

Strivings towards a politics of possibility

Sarah Amsler

It stands to reason that critical theorists should be interested in the newest student movements working to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Yet, while these politics are pushing the limits of critical knowledge about the cultivation of new modalities of radical political resistance, their theoretical significance remains marginalised within the academy. While the academic literature is replete with analysis of the long-anticipated 'crisis of the university', many professional responses to the most recent privatisation policies have been muted and ambivalent; or, at the very least, hopeful that the trends can be arrested or mitigated by sanctioned operations of professional critique and opposition. In this essay, I suggest that some of the recent work of student activists demonstrates both the contingency of this position and the possibility of cultivating new political subjectivities and critical-experimental modalities of resistance, within and beyond the university.

Keywords: neoliberalism, politics of possibility, professionalisation, student movements, university

It stands to reason that critical theorists should be interested in the newest student movements which are developing in Britain, and around the world, to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Yet, while these movements are pushing the limits of taken-for-granted constraints on critical knowledge and the cultivation of new modalities of radical political resistance, they remain marginalised within the academy which, at least in some corners, longs precisely for the politics of possibility they seek to create. There are various reasons for this, including entrenched antagonisms between

habits of opposing rigorous 'scholarship' and social 'commitment', the ascendancy of instrumentalist conceptions of teaching and research in the UK academy and a devaluation of post-1968 student politics more generally (Bourdieu 2002). As governing powers within universities increasingly discredit challenges to both local policies and wider politico-economic processes as disruptive or irrational and scholars are increasingly pressured to produce work that conforms to criteria of economic and political value, the theoretical significance of these particular forms of resistance to neoliberal

eral power is muted even further. In this essay I suggest that the fusions of what Jacques Rancière calls the unauthorised 'intervention in the visible and the sayable' with transgressive, prefigurative experiments in new ways of knowing and social practices illustrates the importance of the critical-experimental attitude in contemporary struggles against neoliberal power both within and beyond the university (Ranciere 2010, 37).

Capitalist realism, academic style

In recent years, Anglophone and Continental social theorists have been preoccupied with the ascendance of what Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism', or 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2009, 2). There have indeed been so many different articulations of this sentiment that it hardly bears attempting a review; even Fredric Jameson, to whom the idea is often attributed, simply wrote that 'someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (Jameson 2003). From Jürgen Habermas's (1989) diagnosis of the 'exhaustion of utopian energies' in modernity to Nikolas Kompridis's (2006a, 2006b) reflections on the deeper philosophical disenchantment with radical possibility itself,

and in recent empirical research on mechanisms of closure in neoliberal forms of institutional power, efforts to lay bare the new forces of repression in advanced liberal societies have been concerted indeed. It might thus be presumed that critical theorists are in a privileged position to visiblise new possibilities for resisting or escaping these forces, particularly as neo-liberalizing agendas intensify and consolidate on the home turf of the university itself.

However, one of the ironies of this dedicated academic critique of the ascendance of neoliberal rationality is that it can also produce a 'politically counterproductive and ultimately disempowering form of "strong theory"' which does as much to embolden the dominant order as it does to denaturalise it (Peck, *et al.* 2009, 97; Clarke 2008). That is, when analyses of neoliberal hegemony focus on illuminating the power of mechanisms of self-discipline and measurement to create docile forms of subjectivity, or on making visible the inordinate complexity of power that flows through the closed networks of the transnational elites, it may easily become difficult to see any alternatives or spaces of possibility for effective political resistance at all. The literature on the neoliberalisation of higher education in Britain, for example, is replete with laments of enclosure through the 'death of educational autonomy' (Beck 1999), the 'impossibility of critical pedagogy' (Gray 2003), and 'the (im)pos-

sibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes' (Davies 2005) – early expressions of mortality which suggest that a sense of crisis has in fact long been immanent. It is, as Rosalind Gill has pointed out, incredibly important to speak these criticisms into public existence, since breaking the silences about the 'psychosocial aspects of neoliberalism...[can] be seen as part of a wider project to make intelligible contemporary modalities of power and thus as connected ineluctably to the struggle for a better, more just world' (Gill 2009, 16). However, this capacity to make such knowledge meaningful in (or indeed, through) struggles for political autonomy, and for the possibility of non-market systems of value to orient social life, remains limited by the professionalization of academic work within the university.

