

CONFERENCE PAPER

Marxism and Education: Renewing the Dialogue
Understanding the Crisis in Higher Education

Institute of Education
University of London
9 April 2011

Cracking capitalist realism: the new student movement and its post-capitalist politics

Abstract There is much talk of ‘the crisis’ in higher education, often expressed in fatalistic narratives about the (im)possibility of critical resistance or alternatives to the deepening domination of neoliberal rationality and capitalist power throughout social life. But how precisely are we to make sense of this situation? In what ways is it experienced? And what knowledges and practices may help us to respond? These questions form the basis for a series of explorations of the history and character of this crisis, the particular historical conjuncture that we occupy today, and the different types of theoretical analysis and political response it seems to be engendering. Our talk will explore the tensions between readings of the situation as a paralyzing experience of domination, loss and impossibility, on the one hand, and radical transformation and the opening of future possibilities, on the other. We will finally consider what implications new forms of political theory being created in the new student movements have for reconceptualising praxis in higher education today, and perhaps for a wider imagination of post-capitalist politics.

Cracking capitalist realism: the new student movement and its post-capitalist politics¹

Sarah Amsler² and Joyce Canaan³

We would like to begin by pausing briefly for reflection on the nature of the current crisis in higher education, the forms of capitalism and mechanisms of neoliberal power that give rise to it, and the character of the field of political responses. The title points to some of our starting points in these analyses. ‘Cracking capitalist realism’ evokes two arguments made recently by two thinkers working in broadly Marxist traditions. The first is Mark Fisher’s suggestion that the deep permeation of capitalist rationality throughout all areas of social life has been not only accepted but internalised by individuals as a totalising order of existence. The second is John Holloway’s contention that this combination of the materialised strength of capitalist power and its subjective internalisation as inevitable or even desirable means that we should radically reassess our understandings of the forms of thought and action that might enable us to collectively resist and create alternatives to it. Similar arguments have in fact been surfacing with increasing frequency during the past two decades, as the development of the newest social movements has occasioned new encounters between and theoretical experiments within communist, socialist, anarchist, autonomist and liberal-democratic struggles for autonomy around the world – particularly attachments to centralised forms of organisation, and to a privileging of political-economic analysis over an attention to the micro-politics of domination.

We see a curious situation, therefore, in which ‘strong’ and often paralysing theories of capitalist hegemony co-exist with theories that such hegemony, even if it exists, need not be challenged in an organised way in order to be refused. It is also a situation in which deep despair about the possibility of overthrowing, adequately ameliorating or even resisting neoliberal rationality at an individual level co-exists with a proliferation of new developments in radical philosophy, new forms of political militancy, new forms of collective social life, and a new faith in the politics of producing possibility itself. In this talk, we hope to speak to these tensions through reflecting on the politics of the recent and ongoing student responses

¹ This paper was jointly presented at Marxism and Education: Renewing the Dialogue at the Institute of Education, London, in April 2011. We welcome all correspondence; please write to Sarah Amsler (s.s.amsler@aston.ac.uk) or Joyce Canaan (joyce.canaan@bcu.ac.uk).

² Aston University, Birmingham, UK

³ Birmingham City University, UK

to the now extreme neoliberalization of universities in Britain, with a focus on what we presently know best, the England-based demonstrations and occupations.

It is difficult not to be excited about these movements, particularly if one is part of them. We believe there is something new about the political practices, the praxis, of these student movements that distinguish them from the earlier practices both in what has been called the ‘old left’, but more generally amongst people struggling against different forms of capitalism under very different historical conditions. It does often feel as if the apathy, cynicism and immobility of an era in which there has been an ever growing erosion of public services, public space, shared thinking and doing, might be halted in its tracks (perhaps because there are moments where it actually is). But there also important questions that emerge precisely from such experiences, namely, what role such politics play in combating not only the experience but also conditions of exploitation, alienation, subjectification and repression in everyday life; what the conditions of possibility of these politics are in themselves; and whether and how such radicalising practices can and should be articulated in other struggles, and with other ways of theorising and social organisation. Might the student movement be one step in a longer process of creating alternatives, lives of greater dignity, equality, sustainability? After the key recommendations of the Browne Report were legislated last December, the most visible acts of resistance seemed to subdue. Should we jump to a conclusion that the nascent movement has been ‘defeated by violence and silence’, as Alastair Hudson¹ suggests is the intention of government, the media, the police and Universities UK? Might it actually be an impetus for something that goes beyond the university itself? Or is it possible that the philosophies of praxis and forms of political action that are ascendant in this movement actually challenge our existing conceptions of praxis and action themselves, and call us to reconsider new possibilities for these new times?

