'By ones and twos and tens':
Pedagogies of possibility for higher education

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This paper concerns the relationship between teaching and political action both within and outside of formal educational institutions in the UK. The context of this relationship is the recent period following the Browne Review on the funding of higher education in England (2010).[1] Rather than speaking directly to debates around scholar-activism, about which much has already been written (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Haworth 2012; Thornton and Maiguashca 2006), I want to stretch the meanings of both teaching and activism. The purpose is to contextualise the politics of contemporary higher learning in light of the diverse histories and geographies of critical education more generally, and to think about the relationship between critical knowledge that is produced within and for the university and that which is produced in other spaces, particularly informal educational projects. My primary interest is the sorts of learning that are cultivated in projects working on principles of 'prefigurative politics' in the UK and internationally. My argument is that some of the knowledge which is most needed to fight for the university as a progressive social institution is being produced not within the institution's physical and conceptual walls, but in more informal and politicised spaces of education. Being receptive to these alternative forms not only can expand scholarly thinking about how to reclaim intellectual life from the economy, but can emancipate the imagination which is required for dreaming big about the creation of higher education as and for democratic life.

The politics of education-in-its-broadest-sense

Even before the Browne Review of higher education was initiated by the last British Labour government in 2009, it had become very difficult to speak or think critically about education as a critical cultural practice, or as a practice of freedom, or as an institution of social power and site of political struggle, in the UK. This was not inevitable. The country's history of radical adult education and developments in the critical sociology of education and cultural studies both inside and outside the universities during the 1970s and 1980s had laid ground for such work. However, the subsequent four decades of increasingly economistic, utilitarian and technocratic discourses about schooling and higher education, combined with the gradual institutionalization of performance monitoring, auditing, managerialism and marketization in schools and universities, has created an environment of what Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2011) have called a state of 'historical amnesia' about the nature, purpose and politics of education. This discursive regime reconstructs the idea of education as a politically barren field of activity, into which no critical life can seep and upon which nothing critically creative or transformative can possibly grow – or indeed, in the framework of the competitive knowledge economy, upon which nothing radically transformative *should* grow, unless it can demonstrably contribute to the consolidation of elite power.

As I am concerned with education as a critical and transformative activity, however, I will bracket this hegemonic imaginary of education in order to make room for others. One way of exposing the limits of a constraining horizon; to challenge conditions of dis-utopia (Amsler 2008) and 'disimagination' (Giroux 2013), is to disclose alternative ways of being. In higher education as elsewhere, we must seek out inspiration in 'social institutions around the world that embody, however, imperfectly, emancipatory ideals and thus potentially prefigure broader alternatives' (Olin–Wright 2012).[2]

It is important to reconstruct our collective memories and imaginations about education. It is often now argued that the time of late, or advanced, or neoliberal capitalism is a time of 'contracting possibilities' in which many people – including and in some cases especially educators – 'experience change as a symptom of our powerlessness rather than as the product of our own agency', and yet are increasingly pressured to respond to rapidly changing conditions with diminished resources (Kompridis 2006, p. 267). One notable response to the resulting crisis of hope has been the elaboration of contemporary forms of anarchistically-inspired prefigurative politics, which are mobilised by people for whom the loss of hope in existing institutions and systems is not a reason for despair but as a strategy for decolonising knowledge and a catalyst for cultivating new political and cultural possibilities (Gibson–Graham 2006; Gordon 2007). Ana Dinerstein calls these 'hope movements' which 'demand not another way of doing [and certainly not an improvement on present ways of doing] but another mode of being' in the world (Dinerstein 2012, p. 598; Dinerstein and Deneulin 2012).

Both doing and being differently in the world imply learning. This is why education, *in its broadest sense*, has been at the heart of social movements and aspirations for democratic ways of life. According to John Dewey, education cannot be reduced to the cognitive or social work that goes on in schools or universities, and is often *not* what happens in formal institutions. Rather, it is the critical and creative activity which guarantees 'the social continuity of life' itself – the 'reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases one's ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (Dewey 1938, p. 39; Rodgers 2002). This definition of education is closely connected to philosophical and political questions about what constitutes a good life and how we can live well together, and to efforts to resist being governed and foreclosed.[3] Yet this broader concept of education has itself become marginal within the academy.

