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Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for a
Post-Capitalist Society

G T Saunders

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Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for a Post-Capitalist Society

Gary Thomas Saunders

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the practical and theoretical significance of autonomous learning spaces that have experimented with alternative forms of no-fee, higher education provision in the United Kingdom (UK). This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by: (i) documenting and critically examining the importance of these autonomous spaces in a way that can inspire and support others involved in similar projects now, or in the future; (ii) grounding them within an Libertarian-Marxist theoretical framework that highlights their potential to prefigure alternative models of higher education provision and self-organisation to crack or rupture capitalist social relations by functioning in, against and beyond them; (iii) highlighting their potential for people from different ideological and theoretical affiliations to work together to overcome differences by working on concrete political projects that is referred to a process of left-wing convergence; and, (iv) examining the use of participatory action research for academics involved in political projects as a form of scholar-activism that supports and encourages more overt political engagement under the concept of public sociology.

The autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis emerged out of the student protests against increased tuition fees and proposed changes to higher education in England that were announced by the UK Coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government in 2010. While these reforms were a tipping point for many involved in these protests, they are part of a much longer ideological and political project that began in the late 1970s to impose a neoliberal model of higher education on the sector. The culmination of these reforms has had a detrimental impact on higher education, including a shift towards less democratic models of university governance, the creation of an unsustainable funding model of higher education, increasingly precarious and intensified working conditions for staff and growing levels of anxiety and debt for students creating a crisis over the nature and purpose of higher education.

These changes have not gone unopposed and, in 2010, they triggered a wave of protests, trade union strike action and the occupation of university property by students opposed to these reforms. While these protests failed to prevent the Coalition's reforms to higher education being implemented, they created a new form of student activism and politics that were part of an attempt to prefigure alternative forms of education and self-organisation. One example of this was the emergence of autonomous learning spaces that experimented with no-fee, alternative models of higher education. This thesis focuses on these experimental spaces and examines what, if anything, can be learned from them to create an alternative model of higher education institution *contra* to the neoliberal model that has been imposed by successive governments since the 1970s. The research focuses on seven autonomous learning spaces based in the UK, including one, the Social Science Centre (Lincoln, UK), which I was an active member of between 2012 and 2014. Indeed, the research stems from an attempt to document and reflect on my own, and others, experience of being involved in creating and running an autonomous learning space through a participatory action research project. The data was gathered using a mixture of participant observation, 28 semi-structured interviews and web-based analysis of minutes of meetings, blog posts and websites.

The research found that while these autonomous learning spaces tended to be embryonic, ephemeral and contested spaces, they functioned as places wherein people not only resisted the neoliberalisation of higher education but also experimented with forms of critical pedagogy as well as models of self-organisation that were underpinned by non-hierarchical and democratic principles. The research found that these autonomous learning spaces were characterised by a diversity of different theoretical, political and cultural perspectives and while this caused friction within groups it highlights the potential for people to work together on concrete political projects in a way that show left-wing convergence is possible. The research found that these autonomous learning spaces also had an important affective, non-intellectual dimension.

This was supported by bonds of friendship and trust that developed between people working on these projects.

The practical and theoretical significance of these autonomous learning spaces, then, is that they have the potential to inform the creation of new higher education institutions or the transformation of old ones along more egalitarian, collectively owned and participatory democratic lines as a response to the neoliberalisation of higher education. Moreover, these autonomous learning spaces provide a fissure of hope and inspiration that alternative ways of being exist that have the potential to challenge, question, rupture and crack the contradictory and exploitative nature of capitalist social relations and create spaces wherein it is possible to prefigure the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society.

Introduction

In 2010, the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government announced a series of reforms to higher education in England based on the findings of the *Browne Review - Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). The Coalition's reforms were made during a period of global economic uncertainty in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008, which shaped the political narrative around public spending. The reforms to higher education formed part of a raft of austerity measures outlined in the *Government Spending Review* (HM Treasury 2010) which aimed to lower public spending in a bid to reduce the government's budget deficit and reduce the huge amounts of debt accrued after bailing out the banking sector with public money in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. It was within this context, then, that the Coalition's reforms were proffered as the best way of ensuring that English universities would be able to continue to offer a "world-class education" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). The government argued that this would be achieved by putting into place a sustainable system of financing higher education that would supposedly lighten the burden on public finances (in line with other austerity measures made during the same period) and be more responsive to the needs of students. Moreover, the reforms were posited as a way of enabling the higher education sector to continue to expand and meet the increasing demands for student places (Brown and Carasso 2013; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010; McGettigan 2013).

The Coalition's reforms have been subsequently added to by consecutive Conservative governments (2015-2017, and 2017-present). This includes the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that was outlined in the Conservative Government's *White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016). The TEF rates university teaching as either ‘gold’, ‘silver’ or ‘bronze’ as a way of recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching and learning and helping to inform student choice (Office for Students 2018). Moreover, the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* created the Office for Students, an independent regulator for higher education, which came into force in January 2018 and will monitor the quality of teaching and learning in higher education to ensure students receive “value for money” (Office for Students 2018).

These changes to higher education are part of a raft of reforms since the late 1970s, which include the *Jarratt Report* (1985), the *Croham Report* (1987), the *Dearing Report* (1997), the *Lambert Report* (2003) and the *Higher Education Act 2004* that have been influenced by neoliberal ideology and have attempted to shift higher education in England towards a more financialised and marketized model of provision (Brown and Carasso 2013). Integral to this ideological process has been successive governments’ attempts to: (i) shift the burden of funding the sector from the state to students through cutting block teaching grants and increasing student tuition fees (financialisation); and, (ii) impose market principles through the (re)emphasising of the rhetoric of “student as customer” and “student voice”, and the external imposition of quality assurance measures (marketisation) to create competition between providers for student numbers (Boden and Epstein 2006; Naidoo *et al* 2011; Molesworth *et al* 2009).

Underlying these reforms has been the neoliberal logic that embedding market principles into the sector will drive up the quality of provision and therefore improve value-for-money. Theoretically, this will be achieved by creating an internal market to increase competition among institutions to attract students, with the latter gravitating towards the most popular, well-run courses, forcing less popular courses to improve the quality of their provision, reduce prices

or cease to exist (Callender and Scott 2013; Thompson and Bekhradnia 2011; Wyness 2013). Moreover, the Coalition's reforms also made it easier for private providers to enter the sector by changing the regulations around degree awarding powers (McGettigan 2013). Underpinned by neoliberal ideology (Gamble 1988; Harvey 2005), these reforms are part of an attempt to impose a neoliberal model of higher education and perpetuate the (re)imposition of capitalist social relations by creating the conditions for the creation and extraction of profit (Cleverer 2017).

This is done by attempting to commodify what is produced within universities. Marx (1976, p. 2) defines a commodity as any product or service that can be offered on the market for sale for the consumption of others:

The commodity is first an external object, a thing which satisfies through its qualities human needs of one kind or another. The nature of these needs is irrelevant, e.g., whether their origin is in the stomach or in the fancy. We are also not concerned here with the manner in which the entity satisfies human need; whether in an immediate way as food – that is, as object of enjoyment – or by a detour as means of production.

Furthermore, Marx (1976) argues that commodities consist of a physical use-value and an abstract exchange-value. The use-value of a commodity is the physical uses it can fulfil: *'It is the utility of a thing for human life that turns it into a use-value.'* (Marx 1976, p. 2) The exchange-value is how much the commodity is worth or what its value is. Marx (1976) argues that the exchange-value of commodity fluctuates around the socially necessary labour time required to produce it, which is realised when exchanged on the market. Socially necessary labour time is defined as being the time on average it takes to produce a commodity or: *'The labour time socially necessary is that required to produce an article under the normal*

conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time.’ (Marx 1976, p. 29)

The dual nature of the commodity also leads to a bifurcation of the concept of labour which within capitalist social relations consists of concrete labour (actual physical labour carried out by the worker) and labour-power which is the abstract potential to work: *‘...we saw also that labour, too, possesses the same two-fold nature; for, so far as it finds expression in value, it does not possess the same characteristics that belong to it as a creator of use values.’* (Marx, 1976, p. 30) The worker is paid by the capitalist for their labour-power, or potential to work, which Marx (1976) argues the value of which is how much it costs to sustain and recreate the worker’s life. While the capitalist pays for the labour-power what they receive is the physical labour of the worker which adds more value to the commodity produced than paid in the wage-form for their labour-power.

This process of adding more value through physical labour than the worker is paid for their labour-power is what Marx (1976) referred to as exploitation and is the how capitalists make profit. The process of exploitation can be intensified through the creation of absolute surplus-value or relative surplus value: *‘The surplus-value produced by prolongation of the working day, I call absolute surplus-value. On the other hand, the surplus-value arising from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from the corresponding alteration in the respective lengths of the two components of the working day, I call relative surplus-value.’* (Marx 1976, p. 221). Absolute surplus value is created by lengthening the working day or reducing break times. Relative surplus value is created through the intensification of work and reducing the cost of living (usually by intensifying the working practices in places that produce the means of subsistence). As capitalist are concerned with the accumulation of profit rather than what or how commodities are produced, the production of use-values tends to be

subsumed by the focus on the production of exchange-values. As such, through competition with other capitalist on the markets for sale of their commodities capitalist are forced to further exploit and alienate workers to produce those commodities more cheaply: *‘His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one single life impulse, the tendency to create value and surplus-value, to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour.’* (Marx 1976, p. 163) Marx saw his contribution of socially necessary labour time as an important contribution to political economy and constitutes his labour theory of value, which see labour as the source of all capitalist wealth (Marx 1976).

So how does this help us understand the neoliberal reforms to higher education and the logic behind them? The main work carried out by universities are teaching and research. Both teaching and research are not unique to universities and occur in other institutions, but what is unique is that they are carried out together in universities often by the same people. Within capitalist universities the labour carried out by teaching and research both produce value but of a different kind (Somerville and Saunders 2013). Academic labour is a service that can be bought and sold like any other, but its main use-value is to add value to students’ labour-power by making them more employable through developing their skills and knowledge in preparation for the labour market. The students’ exchange-value is then realised on the market through exchange in the form of a wage or salary when they commence employment. What is important about this is that education is not something students can simply consume (questioning the notion of students as consumers) but requires them to work on the development of their own labour-power through reading, discussing, thinking and engaging with assessments so take on the role of co-producers, although they are not paid for their contribution in this process (Somerville and Saunders 2013). Research adds a different kind of value that Marx (2005, p. 706) referred to as the “general intellect” which he defines as:

Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it; to what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.

Thus, the knowledge and processes created through research become embodied within the general intellect and various means of production; however, this value can be appropriated by individuals and organisations outside of universities, although this is much more difficult to quantify than the creation of students' labour-power (Somerville and Saunders 2013).

The neoliberal reforms to higher education, then, are part of an intensification of academic labour. The aim of the reforms are to create more labour-power (students) to be exploited on the labour market and for this to be done as cheaply as possible by extending the working day (absolute surplus value) and intensifying the labour process (relative surplus value). Moreover, the same process is extended to research and adding valuing to the general intellect. Finally, by encouraging private providers to enter the sector the logic is that this will further reduce the cost of producing labour-power and adding value to the general intellect by creating increased competition between higher education providers and that profit can be extracted by capitalists through this process through private ownership of higher education providers.

These reforms have had a significant impact on universities' governance structures and organisational culture as universities have not only modified their management systems through the imposition of New Public Management (Shattock 2008; Radice 2013; Deem *at al* 2001; Deem *et al.* 2007; Salter and Tapper 2003; Scott 2013), but also their strategies to cope with the new funding environments (Callender and Scott 2013). For academics, the reforms have resulted in increasingly precarious and intensified working conditions, including increased workloads and often competing duties (teaching, research, income generation, pastoral care and administration), deteriorating pay and contractual conditions and changes to pensions¹ despite universities receiving more funding since the new fee structure came into place in 2012 (Barnett 2013; UCU 2013). It is perhaps unsurprising then that academic staff are reporting increased levels of stress and mental health problems (Kinman and Wray 2013; UCU 2013) as academic labour is intensified (Harvie and de Angelis 2009; Gill 2009) and staff have become more alienated from the process of production (Hall 2018).

Concomitantly for students, those commencing their studies since 2012 can now expect to accrue increased amounts of debt - *circa* £57,343² for a three-year degree programme (The Complete University Guide 2018). Also, mental health appears to be affecting students with 27% stating that they suffer from at least one mental health issue related to studying in higher education (You.Gov 2016). This is part of a much bigger problem that stems from the pressure placed on students throughout the whole educational system, which has also been affected by neoliberal reforms, within which they are tested on average once a month between the ages of 5-18 years-of-age (Dorling 2019). This process now starts even earlier with baseline tests for reception school children (aged between 4 and 5) being implemented since September 2019.

¹ For example, see the ongoing dispute over changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme.

² This figure is based on a three-year degree course commencing in 2018/19 academic year and priced at £9,25000 per annum. Plus, the maximum annual maintenance loan living away from parents outside of London of £8,700 per annum. Plus, the accrual of £3,494 of interest while studying on the course.

These neoliberal reforms have been described as an attack of the “idea of the public university” (Holmwood 2016; Colini 2012) and a fundamental assault on the critical and radical traditions of academic activity, and an act of vandalism against the university as a progressive sociological and political project (Bailey and Freedman 2011), which have fundamentally disfigured the sector (Warner 2015) and left the idea of the university in ruins (Readings 1997). This lament for the idea of the public university has been articulated by several university academics. One of the most vocal has been Stefan Collini - a Professor of English Literature and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge. Collini has written two books on higher education reform in England titled: *What are Universities For?* (2012) and *Speaking of Universities* (2017).

Both books provide insightful critiques of the reforms made to higher education, especially those made since the 2010. Collini argues that these reforms are part of: ‘...*a calculated attempt to re-shape higher education in this country by subjecting it to the discipline of the market.*’ (2012, p. 189) Both books draw upon previous publications and speeches made by Collini about higher education which collectively make a strong argument for the preservation of universities as a way of protecting and promoting the “public good” they provide to society. Collini considers this public good to be a form of value that is something different to economic value (money) which he describes as: ‘...*conserving, understanding, extending, and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific and artistic heritage of mankind.*’ (2012, p. 198) Thus, for Collini, part of the nature and purpose of higher education is cultural transmission. This line of argumentation is also pursued by McKibbin (2012) writing in the London Review of Books (LRB) who argues that: ‘...*universities are examples of the success of public institutions in a country whose political elites are now ideologically opposed even to the concept of the ‘public’.*’ Another advocate of the public university in LRB is Thomas (2011) who argues that: ‘...*that higher education might have a non-monetary value, or that science,*

scholarship and intellectual inquiry are important for reasons unconnected with economic growth. ' Again, there is an attempt to highlight non-economic benefits of higher education that are considered a form of public good that appear to be overlooked by neoliberal reforms to the sector.

This intellectual defence of the idea of the public university has been embodied in the Council for the Defence of British University (CDBU), which was created in 2012 in opposition to the Coalition's reforms to higher education and the marketisation of the sector (CDBU 2019). The organisation was created by 66 founding members, which include Sir David Attenborough, Alan Bennett, Professor Richard Dawkins and Professor Stefan Collini (CDBU 2019). The CDBU has launched a series of campaigns about the impact of the Coalition's reforms, including against the TEF as a measurement of teaching excellence, the increasing use of fixed-term contracts as a source of cheap labour in universities and legislation making it easier for private providers to enter the sector and offer cut-price degree (CDBU 2019).

The CDBU argues that: *'The very purpose of the university was being grossly distorted by the attempt to create a market in higher education,'* (Thomas cited in Malik 2012) The main aim of the CDBU is: *'...to promote and sustain British universities as places where students can develop their capabilities to the full and where scholarship, research, and teaching can be freely pursued at the highest level.'*³ (CDBU 2019) Underpinning CDBU, which consist of

³ These aims are further broken down by CDBU:

1. Make university education accessible to all students able to benefit from it.
2. Promote and enhance teaching and research in conjunction with each other.
3. Foster the intellectual skills and flexibility of students in relation to the demands of a rapidly-changing economy, while developing the powers of the mind, enlarging knowledge and understanding, and enhancing the intellectual and material quality of life.
4. Enhance knowledge and understanding of the physical world, of human nature and of all forms of human activity.
5. Promote the values of academic freedom in research and teaching, and to promote knowledge and understanding of the rights and responsibilities that come with that.
6. Encourage the adoption of appropriate criteria for assessing the quality of teaching and research
7. Sustain the autonomy of institutions of higher education.

mainly academics from “top universities”, is the notion of the idea of the public university as outlined by Scott (*ibid*) ‘*It also includes those, like myself, who hope (against hope?) that we can gradually work our way back to a position in which higher education is regarded as a public good, and funded accordingly.*’ (Scott 2012)

The idea of the public university has also been defended by in the *Campaign for the Public University* (2018) which, using the work of Dewey (1927), argues that the university is a social institution that serves as a public good by creating individuals that are able to think critically and engage meaningfully in democratic society. Thus, the university is posited as a place wherein: ‘*The essential need ... is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public*’ (Dewey 1927: 208). Dewey’s point here is that education should be a holistic process that not only develops human potential, but also improves social welfare. This should be done by providing education that has a humanist aspect that creates citizens who participate meaningfully in democratic society. Dewey argued against education being vocational and practical that should be wide ranging with no fixed outcomes so the focus on the process of learning and thinking critically (Stallman 2003) Thus, this approach functions as a critique of vocational and instrumental forms of higher education that are advocated with the employability focused neoliberal model of higher education.

Moreover, the resistance to the attack on the idea of the public university has resulted in an alternative white paper for higher education being created, entitled *In Defence of Public Higher Education: Knowledge for a Successful Society* (2016). Within this document, the public good that the university serves is described as being: (i) educating the next generation of the

-
8. Promote the work of British universities in transmitting and interpreting the world’s cultural and intellectual inheritance.
 9. Promote all these aims amongst universities throughout the world.

population; (ii) carrying out research to address social and scientific challenges; and, (iii) maintaining an independent platform for research into society and science to facilitate democratic debate. The Alternative White Paper argues that the privatisation of higher education threatens this public good served by the university by eroding academic freedom, positing higher education as an individual investment in human capital, creating a separation between teaching and research and focusing more on vocational courses:

Critical knowledge serves a public good that is guaranteed by the character of the university as an institution. Universities are not aggregates of individuals; they are epistemological communities; that is, communities of scholars and researchers engaged together with issues of truth and validity. It is this that is threatened by the subordination of the university to the market. The new for-profit providers that the Government wishes to encourage have no obligations to the production of new knowledge, to serve public debate, or to the sector as a whole. In this way, the public function of higher education is threatened by making it appear that universities are like private corporations with a private interest.

(ibid)

The *Campaign for the Public University* forms part of a rich history of literature and debate about the idea of the university (Newman 1852, Lowe 1940; Truscott 1943; Moberly 1949) that is concerned with who and what is taught, what kind of knowledge is produced as well as the design and location of university campuses (Neary and Saunders 2011). One of the earliest critiques of the idea of the university was made during the early 19th Century by architect, scholar and political reformer, Charles Kelsall (1782-1857), in his book *Phantasm of an University* (1814) which was a critique of the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Whyte 2015). Both of these universities were criticised for their exclusivity, based on religious

and class affiliations, and for offering too narrow a curriculum that focused on classics and mathematics (Whyte 2015). Both Oxford and Cambridge were seen to neglect political science, moral philosophy, agriculture, commerce and manufacturing, which were described at the time as ‘...*the main bulwarks of the nation, the pride and glory of the English people.*’ (Kelsall 1814, p. 24). In response, Kelsall argued that:

A University should be able to face and confer rewards on every candidate in every department of science and art; she should be a nation, what the sun is to our system, the grand centre, from which the rays of universal knowledge should emanate, and by which the career of all the luminaries of science should be regulated and directed.

(Kelsall 1814, p. 39)

Kelsall went on to outline an alternative idea of the university *contra* to the ancient model of Oxford and Cambridge within which he contemplates the creation of a wholly new institution:

...a massive metropolis of science and art, consisting of no fewer than seven quadrangles somewhat larger than Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London’s largest public square. There would be a museum and a university press, a Senate House, a university church inspired by the cathedral at Rheims, a ‘Grove’ of trees and beautiful walks, and a library full of books. But the heart of the projects consisted of seven enormous colleges, each one pursuing its own subject.... Let a healthy and cheerful spot be chosen in the county of Stafford; and let the silver Trent meander at the end of the University Grove.

(Kelsall 1814, p. 170)

The importance of Kelsall’s idea of the university was that it sought to widen participation beyond the elite minority who had historically benefitted from it. Moreover, Kelsall’s argument that the range of subjects should be expanded to include science and practical knowledge to

enrich our understanding of ourselves and the world around is commendable. However, Kelsall was not immune from the influences of Oxford and Cambridge and replicates their geographical isolation from the centres of industry and commerce with his vision of the idyllic university campus outlined above. Moreover, Whyte (2015) argues that Kelsall was unable to influence the sorts of people who could make his *Phantasm* a reality, mainly due to his utopianism and the rural setting he depicted, when the ambitious and emergent middle-classes saw the need for higher education in towns rather than in the countryside. Nevertheless, what was important about Kelsall's work was his enthusiasm for change, especially his belief that educational and architectural reform would need to be coupled together. Indeed, Kelsall's work on the idea of the university would trigger future debates about what new universities should look like which inspired the development of University College London in particular (Whyte 2015).

Concomitantly in Prussia, the idea of the university was being developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt at the University of Berlin, which was founded in 1810. Central to the Humboldtian model was the union between teaching and research (Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin 2018). Moreover, the Humboldtian model argued for the advancement of knowledge through critical investigation within which teachers and students should participate in creating a community of scholars and students (*ibid*). Like Kelsall, von Humboldt thought the university should offer a broader range of subjects to study rather than the limited focus on universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge (*ibid*). von Humboldt also argued that there should be limited state interference in university governance and both academics and students should have the academic freedom to study what they wished (*ibid*). These ideas underpinned Berlin University and other Teutonic institutions of higher learning still influence practice in Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin today (*ibid*).

The debate about the meaning and purpose of higher education was continued by John Henry Newman through a series of lectures given in Dublin (Ireland) during the 1850s collectively referred to as *The Idea of the University Defined and Illustrated* (1852). Like Kelsall, Newman argued that universities should offer a broader range of subjects with a clear emphasis on teaching rather than research: ‘...that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.’ (Newman 1852, p. xxxvii) Newman’s idea of the university was based on a similar model to that of Oxford, where he had himself studied, requiring a pastoral relationship between students and staff with staff having a significant influence on students. Newman argued that the importance of university education was to prepare students for the world rather than to hide from it:

It is not a Convent; it is not a Seminary; it is a place to fit men of the world for the world. We cannot possibly keep them from plunging into the world, with all its ways and principles and maxims, when their time comes; but we can prepare them against what is inevitable; and it is not the way to learn to swim in troubled waters, never to have gone into them.

(Newman 1852, p. 233)

The ideas of Kelsall, von Humboldt and Newman were all influential in the creation of “red brick” or “civic universities” that were built during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Britain, which included Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, Sheffield and Newcastle (Whyte 2015). What was at the time distinctive about these universities were that they were open to people of different religious denominations, males and females, and the working-class. In fact, these universities were trying to be open to as wide a student constituency as possible, especially those from the local areas within which they resided

(Whyte 2015). Indeed Truscott (1943) argued that the redbrick universities created opportunities in their cities for middle and upper working-class families to attend universities as well as further their community's industrial and commercial interests. An essential characteristic of these universities was that they were embedded within towns and cities and actively made connections with the local communities and were shaped by local needs, local benefactors and local government (Whyte 2015).

However, while the redbricks did much to change the exclusivity and narrow focus on universities, Whyte (2015) argues that it did not go far enough in terms of social exclusivity and were still too few working-class students, which resulted in the creation of Mechanics Institutes and Ruskin College in Oxford in 1899 to provide technical education for those from deprived backgrounds (Rose 2001). This issue would be taken up in the *Robbins Report* (1963) and with the development of the "plate-glass" universities, which Balcoff (1968) describes as the: '...greatest single expansion of higher education that England has ever known.' (p. 15) Of course, the expansion of higher education in England would continue changing the nature and purpose of higher education further with those reforms since the late 1970s imposing a new idea of the university – the neoliberal model of higher education.

Within capitalist social relations, then, higher education is overwhelmingly institutionalised in universities as either a public or private good. However, the dichotomisation of higher education in this way misunderstands the nature of academic labour which is much the same whether the institution in which it occurs is private or public and therefore mis-diagnoses the problems that universities currently face (Somerville and Saunders 2013). Essentially, academic labour, whether carried out in a public or private institution, has to be seen as a form of capital, an asset in which resources are invested to produce more value, which is realised through exchange (Clarke 1991; Neary and Winn 2017). Within this process, the state, or the public, is not a functionalist device that can be repurposed say to create public good but are

social forms that embody the contradictory nature of capitalist social relations and the class struggle that defines them (Clarke 1988; Neary and Winn 2017). Thus, what is required is a more radical alternative to both public and private models of higher education that challenges the groundwork of capitalist social relations (Somerville and Saunders 2013). This would entail academic work taking the form of collective practices undertaken by scholars (academic workers) who will be both teaching and learning, with the value of higher education being realised socially, for the benefit of the participants and of society generally (Somerville and Saunders 2013; Neary and Winn 2017).

A more radical response to the neoliberal reforms to higher education have been the waves of protests, trade union strike action, the occupation of university property and the emergence of autonomous learning spaces⁴ that have experimented with no-fee, alternative models of higher education. These protests began in 2010 and occurred within a period of wider civil unrest in response to the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008 and to the imposition of austerity measures by the Coalition Government, which reached its peak during the London Riots in 2011. This civil unrest was not isolated to England, but became a global phenomenon with similar protests, occupations and riots breaking out in Greece, Spain, Italy, Russia, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and the USA (Solomon and Palmieri 2011; Mason 2013). This thesis takes its inspiration from, and is grounded in, the civil unrest and literature that emerged out of these responses to the imposition of a neoliberal model of higher education and austerity, not only in the UK, but globally.

Perhaps one of the most influential texts for those who participated in the student protests, occupations of university property and wider anti-austerity protests was *The Coming*

⁴ These autonomous learning spaces are part of a rich history of adult learning among the working-classes that are key to the development of democratic scholarship, mutual learning and cultural literacy. These include the Mechanics Institutes, Ruskin College, Workers Educational Association, Ragged School and Welsh Miners' Libraries (Rose 2001).

Insurrection (2009). The book was composed by a left-radical anarchist group known as the Invisible Committee and foretells the collapse of capitalism. The book is divided into two parts, the first part provides a critique of contemporary capitalism using Marx's concept of alienation (estrangement from human creativity or species-being (Marx 1844)). The second part advocates and outlines a programme for insurrection through the creation of communes and affinity groups to attack that state during moments of crisis. The importance of this book is the way in which it not only offers a critique of capitalist social relations, but also considers ways in which people can work towards alternative ways of being or a post-capitalist society – a concept adopted by most involved in the protests against the reforms to higher education and the imposition of austerity.

Another influential text was the *Communiqués from Occupied California* (2010), which was put together by a group of friends to document the California Occupation Movement and the occupations of several university campuses in California in 2009. The document contains a number of texts written anonymously, and often collectively, by those involved in the occupations (*ibid*). While the collection of texts provides an important documentation of the motivations and experiences of those involved in the occupations, it is more than a record of events and, concomitantly, attempts to provide guidance for those involved in similar struggles now and in the future in the form of a handbook: '...it is not a celebration of the past, but an arsenal to be deployed in the immediate future.' (2010, p. i) This thesis takes inspiration from this and also offers guidance for those involved in the development of autonomous learning spaces in Chapter 7.

The rationale for the California occupations is best captured in the text *Communique from an Absent Future*, which begins by questioning the nature and purpose of the neoliberal university: 'No one knows what the university is for anymore. We feel this intuitively. Gone is the old

project of creating a cultured and educated citizenry; gone, too, the special advantage the degree-holder once held on the job market. These are now fantasies, spectral residues that cling to the poorly maintained halls.' (ibid, p. 8) This is a critique not only of the nature and purpose of contemporary universities, but also the economic conditions of late capitalism. However, the text argues that there is no going back, and that the history of the modern university is the history of capital: *'Its essential function is the reproduction of the relationship between capital and labor.'* (ibid, p. 9)

Thus, instead of seeking a return to the past, or make reforms to the current model of higher education, the text explicitly calls for a new form of university and a new form of society: *'...we do not seek structural reforms. We demand not a free university but a free society. A free university in the midst of a capitalist society is like a reading room in a prison; it serves only as a distraction from the misery of daily life.'* (ibid, p. 9) A theme that emerges within the document is the importance of the occupation of space to support people to experiment with alternative forms of higher education provision and alternative ways of being. To support others in this process, the appendices of the document provides a DIY guide to occupation that offers practical guidance about how to occupy spaces as well as the theoretical importance of this form of protest, which is the development of new forms of social relations based on the principles of "communization": *'The only success with which we can be content is the is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the certain immiseration and death which it promises for the twenty-first century. All of our actions must push towards communization; that is, the reorganization of society according to the logic of free giving and receiving, the immediate abolition of the wage, the value-form, compulsory labor, and exchange.'* (ibid) The principles of communization point to alternative forms of self-organisation that are based on more participatory forms of democracy and non-hierarchical organisational forms that

highlight the potential to develop alternative forms of higher education provision as well as post-capitalist futures.

Another important text that covers not only the student protests, but also global and civil unrest during this period is Paul Mason's *Why it is STILL Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (2013). Within this book, Mason documents a series of moments of civil unrest between 2009 and 2011 that emphasise the global nature of these events during this time. Mason focuses on a range of movements, including the Arab Spring, civil unrest in Greece, the UK and Spain as well as the global Occupy Movement. Mason argues that what connected these moments of civil unrest was the Global Financial Crisis in 2007-2008 and the retrenchment of neoliberalism through the imposition of austerity, as well as a crisis of democracy and an unwillingness, or inability, by states to provide for the needs of the general population (*ibid*).

What is important about Mason's work was the way he wrote about these struggles through his own experience of participating, well at least visiting them, and interviewing people involved and providing a detailed insight into the contexts, and their motivations and experiences. Moreover, Mason argues an important feature of this civil unrest has been the networked individual supported by the internet and social media: *'The emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects.'* (Mason 2013, 138-139) Mason argues that not only did this technology play a significant role in nurturing this civil unrest, but that it will also play an important role in the development of future social relations based on democratic and non-hierarchical principles (Mason 2013). Thus, Mason is highlighting the ways in which people and technology are prefiguring post-capitalist futures.

Another influential text is *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (Solomon and Palmieri 2011). In a similar way to Mason (*ibid*), Solomon and Palmieri offer an inside view into the civil unrest that occurred during 2009-2011. However, while both Solomon and Palmieri were involved in the student protests in the UK, their edited books includes the voices of others who were involved in protests, demonstrations and occupations around the world, including the UK, Italy, USA, France, Greece and Tunisia. Again, what links this civil unrest, according to Solomon and Palmieri (*ibid*), is not only the neoliberal reforms to higher education which were happening on a global level, but also the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008, especially the imposition of austerity measures. Moreover, another key theme is the crisis in democracy, either the lack of it in places like Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Syria, or the perceived failures of representative democracy in western Europe and the USA as governments failed to act in the interest of people and, instead, supported the failing banks that had, in part, created the financial crisis in the first place: *'In times of struggle it is possible to transcend the ideological limits imposed by bourgeois society in which democracy itself is becoming increasingly hollow, with the established political parties of the West operating, together with the mediocracy, essentially as a capitalist collective, incapable of even thinking about any serious alternative.'* (Solomon and Palmieri 2011, p. 6). Thus, these struggles not only highlight the failures of democratic capitalist states to meet the needs of the majority of the population, but also an inability to develop alternatives that can.

A more recent book that tries to reflect on the students protests in the UK and give a voice to different people who were involved in them is Matt Myers's (2017) *Student Revolt: The Voices of the Austerity Generation*. The book provides a wider context for student protests by considering global civil unrest in response to the fallout from the Global Financial Crisis as well as the imposition of austerity and proposed reforms to higher education in England. The book chronologically explores the student protests and how they converged with wider anti-

austerity protests, especially UK Uncut in 2011. What is important about this book is that it serves as an oral history of the student protests, the importance of which is ‘...*collecting these memories is essential before they are lost forever...The driving force of the book is the voice of the participants...*’ (ibid pp.24-25). Indeed, Myers argues that there has been no serious attempt at an oral history of the 2010 student protests that substantially grounds its analysis in first-hand experience. Thus, the importance of Myers’s work is the documentation of this period of history in the hope that it might be useful for others now or in the future: ‘*It aims, above all, to rescue an important moment in British history for the condescension of posterity. Hopefully future generation organising for a different world will find these memories useful.*’ (ibid p. 29).