But first, this particular moment of crisis. England’s public university system has been groaning and lurching towards privatization for decades. Until recently, however, it was still possible to argue that ‘the attempt to close off and render impossible the experience of education as a collaborative pursuit of a public good and to make possible its full commodification has not yet wholly succeeded’ here.² Despite being deeply disillusioned with increasingly neoliberal forms of academic work, many academics have thus also maintained that these could never be totalizing; that their implementation could be mediated through critical professional practice, and that social-democratic justifications for public

higher education could prevail even within discourses that had become inhospitable to the very idea of the public itself.

By late 2009, suspicions that this was an incorrect reading of the situation were aroused by a spate of departmental restructurings and closures, mainly in the humanities and critical social sciences (for example, at Middlesex, Kings College London, and Sussex). In the autumn of 2010, these suspicions were heightened into an acute sense of crisis when Britain's new conservative-liberal coalition government confirmed the details of its 'radical plan to shake up higher education.'³ Far from just another shift in a long succession of policy reform, the proposals are designed to structurally transform higher education from a public, cultural good into what Stefan Collini has called a 'lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choice, is sovereign in determining what is offered by service providers.'⁴ Revelations of the scale and depth of these plans came in fast-moving waves following the publication of key government texts. First was the Browne Review, which effectively makes 'student choice' the centre-piece of HE funding and thus redefines higher education from being a public good to a private commodity, a gift of one generation to the next and to being 'an individual's personal investment-even a speculation-on his or her personal future'⁵. Next was the government's Comprehensive Spending Review, announcing plans to revoke teaching funding by 80% in 'STEM' subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine, and some modern languages and a total withdrawal of funding to arts, humanities and social sciences. Third, it was announced that the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which had provided up to £30 a week to young people from families with an income of less than £30,000 to purchase materials for college study, would be revoked. Although tagged as inefficient, The Institute of Fiscal Studies suggests that participation in further education increased by as much as 20% for females and 14% for males of such backgrounds as a consequence of receiving the EMA.⁶

These proposals are not anomalous in the post-war history of the English university. The recommendations display key elements of structural adjustments which have been transforming universities globally since the 1970s. The subordination of intellectual work to market rationalities, described in the 1980s by one politician as a '*kulturkampf*' against academics, was set in motion well before universities were subsumed into a new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2009.⁷ English universities have also really been only quasi-public since they began charging international students in 1980. By the early 1990s,

many vice-chancellors were either resigned to or invested in privatization and lobbying government for the power to charge 'home' students fees as well.⁸ When the New Labour government broke precedent and introduced the first national tuition fee of £1000 in 1998,⁹ more than two million students walked out of lectures in protest; some went into occupation. The head of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals accused them of being 'misguided', asserting that fees were the 'only realistic way of maintaining the long-term quality of provision in higher education.'¹⁰ In 2004, against further opposition, New Labour eked through both a threefold increase in fees and a new system for their quasi-deregulated marketization. And in autumn 2010, after more than 50,000 students (and some academics) marched in anger and as thousands occupied a third of the country's universities, the head of Universities UK urged vice-chancellors to accept that as 'the cuts to the HE budget are a painful reality', opposing higher fees would have 'devastating' consequences.¹¹ In some senses, the Browne Review merely normalized an ideology of university reform that corporate powers, politicians and some vice-chancellors had long insisted was both necessary and progressive.¹² For over thirty years, in other words, there have been concerted (albeit often disarticulated) efforts to subordinate critical rationalities to the logic of the market in academic work, and to transform educational relationships into practices of economic exchange.¹³ Any sense of a sudden attack on the public university here is out of joint.

When, then, have students responded to these policies as they have? Until recently, it was hard to imagine that students in Britain would revolt, let alone pave ways for others to do so. But the cuts to higher education and raising of tuition fees were necessary, not sufficient, catalysts for this response. There was some awareness that the policies being imposed were not ones that any of the three major parties had declared they would introduce if elected. Young people currently at university, many first time voters and many of whom would have voted Liberal Democrat, felt outraged by what they viewed as a betrayal of their vote in the parliamentary democracy. There were other precedents as well, including experiences gained during an earlier wave of demonstrations and occupations held at more than thirty universities in early 2009, to protest against the administrations' silence over the Israeli occupation of Gaza.¹⁴ Students had also responded angrily to the localised cuts which began in early 2010, most notably at Middlesex, Kings College London, Leeds, Cumbria, Wolverhampton, and London Metropolitan. According to one woman, therefore, 'as students in Britain were looking up nervously at the butcher's knife of government spending cuts hanging precariously over them, we know what to do.'¹⁵

More significantly, however, there are indications that some students theorise the present crises of the university as symptoms of a deeper ‘hollowing out of the democratic process itself’, and thus those ‘who marched on the streets to protect their rights [were] fighting for something larger’.¹⁶ There is recognition that by finally subordinating all knowledge and educational relationships to crude market ideologies and mechanisms of economic exchange, the government’s policies go beyond tactical reforms and instead constitute a politico-ideological strategy which denies the very legitimacy of the idea of a public university and institutionalizes political mechanisms to mitigate its future realization in any form.

