Critical education[1] in and against the neoliberalised university: an English perspective.[2]

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Abstract

As left academics studying and seeking to change the public university today in progressive ways, we need in part to understand how it has moved to its current state. This paper seeks to contribute to such change. The paper first frames present conditions using the concept of *neoliberalisation* that views neoliberalism as a historically and nationally located process that is being *done* and can be *undone*. I then use the concept of neoliberalisation to explore changes in the English public university over the past 40 years, a process being intensified under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, leading to the current state of encroaching privatisation. The third section considers what critical education could offer to the creation of progressive alternatives. Mindful of Amsler's (2012) point that critical educators need to define their theory and practice given the overuse and inexact application of this concept, I summarise my understanding (and that of colleagues) of critical education. Section four then presents the perspective I am now developing for assessing the possibilities and limits of alternative higher education projects within (and in the paper to follow this one (Canaan, nd)) outside the public university system that I then use to explore the efficacy of the challenge offered by the public sociology programme that a colleague and I have been running since autumn 2009 to the neoliberalising of the public university. I conclude by suggesting that such a challenge is seriously constrained within, but might be more possible outside, the English public university today.

Keywords

neoliberalisation, neoliberalism, English public university, critical education, public sociology, radical trajectories

[1] I use the term 'critical education' rather than 'critical pedagogy' to indicate my focus on all educational processes in the university rather than teaching alone.

[2] Earlier versions of this paper were given at: Kings College (2011), Middlesex University (2012) and the 17th World Congress of AMSE-AMCE-WAER (2012) in Reims, France. The paper is also under review for the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies.*

> The UK's higher education system is . . . [being] transformed into a patchwork of academic supermarkets with, at one end, research-led Russell Group universities continuing to super-serve wealthier customers with a wide range of niche offerings while, at the other end, former Polytechnics of the Million + group . . . [are being] forced to clear their shelves of distinctive or idiosyncratic goods and to focus on those products for which there is already a clearly defined (mass) market. All shoppers, meanwhile, will have to pay higher prices (Freedman, 2011:1-2).

Introductory remarks

The epigraph captures the process of restructuring now taking place in England (in particular) even before the government's proposed near elimination of its previous funding support for tuition costs and fees concomitant doubling to trebling has begun (autumn 2012). Russell Group universities[3], recently expanded[4], are pitting themselves as the kind of luxury supermarkets of which Freedman speaks whilst the Million + universities are now seeking to become more employment oriented institutions increasingly seeking to best support their (student) 'customers'. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues across English universities indicates that in preparation for government cuts to tuition fees and concomitant fee rises for students from autumn 2012, higher education (HE) in 2011-2012 has become leaner and meaner: academics are facing wider and deeper surveillance of continuously intensifying, calculable/ever-growing and alienating work coupled with growing insecurity[5]. Resistance to these processes does not seem to be growing, despite: exhaustion from overwork; performing a growing number of disheartening work practices; terror at the prospect of possible unemployment and growing fatalism as the attack on HE is only part of a more pervasive government policy of privatising, marketising and financialising public services generally. Indeed, powerful student-led demonstrations/occupations in autumn 2010/winter 2011 that impelled many unions towards activism (including UCU, that of lecturers, during 2011/early 2012 as part of

[3] See page 7 below for a discussion of these tiers of universities.

[4] The formerly 20 institutions in this elite group of research universities has grown to 24, leaving the second tier group of universities with 15 members (Grove, 2012).

[5] 27% of all degree programmes in the UK have been cut from 2006 to the present; of these, the most (31%) have occurred in England (Press Association 2012).

a wave of strikes against raised retirement age and higher contributions to pensions simultaneously), with summer riots (2011) across city centres fuelled by the police murder of a black man in London, appear not to have stopped the government's steamrollering over state funded public higher education (after 40 years of growing encroachments).

In this dispiriting context I ask: what possibilities do left academics and academic activists have to resist this threat within the university and how are these possibilities being realised[6]? Why do some academics/academic activists turn to critical education as part of the process of developing such possibilities?

This paper is the first of two papers that examine alternatives to the neoliberalising university. This paper's focus is on alternative possibilities *within* the public university and the focus of the next one is on alternatives developing *outside*. This paper has six sections. I first define neoliberalisation and second explore how it is being realised in English HE. Part three summarise some key features of critical education that guide my practice within. The fourth part articulates my initial framing of prospects for progressive, counter-neoliberalising university processes and structures. Fifth, I examine a project I have been involved in that seeks to undo current conditions and consider how far it enables students and lecturers' capacities to think and act critically as part of a process moving towards creating a more socially just and sustainable world. I conclude by suggesting first that this project and others in universities outside the Russell Group may face considerable obstacles given that some may face financial ruin and all are being encouraged to offer training rather than education. However, I am less than optimistic about the long-term prospects of such programmes than about emergent alternatives outside.

1. Defining neoliberalisation

Neoliberalism has been such an overused and under-explained concept that, as Clarke notes (2008:136), it seems 'omnipresent', 'promiscuous' and 'omnipotent'—found in multiple 'sites, institutions, processes, and practices', taking different forms and consequently having diverse, sometimes contradictory, meanings yet consistently

[6] My next paper explores critical education beyond and against the neoliberalised university.

presenting itself as an unstoppable, all-powerful, force (2008:138). Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010:3) similarly speak of neoliberalism as 'a rascal concept--promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested'. Like Harvey (2005:198), they seek to critically analyse its current conditions and processes in order to clarify how it works so that 'feasible alternatives presently operating' can be strengthened.

