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# **Millbank tendency: the strengths and limitations of mediated protest 'events' in UK student activism cycles**

## **Abstract**

UK students' desire to create disruptive, media-friendly 'events' during the 2010-11 protests against fees and cuts is reflective of wider cycles and processes in student activism history. First, constant cohort turnover restricts students' ability to convert campaigns into durable movements, necessitating that they must periodically 'start from scratch'. This informs a second process, namely the need to gain the attention of mainstream media, as this can potentially amplify students' grievances far beyond their own organisational capacities. Both have shaped student activism over the past fifty years, compelling contemporary students to create protest events that live up to their radical history.

These processes were evident in autumn 2010, when an NUS demonstration saw students attack and briefly occupy Conservative Party headquarters at 30 Millbank. The protest's mass mediation was central to activists' 'eventing' processes, and provided the spark for the radical UK-wide campaign that followed. Yet once the fees bill was passed by Parliament, students' dependency on mainstream media cycles was quickly exposed. With 'mediatization' tendencies having dogged student activism since the sixties, this article argues that creating 'events' epitomises students' longstanding strengths and limitations as society's 'incipient intelligentsia' (Rootes, 1980: 475).

## **Key words**

Student activism, social movements, protest events, media, memory.

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## Introduction

For better or worse, the history of social movements is prone to foregrounding certain remarkable protest events. Often known by their metonymic title – e.g. ‘1968’, ‘Tiananmen Square’, ‘Seattle’ – events are marked out for their dislocating effects on the everyday order of things, and their capacity to reshape the course of history (Sewell, 1996). Despite this, events are a somewhat contested concept within social movement scholarship. For some, framing protest in this way risks exceptionalising certain occurrences to the detriment of the structural and historical factors that made them possible. For others, an ‘eventful’ approach to studying social movements can be of empirical value in its own right. Not only do events have the power to force immediate social change, they are also powerful *mnemonic* devices that affect how actors understand and act in the world (Gillan, 2018: 5). In other words, the veneration, commemoration, or reassessment of past protest events can significantly impact on how social movements act or portray themselves in the present.

Events and memory are of particular relevance to the study of student activism. Despite having provided considerable case study material for the establishing of social movement studies in the 1960s, there have been remarkably few attempts to theorise student movements in the decades since. Plenty of research has been devoted to the role students have played in wider movements, as well as the politicising conditions of the campus field (Van Dyke, 1998), but few studies have attempted to trace student movements across successive contention cycles. This, admittedly, may relate to the limitations of the field itself. The organisational discontinuity caused by the constant turnover of student cohorts has led authors such as Rootes (2012) to question whether even peak periods of protest activity can be seen as representing the product of an overarching student *movement*.

What students may lack in organisational continuity, however, they gain in youthful exuberance, as each new cohort of undergraduates are, in Crossley’s (2008: 29) words, ‘structurally freed up for activism’. These characteristics have produced a student activism history punctuated by iconic protest events – be it ‘1968’, ‘Grosvenor Square’, or ‘People’s Park’ – rather than longstanding movements (Gitlin, 1980: 234). The power and significance of these events has also drawn strongly on their mediation, as the creation of eye-catching spectacles has enabled students to amplify their goals and grievances and shape public discourse. Through the mediation – and remediation – of these protest events, student activism has developed a *memorative* power that arguably outweighs its own *mnemonic* capacities. Given the cyclical effects of constant cohort turnover, this raises important questions as to how contemporary students regard, and engage with, their activism history.

Of course, the memory of student protest is likely to differ from country to country, so in exploring these processes through the 2010-11 UK protests this article seeks only to offer a starting point. The case study focuses on the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government’s plans for the marketization of higher education, and specifically, the proposal to treble the cap on tuition fees for students in England. Given only seven weeks until the bill was to be voted on by Parliament, the National Union of Students (NUS) organised a national

demonstration in London on 10 November which unexpectedly attracted the participation of 52,000 students. Events suddenly escalated, however, when a small group broke off from the main route to attack the Conservative Party's campaign headquarters at 30 Millbank. As large numbers of marchers surged across to watch events unfold in the courtyard, the building's front windows were smashed and approximately 200 protesters entered and hung banners from the roof. This was followed by clashes with police, culminating the arrest of around 50 protesters (Guardian, 10 November 2010).

With 'Millbank' – as the protest soon became known – broadcast live on TV news stations, activists were compelled to portray its impact in ruptural terms. Millbank was claimed to have 'appeared as if from nowhere' (Meadway, 2011: 17), serving as 'the spark for the inspirational movement that followed' (Swain, 2011). The latter was true insofar as over the next four weeks students organised three more large-scale London demonstrations, numerous local marches, and most remarkably, 51 occupations of campus buildings across the UK (Solomon and Palmieri, 2011: 60).