What makes the conjuncture particularly dramatic is that through this, the balance of political forces which protect critical forms of knowledge and education from commodification within universities has tipped, and in ways widely understood to be beyond traditional forms of democratic accountability. It was thus the government’s hostile response to opposition – its racing through of a tightly-whipped parliamentary vote to raise fees without a White Paper and consequently without parliamentary debate of such a White Paper¹⁷ despite dissent, its deployment of violent policing to discipline the student opposition, and its cavalier use of Dickensian language to justify social inequality – which heightened educational politics into concerns about an attack on democracy itself. It soon became clear that the government’s proposals for budget cuts, tuition fees and the scrapping of various forms of educational support were not educational reforms at all, but communiqués pronouncing the creative destruction of the public university system and the futility of its contestation on intellectual, professional, political, or moral grounds.

This programme of restructuring is thus indicative of what Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore call ‘deep neoliberalism’ in higher education; a shift from the cumulative implementation of neoliberal practices to a consolidated restructuring of the ‘rule regimes’ governing the finance, management, and social function of higher education itself.¹⁸ If we follow Claude Offe’s logic, this itself indicates a shift in state strategy towards managing crises, from those that seek to tinker within existing institutional systems to ‘structural modes of political rationality [that are] adopted in response to conditions of economic and political crisis and require a structural transformation of the state apparatus and its relationship with the economy’.¹⁹ One consequence of this, to put it in Michel Foucault’s terms, is that we move from a complex field of governmental technologies and strategies of resistance to a

relative state of domination in which ‘the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, become themselves firmly set and congealed.’²⁰ In British higher education, this has been described as a dark time, nuclear catastrophe, nightmare, and act of vandalism. Indeed, whilst such possibilities were on the horizon for decades, ‘such far-reaching transformations, with their apparently utilitarian rationale, have never before been contemplated’ by many inhabiting the university today.²¹

It thus appears that the thirty-year project to ‘close off and render impossible the experience of education as a collaborative pursuit of a public good and to make possible its full commodification’ may now be accomplished. What might constitute an appropriate critical response to this situation? We can fatalistically declare defeat in the face of what has been described as a cultural and economic tsunami, or become more radically open to new conceptions of professional practice, modalities of political resistance, and imaginaries of the future – including those in the realm of ‘untested feasibility.’²² Of course, we have been here before. As Stuart Hall wrote thirty years ago, the last great crisis of the Left during the 1980s ‘was a new historical conjuncture, and a moment which the Right, rather than the Left, was able to dominate’. It was a moment ‘when all the reference points, the predictions, have been shot to bits [and] the political universe, as you have come to inhabit it, collapses’. These are not moments at which some correct critical judgement or strategy could lob history back into our court and magically restore all that which we fear might be dying. On the contrary, the crisis is that in this knowledge we are nevertheless called upon to advance democratic education on unfamiliar, less hospitable, and more culturally disarming terrain. The question of course arises here again, sometimes daily: what is now to be done, particularly given that it seems ‘the current conjuncture is marked by a fundamental impasse in terms of how to engage the question of politics’?²³

Responses engendered by this new conjuncture

Liberal-professional academic campaigns (Sarah Amsler)

There have been some critical responses from the professoriate, mainly within liberal-democratic and professional frames: a silent protest by Cambridge professors (to ‘insist that the university is not...a business, but a place of free intellectual activity’), a campaign by the British Academy of Social Sciences (to ‘amass evidence’ of the social utility of social

science), a blog by the British Sociological Association (to publicize analysis), work by the UK Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology (to engage in ‘private diplomacy with politicians’), and a Campaign for the Public University (to ‘defend and promote the idea of the public university’).²⁴ On the whole, however, many academics (particularly those in the critical disciplines which are particularly threatened) often seem paralysed by a political mode that Mark Fisher recently attributed to many students, which he called ‘reflexive impotence’. It is a state of being fully aware that ‘things are bad, but [also that] they can’t do anything. But that ‘knowledge’, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy’.²⁵ And it seems to be reinforced with every failure to call the state into account through sanctioned forms of protest and negotiation, or to engage effectively in counter-hegemonic strategies because there simply are no legitimised political spaces in which to do so.