Brenner et al (2010: 336, 337) suggest that we should speak of *neoliberalisation* as a *process* that started in the 1970s as a series of 'disarticulated' 'regulatory experiments' aiming to counter Keynesian 'state interventionist and redistributive regulatory agendas'. These experiments introduced:

> privatization, financialization, liberalization, workfare and urban entrepreneurialism [and] subsequently acquired "prototypical" status, and became key reference points[7] for subsequent projects . . . (2010:337)

In these subsequent projects, 'patterns of reciprocal influence, coordination and exchange were established' and interconnected, although it was not until the 1990s that 'market-disciplinary, reform agendas were institutionalized on a world scale, using world wide, multilateral, multilevel and supranational juridico-institutional arrangements' of organisations like the IMF, WTO and World Bank (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009:10). From the 1990s to the financial crisis of 2008, Brenner et al argue that neoliberalisation widened and deepened within and between nations, construed distinctively in each nation, given particular national histories and degrees and kinds of economic, political and military power and development (2010:184, Harvey, 2006), and, consequently, given distinct national responses to this imposition. These processes now provide 'the rules of the game' more fully than previously, within and between nations and at supra-national levels.

However, from the economic crisis of 2008, which continues, Brenner et al suggest that we are now in a 'zombie' situation in which dominant neoliberalising regulatory and institutional arrangements are further entrenched as "putative 'solutions' to persistent regulatory dilemmas across scales, territories and contexts" (Brenner et al, 2010: 340). 'Bailouts' given to a growing number of so-called peripheral European

[7] Harvey calls these the 'signal features' (2005:160) of neoliberalisation.

nations could be seen as indicative of this zombie situation—which at least some researchers suggest is spreading across Europe (Lapavitsas, 2012, Mason, 2012. There is life, albeit counter neoliberalised life, in the next phase that Brenner et al propose starts to 'undo' neoliberalisation. They call this phase 'disarticulated counter-neoliberalization' which, like its mirror image, entails experiments of disparate, local redistributive alternatives that can be either *progressive or reactionary*. This phase could then lead to a more 'orchestrated counter-neoliberalisation' (Brenner et al, 2010:340) where progressive or reactionary experiments could be more fully linked, networked. Finally, these processes could deepen, as progressive or reactionary alternatives to neoliberalising processes predominate.

At the micro level, neoliberalisation impacts our 'desires, aspirations and hopes' (Fisher 2009: 13); it gets into our minds and souls, 'into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others' (Ball, 2012:18; Ball, 2003). Whilst 'capitalist realism' (as Fisher put it (2009:13)) recasts 'all dimensions of human life . . . in terms of a market rationality' (Brown 2005:40), its hold remains incomplete. Even if it is dominant (as it is at present) it is not as monolithic as it might appear. Williams reminds us that:

> no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention (1977:125).

The dominant logic can only be effective if it actively 'neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognise' alternatives (Williams, 1977:125). Butler (1994:194) notes that creating dominant social processes or, as she discusses them, relationships/identities require a "constitutive outside" in an 'antagonistic relationship' to an inside. This 'outside' could provide a basis for reconfiguring social processes/relationships. Thus, with regard to British governments since Thatcher urge citizens to believe that 'there is no alternative' (TINA) to neoliberalising capitalism, deconstructively speaking, that is impossible. Further, the work of Brenner et al offers a heuristic device with which to conceptualise the undoing of alternatives to neoliberalisation.

2. The neoliberalisation of English HE[8]

The Coalition government's reconfiguration of HE since coming to power in May 2010 has a 40 year history. In England, since the late 1960s/early 1970s, governments have gradually brought universities to marketise, commodify[9] and financialise HE structures and processes. A key early moment in HE marketisation was captured by E P Thompson's *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (1970), written in response to and against Warwick University's business/industry orientation since its creation in 1965 that included surveillance of staff. Thatcher more fully realised this 'business-ification' (Hatcher, 2001) process; within three days of coming to power (1979), her government cut £100 million from the HE budget. Over the next four years 17% more funding cuts to government block grants to universities ensued (Shattock in Slaughter and Leslie, 1999:41). Universities consequently had to more 'efficiently' use government grants received—the logic of marketization expanded its hold more widely. Commodification was introduced by the Thatcher government's 1980 decision to charge tuition fees (£1,000 per year) for international students.

These initial stabs at marketisation and commodification respectively could be considered indicative of dis-articulated neoliberalisation. The 1985 Jarrett Report, produced by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, introduced neoliberalising discourses by mooting the idea of 'students as customers' and suggested that university workers be evaluated using the kinds of performance indicators monitoring factory floor work. Thus a new logic for organising university processes and structures emerged that could then organise HE in a more orchestrated manner. In 1992 the Conservative government eliminated the 'binary divide' that previously separated universities from polytechnics. Whilst nearly all HE institutions were thereafter deemed 'universities', conditions for academics and students in all such institutions worsened. Student numbers doubled from 1990 to 1996 alone—

[8] The analysis below is partial, highlighting some key neoliberalising processes in English HE. Further, whilst Brenner et al developed a model at national and supra-national levels, I am applying it solely to English HE.