Within my own field of sociology, for example, David Brunnsma and Dave Overfelt have argued that the historical mission of critical theory has crept from being a resource for advancing our various 'walks towards social justice' to becoming a relatively soulless institution of and for capitalism, produced primarily by individuals who 'jump through the flaming hoops that are our graduate programs and tenure processes', and whom they argue 'have lost touch with [their] humanitarian roots' (Brunnsma and Overfelt 2007, 65). More prosaically, much of the guidance offered to newly qualified social scientists today has less to do

with the substance of their work as educators, researchers, public servants or political actors and more to do with maximum academic capital for career advancement, gaining competitive advantage in relation to one's peers, fulfilling bureaucratic programme requirements, securing research funding, managing limited time, and using educational technology (Newson and Polster 2010; Noy 2009).

Nevertheless, the reclamation of space and time for developing clear understandings of what education is and how it might be organised is vital for academics, particularly as the theoretical terrain upon which we base our analysis differs from that of our predecessors', and certain inherited assumptions about critique are in need of re-evaluation. Ours is not the same 'paralysis of criticism' about which Herbert Marcuse (1964) wrote, regardless of how much of ourselves we might see in situations where a lack of resistance to power seems to intensify into the deeper absence of evidence of desires for autonomy at all. Marcuse argued then that an efficacious critical theory would need to begin from a conception of the human as inherently freedom-desiring. This would, he argued, necessarily be oriented towards extracting 'the historical alternatives which haunt the established society as subversive tendencies and forces articulating them in ways that could shatter both the comfort of incorporation and the

illusion of total technological control' (Marcuse 2002, xlii). But we can no longer rely on such fixed figures of human nature or characterisations of revolutionary subjects, and the logics of capital, utilitarianism and technology are believed to have permeated not only the most radical of alternatives but the very realm of possibility and anticipatory consciousness itself. What for Marcuse was an alarming tendency in the ascendance of technological rationality has, for some critical theorists, actually turned into the phenomenological condition of everyday life.

It is thus not surprising that provocative work about knowledge, education and culture is emerging through attempts to theorise resistance in everyday life, in particular in practices which focus deliberately on the transformation of subjectivity in 'the myriad ways in which actions, habits and language produce effects, including effects on subjectivity, ways of perceiving, understanding and relating to the world' (Read 2011, 114). This work is not wholly new and does not sit completely outside of the university. There is a wealth of critical pedagogy projects ongoing around the world, and a growing circulation of knowledge and shared experience amongst academics and activists in global anti-capitalist movements, including those sited in and around universities (Coté, Day and de Peuter 2007; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007). What distinguishes this knowledge work

from more professionalised forms, however, is that it is grounded in radical critiques of neoliberal rationality and integrated into localised struggles to determine the practices that reproduce or challenge this rationality in everyday life. The dual emphasis of this new work is thus on the politics of possibility; produced not simply to make intelligible the effects of power on our lives (much less to acquire professional prestige), but rather 'to find methods and strategies of how to most effectively use the space we find ourselves in to find higher positions of subversiveness in struggle' (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 31).

Surprised by power – waking up to neoliberalism in the house

The political weaknesses of our strongest theories of neoliberalism became apparent in the autumn of 2010 when Britain's new conservative-liberal coalition government confirmed the details of its 'radical plan to shake up higher education' (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance 2010).¹ Far from just another shift in a long succession of policy reform, the proposals were designed to holistically transform higher education from a public, cultural good into what Stefan Collini, in a series of articles, 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', and in

which corporate funding will come increasingly to shape the purposes of research (The Times, November 2009, *The Guardian*, March 2011, and Collini 2010).

