



Reading as communal luxury: On the formation of a resistant subject group

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Abstract

This provocation argues for the importance of reading groups, and for reading books, as a mode of resistance against the instrumentalisation and individualisation of academic labour in today's neo-liberalised universities. Against the dominant 'information processing' paradigm of reading, we argue that reading groups function as invaluable moments of social reproduction in the 'undercommons' of contemporary higher education. Combining Harney and Moten's concept of the undercommons with Ross' analysis of communal luxury, we argue that reading groups can articulate a radical, performative demand for the right to collective cultural creativity. Reading groups can steal back a small degree of academic autonomy, not over academic labour, but over the social reproduction that makes such labour possible in the first place. This argument is interspersed with intermezzo reflections on our collective experiences as members of a 'viral reading group', meeting since the start of Covid. We conclude our provocation with a manifesto for reading groups as a way of contesting the hegemony of instrumental rationality in management learning and education, for academics and for students, and as a place where the two can meet to plan and study, within and beyond the institutional limits of contemporary higher education.

Keywords

Alternative organising, communal luxury, critical management studies, reading group, undercommons, writing differently

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So now you know why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless.

Ray Bradbury – *Fahrenheit 451*

‘What is the use of a book’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation’

Lewis Carroll – *Alice in Wonderland*

Introduction: attempts to decipher reading

This provocation concerns the organisation of reading as a contested scholarly practice. It is based upon our experiences as a reading group formed around the first UK Covid lockdown in 2020. The group connected academics quarantined in bubbles across the UK, Netherlands, US and other countries. More than 30 academics have participated in the group over the years, the membership changing with each book. Reading across sociology, political theory, philosophy, history and psychoanalysis, our discussions have often turned to the place of reading in academia, the nature and scope of the group itself and the group’s relationship to a neo-liberalised higher-education context dominated by output driven productivity metrics where reading doesn’t properly ‘count’ (Ball, 2012). These discussions transected our focal texts, constituting a dialogue between the books and our collective practices of reading. This essay is an attempt to make sense of these experiences through a collective experiment in writing together.

Our argument is that reading books is an indispensable, inherently social academic practice that has been buried by the institutions of contemporary higher education. Our provocation is a call to read more books, to read together and to undermine institutions that depend on us reading but are incapable of recognising that dependency. Reading is a paradoxical practice. Within, against and beyond the university, reading is a kind of fugitive planning and study in the undercommons (Harney and Moten, 2013): the space of social reproduction that makes possible the institutions and practices of higher education but which is always outside, excessive and resistant to them. This *under* or *below* signifies a relationship of disjunction, exclusion and informality as well as a deep interiority that remains elusive. The undercommons is below the threshold of managerial perception, disavowed and discouraged in the dominant discourses of ‘professionalized’ higher-education practice, which fetishise individual researchers as human capital, denying their social and material interdependencies in favour of hierarchy and competition¹.

Against this individualised model of academic subjectivation, reading is inherently social, contagious and unproductive. Combining Harney and Moten’s (2013) concept of ‘the undercommons’ with Ross’ (2016) ‘communal luxury’, we argue for a radically egalitarian ‘fellowship’ of workers, with equal rights to the means of social and cultural creativity, dissolving ‘commodity fetishism’ in favour of ‘freely associated labour’ (Ross, 2016: 64). Reading groups offer a line-of-flight along which such free association might be composed in the undercommons seething below today’s neo-liberal ‘Hellscape Education’ (HE) context².

This provocation is structured as an essay, collectively authored and interspersed with experimental, experiential forms of writing reflecting on the books we read, or on the practices of reading and organising that the group developed. These *intermezzo* elements cut into our more conceptual argument for reading as a practice of communal luxury in the undercommons. To better position this approach, we start with a reflection on the essay form that carries this argument.

The essay as method

This provocation presents an argument for reading, and specifically for reading books. We present it as an essay because it attempts to understand the ambiguous position of reading

within contemporary higher education, and our collective experience as members of the ‘viral reading group’ as it became known, reflecting its spread and growth in tandem with the Covid pandemic.

