a conservative communitarianism (Corbett & Walker, 2013). Whilst, in other times and spaces, it has been possible to say that ‘the very concept of ‘community’ [is] being eliminated’ by neoliberalism (Martínez & García, 2000), startlingly apolitical notions of ‘community’ – along with an equally apolitical understanding of ‘the local’ and a nationalist, paternalist notion of ‘society’ – have become increasingly central to the rhetoric of neoliberalism, even as its programme undermines the structures upon which communities depend.

Yet despite the importance of state power, neoliberalism should not simply be seen as an imposition from the top-down. Much of its ‘common sense’ rhetoric can be understood as a captured bottom-up utopianism, which is distorted and incorporated to the benefit of capital and the state and to the detriment of the subjects who originally produced it. These include, workers’ demands for more control over the working day or critiques of the state’s authoritarianism and the desire for playful, creative cities. In some cases, these are distorted (for example, gentrification in cities) to reinforce existing inequalities (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Puar, 2007; Virno, 2004, pp. 110, 111). We will now discuss ways in which our framework works against neoliberalism in specific ways.

### **Our utopian framework: within, against and beyond**

Co-production can ‘bring air into a closed system.’ It can empower ‘communities’ to collectively construct new lifeworlds, it can help resist potentially damaging policy or development and it can unleash alternative social forms that exist within the social body. In so doing it can also transform the power dynamics of academia, opening up the possibility of ‘transform[ing] the campus into a base for alternative knowledge production that is accessible to those outside its ‘walls’” (Caffentzis, 2010: *metamute.org*); and even to challenges regarding the ethics and necessity of those walls. It has considerable potential, then, in remaking the way we live and the role that research plays in everyday life.

Those interested in actualizing this potential, however, must be wary of neoliberalism’s ability to co-opt such practices so that forms of knowledge co-production are diluted, repressed, or turned against those who produce them. A utopian co-production must structure itself around a critical understanding of ‘hope’ rather than a ‘confident’ or ‘optimistic’ faith in co-production. In this, it proceeds in the spirit of the utopian philosopher Bloch, who argues that:

Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointable, it would not be hope. That is part of it. .... However, hope still nails a flag on the mast, even in decline, in that the decline is not accepted, even when this decline is still very strong ... Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible. (Amsler, 2015; Bloch, 1988, pp. 16, 17, cf.)

If neoliberalism is adept at incorporating utopian demands we should not readily cede these, but expand our utopianism to struggle for them. This critical utopianism (Bell, 2017; Moylan, 2014) knows that reality can be altered for the better but understands the difficulties in doing so. It operates simultaneously within, against and beyond the space opened up by the turn to co-production. It works *within* by utilizing its methods, discourses and affordances such that this space remains open; and by ‘prefiguring’ to the best of its ability the social relations it hopes to see flourish on a larger scale (cf. Bell, 2017; Bloch, 1986; Davis, 2012; Isaacson, 2016). It works *against* by articulating the dissonance between the explicit aims of such practice and the present social order. It works *beyond* by extrapolating from this cramped space to think through what it might be able to do if it could extend itself

more fully (Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2014). We begin by considering how co-production works within the neo-liberal academy.

### ***Within***

In this section we think through how we might operate within the space provided by the turn to co-production such that it might be kept. We consider how co-production can remain open, in both the spatial sense and the temporal sense. We explore how current structures mitigate against such action, and so these actions 'within' are implicitly act 'against', a process we explicitly theorize below. Our claim is that it is a space in and from which a utopianism that challenges and gestures beyond the present may be possible. Many of our arguments may seem mundane yet they are, we contend, absolutely essential if co-production's utopian potential is to be realised.

### ***Research design and methods***

Co-production of a research project should begin from the collective production of research aims and questions. This allows non-academic co-producers to address issues they consider to be of direct importance for their lives; and to frame them in ways appropriate to their knowledge and lived experiences. The skills of academic co-producers, meanwhile, can be useful in shaping questions such that are likely to produce desired and 'useful' forms of knowledge.