[9] Shumar and I (Canaan and Shumar, 2008:4) define marketization and commodification as interrelated concepts:

> Markertization refers to the process by which the state uses market principles and disciplinary apparatuses to create greater efficiencies in non-market institutions. Commodification, on the other hand, refers to the process of turning social goods and processes into commodities.

while funding per student fell by 30% and staff numbers remained unchanged (CVCP, in Barr and Crawford, 1998). Unsurprisingly in this context, Vice Chancellors of the top 20 universities (then receiving 2/3 of UK research grants and contract funding and attracting students with the highest A level marks) formed the 'Russell Group' (1994) in order to pressure government to expand their prior privileges, re-stratifying the seemingly levelled playing field the government created in 1992. Two other groups followed. First 'the 1994 group' (formed that year) sought to separate themselves from those they deemed to be at the bottom of the heap (and by implication from the Russell Group whose initial creation of a top tier impelled their own emergence). Shortly thereafter the 'Million+' group created a 'brand' to highlight their distinctive 'openness' to the now growing working class presence in HE (Ainley and Weyers, 2008).

Despite this differentiation, the problem of rising student numbers without increased government funding continued, leading the government to establish a bilateral committee (The National Committee Inquiry into Higher Education, 1996) aiming to resolve these problems. The resultant Dearing Report (1997) suggested—and government then implemented (with some modification) in 1998—the introduction of student fees of £1,000 per year upfront[10]. Thus began the financialisation of higher education to UK students as its commodification intensified[11]; the then Education Secretary David Blunkett justified fee rises on the basis that graduates would earn higher pay than non-graduates. University education was thereby reconceptualised as an investment in one's future (see Baty, 1997; Wilby, 2009), creating the kinds of customers first mooted in the Jarrett Report. Unsurprisingly, shifting the funding burden from the state to the individual grew further thereafter: eight years later (2006) upfront tuition fee contributions were 'topped up', trebled to £3,000 (reaching £3,375 in autumn 2011, the last year before the near or complete termination of government contributions to tuition fees).

[10] Whilst Dearing also recommended that the government should retain the gradually reducing maintenance grant given to support students' living costs, the incoming Labour government decided to replace it with means-tested loans for students from poorer backgrounds alone.

[11] HE became subject to regimes of accountability from the mid 1980s with the establishment of the then Research Assessment Exercise (1986), the Quality Assurance Agency (1997) and the Teaching Quality Agency.

If, HE has been marketised, commodified and financialised gradually over the past 40 years, shaping more aspects of university life, these processes have *deepened* since the Browne Report on Higher Education (October 2010), the Comprehensive Spending Review (November 2010) and the White Paper on Higher Education (June 2011). These documents framed the changes in HE that they introduced as a response to the supposed financial crisis of 2007-2008, although they carried further and intensified the 40-year neoliberalising of HE.

But cutting government funding of tuition fees by 80% (for so called 'STEM subjects of Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine and a few others) to 100% (for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences), and doubling or trebling public university fees for individual students to between £6 and £9k year[4] (Browne Report, 2010: 47), is shifting the meaning of university education in non-Russell Group universities. It is being redefined largely as 'training for employment' and most universities are defined as serving 'the purpose of training' (Campaign for the Public University et al, 2011)—with the exception of Russell Group universities charging the full £9k and offering mostly elite students the kind of 'liberal' education *all* students received at former polytechnics and universities before 1992. University education is, thus, no longer viewed as an intrinsic good, enabling individual's self-cultivation, or a social good, as the Robbins Report proposed 60 years ago[12], but as serving, especially in non-Russell Group universities, singularly to enable individuals to gain the skills and training necessary that might enable them to perform the lessening number of graduate jobs with which to earn graduate salaries. Thus shifting higher education costs from society to the individual re-orients education from a public to a private good; from a gift of one generation to the next and therefore to society, to 'an individual's personal investment—even a speculation on his or her personal future' (Rustin, 2010, Finlayson, 2010).

Modelling universities 'on the types of financial speculation that helped get us in to this mess' in the first place' (Vernon, 2010: 3) allows the government to encourage corporate speculators to compete with public universities, an encouragement abetted

[12] Robbins argued that universities should: 'entail 'instruction in skills; . . .'produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women . . . ' [be centrally concerned with] the search for truth. . . [and] transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship '(Robbins Report 1963, Ch. 2, points 25-28).

by not subjecting these speculators to the kinds of pervasive regulations that the rest of the system endures (Collini, 2011; McGettigan, 2011a). As McGettigan (2011a) further notes, 'global higher education providers' are primarily concerned with profit, not individual or social good. Indeed, Carl Lygo, the CEO of the first such private provider (BPP[13], granted university status in 2010), stated that he aimed to cut university running costs by 25%--whilst spending an estimated 25% of the total budget on marketing (Shepherd, 2011; Hotson, 2011). But we need not look so far afield to see how profit propels the creation of such universities; at least one university is setting up a for-profit university: Coventry University College (CUC), an offshoot of Coventry University, will open its doors in autumn 2012. CUC will charge no more than £4,800 per year, running professional programmes seven days a week, 42 weeks a year from 7am to 10pm weekdays and to 4pm weekends. Despite its association with Coventry University, students will have no 'access to the university's library, IT or sporting facilities' (Vasagar, 2011).