Taking inspiration from this civil unrest and the literature outlined above, this thesis is part of an attempt to document a particular phenomenon that emerged out of student protests in 2010, the creation of autonomous learning spaces that have experimented with alternative models of no-fee, higher education provision. Similar to Myers’s work, this documentation is based on first-hand experience of those involved in these autonomous spaces, including myself, in the hope that this documentation will support others involved in similar projects now or in the future. This thesis contributes to an emerging body of literature where others have written about their own experiences of working in similar spaces. For example, Cassie Earl (2015) focuses on the pedagogy used within the Occupy Movement and other autonomous learning spaces, which is based on her own experience of being involved in these spaces. Earl examines what can be learned from these experiments with education to challenge the neoliberal enclosure of higher education. Andre Pusey (2014) focuses on his involvement, and others, within the Really Open University. Pusey’s work examines how spaces like the Really Open University have the potential to create new forms of learning in and against academic capitalism. Joss Winn (2015) theoretically examines the nature of academic labour within the neoliberal

university using a Marxist framework. Winn's work is mainly theoretical but does include reflections on his involvement of creating and running an alternative learning space, the Social Science Centre. This thesis builds on this work by providing a more sustained documentation and critical analysis of being involved in an autonomous learning spaces as well as examining similar spaces in the UK.

Research Objective

The main objective of the research, then, is to critically examine what, if anything, can be learned from autonomous learning spaces to create an alternative model of higher education institution?

Research Questions

In an attempt to address the research objective, and to guide the research process, five specific research questions were devised, which will be addressed throughout the thesis. They are:

1. Why were these autonomous learning spaces created?
2. What, if anything, can be learned from the philosophies/models of pedagogy that these autonomous learning spaces have adopted and developed?
3. What, if anything, can be learned from the philosophies/models of self-organisation that these autonomous learning spaces have adopted and developed?
4. What, if anything, can be learned from the way these autonomous learning spaces have used space?
5. What, if anything, can be learned from the way these autonomous learning spaces have networked with other groups?

Importance and Contribution of Research Findings

The significance and contribution of the research findings to practice and theory in this area are as follows:

1. The research makes a contribution to the concept of autonomous spaces by documenting the practice and theoretical conceptualisation of these autonomous learning spaces. This documentation covers a range of different aspects of the functioning of autonomous learning spaces that include the adopting and development of different pedagogical models and self-organisation, the use of space and networking with others. The documentation of these experiences, and the trial and error nature of them, are useful for anyone either creating or already involved in running similar projects and provides hope and inspiration that alternative ways of self-organisation are possible; however embryonic and fragile they are.
2. The research also contributes to the emerging literature on left-wing convergence. Both Prichard and Worth (2016) and Holloway (2010) argue for the importance of the documentation practices, and theoretical reflection of spaces wherein people work together to prefigure alternative forms of being that are anti-capitalist. The documentation of these autonomous learning spaces has shown that people within them have attempted to overcome practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural differences while working on their respective projects. While this has not always been successful the research has shown examples, especially at the Social Science Centre where people have been able to work through these differences and show that working on concrete political projects such as autonomous learning spaces has the potential for a left-wing convergence. Moreover, this convergence has the potential not only to address specific forms of oppression and exploitation, but by grounded these experiments within a Marx's labour theory of value means they also have the potential to function, in, against

and beyond capitalist social relations as a form of anti-value (Dinerstein and Neary 2002; Dinerstein 2014). Holloway (2002 and 2010) argues that the autonomous practices that occur within these spaces are forms of doing that are not subject to the law of value and the creation of surplus value. While to consider these spaces as somehow outside of capitalist relations is misleading, they do at least challenge and question capitalist notions of productive labour. These spaces do this through the concept of anti-value in motion that is alternative forms of work that have as their basis the creation of use-values rather than exchange values (Dinerstein and Neary 2002; Dinerstein 2014). As Holloway (2012) argues, it is essential that these types of spaces and the activities within them be documented and shared because they constitute cracks in capitalist social relations, which if enough of them exist have the potential to rupture and logic of capitalism. While this assumption is tentative, this research does make an essential contribution to this practical and theoretical perspective.

3. The research also makes an essential contribution to the recovery of the concept of friendship. Chatterton (2012) argues that the development of friendship and trust that develop in these projects is important and allows people to work through differences and create a sense of solidarity between those involved in the project and those involved in similar ones. The research found examples of where friendship had created this sense of solidarity and where it had fostered an environment where people had been able to work through differences and disagreements. Dean (2012) argues what is important about this is that it highlights a collective desire for collectively, which she explains is required to get beyond capitalist social relations. Thus, this is more than friendship and indicates a political element to this relationship.
4. The research contributes to the debate around the struggle of the idea of the university (Neary and Saunders 2011). What the research found was that some of the autonomous

learning spaces were not an attempt to defend the idea of the public university, which they saw as elitist and bureaucratic, but part of an effort to experiment with post-capitalist ideas of the university. Integral to this process is the concept of prefiguration which has been used in this thesis to understand how people experiment with autonomous practices now which they hope to see in a future organisation or society. Thus, these experimentations with alternative forms of higher education provision do not offer a blueprint for what they should look like but provide hope that it is possible to experiment with different forms that are based on more egalitarian, democratic and non-hierarchical principles.

5. The research also contributes to the development of critical social research and the active involvement of academics in concrete political projects as a co-researcher with others (Burawoy 2004; Chatterton *et al.* 2006; Roggero 2012; Smith 1997). This is an attempt to develop a research methodology that fits with the democratic and non-hierarchical ethos of autonomous learning spaces. The research has also highlighted how participatory action research can be used to facilitate this process and some of the problems that might be experienced.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Higher Education Policy and Reform in England (1945 – present) – Before focusing on the autonomous learning spaces that emerged in 2010 it is essential to understand the context within which they emerged. To gain a better understanding, the chapter will provide an overview of how higher education policy in England has been shaped during the post-war period (1945 - present). The chapter begins by examining some of the critical pieces of higher education policy and reform, such as the *Robbins Report* (1963), the *Jarratt Report* (1985), the *Croham Report* (1987), the *Dearing Report* (1997), the *Lambert Report* (2003), the *Higher*

Education Act 2004, the *Browne Review* (2010) and the *Higher Education White Paper 2011* and the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, outlining the impact they have had on the sector.

The chapter argues that the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments' reforms to higher education are part of a long history of reform which, since the 1970s, has been influenced by the logic of neoliberalism and form part of an ongoing attempt to financialise and marketise the sector. While some aspects of these reforms have been welcomed – increased access and participation in higher education, for example – they have also had a detrimental impact on universities resulting in less democratic models of university governance, increasingly precarious and intensified working conditions for staff and growing levels of debt and anxiety for students.

Chapter 2: Protest and Resistance: The Emergence of Autonomous Learning Spaces – In an attempt to better understand the struggle over the idea of the university, this chapter explores how some people have responded to reforms to higher education during the post-war period. The chapter begins by exploring the 1968 Student Movement that began as a response to the elitist and bureaucratic nature of universities in Paris and then spread to include workers and trade unions in France and around the world (Rees 2011). Among the key features of the 1968 Student Movement were the occupation of university property and experimentation with alternative forms of education provision. The chapter then explores the Student Protests 2010 and the autonomous learning spaces that emerged out of them in response to the Coalition's announced reforms to higher education. Similar to the 1968 Student Movement, the 2010 student movement was also characterised by the occupation of university property, experimentation with alternative forms of education provision and also spread to become aligned with other forms of protest against the imposition of austerity. The chapter goes on to

argue that these two episodes of protests are not isolated pockets of resistance, but part of a long history of struggle over the idea of the university and capitalism more generally.

Chapter 3: Understanding the Practical and Theoretical Importance of Autonomous Learning

Spaces – To better understand how these autonomous learning spaces might have the potential to inform the creation of an alternative model of higher education provision, the chapter outlines a theoretical framework for thinking critically about their practical and theoretical significance. This theoretical framework is based on the concept of autonomous spaces that are described as places wherein people resist the neoliberalisation public services while experimenting with alternative ways of providing them (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). An essential feature of these autonomous spaces is that they experiment now with autonomous practices that they hope to see now and in a future society. This process is referred to as prefiguration. In this thesis, prefiguration means experimenting with autonomous practices that are not only underpinned by democratic and non-hierarchical principles but also form part of a class struggle against the imposition of capitalist social relations. David Graeber (2009) refers to this as “be the change you want to see” (Graeber 2009). The chapter explores how these practices are grounded in democratic and non-hierarchical principles, such as horizontalism and consensus decision-making (Sitrin 2007).

Moreover, what is interesting about these autonomous spaces is that they appear to have been heavily influenced by both anarchist and Marxist thought – two traditions that are usually viewed as being irreconcilable (Grubacic and O’Hearn 2016). The chapter goes on to argue that despite these perceived theoretical incompatibilities, these autonomous spaces have functioned as places where people can work together to create alliances not only between anarchists and Marxists but also between other different practical, ideological, theoretical and cultural differences. My argument is that these autonomous spaces have the potential to transcend ideological trappings that have historically divided the political left by working

collectively on concrete political projects. Referred to as left-wing convergence (Prichard and Worth 2016), this chapter explores how these autonomous spaces, which autonomous learning spaces are an example of, have the potential to challenge, rupture or crack capitalist social relations and point to post-capitalist forms of being (Holloway 2002 and 2010).

Chapter 4: Methodology – This chapter outlines and examines the methodology and research methods used to gather and analyse data for this thesis. The research used a mixture of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and web-based analysis of websites and blogs. The chapter critically reflects on a participatory action research project conducted within an autonomous learning space that I was an active member of, the Social Science Centre. As part of this participatory action research project, I also conducted research on six other autonomous learning spaces based in the UK using a case study approach. The idea to focus on these six case studies came out of the reflexive cycle of the participatory action research project at the Social Science Centre. A strength of this approach was it encouraged members of the Social Science Centre to be more introspective and developed an ongoing network of people involved in radical pedagogical projects. The chapter then goes on to examine how the data were collected and analysed, using thematic analysis to identify and examine themes within the data, before outlining the limitations and ethical considerations of the research.

Chapter 5: Participatory Action Research and the Social Science Centre – This chapter focuses, and critically reflects, on the participatory action research project I was involved in as an active member of the Social Science Centre between 2012 and 2014. The chapter examines how the Social Science Centre was created in response to the Coalition's reforms to higher education by a group of academics already involved in alternative education projects. The chapter then explores how and why the Social Science Centre adopted a co-operative organisational form and experimented with decision-making processes underpinned by democratic and non-hierarchical principles. The chapter also examines how the Social Science

Centre experimented with democratic and radical models of pedagogy that were inspired by critical pedagogy and Student as Producer. The chapter also examines how the Social Science Centre used different spaces in the City of Lincoln as part of a political project to ‘occupy the city.’ The chapter goes on to outline how the Social Science Centre has made links with others involved in autonomous learning spaces through conferences and visits in an attempt to learn from each other's experiences and create a network of people involved in other autonomous learning spaces.

Chapter 6: Case Study Research with Six Autonomous Learning Spaces in the UK – Using a case study approach, this chapter focuses on research conducted on six autonomous learning spaces based in the UK, which are: Birmingham Radical Education, Free University Brighton, People’s Political Economy (Oxford), Ragged University (Edinburgh), The IF Project (London) and the Really Open University (Leeds). The chapter examines how and why these projects were created, how they operated in practice, the models of pedagogy and self-organisation that they adopted, how they used space, and how they networked with other people involved in similar projects.

Chapter 7: Discussion of Research Findings – This chapter addresses the research objective, which is: what can be learned from these autonomous learning spaces with regards to creating an alternative model of higher education provision? Here the research provides a list of ten practical points of advice for others involved in the development of similar projects. The points of advice are based on the key lessons learned from the experiences of those involved in autonomous learning spaces. The chapter draws to a close by discussing how the ethos of these autonomous learning spaces can institutionalise an organisational form that has the potential to prefigure capitalist social relations. The chapter discusses the potential of a social co-operative university to do this and its ability to produce socially useful knowledge (Harvey 2014; Neary

and Winn 2017) that develops and nurtures humans and nature rather than exploitation and alienating it.

Chapter 1: Higher Education Policy and Reform in England

(1945- present)

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of higher education policy and reform in England during the post-war period (1945 – present). This period is often bracketed off as a time during which universities have undergone a rapid transformation that has resulted in a radically transformed and enlarged higher education sector. This chapter does a significant amount of contextual work by examining key higher education policies and reforms made during this period with the express aim of providing a backdrop to better understand the emergence of autonomous learning spaces in 2010. The chapter begins by outlining some of the significant reforms made during this period, such as those advocated by the *Hankey Committee* (1944), the *Robbins Report* (1963), the *Jarratt Report* (1985), the *Croham Report* (1987), the *Dearing Report* (1997), the *Lambert Report* (2003), the *Higher Education Act 2004*, the *Browne Review* (2010), changes made by the Coalition Government (2010-2015) and the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*.

The chapter goes on to consider the impact of these reforms and argues that they have changed the nature of higher education and have been part of a process to impose a neoliberal model of provision on the sector. While these neoliberal reforms have commendably increased participation rates in higher education, especially from widening participation backgrounds, they have also had a detrimental impact on universities resulting in less democratic university governance models, increasingly precarious and intensified working conditions for staff and growing levels of debt and anxiety for students. The chapter draws to a close by arguing that these reforms have been part of an attempt by successive government to further intensify capitalist accumulation through the creation of an increasingly skilled workforce, the

instrumentalization of research to focus on the needs of business, and the marketisation of the sector to increase competition and reduce unit cost.

The Immediate Post-War Period

The post-war period is often bracketed off as a significant period in the history of higher education in England because of the scale and nature of the changes made to the sector (Taylor and Steele 2011; Shattock 2012)⁵. Pre-1945, universities mainly existed as private, autonomous and non-profit institutions with little or no government interference, or policy, regulating how they operated⁶ (Temple 2013). In this form, universities were funded through a combination of student tuition fees, endowment incomes (such as local investment or monies received from alumni) and grants from the Universities Grant Committee (UGC) (Shattock 2008; Shattock 2013; Temple 2013). The UGC was created in 1919 as a way of distributing small-grant-in-aid funding that government had begun to make to some universities (Collini 2012). The UGC consisted of a small group of senior academics who acted as an intermediary body that advised the government on the needs of universities and distributed what was allocated by the Treasury (*ibid*). This was part of an attempt to ensure academic freedom and minimal interference in university business from government officials while providing some input from the latter.

However, by 1949 this landscape had begun to change significantly as the government increased its financial contribution to 64% of the overall cost (Shattock 2013). As a consequence of its increased financial input, the government became much more involved in university governance, student participation rates, and what was taught and researched within higher education, threatening university autonomy and academic freedom (Karran 2009;

⁵ However, this is not to say that this only period within which universities have undergone a rapid transformation. Whyte (2015) provides an insightful overview of reforms to British Universities from 1783 that highlights significant changes to higher education between 1783 and the present day.

⁶ One example of this was the University of London that opened in 1828 as a joint-stock company (Whyte 2015).

Shattock 2013). This process began shortly after Lord Hankey's Inter-Departmental Meeting on Further Education and Training (1944), which influenced the decision to increase public spending on higher education and recommended that the number of university places be doubled (Shattock 2013). Hankey's recommendations were fuelled by what was described at the time as the requirement to serve the national need⁷, or put plainly, the need to meet future professional manpower requirements by creating an increasingly skilled technical workforce to compete with other technologically advanced industrial nations for international business (Rees 2011; Shattock 2012; Shattock 2013). Thus, this decision was based on the need to develop Britain's competitiveness in an increasingly competitive international capitalist market during a period of economic and political decline for the British Empire (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019).

The government's increased involvement in both the planning and funding of the development of the nation's workforce mirrored a broader trend in the post-war political consensus. Greater government involvement was proffered in Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) and the *Beveridge Report: Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942). The influence of both of these publications was that successive governments started to take a much more central role in political and economic planning and, concomitantly, increased levels of public spending to fund the newly created Welfare State (Shattock 2013)⁸. Moreover, Collini (2012) argues that this expansion of welfare provision, including increasing participation in education, was also part of a 'welfare-state model of cultural diffusion'. Collini defines this process as: '*...some form of cultural good was to be extended to more and more*

⁷ The notion of universities serving the national need actually emerged much earlier in the Nineteenth Century as Whyte (2018) outlines: '*...the growing belief that Britain was falling behind its industrial competitors made higher education – and the research done by institutes of higher education – seem even more critical.*' (p. 76)

⁸ However, that is not to say the universities were part of the Welfare State as they were still elitist institutions attended by a small minority of the population rather than accessible to all who merited a place. However, the issue of accessibility based on merit would be an issue addressed by the Robins Report (1963) which signalled the beginnings of a mass higher education system advocated by Hankey (Shattock 2013).

people by means of state support. 'Culture' was seen as an antidote to or refuge from the grubby pressures of economic life, and universities were expected to be beacons of culture.' (2012, p. 33) Thus, there was not only an economic rationale for the expansion of higher education but also a liberal, and perhaps paternalistic one, that saw the university as some form of public good. It would be this dualist model of both economic and public good that would continue to underpin the model of higher education provision and contribute to calls for further expansion of the sector during much of the post-war period.

The Beginning of 'Mass Higher Education'

The *Robbins Report: Committee on Higher Education* (Committee on Higher Education 1963) laid the foundations for the creation of a mass higher education system. At the time the Robbins Report was commissioned approximately 4% of young people entered into full-time higher education. To give some insight into the exclusive and elitist nature of universities during this period, of all those students who attended university only 1% were working-class females and 3% were working-class males (Barr and Glennerster 2014). This situation is a stark contrast to more recent times with participation rates for the 2015/16 intake now standing at around fifty percent of school leavers with 14.9% from widening participation backgrounds⁹ (Office for National Statistics 2017).

The Robbins Report was commissioned to: *'Review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty's Government on what principles its long-term development should be based.'* (Committee for Higher Education 1963, p. iii) Similar to Hankey, then, the national need, or the creation of an increasingly skilled workforce to compete for financial investment on the international stage,

⁹ This measure is based on whether students were in receipt of free school meals at the age of 15. While there are problems with using free school meals as a measure of class this is the most commonly used indicator in education.

appears to be the driving force behind the review and the reforms that would be recommended by Robbins (Barnett 1990). This is an important point because this period of higher education expansion is often referred to as the public university and while universities were indeed increasingly funded by public money and influenced by vague notions of public good, it is possible to see one of the main driving forces is the creation of an increasingly larger pool of skilled workers to make Britain more competitive on the international market. Thus, it is already possible to detect the economic importance of higher education in the creation of human labour-power for capitalist accumulation within the idea of the public university.

Interestingly, Robbins's proposed expansion of higher education faced a climate of opposition, primarily over the perceived impact it would have on the quality of higher education provision (Barr and Glennerster 2014). Some academics argued that: *'We are already scraping the barrel and to have any more people to teach who are unable to grasp the level of the higher education world would, in the end, destroy its quality.'* (Gibney cited in Shattock 2013) The concern with the preservation of existing standards while expanding provision was not new. Indeed, it had been raised in 1946 in A Note on University Policy and Finance in the Decennium 1947-56, which stated: *'The first duty of the universities is to maintain and improve the level of both their teaching and their research: and they would ill serve the national interest if they were to allow quantitative enlargement to imperil the quality of their service.'* (cited in Shattock 2013). Whether these objections were born out of elitist prejudices against increasing numbers of working-class students and academics entering the sector, out of genuine concern over academic standards, or increased interference from the government, it was clear that there was already resistance to the changes that were being made to higher education during this period.

The Robbins Report argued persuasively that many young people in England who were not attending universities at the time were capable of studying at that level and, moreover, that restricting access to higher education was a significant barrier to economic growth in the UK

(Barr and Glennerster 2014). Again, the importance of economic growth is seen as the driving force of the expansion of higher education. Consequently, perhaps the defining feature of the Robbins Report was the argument that: ‘...*all young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full-time course in higher education should have the opportunity to do so.*’ (Committee for Higher Education 1963, p. 49) Known as the Robbins Principle it entrenched the notion that higher education was a right to be enjoyed by those who had the ability to benefit from it (Watson 2014). Of course, participation in higher education did not become a right in the legal sense; however, the notion that it should be has been used by students throughout the post-war period.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Robbins was to create a student demand model of higher education that would require an increase in university capital building programmes. This paved the way for the creation of many new universities, dubbed “plate-glass universities” (Beloff 1970). However, this is not entirely accurate as the UGC had made the initial decision to fund the creation of several new universities at the end of the 1950s and, the first of them, the University of Sussex opened in 1961 – two years before the Robbins Report was published (Collini 2012). Nevertheless, the Robbins Report went further than expanding access to higher education, it also resulted in the creation of new academic subjects, new ways of teaching and changed the structure of degree programmes (Calhoun 2014).

Where the Robbins Report was criticised was for not creating an appropriate model of funding to support the expansion of higher education (Barr and Glennerster 2014). However, the Robbins Report did highlight an underlying tension about how the sector should be paid for and argued for the need to receive income from a number of different sources (Williams 2013). This included the suggestion that eventually higher education would have to be paid for, in part, by charging student tuition fees (*ibid*) and pointed to future direction of higher education:

At a time when many parents are only just beginning to acquire the habit of contemplating higher education for those of their children, especially girls, who are capable of benefiting from it, I think it probable that it would have undesirable disincentivising effects. But if, as time goes on, the habit is more firmly established, the arguments of justice in distribution and of the advantage of increasing individual responsibility may come to weigh more heavily and lead to some experiments in this direction.

(Committee for Higher Education, 1963, p. 212)

Robbins' recommendations to increase participation in higher education were put into practice by the newly elected Labour Party (1964), but perhaps not in the way that had been suggested in the Report. Labour's response to Robbins was articulated by the then Secretary for State for Education and Science Anthony Crossland at a speech at Woolwich Polytechnic in 1965 (Adelstein 1969). To encourage expansion of the higher education sector, the government announced that while they would not build any new universities as per Robbins, they would instead create 28 polytechnics (later 30) mostly through the merging of smaller colleges (Anderson 2006). Crossland argued that the need for a binary system of higher education was: (i) the increasing need for vocational, professional and industrial based courses which could not be met by universities; (ii) a system based on the ladder concept (a hierarchy of higher education providers that included universities and other providers) would lead to demoralisation in the public sector who would be unable to compete with more established universities; and, (iii) Britain could not stand up to international competition by downgrading the non-university professional and technical sector (Pratt 1997). What Crossland outlined became known as the binary system and was seen as a betrayal of Robbins' philosophy that there should be no rigid distinctions between types of institutions in higher education which should all follow the university model (Kogan and Hanney 2000) What it also did was allow

the government to have greater control of this element of the higher education sector and fashion it according to its desires in a way that was proving more difficult with universities because of traditions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The plan for the creation of polytechnics was outlined in the *DES White Paper: A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges (1966)* and would lead to the creation of two discrete compartments of higher education institutions – the autonomous sector and the public sector (Adelstein 1969). The autonomous sector would include universities and colleges of advanced technology (which had mostly become universities by the time the binary system was created) and would be funded by the Universities Grant Committee which allowed universities to spend their block grants as they saw fit and acted as a buffer for academic freedom (Pratt 1997). In reality, what this funding meant was that universities could be much more selective in which courses they offered and who they accepted to study on their courses. The public sector would include all other higher education institutions, including polytechnics, technical colleges, art colleges and colleges of education and would receive funding from local education authorities and be accountable to them for their spending (*ibid*). This funding model meant that they would be accountable to local education authorities and that pressure could be put on them to provide courses that were required for local and national industry and contribute to economic prosperity more generally. Moreover, they would not be given degree awarding powers like universities and, instead, qualifications would be awarded and overseen by the Council for National Academic Awards (Kogan and Hanney 2000), although qualifications for all levels of study from undergraduate to PhD were available.

The aim of polytechnics was to provide a “differentiation of higher education” (Pratt 1997) by offering a wider range of vocational courses that could be studied either full-time or part-time and promote adult education (Adelstein 1969). The provision of more vocational courses by universities as well as a lack of interest in part-time courses and adult learners was a problem

that polytechnics tried to address (Pratt 1997) Also, there would be better unity between the arts and the sciences, theoretical and practical disciplines and would have better links with the local community in a way that would differentiate them from universities (*ibid*). While these changes could have been made to universities, the funding structure and historical traditions of universities made this difficult. Moreover, there was a general fear that if all higher education institutions became universities the best colleges would abandon their practical vocational orientation referred to as “academic drift” and the binary divide was seen as a way of protecting against that (Anderson 2006). Although, ironically, most polytechnics would become universities in 1992 anyway. Furthermore, that the division would encourage colleges to settle down to their most important task of becoming comprehensive universities organised to serve a wide range of students and the growing needs of industry (Anderson 2006). In many ways the binary divide reflected a longer history of higher education, including the early civic university movement, and provision outside of universities, such as the mechanics institutes, which had existed in Britain since the 19th Century and had provided a route for young working-men to work their way up from the shop floor (Pratt 1997).

Thus, polytechnics were considered as the best way for higher education to serve students, industry and society and the practical problems they faced. Polytechnics were also successful in increasing the number of female students, students from ethnic minorities, mature students and working-class students that studied in higher education (Pratt 1997). Furthermore, they also served as a testbed for shaping what a mass system of higher education might look like in the future. Indeed, what polytechnics evidenced was that higher education could be provided at a lower cost, that access could be increased to a wider community of students and that it could be used to better serve relevant economic and industrial needs and made possible mass higher education across Britain (Pratt 1997). While most polytechnics would become universities after the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 which allowed

them to apply for university status, the legacy of polytechnic experiment was that it blurred the boundaries between them and universities. While polytechnics did eventually succumb to academic drift, universities also become more like polytechnics with the provision of more vocational and professional courses as well as widening access for students (Pratt 1997). Moreover, trying to maintain quality while expanding provision with diminishing resources, staff becoming more stressed and treated less like professionals with less time to think in an increasingly managerial culture, where all features that began in polytechnics and have spread to universities in general (Pratt 1997). Consequently, the binary division can be seen as the thin end of the wedge for reforms that would impose a neoliberal model of higher education on the sector.

The Rise of the Neoliberal University

The 1970s saw the beginning of a series of reforms that have attempted to financialise and marketize higher education in England. The rationale for reforming higher education in this way has been heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology. While the definition of neoliberalism is contested, and sometimes contradictory, it is defined by the following characteristics, which include a rolling back, or hollowing out, of state welfare provision; deregulation and removal or reduction of state involvement in the economic sphere; the rolling out of new state institutions and governmentalities; privatisation of previously public provision; the introduction of public choice; and positing users as customers and creating competition through the implementation of internal markets (Larner 2000; Harvey 2005).

Contextually, the 1970s saw a period of decline for universities with a 10% reduction in unit resource and a significant cut in capital building programmes (Shattock 2008). This decline occurred against a backdrop of more extensive social unrest including the OPEC oil crisis, inflation and ongoing labour disputes (Mercille and Murphy 2015). Influenced by economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan, Margaret Thatcher, the then

Conservative Prime Minister (1979-1990), was persuaded by the merits of neoliberal ideology as a way of overcoming the economic crisis in the 1970s that had been associated with Keynesian economics (Harvey 2005). As a result, in the UK, there was an attempt to cut public expenditure and increase value for money by increasing efficiency through the imposition of new corporate management models to the public sector (*ibid*). Undoubtedly, this was an ideological decision that was part of an attempt to limit, or reduce, the gains made by organised labour during this period of democratic socialism. Indeed, the ideological project had begun in 1947 by an economic think-tank called the Mont Pelerin Society that argued against collectivism and for the imposition of a global neoliberal project that was defined by, the priority of the price mechanism, free enterprise, a system of competition and a strong and impartial state (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009)

For higher education, this process began in 1976 when faced by impending economic crisis James Callaghan's Labour Government were forced to take a \$3.9 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The economic crisis resulted in drastic public sector budget cuts, including higher education, leading the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Anthony Crosland to announce: "The party was over" (Crosland 1975). Moreover, in 1979, the newly elected Thatcher Conservative Government announced a further £100 million reduction in public funding to higher education with the removal of the overseas students' fee subsidy (Brown and Carasso 2013; Shattock 2008). This reduction in public funding was followed by dramatic cuts in the UGC's budget leading to a reduction in higher education funding by 8.5% over three years (Watson 2014) reducing unit funding per student by 40% (Dearing 1997) creating what Thompson calls the "stretched academy" (2000). These were all attempts to impose neoliberal ideology by reducing public expenditure.

Furthermore, structural changes were made to university governance in response to the *Jarratt Report (1985): The Report of the Steering Committee on Efficiency Studies in Universities*

(Jarratt Report 1985). The report was commissioned by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and introduced a new corporate management model for higher education in an attempt to make the sector more efficient by intensifying working practices and increasing productivity of workers while, concomitantly, reducing funding. Moreover, the Jarratt Report marked a shift in power from academics and their departments to more centralised structures of management and control and the dominance of business systems over academic values (Kogan and Hanney 2000). Again, it is possible to detect the logic of neoliberalism here and the imposition business models on the public sector to reduce unit cost and public spending. The Jarratt Report also explicitly used the language of business and suggested that vice-chancellors should be called chief executives and that lay people, for example, local business entrepreneurs, should become more involved in the governance of universities instead of academic senates, which gave academics more control of universities, because, it was argued, the latter was too resistant to change (Dearlove 1998; Lomas 2005; Shattock 2008; Shattock 2012). This is part of an ongoing attempt to open universities up to business in an attempt to discipline them and contribute to economic growth.

Laced with the logic of neoliberalism, the Jarratt Report is also credited with creating the notion of “student as customer” and introducing measures to evaluate human and financial resources more effectively through the introduction of management information systems designed to monitor expenditure and revenues (Lomas, 2005; Newby, 1999). Furthermore, it introduced the need for universities to generate more non-state income, increase efficiency in financial management, rationalise small departments, transfer management roles from academics to professional managers and introduce staff appraisal (Canaan 2012; Shattock 1991; Shattock 2013). To achieve this, the Jarratt Report is closely aligned what has become known as New Public Management, which aims to run public sector organisations in a more business-like manner to improve efficiency by adopting private sector management models (Lane 2000). The

key features of New Public Management include a focus on customer service and creating value for money, setting targets to monitor performance, creating competition between providers and giving more power to executives (Lane 2000).

The imposition of New Public Management in higher education has resulted in collegiate decision-making being replaced by an executive decision making processes (Radice 2013; Deem *et al.* 2001). Also, a steady increase in government prescription through the imposition of an audit culture facilitated by the use of externally imposed quantitatively measured performance targets, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (Radice 2013; Boden and Epstein 2006) and the widespread use of performance related financial incentives (Radice 2013; Boden and Epstein 2006). The problem here is not with the process of auditing per se, but externally-imposed auditing that is based on a neoliberal ideology that undermines universities' autonomy and academic freedom by focusing on the needs of business rather than the pursuit of critical scholarship (Giroux 2002).

This drive to financialise and marketize higher education in England was continued under New Labour (1997-2010), and although student numbers and total higher education spending rose during this period, resources per student (unit cost) continued to fall. There was also a renewed emphasis on the drive for managerial control and the subordination of teaching and research to corporate objectives (Radice 2013). New Labour made reforms to higher education in response to *The Dearing Report (1997): National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (NCIHE 1997), which was the most extensive review of higher education since the Robbins Report (Committee for Higher Education 1963). The Committee was tasked: '*To make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size, and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next twenty years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research.*' (Dearing, 1997, p. 3)

Moreover, the Committee's task was to solve the problem of paying for higher education, which was expanding at a faster rate than gross domestic product (GDP) growth and amid increased pressure for resources from other areas of the public sector (Shattock 2013). Among the most significant recommendations was the introduction of an upfront means-tested tuition fees of £1,000 (Watson 2014). Dearing's rationale for this was: *'Those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries (of higher education), through improved employment prospects and pay. As a consequence, we suggest that graduates in work should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in the future.'* (Dearing 1997) The report and resulting policy signalled the emergence of a more financialised model of higher education (Gillespie and Habermehl 2011). Indeed, Dearing was the thin end of the wedge and paved the way for the articulation of higher education as an individual investment that would accrue personal benefits to the recipient of a degree rather than as a public good (Solomon and Palmieri 2011). This argument would be used to support subsequent increases to tuition fees in the Higher Education Act 2004 and again by the Coalition Government in 2010.

Further changes to higher education were also recommended by the *Lambert Report of Business-University Collaboration* (2003), which outlined a model for universities to follow in order to develop a more entrepreneurial culture and capitalise on business trends that had seen multi-national companies increasingly working with centres of research excellence in universities to conduct their research and development programmes (Lambert Report 2003). The Report argued that university governance, leadership, and management had traditionally relied on committees and sub-committees to make decisions (Lomas 2005) and that businesses who worked with universities found these decision-making processes to be slow-moving, bureaucratic and risk-averse.

The Lambert Report also argued that universities needed to become more dynamic and keep-up with the demands of business by changing the collegiate nature of decision making in

universities towards a more managerial one. Using several case studies, the Lambert Report provided evidence that where more managerial and streamlined forms of governance have been adopted, universities were better able to work with businesses and meet business needs. To encourage universities to work with businesses in this way, the Lambert Report recommended that universities adopt forms of governance used in business and outlined a voluntary code of governance, which it suggested that universities should adopt (Lambert Report 2003). This was part of an attempt to marketize higher education by making it more responsive to the market. Thus, what courses are offered and what research is conducted can be driven by market indicators or what is considered profitable.

Coalition's Reforms to Higher Education

In 2009 the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government announced a series of reforms to higher education in England. Among these reforms were: (i) raising the cap on tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000; (ii) removing block grants for teaching to the arts, humanities, business, law and social sciences; and, (iii) changing the regulations around granting the title of university to “level the playing field” and encourage more “alternative providers” to enter the sector (BIS 2011; McGettigan 2013). These reforms were based on the findings of the *Browne Review - Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010), which was commissioned by New Labour as part of its commitment to review the changes it made to higher education through the Higher Education Act 2004 (Callender and Scott 2013; Shattock 2013).