Despite this sudden and intense upsurge in activism behaviour, the protests were unable to prevent Parliament from narrowly passing the bill on 9 December. Millbank ultimately failed to provide the foundation for an enduring student movement against the marketization of higher education. However, Millbank's legacy can be found in the wider cycle of anti-austerity campaigns that followed in 2011, as well as the more recent election of left-leaning (and anti-fees) Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader (Chessum, 2015; Mason, 2017). These successes and failures are in many ways typical of student activism, and as this article will demonstrate, contemporary students' determination to make an 'event' out of Millbank reflects a significant (albeit partial) engagement with student activism history.

### **Protests as events**

Sewell (1996: 844) defines an event as 'a ramified sequence of occurrences that is recognised as notable by contemporaries', and 'results in a durable transformation of structures'. The latter emphasises events' dislocating effects on the existent order of things, which can produce feelings of fear and caution, but also exhilaration and empowerment. The former highlights the mnemonic practices through which events come to be regarded and remembered. In other words, the meaning of events which initially appear contentious or confusing crystallise over time as their wider impact becomes clearer.

Perhaps inevitably, the ruptural possibilities created by events have proven an inspiration for contemporary radical utopian thought. Badiou and Tarby (2013: 9), for example, argue that events 'bring to life a possibility that was invisible or unthinkable', whereas Žižek (2014: 10) sees them as forcing 'a change in the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it'. While these authors emphasise events' ability to create epochal shifts, Holloway (2010: 30) celebrates them for stimulating a 'temporal crack in the patterns of domination'. Often transitory, events nevertheless attain 'a validity of their own, independent of their long-term consequences' on the grounds that they represent 'an image of the world that we can (and did) create'.

Whereas Holloway et al venerate events in ways not unlike the activists seeking to create them, scholars of social movements are wary of taking such rhetoric at face value. Tarrow (1998) situates events in the wider context of sociological structures and collective action cycles. For this reason, he cautions against treating supposed 'Great Events' as 'A Single Thing'. Though campaigns will often 'grow out of single protest events and take their shape around the initial conflict in those events and their organization', Tarrow argues that this does not render such events exceptional, for they are often 'no more than the culmination of changes that have been germinating unobtrusively in the body politic' (Tarrow, 1998: 191, 55).

Tarrow's understanding of events does not necessarily contradict Sewell's, as both recognise the creative possibilities that emerge from the dislocation of pre-established modes of everyday life. What remains significant, however, is Sewell's emphasis on how the *representation* of past protest continues to inform the present. Through their retelling, commemoration, or reevaluation, certain protests may acquire greater mnemonic significance over time, and operate as benchmarks against which future protests are measured. For activism groups and networks, remembering or honouring past protests can contribute to the construction of a historically-informed identity 'product', as well as affective processes of collective 'identization' (Melucci, 1996). Their grievance, choice of tactics, or achieved outcomes may represent a useful point of reference for contemporary protest planning. In other cases – such as May 1968 – the memory of events can summon a more numinous protest 'spirit' that activists draw inspiration from (Dean, 2016). The latter is clearly illustrated in the reflections of anti-capitalist collective the Free Association:

These moments go down in history under a flattening name. Seattle 1999. May 1968. Kronstadt 1917. They eventually get tamed and forced into the history books but their alternate futures never totally disappear. You read about these events and you can still feel the tug of the future they thought they had. You still feel their potential welling up. (Free Association, 2011: 44-5)

For a protest to achieve this level of reverence, however, it must initially be subjected to what Jackson (2006: 502) calls the 'cultural politics of eventing'. Its essential purpose is to make sense of what has just been witnessed or experienced. Not only are the event's contours interpreted, contested, and reinforced by a range of witnesses and commentators, they are framed within the symbolic context of previous meaningful protests. In this way, the cultural politics of eventing reinforces norms and expectations as to what a 'mass participatory', 'radical', or 'successful' protest should look and feel like to its participants. Somewhat inevitably, the media plays a strong role in the eventing process. As Assmann (2006: 216) asserts, 'a political memory is necessarily a mediated memory', for it 'resides in material media, symbols and practices which have to be engrafted into the hearts and minds of individuals'. With the media acting as a 'picture frame' (Gamson, 2004: 245), this process is governed by the need to create something that mainstream media will consider newsworthy, which according to Gitlin (1980: 234), tends to privilege 'novelty... new events, new trends, new actions' above continuity and persistence.

