Education as the practice of freedom, from past to future:

Student movements and the corporate university

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Abstract

As contemporary universities become increasingly deregulated and neoliberalised structures, how is grassroots student political organising to adapt? What role could student organisers, working in coalition with academics, unions and communities, play in shaping the Future University? We argue that student organising has an even more crucial place in the site of the neoliberal university, working against both the corporatisation of the contemporary university, as well as rising neoliberal conditions in the broader communities within which tertiary education is embedded. These conditions, without doubt, have the potential to stultify student movements by burdening students with ever-increasing debt, and packaging degrees as a commodity with a market-determined value. However, we argue, the neoliberalisation of education also engenders an opportunity for students in shaping the Future University, through grassroots advocacy for staff working conditions, and for critical pedagogies that enable the integration of transformative social justice movements with academic theory. For us, the Future University is a space that nourishes critical and creative thinking, and produces students that are able to integrate theory with radical praxis. However, for this to be realised, the ideological function of the university, in justifying and naturalising hegemonic power structures, and the very meaning of public education, must be exposed and critiqued from the ground up.

Key words

 corporatisation, the future university, neoliberalism, protest, radical pedagogy, student movements

> *Ngara - nangadinye narri nura Gadigal-birrung, Wangal-birrung. Nura-jam biyal wadiyman-birrung, berewalgal-birrung. Nura-jam Iyura-birrung.*

> *The authors acknowledge this paper was written on the lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people, whose sovereignty was never ceded to the British crown. This country rightfully belongs to Aboriginal people.*

Introduction

The concept of the 'future university' is at once descriptive and normative. It asks: 'what does the university of the future look like?', and: 'what do we want the university of the future to be?'. However, as Ronald Barnett (2012) notes, in many ways, the future university is already here. Students' experiences of tertiary education now are radically different to those of fifty years ago. A growing body of commentary from disillusioned staff and students has questioned the impact of neoliberalism on university life in recent decades, criticising the ascendance of corporate logics within the academy and positing alternative visions of education as a vehicle for social justice and the public good (Research and Destroy 2009; Alibhai-Brown 2013; Riemer 2013; Undercommoning Collective 2016). This roll-out of neoliberalism has not been merely a unilinear subsumption of university communities to market logics—rather, we argue that the neoliberalisation of universities has been a contested process which has created new challenges but also new opportunities for progressive forces on campus. We follow David Harvey in understanding neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005, p. 2). The theory of neoliberalism is 'always embedded' within particular institutional practices that produce particular subjectivities within individuals who interact with them (Cahill 2014). Working within this conceptual framework, we argue that the neoliberalisation of the Australian higher education has fundamentally altered the positioning of students, teachers and university 'executives'. In this article, we synthesise a critical political economy of the contemporary academy with our experiences as student unionists at the University of Sydney. We seek to explain how contestation within universities and in broader society has shaped the development

of higher education, and explore the role that students might have in creating more equitable and socially transformative universities for the future. In focusing on the University of Sydney, a university with one of the strongest traditions of student radicalism in the country, we hope to analyse the material conditions that have made these student movements possible. Recognising that universities around the country —particularly regional and rural universities—reflect divergent communities and interests, we nonetheless argue that there are important lessons to be learned from struggles at the University of Sydney.

In the first section, we present a political economy of the contemporary university and account for the transformation of Australian higher education under neoliberalism. In the second section, we draw on case studies of student-led social movements at the University of Sydney and around Australia to examine how these movements have challenged or reshaped the social role of the university. In the third section, we analyse the ways in which the current trends in higher education—the commodification of degrees, the move towards online education, and the deregulation of the sector—impact student movements. However, we argue, the neoliberalisation of education also engenders a central role for students in shaping the Future University, through grassroots advocacy for staff working conditions, and for critical pedagogies that enable the integration of transformative social justice movements with academic theory. We argue that student movements must seek to institutionalise themselves as a counter-hegemonic social force, in line with Nancy Fraser's (1990) theorisation of 'subaltern counterpublics', as vehicles for challenges to capitalist hegemony.

1. The rise of the corporate university in Australia

In 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', Nancy Fraser critiques the Habermasian conception of the public sphere as a site of free and equal political discourse. Habermas' theory, she argues, relies on a historically specific configuration of the liberal, bourgeois public sphere, one which is, in reality, premised on exclusion. Her 'alternative, post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere' is a pluralist model of public discourse (Fraser 1990, p. 67). Fraser's subaltern counterpublics represent 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990, p. 67). While Fraser's account is largely

abstracted from particular real-world political contestations, Australian scholars have analysed socialist organisations (Byrne 2015), the Aboriginal land rights movement (Iveson 2017) and militant trade unionism (Burgmann & Burgmann 2017, p. 6) as examples of counterpublics in practice. We argue that radical student movements provide a further example. Within the institutional setting of the corporate university, which functions to legitimate and perpetuate capitalist hegemony, student collectives form counter-hegemonic settings for the development of oppositional subjectivities and political strategies, exposing the ineradicably plural and contested nature of institutional spaces. We explore this claim through analysis—firstly of the hegemonic role of universities, and secondly of recent student movements that have sought to challenge the ideologico-political function of the contemporary neoliberal university.