Revelations of the scale and depth of these plans came in waves following the publication of key government texts. The first was the long-anticipated 'Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance,' commonly known as the 'Browne Review', commissioned in 2009 by the outgoing Labour government to review the implementation of the country's first 'variable' fees regime in 2004 (Browne 2010). It recommended increasing fees, expanding student loans, introducing new forms of hierarchical competition between institutions and deploying state resources to 'marketize' the entire system. The 'necessity' of these changes was produced in a second text – the government's Comprehensive Spending Review, published some weeks later, which outlined departmental settlements for the nation's fiscal-crisis 'austerity' budget (HM Treasury 2010). In the context of a 25% reduction to public spending, it announced a 40% cut to higher education, including up to 80% of funds for teaching in all subjects and translating into a withdrawal of all support for teaching in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Fardon 2011, 3). 'Institutions which are chosen by students because they offer better quality, responsiveness

and value for money', the Ministry clarified, 'should be able to grow if they wish and, if necessary, at the expense of those that perform less well (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2010).' Universities must privatize and compete against one another for scarce resources in a quasi-regulated marketplace of provision, or elect to perish in what promises to be a wasteland of structural and cultural irrelevance.

These proposals were 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, including the expansion and diversification of higher education systems for economic purposes; the shift from public to private funding for universities and the construction of political mechanisms to facilitate their competitive marketization; the subordination of academic governance, professional identities and intellectual cultures to market rationalities; and the redefinition of 'public' as 'clients' and 'students' as 'consumers' or 'knowledge-entrepreneurs' (Mars, Slaughter and Rhoades 2008).² The subordination of intellectual work to market rationalities in the UK, described in the 1980s by one politician as a '*kulturkampf*' against academics, was set in motion well before universities were subsumed into a Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2009 (Beck

1999; see also Hall 1990).

Despite talk of a sudden privatisation, English universities have also really been only quasi-public since they began charging international students in 1979. By the early 1990s, many vice-chancellors were either resigned to, or invested in, privatization and the lobbying of government for the power to charge 'home' students fees as well, as explored in an article by Trainer (*The Guardian*, December 3, 1996). Under their continuing pressure and despite public opposition, the New Labour government broke precedent and introduced the first national tuition fee of £1000 in 1998. More than two million students walked out of lectures to protest the plans; some went into occupation of university facilities. The chief of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals accused them of being 'misguided', asserting, as reported by Amelia Gentleman, that fees were the 'only realistic way of maintaining the long-term quality of provision in higher education' (*The Guardian*, March 5, 1998). In 2004, against further opposition, New Labour eked through both a threefold increase in fees and a new system for their quasi-deregulated marketization (Harrison 2011). And in autumn 2010, after more than 50,000 students 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 (Smith 2010). In some senses, the Browne Review merely normalized an ideology of university reform that corporate powers, politicians and some vice-chancellors have long insisted is both necessary and progressive (Gilbert 2010).

In other words, for over thirty years there have been concerted (albeit often disarticulated) efforts to subordinate critical rationalities to the logic of the market in academic work and transform educational relationships into practices of economic exchange. Any sense of a sudden attack on the public university here is out of joint, and as Michael Burawoy (2010) bluntly notes, 'the university is in crisis everywhere' (Burawoy 2010). By finally subordinating all knowledge and educational relationships to crude market ideologies and mechanisms of economic exchange, the policies go beyond the tactical reforms which have accumulated in recent decades to constitute a politico-ideological strategy that denies the very possibility of the public university and institutionalizes political mechanisms to mitigate its future realisation in any form. This distinguishes a long period of neo-liberalisation from a new settlement of 'deep neoliberalism' in higher education (Brenner, *et al.* 2009, 185). While they use this concept to theorise changes in global regulation, it is also useful for con-

ceptualizing the shift from a cumulative implementation of neoliberal practices to a consolidated restructuring of the 'rule regimes' governing the finance, management, and social function of higher education itself. To put it in Michel Foucault's terms, 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' (Foucault 1988, 3).