There are at least four different ways to think it back; four routes we might take to reconnect with the politics and possibilities of education in its broadest sense:

- political struggles which articulate around or within formal education;

- situations in which education is conceptualised as a form of political action;

- situations in which pedagogy plays a central role in social movement; and

- epistemologies which frame everyday politics as pedagogical.

Political struggles within and for education

The most immediate way to recover a sense of the political significance of educational work is to keep alive the knowledge that universities and schools are critical sites for the

negotiation of power within society (Apple 1995, 2013; Bernstein 2003; Boler 1999; Freire 1985). Within and through them, struggles over the distribution of personal, local and national resources; the establishment and challenge of social hierarchies and classifications; homogeneity and diversity, recognition and respect, standardisation and autonomy, hegemonic and subaltern knowledge, and control and freedom are constantly being played out. These struggles are ongoing at all levels: pedagogy, curriculum, educational relationships, assessment, arrangements of space and time, and institutional forms. People struggle to participate in formal education where they are denied it and disempowered as a result; they struggle to change formal education where it denies them or forces them into subordinate positions of society and subjectivity; and they refuse formal education where it is irredeemably repressive or damaging.

Today, the most publicly visible examples of education-based struggle are the 'educational dimension of struggles within and against neoliberalism' which have often taken the forms of student-led protests and campus occupations (Cote *et al.*, 2007, p. 3; Amsler 2011). It is significant that these are parts of a wider movement consisting of many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of discrete actions across the world; it is also significant that the landscape of striving for educational justice is itself divided amongst people dreaming different visions of the future and making different kinds of educational demands.[4] What is more theoretically interesting is the way in which some of these education-focused struggles have begun to share knowledge and experience with other social movements (particularly around shared problems of working conditions, debt, housing and migration). This is intensifying experiences of collective learning in which new types of political action and new forms of education are being created and practiced. The history of people's politics suggests that such quiet and often invisible pedagogical work happening behind the spectacles of visible resistance, and for the most part outside formal curricula and courses of the university itself, matter (Motta 2011a).

Education as a form of political action

Such movements, however, often come into existence because students and educators respond defensively to the conservative capture of education. Radical ethics notwithstanding, they are in this sense reactive. Extending our vision to the broader history of educational politics reveals other instances in which educational work has been engaged as a primary method of political action in its own right. From medieval hedge preachers promoting subversive interpretations of religious texts, to the formation of study circles and folk schools promoting philosophical debate, from the nomadic readings of the Levellers to the creation of university settlements extending higher education to workers living in urban slums, from the Plebs League in Oxford to the Chautauqua Movement in the US, from the establishment of anarchist free schools and universities in Spain and Italy to the 'flying university' in Poland, from the rise of workers' education to the internationalisation of popular education from Latin America to the world – it would not be an overstatement to argue that the history of economic and political exclusion has been accompanied by the development of critical education (Scott 1999; Steele 2010), and that the relationship between these activities and the formal university shifts in contingent ways.

Pedagogy as central to movements for social justice

There are other, less acknowledged ways of understanding the relationship between higher learning and political work. One is to decentre the university as the privileged site of knowledge production and to position learning at the centre of social and political work. Reflecting on the purpose of worker's education in 1970s, for example, Raymond Williams resisted imposing canonical standards of knowledge in his classes for the Workers' Education Association, arguing that his 'impulse to Adult Education was not only a matter of remedying deficit, making up for inadequate educational resources in the wider society, nor only a case of meeting new needs of the society, though these things contributed. The deepest impulse was the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself' (1983, p. 158). Those struggling to change the worlds in which they live need to learn – how to organise, form new relationships, develop new vocabularies and conceptual frameworks; how to survive. In this way, spaces of learning within social movements are also 'infrastructures of resistance' and sites of personal and collective care (Shantz 2010).