However, Fraser's theory of counterpublics at times verges on idealism; while she successfully argues for a pluralist model of the public over Habermas' unitary conception of the public sphere, her argument elides the occasional tendency of counterpublics towards introspection and separatism. In this vein, we highlight the challenges faced by contemporary student movements, including, in some cases, an individualistic focus on identity that hinders solidarity and action.

We begin with a brief portrait of contemporary universities and their imbrication within neoliberal economic formations. A critical political economy of education reveals the social conservatism inherent in the capitalist academy. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) forcefully demonstrates the complicity of the western academy in the ongoing project of settler colonialism, a dynamic most obvious in disciplines like anthropology which have directly engaged with Indigenous people, but also to be seen throughout the humanities, sciences and applied disciplines (Porter 2010). Furthermore, universities perform a foundational role in the reproduction of the social division of labour, thereby directly contributing to socio-economic inequality. Universities in some sense 'produce' the middle class, by transforming students into professionals who will use their new technical and administrative skills to manage social production and supervise the working class on behalf of the owners of capital (Butler, Jones and Stilwell 2009, p. 146). This dynamic can produce economically conservative and socially elitist subjectivities among students (Research and Destroy 2009), and underpin social conflict between students and the broader community (Deboer 2017). Universities are themselves sites of intense exploitation of increasingly precarious academic workforces and indebted students, and key strategic sites for the management of global capitalism given their

role as a platform for bourgeois cultural leadership (Zhou 2014; Undercommoning Collective 2016).

Education systems in capitalist society effectively disguise the benefits of inherited social privilege as fair reward for personal qualities like intelligence and dedication, thereby constructing inequality as a natural product of differences between individuals, rather than the outcome of structural processes. This dynamic reflects Fraser's analysis of how access to 'formally inclusive public arenas' is undermined by 'informal impediments to participatory parity'—the cultural and social barriers that operate to entrench structural inequality (Fraser 1990, p. 63). Lawler (1978) argues that IQ tests actually measure students' cultural capital rather than their intellectual aptitude per se, since objective cross-cultural measurement of intellectual capacity is not possible. Such indices underpin the mass testing schemes that determine access to educational resources, with funding allocated between public schools on the basis of their performance on standardised tests, and better-resourced school places for 'gifted' students allocated in the same way. In Australia, academically-selective schools use IQ as the basis for entrance tests (Singhai 2017) and a strong relationship exists between socio-economic background, ability to access private tutoring and access to such schools (Ho 2017). Meanwhile, Australian private schools are allocated hundreds of millions of dollars of public funding despite earning sufficient revenue from fees (Perry and Rowe 2016), while underfunded public schools struggle with a forty-year backlog of overdue maintenance (Munro 2017). Even where egalitarian social policy allows for theoretically equal access to education across social classes, tacit knowledge and cultural capital function to restrict university access to the middle class (Andersen & Hansen 2011). Economic aspects of education further restrict access to the academy to the already privileged—for example, the necessity of taking unpaid internships which provide the opportunity to gain work experience in a highly competitive graduate job market (Kenber 2009), and parents' ability to finance expensive private schooling, tutoring and university fees. Students' access to higher education is consequently very strongly determined by their parents' income, education levels and social class (Georg & Bargel 2017). *Contra* ideological representations of university education as meritocratic, and utopian visions of the academy as a social equaliser, it remains a critical site for the reproduction of bourgeois cultural capital.

For both Fraser and Habermas, the notion of the public sphere represents 'a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk' —the relative autonomy of the public sphere highlights the distinctions

between the state, the economy, and democratic associations (Fraser 1990, p. 57). While these conceptual distinctions are critically important to democratic theory and practice, it is nevertheless crucial to attend to the ways in which the discursive spaces of publics and counterpublics are shaped and constrained by the state and the economy, to avoid overstating the autonomy of the 'medium of talk' from these spheres. The university is still generally conceived as a site 'for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state' (Fraser 1990, p. 57), in part due to the foundational principle of academic freedom. However, recent trends in higher education suggest that the relative autonomy afforded to universities is diminishing, leading to a closing of the gaps between the state, the economy, and democratic associations (Cahill 2014, p. 25). Influenced by changes in government policy, economic trends, and social movements, the university has come to occupy a peculiar position within Australian society, in the liminal space between the public and private sectors. Deregulation of the Australian higher education sector has been on the national policy agenda since at least 2014, following similar trends in the United States (Bexley 2014). With the constant threat (and periodic reality) of cuts to the public funding they receive, universities have focused strategically on increasing enrolment of full-fee-paying international students; international student enrolment grew by fifteen percent from March 2016 to March 2017 (Department of Education and Training 2017). Universities compete fiercely in national and international ranking schemes, causing academics' work to be reduced to the metrics of research output or 'economically impactful deliverables' (Luka et al. 2015). The paradoxical outcome is a hybrid beast—a public sector institution, governed by the corporate logic of cost-efficiency and profit.