Language as Talisman was framed by concepts of magic and alchemy that emerged from initial discussions with young people who were members of a youth club (who became research partners on the project); whilst *Communicating Wisdom: Fishing and Youth Work* developed from conversations with women and girls in Rotherham and took shape in collaboration with a number of community groups. These projects were constructed within the space of a funding call and the way in which the ideas were framed and developed was co-owned by community research collaborators. They troubled academia's understanding of what 'counts' as knowledge (Beebeejaun, Durose, Rees, Richardson, & Richardson, 2015), allowing for peer-to-peer and dialogic forms of co-learning in order to lever new knowledge into existing relational partnerships between communities and research teams (Durose & Richardson, 2016).

That the nature of co-produced research should be determined collaboratively seems a fairly straightforward claim, yet the structure of much academic funding makes this extremely difficult: there is often a need for finely specified research questions in proposals. Whilst writing proposals that may fail is a widely accepted (albeit frustrating) part of academic labour, it is unlikely to be a worthwhile use of a non-academic community's time. This means that the impetus is on academics to 'find' potential collaborators, encouraging an instrumentalism and potentially leading to suspicion regarding the motives of academics (Autonomous Geographies Research Collective, 2010, p. 252). The high-level of community involvement in shaping the projects described here was possible only due to long histories of collaboration prior to the funding bid being written. Pressure should be put on funding bodies to pay attention to the quality of relationships between academic and non-academic co-producers and to 'what is [potentially] at stake' in the research, rather than to the 'quality' of specific, precise research questions when determining how funding is allocated (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 38; Perry & May, 2015).

### ***Challenging power relations***

Whilst co-production challenges the walls between academic and community co-producers, it should not be understood to do away with them altogether; and we think that unpicking assumptions around collaboration, participation, equality, non-hierarchy and divisions of labour are important. What is particularly important here is not to simply assume non-hierarchy; nor to disavow divisions of labour and knowledge in the name of a false equality. By negotiating, questioning and challenging them, however, co-production can help us ask questions about what academia might be; who it might be for; and how it might operate otherwise. A community researcher on the *Imagine* project argues that:

We need to change our attitudes on how we perceive communities and give community knowledge the position it rightfully deserves on the 'ladder of knowledge' ... coming from a minority ethnic background I know a lot of assumptions are based on stereotypes which are then reflected in policy, especially education and positioning minority communities as a 'blank slate'. Before we tell individuals from minority backgrounds to speak English, we need to ask them what they know? We need to respect and acknowledge the knowledge they possess already and put value on that knowledge, rather than pushing it aside as it does not fit with education institutional knowledge. (Rasool, 2017. p. 314)

Against academics who claim to 'know best', this move to re-position knowledge within particular communities is an important task. Co-production as a method of co-inquiry can open up spaces for community partners to challenge academic knowledge structures. By keeping these spaces open and trusting in the process, new insights can emerge, which themselves can challenge the trope of the 'good' academic trying to do better in communities (Janes, 2016).

### *Dissemination and audience*

Despite the turn to co-production, academia continues to overwhelmingly privilege peer-reviewed academic publications (Pahl & Pool, in 2017). Whilst these may be of use and interest to communities (see Focus E15, 2016; for example), they are largely inaccessible – financially (they are behind paywalls), temporally (they take a long time to read) and stylistically (they use difficult or specialist language) (Just Space, 2013). Where such publications are privileged by academic co-producers, co-production risks functioning as a means for academics to reproduce themselves through a parasitical relationship with the collective labour of communities (Autonomous Geographies Research Collective, 2010, pp. 251, 252). It is of vital importance that research produced through co-production is disseminated in forms accessible and useful to those who helped produce it; and to the communities or struggles in which they are embedded. To this end, co-produced research is often disseminated through methods as diverse as co-authored books, podcasts, zines, artworks, films, exhibitions, posters, apps, guided walks, pamphlets and soundwalks. Bespoke forms appropriate for the project in question are also frequently employed. We cannot simply wish away the demands made of academic workers; and it is important that pressures on them – to publish peer-reviewed articles in high-ranking journals, for example – are discussed with community partners as much as possible. Such discussions may help to foster solidarity rather than suspicion.