Privatisation will require many previously state funded universities to 'replace entirely their annual grant income of £35 million (or more) with private fee income within three years' (Campaign for the Public University et al 2011). '[S]uch radical and rapid change' of public universities is something that '[v]ery few private sector businesses could survive' (Campaign for the Public University 2011.2.5). Yet the government has no plans to support universities that might go bankrupt. Further, the annual cost of loans to students from 2015/2016 will be £12billion, paid for in the short term by government, a figure that will add £5-£6billion per year to government debt, and is predicted to increase to '£50 to £100billion to the public sector net debt over the next twenty years' (McGettigan, 2012). This raises the question of the rationale for privatisation as government costs will be considerably greater than under the current government-subsidised tuition fee system (Campaign for the Public University, et al, 2012, 2011).

Additional casualties will be lecturers' pay and conditions and, students loans as well

[13] BPP was an offshoot of the Apollo Group that ran Phoenix University in the US and was fined $9.8 million (£6 million) in 2004 for giving bonuses to recruitment agents to boost recruitment numbers (Fearn, 2009).

asd the kind of education they will receive[14]. Academics, especially in the emergent private sector, will receive less pay, face more insecure and intensified working conditions (Campaign for the Public University, 2012). Those in the public sector will further face geometrically increasing scrutiny of their activities, having to spend even more time than at present providing evidence of compliance with regimes of accountability rather than performing the activities these regimes supposedly measure,. Clearly the neoliberalising of HE is deepening (Ball, 2003, 2012; Canaan, 2008, 2011; Shor and Wright. 2000; Strathern, 2000).

As lecturers' pay and conditions worsen, management levels and salaries grow, further adding to universities' running costs. In 2011, the salaries of Vice Chancellors of 13 of the most elite institutions reached more than £330,000 on average per annum--as teaching and capital project budgets were cut across the board (Shepherd 2012).

Additionally, in 2012-2013, 85,000 university places will be taken out of the system of government-allocated student places. Twenty thousand were opened for competition to universities charging an average of £7,500 or less per student per year—and sixth form colleges (charging less than public universities) successfully outbid universities, gaining more than 10,000 places (Times Education Supplement, 2012). Sixty-five thousand additional places were allocated to students with A level results of two As and a B or higher; such students will likely attend universities charging £9,000. Thus a race to the top (of more than three times as many places to institutions charging maximum fees) accompanies the race to the bottom, polarising the entire system further[15].

Therefore, what was once 'one of the world's most successful higher education systems' (Collini, 2011; Hotson, 2011) is now being reorganised as 'a rigged market . . . that will confer and confirm privilege among the privileged, riches upon the

[14] The exception will be institutions charging more than £7,500 (thereby receiving more income per student than at present).

[15]The race to the top is also indicated by the privately financed New College of the Humanities, led by internationally renowned academics with A C Grayling as its first master. This university will charge double the September 2012 top capped tuition fee (£18,000) with lecturers paid an average 25% more than at public universities. If successful, other similar institutions could follow. But because the government will not offer such institutions student loans, their further development might be limited (Collini, 2011).

[already] rich, and ensure the complete control of demand and supply' (Inglis 2011). This marketisation, commodification and financialisation of HE will likely lead to some universities closing (predominantly those supporting less privileged white and minority students) and a growing polarity between elite and other institutions.

Clearly, then, universities are being more fully conceptualised and realised as profit-making businesses, lecturers are further disciplined, work-intensified and insecure—in short further de-professionalised and proletarianised. Students (except for the elite) are being encouraged to see themselves as customers who pay more for the same, or, likely, worse education that primarily serves earning not learning whilst top management receive nearly corporate sized salaries. HE has clearly reached the stage of deep neoliberalisation as reforms and structures are framed much more fully than before with the logic of marketisation, commodification and financialisation.

3. Critical education

a. Critical education entails explicitly progressive educational processes that engage academic and activist knowledge and practice

Sarah Amsler (2012) reminds us of the importance of defining critical education in an era when businesses and corporate interests are appropriating 'popular education methods' [, . . and the] consumerised longing for autonomy [at the same time that . . .] discourses of participation have become ubiquitous in mainstream politics' (Amsler 2012:61). In this context of slippery signifiers linked to marketising signifieds, critical aspects of critical education must be defined. Such a definition is also needed given that critical educators 'draw on diverse and contradictory philosophical traditions, occupy different generational, class, gender and racial positions', have different histories and degrees of political activism (Amsler 2012:68, Ball 2012).

My definition of critical education partly uses insights of the critical pedagogy/popular education group to which I belong (with Amsler, Stephen Cowden, Sara Motta and Gurnam Singh). As we said:

> Starting from the assumption that 'all life is pedagogical', we therefore seek to develop pedagogies of engagement that combine academic and activist knowledge, and 'classroom learning' with social action (Amsler et al 2010:12).