As a result of this competition to attract students, Australian universities spend ever-increasing sums on advertising, marketing and the construction of visually impressive new facilities. Meanwhile, the actual quality of university education has diminished alongside conditions for an increasingly precarious academic workforce. A significant and growing proportion of education is being delivered through online modules, webinars, and pre-recorded lectures. The online education industry is growing at a rapid rate, and was declared in 2014 as Australia's sixth-fastest growing employer (Ross 2014). The effect of this trend is a decentralised campus, in which students spend less time in physical classrooms, and more in 'virtual learning spaces'. This marks a significant departure from more traditional educational settings, in which interaction between teachers and students was prioritised. This participatory model of education places value on the contribution students can make

to the learning experience, and on a dialogical relationship between teacher and student. However, when students are presented with pre-recorded lectures and impersonal online modules, they are repositioned as passive repositories for knowledge. Paolo Freire names this the 'banking model' of education, in which the goal of the educator is not meaningful communication, but rather to fill receptacles (students) with content (knowledge) (Freire 1972, p. 45). The use of online learning technologies also enables greater surveillance of students and their work. The new plagiarism software Cadmus, developed by a University of Melbourne student, uses data from students' keystrokes to build up a profile of their typing style. It tracks the time that students spend on assignments and records patterns about their working habits (Cook 2016). These trends produce a disciplinary and normalising culture in which students are expected to learn, think and work in a particular manner. Representative organisations for both students and staff have criticised these changes as part of an overall attempt to reconstitute students as consumers, rather than learners—a dynamic which mirrors broader changes to public subjectivities under neoliberalism.

In the past, students have instituted a range of alternative educational spaces, aimed at challenging the traditional hierarchy of teachers over students, and embodying visions for alternative education. For example, student radicals organised an entire program of courses under the Sydney Free U which, at its peak in the late 1960s, attracted over 300 students (Cahill 2005). More recently at the University of Sydney, Radical Education Week has provided a space for alternative, student-run intellectual exchange on a range of topics (Jha & Donohoe 2016), while the Critical Race Discussion Group has provided a forum for anti-racist education on campus (Mason 2016). However, as virtual learning becomes the norm of higher education and students are increasingly isolated and removed from physical spaces on-campus, the potential for these peer-led education programs narrows; we have yet to see whether similar initiatives will be successful in the virtual realm. Nonetheless, the ongoing presence of initiatives contesting the dominance of market logics within universities affirms the way in which institutional spaces are constituted by plural and competing discursive arenas. In the next section, we highlight recent challenges to neoliberalism posed by staff and student groups in contemporary university settings, and the ways in which counterpublics within universities have challenged exclusion and marginalisation not only within universities, but in expanding public realms—a phenomenon that Fraser (1990, p. 67) terms the 'widening of discursive contestation'.

2. Student, staff and community activism: Challenging neoliberalism on and beyond the campus

Global resurgence of youth activism: A new political moment

Some commentators have suggested that low electoral turnouts, decreased membership of political parties and civil society organisations, and falling trade union membership among young people are evidence of their increasing apathy towards politics (see Henn & Foard 2012; Sloam 2016). However, such analyses ignore increasing issue-based youth mobilisations against the inequalities that characterise the contemporary political economy. Young people have been among those most affected by public spending cuts, while neoliberal labour markets (Parkinson 2017; Remeikis 2017) and housing markets (Razaghi 2018) carry fundamental intergenerational inequalities (Henn & Foard 2012; Bowman 2015). Consequently, young people across the world are highly politicised, but increasingly suspicious of the potential for resolving the issues of concern to them through formal politics alone.

Eighteen to thirty year-olds are more than twice as likely as older age groups to attend demonstrations (Ruiz-Grossman 2017), while a growing majority of this age group identifies capitalism as the ultimate cause of the issues they are concerned about (Magness 2017), and an increasing proportion of young people would like to see a transition towards a socialist society characterised by public ownership and democratic control of the economy (McGreal 2017). Despite young people's growing preference for extra-parliamentary forms of political action, these forms of action have arguably had a wider impact on electoral politics. For example, Jeremy Corbyn's rise to the leadership of the UK Labour Party on the basis of a strident pro-youth and anti-inequality platform centered around opposition to the privatisation of higher education shows 'the dissemination of [oppositional] discourses into ever widening arenas' (Fraser 1990, p. 68). On the back of enormous mobilisations of young people, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership has seen at least 188,000 people, mostly under the age of thirty, join a party which had seemed in terminal decline for two decades (MacAskill 2016). Furthermore, both Corbyn and US Democrat Bernie Sanders have cemented their popularity with 'millenials' through their personal involvement in youth-led protest movements (see, for example, Anapol 2018; Earle 2018). While these developments do not necessarily represent a radical challenge to the capitalist academy, they do demonstrate a widespread frustration among young people at the state of higher education and support for a more egalitarian university.