While many social scientists study the role of learning in such social movements, neither the epistemologies nor the methods of learning and producing knowledge in popular education have taken strong roots in many institutions of higher education. There are reasons for this – not least of all that popular education is not higher education. But it is also the case that collaborating with marginalised people or non-elite subjects is often considered a liability to a scholar's or university's reputation – for, as Paulo Freire remarked, 'the intellectual activity of those without power is always characterised as non-intellectual' (Freire and Macedo 1987, p. 122). Given the general devaluation of local, indigenous and practical knowledges within scholarship above transformative politics, an important part of liberating the concept of education within the academy is *unlearning* training in, and *disinvesting* ourselves from, traditional methods of theorization which privilege abstraction over praxis, individual knowledge production over collective learning, and presenting solutions over posing problems (Motta 2011a).

Practices of social movement learning thus stretch the meaning of education as defined academically and create room for conceptualising it – and our own roles as educators – more broadly. However, we may also conceive of education in an even more integrated sense, as a constitutive condition of life and of politics itself. This definition has particular significance for strengthening pedagogies of possibility in higher education today.

Everyday politics as pedagogical

Despite the scarcity of explicit theorisations of education in much contemporary work on radical democracy, there has been a turn towards understanding the relationship between learning and political possibility in critical pedagogy and social movement learning. Such work has illuminated, for example, how neoliberalism is in part a pedagogical project which does not simply assert that social life can be organised along market principles but aggressively constructs institutions, policies and human beings that can then be persuaded or compelled to organise it in this way (Brown 2003; Giroux 2004). Many anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian projects have accordingly incorporated practices of self-education, collective reflexivity and collaborative systematisation of practical knowledge in attempts to create autonomous institutions (Bifo 2004; Day 2005; Motta 2012). Such work both stretches the concept of education

and suggests 'an expanded concept of struggle, [which] emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contests over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations' (Cote *et al*. 2007: 5).

The 'politics of possibility' is a name for this mode of politics which works through processes of 'disengagement and reconstruction rather than by reform or revolution; with the end of creating not a new knowable totality…but of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity' (Day 2011, pp. 108, 113). It is 'prefigurative' because it seeks to create new worlds that embody and enact future principles by working within and using the resources of the existing world, with particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions through which power also works (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxvii).

Towards the production of other knowledges in the university

We can conceptualise the relationship between higher education and politics in any of the abovementioned ways, but it is the last that is now most strategically important. Because dominant discourses of 'teaching and learning' in the university obscure the political nature of both activities, they lend themselves to technical and therefore fatalistic interpretations of the contexts in which we engage in them. For the past twenty years, British universities have therefore been highlighted as particularly illustrative examples of Foucauldian domination and resistance, neoliberalisation and repressive managerialism (Gill 2009; Shore 2011; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Academics have produced large bodies of data about the structural transformation of academic institutions and subjectivities. However, this knowledge seldom informs the everyday practices of teachers within, against or beyond the university itself. As Antliff argues, 'high theory, movement knowledge, self-knowledge need to be examined and worked on – we have so much theory, so much critique, and often feel so trapped' (2012, p. 138).

Henry Giroux (2013) argues that

> 'there is a need to invent modes of pedagogy that release the imagination, connect learning to social change and create social relations in which people assume responsibility for each other. Such a pedagogy is not about methods or prepping students to learn how to take tests. […] It is about a moral and political practice capable of enabling students and others to become more knowledgeable while creating the conditions for generating a new vision of the future in which people can recognise themselves…'.

If we are to generate such pedagogies in the university, however, understanding the forms of learning and knowledge that have long been essential for social movements is vital.

Pedagogies of possibility

When we look to work being done by socially engaged educators, artists and activists – in the case of this article, in the UK – we see that they attend not only to the cognitive dimensions of critical understanding but also to the epistemological, affective and material conditions of learning how to think, feel, do and be in liberating ways – what one environmental activist has characterised as the 'beautiful stuff behind the scenes'.

These can be described as pedagogies of *emergence* and *becoming*; of *encounter* and *discomfort*; and of *sociality* and *community*.