The independent review panel was led by Lord John Browne, former chief executive of British Petroleum (BP) and the remit of the panel was to offer: ‘*Recommendations to government on the future of fees policy and financial support for full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students*’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). The

appointment of John Browne attracted a number of criticisms and questioned the Report's independence. This included his close relationship Reinaldo Avila da Silva who is the long-term partner of Peter Mandelson who appointed Browne to conduct the review while Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Walters and Myall 2007). Moreover, Browne was also criticised for his close relationship with David Cameron who appointed him as the Coalition Government's Lead Non-Executive Director in June 2010 to advise on the recruitment and retention of business leaders in Whitehall – four months before the publication of the Browne Review. Of the appointment, University and College Union general secretary Sally Hunt said: *'Accepting a job from David Cameron, a man who made it quite clear during the election campaign that he wanted university fees to stay, clearly brings the legitimacy of the reviews independence into question. In the interest of this review retaining any legitimacy he should resign.'* (Chapman 2010) Moreover, Browne was also heavily criticised for his tenure as BP Chief Executive where he was responsible for imposing cost-cutting initiatives that comprised health and safety procedures at the company and resulted in a string of major accidents, which include the Texas City Refinery explosion in 2005 and the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010 (Bower 2010).

The Browne Review was published in October 2010 and consisted of 60 pages outlining six key principles, which were:

- Principle 1: There should be more investment in higher education – but institutions will have to convince students of the benefits of investing more;
- Principle 2: Student choice should increase;
- Principle 3: Everyone who has the potential should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education;

- Principle 4: No student should have to pay towards the costs of learning until they are working;
- Principle 5: When payments are made, they should be affordable;
- Principle 6: There should be better support for part-time students.

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010, p. 5)

The Browne Review's case for reform focused on three issues: (i) the need to increase participation rates as demand exceeded supply, including improving access for low-income, underrepresented groups, and part-time students; (ii) the need to improve the quality of higher education to address concerns by employers that graduates did not possess the required skills; and, (iii) the need to create a sustainable model of higher education that got the balance right between public and private funding (Callender and Scott 2013; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). The Browne Review recommended the following changes should be made to higher education:

- A reduction of grants from central government, including the removal of direct funding for the arts, humanities, business, law and social sciences;
- The removal of the cap on student numbers (except teaching, medicine and dentistry);
- The removal of the tuition fee cap allowing universities to set their fees;
- Universities that charge more than £6,000 per annum will be required to give a proportion of the extra income to support poorer students, and those that charge over £7,000 will have their widening participation schemes scrutinised by the Office of Fair Access (OFFA);

- Students will only start paying back loans once they graduate and earn £21,000 or more (up from £15,000);
- Introduction of real interest rates on student loans, i.e., above inflation, which were previously subsidised against the government's cost of borrowing;
- Student debt to be written off after 30 years (up from 25 years);
- An increase in maintenance loans, grants, and other financial support to full-time students;
- Extending access to loans for tuition fees to part-time students;
- Creation of the Higher Education Council, which would combine the roles of the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), the Quality Assurance Agency (QQA), Office of Fair Access (OFFA) and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

The Coalition's formal response to the Browne Report came in two stages: the first, in a statement by David Willets, the then Minister for Universities and Science, in the House of Commons on the 3rd November 2010 and then in the publication of the *White Paper: Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* in June 2011 (Callender and Scott 2013). The Coalition accepted all of the recommendations outlined in the Browne Review, except the complete removal of tuition fee caps (instead implementing a hard-cap of £9,000 per annum but accepting the soft-cap of £6,000 meaning that universities that charged more than the soft-cap would have offer incentives and have an effective plan for supporting for students from widening participation backgrounds). Based on this response the government made the following reforms:

- The removal of block grants for teaching for the arts, humanities, business, law and social sciences;
- Increased tuition fees from £3,290 to a maximum of £9,000 per annum for full-time undergraduate students and £6,750 for part-time students;
- Higher education institutions charging more than £6,000 were to be subject to “a tougher regime” to ensure they met their widening participation and fair access responsibilities;
- Extension of tuition fee loans to part-time undergraduates;
- Maintenance grants for low-income students to be increased;
- Increased earnings threshold for repayments to £21,000 and extended repayment period to 30 years;
- Introduced higher interest rates on loans. Graduates earning between £21,000 and £41,000 will be charged interest on a sliding scale up to a maximum of inflation plus 3 per cent when annual earnings exceed £41,000;
- Universities must become more transparent and publish key information sets (KIS) on their performance;
- A National Scholarship Programme, co-funded by the government and higher education institutions. This support for low-income students is worth at least £3,000. However, this was not an entitlement and higher education institutions determine who receives help and what they get.

(Callender and Scott 2013, pp. 4-5)

The Coalition Government made these reforms to higher education during a period of global economic uncertainty in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008 and as part of a raft of austerity measures outlined in the Government Spending Review (2010). This is an important point as both the reforms to higher education and the imposition of austerity was part of an ideological and political choice in how to respond to the Global Financial Crisis. Among these austerity measures were £83 billion worth of public spending cuts to be implemented over a five-year period, which would see approximately 490,000 public sector jobs cuts, an average 19% four-year cut in public sector departmental budgets, £7 billion in additional welfare cuts and the retirement age raised from 65 to 67 by 2020. With regards to higher education, the Coalition indicated that there would be a reduction in central grants to universities for teaching of around £3 billion per year by 2014/15 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010).

The Coalition's reforms were proffered as the best way of ensuring that English universities would be able to continue to offer a "world-class education" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011) while putting into place a sustainable system of financing higher education that would supposedly lighten the burden on public finances. The reforms were also intended to make higher education more responsive to the needs of students and enable the sector to expand to meet the increasing demands for student places (Brown and Carasso 2013; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010; McGettigan 2013). However, both the imposition of austerity and the increase of tuition fees were both political and ideological choice rather than economic necessity. Indeed, in 2018 even the Conservative Party Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Hammond, admitted that the imposition of austerity by the Coalition Government had been a mistake and that the best way to repair the public finances is to encourage economic growth through public spending stimulus rather than cutting it (Tily 2018). Thus, highlighting that austerity was not only a choice, but an unnecessary one that has resulted

in: *'Economic stagnation, the rising cost of living, cuts to social security and public services, falling incomes, and rising unemployment have combined to create a deeply damaging situation in which millions are struggling to make ends meet.'* (Oxfam 2013)

The first of the Coalition's reforms to higher education came on the 9th of December 2010 when a snap vote was held in the House of Commons to increase the cap on university tuition fees. Part of the Coalition's stated rationale for increasing tuition fees was that reform would allow the country to: *'Maintain high-quality universities in the long term; tackle the fiscal deficit and provide a more progressive system of graduate contributions based on people's ability to pay'* (Cable cited in Mullholland 2010). Willetts argued that the increase in tuition fees was: *'...fair and progressive and puts power in the hands of students'* (Willetts 2010). However, given that the decision to make these reforms was based on political ideology rather than economic necessity it becomes clearer to see that these changes are not about maintaining high quality universities or putting power in the hands of students. They are about imposing a neoliberal model of higher education on the sector that will place an emphasis on creating labour-power and knowledge to be exploited by businesses and encouraging alternative providers to enter the sector not only to drive down costs, but also extract profit.

The Coalition narrowly passed the motion by 21 votes despite having a majority of 84 (Mullholland 2010). The vote split the Liberal Democrats with 27 MPs voting in favour and 21 against the increase in tuition fees. It also inflicted significant damage to the reputation of the party (as highlighted by the results of the 2015 General Election where the party lost 49 seats in Parliament), which had previously made a pledge to scrap tuition fees as part of their manifesto in the run-up to the 2010 General Election (Liberal Democrats Manifesto 2010). This decision was particularly damaging for the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Nick Clegg, who, under increasing criticism, publicly apologised for stating that if elected the Liberal Democrats would scrap tuition fees: *'We made a pledge, we did not stick to it, and for*

that I am sorry. It was a pledge made with the best of intentions...I shouldn't have committed to a policy that was so expensive when there was no money around.' (Clegg 2012 cited in Wintour and Mullholland). Despite this, Clegg went on to keep his Sheffield Hallam seat in the 2015 General Election, but lost it to a Labour candidate, Jared O'Mara, in the 2017 General Election.

The decision to hold a snap vote was seen as a political coup for the Coalition Government as it brought forward the parliamentary vote on increasing tuition fees (using existing secondary legislation) before releasing details of how the new loan scheme would work in practice (McGettigan 2012). Rushing the vote through in this way was no doubt a tactical manoeuvre by the Coalition Government, which was designed to limit parliamentary debate and avoid a prolonged political campaign of opposition (McGettigan 2011). Consequently, the full details of the reforms could not be examined thoroughly by either the House of Commons or the House of Lords when deciding how to vote on increasing tuition fees. A point that was raised in Parliament by Greg Mulholland who opposed the reforms to higher education (MP for Leeds North West):

I do not believe that this debate should be happening today, and I do not believe that it should be happening in the way that it is. It is only seven months since the general election and the Government were formed; it is less than two months since we saw the Browne Report for the first time, and it is a month—a month—since the Government announced their proposals on higher education. Yet, today, we are being forced to hold the significant vote, without considering the other proposals, with a mere five-hour debate.

(Hansard: House of Commons Debate 2010)

Attempts to push through further reforms, especially with regards to increasing competition for student recruitment between institutions and making it easier for alternative providers to enter

the sector, were contained within the government's *Higher Education White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System* (2011). The White Paper was met with strong opposition (from academics, the UCU and student protesters) and, as a consequence, its passage through parliament was "shelved indefinitely" (Gill 2012). Nevertheless, the indefinite postponement of the Higher Education White Paper has subsequently been construed as a hollow victory as many of the reforms outlined in it were passed via secondary legislation and statutory instruments avoiding parliamentary scrutiny and substantially removing the issue from the public arena and wrong-footing resistance to the reforms (McGettigan 2013).

The Coalition's reforms have subsequently been added to by the Conservative Government (2015-2017 and 2017-2019) which has attempted to embed market principles through consultation documents, such as *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016) and resulting *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*. One of the key changes imposed on higher education institutions has been the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that rates university teaching on a gold, silver and bronze scale¹⁰ as a way of recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching and learning and helping to inform student choice (Office for Students 2018). The TEF measures teaching excellence in three main areas: (i) teaching quality: the extent to which teaching stimulates and challenges students, and maximises their engagement with their studies; (ii) learning environment: the effectiveness of resources and activities (such as libraries, laboratories and work experience) which support learning and improve retention, progression and attainment, and; (iii) student outcomes and learning gain: the extent to which

¹⁰ 'Gold for delivering consistently outstanding teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It's of the highest quality found in the UK. Silver for delivering high quality teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It consistently exceeds rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education. Bronze for delivering teaching, learning and outcomes for its students that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.' (Office for Students 2018).

all students achieve their educational and professional goals, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Office for Students 2018).

The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* provided more detail about how tuition fees will be linked to TEF, with only those higher education institutions with a TEF award able to charge the maximum fee of £9,250 per academic year (rising with inflation). Higher education institutions without a TEF award will only be allowed to charge a maximum of £9,000 per academic year. Moreover, the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* also created the new Office for Students (OfS). The OfS is an independent regulator for higher education, which came into force in January 2018 replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales (HEFCE) and monitors the quality of teaching and learning in higher education to ensure students receive “value for money” and grant and revoke institutions degree awarding powers.

Moreover, in response to the success of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party in the 2017 General Election (an increase of 20 seats in Parliament from the 2015 General Election), which attracted younger voters in part by pledging to scrap tuition fees entirely, the Conservative Government, who were able to form a government after striking a deal with the Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on a vote-by-vote basis, made some concessions regarding higher education in England. These concessions were outlined in Theresa May’s speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 2017 and included freezing tuition fees at a maximum of £9,250 and increasing the repayment threshold from £21,000 to £25,000 in an attempt to win back younger voters who had voted for Labour. Consequently, the whole of post-18 education funding is under review chaired by Philip Augar (Department for Education 2018). However, what is missing from the remit of the Augar Report is the possibility of scraping tuition fees entirely. Labour argue this can be done through progressive taxation which would require taxing those who earn over £80,000 per annum to pay a 45p rate of tax and those earning over

£115,000 per annum to pay the 50p rate of tax. Indeed, George Osbourne's decision to reduce the top rate of tax from the 50p to the 45p rate for top earners that has cost the tax payer £8.6 billion, which is close to the figure of £9.6 billion required to scrap tuition fees. Moreover, the only people who appear to have benefitted from Osbourne reduction of top rate tax cuts are the wealthy (including himself) with those earning over £1 million per annum having benefitted from £554,000 in tax reductions. Another way of funding the scraping of tuition fees could be to better address tax evasion (illegal non-payment of tax) and tax avoidance (schemes that reduce or avoid paying tax by finding loopholes) which cost the government around £7.1 billion per annum; however, there appears to be very little appetite from the current government to address this. Many of those involved in these schemes, including David Cameron, David Davies, Sarah Fergusson, Prince Andrew and Queen Elizabeth's private estate, were identified as benefitting from offshore investment in the Panama Papers (Harding 2016). This highlights that both the way higher education is currently funded, and the imposition of austerity more generally, has been a political and ideological choice and that other options were available.

Impact of the Reforms

These reforms have had a significant impact on universities' governance structures and organisational culture as higher education institutions have not only modified their management systems through the imposition of New Public Management (Shattock 2008; Radice 2013; Deem et al 2001; Deem et al. 2007; Salter and Tapper 2003; Scott 2013), but also their strategies to cope with the new funding environments (Callender and Scott 2013). This has led to a redistribution of power within universities (Lomas 2005), which has seen a shift away from the more traditional collegiate model, which is described as a form of collaborative and mutually supportive decision-making by scholars (Bacon 2014), to a more centralised, hierarchical and corporate one shifting the control of universities from scholars to managers (Boden *et al.* 2012; Callender and Scott 2013; Halfman and Radder 2015; Shattock 2008).

This has resulted in what has been described as a “democratic deficit” within many universities, which essentially underutilises academic knowledge and expertise, leaving many academic staff in UK universities feeling that they are unable to make their voice heard within their institution and who would welcome the restoration of more collegiate decision-making processes (Bacon 2014; McGettigan 2015).

For academics, the reforms appear to have led to increased workloads to maximize teaching and research outputs (de Angelis and Harvie 2009; Graham 2015), an increase in more precarious working conditions, deteriorating pay conditions and cuts to pensions despite universities receiving more funding since the new fee structure came into place in 2012 (Barnett 2013; UCU 2013). These changes in working conditions are all attempts to intensify the exploitation of academic labour in higher education institutions through what Marx (1976) called the production of relative surplus value. Marx (*ibid*) argued that a strategy used by capitalist to create more surplus value (profit) was to reduce the wages of workers and intensify of working practices. Since 2010, academics in universities have experienced both of these strategies experiencing a 2.8% fall in wages in real terms (Baker 2017) and an intensification of workloads in terms of teaching, research and administrative duties which has left many academics feeling stressed, underpaid and struggling to find time for personal and family relationships around ever increasing workloads (Bothwell 2018). Concomitantly, there has been a significant increase in vice-chancellors’ and senior managers’ pay and benefits during this period, with many vice-chancellors controversially sitting on salary panels that award pay rises attracting criticism from academics, students, trade unions and MPs (Khomami 2017)

Moreover, staff are reporting increased levels of stress, and mental health problems (Kinman and Wray 2013; UCU 2013) as academic labour is intensified (Gill 2009). Indeed, RAND, in a wellbeing in the workplace report commissioned by the Royal Society and Wellcome Trust found that: ‘...the majority of university staff find their job stressful. Levels of burnout appear

higher among university staff than in general working populations and are comparable to 'high-risk' groups such as healthcare workers.' (p. xv). Hall (2018) goes further and argues that these reforms have led to a sense of hopelessness among academics as working conditions within higher education continue to deteriorate. Hall (*ibid*) uses Marx's concept of alienation which describes capitalist work as an estrangement from human creativity or "species-being" (1844). For Hall (2018) the hopelessness that many academics feel can be best understood as a process of proletarianization within which the intensification of academic labour and reducing the outputs of this labour (creation of labour-power in the form of graduates and general intellect in the form of research) to the imperatives of the creation of surplus value has resulted in academics becoming increasingly estranged from their human creativity and the process of determining what to teach and research, and how this is done.

Furthermore, students commencing their studies since 2012 can now expect to accrue increased amounts of debt - circa £57,343 for a three-year degree programme (The Complete University Guide 2018). While these figures are substantially more than students studying pre-2012 would have accrued, most students will not pay back the full amount, which is wiped out after 30 years and, thus, operating much more like a graduate tax or premium (Lewis 2018). What is also interesting about the new funding model is that because the government loans the money to students through the Student Loans Company it does not currently constitute a public expenditure meaning that the government can argue that they had reduced public spending on higher education (Collini 2012). The new funding model is also somewhat of a "financial gamble" for the government (which still funds higher education albeit through the student loan book) who hopes to recoup these monies through loan repayments in the future (McGettigan 2013). The problem is here that higher than initially predicted levels of unpaid student debt are now forecast meaning that the new funding model may become more expensive than the one it replaced (McGettigan 2013).

Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts that 83% of graduates will never fully repay their loans, while the Department for Education puts this figure between 60% and 65% (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2018). The current outstanding student loan balance stands at £89 billion with forecasts suggesting that around 45% of the values of student loans will not be repaid and by 2021-22, by which time the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that the total outstanding debt will have risen from 1% of GDP to 7%, (£160 billion) (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2018). These debts will ultimately be written-off by the government meaning they will be paid for out of the public purse which, according to former Minister of State for Universities, Science, Innovation and Research, Jo Johnson, was always the intention of the government: *‘The fact that debt is written off is a conscious, deliberate policy decision by the Government. It is not a symptom of a broken student finance system; it is a deliberate investment in the skills base of the country, which delivers benefits for individual students and society at large.’* (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2018). Whether writing off debt was a conscious deliberate policy is hard to know, but the more likely explanation for this was the accounting sleight of hand to make it appear that the government had reduced public expenditure on higher education and an ideological desire to financialise and the marketize the sector.

If, and how, the government will respond to this issue remains to be seen. While the terms and conditions of the student loans can be changed retrospectively, there appears to be very little appetite to make radical changes to the core architecture of the current format (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2018). However, changes to the way higher education is funded are likely to follow in response to the publication of Philip Augar’s review of post-eighteen education funding in November 2018 (Department for Education 2018) and the Office for National Statistics review of how student loans are treated in the national accounts. Both have the potential to alter the way higher education is funded in England (McGettigan 2018).

When the tuition fees were first raised in 2012, there was a general fear that the increased fees would result in a reduction in applications to study in higher education. However, despite an initial dip in applications in 2012, numbers reached an all-time high during the 2015 application cycle with 592,290 applications to study in higher education, including the highest recorded number from students from disadvantaged areas (UCAS 2018). The reason for the increase in student applications can perhaps be explained for the increasing demand by employers for highly skilled workers and, thus, possessing a degree becomes essential to gaining employment. The increase in students from disadvantaged areas has been on the agenda since the passing of the Higher Education Act 2004 and the creation of the Office for Fair Access that was set up to oversee fair access in admissions with regards to class, ethnicity and gender (Tomlinson 2019). Moreover, one of the conditions of the new fee structure was that those universities charging over £6,000 would have to invest some of that money into widening participations schemes and recruitment (McGettigan 2013).

There was another rise in 2016 to 593,720, before dips in 2017 to 564,190 and again in 2018 to 559,030 (ibid), although a dip in the socio-demographics of 18-year-olds can explain some of this (ibid). However, where the increase in tuition fees appears to have had the most impact is on mature and part-time learners with a 40% and a 14% reduction in numbers respectively (HEFCE 2013). This reduction in mature and part-time students has had a significant impact for some higher education institutions, one example being the Open University, which has traditionally recruited mature and part-time learners and recently reported a £7 million deficit and a further decline in student numbers (Times Higher Education 2016).

Moreover, similar to academics, there appears have been a significant rise in students experiencing mental health problems with 27% stating that they suffer from at least one mental health issue (You.Gov 2016). Of this 27 %, 77% state they suffer from depression and 74% with anxiety. 63% state that they suffer from stress that disrupts their daily lives and 77% from

a fear of course related failure. 71% state that university work is the cause of their stress and 39% worry about getting a job after university with around 18% in receipt of university mental health services (You.Gov 2016). While university well-being services are in place to address the rise in mental health problems many are unable to cope with the demand, which is likely to increase as the stigma of disclosing concerns about mental health decreases (Brown 2016). Indeed, the Office for National Statistics found that there had been a 95% increase for counselling services by students in higher education between 2012 and 2017 (ONS 2017). The rise in mental health problems has coincided not only with the reforms to higher education made since 2010, which include students being burdened with increasing amounts of debt, but also appear to have been exacerbated by the increasing precarity of the job market, which Giroux (2013) describes as the: ‘*zero generation – zero jobs, zero hope, zero possibilities, zero employment.*’ This is a crisis that has serious implications with the Office for National Statistics finding that during the 12-month period between 2016 and 2017, 95 students in higher education committed suicide (ONS 2017). While Universities UK has announced a strategy for dealing with mental health in higher education titled *Suicide-Safe Universities* (2018) it remains to be seen whether this will be enough to address the wider structural factors that appear to be impacting on students’ mental health.

The sum total of this raft of reforms since the late 1970s, then, has put increasing pressure on universities to achieve what are to some extent conflicting and contradictory aims of providing more for less by: (i) contributing towards economic growth through the creation both of an increasingly skilled workforce and of new technology and knowledge through academic research (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013); and, (ii) responding to a governmental drive for greater efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability as part of an attempt to reduce public sector spending (Henkel 2000). In short, the thread running through these reforms to higher education since the late 1970s has been the attempt to reduce state

expenditure on higher education and promote the privatisation of the sector and the interests of private enterprises to accumulate profits without necessarily providing a public benefit such as social, cultural and economic needs of communities (Boden *et al.* 2012). This has created a situation wherein universities are forced to focus on short-term survival based on economic imperatives rather than being concerned with the long-term impact of higher education as a public good (Pavlenko and Bojan 2014).

More generally, the reforms are part of an attempt to (re)produce the conditions and social relations needed for continued capital accumulation (Somerville and Saunders 2013). This is done by creating an increased pool of skilled labour-power to be exploited by employers (*ibid*). It is worth adding here that it is the students (through fees) and the government (central funding and unpaid loans) that pay for the training of this skilled workforce rather than businesses themselves. Not only does this increased pool of labour-power have the potential to attract foreign investment and allow Britain to compete on the international market, but like every other commodity in a capitalist market, its price decreases when supply outstrips demand. Thus, the increase of people with degrees means they can be paid less as there is increased competition for graduate jobs by those in possession of a degree, which brings down the exchange-value of labour-power as realised in an employment contract.

Moreover, the increasing interference by government and business with regards to academic research means that there tends to be a preference of funding research that contributes to economic gain (profit). Thus, academic research is becoming increasingly instrumental for the purposes of businesses rather than public good (Collini 2012). Moreover, the opening up of higher education for alternative providers, which is aimed at private provision, is part of an attempt to create competition between providers and ultimately reduce the cost of funding a degree. The imposition of this market mechanism and an attempt to create competition between higher education institutions and academics (both of which have tended to be based on more

co-operative and collective principles) is based on the logic of neoliberalism and creates a contradiction between the use-value of higher education (what should higher education be used for) and exchange-value (what is the value of the outputs of higher education that can be realised in exchange on the market) with the latter seeming to dictate provision. This process is described by Marx as “real subsumption” which: *‘...entails a constant process of revolutionising the labour process through material and technological transformations which increase the productivity of labour. From these secular increases in productivity follow broader transformations in the character of society as a whole, and in the relations of production between workers and capitalists in particular.’* (End Notes 2019) Thus, it is possible to argue that higher education is going through a process of real subsumption that is changing its labour process to reproduce capitalist accumulation. The process is not reversible as it is situated within a broader transformation of social relations along these lines. As discussed above, even the idea of the public university is another form of capitalist accumulation (Somerville and Saunders 2013). Thus, what is required is another organisational form that has the potential to get beyond the public/private dichotomy. To do this, the thesis looks outside of mainstream higher education and examines experiments with alternative models of education provision that have emerged during the post-war period.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of higher education policy and reform during the post-war period. This overview has aimed to provide a backdrop to help better understand the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. The chapter argued that the Coalition’s reforms to higher education in England mark a shift to a more financialised and marketized model of higher education provision. However, they should not be considered in isolation, but as the culmination of a series of reforms which, since the 1970s, have become increasingly

influenced by higher education neoliberal ideology and an attempt to impose a neoliberal model of higher education.

This shift has had a profound effect on the organisational behaviour of universities who have not only modified their management systems (through the imposition of new public management but also their strategies and organisational cultures to cope with new funding environments (Randle and Bradley 1997; Scott 2013). This change in organisational culture has led to a redistribution of power within universities (Lomas 2005) which, in general, has signalled a shift away from collegiate models of decision making to more centralised corporate ones providing a powerful stimulus for the development of the “managerial university” (Callender and Scott 2013). The neoliberalisation of higher education in England has also had an impact on the nature of academic labour within universities and, increasingly, academics are being de-professionalised (Barnett 2013) and experiencing increased workloads while, concomitantly, receiving deteriorating pay and pensions conditions (Bauder 2006; Freedman 2011). This intensification of labour is having a significant impact on academics with increasing stress levels and incidents of mental health problems being reported (UCU 2013). Moreover, students are experiencing increasing levels of anxiety and debt while studying in higher education. The sum total of these reforms has been to (re)impose the conditions and social relations of capitalist accumulation – a process described by Marx as real subsumption. The chapter concluded by arguing that this process of subsumption can be found in both public and private models of universities as both are forms of capitalist accumulation. Thus, the chapter argued for the need to look outside of mainstream higher education at groups who have experimented with alternative models of provision that have the potential to challenge the current neoliberal model of higher education and capitalist social relations more generally.

Chapter 2: Protest and Resistance: The Emergence of Autonomous Learning Spaces

Introduction

While the previous chapter outlined the reforms to higher education in Britain during the post-war period, this chapter will examine the struggles that have emerged in response to these changes. This allows the chapter to examine how students and academics have struggled over the nature and purpose of higher education during this period and how they have tried to re-imagine the idea of the university. The chapter begins by examining perhaps the most sustained, and certainly the most documented, episode of student activism during this period – the 1968 Student Movement. This movement emerged in response to what students considered the oppressive, authoritarian and bureaucratic nature of higher education in France before becoming part of a much wider working-class struggle against capitalist social relations in the form of a general strike and the occupation of workplaces throughout the country. The 1968 Student Movement spread to other countries around the world including Britain and as the focus of the previous chapter was on higher education reforms in Britain, the chapter goes onto focus on the impact the 1968 Student Movement had here.

While the momentum of the 1968 Student Movement would ultimately wane, there were other episodes of student activism in Britain in response to political decisions and reforms to higher education which are examined in this chapter, such as the Cambridge Garden House Riot in 1970, and protests against the introduction of tuition fees by New Labour in 1998 and variable fees in 2004. The chapter then focuses on the more recent student protests that emerged in 2010 in response to the Coalition's reforms to higher education, which were more sustained and involved greater numbers than other post 1968 student activism in Britain. Here, protests took

the form of organised demonstrations in major cities around the UK, trade union-led strikes, the occupation of universities and public property (Ibrahim 2011) and the emergence of autonomous learning spaces that have experimented with no-fee, alternative forms of higher education (Thompsett 2016). While the 2010 student protest began as instrumental opposition to increased tuition fees they become about more than this and signalled the start of a new student movement (Barnett 2011) that engaged with questions of the nature and purpose of higher education (Freedman 2011; Kumar 2011; Solomon and Palmieri 2011) and as a form of class struggle (Jones 2011) against the continuing imposition of neoliberal ideology and austerity (Barnett 2011; Chessum 2011).

The chapter draws to a close by arguing that these protests were not isolated incidents, but part of a longer struggle over the idea of the university during the post-war period and against the imposition of capitalist social relations more generally. While there were many discontinuities between these episodes of struggle, such as the difference in the emphasis they placed on university authority, hierarchy and bureaucracy, the content of the curriculum and educational democracy, access and fees, as well social transformation, there are links between them, especially how they tried to reconfigure space and experiment with alternative models of education provision that have the potential not only to prefigure higher education but also social relations more generally. Thus, it is possible to link these different episodes of struggle as part of an attempt to re-imagine the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society.

The 1968 Student Protests

The post-war expansion of higher education in Britain not only changed the nature of universities, but it also transformed the nature of student politics within them (Kumar 2011; Rees 2011). No longer are universities solely the preserve of social elites but are increasingly

attended by students from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds (Wolf 2002), although equality of access remains a problem across the sector, especially at institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge (Chowdry *et al.* 2010). This change in student demographics has coincided with an increase in student activism (Rees 2011) - a phenomenon which is not specific to Britain but has occurred around the world (Kumar 2011). During the early part of the post-war period another factor for the rise in student activism was that the rapid increase in student numbers which has also coincided with consistently low level of government spending on higher education resulting in worsening material conditions for students, including a growing ratio of students to teachers and physical overcrowding in university and college buildings creating a hotbed for student activism (Stedman Jones 1969). Moreover, during this period students have increasingly become involved in broader political issues outside of the university, such as the 1956 Hungary student protests against Stalinism. In Hungary, student activists compiled a sixteen-point list of key national policy demands which resulted in the successful creation of workers' councils and revolutionary committees across the country (Ronay 2006). Furthermore, in the 1960s, students became heavily involved in the civil rights movement in the USA creating Freedom Schools in opposition to the endemic racism in the country at that time (Rees 2011). Thus, the increase in student numbers has resulted in greater amounts student activism in opposition not only to the conditions, nature and purpose of higher education, but also national and international political action and policy.

Perhaps the most noted and sustained episode of this student activism was the 1968 Student Movement. Cockburn and Blackburn (1969) describe the emergence of this movement as: '*...a renewal of revolutionary politics as well as the arrival of a new social force.*' (p. 7) Here, Cockburn and Blackburn's comments allude to the immediate period before 1968 when students, and revolutionary politics in general, were considered as waning in Western Europe

and the USA. Indeed, the 1968 Student Movement was considered something of a welcome surprise for many radicals who thought there was no longer an impetus for revolutionary politics (*ibid*). Furthermore, the 1968 Student Movement was not only an attempt to radically change the nature of higher education, but the capitalist system as a whole and sought to give people access to more direct forms of democracy giving them: ‘...*power over their everyday life exercised by the people themselves in all particular institutions which comprise society, as well as in general social control of the economy.*’ (Cockburn and Blackburn 1969, p. 7). Thus, this dual revolutionary movement is important because it was not only a struggle over the idea of the university, but also a struggle over the type of society we should live in and proffered an alternative vision based on the principles of collective ownership and control of major institutions.

The 1968 Student Movement began in Paris and became the most significant mass movement in French history (Ross 2002) before spreading to many major countries around the world, including Bolivia, China, Cuba, Italy, Japan, Panama, Peru, Spain, Venezuela, West Germany, UK and USA (Halliday 1969). The 1968 Student Movement began as a series of disturbances and agitations created by a group of students calling themselves *Les Enragés* at the University of Paris, Nanterre and Sorbonne universities (Edleman-Boran 2001). Dissatisfied with what students described as the “authoritarian”, “didactic”, “secretive” and “overcrowded” nature of universities (Barnett 2011; Rees 2011) - which was seen as symptomatic of capitalist social relations more generally (Klimke and Scharloth 2008) - *Les Enrages* called not only for educational change but also broader social change, demanding the destruction of imperialist foreign policy, the military, the bourgeoisie and the university itself (Edleman-Boran 2001).

Within the 1968 Student Movement there was an increasing scepticism of the idea of the university, which was considered by students to have become increasingly focused on one thing: *'...to train the flood of technicians and manipulators which neo-capitalism and the spectacle demand.'* (Cockburn and Blackburn 1969 p. 10) What was meant by this was that there was a perception that the university had become increasingly subsumed by the logic of capitalism and had become more about training workers to produce commodities (technicians) and educating people to be able to manipulate consumers into buying these commodities (manipulators) rather than serving some kind of public good. Steadman Jones (1969, p. 26) provides further clarification on this point argues that many students within the movement advanced the thesis that: *'...universities and colleges today are no longer primarily concerned with the transmission of cultural heritage but are fast becoming a central element of the 'forces of production' in both advanced capitalist countries and the USSR'*. Thus, universities were seen as a key feature of industrial capitalism and the creation of labour-power for exploitation by capitalists (Davidson 1969). Aware of this, students demanded democratic control over the content of education, including course patterns, reading lists, syllabuses and methods of assessment as a way of disrupting the capitalist agenda of universities (Stedman Jones 1969) and trying the re-imagine an alternative idea of the university.