Activists, of course, are well aware of this, and have increasingly sought to organise protests with their wider mediation clearly in mind. The alter-globalization movement of the 1990s and 2000s, for example, created media-friendly spectacles out of disruptions to global governance meetings in order to dramatize the otherwise invisible actions of the World Trade Organization and the G20 (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). This was realised most famously in 1999, when the collapse of the WTO meeting in Seattle succeeded in creating a powerful mediated protest event. Efforts to repeat this action at subsequent meetings, however, were met with a more powerful and repressive police response (Taylor, 2013: 741-2).

This sort of *tactical* eventing is arguably symptomatic of more general 'mediatization' trends within social movements, where modes of interaction and organisation are adapted according to the logic of media (Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Hensby, 2017a). Given activism's longstanding tendency to fetishize beginnings, tactical eventing arguably provides mixed blessings. As Seattle demonstrated, it can generate widespread public attention at crucial junctures, but the temptation to replicate past glories risks 'repertoire exhaustion' (Taylor, 2013: 731) at the expense of the movement's grassroots development. As the next section will demonstrate, these tendencies and risks are especially relevant to student activism, albeit in ways that warrant specific consideration of the opportunities and limitations of the field itself.

### **Events and memory in student activism**

Since the sixties, students in western societies have often enjoyed a prominent role as an 'incipient intelligentsia' (Rootes, 1980: 474). This owes to a combination of structural and life-cycle factors. Upon entering university, most undergraduates are 'structurally freed up for activism' (Crossley, 2008: 29), while the campus itself provides numerous opportunities to develop their political knowledge and engagement. With its foci of political groups, societies, and the student union – as well as its informal, overlapping student social networks – the campus represents an ideal field for generating campaigns and mobilising large numbers (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012).

Despite these opportunities, however, the creation of durable student *movements* is limited by structural conditions unique to the university field. With undergraduates typically graduating from university after 3-4 years, activism groups – like all groups and societies on campus – annually lose a sizeable proportion of their membership base. Though graduates can be replaced with recruits from each new cohort of freshers, these groups face constant challenges in developing organisational and tactical expertise across cohorts, as well as replacing experienced personnel in positions of influence. A core characteristic of student politics hitherto under-examined in social movement literature, Zamponi's (2018) study of Italian and Spanish student activism groups highlights the unique difficulties students face in maintaining a cross-cohort movement memory:

The memory of previous mobilisation seems to be wiped out every few years, when a new cohort of students begins their university career, because 'there is no reference to a past further away than the short span in which one is studying in the university'. (Zamponi, 2018: 227)

Of course, social movements do not reside solely in the minds of their participants. A degree of organisational continuity can be maintained through the archiving of meeting minutes and manifestos, as well as membership lists and contact details. Social media accounts provide opportunities to accumulate a wealth of videos, photographs, and correspondence over a number of years. These modes of organisation do not necessarily guarantee movement continuity, however, as they require activists to grow and maintain groups rather than found new ones. Though this might be a risk for smaller groups and societies, organisational memory is more likely to be maintained through the infrastructure of student unions. In the UK, however, Brooks et al. (2015) have found that unions' autonomy has become increasingly threatened by universities' desire to control and professionalise all aspects of the student experience. As a result, their role and purpose has been repositioned to one of 'consumer satisfaction', with responsibility for organisational and financial matters shifting from elected student officers towards permanent services staff. This loss of structural independence has arguably limited unions' capacity to build and sustain activist positions – ironic, given that the principal driver of these trends – the widespread marketization of higher education – represents the core grievance for many students across the world today (Klemenčič, 2014).

The structural and organisational limitations for maintaining movement memory provides student contention cycles with many unusual dynamics and tensions. According to Zamponi (2018: 227) the lack of knowledge and experience retained across cohorts leaves movements inevitably 'end[ing] because of the same mistakes that have been repeated for 40 years'. Though this might seem a damning indictment of student movements relative to, say, labour movements, comparing them as like-for-like risks overlooking many of the former's unique attributes. Students' auto-renewing membership, combined with their wide-ranging political interests, gives their activism an unremitting vitality that, when provided with the right opportunity structure, is capable of attaining moments of great visibility and influence. As Gitlin (1980: 239) remarks, 'a student movement feels, at times... that it is nothing and that it wants to be everything; and then, during intoxicated moments, its potential strength knows no bounds'. In the 1960s especially, these 'intoxicated moments' often took the form of metonymic, mediated events where students gate-crashed the national and international news agenda with controversial but eye-catching protest actions. Not only were these protests remarkable at the time, the cultural politics of eventing has since elevated their memory to the extent that they represent key symbols within popular narratives of the radical and countercultural 'sixties' (Zamponi, 2018; Dean, 2016).