When the communities involved in co-production determine where and how knowledge is disseminated it is possible to consider how co-production gives them a 'voice' (Campbell et al., 2016; Durose & Richardson, 2016). Co-production is then positioned as a form of 'social inclusion': a means to incorporate 'hard to reach' or 'excluded' communities into existing power structures. There are, of course, often very good reasons why particular communities would seek access to policymakers – for example, a group of women in Rotherham advised the Department of Communities and Local Government about the direction of their 'Empowering Women' initiative, as a result of the Imagine project, and subsequently shifted the direction of the funding call to focus on the arts as a mode of engagement (cf. Cammarota & Fine, 2008 on the potential for co-production to effect such changes). Yet inclusion within existing structures is not in and of itself utopian (though it may help sustain utopianism) (Bell, 2017, p. 141). There are potentially anti-utopian effects of social inclusion, that fail to challenge the unequal and ongoing structures through which inequality, oppression and marginalisation are (re)produced (Levitas, 2005). Communities may not wish to be 'included' in power structures as they currently are and may prefer to increase their own material power outside of such representational structures (cf. McGarry, 2016). It is through such moves that co-production might realise some of its utopian potential.

Co-production does not just cover the production of research but its dissemination as well. It seeks to share findings in forms accessible to those who have helped produce it. A co-production project exploring the relationship between recovery and hope, for example, produced a short-film entitled 'Wonderland: The Art of Becoming Human', which can be watched online for free (2016, vimeo.com). Accessible dissemination may also form part of the research itself, as the use of collaborative blogs



or the public dissemination of notes, sketches and photographs from the research process (Facer & Enright, 2016, p. 126).

### ***Infrastructure as methodology***

If co-production is to empower communities and to challenge academia's privileges then a number of infrastructural issues concerned with research must be addressed. These should be understood as an integral part of research methodology, but rarely receive sufficient attention. Accessible and comfortable space is clearly key, and we encourage reflection on the politics of location: university spaces may be intimidating or unwelcoming for some co-producers; public spaces will be inappropriate if sensitive information is to be discussed; and many communities are seeing communal spaces closed down or sold off as part of neoliberalism's assault on public services.

Equally important is the provision of care for participants and/or their dependents. This may include childcare, elder care or specialist mental health care (perhaps including the opening up of university mental health provision to co-producers). The possibility of their provision is of vital importance if co-production is to be accessible to as wide a public as possible; and has obvious gendered, raced and classed connotations given the unequal distribution of care labour in our society (Charlesworth, Baines, & Cunningham, 2015; James & Dalla Costa, 1972; Orloff, 2002). Care must also be taken to ensure that co-producers who may have experienced trauma are not re-traumatized by the research process, and we would actively encourage researchers to consider adopting safe(r) spaces protocols to this end (see Ahmed, 2015, for a broader discussion of why safe(r) spaces are necessary for a utopian politics).

Payment of non-academic co-producers is also of vital importance. This should not just be to ensure that as many people as possible can afford to co-produce (Facer & Enright, 2016, pp. 107, 108) – but to take steps towards a more meaningful equality between academic and non-academic co-producers. Whilst co-production often assumes a degree of equality between academic and non-academic co-producers, this is likely to be undercut where non-academic co-producers are from disadvantaged, marginalized or oppressed communities. What does it mean, for example, when an exemplary piece of co-production helps the academic co-producer gain a promotion whilst non-academic co-producers – even with the potential benefits of any given project – remain subject to poverty, racism and gentrification? Increasingly, research councils stipulate that paying community partners as co-researchers is good practice, and, more importantly, a scheme whereby community partners are co-investigators on projects has been piloted by the AHRC Connected Communities programme.

We also need to consider the nature of 'work' that is remunerated here. We contend that this cannot be reduced to 'time commitment' (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 30), but the embodied, emotional labour that feeds into knowledge production (Rasool, 2015). If academics bring the cumulative experience of their reading, past research and academic encounters to a project, community co-producers may bring histories of oppression, marginalisation and empowerment, which play out in particular ways. In the context of co-production these experiences must be understood as labour deserving of payment: it is the 'stuff' from which knowledge is produced. Paying for it acknowledges its world-making power; and publicizes (and politicizes) it. It also calls attention to the arbitrary manner in which such labour is remunerated: value is, after all, extracted from it in a number of circumstances other than academic co-production but it is rarely paid for. Whilst expanding the wage relation is not in and of itself utopian it helps to set a precedent that may help open a broader terrain of struggle around unpaid labour (cf. Weeks on 'wages against housework' Weeks, 2011, p. 137).