The first action of the 1968 Student Movement was the occupation of university property in Paris. However, an ill-conceived and heavy-handed police response during the early stages of the movement incited a full-scale riot (Kurlansky 2004). Cockburn and Blackburn (1969) argue that the police's response to the student movement was not surprising and evidences that when the capitalist state is unable to co-opt a movement such as this they deploy an: *'...armoury of repression developed for such purposes: special police, para-military units, guard dogs, water cannon, tear gas, shock grenades etc.'* (p. 7) The response by the police resulted in students

attempting to burn the Paris stock-exchange building (Kurlansky 2004) and taking over the Left-Bank by building over sixty barricades out of furniture, cars, bricks and bicycles and anything else they could carry (Edleman-Boran 2001). Halliday (1969, p. 320) described the scenes in Paris: *'Barricades were thrown up, constructed of overturned cars held in place by uprooted paving stones. These, sometimes reached first storey level, were held by students against police charges.'*

As confrontations continued to escalate, the Student Movement of 1968 became much more than just a protest about higher education and within these occupied spaces new forms of direct action and autonomous politics were being developed and an alternative society being prefigured: *'...these forms of direct action were not just appellative, and symbolic expressions of dissent addressed to the public. Their goal was to change the activists themselves...Also, these protest techniques served as anticipations of the new society: Activists acted as if the norms of the real society had been temporarily suspended, and by autonomously following their own rules, they were prefiguring the alternative society they envisioned.'* (Klimke and Scharloth 2008, p. 5) This highlights that the movement had become more than a protests against the nature and purpose of higher education, but had opened up spaces within which people were experimenting with alternative ways of being that were changing the subjectivities of individuals involved in them showing the importance of being involved in concrete struggles such as these.

The barricades eventually fell in Paris, and the Left-Bank was retaken by the police shortly afterwards; however, the movement had gained enough momentum to sustain itself. When Sorbonne University re-opened, it was occupied by students who renamed it the "Autonomous People's University" (Kurlansky 2004). Moreover, the movement also began to spread beyond

the students to workers with all the major trade unions in France calling for a general-strike and demanding labour reform (Kurlansky 2004). A deep scepticism among workers of formal trade unions and the French Communist Party (PCF), who were accused of manoeuvring to buttress their own positions within the current political system, resulted in a series of wild-cat strikes and, in some cases, workers began occupying the factories they worked in (Edleman-Boran 2001). Moreover, student action groups helped workers produce propaganda materials with leaflets and posters being created by occupied buildings of the Fine Arts School and the Arts Faculty at Censier (Halliday 1969) highlighting the spread of the movement from students to workers.

Indeed, perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the 1968 Student Movement was its ability to spread from students to workers, which marked a transition from a student uprising to a near working-class revolution (Rees 2011). Moreover, among workers, the movement spread beyond the traditional centres of industrial production to include the service, communication and culture industries with no profession, sector, category, region, city or village left untouched (Ross 2002): *'It penetrated every sector of national life, every region of the country. More than ten million stopped work: not only students and industrial workers, but peasants, intellectuals, school children, shop assistants, even TV news-readers, astronomers at the Folies Bergeres.'* (NLR 1968) What had started as a protest against the oppressive nature of universities had become a class struggle against the similarly oppressive nature of capitalist social relations in wider society. Thus, it is possible to see that the university existed as a microcosm of capitalism and students and workers could see similarities in the forms of oppression they experienced in their own spheres of life as shared social issues.

As a result of the 1968 Student Movement and the ensuing strike action by workers, President Charles de Gaulle felt the need to leave France and the country came to a standstill for almost six weeks taking the dissolution of the government-of-the-day and fresh elections to end the movement (Rees 2011). However, the movement was undermined throughout by the PCF who attempted to stop contact between students and workers in an effort to secure parliamentary victory in France – in some cases physically locking occupied factory gates to stop students getting access (Mandel 1968). While the PCF would lose the French legislative election to the Gaullist Union for the Defence of the Republic in 1968, the student movement had highlighted not only a crisis of the university but also a crisis of capitalism (Mandel 1968). Thus, not only was the struggle against the authoritarian nature of universities and the content of their courses, but also the contradictions of capitalism that had resulted in relative deprivation among the working-class and an inability to satisfy the needs of young people in both a material sense and fulfilment of human potential (*ibid*).

The 1968 Student Movement continued to spread across the world and was helped by a series of transnational networks that existed between activists from different countries and mediated by exchanges in countercultural newspapers and magazines via networks such as the *Underground Press Syndicate*, which helped to diffuse and spread new concepts, ideas and forms of tactics and protests (Klimke and Scharloth 2008). Moreover, the movement began merging with other protests, such as feminists, civil rights campaigners and anti-war protesters in the USA, Japan, Ireland, Mexico, Germany, Italy, Poland, Africa and the Middle East (Rees 2011). For example, in the USA around 6,000 people established a radical space on the outskirts of Washington D.C. known as Resurrection City until their demands to end poverty were met by the Federal Government (Hamilton 2013). Resurrection City even created a space for education called the Poor People's University which brought together people from different

racial, cultural and educational backgrounds to engage with the issue of poverty and how society could be organised differently (*ibid*). Furthermore, within mainstream higher education in the USA, a more radical version of student union, the National Student Association (NSA) not only fought for more democratic forms of education but also: ‘...*participatory democracy for organising to pressure the government and end the imperialist war, racial and gender discrimination.*’ (DiSalvo 2015, p. 269) However, the NSA was eventually infiltrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as way of quelling radical sentiment and gathering information about radical student activism and received \$3.3 million of funding between 1952 and 1967 highlighting how seriously the USA Government took student activism as a threat to their national interest and capitalist social relations (Triesman 1969)

In Britain, there had been several episodes of student activism before May 1968. One example was a mass demonstration by students which occurred in 1967 in opposition to the raising of overseas student fees (Steadman Jones 1969). Also, in 1967 at the London School of Economics there had been an organised demonstration about the appointment of Dr Walter Adams as director of the LSE. Dr Adams was closely associated with Ian Douglas Smith’s political regime in Rhodesia, which many students criticised for being racist and imperialist (BBC 2019). The LSE suspended two student union officials who had organised a meeting about Adam’s appointment in the Old Theatre, which had been strictly forbidden by the institution. In response to the suspensions, students occupied buildings and threatened hunger strikes unless the decisions were reversed, which ultimately there were (*ibid*).

When the 1968 Student Movement arrived in England it was criticised as being late and too narrow by comparison with its counterparts on the continent focusing mainly on anti-war and educational provision rather than wider working-class issues (Barnett 2011). Stedman Jones (1969, p. 43) argues the narrowness of the student movement in Britain was down to: ‘*The*

absence of any native revolutionary intellectual tradition and has thus put an important brake on the emergence of a militant student movement. Anderson (1969, p. 214) also makes a similar point: *'...one of the main reasons for the lateness of any student unrest in England is precisely the lack of any revolutionary tradition within English culture.'*

The extent of student activism was also inhibited by the National Union of Students who Widgery (1969, p. 139) argues was a muffler to radical activity among students: *'For either the radical or the revolutionary, work at the NUS is depressing and seldom rewarding. The sheer deadweight of an organisation defined by the absence of militants is difficult to exaggerate. Debate appears so infantile, organisations appears so manipulative and elections appear so deeply conditioned by hucksterism that the value of enlarging the radical enclave within NUS is very questionable.'* Thus, a lack of radical tradition in Britain and pro-establishment Student Union appeared to have been the reasons for the perceived lateness and narrowness of student activism in Britain in 1968. However, the activism in 1967 shows that this was not entirely accurate, and the beginnings of student radicalism were present before May 1968. Moreover, as will be discussed below, there were certainly elements of the student movement in Britain that had a radical element to them even if they did not build barricades and unite with the working-class in the same way has had happened in France.

Early student activism in Britain in 1968 focused mainly on anti-Vietnam war campaigns rather than the nature and purpose of higher education and this tended to be combined with political factions outside of education, such as the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament rather than organised solely by students. Perhaps the most notable example of this was the Grosvenor Square Demonstration on 17th March 1968, which ended with 86 people injured and over 200 arrested after over 8,000 protesters marched on the USA embassy in protest to the USA's military action in Vietnam and the British government's

support of it (Rees 2011). However, by May 1968, like France and other countries, there had been successful attempts by students, at some universities, in particular, the London School of Economics, to occupy buildings in an attempt to establish free universities and reinvent their institutions (Edleman-Boran 2001). Within these occupations there was a focus on issues, such as the examination system, the nature of courses and disciplinary powers of university authorities (Widgery 1969) that highlights the beginnings of a struggle over the idea of the university and similarities with the student movement in France.

One example of this was Hornsey College of Art where, in May 1968, students evicted the College's staff and occupied the institution, including all teaching areas and the running of a 24 hours-a-day canteen (Nairn 1968). The students also ran an exhibition-cum-teach-in at the gallery of the Institute of Contemporary Art called a "National Conference of Art Colleges" as part of an attempt to change the whole system of art education from below (*ibid*). Nairn (1968, p. 68) argues that the importance of the teach-ins at Hornsey were that they: '*...represent an attempt to shift education from instruction to discovery, from brain-washing instructors. It is a big dramatic reversal. The teach-in represent a creative effort, switching the educational process from package to discovery.*' Moreover, Nairn (1968) argues that occupations and teach-ins brought about significant changes in the participants and their attitudes creating a revolutionary subjectivity which made a radical break with the past condition of student apathy. The importance of this was that students were struggling over the form of education they were experiencing and experimenting with alternative forms that were more critical and based on collective enquiry rather than didactic instruction from teachers.

Nairn (*ibid*) argues that while the students at Hornsey were criticised for being indifferent for struggles outside of art colleges, and capitalism more generally, important lessons can be

learned from this episode of struggle. One of the main lessons was that in future, students needed to ground their activism in the material conditions of wider society in an attempt to create a wider revolutionary movement in a similar way as to what had happened in France. Nairn (*ibid*) also argued that the students learned lessons from dealing with university authority, which included being aware of the tactic of procrastination by those in charge to grind the student movement down as people become tired or felt they are not getting anywhere. Thus, the importance of Hornsey was that there was an attempt to reflect on the experience of occupation and think through what can be learned and how student activism can be more effective in the future which is the importance of documenting such events. Moreover, despite some of its shortcomings, the actions at Hornsey inspired other students at dozens of other colleges to do the same and occupy their institutions (Barnett 2011; Edleman-Boran 2001).

Another, example of the British student activism during this period was at the University of Essex¹¹ on 7th May 1968. Police were called to the University and three students were suspended for attending a student and staff demonstration against a talk to be given by Dr Inch of Porton Down, the government germ warfare establishment (Triesman 1968). In response, students boycotted lectures and organised their own educational provision declaring a “Free University” in protest to the arbitrary victimisation of the three students who were not even told by the University why they were being suspended (*ibid*), although it was probably obvious. On 17th May, the three suspended students were reinstated, but Triesman (*ibid*) argues that while the experience resulted in the students becoming more radicalised and the institution less authoritarian, it was a missed opportunity to bring about more radical change as the students: ‘...had the Senate reduced to incompetent incoherence, but they let the chance to take over the

¹¹ Much more can be found out about the Essex Student Movement at the Mustard Project: <https://mustardthemovie.org/>

University slip away.' (p. 71) Thus, the student movement here lacked a radical edge and was more concerned with the reinstatement of the three students rather than challenging the nature and purpose of higher education or with making connections with other students and wider working-class struggles.

Another example of student activism in Britain was at the University of Hull where an overwhelming majority of students voted at a union general meeting to occupy the main administration building on 8th June 1968 (Fawthrop 1968). By that evening the students had taken over the power-centre of the University and hung a sign on the entrance that said, "Under New Management" (*ibid*). The students expressed solidarity with French students and aired grievances about their dissatisfaction with the University of Hull. These grievances included, a demand for greater student involvement in University decision-making, more personal contact with tutors and supervisors and different forms of assessment (*ibid*). The student movement in Hull had begun on 30th May as a sit-in that lasted five days before setting up a student committee called the "30th May Committee". The student committee posed: '*...an alternative formal organisation to the traditional students' union bureaucracy. During the next ten days the campus at Hull became the centre of continues debate, discussion and argument – the political character of the student body had been transformed.*' (Fawthrop 1968, p. 59) Attendance at general union meetings exceeded 800 people that demanded equal representation of students on the University's Senate. Moreover, the students issues a list of "Eight Student Demands", that included reform of the examination system, equal representation and transparency in decision-making, no increase in resident fees, and to treat student like adults (*ibid*).

Fawthrop (*ibid*) argues that the importance of the student movement at Hull was that it highlighted that the students could act offensively against their institutions. Furthermore, Hull highlighted the importance of taking real concrete action for the democratisation of the university as a way of bringing people together and creating a radical subjectivity. Moreover, those involved in the student activism at Hull understood the importance of extending the struggle to the working-class and argued that this democracy should be extended to all members of staff who work at the University, including maintenance staff, catering staff and cleaners. The importance of all of this is summed up by Fawthrop (1968, p. 64) as follows: *'The concept of the 'Free University' has been born in Hull, and 500 people who participated in the sit-in have been through a fantastic experience that we will never forget, and the Senate will never understand – the experience of spontaneous activity, impromptu speeches, and living in close co-operation with nearly 400 other people at one time. For the first time we sensed that we belonged to a real community – and our triumph was to succeed in creating it. Now the campaign continues in the same spirit, as this time we work towards creating not just a particle community, but a total free university as the intellectual bridgehead to a different type of society.'* Thus, while the student activism at Hull began in response to education provision and involvement in decision-making processes the experience of occupation resulted in a much more radical subjectivity that argued not only for a more democratic university, but also an extension of this as part of prefiguring an alternative form of society.

This more radical element of the student movement in Britain was captured by the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF) on 15th June 1968 at a meeting at the London School of Economics. Over 500 students attended its inaugural conference and a pamphlet created for the event described the organisation's aims as being in: *'...opposition to the control of education by the ruling class, support of all anti-imperialist struggles and*

solidarity with national liberation movements, opposition to racialism and immigration control, and workers' power as the only alternative to capitalism.' (Cited in Bourne 2013) The RSSF stance was radical and was part of an attempt to create a wider anti-capitalist social movement which was stated as the first aim on its manifesto: *'RSSF commits itself to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and imperialism and its replacement by workers' power, and bases itself on the recognition that the only social class in industrial countries capable of making the revolution in the working class.'* (RSSF 1968)

The RSSF and those involved in this revolutionary student movement saw universities as a weak link in capitalist social relations and thought they could be turned into “red bases” which would: *'...help all students free themselves from the hegemony of the authorities...detach the student body from the institution's controls, set up dual power on campus, and create the permanent possibility of revolutionary action at the highest level.'* (Barnett 1968, p. 43) Barnett (*ibid*) goes on to argue that these red bases must be: *'...built on democratic centres in the faculties, departments, halls of residence, flats societies, clubs study groups, newspapers and magazines, and on the physical liberation of student existence from external controls.'* Thus, red bases would experiment with mass democratic self-organisation which would function as counter-centres to capitalist social relations (*ibid*). The importance of red bases were part of an attempt to create autonomous spaces wherein students could create the cultural and pre-conditions for revolutionary action through resistance to university authority (*ibid*). The plan was that this would then spread to wider society and link with different working-class struggles which would include setting up a “political university” where: *'...facilities are used to open revolutionary courses for workers, young and old, white-collar and manual, secretaries and housewives...'* (Barnett 1968, p. 53) Thus, this would entail a complete re-imagining of the idea of the university which would become a social and overtly radically political institution.

Nevertheless, while the RSSF attempted to link student activism to working-class struggles, the student movement in Britain was mainly confined to universities and colleges and failed to spread to workers in the same way it had in France (Barnett 2011). However, while the 1968 Student Movement eventually lost momentum it served as an inspiration for many similar protests in the future, e.g. the 1970s free schools, such as *Scotland Road Free School*, *White Lion Free School* and *Summerhill School* (de Castella 2014), the new social movements – feminism, environmentalism and gay liberation (Pearce 2011) and, later on, the student movement in 2010 where protestors brandished “Spirit of ‘68” placards (Kumar 2011).

One of the reasons given why the 1968 Student Movement failed to sustain itself as a revolutionary movement was because it did not have political direction or organisation (Casserly 2011). Moreover, the movement has been criticised for being too inward looking to provide a viable alternative to the society and institutions of which it was critical – a point made by Lefebvre shortly after the movement began to fade: ‘...*contestation and spontaneity – the force of the streets... this power, which lies outside of state power, was and remains the most real and active power... Such power, however, has difficulty in constituting and affirming itself as power... How can a movement based on negation become a power? How can it move from contestation to institution?*’ (Lefebvre 1969, p. 82) This was a question that was never answered by the 1968 Student Movement despite experiments with more democratic forms of self-organisation during occupations. However, this is an important question and one that must be addressed if student and working-class movements are to be able to create alternative ways of being that are *contra* to capitalist social relations.

Furthermore, Cockburn and Blackburn (1969) argue that students not only needed to reject ruling ideology, but they also needed a revolutionary theory to support their struggle and better connect with wider working-class movements which they did not have. They go on to argue that being unarmed theoretically can only lead to political defeat, which of course it did (*ibid*). Furthermore, Gorz (1968) argues that the 1968 Student Movement was without revolutionary organisation and leadership, which meant it was unable to sustain its momentum and led its demise. Gorz (*ibid*) argues that what was required was the creation of working-class organs of control and power to keep the revolutionary momentum going. Moreover, the 1968 movement was defined by an all or nothing mentality whereas Gorz (*ibid*) argues that what was needed was the understanding that a much longer process of change would be necessary: ‘...that the capitalist system could have been swept aside in one fell swoop is an untenable thesis: for this, a revolutionary process far longer and more progressive than two to four weeks of potentially insurrectionary action would have been necessary.’ (Gorz 1968, p.53)

Nevertheless, Gorz (1968, p. 58) argues that the student movement acted as a catalyst for wider revolutionary action, although it was not enough on its own and: ‘*Only a revolutionary party, which integrated every dimension of the anti-capitalist struggle into the project of radical transformation of all levels of social life, could cause the student movement to transcend its limits, and could enable the working-class movement to harness the revolutionary potential of the student struggles.*’ Gorz (1968) sees this revolutionary party as a synthesizing organisation that connects different anti-capitalist struggles which does not follow the Leninist model of a despotic and repressive state, but: ‘...the site of free debate and direct democracy, to encourage collective self-determination by the workers of the means and objectives of their struggle; to aim at the conquest of workers’ power over the centres of production, not merely as an end in itself, but as the prefiguration of social self-management by the sovereign producers.’ (Gorz

1968, p. 60) Whether Gorz is correct about the need for a political party to organise a revolutionary social movement is something that is addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Unable to move from contestation to institution, the anti-authoritarian and anti-statist sentiments of the 1968 Student Movement was captured by the political right and, during the subsequent decades the individual and cultural liberation won through this struggle would be subsumed within consumerism wherein: ‘...neoliberalism and the free market were the main beneficiaries of the movement against state power and paternalism.’ (Barnett 2011, p. 80) At the time, Stedman Jones (1969, p. 54) was also critical of the student movement in Britain and argued: ‘*The student movement in Britain today will only grow if it constantly and dynamically unites the struggle on campus to the struggle against capitalist society at large. It will not ultimately succeed in achieving any substantial advances unless it wins its place within a revolutionary bloc much vaster than itself, under the hegemony of the working-class.*’ Stedman Jones was right about this and perhaps one of the main lessons for the student movement in Britain was its inability to connect with working-class struggles to create a wider revolutionary movement. More generally, the 1968 Student Movement was unable to institutionalise the anti-capitalist movement into a form that would have allowed them to challenge capitalist social relations more generally and this is something that needs to be addressed by future anti-capitalist movements if they are to be successful.

Student Activism 1969 – 2009

The period between 1969 and 2009 was a relatively uneventful time with regards to student activism in the Britain and nothing on the scale of the 1968 Student Movement would reoccur again until the end of 2010. However, the Cambridge Garden House Hotel Riot in 1970 was one instance of student activism during this period. Here, the students were opposed to the

military *coup d'etat* in Greece on 21st April 1967. In an attempt to distract attention away from the coup, and improve the national economy, the Greek military junta decided to promote Greek tourism (Crook 2006). As part of this promotion drive, the Greek Tourist Office in London and the *Cambridge Evening News* organised a “Greek Week” in Cambridge with a series of dinners to be hosted at the Cambridge Garden House Hotel (*ibid*). Student protesters created pickets outside the hotel in an attempt to dissuade diners from entering the premises in an attempt to discredit the Greek military. The protest ended in violence with skirmishes between students and the police and damage inflicted upon the hotel, although both sides blamed each other for the outbreak of violence (*ibid*). 15 students were tried for their involvement in the protest and eight of them were convicted. The sentences given to six of those convicted were between nine and 18-months in prison (or Borstal if under 21 years-of-age) and two international students involved in the incident were recommended for deportation, although the deportation recommendations would be appealed against and cancelled later (*ibid*). The punitiveness of the sentences were to send a message that violence would not be accepted as part of political activism and, more generally, that this type of behaviour from university students was not permissible (*ibid*). However, unlike 1968, this was not a protest against the university or even on university property. This was politically motivated against the Greek military and their actions in Greece rather than a struggle over the idea of the university or even capitalism more generally.

Further student activism in Britain occurred when New Labour were elected in 1997 and they announced the introduction of an upfront £1,000 tuition fee for those studying at university. In response, the Student Union organised a national day of protest against the government’s plans to introduce tuition fees that were held in 14 towns and cities in the UK (BBC 1997). The Student Union’s national secretary at that time, Simon Webber, argued that the introduction of

fees would deter many students from going to university particularly those from deprived backgrounds (*ibid*), thus, not only were the fees themselves of a point of contention, but also the impact they might have on access. While the protests were described by those involved in them as the start of a “full blooded” campaign to stop the introduction of tuition fees (*ibid*), they were successfully passed into law in the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 meaning that students who commenced their studies in autumn term of that year would be the first to pay the fee. However, the fee would be means tested with around 30% of students not eligible to pay anything which was an attempt to address the issue of access for those from deprived backgrounds. Another controversial feature of the Act was that it scrapped maintenance grants and replaced them with income contingent student loans, which was a way of reducing the cost of higher education for the government.

Despite the introduction of the up-front tuition fees in 1998, NUS President at the time, Andrew Pakes said: “We still believe that tuition fees are wrong in principle and practice.” (cited in Myers 2017, p. 14). Demonstrations against the introduction of fees continued in 1999 with protests at 150 universities, including occupations at University of Oxford, University of Sussex and University College London (BBC 2009) Also, there was a campaign of non-payment by six students at the University of Oxford who were threatened with suspension (Myers 2017). Protests against the introduction of fees continued in 2000 when students from Goldsmith College occupied the Department of Education and Employment. In 2003, Education Secretary Charles Clarke announced plans to introduce variable top-up fees that would be paid back after students graduate rather than up-front. Over 30,000 students attended a demonstration against the introduction of variable fees which are introduced in the Higher Education Act 2004, which set a cap of £3,000 per academic year for full-time students (BBC 2009). In both instances, then, the student activism failed to stop New Labour introducing and

increasing tuition fees and resistance to these changes waned shortly after the changes were made to the funding model for higher education in England.

In general, student activism in Britain during 1969-2009 was of a much less radical nature than that of the 1968 Student Movement. Moreover, it was also much more instrumental with a focus either on political events or on tuition fees and access to higher education rather than about its nature and purpose or any attempt to engage with wider social struggles. It is interesting that student activism was not more sustained, or did not connect with wider social struggles, considering the extent of social unrest during this period in Britain, such as the miners strikes (1972, 1974 and 1984), the Winter of Discontent (1978-1979) and the Poll Tax protests (1990). Perhaps this was because there needed to be greater alignment between reforms to higher education and wider social unrest that did not occur during this period. However, it was the Coalition's announcement in 2010 that tuition fees for university students would be tripled that would trigger the most sustained episode of student activism since 1968.

The Student Protests 2010: The 'New Student Rebellions'

The announcement of the Coalition's reforms to higher education in 2010 led to an upsurge in political activity in, and around, universities in the UK (Barnett 2011; Sealey-Huggins and Pusey 2013). These "new student rebellions" displayed levels of radicalism and political activism not seen since the 1968 Student Movement (*ibid*) and transformed the political atmosphere around the Coalition's reforms to higher education and broader public sector cuts in general (Rees 2011). In the broadest possible sense, the 2010 student protests were prefigured by the 1968 Student Movement and, more recently, anti-globalisation protests (Rees 2011), which emanated from the Seattle World Trade Conference in 1999 (Rikowski 2001) and helped spread anti-corporate and anti-capitalist values and revitalised organised demonstrations

as part of political life (*ibid*). This process was continued by the Stop the War Coalition and Students Against the War campaigns in 2003 (UK) and further galvanised by protests and 35 university occupations in the UK at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS); Essex; Birmingham; Oxford; Cambridge and Manchester against Israel's attack on Gaza in 2009 (Solomon and Palmeri 2011). Further protests were staged at SOAS in response to the arrest and deportation of cleaning staff by the UK Border Agency (Ismail 2011).

Consequently, by the time the student protests emerged in 2010, protesters had a well-developed repertoire of tactics (Tilly 2006) or action repertoires (Klimke and Scharloth 2008, p. 5) to draw on. Public demonstrations were a key feature of the 2010 student protests, characterised by tens of thousands of people on the streets of London and in other major cities, the staging of strikes at universities and colleges, flash-mobs and the occupation of university property¹² (Barnett 2011). The protesters themselves were mainly young people made up of school children, sixth-form students, further education and university students, young working people, unemployed graduates, but also included older participants, such as teachers, academics and activists (Hopkins and Todd 2012): *'While a good half of the march was undergraduates from the most militant college occupations – UCL, SOAS, Leeds, Sussex – the really stunning phenomenon, politically, was the presence of youth: banlieue –style [sic] youth from Croydon, Peckham, the council estates of Islington.'* (Mason cited in Pearce 2011, p. 293)

Many of the protesters appeared to have no allegiance to a single political party, organisation or campaign, but comprised a diverse field of actors, some of whom had no history of militancy

¹² Over 25 universities went into occupation in 2010, including Birmingham University, Brighton University, Cambridge University, Cardiff University, Dundee, Goldsmiths, Leeds Metropolitan University, London South Bank University, Manchester Met, Manchester University, Newcastle University, Nottingham University, Oxford University, Portsmouth, Roehampton University, Royal Holloway, School of Oriental and African Studies, Sheffield University, Strathclyde, University College London, University of East London, University of Plymouth, University of Sussex, University of West England, Warwick University. (Barnett 2011)

(Biggs 2011; Robinson 2013) but seemed to have reached a psychological breaking point with the Coalition's austerity programme (Gillespie and Habermehl 2011). What seemed to unite many of the protesters was that they felt: '*...they no longer have a voice or a stake in the political process; that their votes are worthless if the parties that they supported instantly break their manifesto pledges, they took to the streets in their thousands and launched a furious attack on Tory HQ, smashing windows and dropping banners from the roof.*' (Penny 2010) This feeling of being politically disenfranchised was further articulated by one of the student protesters who commented that: '*I joined in because I felt direct action was necessary to enact our anger, frustration and defiance against the government (acting without a mandate) planning an ideologically fuelled, scorched-earth attack on education.*' (Dawson 2011, p. 111) Thus, it is possible to see that these protests were more than about tuition fees, but also the imposition of austerity and perceived crisis in representative democracy.

Another defining feature of the 2010 student protests was the way that participants utilised social media, using Facebook, Twitter, websites and blogs to communicate with each other to provide an alternative view (from that of the mainstream media) of what was happening and to warn protesters how to avoid being "kettled" by the police (Barnett 2011; Biggs 2011; Robinson 2013; Theocharis 2013). Kettling was a crowd control technique used by the police to force large groups of people to stand for hours within a police cordon, regardless of weather conditions, without letting people in or out, leaving protesters without food and water or access to toilets¹³ (Power 2011). The combination of these factors allowed protesters to quickly

¹³ While being a controversial tactic, the use of kettling by police has been ruled legal if used in exceptional circumstances by the Court of Appeal in *Moos & Anor, R (on the application of) v Police of the Metropolis* [2011] EWHC 957 and subsequently by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Austin and others v UK* (2012) 55 EHRR 14. In the Court of Appeal Case, the judges outlined what they meant by exceptional circumstances: "*Containment of a crowd involves a serious intrusion into the freedom of movement of the crowd members, so it should only be adopted where it is reasonably believed that a breach of the peace is imminent and that no less intrusive crowd control operation will prevent the breach, and where containment is otherwise reasonable and proportionate.*"

develop new techniques of networking, consensual organisation, activist solidarity and the creation of intense friendships between participants referred to as the “networked individual” (Barnett 2011), which made the 2010 protests so effective and different to previous forms of protest including 1968: ‘...*spontaneous, self-organised and fluid, using social media such as flash mobs. This is a very different kind of politics from the traditional left form of protests – last seen during the anti-Iraq war movement – which entailed marching troops along the same route week in week out to the same designation and a concluding rally involving the usual suspects.*’ (Hassan 2011, p. 291) This use of technology and the ability to be able to organise in this way is something that distinguishes the student activism in 2010 with that of the 1968 Student Movement.

While the initial focus of the 2010 student movement was on the tripling of tuition fees and cuts to higher education, the movement quickly began making broader and more ambitious demands, such as the call for no-fee higher education, opposing all cuts in public services (Ismail 2011) and a call for more democratic forms of governance (Pusey 2017). Consequently, the student movement became more than a defence of the university (Lear and Schlembach 2011) and quickly merged with other protests against public sector cuts in general (Barnett 2011; Goldman 2011): ‘*Across the country, students are beginning to look outside of the student movement towards mutual aid with others affected by the government’s attacks on the working classes....At student demos over the last few weeks the chant has been ‘Students and workers, Unite and fight!’*’ (Dan cited in Goldman 2011, p. 116) Thus, it is possible to detect similar elements to the 1968 Student Movement, especially with regards attempts to connect with working-class struggles to create a wider anti-capitalist movement. Indeed, the protests became directed against the totality of the state’s economic policy of austerity and the management of democracy and power (Barnett 2011) signalling a political and economic crisis rather than just a crisis of higher education. Student protesters reiterated this point on the roof of Millbank who

stated that: *'We oppose all cuts and we stand in solidarity with public sector workers and all poor, disabled, elderly and working people. This is only the beginning of the resistance to the destruction of our education system and public services.'* (Aitchison 2011, p. 72)

While previous reforms to higher education during the post-war period in England have received very little organised resistance from students (Kumar 2011), what made 2010 different was the growing perception that where graduates once had a bright future, this was no longer the case (Biggs 2011; Gillespie and Habermehl 2011; Hassan 2011) and, instead, were “graduates with no future” and they were not prepared to just lie down and accept it (Mason 2012). Instead, students began to contest the premises the Coalition's austerity programme were built upon: *'...what the state, the government, and the corporate media offer the country and, especially its young, as our fate is unacceptable, and that the claim which accompanies it, that there is no alternative, is a lie.'* (Barnett 2011, p. 16) Thus, again, it is possible to make parallels with the 1968 Student Movement and an increase in relative deprivation and links between the crisis of higher education and the crisis of capitalism appear to be recurrent themes in both these episodes of struggle.

The first wave of student protests in the UK came on the 10th November 2010 when around 50,000 demonstrators gathered on the streets of London to protest about the Coalition Government's proposal to triple university tuition fees and remove educational maintenance allowance (EMA) for students studying in further education (Gillespie and Habermehl 2011). The protest was jointly organised by the NUS and UCU and entitled DEMOLition (Sealey-Huggins and Pusey 2013; Solomon 2011). Despite being approved by the Metropolitan Police, the demonstration appeared to take the authorities by surprise (Gillespie and Habermehl 2011; Lewis *et al.* 2010) with the police seemingly underprepared for the demonstration, despatching approximately 225 officers to oversee it (Lewis *et al.* 2010). Despite starting peacefully, things

quickly got out of hand, culminating in around 200 protesters storming 30 Millbank, (Conservative Party Headquarters) spurred on by over a thousand more on the street outside (Aitchison 2011). Clare Solomon, president of the University of London's Student Union at the time, who was at Millbank, describes what happened next: *'Around fifty students made it up onto the roof...They hung banners and sent text messages in solidarity with public-sector workers. And on the ground the atmosphere was electric: a combination of anger and complete disbelief at what was actually happening. It didn't feel 'radical'; it felt inevitable.'* (2011, pp. 12-13)

The actions of the protestors were condemned by the then President of the NUS, Aaron Porter, who tweeted: *'Disgusted that the actions of a minority of idiots are trying to undermine 50,000 who came to make a peaceful protest.'* (Lewis *et al.* 2010) and by the police and politicians as mindless acts of vandalism by a minority of the crowd who would: *'face the full force of the law.'* (Cameron 2010) In general, the events of the 10th of November were widely reported as being "riotous" and "violent" (BBC 2010c; Lewis *et al.* 2010) and as being "hijacked by anarchists" (Gill 2010). However, what most of the mainstream press overlooked was that opposition to the Coalition's reforms to higher education and public sector spending was much more widespread than the aforementioned "minority of idiots." Thus, the broken glass at Millbank would come to serve as a potent symbol of the rupturing of student apathy (Sealey-Huggins and Pusey 2013); as the place where the Coalition, momentarily, lost control of the political agenda; where the NUS leadership lost control of the student movement, and the police lost control of the streets (Mason 2012).