Though the weight of this countercultural legacy might be seen as burdensome for today's activists, there remain plenty of valuable and pertinent lessons to be learned. Gitlin's (1980) account of sixties student activism in the United States, for example, argues that relying on mainstream media to amplify student voices beyond the campus can leave campaigns vulnerable to misrepresentation or belittlement (e.g. fetishizing isolated episodes of 'violence'; characterising students as naïve or self-interested). Moreover, Gitlin's critique pre-empts mediatization trends in noting how students' desire to maintain public visibility results in the compromising of movement-building strategies in favour of 'rush[ing] ahead' and 'conjuring up new and unprecedented events, one after another' (Gitlin, 1980: 234-5).

A tendency towards tactical eventing is not unique to student activism, but combined with aforementioned structural conditions it has left a movement history characterised by multiple triumphant, yet temporary, beginnings – or what Gitlin (1980: 234) refers to as ‘a sequence of tenuously linked exclamation points’. And yet such is the enduring countercultural resonance of the 1960s – and May 1968 in particular – that these exclamation points continue to represent archetypes of contention against which contemporary student activism is routinely measured. However, as the case study will demonstrate, these archetypes are not accompanied by a durable student movement *memory* that helps contemporary students to make practical sense of these past experiences.

### **The case study**

Research in this article draws on 56 interviews with students from six universities – University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, University of Leeds, University of Roehampton, University College London (UCL), and University of Warwick who were studying at the time of the 2010-11 protests. Universities were selected on the basis that each campus was politically active, and that their students were represented at the NUS demonstration on 10 November 2010. Although this selection should not be viewed as representative of all UK universities, efforts were made to ensure a relative diversity of geographical location, campus structure, and age (e.g. ancient, modern, post-1992).

Interviewees were recruited via a survey of students’ political attitudes and experiences, though in some cases specific activism leaders (e.g. union sabbatical officers) were recruited through forms of purposive and snowball sampling. The purpose of this sample was to provide a range of different levels and forms of protest participation, from petitioning to occupying. Data presented in this article focuses specifically on the accounts of interviewees who participated in the 10 November NUS demonstration. Students were invited to describe their experience of the day, including how they travelled to central London, who they marched with, and where they were when the Millbank attacks occurred. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo to identify and categorise key witness accounts. These were then juxtaposed with the Guardian’s (2010) live blog of the demonstration, as well as relevant Twitter hashtags (e.g. #Nov10; #Demo2010) to build an oral narrative of events as they unfolded on the day.

Although most participants brought up the NUS march freely in conversation, these methods raise issues of reflexivity, as ‘eventing’ processes arguably became entwined with interviewees’ own storytelling. Moreover, interviews took place in spring/summer 2012 – some eighteen months after Millbank. To counter this, participants were invited to distinguish between how they felt about their experiences at the time, and how they felt subsequently. The passing of time gave students the opportunity to reflect on its impact in the wider context of the protests against fees and cuts. This also enabled activism organisers to be more self-critical about protest planning in the aftermath of the December fees vote. All names quoted in this article have been changed.

### **The NUS demonstration in context**



Since the 1990s, higher education (HE) funding for students in the UK – and specifically, in England – has provided a regular cycle of grievances, with each new round of legislation prompting a wave of protest campaigns (Hensby, 2017b; 52-3). Between these cycles, however, HE activism has often struggled to maintain a presence on campuses, as the lack of specific policy grievances have seen students drift off to other campaigns. The previous cycle peaked in 2004, when the introduction of so-called ‘top-up fees’ prompted walkouts of around 2 million staff and students, along with numerous local rallies across the UK (*Guardian*, 25 February 2004). Thereafter, left-leaning activism at Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leeds, Roehampton, and UCL was mostly dominated by environmental campaigns, and the work of Students Justice for Palestine.

The next cycle of higher education activism had its roots in the Labour Government’s commissioning of the Browne Review in 2009, which was tasked with designing a more ‘sustainable’ system of financing higher education. This prompted the formation of new student campaign groups across the UK, including UCL’s National Campaign against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), the Edinburgh-based Anti-Cuts Coalition, and the Really Open University at Leeds, to pressurise NUS and student unions into organising and funding protests. Cambridge already had a group for this purpose – Education Not for Sale (ENS) – which had achieved a level of national prominence during the previous cycle. By 2010, however, interviewees indicated that the group had fallen into disarray:

[ENS] was basically dying away as I turned up, which was disappointing because I’d been talking to various people who’d said ‘there’s this great anti-cuts group since you’re really political’, and I found just five people in a room looking a bit depressed. There had been some really bitter feud just before I’d arrived, and I found mentioning the name ENS sparked off loads of arguments. (Andrew, Cambridge).