The practice of paying co-producers has been challenged or made unnecessarily difficult. Whilst there may sometimes be legitimate concerns about its impact on the knowledge produced (Head, 2009), we believe that the fear of co-producers becoming 'dependent' is greatly exaggerated – and this is never used as an argument for not paying academics. Benefits recipients may jeopardise future payments by accepting payment, others may be in breach of the law if they do. Slow, complex and bureaucratic university administration procedures are also likely to put off some co-producers (Facer & Enright, 2016, p. 112). We now consider how co-production can work against the academy to make change happen.

## Against

We hope – in the sense outlined by Ernst Bloch – that by cautiously and carefully utilising the space offered by the turn to co-production in the manner outlined above, that co-production might work to empower people to determine the conditions of their lives, if only in some small way; and to create spaces within academia to produce and disseminate transformative knowledge. Yet for this hope to be utopian it cannot be content with what is (co-)produced in the here-and-now, nor unproblematically draw a line from that here-and-now to a beyond that may emerge out of it; but must position itself *against* a here-and-now that we have already shown to be hostile to co-production's potential (cf. Bell, 2017; Bloch, 1986; Muñoz, 2009).

An implemented neoliberalism threatens co-production's utopian value: marketization leads to the assessment and ranking of research's 'quality' and 'impact'. The destruction of the welfare state and an increasingly punitive benefits regime work against the kinds of world that utopianism seeks to create. Where neoliberal common sense states that utopianism is 'impossible' (Bell, 2017, pp. 21–23) – a claim frequently reinforced by politicians, intellectuals, the media and online discourse (Sargisson, 2012, pp. 24–31) – utopianism's only response can be to make neoliberalism impossible (cf. Moylan, 2014).

Our concern cannot just be with how neoliberalism constrains co-production's utopian potential, however – it must also focus on how it seeks to co-opt it. We should be wary of how co-production can be utilized in the service of contemporary British neoliberalism's conservative communitarianism, which attacks the very conditions that make empowered communities possible (Corbett & Walker, 2013). The British Conservative Party's 2010 General Election manifesto, after all, was called *Invitation to Join the Government of Great Britain*, as if co-production would become the principle around which the state was organised. Some academic co-production is framed around concepts such as 'resilience', 'social inclusion' and 'community cohesion', ideas partially co-opted by neoliberalism (Burnett, 2007; Diprose, 2015; Gordon, 2014; Grove, 2013; Levitas, 2005). It is common for non-academic co-producers to be private sector organizations, law enforcement agencies, charities and NGOs, many of whom will have their own interests to (Kamat, 2004; Tyler, Gill, Conlon, & Oeppen, 2014); or are straightforwardly anti-utopian (Vitale, 2017). A utopian co-production process must avoid working with groups who will not 'rock the boat'.

## Transforming academia

If co-production should maintain a hostile focus on dominant organising forces of our time, it must also focus on operating against academia. This might sound like a strange claim at a time when neoliberalism already threatens academia but our line of attack here is a little different. Rather than simply defend academia from this attack in the name of an ideal public university that never existed (Basole, 2009) we should position co-production as a means of transforming academia itself. Otherwise, it will simply appropriate hitherto excluded forms of knowledge whilst the subjects from whom this knowledge is taken remain objectified, oppressed, marginalised and disadvantaged (cf. Ahmed, 2000, p. 60). We have begun to unpack and address some of these concerns: they should, however, not be understood as ends in themselves but as transitional processes that allow for the challenging of academic norms. How can co-production work within and against the neo-liberal academy?

## Within and against

Co-production's cramped space is not a given. It can be reduced through complicity with the neoliberal dystopia of the here-and-now, but it can also be expanded by critically astute, utopian praxis. Such praxis is simultaneously within and against. It increases the capacities of communities to co-produce situated, embodied knowledge of relevance for their struggle and its openness to situated and embodied experiences makes neoliberalism's conservative understandings of community impossible to maintain. And whilst it is important to conceptually think through both the within and the against separately, we should not hold on so strongly to the latter that we become incapable of acting in the present lest

we reproduce that which we oppose. In her discussion of the operation of utopianism, Kathi Weeks argues that the negating and productive tendencies of utopianism can be presented:

... as two separate functions ... their simultaneous presence transforms each of them ... the “no” to the present not only opens up the possibility of a “yes” ... it is altered by its relationship to that “yes”; the affective distancing from the status quo that might be enabled is different when it is paired with an affective attachment either to potential alternative or to the potential of an alternative. (2011, p. 207)

Here, Weeks only has two simultaneous functions: the positive and the negative. Our approach, however, has three: the within, the against and the beyond. It is to the final of these that we now turn.