Student-led university occupations (Sarah Amsler)

Students have also produced some similar sorts of responses. The first student-led street demonstration against budget cuts and tuition fees during the autumn of 2010, for example, largely affirmed faith in liberal democratic process. Placards appealed for politicians to ‘honour their promises,’ chided the Deputy Prime Minister to ‘act like an anthropologist’ because he was educated as one; and accused the government of cheating young people out of promised futures. Around the same time, students also occupied fifty universities, on the one hand making demands of vice chancellors, and on the other cultivating spaces for cultural and political experimentation.²⁶ Most of the occupations defended traditional values of intellectual freedom and critique, the idea of the university as a public good, and principles of representative democratic process. In seeking to save academic programmes from arbitrary closure and workers from unfair dismissal – and thus acting as emergency brakes on the contraction of time and space for political intervention – students employed a range of classically ‘liberal’ tactics such as the presentation of evidence, publication of analysis, initiation of dialogue with management, and petitioning.

What radicalized these practices, however, is that they were framed by alternative readings of power which hope but do not presume that these principles can be defended within extant institutional forms. What are under certain conditions *reformist* practices of calling a logic into question thus become *performative* acts of resistance. The aim is not to engage in a

strategic struggle, but to short-circuit relations of power that are understood to have become ‘not open to challenge, negotiation, and reform.’²⁷ When students occupying the Old Schools at Cambridge in November 2010 demanded the university ‘ensure the autonomy of education from corporate interests,’ for example, they ‘had no illusions that the University would do any such thing (and...were proved right).’ But this was no failure, according to one student involved – ‘indeed, one of the major achievements of the occupations was to erode the myth of a cosy academic community as an oasis of humanism in an inhuman world, set apart from capitalist society.’²⁸

What is interesting about this response is that it reflects neither political naivety nor reflexive impotence. The depth of the crisis of capitalism, the power of the state and university administration, and the narrowness of spaces of possibility for effective resistance are all *acknowledged* here, but interpreted – variously – as limit-situations to be transgressed or terminal conditions to be transcended through struggle, inquiry and creative praxis, but more concretely as features of the political terrain upon which we now exist. The purpose of occupation as a political tactic extends beyond the classical conception of holding space (and in the case of commodity production, capital) hostage in order to extract concessions from the powerful, but to additionally reclaim space and time in order to put it to alternative use. It is based on an analysis of capitalism which takes the production of both subjectivity and collectivity as seriously as it takes the production of material life.²⁹ There is a logic at work, which James Tully describes as the possibility of making ‘cautious experimental modifications of our specific forms of subjectivity’ – including (or especially) those we undertake as ‘go on’ in conditions of crisis, and in which we ground our everyday practices of freedom.³⁰

Demonstrations (Joyce Canaan)

There are several notable elements in the three days of largely student national action on 10 November, 24 November, and 9 December 2010 (with the first and third entailing national demonstrations and the second local protests and demonstrations). First, perhaps, was the sheer number of people on the first demonstration; a reported 52,000 people – more than twice the number expected, with a showing of much younger students as well and a visible cross-class composition, it was deemed ‘the largest protest in a generation’ and ‘blew all expectations away’.³¹

Perhaps the most significant moment of this demonstration was the iconoclastic shattering of the front windows of the Conservative Headquarters at Millbank.³² As a participant in this demonstration, my heart sank when I marched past Millbank that day. I was certain that the media would plaster the front pages of the next day's newspapers with this image in order to denigrate all that the demonstration had achieved in terms of numbers, age and class breadth of participants. I was right. But student demonstrators re-appropriated both the occupation of Millbank and this image. Haywood, for example, states that standing on the top of Millbank:

looking down at a sea of thousands . . . [made me realise that] '[w]e had surrounded and occupied the headquarters of the party in government! ... Those who thought that the smashed windows and rooftop occupation had distracted the media from the issues of fees couldn't have been more wrong. Fees became the focus for television, radio and print media, while the protest inspired other students to take a stand'.³³

Len McCluskey, then new General Secretary of the union Unite, shortly thereafter argued that 'the magnificent student movement' has 'put the trade union movement on the spot . . . refresh[ing] . . . the political parts a hundred debates, conferences and resolutions could not reach'.³⁴ As Haywood concludes, 'Millbank taught us that we can achieve our aims not by lobbying, not by polite protesting, but through action'. Here we have an insight into the new politics of the student movement: it aimed not merely to express opposition to government action, but also to resist it, literally and metaphorically revealing the potential fragility of the government's power. Laurie Penny similarly wrote that the writing of this phrase on the wall of the Treasury during the 9 December 2010 demonstration (where many of us were kettled for hours), was so powerful precisely because it was indicative of the movement 'daring to do what no union or political party has yet contemplated—directly challenging the banks and business owners who caused this crisis'³⁵.