For this new generation of activists, ENS’s strength as a campaign group had been fatally compromised by the graduation of key personnel, a loss of campaign focus, and member infighting. Consequently, students sought to create a new group unburdened by past struggles. Though this might have come at the cost of campaign continuity and resources accumulated from the previous cycle, the Browne Review’s publication in October 2010, together with a newly-elected (and as-yet untested) Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, created a new context that warranted a fresh approach:

So 2009/10, there wasn’t any broad forum [on campus] so the task for activists in the next academic year was setting up something called the Cambridge Left Group. By the second meeting there were suddenly 80 people there. That was the day after the Browne Report, and we realised that we were entering a different period now. (Eric, Cambridge)

A similar leap in attendance at anti-cuts and free education meetings was reported on each of the other campuses around this time. Consequently, groups were able to pressurise their student unions into organising free or subsidised coach travel for members to attend the upcoming NUS demonstration, scheduled for 10 November. While this upsurge of activity

represented, in Eric's words, that student activism was 'entering a different period', the NUS had not organised a national demonstration since 2006, which had attracted 5,000 students. This led both the NUS to significantly underestimate attendance, with the Metropolitan Police deploying only 225 officers for the event. By the time the march began at Horse Guards Parade, however, it was clear that the scale of the protest had surpassed all expectations:

My real biggest memory of that day was the *scale* – there were so many people, just incredible amounts of people, and I remember thinking 'holy Christ' the whole day.  
(Danny, Edinburgh)

To be honest, I was very defeatist about the entire thing, thinking it would just be this stupid march where you walk around for a bit, and Tony Benn speaks, and just... the usual. And I didn't realise how big of a struggle and how big of an issue it was.  
(Raphael, Warwick)

I guess with it being the first time for an awful lot of people there – including myself – that they had been on a very large demonstration... Millbank, I guess, must have been the largest demonstration since Stop the War in London. (Ronnie, Warwick)

As evident in Raphael's recollection, the demonstration's remarkable *scale* – 52,000 students – surprised even experienced activists, many of whom had endured HE activism's abeyance period. For Danny and Ronnie, however, it represented their first experience of a mass demonstration, with the latter pointedly indexing its scale against 2003's 'million march' against the Iraq War. The newness of this experience for so many students arguably contributed to a general sense of unpredictability that would define the day, not least as the unusually short length of the demonstration route left the crowds with a surplus of energy once it proceeded to the final rallying point along Millbank:

I think one of the things that made Millbank happen actually was the length of the demo: people started at Horse Guards Parade and ended up at Millbank – that's about a quarter of an hour walk max if there are no crowds. So a lot of people were just like, 'let me run at something!' (Damon, UCL)

### **'Millbank' unfolds**

Although NUS saw 10 November as a clear and obvious opportunity to build a mass student campaign, its organisers had little in the way of radical pretensions. One interviewee cited the NUS's chosen slogan – 'We Will March' – as indicative of their overly cautious approach. For many other radically-minded activists, however, the timeliness of students' grievances provided an opportunity to make a more powerful public statement that could galvanise a wider movement. Interview accounts indicate that small groups of activists had arrived for the march with various disruptions already planned:

I'd known that there was a plan to take Millbank if we could, and I knew that that had been planned by people beforehand. (Gaz, UCL)

I knew that *something* was planned, but I didn't know what it was. (Eric, Cambridge)

On the day I was with people from my course, and I think there was definitely a split between people who were willing to go looking for... confrontational situations. (Ronnie, Warwick)

As the accounts suggest, the desire to create a more radical spectacle was on the minds of a number of students – one that would steal the narrative away from a large-scale but potentially ineffective 'peaceful demonstration'. This was anticipated by the Metropolitan Police insofar as Parliament and Liberal Democrat offices were heavily guarded, but the small number of officers patrolling the demonstration route left nearby Conservative Headquarters unexpectedly vulnerable. Consequently, it was the plan to occupy 30 Millbank that gained traction on the day. At approximately 1.30pm, a small group of marchers broke off from the main route, using SMS, leaflets, and word-of-mouth to urge the crowd to 'follow the red flags'. As they made their way into the offices of Millbank Tower, police and NUS stewards were unable to prevent thousands more students surging towards the lobby. With windows smashed, smoke bombs thrown, and bonfires of placards being lit in the surrounding courtyard, events quickly descended into chaos:

It escalated very quickly. People had smashed windows, someone threw a sofa... People just went absolutely bananas, absolutely crazy. (Hayley, Roehampton)

We took Millbank, we got in through the doors, and there were thousands of people outside. [...] The police had batons but they didn't use them, partly because they realised they were hopelessly outnumbered. (Anon)