Pedagogies of emergence and becoming

When critical cultural workers describe the concerns that motivate their work, they refer to visible and anticipated problems of inequality and injustice. However, they also speak about the need to simultaneously struggle against other pressures that limit and constrain their ability to do this work. These include the enclosure of public institutions, the enclosure of free spaces for possibility in everyday social life, the reduction of and hostility to pluralistic groupings and ways of thinking, the foreclosure of critical ways of seeing; the 'hardening' of relationships in classrooms and organisations, and the fragmentation of communities and of individuals themselves. These forces of closure are in some cases so disempowering that, in addition to concentrating on concrete struggles for dignity, justice and equality, many activists now prioritise activities that aim simply to open spaces for possibility – for, before transformative things can happen, happenings must be possible. The question for educators is what practices have the potential to do this, and to shatter the wider 'dictatorship of no alternatives' to the existing political and economic relations?

Pedagogies of becoming prioritise two types of work: creative and aesthetic learning ('art', in the broad sense), and dialogical and relational learning ('conversation', in the broad sense). This is because both offer methods for, and demand that we attend to problems of, creating spaces, times and opportunities for happenings, on the one hand, and possibilities for people to engage in more open-ended, imaginative and non-essentialist ways of learning and being together, on the other.

The transformative potential of critical conversational practice in formal education is clarified by Beth, who teaches language skills to people seeking asylum and their children in a southern English city. She explains that the 'product' of communication, the explicit subject matter, only makes sense as a form of empowering literacy when it is learned through processes of engaging in critical dialogue, where people are talking and listening to each other in ways that are not pre-emptive or predetermined, and which can be expanded into other areas of life. You can only 'see yourself changing', Beth claims, when people shift from habitual ways of talking about their personal lives and social issues with each other to engage in 'real' dialogue. That, she claims, 'is where the attempt to close down thought, the attempt to close down ideas, opinions, is counteracted' (interview with the author, May 2011).

The process that Beth describes may be further conceptualised as a practice that Nikolas Kompridis refers to as 'intimate critique':

> 'a practice of critical dialogue that aims to preserve and renew trust, and to facilitate a commitment to ongoing processes of cooperative problem solving [...] based on the recognition and performative acknowledgement that we are the facilitators and guarantors of one another's fragile freedom…to criticize and innovate…' (2006, p. 262).

In another context, Jill – an environmental activist, popular educator and teacher of teachers – illustrates the significance of creative activity for resisting the foreclosure of conceptual and political space. 'Art can act in a very slow and sometimes ineffable way', she said, 'a way that can't be predicted or described' (interview with the author, May 2011). Its ineffability stems from the affective logic of creative practice, which – like 'real dialogue' – cannot be easily regulated, quantified or controlled. The very act

of creating space, time and desire for such work thus also contributes to the creation of a relatively autonomous 'outside', which itself provides space to challenge the logics of hierarchy, accountability and control that permeate neoliberalised institutions of education. The potentiality in this activity is clear enough when it appears in exercises of explicitly activist educational and artistic events. When such acts are made less visibly in classrooms, conversations and institutional meetings, however, they often pass by unnoticed and are deprived of critical theorisation. But the importance of disrupting habituated patterns of feeling, thinking and being for opening spaces of becoming otherwise in everyday life, which lies at the heart of forum theatre and other participatory and creative performance, also matters for educators. They are important because:

> 'the democratic future that we're after is actually a future that we will only be able to make by opening the present differently. I think that many of us experience the present as terribly closed—not just closed because certain options have been foreclosed, but also closed because of certain stoppages in progressive history. I think the opening that we have to cultivate is a kind of affective and intellectual opening to political possibility that would help us read the present differently.' (Brown 2006, p. 41).

What we learn from Beth, and Jill, and other cultural workers who are enacting pedagogies of possibility in formal educational spaces that are often overlooked as sites of critical philosophical work is that theorising the politics of possibility only makes practical sense when we attempt to put it into educational practice. In order to do this, we must also make ourselves open to transformative disruption and critique. But we are not 'naturally' receptive to receptivity, hospitable to critique or confident in creativity; we are often even less so when in precarity or when running on the hamster wheels of the capitalist everyday (Kompridis 200, p. 257). To enable pedagogies of becoming, pedagogies of encounter and in many cases of discomfort are therefore necessary as well.