The second day of action (24 November 2010) took place at local campuses and in city centres across the country; an estimated 130,000 people participated. It was characterised as 'the cat-and-mouse protest', as in London students sought to run away from the Students – many very young – learnt from the experience of being 'kettled' that police could be violent and that the media lied in its representation of events.³⁶ They recognised that they could not take things to be as those in power claimed that they were. As one student's passionate

speech indicates, cracks in capitalist rationality are becoming more apparent to a growing number of young people, and they are speaking from within them, developing questions as they walk.³⁷ Here we see again a certain kind of creativity, a capacity to transgress, to break dominant rules –especially when such rules were already being broken by those in authority to impose them. Young people took initiative rather than waiting for guidance from trade unions, teachers or others. There was, then, a growing sense of power in the student movement.

The third day of action contained many of the same features as the first and second. What is perhaps most interesting here is the way in which mainstream media attempted to represent its character. Reporting focused, on the one hand, on young people being kettled in Parliament Square and breaking windows at the Treasury, and on the other hand on the encounter of protestors and Prince Charles and Camilla. But as James Butler put it, the acts of pouring paint onto the car and touching Camilla entailed a ‘disruption of order’ . . . [which] has something to do with both what royalty is and what form protest should take’. And as he later said, the juxtaposition of these images, combined with the marginalisation of reporting on police violence against the protestors, represented ‘not mindless violence but quite the antithesis: the point at which structural inequality, when the whole, stinking, hypocritical con becomes utterly apparent . . . and is sitting there in front of you in a chauffer-driven car’³⁸. We see here again a re-reading of dominant images, and the way in which media savvy young people are opening cracks in the dominant orders of crisis and representation.

Theoretical and political significance

Ultimately, we both argue in different ways that there is something theoretically and politically significant about the work being done in these movements.

Joyce: I suggest that the demonstrations that occurred in the autumn of 2010 were more than mere protest or dissent. According to John Holloway, ‘the scream’, that is, the cry of no or, ‘ya basta’ – enough is enough – ‘carries with itself a hope, a projection of possible otherness’.³⁹ Hands does not suggest that there is a teleology of movement from protest to resistance and then rebellion. Rather, for Hands, as for Holloway and the wider autonomist Marxist tradition that informs their writings, these moments are perhaps simultaneous. As Holloway says in his recent book *Crack Capitalism*, ‘asking we walk, but walking, not

standing still, is how we develop our questions.⁴⁰ As the Zapatistas put it, movement opens up cracks in ‘a world that presents itself as closed . . . [C]racks are centres of transgression, radiating waves of rebellion, . . . experimentally, creatively’.⁴¹ This praxis thus suggests that a movement makes its path ‘by walking’ it, building an alternative by realising it concretely, here and now.⁴² Movement building from this perspective aims to deepen understanding of the world as it is lived, in order to ‘back control [of it] collectively’.⁴³ It is a pedagogical rather than a didactic kind of politics.

Concretely, the students who were protesting on the streets and occupying the universities here admit they do not have definitive answers as to how to resist the neoliberalization of and through the university, and also acknowledge that they could not find such answers alone. But they vociferously rejected the injunction that there could be no answers at all, and demonstrated what it takes to engage practically in the awkward, messy, joyful, and risky work of thinking and acting differently in seemingly frozen states of domination. ‘You fight the closing down of possibility,’ writes one, ‘by opening it up, by widening the field of potential historical actors – we are engaged in a battle over the conditioning of the future.’⁴⁴

Thus, no matter what follows or does not immediately follow on from the autumn student movement, their thought-informed actions, taken collectively, spontaneously, playfully (at times) and not so playfully (at others) speak to an emergent politics. This is a politics of people power, as was said and practiced in Tahrir Square in Egypt and in other North African and Middle Eastern countries, as well as amongst those who occupied the state capital building in the state of Wisconsin during much of February 2011 and held the largest demonstrations in the US since the anti-Vietnam movement forty years ago.

The power that must be faced is considerable, but as Peter Hallward noted, ‘with each new protest we learn a little more about what we are up against’.⁴⁵ He also suggested that by so much more fully exposing the literal and metaphorical hand of state violence, police power may become more transparent – and therefore more readily undercut, undermined, overthrown. But the battles now to be faced are considerable. Could, and should, the kinds of bottom up, horizontally organised, spontaneous and media savvy modalities of resistance that characterise much of the student movement guide efforts to create a more sustainable, just and equal world, here and now?