The importance of Millbank with regards to political action was that it did not just inspire more people to protest; it changed the whole attitude to protest in the UK as people reclaimed demonstrations, encouraged people to break away from the police when kettled, to look for

buildings to occupy and to organise without waiting for organisers or unions to give them orders. Indeed, the 10th of November 2010 was the start of months of sustained militant action throughout the UK, which included marches, strikes, occupations and protests across university campuses and cities almost on a daily basis (Gillespie and Habermehl 2011).

The next significant protests occurred on the 24th November 2010, dubbed Day X. The National Campaign Against the Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) coordinated a mass walkout/march as academics, teachers and students were urged to walk out of their classes and join protests across England (Gabbatt and Batty 2010; Solomon 2011; Walker *et al.* 2010). Those involved in organising the event were labelled as “domestic extremists” by the police in an attempt to stigmatise and marginalise them and their activities and were the focus of a national intelligence operation (Gabbatt and Batty 2010). The starting point of the march in London was Trafalgar Square and a “Carnival of Resistance” was organised for the end of the march (Solomon 2011). Thousands more marched in other cities around the country or occupied university property: *‘About 3,000 higher education students and school pupils gathered to protest in central Manchester, where there were four arrests, and a similar number gathered in Liverpool. A crowd of around 2,000 people protested in Sheffield, with about 1,000 doing so in Leeds and 3,000 in Brighton. There were scuffles in Cambridge as crowds attempted to storm the university's Senate House.’* (Walker *et al.* 2010).

Thousands of protesters gathered outside Whitehall in London to protest about the reforms to higher education and cuts to EMA (Walker *et al.* 2010). These were significant numbers and highlight the strength of sentiment against the Coalition’s proposed reforms. This time the police were ready and were taking no risks, deploying thousands of officers across the streets of London (Donnelly 2010). Apart from the occasional chant of “Fuck off David Cameron!”,

and a conveniently placed police riot van being vandalised, the protesters were mainly peaceful and good-natured (Gabbatt and Batty 2010). Indeed, when some people in the crowd started to attack the police riot van it was protected by a group of school girls who were referred to as the “angelic spirits of ‘68” (Dean 2016). It was only later when some of the protesters tried to break out of police kettles (Biggs 2011) that things began to turn nasty: *‘At first, the cops give curt answers to the kids demanding to know why they can't get through. Then they all seem to get some sort of signal, because suddenly the polite copper in front of me is screaming in my face, shoving me hard in the back of the head, raising his baton, and the protesters around me are yelling and running back.’* (Penny 2010)

Despite the earlier co-operation between protesters and the police, mounted officers began to charge the crowd without warning (Gabbatt and Lewis 2010; Walker *et al.* 2010). Some of the protesters in the crowd were as young as twelve and thirteen-years-old (Solomon 2011): *‘Let us out; Let us out!’ they chant. A 13-year old girl starts to hyperventilate, tears squeezing in raw trails over her frightened face, unable to tear her face away from the fight -- I put a hand on her back and hurry her away from the police line.’* (Penny 2010) Some of the protesters were hit with batons and over 200 protesters, including children, were kettled in freezing conditions for up to 10 hours without food, water or access to lavatories (Solomon 2011; Walker *et al.* 2010). One seventeen-year-old girl commented: *‘We waited and waited. Kettling does work when you have no choice about where you move; you start to feel very desolate and very depressed. People were crying. It was horrible; it was freezing, and there were no toilets ... we all just had to wee in a specific corner.’* (Burge 2011, p. 77) Another protester commented:

This is the most important part of a kettle when it's gone on for too long, and you're cold and frightened and just want to go home. Trap people in the open with no water or toilets

or space to sit down and it takes a shockingly short time to reduce ordinary kids to a state of primitive physical need. This is savage enough when it's done on a warm summer day to people who thought to bring blankets, food and first aid. It's unspeakably cruel when it's done on the coldest night of the year, in sub-zero temperatures, to minors, some of whom don't even have a jumper on.

(Penny 2010)

Another protest took place on the 30th of November, Day X-2 and, despite the freezing weather, thousands turned up in London, with massive demonstrations also taking place in Brighton, Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Newcastle and Oxford (Taylor *et al.* 2010). While numbers were significantly less than on the previous two occasions. Again, the police took no chances, and pre-emptively blocked the routes to Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament. Fearing that they might be kettled, some of the protesters decided to make a run for it and, as they left Trafalgar Square, they were chased by the police (Taylor *et al.* 2010):

As soon as police lines formed, the crowd heading down Whitehall turned and ran in the opposite way. Then another police line, and we turned again. This went on all day, in snow and freezing cold. We broke up into smaller groups and marched all over London: down Victoria Station, to Hyde Park Corner, up and along Oxford Street. Another made it to St. Paul's and the Barbican; another over to Waterloo and on to Piccadilly Circus.

(Solomon 2011, p. 15)

The remaining protesters were kettled, and the police allowed small groups to leave one at a time, although around 150 of them were arrested for refusing to leave (Solomon 2011). At

similar protests in Bristol, the police were pelted with mustard and, in Sheffield, with snowballs.

On the 9th of December, Day X-3, at noon, protesters began to congregate in Bloomsbury Square. The protest was organised by NCAFC and the London Student Assembly working with students occupying university property (Barnett 2011). The University of London Union (ULU) handed out green hardhats with the words “Tax the banks, not the students” on them (Walker and Paige 2010). Inside the House of Commons, the then Secretary of State for Business, Skills and Innovation, Vince Cable outlined the Coalition Government’s plans to increase university tuition fees before holding a parliamentary vote. There was a heavy police presence on the streets of London and riot police and vans lined the Houses of Parliament acting as a barrier to stop any protesters getting near them (Walker and Paige 2010).

At 14.00 around 40, 000 protesters started to march from the University of London's Senate House towards Parliament Square (Mason 2012). Some of the protesters broke down metal barriers to gain access to Parliament Square, and the police were quick to kettle them in (Solomon 2011). Mounted police began to charge the crowd to disperse them and around 30 protesters required medical treatment for head injuries inflicted by police batons (BBC 2010d). Unable to gain access to Parliament Square protesters gathered at other sites in London. At the Cenotaph protesters swung from the Union flag and at the Supreme Court and HM Revenue and Customs protesters smashed windows. On Regent Street, a vintage Rolls Royce carrying the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall was attacked (Mason 2012) accompanied by shouts of “*Off with their heads*” (Barnett 2011). These actions struck right at the heart of the British establishment and were imbued with imagery of radical insurrection. The fact that

protesters had been able to get to the Royal Family seemed to cast doubt on the government and the police's ability to be able to deal with the protesters despite their heavy-handed tactics.

Perhaps the most evocative image from the 9th of December 2010 was a protester with cerebral palsy, Jody McIntyre, being pulled out of his wheelchair and dragged across the ground by a policeman (Mason 2012; McIntyre 2010). The video footage was circulated online, shocking many people, although McIntyre himself struggled to see why the public were so surprised by the actions of the police, arguing that: *'Is it really more shocking to see what happened to me than to see a police officer kicking a fifteen-year-old school girl in the stomach as she lay on the floor, or a police officer batoning a student [Alfie Meadows] in the head so that he is rushed to hospital for emergency surgery, within an inch of his life, thanks to internal bleeding to the brain?'* (McIntyre 2010)

What this showed was that the police were willing to use violence against the protesters indiscriminately as a tactic for crushing the student protests. The tactics used by the police throughout the demonstrations outraged many with over 100 complaints submitted to the Independent Complaints Commission, especially over the use of kettles. A vast majority of the students who had participated in the demonstration came away feeling that the police were there to protect the government and property, not the public (Harvey *et al.* 2011). As Penny comments: *'I didn't understand quite how bad things had become in this country until I saw armoured cops being deployed against schoolchildren in the middle of Whitehall.'* (2010)

Power (2012) argues that protesters were viewed and portrayed as "dangerous subjects" by the police and media with many given disproportionate sentences for minor offences to deter others from becoming involved in the protests and to gather information about perceived ringleaders.

What this illustrates is that one of the main functions of the police is to protect the interests of the ruling-class and to ensure the fabrication of capitalist social order to perpetuate the conditions necessary for capitalist accumulation (Neocleous 2000). The protesters were seen as a threat to this social order and were dealt with as enemies of the state.

After the 9th of December 2010, the intensity and frequency of the student protests began to subside. However, there remained a current of resistance that refused to go away (see Occupy Sussex, Occupy Warwick, University of West England, London School of Economics Occupiers, Quebec and Amsterdam) and threatened to re-emerge at any moment as part of a: ‘... *struggle for the soul of the universities that will be played out over the years rather than months...*’ (Bailey and Freedman 2011). Whilst the student protests have and continue to play an important role in drawing attention to the Coalition’s reforms to higher education, the current crisis of neoliberalism and issues of class (Callinicos 2010; Jones 2011), they ultimately failed to stop the Coalition reforming higher education in England and making significant cuts to the public sector. As Callinicos (2010) argues: ‘...*an important question now is how the student movement can maintain its forward momentum – despite the passage of higher tuition fees through parliament – and invigorate much broader resistance to the coalition's austerity programme.*’ There was an attempt to continue to the forward momentum of the student protests and anti-austerity demonstrations in the experiments of self-organisation that occurred in the occupations during this time.

Indeed, one of the critical features of the student protests was and remains to be, the occupation of university property (Hatherley 2011). Students who occupied university property made a number of demands, which included that university vice-chancellors openly condemn the Coalition's reforms to higher education, that universities made no further staff redundancies, staff are paid a living wage, to stop outsourcing employment and that university decision

making processes become more transparent and democratic (Biggs 2011; Casserly 2011; Hopkins and Todd 2012). There were even occupations at Scottish universities in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Strathclyde and St Andrews who would not be affected by the Coalition's reforms to higher education but stood in solidarity with their English counterparts (Ibrahim 2013). While many university senior managers spoke out about the removal of block funding for teaching in the arts, humanities, business, law and social sciences (Morgan 2010), few condemned the rise in tuition fees which, given that many universities benefitted from the new funding model as well as vice-chancellors with regards to pay increased, perhaps it is not surprising.

While many of the students' demands might appear fanciful within the climate of austerity and economic stagnation, it must be remembered that the Coalition and subsequent governments' responses to the continuing economic crisis has been an ideological and political choice when other options were available that would not have entailed cuts in public spending as has happened since 2010 (this is addressed in more detail in Chapter 3). Furthermore, the students' demands about public spending and democratising higher education is similar to the wider anti-austerity movement and anti-capitalist protests that are being played out across the world and appear to be part of a global struggle against capitalism.

Ultimately, many of the occupations were ended by the issuing of eviction notices and raids by police and university security teams (BBC 2010a; BBC 2010b; Dawson 2011; Finan 2013; Jamieson and Malick 2013). Again, illustrating the role of police in capitalist society as an agency to protect ruling-class interests and private property (Neocleous 2000). By the end of 2010, there had been approximately 46 occupations of university property across England (Ishamil 2012), which brought the education debate to individual universities and, through media coverage, to broader society. These occupations have been a constant polemic against the neoliberalisation of higher education by experimenting with the campus as a site for protest

and demonstration (Casserly 2011) and by providing students with the: *'...space and opportunity to explore alternative ideas about education and society, build solidarity networks, and practice egalitarian decision-making and plan future actions.'* (Rheingans and Hollands 2013, p. 246).

What has happened inside these spaces has been extremely important to the student movement and to anti-capitalist struggles. The occupation of university property has been a critical strategy employed to allow students to advance their movement and promote an alternative vision of what higher education and society more generally might look like (Hopkins and Todd 2012) as well as allowing students to plan and coordinate future demonstrations and action (Biggs 2011). The occupation of university property has helped create practical solidarity among occupiers, allowing them to practice prefigurative politics (Burton 2013) and create autonomous spaces for experimentation with alternative forms collective practices. Moreover, contrary to the perception of occupations portrayed by the mainstream media and the reality of the nature of private property within capitalist social relations (Marx 1844) some occupiers have argued that: *'...occupation is not ...a hostile takeover. A school occupation is an action by those who are already its inhabitants – students, faculty, and staff – and those for whom the school exists. (Which is to say for a public institution, the public itself.) The actions termed 'occupations' of a public institution, then, are really re-occupations, a renovation and reopening to the public of a space long captured and stolen by the private interests of wealth and privilege.'* (Bousquet 2011, p. 7) This is an interesting understanding of private property and what is being suggested is one the key principles throughout this episode of struggle which is that of collective ownership and control. Furthermore, what has been evident in these occupations is an acknowledgment that resistance to the Coalition's reforms requires more than just protests: *'...it requires a commitment to 'build something,' to create a different model of*

what a university could be.' (Bonnett 2013) Thus, is about creating an alternative model of higher education and an alternative model of society that are *contra* to the logic of capitalism.

In response, many of the occupations have developed a strong pedagogical element creating "free education zones" with "parallel institutions" springing up in lecture theatres, offices and event rooms across the country (Wainwright 2011). These spaces are about creative thinking, alternative ideas and a rejection of the marketisation of higher education (Ishmail 2011), sparking a debate about what higher education is, who it is for, why it matters and what it should look like (Dawson 2011). This is a struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education and the idea of the university which has been embodied in these occupations that have experimented with alternative models of provision.

One example of this was the Really Open Occupation in Manchester in 2011, whose rationale was to: '*...set up a free school within the occupation to offer an alternative education through the medium of lectures on a range of subjects as well as seminars delivered by PhD students, university lecturers and other guest speakers. At the last occupation, lectures were delivered on a range of topics by speakers from the Guardian to the University of Manchester history department.*' (Really Open University 2011) A similar space was created at Exeter University called Exeter Free University and attempted to be: '*...beyond radical (to attack the cause) to imagine and prefigure something new. The Exeter Free University was open to all, and anybody could teach, facilitate a workshop, skill share, or attend lectures/workshops. A flip chart was available for people to add a session and timetables publicly displayed, in the university and online.*' (Burton 2013, p. 471)

Another, the University of Strategic Optimism, was set up by a group of students from Goldsmiths University, moving beyond the confines of the university to occupy public places

to offer free education: *'They are not just staying in their nests of slogan-daubed bed sheets and posting songs on YouTube. Like all good community-minded establishments, they have outreach departments and plot external actions. A group of Goldsmiths students has established the University of Strategic Optimism, a nomadic institution that pitches up in unexpected places, briefly converting them into spaces of learning. Their inaugural lecture took place in the London Bridge branch of Lloyds TSB, and they have since lectured at Tesco.'* (Wainwright 2011, p. 98)

As well as the strong pedagogical element and experiments with free higher education, what has also been important about these occupations is that they have experimented with forms of autonomous self-organisation. These experimentations appear to reject political parties and the state as sites for radical social change: *'The young people of Britain do not need leaders, and the new wave of activists has no interest in the ideological bureaucracy of the old Left. Their energy and creativity are disseminated via networks rather than organisations, and many young people have neither the time nor the inclination to wait for any political party to decide what direction they should take.'* (Penny 2010) Within this movement there appears to be no individual leadership (Moses 2011) and, instead, decisions are made by consensus with students within the occupations often: *'...divided into working groups according to their talents – IT, media, process (analysis of how the occupation itself is working.'* (Biggs 2011, p. 100). At the Royal Holloway Occupation: *'The occupation was run completely democratically and autonomously, with regular group meetings to discuss the division of labour, responses to the media and management requests and the news from the rest of the student movement.'* (Dan cited in Goldman 2011, p. 114)

The Emergence of Autonomous Learning Spaces

Out of these the student protests and university occupations has emerged a wave of autonomous learning spaces that have experimented with no-fee, alternative forms of higher education as part of a growing field of alternative educational projects, such as Tent City University, The Bank of Ideas and London Free University (Howard cited in Playford et al. 2011; Saunders and Ghanimi 2013; Swain 2013). These autonomous learning spaces were created in opposition to the Coalition's reforms and served not only as an act of protest but also as spaces to create alternatives to the neoliberalisation of higher education (*ibid*). Although these projects are organic and diverse, responding to local needs and interests, those involved in them share the desire to rethink higher education and make it accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial means (Haworth and Elmore 2017).

In 2010, these spaces held workshops, discussions and lectures and were attended by some leading writers, activists, journalists and academics (Stainstreet 2012). Tent City University started as a series of informal "teach-outs" but quickly developed into a programme of lectures, debates and workshops (Stainstreet 2012). While Tent City University was a way of sharing skills and knowledge it was also a reaction to the perception that formal education is becoming more and more commodified and inaccessible (Stainstreet 2012): *'What we are creating in the occupation and at Tent City University in particular is a space in which we people can share their grievances about the system within which we live, learn how to understand what creates it and develop in the process an answer for what to do about it.'* (Howard cited in Playford et al. 2011)

As well as being no-fee, these autonomous learning spaces attempt to create an environment that is supportive, democratic, critical and political in the hope of creating a space for

communities to better understand the problems they face in their everyday lives and help re-imagine the world around them (Saunders and Ghanimi 2013; Haworth and Elmore 2017): *‘We can in our actions begin to fight for the real benefits of free education: not just free access but free from the limitations imposed by the academic system. Free education can expose and analyse knowledge and ideas that find no place in tutorials, lectures, and classes. Vitally, it can foster innovation in methods and ideas of collaborative education – open, flexible, critical and creative.’* (Gallagher 2011, p. 44)

The emergence of these autonomous learning spaces is not specific to the UK¹⁴ but has happened across the world in response to similar restructuring programmes (Haworth and Elmore 2017; Thompsett 2017). These projects are mostly set up and run by volunteers (students, academics and members of the local community) and offer one-off classes, workshops and short courses for no-fee, which have included critical knitting, social sciences, art, photography, bicycle repair and economic literacy (Haworth and Elmore 2017). The importance of these autonomous learning spaces lies in the philosophies/models of radical self-organisation and radical/critical pedagogies that they have adopted and developed, which help to expand our imagination with regards to actual and potential alternatives and have the potential not only to transform the way higher education is currently organised, but also inform more wider social change (Haworth and Elmore 2017) which are: *‘...underpinned by a reinvention and reinvigoration of political process, decision making and communication through experimentation with particular organizational principles such as direct democracy, decentralization and consensus.’* (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, p.739) Moreover, these autonomous learning spaces have been informed by both anarchist (Rouhani 2017; Shantz

¹⁴ As part of my doctoral research I created an ‘Alternative Education Counter-Cartography’ that highlights 123 of these projects worldwide:
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1NqScqpNo2fAa2AEA33cwaK7fuXw&usp=sharing>

2017) and Marxist traditions (Pusey 2017; Neary and Saunders 2016), as well as other critical theoretical perspectives, for example, feminism and multi-culturalism.

An important aspect of these autonomous learning spaces is the way they have experimented with more radical and critical models of pedagogy, which are grounded in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people, overtly political and critical of the status quo, and committed to progressive social and political change (Crowther *et al.* 2005) or critical pedagogy (Cowden *et al.* 2013) that are geared towards freedom, autonomy, critical reflection and liberation and have helped develop practices within them that are dialogical, horizontal and mutual (Haworth 2017). One of the most prominent approaches is informed by the work of Paulo Freire, especially his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire wrote the book while working as an educator in Chile, within which he offers a critique of didactic educational methods which he argues are predicated on teachers who are posited as experts filling passive students with knowledge: ‘...*knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry*’ (1970, p. 53)

Freire referred to this model of education as the “banking model of education”, which he describes as: ‘*Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorise, and repeat. This approach is called the Banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.*’ (Freire 1970, p. 58). Freire argues that the theory and practice of this model of education are based on: ‘*Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating “knowledge,” the distance between the teacher and the taught, the*

criteria for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking.'
(1970, p. 57)

However, Freire argues that this does not mean students are not encouraged to change the way that they think within the banking model, but instead to learn to adapt their thinking to social structures of oppression rather than attempt to change those structures: *'...the interest of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"; for the more, the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated.'* (1970, p.55) Alternatively, Freire argues, education should be about the transformation of society: *'The solution is not to integrate "them" into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves."*
(1970, p. 55)

Freire was critical of the banking model of education, which he saw as an instrument of oppression: *'Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of the students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression.'* (Freire 1970, p. 59) Instead, he favoured a "dialogical model" of education that was based on discussion and critical inquiry with both students and teachers learning from each other: *'It is not our role to speak to people about our own worldview, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with people about their view and ours.'* (1970, p. 77) This entails changing the relationship between teachers and students: *'Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of contradiction, so both are simultaneously teachers and students.'* (Freire 1970, p. 53)

This model of education begins by exploring issues, or "generative themes" that students are interested in: *'The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the*

opportunity both to discover generative themes and to stimulate people's awareness on regard to those themes.' (Freire 1970, pp. 77-78) Teachers can support this process by suggesting readings that would help this critical inquiry. Freire referred to this alternative model of education as problem-posing or problem-based learning within which students would actively work on solving problems with teachers in a way that acknowledges that students have prior knowledge, skills, and experiences that could be used to enhance education: *'They must abandon the educational goals of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world. Problem-posing education responding to the essence of consciousness – intentionally – rejects communiques and embodies communication.'* (Freire 1970, p. 60)

At the core was Freire's work was not just encouraging people to learn, but to change the world through the development of a critical pedagogy a process here referred to as “conscientization” or the development of “critical consciousness” through reflection and action – the latter being important because this how social reality is changed (Freire 1970). This approach became part of a more comprehensive educational programme in Brazil when Freire became Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo in 1989. It was here that Freire established the Popular Public School, which embodied that lessons learned by Freire through his involvement in popular education projects (O'Cadiz 1998).

Another influential critical pedagogist is bell hooks. Similar to Freire, hooks (1994) argues that the dominant model of education dulls students' enthusiasm and teaches them to obey authority. hooks (*ibid*) argues that in general, students are bored, disinterested and apathetic towards education. What hooks advocates is a form of critical pedagogy that is grounded in feminism and can engage students by transgressing categories of race, gender, class in a way that can be described as intersectional. This would help create a form of critical education that challenges

oppression and helps build communities that transgress socio-demographics hooks argues (*ibid*). Moreover, hooks argues that education should not be confined to classroom and that learning can happen anywhere and needs to be extended to the home, work, friends and politics and based in real-world activities. Furthermore, hooks argues that teaching is a performative act, and all should be involved in this process, which would fundamentally change the relationship between teachers and students. She also argues that teaching spaces should be safe spaces which promote and nurture the well-being of teachers and students arguing that teaching requires love, and this allows the whole person to be fully committed to the process. hooks argues that creating these types of spaces allows us to think critically about education, to change it, and be creative about the form it takes.

Another notable critical pedagogist is Peter McLaren who argues that education is political and functions as a “war of position” that should be part of an attempt to unify the working-class (2000). McLaren argues that neoliberalism has resulted in huge inequalities in wealth, poverty and an environmental crisis that this can be addressed through a form of critical pedagogy by making people aware of these issues and the cause of them. Critical pedagogy, then, is seen as part of a radical political project that needs to offer a critique of capitalist social relations (*ibid*). Furthermore, McLaren argues that lessons can be learned from Che Guevara and Paulo Freire as educators to transform schools into sites of social justice and revolutionary social praxis and calls for the development of a radical critical pedagogy that contributes to the creation of a socialist world. McLaren argues that should not just be the goal of educators but all people who want to live in a socially just world

As will be addressed later on in the thesis, critical pedagogy and its reinterpretations has had a major influence on autonomous learning spaces and are important part of re-imagining the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society because they allow people to think critically about

the world around them an open up the possibility of addressing issues that they face in everyday life.

Episodes of Struggle Over the Idea of the University

At the beginning of this chapter the student activism outlined above was considered to be a series of episodes struggles over the idea of the university. However, while there are many similarities between the episodes discussed above, there were many discontinuities with regards to the contexts they emerged in, what the students were protesting about and the form those protests took. For example, student protests in Britain in 1998 and 2004 tended to be more instrumental and focused on the introduction and raise of tuition fees. Furthermore, the 2010 student protests were initially instrumental and directed at the increase of tuition fees. Ibrahim (2013) uses E.P. Thompson's *The Moral Economy of the Crowd* (1971) to argue what initially triggered these protests was the increase in tuition fees which were considered unfair or illegitimate by students and, thus, resulted in collective action against the increase. Ibrahim (*ibid*) argues that folk memories of no, or low tuition fees, fed into a sense that this is a custom or entitlement and that a tripling of the fees was seen as an entitlement violation of the right or custom of free higher education leading to a moral outrage and protests. However, while this moral outrage against the increase of tuition fees appears to have been one of the main reasons for the student protests in 2010, the focus of student activism increased beyond fees to include and nature and purpose of higher education more generally as well the imposition of austerity as can be seen with mergers between students and UK UNCUT and other anti-austerity protests.

In contrast, the students in 1968 were struggling against an authoritarian model of higher education (Nairn and Singh-Sandhu 1969) and the power university administrators had over

their personal lives and sought to change this. For the students in 1968 educational change for them: *'...also meant the total abolition of all special university disciplinary powers over the private lives and conduct of students.'* (Stedman Jones 1969, p. 46). For example, Tinkham (1969, p. 83) argues that teacher training colleges for women during the 1960s believed themselves responsible for: *'...not only the students' education and professional training, but also for their cultural and social life, their physical and moral welfare.'* Tinkman (1969, p. 84) also provides a quotation from a prospectus for a teacher training college for the 1962-63 academic year that provides further insight into the authoritarian nature of education: *'Candidates must satisfy the Principal as to their character, probable suitability for the teaching profession, health and physical capacity for teaching.'* Halliday (1969, p. 318) also argues that French students waged a constant struggle against the discipline in their halls of residence: *'The disciplinary rules were repressive and archaic: political meetings and propaganda were forbidden, and men were not allowed into women's lodgings. Students were not allowed to decorate their rooms or affix things to the walls: in many of the halls of residents could only be receive their guests in common rooms.'* What was being fought for here was sexual liberation, cultural revolution and the right to be an adult.

Moreover, the context of the 1968 Student Movement and the student protests that emerged in 2010 are entirely different. The 1968 Student Movement, in Britain, was mainly confined to universities and art schools meaning that it could be marginalised and isolated more easily, whereas the 2010 student protests have been able to make a more: *'...credible claim to voice the anger and concerns of a wider public'* (Barnett 2011, p 283) by merging with anti-austerity protests. This has been a consequence of the debt and financial insecurity that many people currently face after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the imposition of austerity measures since 2010 meaning that the: *'...legitimacy of the system has been shaken, in a way that did*

not happen under Harold Wilson.' (Barnett 2011, p. 283). Moreover, the 2010 student protests also encompassed a wider demographic of student, e.g., working-class, especially with cuts to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) (Barnett 2011; Pearce 2011) than did the 1968 Student Movement in Britain, although this connection with wider struggles is something that happened in France.

Moreover, while there was evidence of literature and placards referring to 1968 by students involved in the 2010 protests, Dean (2016) argues that these references were used by some as a way of affirming the radicalism of the latter. However, Dean (*ibid*) goes on to argue that one of the problems of trying to find continuities between 1968 and 2010 is that there were different ideas about the nature of student activism during 1968. Within the 2010 student movement there was a split in the understanding of 1968 with some among the more recent student activists taking a more negative view, especially with regards to British student activism in 1968, which was described as apathetic and having a lacking a revolutionary culture (*ibid*).

Furthermore, Dean (*ibid*) argues that some wanted to make a break from 1968 and see 2010 as something new or unique underpinned by technology, the networked individual and popular culture. Dean (*ibid*) also argues that those who made the links between 1968 and 2010 tended to be those who had been involved in the previous and were guilty of romanticising their experiences and using this as a yard-stick to measure the success of 2010. The main point that Dean (*ibid*) makes is that while there is an affective or spiritual connection between 1968 and 2010, there is an ambiguity about the impact of the previous on the latter. This is because there is was no collective memory of 1968 among many involved in the 2010 student protests. Instead, there were conflicting ideas about the nature of 1968 with some positive and some negative perceptions.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, it is clear that these episodes of student activism are linked in their struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education and how wider society is organised more generally – students as a “class with radical chains” fighting back against the precarious and indebted future being created for them (Power 2012). Despite the fact that there appeared to be an eagerness from some of those involved in the 2010 student protests to avoid comparisons with 1968, there has undoubtedly been an attempt to learn from their predecessors (Hancox 2011), especially in terms of the repertoires of action or forms of protests adopted by the previous movements, which include direct action, occupation of property, autonomous politics, networking and alternative education. However, the point made by Lefebvre about the 1968 Student Movement remain relevant today and what has should have been learned is the need to create an organisational form that embodies the ethos of these episodes of struggle based on the principles of collective ownership and control.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in response to the reforms made to higher education there have been several episodes of struggle by students. The chapter began by outlining perhaps the most sustained episode of struggle the 1968 Student Movement and how this began in response to the authoritarian, elitist and bureaucratic nature of higher education and ended up as a near working-class revolution in France. This movement spread to many countries around the world including Britain. While the 1968 Student Movement in Britain did not have the same impact as in France, there were several examples of students occupying their colleges and universities and experimenting with alternative forms of education provision. The chapter then examined subsequent episodes of student activism in Britain, which tended to be fleeting and have less momentum compared to the of the 1968 Student Movement. That was until 2010 when the

Coalition Government announced a series of reforms that led to the most significant episode of student activism since 1968. These protests took the form of street demonstrations, organised strikes, occupation of university property and the emergence of autonomous learning spaces that experimented with alternative, no-fee forms of higher education. The chapter argued that while there were differences between the episodes of struggle that emerged during the post-war period, what links them is how they have experimented with the nature and purpose of higher education and tried to re-imagine the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society. Within these experiments reside the seed of potential to prefigure an alternative organisational form that embodies the ethos of these struggles and the potential for wider social reform.

Chapter 3: Understanding the Practical and Theoretical

Significance of Autonomous Learning Spaces

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis to help understand their practical and theoretical significance. The theoretical framework draws upon the concept of autonomous spaces, which is where autonomous learning spaces derive their names from. Autonomous spaces that are described as places of resistance and creation wherein people struggle against oppression and exploitation while concomitantly experimenting with autonomous forms of self-organisation (Chatterton, Pickerill and Hodgkinson (2006; 2007; 2008; 2010)). The concept of autonomous spaces was chosen because the dual process of resistance and creation described within them are similar to those found within autonomous learning spaces, which were created in opposition to reforms to higher education, but which experiment with alternative forms of higher education provision.

The chapter then critically examines this process of resistance and creation using the concept of prefiguration. Prefiguration is described as the experimentation with practices now that people wish to see in future organisations and societies (Juris 2008; Sitrin 2007). The process of prefiguration is often referred to when discussing practices found within autonomous spaces and is characterised by the use of democratic and non-hierarchical principles to transition towards post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009). The plural is used here because what post-capitalism will look like is the product of an ongoing process of prefigurative practices rather than a finished blueprint. Moreover, those post-capitalist futures may be different and highlight that multiple ways of being are possible. Prefiguration is an important concept for thinking

about autonomous learning spaces because it highlights their significance not only with regards to experimenting with alternative forms of higher education provision but also acknowledging that they form part of a broader class struggle over the imposition of capitalist social relations and developing alternative ways of being.

Unpacking the concept of prefiguration further, the chapter argues that these prefigurative practices have been influenced by both anarchist and Marxist thought (Bohm et al. 2010; Haworth and Elmore 2017) – two traditions which have a history of hostility and are considered theoretically incompatible (Grubacic and O’Hearn 2016). However, this chapter argues that despite these perceived theoretical incompatibilities, more recent tendencies, such as ‘small-a anarchism’ (Graeber 2002), Autonomous Marxism (Cleaver 1979) and Open Marxism (Bonefeld et al. 1992b) have much in common. For example, these tendencies are against all forms of oppression, exploitation and domination. Moreover, they focus on the development of autonomous practices, self-organisation, collective ownership and the development of more participatory forms of democracy. These autonomous practices reject the use of political parties and state power as sites of revolutionary social change and, instead, attempt to question and challenge capitalist social relations through the creation and connection of autonomous spaces that are based on the principles of collective ownership and control, and participatory forms of democracy. This chapter argues that these commonalities highlight the potential for prefigurative practices found within these autonomous spaces to merge anarchist and Marxist traditions as well as a diverse range of practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural differences that are found within them (Cleaver 2017).

The process of merging these different left-wing perspectives is referred to as left-wing convergence and is part of an attempt to analyse autonomous spaces and document the ways in which people allied to different theoretical perspectives have worked together to challenge forms of oppression and exploitation they have faced in their everyday lives (Prichard and

Worth 2016). The importance of this documentation is to highlight, and provide guidance, of how people have been able to transcend practical, ideological, theoretical and cultural trappings that have historically divided and fragmented the political left by working collectively on real or concrete projects (Grubacic and O’Hearn 2016; Prichard and Worth 2016). The chapter further develops the concept of left-wing convergence by grounding it in Open Marxism using the work of Holloway (2002 and 2010) and Dinerstein (2014). Open Marxism not only offers a compelling critique of capitalist social relations so that we can understand the problems that we currently face, but also prefigurative practices that like small-a anarchism do not see political parties or the state as sites of revolutionary change. This process is referred to as ‘crack capitalism’ and entails creating ruptures within capitalist social relations through the creation of autonomous spaces and practices in a way that question and challenge the capitalist dialectic (Cleverly 2017). Thus, it is these autonomous spaces that make left-wing convergence possible.