We define critical education as 'overtly political and critical of the status quo' and, cncomitantly, 'committed to progressive social and political change' (Crowther 2010:16). We share Ira Shor's view that 'the whole activity of education is political in nature' (Shor, 1993: 27)—a position that builds on Freire's idea that whilst education claims to 'serve everyone', it actually 'function[s] in the interests of the dominant class' (Freire, 1987:103)—as section 2 above shows.

3b. If education is inherently political, then alternative progressive educational processes start from different political assumptions and utilise different learning, teaching and assessment practices to those currently promoted by government policies

Freire introduced what he called problem posing pedagogy that, like Dewey's child-centred curriculum, starts from and gives primacy to 'the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his [sic] activities in the learning process' (Dewey in Shor, 1998). Teachers and students are 'co-investigators in dialogue' (Freire, 1996:62) in which both cooperate, mutually. Learning entails 'a constant unveiling of reality' that teachers facilitate through asking questions, learning from students' responses to teachers problem-posing so that students can challenge their current views in order to develop 'a critically conscious understanding of their relationship with the world' (Au, 2007:4). Lecturers concomitantly come to appreciate, challenge and learn from and about students' prior understandings in order to more effectively guide student learning in future.

3c. Critical education moves beyond the classroom towards praxis

Those of us in the Critical Pedagogy Group, to different degrees, seek to move educational process beyond the classroom, believing, like Freire and Macedo (1987) that critical education dialectically links the word and the world. We seek conscientisation enabling students and lecturers together to rework theory through practice, and practice through theory inside and, importantly, outside formal education. Freire claims that conscientisation:

> does not stop at the level of mere subjective perceptions of a situation, but through [joint] action prepares men [sic] for the struggles against the obstacles to their humanization' (Freire, 1996:100).

Collectively doing is intrinsic to learning; reading and theorising about, conjoined with working to ameliorate, social problems. As Feagin and Vera (2008:21) note this process requires radicalisation which for them:

> literally means going to the root of things, a process that in Freire's experience involves 'ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality'.

Through getting to the root of things, dialectically and collectively, engaging with problems theoretically and practically, education seeks *praxis*, both the 'deepening . . . [of] consciousness and changing the world for the better' (Au 2007:5). Critical education thus presumes that 'critical learning for progressive action happens everywhere in society' (Amsler et al, 2010: 11); it does so most powerfully when it links knowledge gained by scholar activists with that of activists elsewhere, sharpening the process of doing through theorising and theorising through doing in order to help create a more just and sustainable world.

3d. Critical education seeks to resist fatalism by negating it and acting otherwise

Yet critical education is increasingly difficult to realise in the neoliberalising university, as suggested in 2 above. Shortly before his death Freire observed that governments across the world, run by and for the elite, encourage all (other than themselves) to believe that they live in 'a closed world from which there is no exit' (in Rossatto, 2005:16), in which a competitive and ruthless dog eat dog survival of the fittest attitude is essential (Brown, 2005). For Freire such fatalism can be countered by the human capacity to hope which is 'an ontological need… an existential concrete imperative' (1994:2); human incompleteness provides the basis for this imperative. But how possible is it to fulfil this ontological need in the public university? Outside it? Below (4.x) I highlight one alternative I have been involved with in and against the

public university[16] which seeks to challenge this seemingly closed perspective on the world pedagogically, theoretically, methodologically and in practice/praxis.

4. Theoretically framing alternatives in and against the neoliberalising university: building on Freire

Before I discuss these alternatives, I will frame them. Alain Badiou, like Freire, speaks about the human need to believe in alternatives to the current order:

> If we accept the inevitability of the unbridled capitalist economy and the parliamentary politics that supports it, then we quite simply cannot *see* the other possibilities that are inherent in the situation in which we find ourselves (Badiou 2009:64, emphasis in original).

For Badiou as for Freire, the creation of alternatives starts by seeking to contest the fatalism of neoliberal capitalism (TINA). Although we may be partly captured by fatalism, we must look for and work against limits to the current order (Badiou) or state of being (Freire) to move towards a progressive 'elsewhere'.

John Holloway explores the process of realising this alternative trajectory in *Change the world without taking power* (2002), which starts with the following:

> In the beginning is the scream . . . Faced with the mutilation of human lives by capitalism, [comes] a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal: NO (2002:1).

This NO, this 'opposition, negativity, struggle' (Holloway 2002:1), comes from the kind of refusal of present conditions or state of being tof which Badiou and Freire speak. For Holloway the scream:

> is two-dimensional: the scream of rage that arises from present experience carries within itself a hope, a projection of possible otherness . . . The scream implies a tension between that which exists and that which might conceivably exist, between the indicative (that which is) and the subjunctive (that which might be). We live in an unjust society but we wish it were not so: the two

[16] I am involved in two alternatives.

> parts of the sentence are inseparable and exist in constant tension with each other . . . [and together give] meaning to the scream (2002:6-7).

Holloway further suggests that this 'No' to existing society entails :

> a Yes, or indeed many Yeses, . . moving against-and-beyond . . . , against the society which is based on the negation of self-determination and *at the same time* a projection beyond existing society—a projection in dreaming, in talking, in doing (2002:218, italics in original)[17].