Pedagogies of encounter and discomfort

Becoming aware of the limits of understanding and possibility requires learning to experience troublesome knowledge and discomforting encounters with otherness and critique, and to reframe these 'not [as] the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibility begin' (Vieria Pinto in Freire 2000, p. 99). Many critical theorists, particularly those emphasising only the cognitive, intellectual and sociological dimensions of critical practice, have presumed that this sensibility is a precondition for critique, and in some cases that it is an inherently human trait which can be repressed by and liberated from relations of alienation, abstraction and domination (see Amsler 2012). Others, however, begin by regarding this as a condition of possibility that is necessarily educated or mis-educated, and whose learning is grounded in a particularly demanding set of material conditions and desires which are learned themselves.

Megan Boler, for example, therefore begins her thinking about critical pedagogies not by presuming that they are legitimate but by asking 'what we – educators and students – stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions' (Boler 1999, p. 176). Her response is that through this we come to understand how emotional investments in certain knowledges, practices, ways of knowing, disciplines, power structures and identities

have been 'insidiously woven in the everyday fabric of common sense' (ibid.). As Kompridis points out, however, this experience is 'genuinely uncomfortable' and, 'understandably, it is resisted' (Kompridis 2006, p. 214). A question therefore arises: what practices have the potential to make people more *receptive* to discomfort as a critical emotion, and to engaging critically and generously in encounters with difference, ambiguity and unfamiliarity?

This question is pressing in light of the experiences of cultural workers mentioned above, which suggest that opportunities for people to experience such encounters – what another popular educators calls 'constructive conflict' and the foundations of democratic life – are, he claims, being 'stripped away from our lives' through various forms of enclosure (interview with the author, April 2012). A substantial element of his pedagogical work with people living in marginalised communities therefore involves creating 'physical spaces where people are able to come together and exchange ideas, feel respected and feel that there are possibilities out there other than just staying on a track'. This, he argues, is ultimately what 'generates energy that goes off in directions that you hadn't really anticipated'. Like other popular educators, he uses a range of participatory tools and techniques to accomplish this. But he reports that in fact, making spaces for constructive conflict involves dedicating one's time to 'deeply mundane time-consuming processes that really require a lot of personal energy and a lot of mundane stuff like just being, getting food, making sure that children are cared for, having fun, [and] making sure that people are healthy' (ibid.). He says that this work is 'really hard' – not because it is physically or intellectually demanding, but because it is not, and because – like other local, indigenous and political knowledges and practices – it is often invisible, unrecognised and disregarded as valuable.

Pedagogies of community and solidarity

It would thus be unwise to conclude that we can effectively create spaces of possibility solely through pedagogies of becoming, discomfort and encounter. This is particularly the case if those learning are imagined as autonomous, rationalist subjects of liberal democracy who may remain comfortable in individualised and regulated social relationships. It is easy to avoid being troubled or transformed on one's own; new possibilities cannot emerge without at least 'the presence of a plurality of local worlds and cultural practices' (Kompridis 2006, pp. 220, 229). Conditions for transformative learning thus also include the cultivation of radically democratic collective relationships.

To think and govern ourselves in new ways, we must learn to be together otherwise, and we learn to be together differently through practicing the arts of self-governance and co-operative learning. Those who engage in such work systematically have much to offer to this project. Jim, for example, who has been a member of an independent artist–activist collective for over two decades, argues that working in open and collaborative ways demands that people to exercise a 'weak muscle' in a society which expends huge energy and resources on teaching people how to be individualised rather than collaborative (interview with the author, May 2012). But how do you 'exercise a muscle' that is actually a way of being or a condition of possibility? What can close distances between divided subjects in a way that expands the horizons of intelligibility for both?