However, the documentation of these prefigurative practices is not enough, as acknowledged by the doyens of left-wing convergence, and what is required is a more compelling critical theory that provides a critique of capitalist social relations and how these different perspectives can work together to create revolutionary social change (Prichard and Worth 2016). To address this point, the chapter attempts to develop left-wing convergence by grounding it within the work of Holloway (2002) and Dinerstein (2014) who have also examined how autonomous spaces can be grounded in a robust critique of capitalist relations while prefiguring post-capitalist alternatives that are not predicated on the creation of a political party or state power.

The importance of this theoretical framework, then, is that it allows the thesis to analyse the practical and theoretical significance of autonomous learning spaces and their potential to re-

imagine the idea of the university along more egalitarian and participatory democratic and co-operative lines (Neary and Winn 2017; Saunders 2017). Moreover, the chapter illustrates that these types of spaces and the autonomous practices that are found within them, also provide hope, albeit fragile, that post-capitalist futures are possible by having the potential to question, challenge and rupture the contradictory and exploitative nature of capitalist social relations by creating cracks (Holloway 2010) within these relations that function as a negative dialectic in, against and beyond capitalist institutions (Dinerstein 2014).

Defining Autonomous Spaces

The concept of autonomous spaces draws on a long history of social struggles in Europe since the emergence of capitalism around the beginning of the fifteenth century in England (Meiksins-Wood and Wood 1997). Examples of these autonomous spaces includes the English Diggers (1649), European squatters (1970s), the Italian social centres movement (1970s), travellers and ravers (1980s) and autonomous and social centres in the UK (1980s). Chatterton and Hodgkinson (2007) argue that when faced with the imposition of authoritarian rule, enclosure, dispossession or enslavement, people have often attempted to create their own self-managed, autonomous spaces in opposition to the oppressive and exploitative social relations within which they exist. These autonomous spaces are described as being opposed to all forms of domination and oppression, and function simultaneously as places of resistance and creation wherein people challenge or resist oppression whilst concomitantly experimenting with alternative forms of self-organisation and, as such, are: ‘...*places of creativity and experimentation where the colonising, dehumanising and exploitative logic of capitalism is actively resisted by people trying to live and relate to each other as equals.*’ (Chatterton and Hodgkinson 2007, p. 201).

However, it is important to note that one cannot simply uproot and create an alternative society. This is because capitalist social relations is a totalising set of relationships that one must enter

into in some form to survive (Marx 1992). There is no outside. Marx (1992) explain this through the concepts of formal and real subsumption as stages of capitalist development. Formal subsumption was the process wherein capitalist exploited traditional forms of working practices to create profits. Real subsumption is the process where all forms of social relations and working practices become imbued with the logical of capitalism. Thus, this logic subsumes all social relations and working practices meaning that survival requires entering into these relationships. Thus, whether it is possible to be completely autonomous from capitalist social relations in the way articulated by Chatterton and Hodgkinson (2007) is unlikely and perhaps a better way of thinking about autonomous spaces is that they function in, against and beyond capitalism.

This was the view of the London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1979) who were a group of socialists who worked in, or who relied upon, the public sector or the state for their survival. What they acknowledged was the contradictory nature of their positionality in that while they were activists fighting against capitalism, they also held it together by delivering or relying on services provided by the state that re-impose the capitalist social relations they were opposed to (*ibid*). The group likened this to unpicking the seams of capitalism at night through their political activism and sowing them back together during the day through working for or using the state and led them to realise there could be no outside of capitalist social relations or autonomy from it. Thus, they articulated their positionality as existing within the totality of capitalist social relations (in), in opposition to them (against) and trying to create alternatives to capitalism (against). This is a better way of understanding the positionality of people within autonomous spaces and the functionality of the spaces themselves rather than as some kind of alternative space outside the totality of capitalist social relations.

The concept of autonomous spaces was further developed by Pickerill and Chatterton (2008 and 2010) which they describe as spaces: ‘...*where there is a questioning of the laws and social*

norms of society and a creative desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social and economic organisation through a combination of resistance and creation.’ Again, Pickerill and Chatterton (*ibid*) emphasise the importance of these spaces as places of both resistance and creation and help to develop the concept of autonomous spaces further by grounding it in concrete, practical examples and examining the day-to-day practices that occur within them. For example, in their research they focused on autonomous social centres, Low Impact Developments and tenants’ networks resisting gentrification and discussed how people resist neoliberal reforms and experiment with alternative forms of provision (*ibid*).

Autonomous spaces are characterised as being anti-capitalist, anti-statist, anti-hierarchical (Bohm *et al.* 2010) and are considered as part of a broader anti-capitalist political movement (Chatterton 2012). The autonomous practices found within them are based on Do-It-Yourself (DIY) or ‘punk’ principles wherein people organise and run the spaces themselves and serve as hubs for various activities, sub-cultures, counter-politics, anti-capitalist movements and local-campaign issues (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015). In practice, Chatterton (2012) argues that these autonomous spaces function as *‘urban commons’ (like the village commons) which is self-managed and open to all who respect it... independent, not for profit, politically plural spaces where groups outside of the status quo can meet, discuss and respond and plan away from direct policing and surveillance.*’ Thus, the importance of these autonomous spaces are that they create places wherein people develop alternative ways of being that are *contra* to the forms of oppression they experience in everyday life. It is this experimentation with anti-capitalist ways of being that points towards post-capitalist futures.

Turning our focus on the practices of autonomous spaces, they are usually situated within unused or condemned public buildings, which are turned into self-organised cultural spaces for the provision of essential services and protest (Chatterton and Hodgkinson 2007). However,

Chatterton (2012) notes that squatting in these spaces has become increasingly difficult in the UK and, thus, it appears that places for the creation of autonomous spaces are being closed down. This is especially true since the implementation of Section 144 of the *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012*, which has made squatting in residential property a criminal offence. The implementation of this legislation along with previous regulation contained in Section 6 of the *Criminal Law Act 1977* means these types of spaces are now more frequently bought or rented by the groups, but given the high cost of both can make it difficult for the types of places to exist. Undoubtedly, making squatting unlawful in this way is a strategy used by successive governments to stigmatise these types of spaces and make it more difficult for them to exist. However, Chatterton (*ibid*) argues that there is an upside to this and the process of securing and managing a physical location is important because it serves as an organising tool for political education within communities and movements. This is because it gives people the experience of organising and running these types of spaces and working together in a way that is grounded in democratic and non-hierarchical principles. Experiences that are considered important for successfully transitioning to post-capitalist futures. However, there is a danger that renting or owning property could make groups less radical because involvement in radical political activity could result in criminal or civil actions being brought against the group. This could result in restrictions being placed upon the property or loss of it if it is rented and thus functions a way of co-opting radical spaces within capitalist social relations. This is why developing an organisational form that has the potential to function in, against and beyond capitalist social relations is so important.

Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) found that while the autonomous practices were often experimental, messy and contingent, their importance was that they created a place where people could experiment and develop alternative forms of self-organisation through a process of trial and error (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010): ‘...with a general willingness to accept

mistakes and try new avenues when things do not work out.’ (Chatterton 2012) Chatterton and Pickerill (*ibid*) go on to argue it is the everyday rhythms that are practised within these spaces, which are often ordinary and mundane, and the social relationships that emerge out of them, that are important as they give meaning to what a post-capitalist future might look like by engaging with “new practices of the self” (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). What is important about this is the understanding that revolutionary social change is likely to be a long process that requires experimentation with new ways of being through working together on concrete projects and interacting on a regular basis. There is no quick fix here and the development of non-capitalist ways of being are not only likely to take time to develop but will be difficult to maintain within capitalist social relations.

These autonomous practices include: ‘...*a rejection of fixed leadership and committees, in favour of more flexible, experimental and participatory strategic priorities to achieving radical social change.*’ (Chatterton 2012) However, this does not mean a rejection of all forms of leadership but that these practices are part of an attempt to challenge power and develop more direct democratic processes which are transparent and accountable. Moreover, it is an attempt to experiment with these practices by working through problems collectively and creating new forms of social relations by working together on concrete projects. Thus, Chatterton (2012) argues that these autonomous spaces function as a programme for the expansion of self-management, a commitment to direct democracy, consensus decision-making, direct participation and a rejection of hierarchical organisations.

A problem with this approach is trying to develop a collective understanding of what self-organisation means and how this will be implemented in practice. The reality of these autonomous learning spaces is that people come to them with preconceived ideas about what self-management entails which results in a dissensus within groups that can be difficult to

reconcile and can lead to disagreement, the group breaking up and projects disbanded. While this is a concern for groups involved in autonomous spaces, Chatterton (*ibid*) is much more optimistic and describes this process as a form of “impure politics” that: ‘...*opens up the debate so that conflicts and differences can be acknowledged and resolved.*’ Thus, while Chatterton acknowledges that this is not an easy process and needs constant work as different views and backgrounds clash together, he argues that this is important because it allows different views to be heard and make attempts to resolve them. This is democracy in practice. Moreover, Chatterton (*ibid*) argues that this process leads to the development of the social bonds of friendship and trust: ‘*Creating these bonds can transform people so they can understand themselves, their situations, their relationship to others and those with more power, and begin the task of political awakening.*’ (Chatterton 2012). What Chatterton is highlighting here is the potential for people to overcome these differences by working together within these autonomous spaces and uniting against the forms of oppression, power and exploitation faced by the majority of people within capitalist social relations. Moreover, the bonds of friendship and trust developed within autonomous learning spaces are more than that and also encompass a political element that is often acknowledged in militant language, such as comrade for example. However, the rediscovery of the concept of friendship is part of an attempt to be more inclusive yet still contain a political element. The term comrade is saturated with imagery of the Soviet Union and what that entailed for people who experienced oppression within it. Thus, friendship is an attempt to prefigure a new kind of social relationship that is based on trust and reciprocity but also critical political activism.

However, that is not to be naïve about how these autonomous spaces work in practice and it may be much more difficult to overcome these differences in practice. For example, Chatterton (2012) argues that a common problem is that autonomous spaces often suffer from a lack of attention to: ‘...*accessibility, emotional needs and inclusivity, gender divisions and domination*

of men especially within group process, and age divisions especially those between different political cultures and movements.' This is important and highlights the potential problems that can emerge when people from different backgrounds work together within autonomous spaces. Again, there is no quick fix here and groups not only need to be aware of these differences but continually challenge them. While this is not an easy process there is much to be learned from these practices that can be shared with others. Indeed, Chatterton (2012) argues that documenting, reflecting and learning from the experiments with autonomous practices is something that needs to be done more thoroughly. This should be done using a collective methodology: *'How do we decide what we do next? How can we use wider consultations and co-inquiry to develop a greater collective understanding of what we have achieved, and would like to achieve, and to engage with others about key issues?'*¹⁵ Thus, the importance of this would be that the democratic and non-hierarchical principles of autonomous spaces would be pulled through to the research methodology used to evaluate experiments with autonomous practices. Moreover, the documentation of these evaluations through collaborative methodologies is something that can support and encourage others to create and develop autonomous spaces.

Another problem with autonomous spaces outlined by Chatterton (2012) is the ambiguity over whether these spaces should function as containers or catalysts for political activism or whether their existence is in itself a form of political confrontation. The key issues here is whether the autonomous space is a political project simply because it exists, or does it need to engage in political activism. Chatterton (*ibid*) argues that so much work goes into running and maintaining an autonomous space and there is often very little time or energy left to be involved in political activism. Consequently, there is a tendency for those involved in autonomous

¹⁵ This point was influential for the development of the participatory action research at the Social Science Centre, which was part of an attempt to document and critically reflect on our practices as well as connecting with others involved in similar projects – this is addressed in more detail in Chapter 4: Methodology.

spaces to become inward looking without necessarily connecting with the local community or supporting local struggles. Of course, this is further exacerbated when groups need to pay rent or a mortgage on property as outlined above. However, while Chatterton (*ibid*) argues that while forging relationships between those involved in autonomous spaces and the local community remains a problem, more recently there has been an attempt by those involved in autonomous spaces to avoid looking like “ghettoised anarchist squat spaces” by trying: ‘...to attract people to engage in debate, analysis and socialising, through public talks, film screenings, reading areas, café and bar spaces, gigs.’ (Chatterton 2012) Trying to better connect with the local community in this way may be down to the need to create some income to fund rented or owned spaces but does show the potential to gain broader appeal. This is an important point for any group trying to effect revolutionary social change because without broader appeal the project will be easily marginalised (Saunders 2017).

Chatterton (2012) also argues that there needs to be better links between different autonomous spaces to support what he considers as the development of a broader anti-capitalist politics. This is an important point because what is being argued is here is that radical social change occurs not through taking state power, but through connecting autonomous spaces. Chatterton (*ibid*) argues that this could be achieved by the groups themselves trying to create stronger links between them by developing a network of resistance both locally and nationally through the internet and independent media. Moreover, this network of resistance could develop through the provision of services and the people involved in them, such as alternative healthcare, housing projects, food banks, leisure activities, and community work projects: ‘...growing these kinds of projects into a more connected, coherent and politically effective movement.’ (Chatterton 2012)

Key to this network of resistance argues Chatterton (2012) is the need for people involved in these types of projects to come together and discuss potential ways of overcoming

neoliberalism and capitalism more generally: *'There needs to be more times and spaces for people to come together to discuss joint approaches to confronting neoliberalism. At some point, there needs to be serious connected conversations with all those on the Left about the merits, or not, of movement building to seize power on the one hand and focusing on grassroots power on the other.'* (Chatterton 2012) Thus, what Chatterton (*ibid*) is highlighting here is the potential for those involved in autonomous spaces to form a network of resistance that can question and challenge capitalist social relations and develop post-capitalist ways of being through experimentation with autonomous practices.

Prefiguration and Autonomous Practices

This process of experimenting with different forms of autonomous practices is also known as prefiguration. This is a form of revolutionary social action that encourages people to experiment with new and different forms of social relationships, self-organisation and decision making now, but which in some way reflect the future society being sought by the group (Graeber 2009; Kaldor *et al.* 2012; Maeckelbergh 2012; Sitrin 2007). This is done by working on concrete projects collectively that help develop ways of being that question and challenge capitalist social relations. Prefiguration is posited as being different to other forms of revolutionary social action because it does not offer a doctrine for how society should be structured in the future or provide a coherent vision or blueprint of what an alternative society might look like (Graeber 2013; Mason 2012). Prefiguration focuses on autonomous practices themselves, or on the means rather than the ends and is often explained by the phrase: “be the change you want to see” (Graeber 2010) or as the Committee for Non-Violent revolution describe it: *'...sowing the seeds of the future order through experimental organisational forms and intellectual discussions rather than this grim and ludicrous, though ever so dedicated, procession of picket signs, this trembling of the fist on the street-corner.'* (Committee for Non-

violent Revolution, cited in Poulletta and Hoban 2016) Thus, prefiguration is more than about protesting it is about creation.

Prefiguration is about collectively creating solutions that emerge organically and contextually in response to problems that people themselves directly experience rather than forcing or having forced upon them, practices from outside (Bohm *et al.* 2010). Prefiguration is the development of context specific strategies that are created by the people in response to the problems they face in their everyday lives. However, prefiguration does not mean that there is no overall strategy or that it is spontaneous, but strategy is created and revised democratically by those people affected by issues instead of a political party or a leader that may not understand the situational context and complexities. Furthermore, prefiguration means that people do not have to wait for a perfect alternative to be created before trying to effect social change. Instead, it is a dialectical process within which people do not withdraw from society to design some utopian scheme, but that the seeds for post-capitalist futures emerge out of experimentation with alternative ways of being (Sitrin 2007). Moreover, prefiguration helps foster a sense of solidarity, friendship and trust within groups and develops hope that they can challenge the status quo, create social change and improve their own lives (*ibid*).

Prefiguration marks a significant rupture for revolutionary social action, which in the past has tended to focus its energies on the state and either make demands of it or attempt to overthrow it and assume state power and, thus, is closely aligned to anarchist tendencies (Graeber 2009). The scepticism of the state as an agent of change is rooted in the perceived failures of Marxist-Leninism and Social Democracy (Boggs 1977). Marxist-Leninists have tended to recreate the state in a more centralised, bureaucratic and authoritarian form (see the Stalinism and the USSR for example (Cleaver 1979)) and Social Democracy has tended to discourage prefigurative movements by directing struggles through parliament, which essentially legitimises capitalist society rather than destroying it (Boggs 1977). Based on these perceived failures of the state

as a site for revolutionary social change, those involved in prefigurative practices tend to be concerned with: (i) a fear of reproducing hierarchical authority; (ii) criticism of political parties and trade unions because they tend to promote centralised and hierarchical structures that reproduce old power relations; (iii) commitment to democratisation through grassroots and local struggles that anticipate a future society (Boggs 1977).

While prefiguration has become popular through recent social movements, such as the Occupy Movement (Graeber 2009; Sitrin 2007), Boggs (1977) argues that this process is not a new thing and traces its roots back to factory committees and Soviets in Russia, which during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became legitimate decision-making bodies in factories and communities (*ibid*). Both the factory committees and Soviets were grassroots or bottom-up organisations that used more direct forms of democracy, often consensus decision-making processes (*ibid*). Open meetings were held regularly, sometimes daily, and people from factories and communities would meet to discuss and decide local issues (*ibid*). These innovative practices with more democratic forms of decision making and self-organisation were prefigurative in the sense that they were experimental and differed significantly from previous forms of organisations and decision-making in factories and local communities and that people hoped these processes would be a key feature of future social relations (*ibid*).

While the Bolsheviks eventually subsumed the factory councils and the Soviets both before and after the 1917 October Revolution (Boggs 1977), the prefigurative practices employed by them would emerge again across Europe in Germany as part of the factory councils, or *Arbiterrae* (1917-1919), during the *Bieno Rosso* (Red Years) in Italy (1918-1920), the Civil War in Spain (1936-1939) and in Hungary in 1956 (*ibid*). Moreover, from the 1960s onwards; prefigurative practices started to be expanded to all aspects of social life and against all forms of oppression (Boggs 1977). A principal exponent of prefiguration was the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s, which was a broad-based, grass-roots political movement that

encapsulated a diversity of political tendencies committed to democratic and egalitarian principles, including civil rights, environmentalism, feminism, gay rights as well as labour rights and gave birth to identity politics (Maeckelbergh 2011).

In Britain, the emergence of the New Left is documented by E.P. Thompson in his article *The New Left* (1959) and more in detail within the journal *The New Reasoner* citing a perceived political crisis (both with liberal democracy and actual existing socialism) as well as a crisis of capitalism as factors for its creation. The New Left marked a break away from actual existing socialism and centralised authoritarianism and was characterised by a scepticism towards political parties, the state, especially the Soviet model of communism (Maeckelbergh 2011; Nunes 2005; Tabb 2015). Although the New Left was comprised of a diverse range of movements encompassing an array of political motivations they were united by their desire for more direct forms of democracy as well as social and economic justice, which argued for greater involvement of the population involved in the political decision-making process, including the economy and the workplace (Maeckelbergh 2011).

Two Traditions: Anarchism and Marxism

These autonomous spaces and the prefigurative practices found within them have been influenced by both anarchist and Marxist traditions (Bohm *et al.* 2010). While other practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural differences have also influenced these autonomous spaces, anarchism and Marxism seem to be the dominant traditions for those involved in them (*ibid*). However, these two theoretical perspectives are often seen as being irreconcilable given their respective positions with regards to the role of the state, political parties, trade unions, the working class and vanguards as agents of radical social change (Grubacic and O’Hearn 2016; Prichard and Worth 2016).

This discordance can be traced back to The Hague Congress of the First International Workingmen's Association in 1872, which was part of a working-class movement that convened to discuss how best to realise a socialist society (May 2010; Grubacic and O'Hearn 2016; Prichard and Worth 2016). At the Hague Congress, Mikhail Bakunin, an anarchist, was famously expelled from the First International by Karl Marx after a dispute over the dictatorship of the proletariat (Lowy 2014). While Marx argued that revolutionary social change would require the proletariat to take state power to force through socialist principles (Lowy 2014) Bakunin argued that any attempt to appropriate state apparatus, even for a transitional period, had the potential to create a new form of oppressive dictatorship over the working-class rather than liberate it (Lowy 2014). Moreover, Bakunin disagreed with Marx that all exploitation should be seen through the lens of class and, instead, argued that other forms of exploitation needed to be addressed, such as gender, ethnicity and religion (Lowy 2014). Thus, early divisions between anarchists and Marxist appear to have focused on the state as a site for revolutionary action and on whether exploitation should be expanded beyond the limited confines of economic class – issues that are still contended today (Grubacic and O'Hearn 2016).

However, what is often overlooked is that despite these disagreements and conflicts, partisans of Marx and Bakunin were able to work together for several years, to adopt common resolutions and to fight side-by-side in pluralistic associations (Lowy 2014). One example of this is the development of the Provisional Rules of the Association that remain common ground for both anarchists and Marxists today: *'The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.'* (cited in Lowy 2014, p. 108) Another example of this close working relationship is that Bakunin translated the first Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, which was published in 1869. Moreover, despite Marx's disagreement with Bakunin it is possible to discern from Marx's work that his view of the taking over the state

was ambiguous. For example, in *Class Struggles in France* (1871) wherein Marx discusses the importance of the Paris Commune he appears to suggest that the working-class cannot take over the existing bourgeois state but must destroy it and start afresh with their own institutions. This suggests a different interpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat than suggested above and one that leaves open the possibility of agreement between anarchists and Marxists with regards to revolutionary social action.

Nevertheless, the disagreement between Bakunin and Marx has resulted in a long-term divide between anarchist and Marxist traditions, especially with regards to how to transition towards a communist society with anarchists tending to focus on the creation of experimental forms of self-organisation and Marxists tending to focus on affecting social change through the state or political parties (Lowy 2014). However, recent tendencies¹⁶ within both traditions, such as small a-anarchism or third wave anarchism (Graeber 2002; Lyn and Grubacic 2008), Autonomist Marxism (Cleaver 1979) and Open Marxism (Holloway 2002; 2010) share a number of similarities, especially with regards to autonomous practice, self-organisation, collective ownership and the development of more participatory forms of democracy highlighting a potential to work together both theoretically and practically.

Small-a Anarchism

Given successive failures to overcome capitalism by seizing control of the state throughout the twentieth century and the collapse of what has been presented under the banner of Marxism; anarchism has become popular once again (Grubacic and Graeber 2004; Mat 2010). Described as small-a anarchism (Graeber 2002) or third wave anarchism (May 2010), this new turn within

¹⁶ Lowy (2014) argues that there are other examples of anarchists and Marxists working together and cites the examples of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman supporting in Bolshevik leaders in the October Revolution (1917-1921); Anarchists of the Confederation Nacional del Trabajo and the Trotskyist Partido Obrero de Unification Marxista during the Spanish Revolution, and the March 22 Movement under the leadership of anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendt and Trotskyist Daniel Bensaid during the 1968 Student Movement.

anarchist thought tends to be less sectarian and more informed by identity politics, including indigenous, feminist, ecological and cultural-critical ideas and is based on the principles of self-organisation, voluntary association, direct action and mutual aid (Graeber 2010). This new generation of anarchists is interested in developing new forms of autonomous practices, especially more participatory forms of decision-making processes and have been heavily influenced by the Zapatista autonomous municipalities (Holloway 1998), feminism and the Quakers (Grubacic and Graeber 2004). However, the new form of anarchism remains anti-statist and, thus, entails a rejection of the state and political parties as sites of radical social change.

One of the key practices associated with this perspective is the development of horizontal organisational structures that challenge and question hierarchical structural forms and the power relationships associated with them (Sitrin 2007). Often referred to as 'horizontalism,' this form of organising came to prominence in Argentina after the country's economic collapse in 2001, which saw recuperation and communal ownership of factories and public services (*ibid*). Here, decisions were made through the use of neighbourhood assemblies and worker co-operatives co-ordinated through larger inter-neighbourhood assemblies, such as the National Movement of Recovered Factories and the National Federation of Worker Co-operatives in Recovered Factories in Argentina (Chatterton and Hodkinson 2010; Sitrin 2014). This spirit of horizontalism spread throughout Argentina during this period and emerged in workplaces and movements of the unemployed where it was seen as a tool to create more participatory and freer spaces for all (Sitrin 2014).

Horizontalism is described as a "process in and of itself" (Sitrin 2014a.), that encourages people to become agents of change and collectively take responsibility of their communities and co-operatively decide how wider society can be organised using forms of direct democracy. This process is facilitated by the development of horizontal relationships and decision-making

processes that rejects the nation-state, its apparatus and political parties as sites of radical social change and develops an “autonomous politics” (Sitrin 2007): ‘...*autonomy often means that people have the capacity to make decisions about their own lives without having to subordinate these decisions to forces external to them, such as the state. As with horizontalism, autonomy moves away from the politics of "isms" and the building of political parties that aim to take state power.* (Sitrin 2014a, p. 44) However, as discussed previously, whether it is possible to be autonomous in this way within capitalist social relations is doubtful given its totalizing nature.

Nevertheless, these horizontal relationships significantly change the nature of democracy in many different ways by emphasising becoming pro-active agents of change rather than waiting for representatives or domestic/external events to motivate people into action (Sitrin 2007). They also encourage people to create the change they want to see in the future now by experimenting with their day-to-day relations breaking down hierarchies that seek to contain them and actively limiting power inequalities as they rise (Maekelbergh 2011). Moreover, they also allow communities to be able to pursue multiple and divergent courses of action and solutions to problems rather than trying to minimise difference and gain agreement and uniformity. These divergent courses of action can be facilitated because working groups or neighbourhoods can split into multiple hubs without compromising the overall unity as a whole. The power of this approach is that acknowledges that there are multiple solutions to problems and that the communities and neighbourhoods that are experiencing oppression are in the best place to decide appropriate solutions (Maekelbergh 2011). This can be done in consultation with people who have expertise with regards to problems that people are facing, but ultimately it would be the community that decides after consultation and debate rather than an overreliance on expertise. Thus, horizontalism is a form of autonomous politics that attempts to challenge traditional thinking about how politics is done and reinvigorate democracy by

experimenting with more inclusive and direct models of decision-making and the creation non-hierarchical social relations using forms of consensus decision-making processes (Graber 2002; Kaldor *et al.* 2012; Sitrin 2014).

Consensus decision-making is an important aspect of horizontalism. Consensus has a long history and has been used by a range of different groups to develop more direct and participatory forms of democracy Cornell (2012). Initially used by Quakers as a way of collectively interpreting and agreeing upon divine guidance from God. Consensus was further developed by the Peacemakers – a group of pacifists and anarchists imprisoned together for resisting being drafted into the armed forces during the Second World War. The Peacemakers hoped that the use of consensus could challenge and eventually replace the hierarchical organisational structures of the state and political parties. Consensus decision making was further developed during the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and outlines how the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) developed the concept of 'group-centred leadership,' which attempted to encourage and support those not used to speaking up to become involved in consensus decision making (Cornell 2012).

Consensus decision-making was a key feature of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the 1960s. Its founding document called for the creation of a participatory democracy within which individuals would participate in those decisions that determine the quality and direction of their lives (Cornell 2012). SDS described this as a prefigurative process and argued that: *'...it is important to make real what kind of society we want, and we think is possible...the real power relationships in the society will become apparent as we create a new 'counter-culture.'* (Cornell 2012, p. 4). Consensus was also used by radical feminist groups in the 1960s as a way of challenging male domination and male leadership styles and advocated non-hierarchical and leaderless organisations that could make use of consensus decision making – an approach that was found to be effective in feminist consciousness-raising groups (Firth and Robinson 2017).

Consensus decision making was further developed by the Movement for a New Society (MNS), which was initiated by radical Quakers in 1971 and helped develop what was called small-to-large decision-making processes, which later became known as the “spoke council” model of coordinating affinity groups and working groups (Cornell 2012). Thus, highlighting the ways in which this model of decision-making can be used on a broader scale.

In the UK, a more recent example of the use of consensus decision-making was Occupy London Stock Exchange (Occupy LSX), which emerged shortly after the start of the student protests in October 2011. Linked with other Occupy protests around the world, Occupy LSX was a non-violent protest against the crisis of representative democracy, neoliberalism and its perceived side-effects of economic inequality, social justice, austerity and corporate greed (Akbaba 2013). Encapsulated by the “We are the 99%” banners its strategy was to encourage protestors to: *‘Exercise your right to assemble peaceably; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face and generate solutions accessible to everyone.’* (Occupy Wall Street 2015) Initially, Occupy LSX had intended to camp outside the London Stock Exchange but were thwarted by the police so set up camp next to St Paul’s Cathedral (Davies 2011). Over a four-month period, the protesters set up residence outside the cathedral – later dubbed as Tent City – and were later forcibly removed by an injunction issued by the Supreme Court (BBC 2012).

Occupy LSX was notable for bringing together a diverse group of people under the banner of “we are the 99%”, which shows the potential for mobilising and uniting a fractured and divided political left (Dean 2012). Also, the movement challenged and politicised the use of space, which was underpinned by non-hierarchical organising and do-it-yourself (DIY) politics (Halvorsen 2015). Occupy LSX also placed a strong emphasis on alternative education and brought people together to practice prefigurative politics (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012), carrying on what had emerged during the student protests in 2010. At its core, then, Occupy LSX was

an attempt to experiment with alternative ways of self-organising that put: “...*people, democracy and the environment before profit.*” (Occupy London 2014). Key to this form of self-organising was valuing: ‘...*diversity and horizontality, meaning that every individual who participates stands equal to everyone else.*’ (Occupy London 2014) invoking a strong sense of autonomy to act according to one's own free will (Savio 2014). Decisions were made democratically using consensus decision making in: ‘...*assemblies that were open for everyone to attend and working groups implement actions.*’ (*ibid*), using strategies such as: ‘...*rotating leadership, and principles, a way of encouraging traditionally marginalised voices to speak, while asking those who have spoken a lot to ‘step back.’*’ (Savio 2014, p. 44)

In practice consensus decision-making can be used in two different ways: (i) at a micro level involving a small group/organisation; or, (ii) at a macro level involving a whole community or a sizeable non-hierarchical organisation. On a micro level this can be done quite easily as small groups tend to be comprised of like-minded people, often friends, and, thus, reaching consensus tends to be achieved without much difficulty (Kokkinidis 2015). At the macro level, the process usually takes the form of spoke councils or decentralised working groups discussing issues that are important to them and developing proposals that they would like to see actioned at a centralised general assembly. Decisions are reached using consensus decision-making processes at both the decentralised group and general assembly levels, which means people have to agree before a proposal can be put forward or actioned. While this process can lead to dissensus, this is considered as a positive thing because it opens up space to a range of different views that might not be heard otherwise making the process more inclusive and creative and potentially opening up new ways of solving problems (Polletta and Hoban 2016).

Nevertheless, these experiments with participatory democracy, especially consensus decision-making have not been without their problems. Some of these problems were outlined by Freeman in her work, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1972), which was based on her

experience of being involved in the US Women's Movement. Freeman argues that groups that describe themselves as structurelessness can mask informal structures and power relations that are often much more oppressive than the ones they try to erode (*ibid*). Chatterton and Hodkinson (2010) also found that in practice it can be a challenge to implement horizontalist processes, and often it becomes the survival of the fittest. Nunes (2005) provides further insight into this claim and argues that some individuals hold more sway within a group because they can commit more of their time, can work more flexible or have been part of the group for longer.

Moreover, hierarchies and structures can also manifest themselves along the lines of knowledge, access to information, economic resources as well as gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and social class. (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015; Halvorsen 2012 and Pickerill and Krinsky 2012). Moreover, Tabb (2014) argues that the insistence on no leaders and the use of consensus decision making in meetings can be off-putting for many who want to get involved in these movements. This reluctance is mainly because consensus decision-making can be complicated, and meetings often lead to unstructured and draining discussions that can be unwelcoming for newcomers, even those that have been involved in a project for some time (Chatterton and Hodkinson 2010). Also, the desire to avoid specialist roles and hierarchy and making people responsible often means that ultimately no one is accountable for anything meaning that essential tasks may not get completed (Chatterton and Hodkinson 2010; Dean 2012; Freeman 1972).

Nevertheless, despite the problems with consensus decision-making it is an important part of autonomous spaces and the prefigurative practices that occur within them. Moreover, the dissensus that exists within this process is important because it allows for more robust critiques of ideas and plans rather than accepting them at face value. This process entails drawing upon expertise and experiences that may not be heard within more hierarchical forms of decision-

making processes and means that people are involved in decision that affect them. Furthermore, ways of dealing with dissensus have been developed within consensus decision-making. For example, if someone does not agree with a proposal, they can express reservations with the proposal in general, or points within it, but still allow it to pass (Seeds of Change 2019).

Another option is to stand aside where someone may not agree with a proposal or points within it but agree not to stop the group implementing it, although the person who stands asides will not put any effort into making this particular proposal work in practice (*ibid*). The final option is for someone to block a proposal, which means that the proposal cannot be implemented within the organisation (*ibid*). This raises issues about the power one person has in this situation as they can stop the will of the rest of the group. Given the significance of the block, there have been attempts to attach conditions to its usage, which include only using it when a proposal goes against the fundamental principles of the group, requiring those who block to help find solutions or have a fall-back position of one-person-one-vote should the issue not be able to be resolved through consensus (*ibid*). Thus, these autonomous practices that are being experimented with by those associated with small-a anarchism are part of an attempt to prefigure post-capitalist futures through the development of more direct and participatory forms of democracy outside of political and state power. Interestingly, a similar process is occurring within some tendencies of Marxism.