In his *Essais*, ‘Montaigne speaks of his thought and his writing as ‘trials’, ‘attempts’, ‘soundings’; one often finds the verb, too, especially in the reflexive form ‘je m’essaye’” (Cave, 2005: 190). Our essay attempts to understand and articulate what this reading group has meant to us. The writing was a collaboration, so it differs from Montaigne’s individualised reflections in the *Essais*. Addressing his readers in the original 1580 introduction, he wrote ‘I am myself the subject of my book; there is no reason for thee to employ thy leisure on so vain and frivolous a topic’ (Montaigne, 1800 [1580]: xxii). Likewise, we see no *good* reason for you to spend your time on our reflections. We are the collective subject of this text and it won’t help you with your next promotion or increase your publication productivity. We argue for the unproductive necessity of reading books as a luxurious, always excessive, academic practice and as a form of resistance to both professionalisation and proletarianisation in higher education, where the former qualifies proper readers, and the latter turns reading into ‘information processing’. The risk of reading is to court disqualification, at least from the phantasmatic games played by the senior managers sitting on university promotion panels.

Adorno (1991) argues that ‘the essay arouses resistance because it evokes intellectual freedom’ (p. 4). The essay form mitigates many of the genre conventions of contemporary academic writing: the need to identify a ‘gap’ or problem to be solved, the need for a ‘methodology’ and the requirement for neatly summarised and packaged ‘contributions’. It undermines ‘the absolute privilege of method’ (Adorno, 1991: 9) and rhetorical appeals to scientific authority. It resists the temptation to make a final, definitive statement in favour of a more modest ‘attempt’, neither orientated towards education, nor formal scientific proofs. The essay can be an interwoven, fragmentary critique, jumping from topic to topic around a theme and proffering a form of ‘writing differently’ (Boncori, 2023). The essay form is structured ‘in fragments just as reality is fragmented and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing over them’ (Adorno, 1991: 13).

This essay presents such a series of fragments – a patchwork, critical evaluation of the practice of reading in neoliberal academic institutions – without reconciling itself to what Adorno termed the ‘false totality’ of those institutions. It argues for reading differently as an immanent practice of resistance within, against and beyond the neoliberal edu-factory (cf. Jones et al., 2023). These fragments focus on aspects of the reading group which emerged over time, according to the composition of the group, its changing context, its individual participants and the books themselves. The books are important. In addition to the named authors of this paper we have an unpayable debt to the authors of the books we have read, and the authors they read.

The products of work cannot be strictly proportionate to work performed because they result from everyone’s labor – even and especially. . . the labor of previous generations. It was thus impossible, pragmatically or theoretically, to measure the exact value of an individual’s labor: ‘The tools or knowledges that allow us to accomplish our activities necessarily derive from other workers, from preceding generations. . . and the evaluation of the recompense that should be attributed to each is necessarily arbitrary’. (Ross, 2016: 125, citing Elisée Reclus)

As Harney and Moten (2013) argue, true debt is unpayable. It is the basis of an ongoing social relationship and inheritance that can’t simply be paid off. Reparations are due but not as an indulgence: no cheque can ‘make good’ and cancel that debt.

Intermezzo—the empty library

On the 10th of May 1933 over 20,000 books were burned by university students in Berlin in a symbolic event to demonstrate their commitment to the Nazi regime. Copies of books by Einstein, Freud, Kafka, Marx, Gide, Zola, Brecht, Hemingway and others were burned and many more censored. The site of this ceremony is now marked by a monument called The Empty Library. Shortly after the war Ray Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, in which he imagined a future world where books are feared and it is a crime to possess or read them. The practice of book burning is not confined to fascism and has a long historical tradition. In recent years copies of *Harry Potter* have been ceremoniously burned, first by Catholics in Poland and later by evangelical Protestants in the United States. Smith (2022) observes that book burning is not merely a form of censorship but political theatre and ritualised purification. Censorship is less theatrical but no less damaging. In 2023, PEN America reported that 2532 individual books were currently banned in the US. The majority of these were directly concerned with civil rights issues relating to racial or sexual discrimination.