Around fifty students made it onto the roof of Millbank Tower, whereupon they hung banners and waved anarchist flags. Meanwhile, large numbers were departing NUS's rally point to watch events unfold in the courtyard. Until Territorial Support Group (TSG) officers arrived approximately 45 minutes after the initial attack, protesters were virtually given free rein. For many involved, this engendered a sense of empowerment that surpassed the scale of the demonstration itself. In occupying Conservative HQ, they were defying Government *and* the police:

I think the feeling on that day – especially speaking to some of my friends who wouldn't have defined themselves as 'activists' before that, they really felt empowered, they felt that for the first time in their lives they had the power to make the people *with* power pay attention to them. (Ronnie, Warwick).

### **Eventing Millbank: mediation and deliberation**

Sewell (1996: 865) notes that emotional excitement is a 'constitutive ingredient of many transformative actions', whereas Melucci (1996: 374-5) highlights the power caused by feelings of collective *uncertainty* during the apparent suspension of order. For the majority of the 52,000 people on the demonstration, however, the events of Millbank were difficult to initially make sense of. Interview accounts suggest that media played a crucial role in this process from the start, as marchers used smartphones to share take photos and record videos, as well as follow

coverage of the demonstration via social media and news alerts. As a result, it is perhaps significant that for most interviewees, their recollection and subsequent recognition of Millbank as an *event* draws strongly on its mediation on the day:

There was a TV in the lobby [of Millbank] showing Sky News, and suddenly just seeing the Skycopter filming this massive crowd that were outside – it was like, ‘oh, I’m stood inside there! That’s a lot of people!’ (Jeremy, Edinburgh)

There were two issues of the Evening Standard that day: in the first, the protest was on page four and it was like, a picture of two pretty girls holding a placard, and a little piece about, like, ‘twenty thousand students went on a protest...’ And then two hours later, it was, like, front page, with a picture of a boy smashing up Millbank, and ‘50,000 students on the protest!’ (Donna, UCL).

I ended up on Radio Scotland talking about it [and] I remember leaving and being clear that this was immediately a major event. (Lindsey, Edinburgh)

Interactions with media quickly gave marchers an understanding that students had become the headline news story for the day. For Jeremy, glimpsing the television screen from the lobby gave him a sudden awareness of the wider spectacle the attacks had created. This was also true for Lindsey, who as an experienced activist leader recognised the significance of mainstream media coming to *him*. This arguably reflected the realisation of Millbank’s core purpose: as an act of direct action, it would not only empower those directly involved, it would also attract a much wider audience through its mediation across the UK. Millbank’s mediation was also important for many students who had attended the NUS demonstration but had found themselves too far away from the action as it was unfolding. Instead, their experiences of the day were shaped by watching it as a lead news item on television:

We couldn’t even see that going on, so I didn’t see the door being smashed in and all that stuff until I got home and saw it on TV. (Mick, Cambridge)

We left and went to a pub, and the pub had the TV on showing the student protests with all the footage from Millbank! So were all sitting there, going, ‘ah, we wouldn’t have really got this coverage otherwise, would’ve we?’ and we had this awkward moment of being, like, ‘it’s great! We’re on the news... but that was really awful’.  
(Rhiannon, Edinburgh)

The blurring of Millbank as a physical and mediated event was critical for students’ subsequent ‘eventing’ processes. As indicated in Rhiannon’s recollection, the live news coverage saw student grievances and actions elevated to centre-stage, albeit at a cost. Echoing Gitlin’s frustrations, the mainstream media zoned in on the protest’s most extreme aspects, notably the actions of a sixth-form student who threw an empty fire extinguisher from the roof of Millbank Tower. In the minds of many activists however, its disruptiveness was necessary to elevate Millbank as a significant act of protest. For Jeremy, this allowed its actions to be framed within the symbolic context of previous meaningful protest events:

Throughout it all I was very much seeing it from a tactical perspective, of suddenly going 'wow, this caused a massive media storm', looking at it from the media side of things, creating a spectacle. I instantly saw that examples of the 1960s sit-in movement stuff, which I studied quite a bit in history. I'm seeing these moments where things change, and inspire people. (Jeremy, Edinburgh).