Student protest on the rise in Australia

Universities in Australia have borne witness to this shift, with increasing student mobilisations focused both on intramural issues, that is, on the conditions within universities themselves and on higher education policy more broadly, as well as on other social and economic issues. In 2014, there was national political contestation over higher education in Australia, with an incoming Liberal government pursuing an agenda of fee deregulation and reduced public contribution to the sector which was intended to further the marketisation of Australian universities (Bexley 2014). University deregulation was framed by education minister Christopher Pyne as necessary in order to promote efficiency and innovation in the sector, supposedly generating better quality and more diverse course offerings and thereby benefiting students (Hurst 2014). While supported by industry peak bodies and a majority of university executives, the scheme was fervently opposed by student organisations and campus trade unions on the basis that it would see student debt skyrocket and further entrench barriers to access (Hurst 2014; Rea 2016). Deregulation was criticised as a fundamental attack on the pre-existing ethos of higher education as a public good (Bexley 2014), a key feature of Australian public life since the 1970s.

Student and staff outrage precipitated the largest student demonstrations since the Iraq War, with thousands of students rallying across the country as part of protests organised by the National Union of Students and campus activists (ABC 2014; AAP 2003). Sydney University students were especially prominent in the anti-deregulation movement in 2014, frequently picketing Liberal politicians' visits and ultimately forcing them to avoid the campus altogether (ABC 2014). In one memorable episode, students disrupted Pyne's appearance on the main national current affairs panel show by chanting 'no cuts, no fees, no corporate universities' (Moodie 2014). These protests captured media attention and garnered public support, with 64% of the public opposing the government's policy (Massola & Aston 2014). Ultimately, the Labor opposition, along with small parties and independents, formed a coalition in the Senate to block the deregulation bill, and the policy was eventually abandoned (Conifer 2016).

Student-staff solidarity at the University of Sydney

Alongside this agitation around federal education policy, the University of Sydney has seen two periods of industrial action in 2013 and 2017. The contestation was

focused on staff casualisation, restructuring of faculties and student services, and staff pay cuts. Campus unionists, supported by the Education Action Group in the student union, presented these actions as part of a broader struggle against the 'ongoing commodification' of higher education (Riemer 2013). These disputes have seen major mobilisations of hundreds of staff and students, with sometimes heavy-handed responses by police including arrests of student activists (Davidson 2013). While 2013 protests were successful in forcing significant concessions on wages and conditions from university management (Rowbotham 2013), the result of 2017 strikes was more ambivalent, with some of the union's key demands not achieved in the final enterprise agreement (Chrysanthos 2017a). This outcome reflects an industrial relations arbitration regime which is both hostile to workers' representatives and easily exploited by university managers, leaving campus trade unions in a weak bargaining position and underpinning poor outcomes for university workers nationally.

The University of Sydney has in previous decades been the site of successful movements aimed at institutionalising progressive disciplines within the university. The Department of Political Economy was established through a thirty-year struggle by dissident staff and students who began within the Economics department (Butler, Jones & Stilwell 2009). These radical academics were unsatisfied with the dominance of politically conservative, mathematically-focused neoclassical approaches in their faculty, and argued for a more holistic approach, which instead saw economics as a social science that should be employed in service of the public good. After a heated campaign including strikes of up to 4,000 students and staff, arrests of student activists and sackings of radical academics, the struggle was successful and an independent Department of Political Economy was established in 2008. It is the only such department at an Australian university and one of only a handful worldwide teaching heterodox perspectives on economics (Butler, Jones & Stilwell 2009, p. 182). Political Economy staff and students maintain a strong focus on the social utility of their research outside the university, and hold strong links with the labour movement, progressive political parties, community groups and left-wing think tanks (Butler, Jones & Stilwell 2009, p. 190). Fraser (1990 p. 67) notes that successful counterpublics are oriented towards the broader public, rather than becoming introspective enclaves—this concept of 'publicity' is reflected in the outward-facing focus of the PE department. The department has remained unpopular with university management and faced occasional threats to its autonomy despite high enrolments, overwhelmingly positive student reviews, and high-quality research

output with a substantial international reputation (Bacon 2011). In 2011, a student and staff campaign succeeded in defeating an attempt to merge the department with Economics and International Relations. A further threat to the department was posed in 2016 with the abolition of one of its main feeder courses (Furst 2016), as a result of which first-year enrolments have approximately halved (Brooks 2018, pers. comm). Despite these setbacks, the department remains a key site of radical thought and praxis on campus. Sydney University also saw the introduction of the world's first feminist philosophy course in 1973. When the course was proposed by two junior academics, senior faculty and university management initially opposed the move, but ultimately acquiesced after construction workers employed on campus renovations threatened to walk off site unless the course was approved (Burgmann & Burgmann 2017, p. 101).