Cultural workers accomplish such bridging work in simple ways: through vigilant sharing of work, visualising personal and collective experiences, organising co-

produced performances, and building relations of mutual aid and spaces for convivial conversation. In each case, the intention is to find ways for 'multiple experiences to be all in the same room at the same time' in order to provide opportunities to connect individual with collective knowledge (interview with the author, March 2012). Such practices may even be regarded as practical methods for 'keeping open...the logical space of possibility', where logics of impossibility are materialised through the fragmentation of physical space or fixed societal classifications and roles (Kompridis 2006: 204). As David, an environmentalist popular educator illustrated,

> the government and [the corporation] know how to compartmentalise, or think they know how to compartmentalise, like – that's what an activist looks like, that's what an Asian community organiser looks like, this is what a trade union is like. What they didn't expect was for us all to speak with each other, and that's where things become a bit scary for the powers that be. They can't compartmentalise us, and I thought that was incredibly powerful and possibly one of the biggest successes of our campaign' (interview with the author, June 2012).

Such work, although it may appear simple and spontaneous, was in fact the result of considerable patience and time. The politics of time – to reflect; deliberate and agonise; build trust, understanding and confidence; and take ownership of a process – are critical. As Wendy Brown argues, without time for 'both deliberation and negotiation, and of the leisureliness that affords them, the conditions for democracy are literally eviscerated' (Brown 2005, p. 8).

But time – in networked neoliberal societies of speed, in the frenzied temporalities of frontline activist politics, in the compressed labour processes of advanced capitalism, in the gendered divisions of labour in the university, in the compartmentalised of processes of learning and discovery into tightly ordered committee meetings and lines of institutional management – is precisely what many educators – including those working inside and outside formal institutions – cannot imagine having (Adams 2011). This is indeed why some educators prefer working in informal rather than institutionalised contexts, as they believe that even the most powerful pedagogies of becoming, encounter and sociality are ineffective or counterproductive when embedded in short-term and institutionally-defined relationships. For those choosing to remain within, learning to honour an 'ethic of slowness in an era of neoliberal corporatism' is an important part of any politicised educational project (Leung de Kloet and Chow 2013).

Such pedagogies are important dimensions of prefigurative politics enacted within existing institutions because they enable not only the critique and re-imagination of ourselves, others and society, but also because they recognise the affective and social labour upon which critical thought and practice rely. Pedagogies of becoming, encounter and sociality have the potential to oppose and undermine capitalist rationality and to strengthen radical democratic relationships, knowledge and practices. While these do not constitute radical democratic politics, they are an indispensable dimension of them, for as Dewey pointed out,

> 'a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put up in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating "criticism" of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress' (2005, p. 360).

The experiences of educators working in and with social movements illustrate the power of living critique which names the potentiality of the here and now by learning to read the world through alternative eyes. Sara Motta, reflecting on her work with women popular educators and revolutionaries in Colombia and in articulating a feminist critical political economy from below, has contributed much to our understanding of the importance of these forms of knowledge and practice for politicizing university education. She in fact suggests that it 'would be unwise at this political conjuncture to close off our political imaginary, through a dismissal of its relevance, to our political context' (Motta 2011b). Rather, she argues, historical experience suggests that 'it is urgent to cultivate an ethic of openness, dialogue, experimentation and exploration' if we are to give any 'hope to break out of the straightjackets of politics as normal' (ibid.).

Prefiguring universities for the future

Arguably, for all the radical thinking and practice that goes on everywhere inside them, contemporary British universities are good illustrations of institutions in which there is much trapping in 'the straightjackets of politics as normal'. Those occupying positions of economic and professional power within them have also developed a range of defences which render them relatively impervious to ethical, political and pedagogical critiques of consumerism, marketization, economic instrumentalism, managerialism and quantitative measurement of value. These are simply asserted as the guiding principles of and conditions of possibility for academic work itself. By developing and practicing some of the pedagogical approaches mentioned above, however, university educators might be able to take advantage of their potential to 'open up greater possibilities for imagining and cultivating alternative social relationships in the minds of those who would live them' (Mueller 2012, p. 30; Motta 2012, p. 146).