This has wide-ranging consequences for all of academic life, but particular implications for the arts, humanities and critical social sciences, which as James Vernon argues, 'speak to different systems of value, different orders of pleasure and enjoyment' and cannot assimilate to market logics without being somehow transmogrified or negated (Vernon 2010, 6). For many in these fields, the proposals thus not only threaten passions, livelihoods, research, teaching programmes and institutions, but promise a Procrustean existence. By the beginning of 2011, mortality had become a common currency of political expression. Philosophers protested that the government was 'putting the university to death;' students carried cardboard coffins painted with the epitaph 'R.I.P. education;' education was 'on life support' according to a flat-lining placard; a skull-adorned

banner simply requested 'don't kill the arts' (Düttmann 2010). The moment has been described as, in no particular order, a dark day (Gerada 2010), tsunami (Reisz 2010), as a nuclear catastrophe (McQuillan 2010), by Mike Baker as a nightmare (BBC News, June 5, 2010), and by Toby Helm and Anushka Asthana as act of vandalism (*The Guardian*, December 5, 2010). 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 (Fowler 2011). This is exacerbated as the changes are being imposed in ways and for reasons felt widely to be beyond democratic accountability, explored in an article by Smith (*The Guardian*, October 19th 2010). It was above all the government's hostile response to opposition, including speeding through a tightly-whipped parliamentary vote to raise fees despite dissent, deployment of violent policing to discipline the student opposition, and a cavalier use of Dickensian language to justify social inequality, which elevated university politics into concerns about an attack on democracy itself. It soon became clear that these 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.

Thus was accomplished a thirty-year project to 'close off and render impossible the experience of education as a collaborative pursuit' and this creates new demands of anyone concerned for the future of critical education (Gilbert 2008, 174). We clearly cannot go on as we have been accustomed to, so can either fatalistically declare defeat in the face of what has been described as a cultural and economic tsunami, retreat into reactive modes of 'survivalism' and defence, or become open to new conceptions of professional practice, modalities of political resistance and imaginaries of the future, including those in the realm of 'untested feasibility.'³ For as Simon Critchley argues, 'the massive structural dislocations of our times can invite pessimism, even active or passive nihilism...but they also invite militancy and optimism, an invitation for our capacity of political invention and imagination' (Critchley 2007, 131). But what might make the difference?

Demanding the impossible, nevertheless

Responses to the present crises of the university are multiple and divided. For the architects of the neoliberal versions of the new university, things are progressing in a period of hyperactive innovation – responding to changing market demands and public discourses, gaming the rankings, securing superior position against 'competitor'

institutions. Indeed, as a missive circulated recently at one university asserted, this is no time or place for 'negative thinking'; academics were instructed to 'be enthusiastic, persistent and courageous supporters in the face of cynicism'. For students and academics who can adapt to the new regime, it will offer new routes to certain forms of professional recognition. For those more deeply committed to the idea of the public university as a democratic institution governed by a community of scholars and students for educational rather than solely economic purposes, however, academic life is continually disorienting.

To an extent, such 'out-of-placeness' and 'out-of-timeness' constitutes a critical distance between nonmarket and neoliberal rationalities and offers reminders that neoliberalism 'is always contingent and can never completely close down alternatives' (Nonini 2008, 152). There are thus ongoing attempts by academics to re-establish the authority of professional knowledge and reasoned argumentation in processes of political decision-making about both universities and social life more generally. These have taken various forms: 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'). These are not presently coordinated; indeed, there are some fundamental differences between them. In each, though, the emancipatory promises of critical knowledge are defended not simply because they are familiar modes of professional action, but also because they are understood to be important for any democratic project and to be themselves under threat. These responses are also bound by a more substantive conception of the political, in which 'subjects raise a problem about a rule of practice' in sanctioned languages and procedures of 'negotiation, deliberation, problem-solving, and reform' (Tully 2002, 540). In other words, they are bound into the hope of a politics of demand.⁴