Badiou helps us further understand what these alternatives might entail in his framing of the significance of May '68 (2009:62). Badiou argues that there were four May '68s. The first and most spectacular was that of students across France (and elsewhere) whilst the second was that of French workers, whose youth members fomented what became the largest general strike in French history. He calls the third May '68 libertarian as it entails beginning to change the moral climate for individuals that led to new cultural creations in theatre, music, art and other areas of cultural production. For Badiou the most interesting May '68s was the fourth, 'the diagonal that links [and circulates between] the other three, . . . especially between the student movement and the workers' movement . . . (2009:57). Badiou participated in this 'diagonal' as part of a group of striking lecturers and students in May '68 who began meeting, thinking and organising with workers at a local factory through which they began to question prior ways of thinking and doing, opening new possibilities for political action and thought:

> What would a political practice that was not willing to keep everyone in their place look like? A political practice that accepted new trajectories, impossible encounters, and meetings between people who did not usually talk to one another? At that point, we realized . . . [that] a new emancipatory politics . . . would turn social classifications upside down [, . . .] not organizing everyone in the places where they were, but in organizing lightning displacements, both material and mental (2009:60).

[17] Holloway pointedly notes that striving towards self-determination requires collective action 'because in a world where the doings of all are intertwined, the only self-determination possible is one that involves all people' (2002:219).

Like Holloway, Badiou explores emergent ways of organising. Could we not consider that today such new trajectories and new spaces of doing and thinking are beginning, as indicated by the coming together of diverse groups of people not previously interconnected in squares such as Tahrir and Syntagma and in Zucotti Park, in such 'lightning displacements' of traditional political thought and action? Where they go remains uncertain; their emergence offers at least the prospect of progressive alternatives to the current order. I return now to the more micro level of higher education to consider the significance of one such alternatives I have been involved in creating. I will first examine this programme with regard to what it achieves in its own terms. I will then explore how far it realises the principles of critical education with which progressive alternatives may be built.

5a. In and against the neoliberalising university: public sociology at BCU[18]

In autumn 2009, my colleague Matt Badcock and I set up what was, and remains, the only UK undergraduate programme on public sociology. Matt introduced the programme after being inspired by Michael Burawoy's efforts to re-inject a political dimension to sociology in his Presidential Address to the 2004 American Sociological Association meeting. For Burawoy, public sociology sought to enable students and academics to intervene in today's troubled world as earlier sociologists 'with a passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom or simply a better world' had done when the discipline emerged. In the early twenty-first century:

> unfettered capitalism fuels market tyrannies and untold inequities on a global scale, while resurgent democracy too often becomes a thin veil for powerful interests, disenfranchisement, mendacity, and even violence . . . (Burawoy, 2004:4).

Given these inequities and lies and this violence, Burawoy sought to encourage sociologists to take 'knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fiber (Burawoy 2004:5).

[18] Matt Badcock and I wrote the first draft of this section that I have now substantially rewritten.

Building on Burawoy, Matt argued that at the present 'critical juncture', public sociology offered an opportunity within the university for writing and engaging "with the world outside the academy, one that is more interventionist and . . . aims to create mutually beneficial links with different 'publics'" (2010:27). Matt and I have sought, through this routeway, to expand sociology students' commitment to and engagement with its publics by reconnecting sociology with social issues, in mutual dialogues. Our usage of critical education, which I introduced, builds partly on Burawoy's idea that students are sociology's first public, taking insights gained at university with them outside, as graduates. Like Burawoy we start 'from where they are, not from where we are' (2004:x).

However, as we read Burawoy and others, we began to see absences in/limits to his version of public sociology. Like Hays (2007: 80) we were worried that following Burawoy's suggestion of adding public sociology to the established domains of professional, policy and critical sociology limited its potential. We were mindful of feminists' insistence that 'adding on' a new domain without also challenging these other domains' theories, methods or power in and outside the discipline would not bring them to question their modus operandi. We also wondered how far public sociology could go politically given that it did not seek a '"sociology for the oppressed" that sought "to reduce that oppression" (Feagin and Vera 2008:33). Further, we felt uncomfortable with a less than fully dialogical public sociology. Whilst it urged practitioners to 'engage directly in interactive dialogue with some public' (Feagin and Vera 2008:33), it gave primacy to academic over other knowledge by advocating that academic knowledge should be taken outside without also considering how to bring grassroots/campaigning knowledge inside.

We shared Feagin and Vera's call for what they call 'liberation sociology', which sought to get to the roots of problems by conjoining academic and activist knowledge. We did not rename our programme 'liberation sociology'; we feared that such an overtly left agenda might face management obstructions (and here we were not assuming that our university was any more controlling than others). Nonetheless, liberation sociology is our required textbook and, like Feagin and Vera, we seek to encourage students to critically and dialogically link the university and outside practitioners' insights.

We have had some success thus far with this second and third year programme. We co-facilitate thus far small student groups in 'the beanbag room' that I helped establish a few years ago. We encourage students in the second semester of the second year and all of the third year to engage in projects largely with outside groups on issues they negotiate with us. Unlike final year dissertations, students' projects usually entail 'doing' *with* rather than singularly writing *about* issues and students are encouraged to produce work in non-conventional virtual forms (such as blogs, posters or videos) alongside academic work.