The examples canvassed above reflect the commitment of dissenting staff and students to a vision of the university as an institution embedded in broader social and political contexts, with an ethical responsibility to address injustice in these contexts. It is important to note that it is often students who are marginalised as a result of racism, sexism, homophobia and class, as well as staff in more precarious positions, that are most active in such struggles. In his 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire provides a theoretical framework for thinking about the role of education in the process of resistance. A liberatory pedagogy 'makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed [...] from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation' (Freire 1972, p. 25). Freire takes the practice of education to be inherently politicised, and thus a fertile ground for political action and transformation.[1] It is precisely this dialectic between the process of education and political engagement that we see not only in the examples above, but also in student and staff involvement in broader social movements, beyond the bounds of the academy.

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[1]   Freire places significant emphasis on the concepts of liberation and freedom, by which he means *collective* freedom from oppression, as opposed to liberal formulations of freedom as individual autonomy. While this discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is important to note how the latter conception of freedom dominates the neoliberal imaginary, and the ways in which this has usurped collectivist demands for freedom in the Freierian sense. For a discussion of how Freire's critical pedagogy can be applied to neoliberal universities, and Freire's treatment of freedom, see Giroux 2010.

Campaigns around social and environmental issues

Students at the University of Sydney have also been active in recent protest movements around the environment, Aboriginal rights, refugees, LGBTIQ rights, and other social issues beyond the walls of the ivory tower. While some see involvement in such issues as a distraction from the 'real business' of student unions as service providers to students (Liberal Students 2016), we adopt a 'social movement (student) unionism' perspective which regards broader action on such issues as indivisible from narrower advocacy around student learning conditions. This perspective is inspired by a substantial tradition of Australian social movement unionism, including construction workers going on strike for Aboriginal rights and environmental causes in the 1970s (Burgmann & Burgmann 2017, pp. 94-98), and more recent support across the trade union movement for marriage equality for LGBTIQ people (Australian Marriage Equality n.d). Since students are a diverse group affected by an array of social issues, genuine advocacy for students should support their interests in the community beyond the campus. Thus, we argue, student unions should encourage students to be actively engaged in broader society and develop a sense of social solidarity, as well as fight for lower fees, cheaper textbooks and smaller class sizes.

Fraser (1990) suggests that subaltern counterpublics may 'function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (p. 68). This certainly seems to be the case in recent student campaigns, which have succeeded in building connections between 'on-campus issues' and broader community concerns. For example, queer activists at the University of Sydney have campaigned for gender-neutral bathrooms and the recognition of preferred names for trans students, as well as collaborating with staff to pressure management to publicly support equal marriage and organising students to participate in the broader marriage equality campaign (Abi-Hanna, Kim & Barz 2013; Jonscher 2015; Chrysanthos 2017b). Recruitment drives organised by campus activists along with NGOs succeeded in enrolling 90,000 young people to vote in the lead-up to the national referendum on marriage equality (Karp 2017), playing a significant role in its success. Similarly, students have mobilised against the planned closure of the University of Sydney's Aboriginal support centre and Aboriginal support staff redundancies (Smith 2012), and have stridently criticised the University's hypocrisy in marketing itself as a culturally sensitive institution committed to engaging Aboriginal students while in reality Aboriginal enrolments have halved because of inadequate support services (Webster & Blakeney 2014). At the same time, these organisers have recognised the

need for broad community activism aimed at challenging settler-colonial attitudes and anti-Aboriginal racism both on campus and beyond. Therefore, campus activists have challenged not only the university's failure to provide adequate support to Aboriginal students, but also symbolic issues such as the official celebration on campus of historical figures who openly endorsed violence against Aboriginal people (Mason 2017a). Aboriginal academics have sought to use the university as a platform for decolonisation, in order to challenge the dominance of colonial knowledge and 'Indigenise' the academy (Corr 2016). They have also sought to bring onto campus Aboriginal activists campaigning around issues such as Aboriginal sovereignty, the ongoing forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, abuse of children in juvenile detention and the closure of remote Aboriginal communities, exposing students to Aboriginal community perspectives through public forums and by giving Aboriginal voices a platform in student publications (Weatherall 2017). Through campus consciousness-raising activities, student activists across Australia have succeeded in building awareness among young people of issues affecting Aboriginal people. These efforts have contributed to the surge of support which Aboriginal rights movements have seen in recent years, with crowds of tens of thousands of young people taking to the streets to demand that Australia reckon with its colonial history and combat ongoing racial injustice (Wahlquist 2018).

Another prominent student-led movement within the University has focused around the high rates of sexual violence experienced by students as well as staff. Students have been active in drawing attention to this issue since at least the 1970s (Williams 1977). However, the campaign has reached national prominence in the past five years, with growing public awareness of the problem of sexual violence in university communities. Students from the University of Sydney Women's Collective, an autonomous collective of mainly undergraduate feminists, have led protests, petitions and poster campaigns to demand safer campuses for women students. In 2016, students carrying mattresses disrupted the University of Sydney Open Day information lecture for parents, took over the microphones, and gave speeches about their experiences of sexual violence within the university (Cormack 2016). This protest attracted national media attention, and was accompanied by the release of an open letter signed by a decade of University of Sydney Women's Officers, demanding change from the University (Dumas 2016). This campaign also engaged with staff members and the staff representative union, through the formation of a group called Staff Against Rape (2016). As a coalition of the undergraduate Women's

Collective and the campus branch of the National Tertiary Education Union, Staff Against Rape aims to draw links between the working conditions of staff and the learning experiences of students, in order to create political solidarity between the two groups.