Sarah: The ‘politics of possibility’ is J. K. Gibson-Graham’s name for an emergent political imaginary which has been ‘radically altering the established spatiotemporal frame of progressive politics, reconfiguring the position and role of the subject, as well as shifting the grounds for assessing the efficacy of political movements and initiatives’ in recent years.⁴⁶ Practices in this logic articulate a ‘vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty’. They tend to rely on conceptions of the political that privilege not only institutional structures and forces of power, but practices of cultural representation and radical imagination, and the micropolitics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions.⁴⁷ They take seriously the argument that ‘the connection between production and politics that lies at the root of the Marxist project remains as valid as ever, but [that] production needs to be understood in the broadest sense, not just work, the efforts on the factory floor, but the myriad ways in which actions, habits, and language produce effects, including effects on subjectivity, ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to the world’.⁴⁸ Perhaps most importantly, a politics of possibility privileges the collective cultivation and political application of a critical-experimental attitude towards being, which seeks to expand and resignify space and time while inhabiting them with others.^{49 / 50 / 51}

As neoliberal governance is a continually emerging political formation, responses to it must be imagined anew as well. A politics of possibility is not intimidated by this problem. Rather, it conceptualizes this as a limit-situation that creates conditions for the emergence of politics itself, and thus a rationale for building ‘a politics that acts in the moment, not to create something in the future but to build in the present, it’s the politics of the here and now.’⁵² Applying this logic to present crises within the English university, for example, it is possible to consider that while the ‘proposed reforms triggered large student demonstrations [which] had no impact on any constituency of real influence either in the universities or in politics,’ this signals the need for as-yet-untested modalities of engagement, rather than delimiting the bounds of possibility itself.⁵³ As Parliament was passing the legislation which accepted the proposals for university restructuring in December 2010, for example, two demonstrations were held. One was a small candlelight vigil organized by the National Union of Students to mark the closure of the possibility – and thus the legitimacy – of critique and resistance. The other was a thirty-thousand strong protest organized by a network of student activists, for whom the passing of the vote was both anticipated and illegitimate, and marked the emergence of a new political terrain upon which new ways of thinking and being must be

formed. ‘No need for a vigil,’ wrote Clare Solomon. ‘We were celebrating the birth of a movement, not the death of education.’⁵⁴

This is the materialisation of an ethos of critical experimentation in political resistance that shifts, as Foucault suggested was necessary, ‘critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression’?⁵⁵ It also shifts the student movements to oppose the further neoliberalization of higher education in Britain from a ‘politics of demand’ to something more resembling a ‘politics of the act’, or in Richard Day’s terms, from modalities of resistance which hope that ‘the currently hegemonic formation will recognize the validity of the claim presented to it and respond in a way that produces an event of emancipation’ to ones that abandons this fantasy in favour of ‘inventing a response which precludes the necessity of the demand and thereby breaks out of the loop of the endless perpetuation of desire for emancipation’.⁵⁶ My question too is what insights the experiments in such politics made by students within the universities might have for informing wider political engagements.

Conclusion/opening up

The phrase ‘this is just the beginning’ was the self-professed ‘mantra’ of the autumn student movement⁵⁷ – as well as the headline of the Guardian on the day after the first demonstration of 10 November 2010. As the *Cambridge Student Online* (2010) put it, the: ‘mass mobilisation of disgruntled and disillusioned students has made fertile ground for a major political upheaval against this coalition and its cuts, inspiring a large following with the mantra “this is just the beginning”’.⁵⁸

We suggest that from within these movements, people are generating some ‘really useful knowledge’ about the linkages between the current crises of the university, the neoliberal state, and capitalism itself. Here we are guided by Richard Johnson’s examination of the educational strategies of 19th century working-class radicals, which showed that through their practices they developed ‘a theory of economic exploitation, a theory of the class character of the state and a theory of social or cultural domination.’⁵⁹

But are these analyses of capitalism and power accurate and adequate? The student movement has illustrated that alternative conceptions and possibilities are being created on

the ground, in the here and now, when capitalist realism had seemed so all-encompassing. It is thus clear that the prevailing conditions of apathy, cynicism and immobility can in fact be transformed – but why has this been so much more pronounced amongst students than even within the other and often longer-standing organisations of resistance? In another vein, media commentators argued that the occupation of the Millbank tower was evidence that ‘a whole new generation has tasted the power and energy that comes with effective rebellion and we can expect to see resistance snowball’.⁶⁰ Are the destruction of corporate-private property and the occupation of spaces and resources of state or corporate power effective forms of rebellion against neoliberalism? If yes, then in what way? And have we seen acts of effective resistance snowball in recent months in this country? What roles do such politics play in combating not only the experience but also conditions of exploitation, alienation, subjectification and repression in everyday life? These questions suggest that the philosophies of praxis and forms of political action that are ascendant in this movement challenge our existing conceptions of praxis and action themselves, and call us to reconsider new possibilities for these new times.