Although Jeremy was not involved in planning the occupation, his comments arguably demonstrate how Millbank represented a form of tactical eventing, one that could draw power and influence through satisfying the mainstream media's criterion for a major news story, while simultaneously evoking student activism's celebrated past. For this to come to fruition, however, it necessitated a period of reflection and deliberation among student groups and networks about the meaning and value of Millbank. A significant outcome of this process was the diffusion across student activism networks of the 'Millbank defence', namely the moral distinction drawn between physical violence and violence against property:

It was the first time I'd had to contemplate issues of violence against property as a political statement, so I spent a lot of time thinking about it, bouncing ideas off people – political friends whose opinions I trusted [...] and I realised that I'd been thinking about it in a kind of reactionary way. (Andrew, Cambridge)

I think I stood by Millbank being very bad up until there was a motion taken to Student Council [...] and that was the first time I heard someone say that violence is very different if it's towards an inanimate object. I guess hearing people talk about that changed my mind a huge amount. (Rhiannon, Edinburgh)

Broad consensus on the 'Millbank defence' helped students assert greater control over the eventing process as it played out on campuses and in the press, and thereby take advantage of the media traction Millbank had created. This soon became evident not only in rolling newspaper coverage, but also the sudden surge in attendance at anti-cuts meetings on campuses. In other words, Millbank's impact was helping stimulate engagement and mobilisation from the wider student body, most of whom had not attended the NUS demonstration:

Millbank gave us coverage in terms of all of a sudden every newspaper in the country would be calling you, going 'when is the next big mobilisation, because these photos are selling like hot cakes!' (Damon, UCL)

So literally a week later there was a meeting. It was quite a small group before then, but at this meeting a lot more people turned up than we expected, and there were a lot of people just really angry, calling for an occupation which I didn't expect. (Raphael, Warwick)

I went to a packed meeting in one of the biggest lecture theatres in UCL, and we were, like, 'what do we do next?' This is the meeting at which the *implicit* decision was taken to hold an occupation. I said something like 'we can't condemn the violence: we have

to defend Millbank and keep on taking on management and fighting cuts...' (Brett, UCL)

This new surge in participation gave activists confidence that they could further exploit their media traction and force a defeat of the HE bill in Parliament on 9 December. After all, students had few alternate means available for affecting the fees vote beyond maintaining a powerful public presence that could pressurise MPs into defying their party whip. The subsequent network of 51 occupations – some of which became mediated spaces in their own right through activists' social media use – were therefore designed to take the spirit of Millbank to campuses across the UK, while creating a similarly powerful visual representation of students' burgeoning radicalism and power.

### **After Millbank**

For all the mass mobilisations, radical tactics, and mediated pressure exerted on MPs in the seven weeks following the Browne Review's publication, Parliament narrowly passed the fees bill by 21 votes. Despite this, activist interviewees recalled entering 2011 with a strong desire to continue the fight and build a student *movement* against higher education marketization. Initial mobilisations, however, failed to attract the mass-participation or media interest that students had enjoyed the previous autumn. With grievances concerning the Government's HE White Paper failing to create the same opportunity structures as before, students' prior reliance on mainstream media was suddenly exposed:

We started to call more days of action after Christmas and, like, three school kids would show up: the message wasn't really getting out there. There is a limit to how much you can use the press, the Guardian front page, as your main communications tool because they *can't* actually print it every other week. (Damon, UCL)

Consequently, 2011 saw parts of the occupation networks slowly drift off into different directions. Some took steps towards institutionalisation, forming activist 'slates' for student union elections so that future campaigns would be better resourced at a local level. Others felt that the fees campaign's most powerful legacy had been the use of direct action, and sought to create more radical occupations that followed the neo-anarchistic ideal of creating 'futures in the present'. Some drifted away from campus politics altogether, sensing that the post-Millbank decline exposed the limitations and contradictions of building a standalone student movement, and instead forged links with groups and unions within the wider anti-austerity movement.

This 'reform or revolution' dilemma recalls the latter stages of Tarrow's (1998) protest cycle, even though the cycle in question was barely six months old. Frustrated by this impasse, the temptation for some activists was to 'chase the possibility of another Millbank moment' (Woodcock, 2013: 15). This reflected a desire to re-engage the wider student community about the future of higher education, though in practical terms it would again require satisfying the media's definition of newsworthiness. This tendency was evident on NCAFC's 'unofficial' national demonstration in November 2011. In stark contrast to the previous autumn, attendance was reported at only 2,000, while the Metropolitan Police deployed almost twice as

many officers. With students encircled by a police line for most of the march's duration, opportunities to disrupt or deviate were virtually non-existent:

I think everyone was expecting 'Millbank 2' and it didn't happen. Clearly the Met were looking for a fight, and yeah, it was very tense, and it was because of Millbank. No-one was pretending it wasn't – it was because of Millbank and they didn't want it to happen again. (John, Edinburgh)

Police tactics ensured that not only were there no direct actions, there was also minimal reporting of the protest in the mainstream media. As this suggests, there is a limit to how much activists can 'force' event creation when, as Tarrow argues, they are dependent on wider structural opportunities. Whereas the power of students' tactics in November 2010 was largely made possible by the poor preparation of the Metropolitan Police, the wider context of an untested Coalition Government, and a sense of betrayal felt by the large numbers of first-time Liberal Democrat voters, had already provided a news narrative ripe for activists to exploit. In creating 'Millbank', students gifted a perfectly-timed story for the media to cover, which in turn, generated sufficient attention and coverage that the students could use for their own ends.