Advocates involved in the campaign against sexual violence claim that universities have historically minimised the problem, seeking to manage their reputations rather than create genuine cultural change (see, e.g., Funnell in Dent 2017). Strategically, student organisers have framed the issue as one of student safety, educational justice and the duty of care that a university should provide for its students. This presents a challenge to the commodification of degrees in the neoliberal university. Students are conceived not simply as consumers purchasing a product, but embodied subjects, existing in networks of gendered power and thus vulnerable to violence and harm—this presents a challenge to the commodification of students that characterises the neoliberal university. Campaign advocates argue that universities, as spaces of learning, have a particular responsibility to prevent this harm from occurring.

In recent years, one strategy proposed by students has been for universities to implement consent education as a form of primary prevention of sexual violence. In a context where specialist courses are being cut in favour of generic undergraduate degrees that emphasise vocational and instrumental knowledge, the demand for consent education challenges universities to act on their duty to impart socially useful knowledge to their students. It positions universities as institutions with a social purpose—to create ethical and engaged citizens, able to enter into respectful relations with one another—rather than just useful workers. This reflects bell hooks' (1994) conception of 'engaged pedagogy' (after Freire's 'critical pedagogy'), an ideal in which learning is a personally and emotionally transformative process for students and teachers alike, rather than a mere transmission of knowledge.

While the successful national mobilisations of students against fee deregulation demonstrate the widespread resonance of an egalitarian approach to higher education, it is important to note that the experience of student radicalism at Sydney University is not necessarily representative of all university campuses in Australia. Historically, the country's student movement has been dominated by inner-urban universities in major cities, with student activism at suburban and regional campuses being relatively weaker. While a detailed analysis of the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this paper, the inherent geographical barriers to organising non-

urban students play a significant role, as do government attacks on independent student unions which have especially impacted rural universities. Nonetheless, the examples we have discussed demonstrate the potential of student activism, in concert with campus unionism and broader community mobilisations, to foster the development of progressive counterpublics at universities in order to contest their ongoing neoliberalisation and articulate a vision for a more egalitarian academy.

3. Promises and pitfalls: Organising students in the neoliberal university

The neoliberalisation of education has posed significant challenges for efforts to politically mobilise students. A (supposed) lack of mass student activism in the contemporary era compared with its heyday in the 1960s and 70s is held by some former student radicals to be evidence of a widespread acceptance of the neoliberal conception of higher education as a commodity, and increasing conservatism among students (Burgess in Butler, Jones & Stilwell 2009, p. xix), with student movements sometimes described as increasingly irrelevant to most students (Jha 2018). While student grievances may be widespread, as shown for example by the increasing drop-out rate among Australian students (Moodie 2016) and increasing levels of student poverty (Bexley et al. 2013), this ideology of individualism helps foster individualistic responses to distress and may preclude possibilities for collective action. However, such an attitude ignores the structural barriers to participating in political movements.

Firstly, the transient nature of university communities presents persistent barriers. Student groups must orient themselves around seasonal cycles of semesters and breaks, and face constant turnover of members and organisers as older, more experienced organisers graduate and are replaced by younger students (Deboer 2017). Handovers of knowledge, skills, resources and connections between generations of student activists can consume much of a group's energy, and inadequate handovers can render student activist groups incapable of undertaking any outward-looking work at all. Political campaigning can be highly emotionally intense, especially for more inexperienced students, and unless properly supported, members are likely to 'burn out' and withdraw from activist projects if they have bad experiences (Anonymous 2014). Student activists may also face persecution by university authorities and by the police for their activities.

These already-difficult circumstances, which have been common to all periods of student organising, have been especially exacerbated as a result of the neoliberalisation of universities. Coursework and assessment loads have increased for students, reducing the time available for student activist projects (Deboer 2017). The proliferation of online learning modules and pre-recorded lectures has eliminated significant quantities of face-to-face teaching, further fragmenting student communities already segregated by faculty, age, and so on. Student unions have come under sustained attack from conservative governments, especially in terms of their role in political advocacy for student interests and, as a result, the resource base of Australian student unions has diminished significantly (Rochford 2006). Some student unions, especially those at more isolated suburban and regional campuses, have been abolished entirely as independent entities and replaced with university-run advisory committees (Harrison 2010; Fan & Nott 2015). Alongside these attacks from without, student unionism has also sometimes experienced a 'neoliberalisation from within', with some student organisations prioritising corporate partnerships and pro-management politics over the collective interests of students and staff (Rowbotham 2014; Mason 2017b). For example, the University of Sydney Union (a student association) voted not to support campus trade unions during industrial action in 2017 (Landis-Hanley & Napier-Rahman 2017), and sought $50,000 in damages in the NSW Supreme Court against a student representative who blew the whistle on collusion between university management and police during the 2013 wave of industrial action (Loussikian 2013).