Academia organises its own hierarchies of textual value through Research Excellence Frameworks, appraisal, promotion, tenure and supervision. In business schools it is common to be told that books ‘don’t count’ so there is no point in writing them, or to hear colleagues advise PhD students against reading books on the grounds that they are a time-consuming distraction. Students are trained instead to systematically ‘review’ articles, shunning the kind of protracted intellectual engagement that requires disciplined reading. In the resultant articles, careful reading and argumentation is supplanted by gestural citations to recent articles that rhetorically ‘position’ a ‘contribution’. There is no reading or discovery in such endeavours and no time for books. This is reading for a confined and sterile thought. Thus informed, neophyte academics are better prepared to plug themselves into the neoliberal publication machine and start churning out their own articles. As Davidson (2019) put it, we ought not to ‘yield to the temptation of static complacency [but be] unafraid to get lost in the unknown, taking the chance, and the risk, of emerging with a genuinely different perspective’ (p. xxiv).

While censorship and burning fetishise books as material objects of near magical power, the research audit systematically diminishes books’ power. Both, however, devalue long form writing and reading. They function to discourage or block the development of protracted lines of thought and argumentation, confining thought to the size of a social media post or 8000 word ‘contribution’ we can gesturally cite, locate and move on from unscathed and unchanged. Books are dangerous.

‘What are you reading . . . for?’

The use of reading groups as pedagogic tools has a long history, though relatively little has been written about them within the field of management and organisation studies (Coleman, 2016; Firth, 2021; Grenier et al., 2022). For Business Schools adopting principles of ‘Evidence Based Management’ (Tranfield et al., 2003) the ‘journal club’ will be familiar from the medical sciences, where it has been a common practice since the 1800s when surgeons encouraged medical students to meet to discuss articles (Bowles et al., 2013). In this model, collective reading is an efficient mechanism for disseminating scientific evidence. Someone presents a paper in a structured review of the evidence and the group discusses the implications for practice (Bowles et al., 2013). In a similarly functional vein, business academics have advocated for book clubs as a mechanism for developing students’ communication and leadership skills (Coleman, 2016).

More critical scholars have argued for reading groups as an emancipatory, egalitarian form of pedagogy (Firth, 2021). In this essay, we follow Firth’s (2021: 96) positioning of reading groups as

a resistant practice: a form of commoning that creates ‘cracks in the capitalist accumulation process’. Reading can slow research down (Berg and Seeber, 2016), offering a form of passivism (Berardi, 2024) with the potential to derail the smooth processing of knowledge. The individualised productivity function of the edu-factory depends on continuous (hyper)activity (Edu-factory Collective, 2009). Stopping to think can disrupt the functioning of the paper/grant machine which depends on a kind of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016a). Neoliberal performance measures encourage the unreflexive, short-term pursuit of ‘outputs’, ‘deliverables’ and ‘impact’. They marginalise affective, embodied and emplaced commitments to long-term practices of scholarship and the community of scholars.

In contrast, the reading group embodies ‘mutual learning’ (Firth, 2021: 97), a collective, anarchistic practice of mutual aid as emancipatory self-education. The reading group represents an affective commitment to books with no immediate reward or measurable outputs, only a self-referential community anchored in practices of reading and study. By creating a space for open intellectual engagement, reading groups constitute a form of resistance to the commodification of academic labour. From this perspective, reading groups share common ground with activist networks in their commitment to substantive social values and a reliance on voluntary self-organisation. But in calling for a turn to the undercommons, we might be better to think of this as a *passivist* network, rather than *activist* network, as the focus is socially reproductive, and activism can too easily morph into social entrepreneurship (cf. Berardi, 2024).

A socialised perspective on reading challenges the dominant, individualised image of a solitary reader. Reading and writing constitute communities, as evidenced by the role of literature and language in producing the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 1983; Laporte, 2002). Reading groups are social practices of commoning: self-governed groups sharing resources for their ongoing social and cultural reproduction (De Angelis, 2017: 10-11). In the case of our reading group, this commoning was the informally collectivised intellectual labour of listening and responding to each other, making sense of a text together and inviting authors, living and dead, into our community. Although the practice of reading requires focus, quiet and self-discipline, it is also an organised social activity. Voting for and buying a new book, recruiting new readers into our collective and discussions of our chosen text were all inherently social activities.