Notes

¹ Alasdair Hudson, ‘Defeated by violence and silence’, in *Times Higher Education*, 20 January, 2011, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414866&c=1.

² Jeremy Gilbert, *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 174. For a discussion of the neoliberal turn, see David Harvey, ‘Neoliberalism as creative destruction,’ *Geografiska Annaler*, 2006, 88, 2: 145-158; and Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner, ‘Postneoliberalism and its malcontents,’ *Antipode*, 2009, 51, S1: 94-116.

³ Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, ‘Putting students first: a radical plan for choice,’ October 2010, <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Browne-Report-Release.pdf>.

⁴ Stefan Collini, ‘Browne’s gamble,’ *London Review of Books*, 2010, 32, 21: 4 November.

⁵ Michael Rustin, ‘A principled approach to higher education in England and how it should be paid for’, Our Kingdom, *OpenDemocracy*, 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/mike-rustin/principled-approach-to-higher-education-in-england-and-how-it-should-be-paid-> .

⁶ Lorraine Dearden *et al.*, 'Education subsidies and student dropout rates', The Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Working Paper 05/11*, 2011, <http://www.ifs.org.uk/wps/wp0511.pdf>.

⁷ John Beck, 'Makeover or takeover? The strange death of educational autonomy in neo-liberal England', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1999, 20, 2: 225; see also Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October*, 1990, 53: 11–23.

⁸ Douglas Trainer, 'Are tuition fees a necessary evil?' *Guardian*, 3 December 1996, Education, 2.

⁹ Simon Jenkins, 'Dons must do or die,' *Guardian*, 31 January 1996; *Hansard*, 21 February 1996, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1996/feb/21/higher-education-tuition-fees>.

¹⁰ Amelia Gentleman, 'Students walk out in fees protest,' *Guardian*, 5 March 1998, 4.

¹¹ Steve Smith, speech to Universities UK on the funding debate, 25 November 2010, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Newsroom/Speeches/Pages/ProfessorSteveSmith'sspeechforUUKfundingdebate.aspx>.

¹² Jeremy Gilbert, 'Elitism, philistinism and populism: the sorry tale of British higher education policy,' *Open Democracy*, 14 January 2000, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jeremy-gilbert/elitism-philistinism-and-populism-sorry-tale-of-british-higher-education-p>.

¹³ Sarah Amsler, 'Beyond all reason: spaces of hope in the struggle for England's universities', *Representations*, 2011, 116: 90-115.

¹⁴ Clare Solomon, 'We felt liberated' in Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011); H. Hesham Yafai, 'Rebirth of student activism' in Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011).

¹⁵ Elly Badcock, 'SOAS: school of activism studies' in Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011), 67.

¹⁶ Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri, Introduction to Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011), 1.

¹⁷ Stefan Collini, 'From Robbins to McKinsey', 25 August 2011, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n16/stefan-collini/from-robbins-to-mckinsey>.

¹⁸ Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, 'Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways', *Global Networks*, 2009, 10: 214.

¹⁹ Martin Jones and Kevin Ward, 'Excavating the logic of British urban policy: neoliberalism as the "crisis of crisis-management"', *Antipode*, 2002, 34, 3: 479-494.

-
- ²⁰ Michel Foucault, 'The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom' in James W. Bernauer and David Rasmussen (eds) *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 3.
- ²¹ Bridget Fowler, 'The new mode of funding,' *Sociology and the Cuts*, 6 January 2011, <http://sociologyandthecuts.wordpress.com/2011/01/06/the-new-mode-of-funding-by-bridget-fowler/>.
- ²² 'Untested feasibility' is a concept introduced by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 117.
- ²³ Jason Read, 'The production of subjectivity: from transindividuality to the commons', *New Formations*, 2011, 70, 113.
- ²⁴ See 'Cambridge university dons protest,' *Guardian*, 17 January 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jan/17/cambridge-university-dons-protest>; the Academy of Social Sciences, <http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/>; British Sociological Association, http://sociologyandthecuts.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/statement_on_sociology_the_bsa_and_the_cuts4.pdf.
- ²⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 109.
- ²⁶ For a rough national map of the occupations, see Solomon and Palmieri, *Springtime*, 60.
- ²⁷ James Tully, 'Political philosophy as a critical activity', *Political Theory*, 2002, 30, 4: 540. 540.
- ²⁸ Nineteensixtyseven, 'The occupations in perspective,' *The Great Unrest*, 20 December 2010, <http://thegreatunrest.wordpress.com/2010/12/20/889/>.
- ²⁹ Read, 'The production of subjectivity'.
- ³⁰ James Tully, 'To think and act differently: Foucault's four reciprocal objections to Habermas' theory,' in Samantha Ashenden and David Owen (eds) *Foucault Contra Habermas* (London, 1999), 98.
- ³¹ Simon McMahon, 'As the dust settles: the significance of the national student demo', 2010, *OpenDemocracy*, www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/simon-mcmahon/as-dust-settles-significance-of-national-student-demo.
- ³² McMahon, 'As the dust settles'; Solomon, 'We felt liberated', 12.
- ³³ J. Haywood, 'The significance of Millbank' in Clare Solomon and Tanya Palmieri, (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011), 69.
- ³⁴ McCluskey in Haywood, 'The significance of Millbank', 213. For McCluskey's view, see Len McCluskey, 'Unions, get set for battle,' *The Guardian*, 19 December 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/19/unions-students-strike-fight-cuts.