The first student-led demonstration against budget cuts and tuition fees held in London in autumn 2010 also made such demands, mainly of the state. While represented in mainstream public discourse as being an affront to liberal democracy, students' early protests affirmed a faith, or at least an avid hope, in a liberal democratic process that many had in fact just discovered. 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. Even many of the student occupations during this time were undertaken in defence of the values of intellectual freedom and critique, the idea of the university as a public good, and principles of democratic process. In seeking to save academic programmes from arbitrary closure and workers from unfair dismissal, 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 radicalised such practices, however, is that they were framed by an alternative reading of power which hopes but does not presume that these principles can now be defended or realised within extant institutional forms. What may be under more liberal conditions a *reformist* practice of calling logics into question, thus often became a performative act of resistance. Students' aim in occupying university spaces was generally not to partake in an ongoing strategic game but to short-circuit relations of power that were understood to have become, as James Tully describes it, 'not open to challenge, negotiation, and reform' (Tully 2002, 540). When students occupying the Old Schools at Cambridge in November 2010 demanded that 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)' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010). 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 cozy academic community as an oasis of humanism in an inhuman world, set apart from capitalist society' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010). It was not a rejection of democratic process or of the university, but a demonstration that those now governing the institutions which claim to value these principles do not. This hypocritical distance between what is said and what is done by those in power pervades other social institutions as well. Students' refusal to consent has therefore inspired other groups engaged in parallel struggles against neoliberal restructuring. The president of the National Union of Journalists, for example, wrote that 'the student occupations have lit a fire under the whole movement – they have shown all of us the power of resistance' (Murray 2010). According to another commentator, they have 'played a concrete role in widening the realm of the possible beyond the constrictive paradigm of the status quo and "common sense"' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010).

Many academics agree with this diagnosis. Indeed, all the metaphorical invocations of death and dying circulating these days suggest they

sense it all too well, and as Hallward wrote after seeing his students beaten at a demonstration, 'with each new protest, we learn a little more about what we are up against' (Times Higher Education, December 2010). But for those who feel their futures to be intertwined with the survival of a university that is already deeply de-democratised and commodified, the example is less a mobilising call to arms and more of a disarming summons to do a 'different reading of our attachments and possibilities' (Brown 2006, 41). For many, the university is materially a primary site of intellectual work and professional recognition, and its wages pay the bills. Ideologically, it is still imagined as, and sometimes is, a space for intellectual activity, free inquiry, enlightenment, and emancipation – a place of relative freedom where it is possible to carve out spaces of alterity in scholarship, pedagogy and political action. Politically, it is also experienced as an alienating and repressive arm of the state-capitalist apparatus. The university is at once real, nostalgic, and utopian and the more distance grows between the desire and its eventualized forms, the more effort seems to be channelled into repairing the latter. But when students say, as some do now, 'we don't want to defend the university, we want to transform it,' they are also calling academics to account (Really Open University 2010). They are rejecting, reclaiming, re-imagining and trying

to repurpose universities that have been undermined on our watch, albeit not generally with our approval. It is thus not surprising that some students decided 'it was time to take our campuses back into our own hands' (Casserly 2011, 71).

It is thus instructive to explore the logic of this position, not only for its political gumption but because it appears to reflect what Nikolas Kompridis argues is a critical consciousness of seeking the 'disclosure and realization of possibilities for going on with our practice more reflectively, cooperatively enlarging the space of freedom as we cooperatively enlarge the space of possibility' (Kompridis 2006a, 182). However, while there has been considerable commentary on the causes, character and political efficacy of students' responses, there has been less serious exploration of their contributions to the cultivation of new political subjectivities and critical-experimental modalities of resistance.⁵ It is these formations that I turn to now.

Student resistances and the 'newest' logics of political intervention

The newest student movements in the UK, as internationally, are plurivocal. They are comprised at different points by a number of often student-led organisations which formed around university occupations in 2009 and 2010, new articulations of existing political networks

and parties, heterogeneous action groups focused on work in particular communities and locales, faculty-student groups rooted partly in university centres and departments, and national, international and transnational networks of loosely affiliated educational and social activists. They are brought together, and divided, through demonstrations, space occupations and reclamations, 'people's assemblies', international conferences and networking meetings. They create affinities through opposition to anti-social policies, the critique of neoliberal capitalism and anti-democratic politics, and a will to practice solidarity with other communities of struggle in broader anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements worldwide.