Intermezzo – on readings and conversations

6.30

Fuck!

20 pages to go

And dinner to make

Pasta. . .again!

Stir sauce, read Karatani

Drain spaghetti, read Marcuse

Inhale food, read Fraser

Dishes

Zoom-time-show-time

Turn camera on, prod cat off chair

Evening!
How are we all?
Mandatory Elon Musk bashing
Surreptitious chapter finishing
Generous wine pouring
Shall we?
To the book!

Thoughts?
Loved it
Tedious bullshit
Read the wrong chapter!
Finished the whole bloody thing
A late arrival
A confession
I ran out of time
(But I'm still here)

Expletive rants
Cathartic demolitions
Sojourns in Mesopotamia
Ghosts of Foucault and Nietzsche again
On what page?
Ex-Ex-Vee-Aye-Aye
Don't you mean 27?
No, I meant Ex-Ex-Vee-Aye-Aye
I'm on a fucking eBook!

Chapter for next week?
Just one, please!
And the next book?
You pick
Pick something old
Pick a genius
Pick something totally, completely, beautifully un-REF-able
And read books
Read books together

The viral organisation of reading

Some reading groups meet in coffee shops, some in pubs, offices or at home. Our reading group began in a pub but metamorphosed into the ‘viral reading group’, moving online with the onset of the Covid pandemic in early 2020 and becoming an open, inclusive and international experiment in collective self-organising around an under-appreciated academic practice. It constituted a form of scholarly sociality at a time when both the social and the scholarly seemed a distant possibility. Quarantine intensified both our focus and the sheer number of books we consumed. Meetings move to twice weekly and for the first few months of lockdown we grew rapidly, incorporating fellow isolates looking to ward off the loneliness of ‘the new normal’. This lasted for over two years when we reduced the meetings to once a week, shortly after vaccines were developed and the quarantine was lifted.

This organising with and through contamination and risk was not unique in the history of reading. In the late 19th Century public health concerns were raised about books as disease carriers in the Infectious Diseases Act of 1889, and later in the Public Health Act Amendments of 1907, which restricted the circulation of library books from infected households. Smith (2022) has observed that such public health concerns about books are reflected in panics over apparently ‘immoral books’, able to infect their readers with corrupting ideas. Previous pandemics, and moral panics, have thus positioned books as vectors of disease and contagion, associating reading and sickness. Tuberculosis has been long associated with the literary pursuits, the bookish and delicate, those consumed by romanticism and ‘inward burning’ (Sontag, 2002: 210). Nietzsche observed that the asceticism and discipline necessary for the acquisition of knowledge makes us sick: ‘more diseased, more insecure, more changeable, more unpredictable, more capricious than any other animal’ (Nietzsche, 1977: 107). In the *Gay Science* Nietzsche (1974: 177) asks ‘whether we can really dispense with illness – even for the sake of our virtue – and whether our thirst for knowledge and self-knowledge in particular does not require the sick soul as much as the healthy’. In the reading group, we perhaps intensified one kind of sickness – a readerly dis-ease – to escape from another.

The quarantines of the Covid pandemic exacerbated anxieties over loneliness, health, employment, family and other issues. Anxieties were frequently discussed, and occasionally the book felt like a secondary concern. On some level the viral reading group was an attempt to reconstitute the anxious quarantined subject as a reading subject, breaking through isolation with a collective practice. Choosing, reading and discussing books was not a therapeutic process but did offer a kind of ‘anti-adaptive healing’ (Proctor, 2024), building a community capable of struggle within and against a context not of its choosing. In confinement – both through lockdown and the stifling air of the edu-factory – it opened up lines of flight, leading to new conversations, new friendships, new ideas, new books and who knows where else. It was a therapy against the death of thinking, creating an ‘us’ in struggle with text/self/academia. Each of us arrived in the group weighed down by the problems of our working and personal lives. We arrived in the group with ‘no time to read’. Many raised concerns about how we could make our reading productive. We squabbled over which books might be useful for ‘our work’ (‘my’ work). We read, talked and complained: about the book, about the pandemic, about work and life. The reading group cut across other social formations: the family, university department, classroom, union, bookshop, Parcelforce, off-licence and hospital. We brought the neoliberal machine with us, trying to plug our reading into our careers, increasing our human capital and developing our academic brand value. We let the shit flow in. Nevertheless, the neoliberal quantification machine felt unsettled and out of place in the group.