While this process is not perfect and some issues may not be able to be resolved through consensus, it does involve people directly in the decision-making process. One of the benefits of this is that people will have a better understanding of the process and what is being discussed instead of leaving it to others to decide on their behalf. This means people are directly involved in decisions that affect them, which is key issue for small-a anarchism (Greaber 2009) and integral part of any future society that has at its core human emancipation. Moreover, while

issues of power will still exist along the lines of knowledge, age, ethnicity, experience and time served at a project, people are aware of them and this process is a way of challenging and questioning power in a forum that can be attended by all. Those involved in the consensus decision-making process are likely to have experience of the issues they face and can draw upon expertise to consider the best ways of dealing with them.

Autonomist and Open Marxism

A similar trend of autonomous practices and self-organisation have also emerged within Marxist social theory. One tendency is Autonomist Marxism which emphasises the autonomous self-organisation of the working-class as a site for radical social change (Cleaver 2017). This model of autonomous self-organisation is distinct from Marxist-Leninism, which tends to posit trade unions, vanguard political parties and the state as necessary mechanisms for the overthrow of capitalism (Lenin 1989; Cleaver 1979). Instead, Autonomist Marxism is sceptical and even opposed to engaging with the state, political parties and trade unions as they tend to be intrinsically reformist and hierarchical. Thus, they share similar concerns as anarchists about the state as a site of revolutionary social change (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015; Holloway 2002 & 2010).

While the emphasis is still placed on class-struggle, Autonomist Marxists tend to focus on concrete struggles by the working-class, such as wildcat strikes, absenteeism, breaking company machinery and destroying products, which are organised autonomously from existing trade unions, electoral and party organisations (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015). Furthermore, in distinction to Marxist-Leninism, Autonomist Marxists extend the definition of working-class beyond the traditional confines of those employed in factories so that it encompasses housewives, students, precarious workers and the unemployed, all of whom are often unrepresented by trade unions and/or political parties referred to as the “multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2006). The extension of the definition of the working-class is referred to as the social

factory or the multitude which, autonomists argue, better captures the nature of (un)employment and precarity in late capitalism, especially the growth of services and creative sector industries, which are referred to as “immaterial labour”¹⁷ (Hardt and Negri 2006).

Workerism or Autonomism started to gather momentum after the Second World War in the USA led by a group of intellectuals and workers known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency. The Johnson-Forest Tendency is commonly associated with C.L.R James and Raya Dunayevskaya who used the pseudonyms J.R. Johnson and Freddie Forest respectively (Cleaver 1979). The Johnson-Forest Tendency emerged out of disillusionment with what James and Dunayevskaya saw as bureaucratic state capitalism in the USSR, the failure of a working-class revolution to materialise in the USA and the struggle to recognise the importance of workers’ self-activity. Initially, both James and Dunayevskaya were part of the Trotskyist movement in the USA; however, being unable to reconcile their views about the importance of working-class struggles with the Trotskyists they split from it in the 1950s (*ibid*).

Instead of focusing on the state, trade unions or vanguardist political parties as sites for radical social change, the Johnson-Forest Tendency stressed the importance of understanding

¹⁷ *‘The first form refers to labour that is primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions. This kind of immaterial labour produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images and other such products. We call the other principal form of immaterial labour "affective labour". Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. Affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. Affective labour, then, is labour that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognise affective labour, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labour, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character and "prosocial" behaviour as the primary skills employees need.’* (Hardt and Negri 2006, p. 108.) However, why the production of these commodities should be considered different to other commodities is unclear. Marx (1976) was quite specific in *Capital* that a commodity could be any external thing that *‘through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or imagination, makes no difference.’* (125) As long as they are produced to be exchanged for the consumption of others they constitute a commodity the same as any other, thus, the labour expended to create them does not differ in a Marxist sense and consisting of a duality of abstract and concrete elements. Thus, while the means of production might be different, the capitalist mode of production remains the same.

autonomous working-class self-activity as a form of struggle against capitalism stressing that: *‘Only by understanding the actual conditions of life and the actual strivings of the working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood.’* (Stone 1947, p. 10). These autonomous activities, which included wildcat strikes, absenteeism, breaking company machinery and destroying products existed outside of political parties and mainstream trade unions. Moreover, they illustrated alternative ways of organising labour, arguing that working-class struggles often emerged autonomously, and often against, the influence of the state, trade unions or vanguard political parties¹⁸ (James 2006).

Understanding the conditions of the working-class and their struggles was something that was overlooked by Marx (1976) in *Capital*, which tended to be abstracted from these experiences. Of course, Marx did spend considerable time incorporating factory inspectors’ reports into *Capital*, but these do not provide the full picture, nor do they tell us much about the experiences of working-class struggle. However, Marx did acknowledge this towards the end of his life and in 1880 developed a survey to find out more about the experiences of the working-class and the types of struggles against capitalism they were involved in. In a preface to the survey Marx stated: *‘We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviours sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey. We also rely upon socialists of all schools who, being wishful for social reform, must wish for an exact and positive knowledge*

¹⁸ As part of this approach, Johnson-Forest Tendency wrote a series of essays with workers that described and analysed their struggles against managers and trade unions in the workplace (Cleaver 1979). These essays were shared with other workers to help them understand the real struggles they faced and help galvanise the working-class struggle against capitalism (Cleaver 1979). Among their work were publications such as *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone 1947) and *Punching Out* (Glaberman 1952) and *Union Committeemen and Wildcat Strikes* (Glaberman 1955). The group also extended their analyses beyond the factory to encompass working-class struggles in broader society, especially James who was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA (Goldner 2004).

of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – works and moves.’ (O’Callaghan 1938) Thus, Marx showed an acute awareness of the importance of self-organisation of the working-class.

A similar Autonomist Marxist group that emerged in parallel, and in dialogue, with Johnson-Forest Tendency was *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France. The groups were so close that they published each other’s material (Cleaver 1979). The group’s name, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, is a reference to a quote by Rosa Luxemburg ‘*Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to Socialism or regression into Barbarism.*’ (1915) *Socialisme ou Barbarie* like the *Johnson-Forest Tendency* was anti-Trotskyist and composed of both intellectuals and workers, and considered the concrete experiences of the working-class in their daily struggles as the real content of socialism rather than the actions of the state, trade unions or vanguard political parties (Cleaver 1979).

Both of these groups were influential in shaping the New Italian Left or Operaismo in the 1960s and 1970s, which was also anti-Trotskyist and anti-statist. Operaismo grew out of a conflict between workers and both the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the major trade unions, which it argued had lost touch with the struggles of the Italian working-class both in the factory and the community (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015; Cleaver 1994). Operaismo gathered momentum after the events of May 1968 when the PCI joined forces with the Italian capitalist state to contain the student revolt, and a large number of industrial strikes by workers in Northern Italy referred to as the Hot Autumn (1969-1970). Similar to Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, at the core of Operaismo’s philosophy was the concept of workers’ autonomy outside of organised trade unions (Cleaver 1979; Wright 2002). The reason for this was that Operaismo saw the working-class not as a passive and reactive victim of capital’s onslaught that seeks to protect its interests, but that its revolutionary power lay in its ability to initiate struggle, which forced capital to reorganise and develop itself to recreate the conditions required for capital

accumulation (Cleaver 1979). Thus, Operaismo sees the working-class as the driving force of capital social relations with capitalists forced to react to struggles against exploitation and develop new forms of capitalist accumulation.

Expressed in journals such as *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, *Lavoro Zero*, *Contropiano*, *Primo Maggio*, and *Quaderni del Territorio*, authors such as Alessandro Pizzorno and Romano Alquati investigated the composition of the working-class not only from a theoretical perspective, but from the materiality of struggles, power relations and everyday behaviour – in short, the individual and collective subjectivity of the working-class (Wright 2002). However, despite a greater focus on the concrete experiences of the working-class and their struggles Autonomist Marxism places an importance on empowering the working-class at the expense of capitalists. While this is laudable, this approach runs the risk of perpetuating capitalist social relations rather than abolishing them. Postone (1993) argues that empowering the working-class in this way may provide them with better standards of living and working conditions, but this comes at the expense of challenging capitalist social relations themselves. Thus, for Postone (*ibid*) what is required is not the empowerment of the working-class, but the abolishment of it and all capitalist social forms. This point is taken up by Open Marxists, which emerged in response to Autonomist Marxism.

Open Marxism has its roots in a series of discussions that started within the *Conference of Socialist Economists*, continued in the journal *Capital and Class* and *Common Sense* and were further articulated in the 1990s in three volumes *Open Marxism Volume 1: Dialectics and History* (1992); *Open Marxism Volume Two: Theory and Practice* (1992) and *Open Marxism Volume Three: Emancipating Marx* (1995). Since the late 1970s, Marxist-Leninism has been heavily criticised for being outdated and unable to explain postmodern or post-Fordist society. Open Marxists begin by taking aim at what they argue is the structural and teleological

nature of Marxist-Leninism and argue that it appears archaic when held up to a fragmented, technological and consumer-driven contemporary society (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992a).

According to Open Marxists, Marxist-Leninism fetishisation of dynamic social relations has resulted in an overly: ‘...*deterministic conceptualisation of capital in that capital becomes a structure of inescapable lines of development, subordinating social practice to predetermined ‘laws’*’ (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992b, p. xi). Consequently, according to Open Marxists, Marxist-Leninism tends to make a separation between the structural contradictions of capitalism and class struggle (Holloway 1994): ‘*Capital is seen as an entity which has its own logic, a logic which stands above class relations.*’ (Bonefeld 1994, p 43) Thus, the structural contradictions of capitalism are considered to exist independently of class struggle as objective laws of capitalist development and undermine the importance of class struggle (Holloway 1994; Cleaver 2017). The tendency to separate class struggle and structural contradictions in this way sees capitalism as a set of objective laws that undermine labour in its struggle against capital (Holloway 1994). Open Marxists argue that what Marx’s work shows is that the structural contradictions define the objective framework within which class struggle develops (Holloway 1994) or class struggle unfolds within the framework of capitalist social relations (Bonefeld 1994) as Marx pointed out in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): ‘*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.*’ Thus, Open Marxists attempts to highlight the importance of both agency and structure within Marx’s work, which they argue has been lost within Marxist-Leninism.

Thus, what is important about Open Marxism is that, like Autonomist Marxism, it places an emphasis on the importance of working-class struggle as a motor for social change within capitalist social relations. How Open Marxists attempt to do this is by re-emphasising the

importance of the dialectical dimension of Marx. They do this by using the concept of social forms which they argue can be used to describe all social phenomena within capitalist social relations, which includes class, value, money and the state (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992a). According to Open Marxists these social forms embody the struggle between labour and capital and are constantly changing through this dialectical process (Cleaver 2017). Thus, these social forms are driven by class struggle and contain the contradictions of this relationship and change in an attempt to (re)impose capitalist social relations (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992b, p. xii). Viewing social forms in this way, Open Marxists argue, allows for an openness that sees social phenomena as moments of historically asserted forms of class struggle (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992b).

Furthermore, Open Marxists argue that this allows us to see that capitalism is not a deterministic structure that is imposed on the working class, but an antagonistic social relation that always has to recompose itself by reintegrating the working class into the capital relation (Cleaver 1979). Thus, capital relies on the working class for its existence, but the working class does not rely on the rule of capital for its existence. Open Marxists argue that this highlights that capitalism is not teleological but grounded within class struggle and a contradictory set of social relations within which revolutionary social change is not a foregone conclusion but based on the outcome of class struggle that attempts to resolve structural contradictions through the (re)imposition of capitalist social relations (Bonefeld *et al.* 1992b). Thus, what Open Marxism highlights is that class struggle should not be about trying to resolve structural contradictions within capitalist social relations, which are unresolvable, but about abolishing this form of social relations and the social forms that embody these struggles and contradictions. This marks a difference with Autonomist Marxists that attempt to strengthen the position of the working-class rather than abolish all capitalist social forms. This is because social forms such as the state cannot be taken over by the proletariat as it embodies the contradictory class relations between labour and capital. Instead, what is required is the

abolition of the capitalist state form in a way that shares similarities with the small a-anarchism outlined above.

Autonomous Spaces and Left-Wing Convergence

Thus far, this chapter has provided a critical analysis of the concept of autonomous spaces and how they have been influenced by both anarchist and Marxist traditions. Moreover, that these traditions, especially more recent tendencies, have much in common, especially when it comes to experimenting with forms of self-organisation which are grounded in direct democratic and non-horizontal principles and are anti-statist in nature. What this points to is the potential for people to work together on concrete political projects in ways that have the potential to transcend practical, ideological, theoretical and cultural trappings that have historically divided and fragmented the political left (Grubic and O'Hearn 2016; Prichard and Worth 2016). In an age of widening inequality, austerity, right-wing extremism and the seeming dearth of alternatives, left-wing convergence is an attempt to explore the prospects of attempting to overcome these differences (Grubic and O'Hearn 2016).

Prichard and Worth (2016) argue that the practices they found within a range of autonomous spaces point to the potential of a practical and ideological convergence between more open tendencies within both anarchism and Marxism. Moreover, Choat (2016) argues that anarchist and Marxist have found a common cause in responding to the forms of exploitation and oppression generated by contemporary neoliberal capital and that activism can only be strengthened by maintaining and extending these alliances. Furthermore, the focus of left-wing convergence can, and should, be on all forms of domination with the vision for alternative societies the outcome of an open-ended struggle for non-domination that encompasses difference practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural differences (Prichard and Worth 2016).

Thus, left-wing convergence is an attempt to do is explore whether the tensions between anarchism and Marxism can be resolved by documenting a range of different examples where this has been attempted (Prichard and Worth 2016). While Prichard and Worth (2016) argue that a potential convergence between anarchists and Marxist is sorely needed to unite a fragmented political left, they add a note of caution by stating there is very little evidence of ideological convergence between the two perspectives. However, in the special edition journal, Vey's (2016) exposition of how Mietshauser Syndikats function in Germany and have been influenced by both anarchism and Marxism highlights the potential for left-wing convergence and provide optimism that this is possible. While left-wing convergence is somewhat tentative, there are two ways in which it can be developed: (i) the continued documentation of groups that attempt to overcome ideological differences while working on concrete political projects; and, (ii) the theoretical development of left-wing convergence and ways in which ideological differences might be overcome. While it might prove difficult to overcome these differences, it is important to try and to reflect on those experiences in a way that might guide and support others who are also willing to address the problems faced by humanity and a seemingly fragmented and irreconcilable political left.

However, this is not to say that left-wing convergence is a return to Eurocommunism, which grounded in the work of Gramsci also attempted to develop broad-based alliances with other left-wing movements to gain hegemonic support for social reforms and focus on issues faced by those groups (Devlin 1979). While it does share a shift away from Marxist-Leninism and the vanguard revolutionary party there are other notable differences. Left-wing convergence, at least the way it is considered in this chapter, is different because it does not seek to make these social reforms democratically through the state apparatus. Nor does it discard Marx's labour theory of value or the importance of class-struggle. Instead, the state in its current form is rejected as a site of revolutionary change and an importance is placed on an autonomous struggle

of the working-class not only outside of the state, but also political parties and trade unions. Thus, what left-wing convergence is more akin to is a form Libertarian-Marxism which supports the anti-authoritarian elements of Marx's work and argue that the working-class is the revolutionary subject and does not require a vanguard political party for revolutionary social change. This can be seen in the work of John Holloway and Ana Dinerstein whose work can help develop the theoretical and practical dimension of left-wing convergence.

Much of the groundwork for the theoretical development of left-wing convergence has been developed by John Holloway, especially in his books *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002) and *Crack Capitalism* (2010). Within these books he tries to develop a practical and theoretical framework that challenges capitalist social relations drawing on both anarchist and Marxist tendencies. In *Change the World Without Taking Power*, Holloway begins with the notion of "the scream". This is not an individual scream, but a collective one against all forms of oppression that emanates from all aspects of society. This is an important place to begin as it is concerned with all forms of oppression in a way that points towards the potential of left-wing convergence. Holloway argues that the scream is both negative and hopeful in that it is not only directed against the horrors of capitalism, but also in the hope that an alternative world might be possible. The duality of this scream serves as an allegory for understanding both contradictory and totalizing nature of capitalist social relations. Moreover, that there is hope; however, slim, that we can get beyond them.

Holloway discusses the reasons why we scream and uses the concepts of power-to and power-over. Drawing upon Marx's concept of alienation, Holloway argues that power-to is our subjectivity, or our human creativity, which is an essential part of our species-being and Marx thought distinguished us from non-human animals (Marx 1976). Within capitalist social relations power-to, or human creativity, is denied through the labour process as labour becomes

subject to the law of value. Marx's labour theory of value states that the value of commodities produced within capitalist social relations is based on the socially necessary labour time required to produce them, which is the time on average, with a given state of technology, skilled labour, economic conditions, it takes to produce the commodities (Marx 1976).

Within this process, workers are exploited by being paid for their labour-power (capacity to work), which is based on what is required to reproduce their labour-power (acquiring the necessities required to sustain their lives and re-energise them for work) but add more value to the commodities they produce through their concrete labour than they are paid for. Marx referred to the difference between what a worker is paid for their labour-power and the value they add to commodities through their concrete labour as surplus value, or profit, which is reinvested by capitalists to fund future production cycles (Marx 1976). Following Marx, Holloway argues that because capitalists compete with each other to sell their goods on the market there is a tendency for capitalists to discipline labour to increase productivity and exploit workers to create more surplus value to reinvest in the production process through either extending the working day (absolute surplus value) and intensifying the production process (relative surplus value) (2002).

Holloway argues that this results in power-over workers, with regards to the production process (how it is produced) and what is produced (in the sense of what is actually produced and ownership of it), which denies our power-to, our creativity, our subjectivity, our humanity, our species-being and is part of an ongoing violent process of separating subject from object. Holloway argues that within capitalist social relations our creativity exists in a state of being denied or as 'not yet'. Thus, humans have the potential to develop and express our species-being, but the alienation we experience within capitalism denies us the ability to do both of these things essentially stunting our human potential in the name of creating surplus-value.

Thus, capitalist social relations alienates us from our humanity and forces us to participate within these exploitative relations for survival. Other than survival, these relationships do not exist for the benefit of the working-class but for the creation of surplus-value that benefits the minority within the capitalist class. What this means is that class struggle is a continuous process wherein classes are continually being constituted and struggled against, over alienation and dis-alienation, between definition and anti-definition and between fetishisation and dis-fetishisation. So, we do not struggle as working-class, but against being working-class. It is not the struggle of labour, but against labour as a capitalist category in a way that is similar to Open Marxism and the theory of social form.

At the core of Holloway's work is how we can create a society that values power-to, or human creativity, as opposed to power-over that is a denial of our species-being. This is directed against all forms of oppression and highlights the potential for left-wing convergence because it provides an ideological critique of capitalist social relations more generally by focusing on Marx's value theory of labour as being foundational for all forms of oppression. What this means is that the abolishment of all forms of oppression should be the goal of revolutionary social movements. However, all forms of oppression are manifestations of attempts to justify inequalities and fragment resistance against capitalist social relations. That is not to say that these forms of oppression did not exist prior to capitalism but that they have been continued, and in many cases exacerbated, to benefit the capitalist class.

Holloway discusses how we might create post-capitalist futures and begins by discussing the Marxist tradition of gaining control of the state. Here he rehashes the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein in *Social Reform or Revolution* (1899) about the best way of achieving this either through reform through democratic socialism or by more revolutionary means. However, Holloway is critical of the capturing of state power to change the world and

drawing upon the experiences of communist states, such as the USSR and China, argues that they have done very little in the way of creating self-determining societies or increasing levels of freedom. Holloway argues that this is because the state is seen in an autonomous entity that stands above capitalism and can be used instrumentally to bring about radical social reform if only it were in the hands of the working class instead of capitalists.

Holloway is critical of this instrumental conceptualisation of the state and argues that this is a fetishisation that misdiagnoses the state as functional-structuralist rather than as a social form composed of fluid and contradictory social relations between labour and capital as per Open Marxism. Moreover, in a similar way to that outlined within small-a anarchism (Graeber 2009), Holloway argues the idea of changing the world through the conquest of power ends up achieving the opposite of what it set out to achieve. Instead of the abolition of power relations, it ends up reasserting them. Thus, instead of changing the world through the state power, what Holloway argues is that revolutionary action is the dissolution of power relations to create a society that is based on the mutual recognition of people's dignity and power-to or as Holloway refers to it - anti-power.

Holloway argues that this entails a refusal to accept humiliation, oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation and that we should struggle for the destruction of capitalism and everything that dehumanises us. What Holloway does here is makes potential theoretical links between anarchist and Marxist tendencies that value the autonomous activities of the working class, but grounds them in a critique of capitalist social relations. While Holloway provides no real insight about how this might work in practice, leaving it open is important as it encourages people to experiment with forms of power-to that struggle against power-over in different ways that point beyond capitalist social relations and assert alternative ways of doing through experimentation and prefiguration.

In *Crack Capitalism* (2010), Holloway provides more of an insight into how we might practically begin to challenge capitalist social relations. Here he discusses how if we want to break with the injustices of the world we live in we must seize the initiative and set the agenda. In a similar way to *Change the World Without Taking Power*, Holloway attributes these injustices to capitalist social relations and the subordination of our “doing” to alienated or abstract labour and discusses ways to dialectically overcome these social relations by being in, against and beyond them. Holloway argues that everyday act of transgressions, which are not alienated labour, such as reading a book, walking in the park or gardening on our own allotment are forms of doing that exist as cracks in capitalist social relations and show us that other ways of doing exist: *‘The opening of cracks is the opening of a world that presents itself as closed. It is the opening of categories that on the surface negate the power of human doing, in order to discover at their core, the doing that they deny and incarcerate.’* (p. 9) Holloway defines these other ways of doing as cracks, which: *‘...is a moment in which relations of domination were broken and other relations created.’* (2010, p. 31) However, this use of poetic language and metaphors throughout the book leads to ambiguity and confusion that make it difficult to read or understand in places. The irony is that Holloway is doing this to make his work more accessible. Nevertheless, he does seem to understand the problems with using these metaphors: *‘...all metaphors are dangerous games that may have to be abandoned at some point’* (2010 p. 51); however, he persists in using them throughout the book in a way that is distracting and can make concepts vague at times (Susen 2012).

Key to Holloway’s process of revolutionary social change, then, is creating and extending spaces in, against and beyond capitalism: *‘Create spaces or moments of otherness, spaces or moments that walk in the opposite direction, that do not fit in. Make holes in our own reiterative creating of capitalism. Create cracks and let them expand, let them multiply, let them resonate, let them flow together.’* (2010, p. 261) Thus, for Holloway *‘...the only way to think about*

revolution is in terms of creation, expansion and multiplication of cracks in capitalist domination.’ (p. 51). Holloway sees this as a process of “refuse-and-create” (2010, p. 261) that resists capitalist social relations while creating new ways of being. This creation, or doing, creates cracks in, against and beyond capitalist social relations that are more than a protest; rather they both negate the subordination of our activities to alienated labour but also create alternative ways of being: *‘By focusing on doing, we also state clearly that the argument for this book is not for “more democracy” but for a radical reorganisation of our daily activity, without which the call for more democracy means nothing at all.’* (pp.85-86)

One of the key features of Holloway’s work is the importance he places upon autonomous forms of agenda-setting for both individual and collective emancipation (Susen 2012). This provides encouragement for individuals and groups to challenge the imposition of capitalist social relations in the immediate contexts they find themselves in and, thus, values ordinary everyday struggles akin to the process of prefiguration outlined above. Moreover, it means that individuals and groups do not have to wait for a political party, or a vanguard, to start this process, but instead should be reliant on their own practices and reflection as a form of critical praxis. Moreover, what Holloway’s work does is encourage the development of an alternative critical theory that is based on the premise that it is possible to take power without the state. However, although it may well be that this refers to the state in its current form, but does not preclude an alternative form of national or international organisation that is able to connect these cracks in capitalist social relations in a way that stays true to its ethos of human emancipation. The importance of the development of this alternative critical theory by Holloway is that it attempts to unite both anarchist and Marxist traditions by retaining a Marxist critique of capitalist social relations grounded within the labour theory of value, but draws upon elements of anarchism with regards to how people might organise themselves outside of the bourgeois state. However, one of the things that is missing from Holloway’s work is the

use of evidence or concrete examples to illustrate the points he is trying to make (Susen 2012). This is an issue taken up by another Open Marxist, Ana Dinerstein.

Dinerstein (2014) draws upon Holloway's work and uses this to critically examine radical concrete projects to which Holloway alludes to work in practice. Examining autonomous spaces in South America, Dinerstein (*ibid*) focuses on what she refers to as "autonomous practices" within these spaces. She argues that these spaces are part of a broader autonomous struggle for self-determination, self-organisation and self-management both in the Global North and Global South¹⁹. Using an Open Marxist theoretical framework, Dinerstein (*ibid*) contends that these autonomous spaces are not self-contained spaces of autonomy that are somehow outside of the structures and relationships of domination from which they are trying to escape, but are part of a struggle in, against and beyond the capitalist social relations of which they are part. Here Dinerstein develops a much more theoretically sophisticated understanding of autonomous spaces as compared to Chatterton *et al* that understand the totalizing nature of capitalist social relations.

For Dinerstein (*ibid*), this is a dialectical process which, through concrete struggles engaged in by those involved in autonomous spaces, attempt to both negate capitalist social relations while, concomitantly, creating alternative ways of being. Dinerstein (*ibid*) goes on to argue that four elements are present in autonomous spaces that struggle in, against and beyond capitalist social relations, which are: (i) negating – they serve as a negative critique of capitalism or are anti-capitalist; (ii) creating – they tend to be based on concrete or real practical experiments, which develop alternative ways of self-organising; (iii) contradicting – these autonomous practices are part of capitalist social relations and are thus part of an ongoing struggle over the meaning

¹⁹ Dinerstein argues that the focus of these autonomous spaces in the Global North and Global South differ with the latter more focused on anti-capitalist struggles while the latter tend to be anti-statist and anti-colonial (2014).

of autonomy, which is in, against and beyond the state, capital and the law; (iv) excess – that alternative forms of post-capitalist relationships can produce an excess that can develop more dignified forms of work, participatory democracy and alternative economics.

What is significant about Dinerstein's work (*ibid*) is her theoretical understanding of how autonomous spaces are not static, but part of a dialectical process of struggle within which these autonomous practices are not finished, but and are continually developed through a process of trial and error or critical praxis often evaluated by the groups themselves collectively using participatory research methods (*ibid*). This dialectical process is situated theoretically within Marx's labour theory of value and the way capital moves in a self-reproducing and self-expanding circuit, as value in motion (Neary and Dinerstein 2002). Dinerstein argues that the practices found within autonomous spaces function as anti-value in motion which is part of a process of constructing new forms of post-capitalist social relations (Dinerstein 2014).

Dean (2012 and 2016) also addresses the issue of autonomous spaces and their revolutionary potential. Critical of neoliberal individualism, she argues that these autonomous spaces are important because they develop a “communist horizon” or as Dean describes it “a collective desire for collectively”, which: ‘...*impress upon us the necessity to abolish capitalism and create global practices and institutions of egalitarian cooperation* (2012, p. 11) Drawing upon the experience of the Occupy Movement, Dean argues that this movement was able to create a mass movement because it focused on the notion of proletarianization, which she defines as ‘...*a process of exploitation, dispossession, and immiseration that produces the very rich as the privileged class that lives off the rest of us.*’ (2012, 18) Dean (*ibid*) argues that using the concept of proletarianization allows for the production of new global alliances that connect the global population in a shared project against capitalism highlighting the importance of autonomous spaces to effect revolutionary social change.

However, despite this potential, Dean (2012) offers a more cautionary note and argues that prefiguration and the autonomous practices associated with it point to a fragmentation of the left rather than a unity. Moreover, she argues that they can be easily co-opted into what she calls communicative capitalism, which she describes as: *'The proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity result in a deadlocked democracy incapable of serving as a form for political change. I refer to this democracy that talks without responding as communicative capitalism.'* (2009) Dean's point here is that notions of democracy, access, inclusion and participation materialise within communicative technology that can be exploited by capitalism for the creation of surplus-value. Thus, for Dean (2012), the radical energies of autonomous spaces have tended to be absorbed within capitalism as a form of communicative capitalism or knowledge economy that does not affect or change capitalist social relations. One only needs to consider Facebook and Twitter to see how this works in practice.

Dean (2012 and 2016) argues that what is required to develop the revolutionary potential of autonomous spaces, and the political left in general, is the creation of a political party that develops the communist horizon and decides how best to institutionalise it and the lessons learned from experimentation with autonomous practices. Critical of the Marxist notion of dictatorship of the proletariat, Dean (*ibid*) argues that what should be embedded within this political party is the concept of the "sovereignty of the people". Dean (*ibid*) argues that term is more preferable to the dictatorship of the proletariat because it prioritizes people's efforts to exercise self-authorisation and creates antagonistic relations between the rich and the rest of us. Thus, argues Dean (2012 and 2016), the party would act upon the demands of these autonomous spaces and experiments with autonomous practices but bring them together in way that is not possible with by groups involved in these struggles alone.

Nevertheless, Dean (2012) argues that those on the political left are reluctant to take state power and create a communist party because of what she describes as left-wing melancholy, which she describes as an inability to come to terms with atrocities committed in the name of communism or to be able to separate between failures and successes of communist practices. Dean (*ibid*) argues what is required is a recovery of the concept of communism, which has been stigmatised with an ahistorical understanding of the USSR. Here, Dean (*ibid*) argues that what is required is a more thorough analysis of communism in the USSR to learn from the lessons of that experience and highlight positive elements of that experience.

Nevertheless, the problem with Dean's notion of the party is that it is predicated on hierarchical political decision-making and would abandon the direct and participatory forms of decision-making processes that have been a key feature of autonomous spaces and which have had some success in bringing people together from different ideological backgrounds. Dean is critical of democracy in general and she provides a greater insight into why in her book *Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (2009) wherein she argues that liberal democracy is grounded in individualism and forms part of an attempt to reform capitalism rather than effect revolutionary social change. However, what Dean overlooks here is the potential of more radical forms of democracy that have been practiced within autonomous spaces that are more participatory and non-hierarchical and support more collective forms of decision-making. While groups involved in autonomous spaces might need to work collectively to further extend cracks and challenge capitalist social relations. The party, as Dean outlines it, has the potential to recreate hierarchies and authoritarianism that repeat the mistakes made in the USSR. Instead, any sovereignty of the people should entail involvement of people in both the economic and political sphere that is based on the democratic and non-hierarchical principles developed within autonomous spaces. To go back to a communist party is unlikely to unite the political left in the way that Dean argues but is likely to cause more

division. Thus, can be ruled out as a way to effect revolutionary social change that keeps with the participatory democratic and non-horizontal ethos of this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a conceptual framework for helping to understand the practical and theoretical importance of autonomous learning spaces. Using the concept of autonomous spaces, the chapter has outlined how they function as both places of resistance and creation allowing groups to experiment with autonomous practices. The chapter describes how this process of resistance and creation is referred to as prefiguration – a process wherein people experiment with autonomous practices now that they hope to see in current and future organisations and societies. These prefigurative practices are important in a number of different ways, which includes: (i) placing emphasis on people becoming pro-active agents of change rather than waiting for representatives or domestic/external events to motivate people into action (Sitrin 2007); (ii) by encouraging people to create the change they want to see in the future now by changing their day-to-day relations and breaking down hierarchies that seek to contain them and actively limiting power inequalities as they rise (Maekelbergh 2011); and, (iii) allowing groups/communities to pursue multiple and divergent courses of action and solutions to problems.

The chapter has explored how autonomous spaces appear to have been influenced by both anarchist and Marxist tendencies. While these tendencies are often seen as being irreconcilable more recent tendencies within both traditions, such as small-a anarchism, Autonomist Marxism and Open Marxism have much in common, especially with regards to the development of autonomous practice, self-organisation, collective ownership and the development of more participatory forms of democracy. This highlights the potential for a convergence between these theoretical positions, which is referred to as left-wing convergence (Prichard and Worth 2016). Moreover, left-wing convergence also extends oppression beyond traditional class-

based ones to include other practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural differences that are commonly found within autonomous spaces. However, this does not dispense of a critique of capitalist social relations and sees class as foundational to all forms of domination, oppression and exploitation. In an attempt to further develop left-wing convergence practically and theoretically, the chapter grounded the concept within the work of Holloway (2002 and 2010) and Dinerstein (2014). These more libertarian Marxist tendencies not only provide a robust critique of capitalist social relations using Marx's labour theory of value, but also embrace more participatory forms of democracy and horizontal forms of self-organisation associated with small-a anarchism. The chapter also considered the work of Dean (2009, 2012 and 2016) who also outlines the importance of autonomous spaces. Here, the chapter argued that while the notion of a communist horizon is important for the development of autonomous practices to point towards post-capitalist futures, the return to a communist party is likely to be divisive and is thus dismissed as a way of developing a potential left-wing convergence.