It is tempting to want to name these formations, and numerous labels have already been applied: the international student movement, the new student movement, the new student rebellions, university struggles, the free education movement, the precarious and student movements, autonomy-oriented movements, and a decentralised confederation of non-aligned anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian struggles. Indeed, this paper itself is part of a volume that aims to map out responses to the 'crisis of the university' and explore developments in the re-imagination of the university itself. There are concerns, however, that the very desire to pin the resistances into existing identity categories may not only

homogenise what is in fact a very pluralistic and often divided field of action, but may also be antithetical to the epistemologies and practices of resistance being cultivated within it. Despite these worries, there is some interesting connective tissue that distinguishes them from both previous student politics and more professionalised forms of academic politics, and that links them to other parts of what Richard Day refers to as the 'newest social movements' (Day 2005). This is a commitment to, and belief in the necessity of, what might be named a *politics of possibility*.

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 (Gibson-Graham 2006, xix). This imaginary frames a 'vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty' (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii). However, it does not presume that such conditions can simply be resisted or altered by individual will and on demand. Indeed, it does not presume that 'the currently hegemonic formation will recognize the validity of the claims presented to it

and respond in a way that produces an event of emancipation', but, like all anarchistic politics, works through 'disengagement and reconstruction rather than by reform or revolution; with the end of creating not a new knowable totality (counter-hegemony), but of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity' (Day 2011, 108, 113). A politics of possibility cultivates conceptions of the political that privilege not only institutional structures and forces of power, but equally practices of cultural representation and radical imagination, and the micropolitics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii). It centralises the collective production of a critical-experimental attitude towards being, which seeks to expand and re-signify space and time while inhabiting them with others (University for Strategic Optimism 2010).⁶

Further, a politics of possibility does not view complex political struggles as simple matters of failure or success. Instead, it conceptualizes all political conditions and outcomes as limit-situations which create further theoretical questions and political demands and thus as a rationale for building a politics that engages simultaneously with both the present and future. 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 might signal the need for as-yet-untested modalities of engagement, rather than delimiting the bounds of possibility itself (Pears 2011, 12). 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' (Solomon 2011, 16).

Such practices illustrate the materialisation of an ethos of critical experimentation in political resistance that shifts 'critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression' (Foucault 1984, 45). As such, it also shifts efforts to oppose the further neoliberalisation of higher education in Britain from a 'politics of demand' to something more re-

sembling a 'politics of the act'. Alternatively, in Day's terms, from modalities of resistance which refuse to wait for power to either come to see the reason of its opponents or to dissolve itself, towards practices that favour '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' within the existing system (Day 2011, 108).

The problem of the professional philosopher

The need for at least a critical openness to such a politics of possibility amongst academics could not be clearer. We know that our universities are not fully democratic institutions and yet we cannot quite believe that they are otherwise. We continue to assert the political authority of the critical academic even when bypassed or suppressed. In one article (*The Founder*, January 21, 2011), Stuart Stone even synonymised the idea of 'the academic' with inefficacy and irrelevance, reporting that the 'protests prove academic as government win fees vote'. By channelling critical intellectual work into the logics of the neoliberal corporation, distorting words and minds simply so to survive the broader structural changes without being too much transformed ourselves, we seem to have forgotten, or at least forgotten to consider, Marcuse's warning that 'the philoso-

pher can only participate in social struggles so long as he is not a professional philosopher' (1989, 66). As Kompridis further suggests, philosophy abstracted from practice cannot yield solutions in moments of crisis precisely because 'that knowledge is part of what is in crisis, along with the perspective(s) in light of which we apply it' (2006a, 167).