One way of warding off an instrumental logic of ‘usefulness’ was the democratic selection of texts, nominated and voted for via social media. Most books were only immediately useful to the person nominating them but other members participated anyway, forging indirect connections and finding interest in texts that could not be cashed out as an economic return on investment. The value was anchored in the practice and community of readers that constituted the group. This democratic organising did not preclude functional specialisation or leadership. Despite a voting system for selection, the group was and remains reliant on one specific member to care for it by organising voting through their Facebook page, minding the results, reminding participants of the time and chapters each week and hosting the Zoom link. This care-work is important, and it is steadfast in its commitment and expresses collective leadership in a group that is wary of bureaucracy, rule and exclusion. People turn up or drop out as they wish. The group has no unity beyond the chosen book and the time allocated for meeting. Rules are temporary and ad hoc. All are welcome, but the group’s spread, like the virus, required a vector.

The undercommons: fugitive planning

To characterise the reading group as a community, or even a ‘commons’, is perhaps too romantic, too nostalgic. It carries the distant sound of leather on willow and the scent of freshly cut grass on the village green (cf. Delanty, 2003). As a collective, resistant and intellectual activity, undertaken despite the university, the reading group can better be understood as ‘undercommons’ (Harney and Moten, 2013). The difference is significant. If the commons is a mode of organising activities in common, the undercommons is the subterranean network of social reproduction that makes possible the organisation of the commons. It is where capacities are developed and where planning *is* the organisation. It is sometimes necessary to escape the surveillant gaze of managerial accountability by becoming invisible, or imperceptible (Jones et al., 2023); to care for one another ethically and to enable the pursuit of study without burn-out, but also without quantified, alienable output. The undercommons lies beyond formal academic institutions: it manifests in bars, in kitchens and living rooms. It constitutes a ‘nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside’ (Moten and Harney, 2004: 112). We sometimes have to steal time from our institution in order to be able to do our job, to maintain ourselves, one another, and to reproduce our bodily and social capacities.

To be managed, activities must be represented and removed from the immediate concerns of the activity itself. ‘Labour’ is undertaken by human resources, deployed by management for reasons of State. Harney and Moten (2013: 74) contrast this instrumentality with the counter-intuitive notion of ‘fugitive planning’:

In the undercommons of the social reproductive realm the means, which is to say the planners, are still part of the plan. And the plan is to invent the means in a common experiment launched from any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night. This ongoing experiment with the informal, carried out by and on the means of social reproduction, as the to come of the forms of life, is what we mean by planning; planning in the undercommons is not an activity, not fishing or dancing or teaching or loving, but the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of forms of life that make such activities possible.

From this perspective, our reading group was a ‘common experiment’, launched on Zoom calls from kitchens, porches and basements, every Monday night (for those of us in the UK). Reading was our activity, but in the undercommons this was a fugitive planning that sought to make reading possible: constructing forms of life ‘to come’, but not only human, academic life.

Troubling times

The first book we read during the pandemic was Haraway's (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. With its concern for humanity's coevolution with other species and their viruses, the book fitted the circumstances. It resonated for many of us developing new modes of living together, with Covid, with texts, on Zoom, and in 'bubbles', creating new forms of kinship³. Trouble is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning 'to stir up', 'to make cloudy' and 'to disturb'. We live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable – with each other in all of our bumptious kinds – of response, of experimentation, of planning (Harney and Moten, 2013). With Haraway, we can read this task as one of making kin through 'inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present . . . Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all' (Haraway, 2016: 1–4).

In the heat of the Covid compost pile we found quite unexpected collaborations: forms of life but also encounters with death. The transatlantic, entangled, reading oddkin was formed and welcomed with trepidation, offering both challenge and respite, escape and contagion. In this desperate, if relatively privileged and sheltered situation, the troubled suspension of the usual flow of work, family and social life created a place for this new community/co-mutiny of readers.