## **Beyond**

A utopian co-production cannot settle for operating within the cramped space academia currently offers. It must work against dominant power relations such that its utopian potential might be furthered. In so doing it will not just expand academia's quantitative capacity but will force academia into qualitative shift to a beyond: a beyond in which other ways of organising our world are enacted, where utopianism's 'element of uncompromising marvellous otherness'. (Geoghegan, 2007, p. 77) can be felt; where the potentials inherent to co-production might be realised in ways we cannot yet imagine. Such a utopianism is not oriented to a blueprinted good place but creates it through its actions (Bell, 2017; Jameson, 2005).

However, there is no harm in extrapolating from the within and against to imagine an 'imaginary reconstitution' of academia that actualizes the utopian potentials of co-production (Levitas, 2013): to think of an expansive – rather than cramped – 'co-production' that is open to all; and where knowledge can be exchanged and produced. A space where no-one is excluded because of their class, race, gender or caring responsibilities. A space where different forms of knowledge and knowledge production are understood to have much to offer our lives. Such differences would not be neutralized or appropriated in this space, nor made to conform to particular norms. Rather, they would enable transformative increases in our capacities to collectively determine the conditions of our lives.

Such extrapolative praxis is rare in even the most radical co-production. On one level, this is entirely understandable: when a co-produced research project is challenging power relations in the here-and-now; and is undertaking the difficult reflexive work necessary to unpick its power relations. Engaging with a utopian vision can seem fantastically idealistic: a distraction entirely divorced from material reality (it is in this sense that the word 'utopian' is often used disparagingly). Yet where such projections extrapolate the utopian potential immanent to co-production they are not simply abstract idealism. By taking them seriously we are simultaneously estranged from the world as is (that is, we are shown that *it doesn't have to be this way*) and shown how things could be (although not, necessarily, as they 'should' be: these extrapolations should not be read as blueprints but as devices that can orient debate and action) (Bell, 2017; Jameson, 2005; Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2014; Sargisson, 2012). In the words of Thompson, we 'enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: the education of desire. This is not the same as a 'moral education' towards a given ends: it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way' (Thompson, 2011, p. 791).

This is all the more powerful when it merges with existing potentialities that operate within and against our present. We suggest that a utopian co-production should put aside time to consider a utopia beyond what is presently 'possible' in order that its actions within and against the present can be connected to a beyond. This may take the form of discussions about how co-production could be done if particular material constraints did not apply (and the struggles necessary for this 'impossible' to become possible); and could take the form of engaging with particular utopian texts set in worlds beyond our own.

## Conclusion

We should fight for academia as a space in which co-produce. Not to preserve an ideal form that never existed, but to transform it such that the utopian potentials immanent to co-production might be realised. Perhaps, ultimately, these potentials might destroy academia as a specialist site of knowledge production and dissemination. They would certainly ask questions of the walls that currently mark off academia as a semi-autonomous sphere of public life. We should think what it would mean to allow for a universalization of the production and dissemination of knowledge, rather than contenting ourselves with providing opportunities for collaboration with an institution that may allow for 'cramped spaces' for critical utopianism, but which remains hostile to many communities. We should engage non-academic co-producers to see how they think the production and dissemination of knowledge might be done if the limitations of this world were dispensed with.

This 'beyond' is impossible, at the moment, of course. But we should remember that (im)possibility is a social construct; and that the possibility of the impossible can be felt in the cramped spaces of co-production. It can be felt when oppressed, marginalised and disadvantaged subjects produce their own knowledge. When they de-centre academic knowledge and challenge established ways of doing things. When caring labour is shared by a co-production collective. When co-produced research produces plans for commonly owned eco-estates rather than gentrification and social cleansing (London Tenants Federation, Loretta Lees, Just Space & Southwark Notes Archive Group, 2014, p. 24). Though this beyond is not imminent, it is immanent; and we should utilize it to function reciprocally with the 'within' and the 'against'. This is a process through which all involved in co-production are empowered to think through how they might live not just in this world, but against and beyond it too.

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