Faced with the imposed reconstruction, and in some cases the wholesale destruction, of some of the most basic conditions of legitimacy and meaning for academic work in critical social science, philosophy and education, many people now hope that the exercise of deep neoliberal power can still be arrested, reversed, or at least adequately mitigated by institutionally sanctioned resources of critique within the universities. I write, sort of, as one of these people. There is a fear that calling this into question would betray commitments to reasoned argumentation, intellectual autonomy and the promises of the university as a potentially democratic institution, or in Edward Said's words, a preserve for utopian imagination (Said 1996, 224). There is also a fear of what might happen if we were to demand the rights that are routinely denied for us to make it so, and even greater anxieties about whether we could in fact pursue this project if permitted to or not. One insight from the emergent student resistances, particularly in tactics such as occupation, is

that while the critical-experimental ethos is a necessary component of any response to processes of deep neoliberalisation, it is not sufficient; that indeed, it must sometimes be defended through political action.⁷

But despite understanding that the imposed neoliberalisation of higher education is an attack on the very possibilities we seek to expand, the university is generally not regarded as a legitimate site of political commitment. It is not even necessarily regarded as a place where we can or should make 'cautious experimental modifications of our specific forms of subjectivity' as we undertake to 'go on' with our work in conditions of crisis (Tully 1999, 98). This is not a new situation and similar debates emerge whenever the role of the university shifts in relation to (and particularly to converge with) the state, capital, industry or military interests (Chomsky 1998; Wallerstein and Starr 1971). But each time is new and in the conditions of deep neoliberalisation in which we are emplaced today, responding critically will take some considerable work, of the sort that, which in our professional roles, we will likely be neither recognised nor rewarded for. Indeed, the challenge lies in being receptive to other possibilities such as those illustrated in this article and to undertake serious experimental work in rearticulating reclaiming and creating conditions for knowledge production 'as a critique of existing cultural practice,

with a view to how one might be emancipated from forms of un-free praxis towards more free praxis' (Critchley 2003).

The pressing question now may not be whether the public university will survive but how any form of democratic education and critical knowledge production will be possible despite its deep neoliberalisation. The students who have been protesting on the streets and occupying the universities admit they do not have definitive answers to these questions and that they cannot answer them alone. But they also reject the injunction that there can be no answers at all and illustrate 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. As one student wrote, 'you fight the closing down of possibility by opening it up, by widening the field of potential historical actors – we are engaged in a battle over the conditioning of the future' (Russell and Milburn 2011) The material and subjective forces of neoliberal rationality are present in such responses to the current crisis of the university, but their inevitability is not. Perhaps, when capitalist realism meets the politics of possibility, it loses its grip.

Endnotes

¹ This and the following section of the paper draw heavily on another article

which is now in press (Amsler forthcoming).

² For discussions of post-war structural transformations of the university see Calhoun (2006), Fischman, Igo and Rhoten (2007), and Peters (2005).

³ 'Untested feasibility' is a concept introduced by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000, 117).

⁴ Richard Day's notion of a 'politics of demand' refers to reformist political logics which appeal 'to the benevolence of hegemonic forces' and through such appeals to transform their relations, in a desire to be recognised by them. This is contrasted in his work to a 'politics of the act', which abandons hope that such forces (particularly in the forms of state and market) 'are somehow capable of producing effects of emancipation' and thereby orienting action towards the assertion of rights and creation of autonomous possibilities (Day 2005, 80, 15).

⁵ The notions of 'critical' and 'experimental' attitude are both from Foucault. For Foucault's explanation of the first, see 'What is critique?' (Foucault 2007). For a discussion of the second, see Tully (1999).

⁶ Significant parts of the emergent student movements in Britain, wider Europe and the United States also share what 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' (Day 2011, 113). However, there are also elements of and cross-fertilisations with orthodox and heterodox Marxisms, more classical anarchisms, and liberal-democratic orientations, and the movements thus defy such generalisation.

⁷ Debate on the tensions arising within such situations now circulates within the movement broadly defined, as deeper questions about the relationships between scholarship and activism (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2009), horizontalism and hierarchy (Nunes 2005), and democratic openness and defensive closure (UMN Solidarity Network 2011) have become, often abruptly, questions of practical import.

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