Students are also facing unprecedented pressures in housing, employment and cost of living. Two thirds of students report experiencing rent stress, which the NSW government defines as spending over 30% of one's income on rent, and some students spend as much as 90% of their income on rent (Gilmore 2010). This housing affordability crisis has given students a choice between expensive corporate student accommodation proximal to campus, and overcrowded, run-down terrace houses in the surrounding suburbs (Bagshaw 2015). As a result of high housing costs, coupled with inadequate welfare payments, low wages and insecure work, two thirds of students in Australia now live below the poverty line, and an increasing proportion report missing meals to make ends meet (ABC 2013; Cowan 2017). While many middle-class school leavers are able to rely on financial assistance from their parents, disadvantaged students such as Aboriginal students, students from regional backgrounds, mature-aged students, students with children, and those with disabled relatives may actually be required to financially support their families while

studying (Bexley et al. 2013; Hermans 2017). Welfare payments for university students and young jobseekers have not increased in real terms in Australia for more than 20 years, with students receiving these payments living on the equivalent of less than half of the minimum wage (Bullen 2016). Stagnant wages and cost-of-living increases have required students to increase their hours in paid employment, with an increasing proportion of students working more than 20 hours a week (Bexley et al. 2013). Increasing numbers of students who are employed while studying report disruption to their studies because of work, with a third of students regularly missing class to make shifts (Bexley et al. 2013, p. 49). These stresses have serious consequences for students' mental health (Gillespie 2017) and are responsible for increasing drop-out rates, especially among students from marginalised backgrounds (Moodie 2016).

Further, students and staff today find themselves within a highly corporatised university culture, in which political engagement is both implicitly and explicitly discouraged. Recent years have seen a roll-back of earlier arrangements which institutionalised a democratic culture within some university departments, and a re-assertion of management prerogative, with extensive staff redundancies following management-led restructuring of courses and faculties (Butler, Jones & Stilwell 2009; Asimakis 2017). University executives have also utilised a pro-employer industrial arbitration system to out-maneuver campus trade unions and enforce cuts to wages and conditions (Bonyhady & Napier-Rahman 2017). Management capacity to cancel collective agreements altogether and threats of hefty financial penalties for illegal industrial action create enormous difficulties for attempts to unionise university staff, and decrease campus trade unions' ability to contest the further neoliberalisation of their workplaces. This reinforces the importance of students' allegiances with staff and their unions, as these changes have a significant impact not only on students' learning conditions but on the broader capacity to organise communities on campus.

Beyond these structural barriers to participation in social movements, student collectives are also affected by the ideological impacts of neoliberalism. This is reflected in a heightened focus on questions of individual identity, as opposed to collective action: for example, debates about whether or not asexual people should be included in the University of Sydney Queer Collective, or non-binary people in the Women's Collective (Buckett 2016; Parissis 2017). Nancy Fraser (1990, p. 68) notes that counterpublics act both as spaces for political discourse and for the oppositional formation of identity. However, in practice the latter can come to

dominate the activities of counter-public spaces, due to a neoliberal emphasis placed on individual identity and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The effect is intensified introspection and internal conflict within student collectives, sapping energy for political organising and action—which cautions against Fraser's (1990, p. 67) assertion that counterpublics are not 'enclaves'. Ironically, however, her more recent critique of identity politics under neoliberalism (2013, pp. 167-170) and the liberal politics of recognition provides us with useful tools to understand the ways in which 'separatism and political correctness' (p. 167) are underpinned by the rise of individualism under capitalism.

4. Where to from here? The revival of student movements in and for the Future University

The history of student movements outlined in Section 2 makes it clear that well-organised students, working in coalition with staff and communities, have the collective agency to transform the institutional structures of universities. However, the rapid neoliberalisation of universities presents both barriers and possibilities for those seeking to mobilise students in service of both struggles for educational justice, and for broader community campaigns. In this final section, we will suggest some future directions for these movements, and imagine the role they might play in shaping the future university.

Firstly, the structural burdens placed on students and young people—including the cost of housing, increasing student debt, the declining quality of tertiary education, and precarious employment—provide an obvious starting point for mobilisation. Mass movements of young people in the USA and UK have shown that while these conditions can fragment communities, they are also powerful motivating factors for young people's involvement in protest movements (Sloam 2016; Earle 2018). Emotions such as anger, resentment and hope, engendered by these conditions, can provide social movements with energy and solidarity when harnessed effectively by organisers (Collins 2001). It is critical that political challenges to these phenomena highlight their structural nature, contrary to neoliberal discourses which portray economic stress and debt as a failure of individual financial management, a lack of intelligence, or simply bad luck. Emphasising that these problems are the planned and inevitable outcome of a political system aligned with the interests of capital promotes responses that aim not merely to remedy the individual effects of these burdens, but to transform the very conditions which give rise to them. As Paulo

Freire writes, 'a deepened consciousness of their situation leads men [sic] to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation' (Freire 1972, p. 58). Student media, posters and leaflets, as well as social and digital media, provide students with many opportunities for such consciousness-raising projects.