Drawing on the foundationally anarchistic principles of radical poststructuralism and prefigurative politics, for example, it is possible to reconceptualise institutions not as things but as 'relationships to remake and ideas to replace' (Mueller 2012, p. 39).[5] Once this is accomplished, it becomes easier to problematize and play with the language that we use in our everyday interactions within the university. It may also become possible to create space for more authentic forms of dialogue, or to dare to dream big – beyond 'resistance' to conservative education and towards the construction of progressive real utopias (Olin–Wright 2012). Indeed, educators working in universities – at least within the present political context of the UK – have comparatively few risks to take. People take a leap when declaring to the world that their children will continue to attend a school that bulldozers are threatening to tear down, or that there really are viable alternatives to capitalism (Notes from Nowhere 2003). But, from the perspective of education in-its-broadest-sense, it is not particularly radical to suggest that education should help people achieve political and intellectual autonomy, satisfy the need for flourishing social collectivities, foster egalitarian relations of economic organisation, encourage creative experimentation, and cultivate a general reflexivity of self and hospitality to otherness. It is only slightly more daring to suggest that educators should either take control of or disinvest from institutions that are not democratically accountable; challenge forms of power that operate through people's fear of exclusion and desire to be loved; challenge deterministic ontologies which stunt both critique and radical imagination; and cultivate 'capabilities' that allow people to engage critically and openly with difference and complexity.

However, if these are leaps too far for higher educators who are bound by either circumstance or desire to professional subjectivities which separate teaching from

politics, we also learn from social movements that micro-politics matter. In the context of the university, what happens when, instead of discussing employability in a meeting we discuss liberty or equality; when we introduce concepts of solidarity or mutual aid into the meeting of a mock-Research Excellence Framework panel;[6] when we set self-management or empowerment as a learning outcome; or when we inquire about co-operation when presented with the student satisfaction scores of other departments? What happens when academics queer official spaces by refusing to perform hierarchical deference; when we try to make decisions in horizontal ways; when we problematize undemocratically derived criteria for evaluation; when we assert our right to write with and for a local community whose journal has a negative impact factor in publication rankings? What happens when we ask to distribute resources for teaching based on principles of fluid interconnected need, when we encourage dialogue about items of 'any other business' on a bureaucratic agenda? What happens when we demand time to reflect on lessons from past failures rather than spending time planning how we will 'go forward'? What happens if we facilitate public discussions about the politics of dignity and the problems of university funding from the perspective of the perpetually indebted student and worker? What happens when we subvert institutional norms, sabotage institutional policies and create alternative spaces and projects both within and outside of the institution itself? What happens when we say no to discourses of impossibility and yes to hope?

It is, of course, impossible to say what would happen in any of these situations – partly because the consequences would likely be different for different people in different circumstances. One of my arguments is simply that the act of imagining them, which will always have either been made possible by a prior leap of faith in possibility or a way of practicing to make one, is an important form of critical–practical philosophising; an act of, as Nathan Jun puts it, learning a 'way of life founded on the *praxis* of seeking, questioning, complicating, problematizing, potentiating [and] "possibilizing"' (Jun 2012, p. 297). My other arguments are that there are forms of learning that can enable educators who are not particularly politicised to engage in even small acts of resistance, self-determination and co-operative creativity, and that in order to engage in them it is necessary to stretch the definition of education to its broadest horizons. Prefigurative pedagogies of possibility, however, offer insights into how we may be able to 'use the institutional space without being of the institution, without taking the institution's goals as one's own' (Shukaitis 2009 in Howarth 2012, p. 5); and to learn to 'insert other ways of knowing and being into the academy to challenge systematically oppressive realities' (DeLeon 2008, p. 315).

In the end, engaging in even such small acts of resistance may enable us to do something that Howard Zinn implored scholars to do many years ago, to 'challenge these rules that quietly lead the scholar towards trivia, pretentiousness, orotundity, and the production of objects: books, degrees, buildings, research projects, dead knowledge' and to 'defy the professional mythology that has kept us on the tracks of custom…' (Zinn 1997, p. 503). And when the production of objects and dead knowledge is essential for the continued development universities as sites for the exploitation of immaterial labour, it is clear that these may not be small acts at all.