Intermezzo – weaving text and texture

The act of thinking and interpreting can be viewed as a form of 'weaving' – a process of intertwining our thoughts and perceptions with books, events, news and our collective experiences. When we engage with a text in the reading group, we weave our understandings together, drawing from the tapestry of daily lives, current events, and the 'archives' of knowledge and experiences we carry within us.

These moments of creation are spontaneous and ephemeral, yet they represent a constant weaving – a dynamic interplay between the past, present and future, between the cosmos and our internal narratives. This weaving is never planned, nor does it endure indefinitely. It exists as a perpetual flow of 'moving archives', both external and internal, shaping and reshaping our comprehension.

This process of weaving is not solely about creating new understandings; it also involves undoing (mis)understandings – shedding preconceived notions and biases that may have clouded our perspectives. This phenomenon is particularly poignant when collectively engaging with texts that challenge our worldviews, such as Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*. In grappling with Said's critique of the West's representation and perception of the 'Orient', we are confronted with the violence of simplistic and often imaginary categorisations of the 'other'. The text prompts us to unravel and deconstruct these deeply ingrained (mis)understandings, paving the way for more nuanced and empathetic perspectives. Butler's (2020) *The Force of Non-violence* with its elaboration of grievability, read together with Mbembe's (2019) *Necropolitics* with its uncannily precise genealogy of the contemporary global crisis, dislodged engrained notions, radicalising democracy and inequality's meaning and conditions.

Reading groups can provide space for weaving a form of critical consciousness that challenges entrenched (mis)understandings. By collectively engaging with works like *Orientalism* (Said, 1979) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964), we are prompted to confront the very foundations of our thought and to question narratives that have been presented as immutable truths. This process extends beyond the individual; it is a collective endeavour that transcends the boundaries of reading groups or academic discourse. As we engage with texts and ideas, we are influenced by

the perspectives and experiences of others, both past and present. Our tapestry is woven not only from our own threads but also from the threads of those who have come before us, and those who will come after.

This weaving is a profound act of meaning-making – a continuous process of creating, undoing and recreating our understanding of the world, ourselves and our relationships with others. It is a dance between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, where we are challenged to confront our biases, expand our horizons and, ultimately, weave a more intricate and inclusive tapestry of knowledge and empathy.

Some reading subjects are happy to read all that is suggested, even those readings that are not first or even last on their list. Who knows it may be interesting anyway? Let's find out. There are joyful surprises, confusion, frustration, anger and pain. Every book leaves its traces as a dispersion in each reading subject, but some books seem to create a kind of common ground, whether through surprise, disappointment or other contagious affects.

Communal luxury

Another book from the early days of Covid was Kristin Ross' (2016) *Communal Luxury*: an analysis of the spatial and organisational practices of the Paris Commune. Presenting a radical challenge to the dominant mores of work, the Commune refused the terms of alienated labour, reintegrating work into a collective attempt at living well, together. Ideas of care and social reproduction were discussed in the face of isolation and medical quarantine, but also of cultural dispossession and the intensification of social-mediated communication. Communal luxury addresses this collective right to cultural reproduction:

The world is divided between those who can and those who cannot afford the luxury of playing with words or images. When that division is overcome, as it was under the commune, or as is conveyed in the phrase 'communal luxury', what matters more than any images conveyed, laws passed, or institutions founded are the capacities set in motion. (Ross, 2016: 50)

In Ross' sense, 'communal luxury' is a radical insistence on equality of the right to cultural and social reproduction. Our shared world is one of meaning and signs but also one of material sensuousness and affect, or what Lazzarato (2016) calls asignifying semiotics. The modern reality for the majority, however, has been one in which the right to a cultural life is restricted to a small elite who define culture. The rest of us execute what we have been told is worthy and good; what is of value. The Commune challenged this division by insisting on the right of all to create a shared culture, refusing established distinctions between art and craft, which reflect class divisions more than difference in kind. This challenge inspired William Morris to shape the English arts and crafts movement as a way of 'creating and expanding the conditions for art' (Ross, 2016: 62). This was not done by rejecting the materiality of work, but by recognising and valorising the inherent creativity of work when undertaken collectively, in free association and without the alienation that commodity fetishism brings to the capitalist labour process (Ross, 2016: 79). Communal luxury recognises the inherently aesthetic nature of everyday life and makes it 'an integral part of the process of making' (Ross, 2016: 64).