-
- ³⁵ Laurie Penny, 'Inside the Millbank Tower riots', in Dan Hancox (ed.) *Fightback: A Reader on the Winter of Protest* (London: OpenDemocracy), <http://felixcohen.co.uk/fightback.pdf>.
- ³⁶ Haywood, 'The significance of Millbank', 64.
- ³⁷ See Barnaby Raines, online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrgzpPvJxmQ>.
- ³⁸ James Butler, 'Image of the year: the royals photo symbolises the productive disorder of the student protests', *OpenDemocracy*, 6 January 2011, www.opendemocracy.net/author/james-butler.
- ³⁹ John Holloway quoted in Joss Hands, *@ Is for Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 37.
- ⁴⁰ John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 13.
- ⁴¹ Cited in Hands, *@ Is for Activism*, 9 and 35.
- ⁴² Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
- ⁴³ Sara C. Motta, 'Notes towards prefigurative epistemologies' in S. C. Motta and A. G. Nilsen (eds) *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16.
- ⁴⁴ Bertie Russell and Keir Milburn, 'From the defence of the present to the control of the future,' *Shift Magazine*, 2010, 11, <http://shiftmag.co.uk/?p=398>.
- ⁴⁵ Peter Hallward, 'A new strategy is needed for a brutal new era' in Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri (eds) *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011), 38.
- ⁴⁶ J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix.
- ⁴⁷ Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, xxvii.
- ⁴⁸ Read, 'The production of subjectivity', 113.
- ⁴⁹ See 'The University for Strategic Optimism and the spatio-political performance,' <http://www.scribd.com/doc/45743999/The-Spatio-Political-Performative>.
- ⁵⁰ The notions of the 'critical' and 'experimental' attitude are both from Foucault. For Foucault's explanation of the first, see 'What is critique?' in Michel Foucault, *Politics of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). For a discussion of the second, see Tully, 'To think and act differently'.
- ⁵¹ Significant parts of the emergent student movements in Britain, wider Europe and the United States also seem to share what Richard Day describes as a '(post)-anarchist logic of

affinity’, including ‘a desire to create alternatives to state and corporate forms of social organization, working “alongside” the existing institutions; proceeding in this via disengagement and reconstruction rather than by reform or revolution; with the end of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity; and finally, focusing on relations between these subjects, in the name of inventing new forms of community’. See Richard Day, ‘Hegemony, affinity and the newest social movements: at the end of the 00s’ in Duane Rousselle and Süreyya Evren (eds) *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London: Pluto Press), 113. However, there are also significant elements of orthodox and heterodox Marxism, more classically anarchist, and liberal-democratic orientations, and thus such a characterisation cannot be generalised.

⁵² John Jordon cited in Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, xix.

⁵³ Ian Pears, ‘After Browne,’ *London Review of Books*, 111 March 2011.

⁵⁴ Clare Solomon, ‘We felt liberated’, 16.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘What is enlightenment?’ in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 45.

⁵⁶ Day, ‘Hegemony, affinity and the newest social movements’.

⁵⁷ Mary Robertson, ‘Aaron Porter is no longer fit to lead the student movement,’ *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/11/nus-porter-failed-student-protestors.

⁵⁸ Cambridge Student Online (2010) Interview: Aaron Porter – National Union of Students president, www.tcs.cam.ac.uk/story_type/trail_story/nus-president-aaron-porter-talks-about-placards-protest-and-candlelit-vigils/.

⁵⁹ Richard Johnson, “‘Really useful knowledge’”: radical education and working-class culture, 1790-1848’ in John Clarke, Charles Critcher, and Richard Johnson (eds) *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 88.

⁶⁰ Jess Worth, ‘We need to support direct student action,’ *New Internationalist* blog, 11 November 2010, <http://www.newint.org/bl>.