Secondly, the history discussed above shows that student movements are most successful when they have broad and deep roots to communities both 'inside' and 'outside' the university. Not only does this provide organisers with a practical advantage of an increased base of people to mobilise, it also demonstrates a social basis of support for activism. We would argue that this is crucial for the re-institutionalisation of a political culture in university communities, in which protest and resistance is not merely reactive to attacks from government or university managements, but a central aspect of student life. The rich history of student-led political engagement creates, in Fraser's words, an 'institutionalised arena of discursive interaction' (Fraser 1990, p. 57)—existing within historically elite institutions, while at the same time seeking to challenge the structure of these institutions. Connections between student movements and communities depends on an understanding of the university not as an abstract institution, existing separately to other social spaces, but as deeply embedded within communities. As we argued in Section 1, the tertiary education system mediates access to employment, housing and thus quality of life—it can act either to remedy or to further entrench class differences. Thus, struggles around the conditions of education are not separate to concerns 'outside' the academy—they are integral to the broader project of building a more just and equal society. Students interested in a more egalitarian academy should therefore seek alliances with workers, and with those most marginalised by the dominant economic system. Examples of union-faculty relationships in courses related to progressive public-sector professions like nursing and teaching demonstrate how such academy-community links can be institutionalised. In NSW, student nurses and teachers are both offered free membership by the relevant trade unions, along with a variety of support services including mentoring and financial assistance (NSW Nurses and Midwives Association 2017; NSW Teachers Federation 2017). These initiatives underpin a politicised culture among these sections of the student body, with students encouraged to participate in union campaigns around defending and extending public services, and to support the maintenance of a high rate of unionisation in these industries.

We have discussed above the challenge that the rapid turnover of students poses to organisers; however, past movements have shown that this challenge can be

overcome. For example, the campaign against sexual assault on campus has been fought for almost five decades (Funnell & Hush 2018)—indeed, this history, and the support of older feminists, acts a galvanising factor for current feminist organisers on campus. This suggests that it is particularly important for student organisers to learn the histories of previous movements, not only to avoid reinventing the wheel, but also to build on the successes of the past. In this vein, the University of Sydney group Students Support Aboriginal Communities (SSAC) drew on the model of the 1965 Freedom Rides to organise a road trip to remote Aboriginal communities in 2016, seeking to leverage their resources and networks in support of grassroots Indigenous community projects (SSAC 2016). Similarly, the resistance to the merger of the Department of Political Economy with the Department of Economics and International Relations in 2011 was bolstered by the history of Political Economy as a site of political struggle in the university (Bacon 2011). Given that staff often remain at universities for far longer than students, supportive staff with an understanding of this history provide an important locus for the institutionalisation of movements. As Butler, Jones and Stilwell (2009) observe, 'one lesson from the political economy struggle [at the University of Sydney] is clear: cooperative and sustained commitment by students and staff is an essential ingredient for turning concern into challenge and struggle into success' (p. 191).

Finally, we believe that student movements need to construct a positive vision of what the future university ought to be. For example, bell hooks argues for the importance of love to education, and for 'passionate teaching and learning' that treats students not as disembodied and purely rational beings, but as holistic subjects with the potential for emotional and political engagement in the educational process (hooks 1994, p. 199). Alternative visions of higher education should be pursued not only in the defence of accessible education, but also in advocacy for critical pedagogies, in which the political values of justice and equality are integrated into curricula and teaching practices. This goal is already modelled in the context of Aboriginal education, where research is often explicitly oriented towards supporting community projects, accountable to those it seeks to benefit, and conducted with a strong social ethic (Smith 2012). Activists within universities would do well to follow hooks' call to 'continually claim theory as a necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism', integrating critical theory learnt within the classroom and political praxis undertaken outside the classroom (hooks 1994, p. 69).

It is undeniable that the university of the future is already taking shape in Australia. We have raised many reasons for students, staff and communities to be concerned

with the neoliberalisation of tertiary education, including poor working conditions, decreasing quality of learning, and attacks on student unions. However, as we have argued, these conditions at the same time provide a fertile ground for political dissent. The success of movements driven by young people, both in Australia and abroad, shows that movements against class inequality are able to gain a foothold in the current political climate. For these movements to play a role in shaping the future university, they must grapple with the very conditions that are currently fragmenting university communities, as well as the broader communities within which they are situated. Our account of the recent history of student movements shows that the contemporary moment is once again one of possibility and opportunity for the struggle to create a more equitable, just and socially useful university. As Henry Giroux (2003, p. 14) argues,

> Resistance must become part of a public pedagogy that works to position rigorous theoretical work and public bodies against corporate power, connect classrooms to the challenges faced by social movements in the streets, and provide spaces within classrooms for personal injury and private terrors to be translated into public considerations and struggles.

Acknowledgements

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