We understand the reading group as a parallel reclamation of the 'aesthetic dimension' (cf. Marcuse, 1978): a radical insistence on our collective right to creativity and meaning-making, in free association, without the pre-structured value systems of an already alienated, metricised and commoditised form of labour in higher education. Here, also, is an overlap with the undercommons because, above all, communal luxury is about the development of our (always more than human)

capacities. ‘It brings a transformative and sensuous relationship to the materials – their texture, density, pliability and resistance – and to one’s own processes and labour, to the steps taken in making itself and to the remaking, in turn, of one’s own capacities’ (Ross, 2016: 64). In this concept of communal luxury we see the role of creativity and free association in remaking forms of life ‘to come’: in the reproduction of our collective, affective and aesthetic capacities in the undercommons. It is through such practices, collectively weaving meaning and remaking our capacities to be interested, to care and to make sense, that we remake ourselves and challenge the institutional processes and structures that separate us from each other and from this capacity to remake life in the compost-heaps of the undercommons. The reading group offers an image of communal luxury as a fellowship of scholars:

‘Fellowship’ was the name Morris gave to that aspect of social life denied by the capitalist system, for which his model remained something like the collective endeavour of craftsmen working together as equals. (Ross, 2016: 135)

Conclusion: a manifesto for reading groups

The essay has drawn on the practices and organisation of the ‘viral reading group’, weaving its social and economic conditions together with concepts, ideas and discussions emerging from the books we read. Pulling these threads together, we can identify several implications for management learning and education. The reading group, as ‘communal luxury’ (Ross, 2016) and ‘undercommons’ (Harney and Moten, 2013), offers a model for resisting the instrumentalisation of knowledge through metrification. By creating space for unproductive intellectual work, reading groups exemplify what Fournier and Grey (2000) term ‘reflexive learning’, challenging the performative intent of mainstream management education and research. Our emphasis on reading books rather than articles resists the acceleration of knowledge production critiqued by Alvesson and Spicer (2016b), encouraging a deeper, slower, collective engagement with ideas and theory (Berg and Seeber, 2016). By embodying these principles, reading groups offer a practical model for critical management self-education that resists the alienated commodification of learning in the edu-factory and fosters the development of a reflexive, ethically minded community, or co-mutiny, of management learning. Based on the themes we have stitched together in our patchwork critique, we conclude by proposing a manifesto for reading groups, to manifest new forms of scholarship from below.

Reading groups should

1. Recognise the equal status of all participants, reflecting the democratic spirit of such groups and their enthusiasm for maintaining the historical practice of reading.
2. Steward the knowledge-commons for those ‘to come’, and for fugitives subsisting beyond the university system.
3. Sustain the discipline of reading, which requires commitment to ideals of intellectual autonomy and freedom that are fundamental to the life of the mind.
4. Be multidisciplinary in keeping with the historically universal remit of the university.
5. Express a distinctive form of academic solidarity in their resistance to the modern university’s Stalinist management practices (McCann et al., 2020).
6. Focus on books, rather than articles, to avoid falling into the trap of performative ‘output oriented’ reading, exemplified by ‘paper development workshops’ and ‘journal clubs’.
7. Recognise that the fate of books depends on the capacity of the reader (cf. Benjamin, 2009).
8. Be prefigurative, embodying alternatives to the neoliberal organisation of academic practice.


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Notes

1. According to UUK (2025), 25% of universities in the UK made compulsory redundancies during the first part of 2025. The figure will likely be much higher for voluntary severance schemes. This creates an increasingly competitive environment for jobs and increased pressure on academics to justify their continued employment in terms of the reigning managerial metrics.
2. We are indebted to one of our anonymous reviewers for this delightful turn of phrase and would like to thank them for the suggestion to include it.
3. In a strange turn of events, three of the authors ended up in a lockdown bubble together, enrolling other family members and friends, some in person/bubble, and others online, expanding the experiment and creating a peculiar association of reading as a symptom of the Covid virus.

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