

Warwick University Ltd

Hugo Radice

Hugo Radice did an MA in Economics at Warwick in 1968-69, and became involved in the Warwick events as a reporter for a radical student paper. He worked in higher education, eventually teaching economics and politics at the University of Leeds from 1978 to 2008. He continues to research and write on contemporary capitalism from a socialist standpoint.

On February 3rd 1970, a student occupation of the Registry building took place at the University of Warwick, in protest at the authorities breaking a promise they had made to provide a student union building on the campus. As such, it was only one of many occupations that took place at British universities and colleges in the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes on issues of facilities as at Warwick; sometimes in pursuit of changes in teaching, management and research activities; and sometimes about wider social issues such as the Vietnam War. Unusually, however, the occupation at Warwick developed into a major public issue – the ‘Warwick files affair’ – with substantial national media coverage and legal repercussions well beyond the immediate issue at stake.

The reason for this was that in the course of a second occupation on February 11th, the students stumbled upon files in the Registry that provided clear evidence of the routine surveillance of staff and students, files that were kept apart from the normal information stored for administrative purposes. After much debate, selected documents were removed by the students, and their existence was reported to the historian E P Thompson, then Reader in Labour History at Warwick, and to the Student Union which had authorised the occupation. This led to events which came to involve the entire university through the following weeks, as well as newspapers, politicians and the courts.

While Warwick students and staff spread the news about the files and debated further action, E P Thompson published a passionate account of the background to the affair in the

magazine *New Society*, which appeared on 19th February under the title ‘The business university’. In it he linked the university’s refusal to honour their promise of a union building not only to the political surveillance revealed in the files, but also to wider concerns about the origins, academic purpose and governance of the university. At that time, Penguin Books had established a form of instant book, which could present detailed investigative journalism on major issues in a convenient permanent form in a matter of weeks. Speedy negotiations with Penguin led to a contract to produce such a book – drafted in a week, edited in another week, and published in late March 1970, while the Warwick affair continued to hold the attention of the public.

The writing of *Warwick University Ltd* had an important effect on everyone involved. We learned a great deal not only about the origins and development of Warwick University, but also about the workings of business, the media, the judicial system, and the wider power structures of the UK within which these institutions function. For many of us, it gave impetus to our growing political awareness, setting us on our way to decades of activism in various forms, and providing us with experience in how to research and report on social issues.

Our purpose in republishing *Warwick University Ltd* is, however, not one of nostalgia. Rather, we believe that what our work revealed in 1970 is very relevant today; it represents an early milestone in the transformation of higher education, and our society as a whole, in the decades since then.

The relevance of *Warwick University Ltd* today

On June 20th 2013, echoing the events of 1970, an occupation took place at the University of Warwick. *The Independent* reported:

‘A room of the Senate House building at the University of Warwick has been occupied by a group of students to protest against the “privatisation and marketisation” of higher education since late last week. The group calls itself Protect the Public University – Warwick (PPU) and has outlined eight “objectives”, including that Vice Chancellor Nigel Thrift give up his £42,000 pay rise and use it to fund a bursary for local students.’

Our immediate concern in writing *Warwick University Ltd* was to provide an explanation of the events of February-March 1970 at Warwick, and the analysis that we set out prefigures closely the travails of higher education today. We highlighted the contradictions in the liberal model of the university, based on a commitment to public service, academic independence, and close relations with local communities – all in the wider

context of government policies and international scholarship. Local business interests had always played an important part in the establishment of the old civic and modern technological universities alike, as well as the polytechnics created in the 1960s, but within the rapid expansion that followed the 1963 Robbins Report, Warwick showed how this model could be moulded into a form that placed business at the heart of this constellation of interests. This shaped not only the academic development of the university, in terms of the balance of subject areas in teaching and research, but also the representation of external interests on the university's governing Council, and through that, its internal governance. In recent decades, higher education has become almost universally subordinated to commercial economic imperatives: these include the employability of students rather than their education as such; the provision of knowledge in the form of skills and research outputs of direct benefit to businesses and the state; and internal governance structures modelled on those of private companies. In addition, while universities have acquired more autonomy from central government, the decline in public funding has forced greater reliance on the 'markets' for both education and research, which have thus come to shape the choices made by university managers.

Beyond higher education, the occupation at Warwick also revealed the use of covert intelligence for political surveillance; the readiness of powerful interests to resort to the law when challenged; the subordination to the legal system of freedom of speech and of the media; and the readiness of supposedly respectable private businesses to defraud the state. In 1970, these issues were not widely perceived even by specialists in such matters, let alone the general public. In 2013, they stand at the centre of British politics, reflecting the wider processes of change from the post-war settlement that broadly prevailed from 1945 to 1979, towards what we now call neo-liberalism.

These excerpts by Hugo Radice and Ron Rose are taken from the new edition of Warwick University Ltd. (www.spokesmanbooks.com £9.95)

Films, reviews and papers are available online at the site of the Warwick branch of the University and College Union, which sponsored the conference entitled 'Warwick University Ltd: Lessons from 1970 and the higher education sector today', held on campus at Warwick Arts Centre on 6 June 2014. (www.warwickucu.org.uk)