Extracts from two third year students' blogs indicate how some students have come to engage differently with issues through reading, talking and sometimes working with organisations concerned with these issues:

Student 1 (project working with asylum seekers):

- So why is it we only hear one side of the story [abut asylum seekers?] . . . Hearing . . . about their life directly from an asylum seeker is very different from hearing about [them] . . . from the media . . . [A]s people in society it is our job to be critical and dig deeper . . . Being critical is . . . very hard . . . , as I already know. I am now critical but I never was [before] . . .[A]fter studying public sociology I have become a new person who now challenges everything I read . . . Public sociology is . . . a dialogue, in which students and the community interact.

Student 2 (project on public sector cuts):

- I am a Public Sociology student . . . carrying out a project on how the cuts [to public sector organisations] are not necessary, but are about fulfilling the ideology of neo-liberalism, the same ideology which had caused the recession in the first place. I feel it is important to create awareness about how ideological these cuts really are . . .We should not be fooled; these cuts will only benefit the small minority of elitists.

- I am [also] going to find out how young people . . . [think] the cuts will affect them and their future decisions . . . [and] whether young people think that the cuts are necessary or not, because this will indicate whether a further

ideological change is already taking place or if a potential resistance is building up[19].

Clearly these students were digging more deeply into issues than previously. One claimed that this changed them and both articulated ways that their engaging with public sociology, and applying its critical perspective to their work with outside groups, expanded students' appreciation of how powerful interests shaped the issue they researched and/or groups they worked with.

We also faced challenges. First, student engagement varied—as is the case with all degree programmes. Second, we spent (and still spend) a significant amount of time helping second year students develop reading, writing and analytical skills, and therefore less time facilitating as full and deep student engagement with public sociology as we would have liked. Third, and probably connected to the second point, the first cohort of graduating students (2011) claimed at the course's end that they were still unsure what exactly public sociology was. Our response in 2012 was to hold more regular classes than previously in which we encourage students to more fully link projects with relevant literatures. But we also wonder if student uncertainty can be considered positive as it could indicate that students are taking up the offer we make for them to engaging with a very different sociology than they previously knew. Fourth, the programme is threatened with closure given low intake and university requirements for classes with at least 15 students and given heightening pressure on academics to teach growing student numbers.

5b. Possibilities for and limits to realising a praxis-based orientation in and against the neoliberalising university

How far, then, does this example suggest that students and lecturers are developing a critical oriented engagement with learning, teaching and practice and an awareness of social inequities through these processes? To what extent are prospects raised for the double pronged trajectory of 'the scream' of which Holloway speaks or for the kinds of material and mental displacements of which Badiou speaks? I will now suggest that we have been able to realise some key tenets of critical education—within limits. Yet

[19] All expression and punctuation is as students wrote it.

there are more serious constraints on our possibilities for the praxis-aimed scream at least in the programme in which we have been engaged,

With regard to the first two tenets of critical education discussed in four above, I would argue that the dialogue-based beanbag room space offers the thus far small number of students and two lecturers the opportunity to begin to engage more critically and dialogically in learning and teaching respectively than previously as we all sit literally 'at the same level' as us, as students tell us each year. Most students find this seating arrangement, coupled, importantly, with our critical education informed dialogical discussions of ideas in and through the articles we read, in which we encourage students to bring more of their own understandings—and questions—to class helpful in facilitating their greater participation in discussions as do we. Further, focus group discussions with students in 2011-2012 indicates that at least some students find our co-teaching useful given that we interpret articles somewhat differently abd take somewhat different political positions on issues discussed. They reportedly find it easier to explore their own understandings of readings and issues in class given our expressed differences.

But this seemingly more egalitarian organisation of learning and teaching space does not in itself make learning and teaching more equal and engaged processes. We additionally introduce students to critical learning and teaching practices at the start of the programme and concomitantly reflect with them, as fully as we can throughout the programme given the limited time we spend together, how far we can and do put this into practice. We encourage them to question: readings; our teaching; their learning and their and our understandings of wider social, political and economic processes. We also cover explicitly political topics in the first semester of year two—like May '68, the autumn 2010 student-led demonstrations and summer 2011 urban youth uprisings—aiming to encourage students to locate these events in wider contexts—and, by implication, how such contexts shape other events. We additionally explore the political stances of different social research methodologies, and encourage students to use action research and participatory action research methodologies in their projects that offer greater agency to researcher and researched (Feagin and Vera, 2008; Kindon, et al, 2007). In year three we read and think more fully with *Liberation Sociology*, exploring how sociology as a discipline has been politically, socially and historically located and is therefore not neutral and, concomitantly, how

students' own projects can be viewed through these locations. Students are also offered the opportunity to work with activist organisations that one of us knows through our political activism outside. Students finally are encouraged to produce assessed work outside the narrow bounds conventionally on offer; a minority of third year students in particular have created issue-based blogs, videos and slide shows informed to a greater or lesser extent by their engagement with public sociology, as the extracts from two student's blogs above indicate.

The programme won (2011) a university award for enabling student 'employability', an award we applied for to obtain what we believed was due recognition of the programme and to receive a small monetary award that we then spent on video cameras and voice recorders for students' projects. The programme also achieved national recognition[20].