This mediatized eventing process benefitted students in their short-term goal of pressurising Parliament into voting down the fees bill, but in so doing it allowed the students' relevance to be determined by the logic of mainstream media cycles. This meant that once the fees vote was passed the protests were considered to have reached their natural conclusion. Recalling Gitlin's (1980) earlier reflections, one can argue that in creating – and then seeking to recreate – Millbank, the students of 2010-11 were discovering the same opportunities and limitations of event creation as their sixties predecessors. The frustrations of this process were clearly felt by Gaz:

You can't do anything more except manufacture a spectacle for the media. In the sixties, they managed to get shitloads of people going with an entire critique of society: they didn't have to pick up on PR politics. Now I don't know if you could get anyone to sit down and read it. (Gaz, UCL)

Though Gaz recognises students' longstanding requirement to 'manufacture a spectacle for the media', his impression that students in the sixties 'didn't have to pick up on PR politics' differs from Gitlin's assessment. In short, Gaz is invoking a cultural representation of students in the sixties that recognises their sequence of 'exclamation points', but little of their own comparable mediatization struggles. This chimes with Dean's (2016: 311) study of historical discourses in the 2010-11 protests, which found that activists often sought to invoke comparisons with their sixties predecessors, but that this 'rarely spelt out which precise characteristics of the radical sixties were being referred to'. In creating Millbank, students arguably recognised the importance of creating an event that could measure up to previous great events from student activism history, even if this unwittingly and ironically involved encountering precisely the same pitfalls.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this article indicates that students' occupation of Millbank was a form of 'tactical eventing'. This was demonstrated not only in a minority of activists' plan to hijack the NUS demonstration with a more radical (and media-friendly) spectacle, but also in the way students sought to frame Millbank in the weeks that followed. Efforts to popularise the 'Millbank defence' on direct action, together with the desire to take its radical spirit to the campus in the form of 51 simultaneous occupations, helped ensure that Millbank would have consequences that extended far beyond the events of the day itself.

Ostensibly, Millbank was a response to Government proposals to treble the cap on tuition fees, and the limited timescale students had available to influence the parliamentary vote. Yet students' tactical eventing also reflected longstanding patterns of contention within the history of student activism. The turnover of cohorts and activism groups, together with the limited leadership of student unions, provided an opportunity for a fresh and radical approach unburdened by past struggles. At the same time, however, Millbank had many of the hallmarks of what student activism is most famous for – a scene-stealing moment of agency and defiance that could shock and inspire a national and international audience into taking note of their grievance.

As this suggests, students' tactical eventing reflected a partial engagement with their own activism history. The protests of the 1960s continue to serve as a benchmark for student activism, and this was evidenced in interviewees' desire to create a 'media spectacle'. Yet in so doing, students experienced the same limitations as their predecessors, including the compulsion to repeat the same tactics in order to salvage their dissipating media platform. The incompleteness of this mnemonic process has consequently left today's student activists with a powerful legacy of 'exclamation points', but little movement memory to help them learn from their failings. In this respect, the memorative *representation* of student activism continues to overshadow mnemonic *processes* across successive cohorts.

These processes arguably result in a student activism history comprised of multiple episodes of spectacular yet ultimately thwarted beginnings. Activists' efforts to create galvanising, scene-stealing moments of agency may therefore represent their greatest attribute, albeit one that is constrained by their greatest weaknesses. Millbank, therefore, arguably represents a new benchmark for student activists in the UK to live up to, a benchmark that, at the time of writing, continues to be strengthened through Jeremy Corbyn's touting of free higher education in his role as Labour Party leader.

Admittedly, these conclusions are tentatively drawn from a single case study, and activism in a single country. While informed by Zamponi's (2018) recent work on student movement memory in Italy and Spain, more research is required to trace the memorative representations and mnemonic processes that continue to shape student activism in other countries. It might be the case, for example, that memorative and mnemonic processes diverge to a lesser degree in cases where student activism is more institutionalised, as this may create greater organisational continuity across successive cohorts. It is also hoped that this discussion has helped demonstrate the value of studying events for their mnemonic properties. Though it may be true



that past student activism events have provided the necessary ruptures that force social change, their representation and commemoration can also influence how contemporary movements act in the present.

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