But what we really learn from taking a broad view of the political terrain of education and from experiences of learning in social movements is that it takes courage and care to prefigure alternative futures, even – or especially – within our everyday lives where doing so may often seem unimportant. There is enough to do. J. K. Gibson–Graham once pointed out that in this society, capitalism is not the only thing we are up against when striving to make life liveable and enlarging for all. Within the academic

professions, we may also need to fight melancholia and nostalgia, cynicism and despair, laziness and resignation, the need for status and institutional recognition, and deeply rooted prejudices and privileges. For those who are committed to the historical promises of the university as a progressive intellectual and social institution, it may also be necessary to weaken psychological attachments to elite systems of valuation and recognition, and perhaps to cherished or pleasurable parts of one's professional and intellectual identity, to make a little 'room for neglected formats of reason' and for autonomously formulating and valorising our own (Kompridis 2006).

Both doing and being in the world imply learning. Where the kinds of doing and being we desire are radically otherwise or oppositional to prevailing powers, and where the kinds of learning which allow people to act and become in emancipatory ways are foreclosed, then the politics of education become particularly visible. This is why, despite what appear on the surface to be successful efforts to construct higher education in contemporary Britain as either a functional affair or matter of individualised consumption, universities themselves remain sites of political contestation. In this context, it is therefore perhaps useful to remember that education, in its broadest sense, lies at the heart and soul of movements to democratise and humanise everyday life. There is sufficient demand for democratising the university to believe that it is possible and sufficient evidence for the role of learning in political change to believe that pedagogies of possibility can contribute to challenging even the most corporatized system of higher education through enabling either transformation or informed lines of flight. There is scope for experimenting with prefigurative forms of politics within existing institutions of higher education as well as in the simultaneous creation of the new institutions (or anti-institutions) of the future. These allow us to connect everyday practices with critical theories of the conditions of possibility, and offer a range of methods for building confidence in cultural action even within the context of dehumanising institutions. The people's historian Howard Zinn already pointed to this long ago:

> 'I am not sure what a revolution in the academy will look like, any more than I know what a revolution in the society will look like. I doubt it will take the form of some great cataclysmic event. More likely, it will be a process, with periods of tumult and quiet, in which we will, here and there, by ones and twos and tens, create pockets of concern inside old institutions, transforming them from within. There is no great day of reckoning to work toward. Rather, we must now *begin* to liberate those patches of ground on which we stand – to 'vote' for a new world (as Thoreau suggested) with our whole selves all the time, rather than moments carefully selected by others.' (Zinn 1997, p. 508)

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Notes

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[1] The controversial review was chaired by Lord Browne. For the report, see Brown (2010). See Collini (2010, 2012), Holmwood and Bhambra (2012) and McGettigan (2012) for further commentary.

[2] Giroux (2013), borrowing a concept from Didi-Huberman, describes disimagination as a a process by which 'institutions, discourses and other modes of representation…undermine the capacity of individuals to bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics and collective resistance'. David Graeber (2013) has elsewhere argued, more appropriately for this context, that political imagination is being foreclosed through a materialised 'apparatus of hopelessnes'.

[3] Dewey once argued that philosophy could be 'defined as the general theory of education', in so far as, on the one hand, philosophy's concern with 'fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow [human beings]' is toothless without educational practices to make it a matter of public concern, and on the other hand such practice – regardless of its disciplinary location – tends 'to become a routine empirical affair unless its aims and methods are animated by…a broad and sympathetic survey of its place in contemporary life', which is a philosophical problem (Dewey 1916, p. 331).

[4] There is presently no inventory or archive of contemporary educational struggles and movements in global perspective, and none comprehensive historically. For US-American and European perspectives, see Wallerstein and Starr (1971) and Boren (2001). Partial chronologies and records can be found on the site of the International Student Movement (http://ism-global.net/protests_worldwide_june2012) and on the Edu-Factory website (http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/).

[5] For more on post-structuralist readings of anarchistic thought and politics, see May (1994) or DeWitt (2000).

[6] The Research Exercise Framework is the UK's national assessment of research quality, which has taken place in various forms since 1986 (in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008). For further information, see the official REF website at: http://www.ref.ac.uk/. For competing analyses of its purpose and legitimacy, see Martin (2011) and Smith, Ward and House (2011).