There are, nonetheless, limits to what we have done and can do with regard to realising the first two tenets of critical education in 4 above. As noted in 5a, we spend much time facilitating students' development of academic reading and writing skills so that we can together examine and engage with ideas in set readings. As we engage more fully with the critical literacies literature, we increasingly should question the deficit model of academic literacies that presumes that students who face challenging reading academic work lack literacy skills. We are persuaded by the idea that students have high-level literacy skills in media other than written academic work. Therefore, as this literature suggests, we are exploring how to encourage students to build upon their existing skills in and through the degree programme (Pardoe and Ivanic, 2009).

If that is one of our failings (and space limits prevent me from discussing them all), there are others outside our control. With regard to assessment, although we encourage students to produce different kind of work than conventional academia does, we are forced to assess this work relative to that of their peers rather than

[20] One of us gave a conference presentation on the programme where we were asked to provide a case study for an HEA funded project at the University of Gloucester on creative third year projects. We were then asked to participate in interviews on our programme (with us and students) that led to a case study of the project that further led to us being asked to talk to a poster of our programme at the project's final conference (http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/examples/Pages/Education,SocialandEnvironmentalSciences.aspx).

relative to *their* own starting point. That is, marks are the currency of academic work and that currency encourages students and lecturers to identify the person with the marks their work receives (Canaan, 1997).

Further, despite the explicit political agendas we use to frame class discussions, we are aware that students in our classes start from different positions than many students on popular education informed adult education programmes do. As Crowther (2010:16) notes, popular education alone has been committed to and often located in 'communities of resistance and struggle' that share a collectively produced pedagogy' aiming 'to link education with social action'. Critical education, located in and through the public university classroom, works with students, most of whom initially attend university in order to obtain degree qualifications with which to secure the decreasing number of graduate jobs available—an individualising process that will only grow with university privatisation. Given government and university pressures to treat students as 'customers' paying for service received (as 2 above suggests), lecturers advocating critical education must tread carefully in their efforts to encourage students to question their current perspectives. Clearly this limits how far this questioning can go.

The second two tenets of critical education are still harder to realise in the current context. Certainly students on our programme are offered the opportunity of moving beyond the classroom and some take up projects with progressive grassroots/campaigning groups. In the 2010-2011 academic year, for example, one second year student worked with a community group in her local area, using her skills in community languages to support local women seeking to solve problems they faced. In 2011-2012, this student worked with a local school setting up an anti-academies campaign group to ensure that the school remained in the public sector. She reported during her third year that she was becoming angry about government policies, for the first time. A handful of other students, including the two students producing blogs (discussed in 4a above), also reported that the programme generally, and project work in particular, helped them become more aware of social injustices. It could therefore be said that the programme to date offers students the opportunity for conscientisation. It makes opportunities available to engage in '[a] political practice that accepted new trajectories' as Badiou (2009:60) put it with which it would seem that a minority of students are moving towards praxis, engaging with the double-

pronged scream of which Holloway spoke, away from what is and towards what could be. We would like to enhance possibilities for such a trajectory more widely but fear these are limited especially as universities like ours are increasingly emphasising training over critical thinking and doing.

However, we have failed to realise a key tenet of liberation sociology on this programme. Whilst we have intended to forge a fully two-way dialogue between university and grassroots/activist knowledge, we have not had the time to engage, with students, to synthesise theoretical and practice-based knowledge. We—and the organisations students work with—face intensifying workloads and lessening resources as well as job cuts fhat prevent such a synthesis.

Finally, as the only public sociology programme thus far in England, with low student numbers and lacking links to similar programmes elsewhere with which a more articulated and articulate network could be built, the prospects of collectively realising the radical potential of public sociology are limited. As Brenner et al (2010 and Peck et al 2009) suggest, forging strong progressive alternative against neoliberalisation requires interconnectedness and the concomitant capacity to reflect upon and more fully elaborate such alternatives. We cannot do that as a singular programme nor in the kind of environment where revolutionary prospects are not imminent. Thus we have been doing the sociology whose name we dare not speak whilst recognising its limits.

6. Concluding thoughts

Inglis claims that in the current HE system 'the official speech used for the discussion of what universities are for . . . [is] one in which it is impossible to tell the truth' (Inglis, 2011). This rather totalising statement belies the at least partial possibilities that programmes like the public sociology programme that Badcock and I have run that has sought to encourage students to speak truth to power--something that a minority of students take up to a greater or lesser extent. Resistance against this system is getting harder given growing and now increasingly overwhelming work loads, job insecurity and lowering wages in our institutions and in the groups outside the university that some of our students work with. As Inglis (2011) unflinchingly

noted elsewhere in that same piece, academics are at present largely ‘a docile and nerveless workforce’ that seems unable to act together, or to believe that such action could make a difference. This is the kind of fatalism that neoliberalisation engenders as Freire, Badiou and Holloway, amongst others, recognise and rail against. Only a minority of academics persist in resisting government policy. It is therefore of utmost importance that those who can continue to work in the public university continue to develop programmes such as that of public sociology in order to enable at least some students to develop critical thinking and doing. However, I am not at all confident that this space will remain available as the currently harsh neoliberalising conditions under which universities are operating provide conditions for realising critical, progressive alternatives. I, for one, have had enough of the public university and am now putting most of my efforts into developing outside alternatives.

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