The importance of autonomous spaces, then, is that they have the potential to function as places wherein people can work together to create alliances between different groups and attempt to transcend practical, theoretical, ideological and cultural trappings that have historically divided the political left by working collectively on real or concrete projects (Prichard and Worth 2016). This is achieved by people working collectively on projects that both seek to resist all forms of domination and oppression while concomitantly experiment with alternative forms of autonomous practices through a process of prefiguration. This prefigurative practice entails experimenting with forms of autonomous practice now that people hope to see in a current or future organisation or society that have the potential to challenge, question and rupture the contradictory and exploitative nature of capitalist social relations by creating 'cracks' (Holloway 2010) within these relations that function as a negative dialectic in, against and beyond them (Dinerstein 2014). It is these autonomous spaces, and the prefigurative practices

that occur within them, that will be used as a theoretical framework to examine the practical and theoretical significance of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis and their potential to prefigure the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to outline and critically evaluate the research methodology and research methods used to gather and analyse data for the thesis. It begins by restating the primary objective of the research before outlining five specific research questions that address key critical themes that emerged in the previous chapters. It then critically outlines the participatory action research and case study methodologies used by the research and the different research methods used to gather data. The latter were a mixture of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and web-based analysis. It then goes on to discuss how the research methodology and methods were employed in practice and consider the strengths and limitations of this process. The chapter draws to a close by examining the implementation of ethical protocols that were outlined and approved at the proposal stage of the research.

Research Objective

To critically examine what, if anything, can be learned from autonomous learning spaces to create an alternative model of higher education institution?

Research Questions

In an attempt to address the research objective, and to guide the research process, five specific research questions were devised, which will be addressed throughout the thesis. They are:

1. Why were these autonomous learning spaces created?
2. What, if anything, can be learned from the philosophies/models of pedagogy that these autonomous learning spaces have adopted and developed?
3. What, if anything, can be learned from the philosophies/models of self-organisation that these autonomous learning spaces have adopted and developed?

4. What, if anything, can be learned from the way these autonomous learning spaces have used space?
5. What, if anything, can be learned from the way these autonomous learning spaces have networked with other groups?

Research Design

Given the overtly political and radical nature of these autonomous learning spaces, and this research, the thesis is grounded methodologically within a critical social research epistemology. Critical social research rejects both positivistic and interpretivist traditions for guiding the research process, both of which tend to be descriptive and less critical of social norms and values and structural forms of oppression and subjugation (Gray 2014). Instead, critical social research attempts to delve beyond surface appearances in order to reveal the nature of these oppressive social practices and structures and endeavours to change them (Harvey 1990). Accordingly, critical social research contends that all social research ought to have political goals which attempt to both challenge and transform unequal power relations and develops more egalitarian forms of social relationships (Henn *et al.* 2006; Gray 2014).

This process is referred to as critical praxis and is one of the main aims of critical social research, which is to integrate theory and practice in such a way that individuals and groups become critically conscious of contradictions and distortions of the social relations within which they find themselves and become motivated to change those oppressive relations (Schwandt 2015). Thus, critical social research is a way of attempting to sustain social criticism and facilitate radical social change (Munice 2006). In this thesis, radical social change means the prefiguration of alternatives to capitalist social relations and not merely reforms that perpetuate their (re)imposition. This view is echoed by Pickup and Kuntz (2017), who argue that critical social research should not only be critical and diagnose inequalities that exist within the practical realities of life, but also ‘...*necessarily intervenes in the status quo and links to*

praxis by offering alternative modes of action from those we critique as problematic. Critical work involves taking a stand for change based on a vision for social justice, scary and challenging though that might be.' (p. 76) Again, what Pickup and Kuntz (*ibid*) are outlining here is a form of critical praxis that not only provides theoretical explanations for forms of exploitation and oppression but encourages the prefiguration of alternative ways of being that are post-capitalist. This is not dissimilar to Marx's final comments in *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' (1845). Marx's argument here is that it is not enough to simply theorise about social conditions, we must theorise (to understand) and act (to make a radical social change). This is the aim of autonomous learning spaces and this thesis.

Critical social research encompasses a range of different forms of emancipatory research methodologies that embody this philosophy, which includes 'liberatory inquiry' that uses collaborative research methods and create social justice and locally desired change (Smith 1997), 'scholar-activism' that entails scholars engaging in practical problems to change the world by speaking truth to power (Chatterton *et al.* 2006) and 'militant co-research' that entails researching radicals and the political activism they are engaged in alongside them as both an activist and researcher (Roggero 2012). These methodologies are an attempt not only to realise political goals through academic research, but also to change the traditional role of researcher, who is usually posited as a disinterested or objective observer (Schwandt 2015), to one in which they are actively involved in the political project alongside other members of the group or project (Chatterton *et al.* 2006). These types of critical social research connect academia with issues that are of significant public and political concern and have been collectively referred to as the development of a 'public sociology' (Burawoy 2004). Within public sociology, critical social research blurs the boundaries between the researcher and the researched with both

becoming actively involved in radical and political concrete projects where both are activist and researchers (Burawoy 2004).

This approach to scholarly inquiry is often criticised for its normative positionality which supposedly undermines academic objectivity and, instead, politicises scholarly work and endangers the legitimacy of academic research (Burawoy 2004). Nevertheless, Burawoy (2004) argues that public sociology, while more politically orientated, is still grounded within ‘...*true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks*’ of what he refers to as ‘professional sociology’. Thus, the rigour of academic research within public sociology remains as does its legitimacy, the difference is that it acknowledges unequal and oppressive relations and attempts to do something about them – similar to Howard Becker’s exhortation to take the side of the underdog (1963).

Another criticism of public sociology is that there is no moral consensus within academia and therefore to argue that sociologists agree on what struggles to engage with or what the response to those struggles should be is not representative of the range of different viewpoints within the discipline (Nielsen 2004). What this means is that within universities, those academics pursuing public sociology tend to be in the minority. Not only because of the divergence of political and moral viewpoints adopted by academics, but also because of the risky nature of engaging in this type of research and political activism. One only needs to consider the response of the criminal justice system to those involved in protests about reforms to higher education or the imposition of austerity measures (as outlined above) to understand the risk of being involved in similar movements.

However, Burawoy (2004, p. 24) argues that the standpoint of academics pursuing public sociology is clear: ‘...*the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—*

defends the interests of humanity.' However, this is not to say that it is for academics to arrive at their own conclusions about the salience of these struggles and how to respond to them, but that: *'We should be sure to arrive at public positions through open dialogue, through free and equal participation of our membership, through deepening our internal democracy.'* (Burawoy 2004, p. 8). Thus, what public sociology is arguing for is an open dialogue between sociologists and the public to collectively decide and shape academic research in a way that produces critical knowledge and practice, or critical praxis, in a way that addresses the problems that people face in their everyday lives. This attempt at a more democratic and publicly involved sociology is not dissimilar to the democratic and non-hierarchical forms of decision-making and pedagogy that have emerged out of the student protests and autonomous learning spaces that have been outlined previously in this thesis.

Critical social research and public sociology were chosen for this research because they best reflect the overtly radical and political nature of the autonomous learning spaces that feature within it, including the Social Science Centre²⁰ and my involvement in the project as both an active member, and a researcher, alongside other members of the group. Moreover, it is an attempt to work in a democratic way, through dialogue, with people involved in a struggle against the financialisation and marketisation of higher education as well as the crisis of capitalism more generally. Or as Burawoy (2004) might argue – a defence of the interests of humanity.

The primary research was conducted between 2012 and 2014 and began as a participatory action research project within which I aimed to document and reflect on the working practices of the Social Science Centre as well as other autonomous learning spaces. With regards to the latter, using a case study approach, I also visited six other autonomous learning spaces in the

²⁰ More information about the politics of the Social Science Centre is provided in *Chapter 5: The Social Science Centre*.

UK with the intention of sharing experiences and lessons learned from running these projects and helping to develop a network of people involved in autonomous learning spaces. The six autonomous learning spaces that I visited were: Birmingham Radical Education; Free University Brighton; IF Project (London); People's Political Economy (Oxford); Really Open University (Leeds) and Ragged University (Edinburgh).

Participatory Action Research at the Social Science Centre

The findings of this thesis are based on data gathered as part of a participatory action research project at the Social Science Centre. Moreover, the use of participatory action research also fits with the literature on autonomous spaces, especially the importance of implementing a collective reflective cycle within projects (Chatterton 2012; Dinerstein 2014). Because of my involvement in the Social Science Centre, the project was selected for the research by what is often called a convenience sampling method (Bryman 2012; Gray 2014; Henn *et al.* 2006). A convenience sample is described as a site of inquiry that is available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility (Bryman 2012; Gray 2014; Henn *et al.* 2006). This is usually because the researcher has access to the site either due to their involvement with it or through a gatekeeper that allows them access. However, this does not mean the Social Science Centre was selected because it was the easiest option, but because it presented an exciting opportunity to conduct a significant piece of research in a way that was not readily available to others (Bryman 2012), about a radical, political project that I was involved in and which would benefit the project and could be used for doctoral study.

Being an active member of the Social Science Centre meant that gaining access to the project was relatively straightforward²¹. The reason for this, apart from being a member, was that other members involved in the Social Science Centre, including me, were keen to document and

²¹ Although one member did indirectly accuse me of 'strip-mining' the Social Science Centre for my PhD., which is a point I address later in this chapter.

reflect on the day-to-day running of the project, which was captured in the notes of one of our monthly meetings: ‘...it will be vital to organise a systematic means of reflecting on and theorising the project as a whole, and setting aside a number of days throughout the year for collective reflection, critique, celebration and revision as a regular feature of the curriculum. It was suggested that we could explore methods (and histories) of participatory inquiry, dialogical and appreciative inquiry, and development appraisal for inspiration.’ (SSC Meeting Notes 2012)

In response to these discussions, I decided to focus on the Social Science Centre as part of a funded doctoral scholarship that I had been awarded to focus on the development of alternative models of higher education but was still in the early stages of conceptual development at this time²². My rationale was that using the funded doctoral scholarship in this way would not only give me the time and space to conduct the research but also give me more time to work at the Social Science Centre as an active member in a way advocated by critical social research and public sociology. When thinking about how best to document and reflect on practices within the Social Science Centre, I took inspiration from a similar piece of research that adopted a critical social research epistemology wherein the academic researchers were part of a political project with others, Chatterton *et al.*'s (2006) *Autonomous Geographies: Activism in Everyday Life*. Chatterton *et al.*'s research was conducted with autonomous social centres, Low Impact Developments (LID) and tenants' networks as part of a conscious attempt to link their scholarly work with political activism. Key to Chatterton *et al.*'s (2006) approach was instead of conducting research on, or about participants, as is traditional (Gray 2014), they researched people involved in these settings as ‘co-researchers’ using participatory action research.

²² In 2012 I successfully applied for a doctoral scholarship at the University of Lincoln.

The rationale for adopting a similar approach to Chatterton *et al.* is that: (i) both pieces of research (this thesis and Chatterton *et al.*'s) focus on autonomous spaces (in the case of my research, autonomous learning spaces); (ii) the aims of both pieces of research were similar in that they formed part of a: "...*deliberate political intervention into autonomous activism using participatory action research...*" (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, p. 2); and, (iii) both pieces of research attempted to further develop a participatory approach to conducting research. Informed by the work of Chatterton *et al.* (2006), a participatory action research approach was adopted for this research and agreed by members of the Social Science Centre at one of our monthly meetings in 2013 where we began to discuss how this might work in practice as can be seen from the actions agreed at that meeting:

'Actions from Gary's contribution re the focus of his PhD research and the potential links to the SSC:

- a. Gary and others to move forward the 'outreach' work possibility linked to the St Giles Estate, Lincoln.*
- b. Gary to input into a future SSC meeting re his visit to Brighton to explore the alternative HE provision.*
- c. Gary and others to produce a 'map' of alternative HE provision across the country.*
- d. Explore how the SSC can gather a research base of how alternative HE groups across the country work.*
- e. Gary to send key interview questions that he will be using to focus his visit to Brighton.'*

(Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2013)

Participatory action research is described as a methodological approach to conducting research that attempts to democratise knowledge production by encouraging academics to experience

and commit to working within, and alongside people, involved in these struggles in a way that supports them and promotes equality, democracy, self-reliance and learning (Fals-Borda 1991). Participatory action research, at least in Western Europe and North America, first emerged as a way of examining and creating organisational change, but rather than researching participants as is the case with action research, it is used to research in collaboration with them (Glassman and Erdem 2014; Gray 2014). Thus, the critical feature is the focus on participation, which entails the researcher becoming immersed in the research setting and involving participants in the process as co-researchers (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005).

When I started to think about how I might conduct my research at the Social Science Centre, I thought participatory action research fitted well with the critical social research epistemology outlined above, my involvement in the Social Science Centre, and the ethos of the project itself. This is because the Social Science Centre is run as an unincorporated worker co-operative with all members invited to participate in the running of the project through the use of a consensus decision-making process²³. Moreover, the Social Science Centre's courses are created and developed with a similar ethos with all scholars involved in curriculum design as well as facilitating classes²⁴. However, the reality of conducting, analysing and writing up the research was different to the ideals espoused in the literature. For example, not all members of the Social Science Centre were involved as participants or co-researchers in the research process. I endeavoured to make the research as participatory as possible by discussing and agreeing the research process with members of the Social Science Centre at several of our monthly meetings in 2010; however, not all of our members attended these meetings. Moreover, not all of those

²³ More detail about decision-making processes at the Social Science will be provided in *Chapter 5: The Social Science Centre*.

²⁴ More detail about the design and delivery of courses at the Social Science Centre will be provided in *Chapter 5: The Social Science Centre*.

who attended the meetings were interested in being involved in the research process either as a participant or a co-researcher.

Initially, I found this discouraging because, perhaps naively, I had expected all members to want to be involved in the research process. Indeed, the level of participant involvement is one of the main criticisms of participatory action research, because while the process describes itself as being participatory and democratic, the focus of the research, and how the findings are interpreted and used, may not benefit everyone in the group as members may not have participated in the process and, thus, their voices are not heard (Cooke and Kothari 2001). However, in an attempt to address this problem, Smith (1997) argues that throughout the research process it is essential to keep addressing the needs of the group as a whole, not just those individuals who agree to participate in the process. In practice, I found this to be a difficult process, especially if people involved in the project did not regularly attend meetings or voice their views. Moreover, as my research was conducted over a two-year period (and the writing up has taken four years as a part-time student), people tended to drift in-and-out of the Social Science Centre making involvement and engagement with them much more difficult once the data had been collected²⁵.

Furthermore, once I started to analyse the data and write-up the research findings, input from the other members became less frequent. This was because once my PhD funding had finished, I started to work full-time at the University of Lincoln. Moreover, during this period I also had two children, which meant the time I could contribute towards working at the Social Science Centre was reduced significantly. I also found that as the time to complete my PhD was running out, naturally, I become much more focused on completing it. Thus, given the pressure on my

²⁵ This was the case even during data collection as people might only attend meetings and classes for a month, sometimes less, and not return. We have tried to contact people who have left in this manner, but either we had no contact details for them or received no reply to emails.

time from paid work, family commitments and the nature of a PhD as an individual piece of work rather than a collective endeavour, I started to become increasingly distant from the Social Science Centre and members in an attempt to complete my thesis²⁶. Consequently, this meant that the research was not as participatory as envisioned initially, with only some members being directly involved in the process and less so concerning writing up this thesis.

When reflecting on the participatory action research project I had been involved in as compared to those described in the literature, I felt I had not done the methodology or the Social Science Centre justice. However, I was reassured by the work of Reason and Bradbury (2008) who point out that in reality, it is not unusual within participatory action research for participants' involvement to occur at different levels and to different degrees, which range from shaping the focus of research to collecting, analysing and writing up research findings. Thus, what I took from Reason and Bradbury's work (2004), was that the reality of conducting participatory action research can vary from project to project and may never achieve the ideals outlined in some of the literature. However, what is important is the attempt to embed the principles of participatory action research and reflect on this process so that others can learn from the project.

To be clear, then, while the participatory research project outlined in this thesis began with the intention of involving all members of the Social Science Centre in the research process, the reality was that it was only members who regularly attended the monthly meetings and who were involved in the design and delivery of courses were involved in this process. Their involvement in the participatory research process extended to shaping the initial focus of the research and agreeing to participate in participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. The main reason for the levels of involvement by participants was that they too had

²⁶ This is why one member indirectly accused of strip-mining the Social Science Centre as I was using it, in part, to attain a doctoral level qualification and the benefits attached to it with regards to my career. While this is true, it is only part of the story as my time, and the research has been used by the Social Science Centre to develop the practice at the project and the way in which we intellectualise what we are doing.

other commitments, which included paid work and families. Thus, while members were supportive of the participatory action research process, their sentiments echo a theme that runs through these autonomous learning spaces, that people involved are volunteers with competing demands which means they can only commit limited time to the projects they work within. So rather than being dispirited about the levels of engagement, I have become grateful and positive that we were able to achieve at least some level of participatory action research project and that we could reflect on this process.

While encompassing a range of different participatory approaches, a common characteristic of all participatory research is that it is used to create change (practice, institutional or social) through collective, self-reflective practices within which researchers and participants undertake co-research as a process to support collective understanding and collaboratively improve the situations they find themselves in (Baum *et al* 2006; Rahman and Fals-Borda 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2008; Wadsworth 1998). Key to this process is the development of an informal reflective cycle where participants collectively agree on actions, collect data, evaluate actions and then use this process to inform new action akin to participatory action research (Gray 2014; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Kindon *et al* 2007; Pain *et al* 2011; Reason and Bradbury 2008; Smith 1997). While reflective cycles are often contextually unique and concerned with what happens differs in different groups (Smith 1997), what is common to all is that this reflective cycle begins with practice and develops an evolving praxis between practice and theory (Smith 1997).

An informal reflective cycle was embedded in the Social Science Centre's practice in two ways. At the end of each course, scholars would evaluate the course concerning what worked well and what did not. This was done through a simple process wherein the last session of each course would be used for reflection on the course. This was then used to develop the next course the Social Science Centre would deliver. A similar process was also used at the Social Science

Centre's Annual General Meetings (AGM) wherein we would reflect on the previous year, our constitution, and consider how we would proceed as an organisation in the following year. Both reflective cycles were basic and based on what members remembered and discussed. The point of this research was to develop a more formal and rigorous way of documenting and reflecting on our practice. The preliminary findings of this research have been fed back into the Social Science Centre's reflective cycles at various stages, including evaluations of the courses; the development of the Co-operation and Education Course is an example of this²⁷. Also, aspects of the research have been fed into monthly meetings, AGMs and publications in an attempt to develop our practice and provision at the Social Science Centre. Moreover, this thesis forms part of a longer and more extensive evaluation of the Social Science Centre with the emerging findings fed back at monthly and annual meetings as well as documenting this evaluation as a historical document for the Social Science Centre and others to support similar projects.

Case Studies: Six Autonomous Learning Spaces Based in the UK

As part of the participatory action research at the Social Science Centre, we agreed that it would be helpful and supportive to visit other autonomous learning spaces to share our experiences of working within our respective projects and develop a network of people engaged in radical pedagogical projects. As such, during 2012 and 2014, I visited or interviewed members of the following six autonomous learning spaces, which are based in the UK: Birmingham Radical Education, Free University Brighton, People's Political Economy, Ragged University, The IF Project and The Really Open University. These autonomous learning spaces were selected using a snowball sample (Bryman 2012; Gray; Henn *et al.* 2006). Snowball sampling typically

²⁷ More detail about how this process was used to shape educational provision is outlined in *Chapter 5: The Social Science Centre*.

involves building up a network of respondents through an initial group of informants who introduce the researcher to members of the same population (Henn *et al.* 2006).

In this case, access to these six autonomous learning spaces was gained by developing personal networks through being a member of the Social Science Centre and attending conferences that focused on alternative higher education, such as the Free University Network Conference in 2012: Sustaining Alternative Universities²⁸. A snowball sample was used because gaining access to these autonomous learning spaces can be difficult, especially those based outside of the UK. Indeed, during the research, I contacted 12 autonomous learning spaces²⁹ about conducting research with them; however, only six of them got back in touch with me (those that feature in the research). While difficulty in gaining access to research sites is not uncommon (Bryman 2004; Gray 2014), this was exacerbated by the fact that many of the autonomous learning spaces had ceased to exist.

A case study approach is often used by social researchers when focusing on a specific phenomenon or event – this could be an individual, a community, an organisation or a particular setting (Bryman 2004; Gray 2014; Stake 2000; Thomas 2011; Yin 2009). Moreover, the use of case studies has also been extended by social researchers to encompass the examination of processes or relationships, such as evaluations of training programmes, organisational performance, project design and implementation, relationships between sectors of an organisations, or to examine the workings of a particular organisation or community (Gray 2014; Hammersley and Gomm 2000; Simmons 2009; Stake 2000; Yin 2009). A case study

²⁸ The Free University Network Conference: Sustaining Alternative Universities was hosted in Oxford and was attended by members involved in radical pedagogy projects, including autonomous learning spaces. For more information about the Free University Network Conference see:

<https://sustainingalternatives.wordpress.com/conference/>

²⁹ Free University Liverpool, Free University Liverpool, Free University Melbourne, Free University Sydney, Cardiff Free University and Free University New York.

approach can either focus on a single case, or it can examine multiple cases (Bryman 2012). The former is usually used when a particular organisation or event is of interest and the latter when the researcher wants to focus on a particular phenomenon rather than an individual case (Thomas 2011): ‘...a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition. I call this a multiple case study or a collective case study.’ (Stake 2005, p. 445)

A case study approach is also adopted by social researchers when they are attempting to explore the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about a particular phenomenon, processes or relationships, focusing on providing up-to-date information and to provide a detailed illustration (Gray 2014; Thomas 2011; Yin 2009). Thus, what distinguishes a case study approach from other forms of social research is that it attempts to provide a detailed insight into the uniqueness of the case(s) under investigation (Bryman 2004; Thomas 2011), which aims to add insight and understanding about a particular type of context that is often considered ambiguous or uncertain (Yin 2009): ‘Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real-life’ context... The primary purpose is to generate an in-depth understanding of a specific topic...’ (Simons 2009, p. 21)

A case study approach was adopted for this research to explore a particular phenomenon, namely autonomous learning spaces that had emerged in response to the Coalition’s reforms to higher education. Originating out of my involvement of being a member of an autonomous learning space, both myself and some members of the Social Science Centre, wanted to make links with other autonomous learning spaces because we were curious about how they had been created and how they worked in practice. Given that learning about each autonomous learning space would require an examination of their history and educational provision, the adoption of case studies seemed to be the most appropriate approach because: ‘Building theory from case

study research is most appropriate when the topic is relatively new, or when there is a need to inject some fresh perspectives into a theme.’ (Gray 2014, p. 269). Thus, this part of the research is an attempt to explore the practical and theoretical importance of autonomous learning spaces.

Research Methods

The data collection for the research used three different methods, which were: (i) participant observation; (ii) 28 semi-structured interviews with members and students of autonomous learning spaces; and (iii) web-based research that examined organisational documents, meeting notes and websites. These different methods were used to examine the autonomous learning spaces from different angles in an attempt to cross-check that the findings were valid, which is often referred to as triangulation (Bryman 2012). Moreover, using different methods and sources also helps to create a thick, detailed description of each of the autonomous learning spaces (Bryman 2012; Gray 2014). Nevertheless, while there was an attempt to use all three methods across all six case studies this was not always possible. For example, participant observation could not be used where an autonomous learning space had ceased to exist (for example, The Really Open University) or had not fully delivered its education provision at the time of visiting (for example, Birmingham Radical Education). Similarly, it was not always possible to conduct semi-structured interviews with all those who had been involved with autonomous learning spaces as some people no longer attended or contact details were not available. Thus, there may be gaps in the development and running of each of the autonomous learning spaces and voices that remained unheard; however, any further contributions to this topic are always welcomed.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is an approach to conducting social inquiry where the researcher immerses themselves within a group or setting for an extended period observing behaviour and taking part in conversation and actions agreed by the group (Bryman 2012). There are two

types of participant observation – covert and overt. Covert is when a participant observer does not reveal to those being researched that they are a researcher and overt is when the participant observer declares that they are a researcher (Bryman 2012; Gray 2014). For both parts of this research, I was an overt participant announcing myself to the group and explaining what I was doing there. The main difference between the case studies, with regards to participant observation, was at the Social Science Centre, I was an active observer or participant-as-observer, in that I actively contributed to the work of the Social Science Centre and its organisational aims (Bryman 2012; Thomas 2011), whereas for the case studies I did not.

During my time at both the Social Science Centre and the case studies field notes were taken. Bailey (2007) argues that field notes are the backbone for collecting and analysing data when engaged in participant observation. In an attempt to make this process rigorous, the research adopted a similar analytical process to the one outlined in Gray (2014, p. 417). This process encourages field notes to be broken down into the following categories:

1. **Primary observation:** Raw data about people, settings, behaviours, and conversations. These notes were taken on site or shortly afterwards.
2. **Reflection and recall:** Further detail about objects and events are stimulated and expanded upon after going over initial observation notes. This process was undertaken up to approximately a month after initial notes were made.
3. **Pre-analysis data – ideas and inferences:** Themes and insights start to emerge as one reflects on primary observation data. These preliminary themes should be recorded in the margins of one's field notes. This process was conducted at the time or very shortly after reflection and recall.

4. **Experiential data – impressions and personal feelings:** One notes feelings about people, events, conversations and interpretations of emotional reactions. These can be a useful source of analytical insight. This process was conducted throughout the process of writing and reflecting on my field notes.
5. **Forward planning:** Revisiting sites to obtain any missing information identified by engaging in this process. This was done throughout all stages of writing and reflecting on my field notes, and further information was gathered when necessary, mainly through semi-structured interviews.

One of the weaknesses of participant observation, as used in this research, was that it was not always possible to take extensive field notes on site and, instead, I sometimes had to rely on memory, which may not always be accurate (Gray 2014). However, Bryman (2012) argues that taking field notes during participatory observation is not always appropriate as it might difficult to take notes while participating in the setting and it might make it more challenging to create a rapport with other participants. The inability to take field notes on site tended to happen while at the Social Science Centre when I was more likely to be involved as a participant in the research setting. This may mean that some aspects of events are missing or have become distorted in the findings. However, I did write field notes directly after attending the Social Science Centre in an attempt to capture what had happened while it was still fresh in my mind.

Moreover, in an attempt to address this, my field notes were complemented by other methods (as outlined above) and the findings went through a process of respondent validation to check for accuracy (Bryman 2012), although not all of the autonomous learning spaces responded to this process (Birmingham Radical Education, Ragged University and The Really Open University did not respond). Those that did respond agreed with the accuracy of the way in

which their autonomous learning space was presented or asked for a few minor modifications (for example, People's Political Economy commented that the process of creating and running the project was a little messier than I portrayed. These comments have since been incorporated into the research (see Appendix D for an example of one of those case studies that did respond). Given that I intended to document these autonomous learning spaces I wanted to make sure that I had captured experiences of this process accurately and respondent validation was a way of doing this. However, given the ephemeral nature of these autonomous learning spaces it was perhaps not surprising that some did not respond to the emails I sent them. Indeed, two of the three that did not respond (Birmingham Radical Education and Really Open University) no longer existed when I contacted them.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews are often used by researchers when they are trying to gather rich, detailed information about a research topic (Bryman 2012). Qualitative interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured; however, both parts of this research used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured usually consist of a list of themes, topics or questions to be covered (referred to as an interview schedule - see Appendix A for the interview schedule for this research), but they are not always addressed in the same order, or even posed at all, depending on the direction the interview takes (Gray 2014). Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow interviewees a great deal of leeway in how they respond; however, the interview schedule ensures specific topics are discussed (Bryman 2004; Thomas 2011). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to probe views and opinions in an attempt to explore respondents' experiences and the meanings and sharing of a phenomenon (Gray 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were used both for research at the Social Science and the other six autonomous learning spaces. At the Social Science Centre, seventeen members were

interviewed and included people who had been involved in the creation of the project as well as those who had joined at a later date, including those who attended as scholars. Towards the end of the interview process, I got a sense of theoretical saturation in that no new data was emerging regarding different analytical categories and relationships between categories were well established (Bryman 2012). Semi-structured interviews were useful here as they allowed the research to fill in the gaps of any part of the project that I had not been involved in (for example, some of the early stages of the creation of the project) and further explore people's perception of the project that has not been articulated within meetings or courses.

Semi-structured interviews were also used to gather data at six other autonomous learning spaces. This was an essential method as it was not always possible to attend autonomous learning spaces' education sessions as they no longer existed. Using semi-structured interviews for both parts of this research meant that I could ask respondents about themes that related to the research questions while retaining a degree of flexibility to explore other issues. Semi-structured interviews also allowed the respondents to frame their understanding of issues and events and what they think is essential in explaining them (Bryman 2004; Thomas 2011). Interviews were conducted with 11 members, or students, of autonomous learning spaces either in person (site visits) or using Skype (when face-to-face interviews were not possible). All interviews were recorded, which was helpful for analysing the data later on.

Web-based Documentary Research

The research also employed web-based research to gather further information about each of the autonomous learning spaces. Web-based research can be used to find out further information about groups by examining their websites, blogs, news articles, and Facebook and Twitter accounts (Bryman 2012). This research used web-based research to find out more about the autonomous learning spaces which feature in this thesis and to cross-check information gathered by other methods used as part of the research (Bryman 2012). The web-based

documents that were examined were autonomous learning spaces' websites that presented information about the projects and any documentation that was available through these websites. The Social Science Centre provided website included minutes of meetings and blog posts that documented sessions within courses.

However, Bryman (2012) argues that there are difficulties with using web-based analysis. One of the main difficulties highlighted by Bryman (*ibid*) is the amount of time spent finding websites relevant to your research questions, which can entail trawling the Web using various search engines. This was not an issue for this research because I already knew the autonomous learning spaces I was going to examine and had access to their websites. Another difficulty with web-based research highlighted by Bryman (*ibid*) is that websites are constantly changing and are either updated or disappear. While none of the autonomous learning spaces' websites that were examined had disappeared, two of them, Birmingham Radical Education and the Really Open University, had stopped updating their websites in 2013 and 2011 respectively. All the other autonomous learning spaces had continued to update their websites during the period of data gathering (2012-2014); however, I stopped collecting data from them in 2014.

In an attempt to assess the quality of documents, which can be extended to websites, Scott (1990) sets out four criteria. The first relates to the authenticity of the document and whether it is genuine or not. In an attempt to address this, when I spoke to members involved in the autonomous learning spaces, I asked them about the website to ensure that I had the correct web address and if it was being updated by members of the group. I received assurances that the websites were genuine in all circumstances. At the Social Science Centre, this was much easier because I was involved in the project and often updated the website myself, including writing blog posts.

Scott (*ibid*) also argues that researchers need to consider the credibility of the websites and documents taken from them. Here, Scott (*ibid*) is referring to whether the documents are free from error and distortion. I found that most of the websites and related documents were well written and contained very few typographical errors. Also, I found that the information contained on the websites and related documents tended to be a relatively accurate representation of events happening at the autonomous learning spaces as well as in broader society. There was an overt political leaning on all of the websites that were essentially anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist but given the overtly political nature of the autonomous learning spaces I did not find that unusual.

Scott (*ibid*) also argues that websites and documentation need to be assessed for their representativeness, which means examining whether both are typical of their kind. I found that the websites of all the autonomous learning spaces in this research were similar in the sense that they provided a rationale for the project and an outline of the types of workshops and courses that they offered. With regards to other documents, there was some differentiation here, with some autonomous learning spaces providing detailed minutes of meetings (Social Science Centre) and a review of their practice (People's Political Economy and the IF Project). Scott (*ibid*) argues that the meaning of the content of websites and documents need to be clear and understandable. Here, the research found that both websites and documentation of each of the autonomous learning spaces examined were easy to access and understand. Where arguments were put forward, they were often substantiated by evidence. Again, there was an apparent political leaning, and at times these arguments were rhetorical, but this appeared to be standard practice for these types of overtly political projects.

In general, Bryman (2012) advises researchers to be careful about the quality of websites and consider why they were constructed in the first place, what function they serve and whether it has an axe to grind. With regards to all of these questions, the research found that each of the autonomous learning spaces had created their websites to raise attention to the work they were doing and to encourage more people to become involved in their projects. There was also an attempt by autonomous learning spaces to use their websites to share their education provision with people who were unable to attend in person. For example, the Social Science Centre wrote notes from each of its classes and shared electronic reading on its website. Also, Ragged University used its websites to share its sessions using podcasts as well as sharing electronic resources. What was clear from the research was that each of the websites was part of an overt and explicit political agenda that was critical of the Coalition's reforms to higher education and that their projects were part of an experiment to create an alternative model of provision. In this sense, they were not dissimilar to the ideals of public sociology outlined above (Burawoy 2004).

Thematic Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This process goes through six stages, which was applied to data gathered from participatory observation, examining interview transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and when conducting web-based research (*ibid*). The first stage is becoming familiar with the data, which is writing up field notes, transcribing data and reading through all the information gathered. The second part is developing initial codes and looking for recurring patterns, especially those that relate to your overall research aim and specific research questions. The third stage entails looking for overarching themes within the data and drawing upon the initial codes developed in the

previous stage of analysis. The fourth stage requires the researcher to review the themes developed and examine whether it supports relevant theory and literature, or not. Stage five is about defining and naming the themes that have emerged from the data and highlighting what is essential or interesting about the themes. The sixth and final stage is writing the final report up using the themes developed from the data to support this process.

In practice, the initial analysis of the data began when I started transcribing the semi-structured interview data and reading website and document content. I then entered a period of coding data using the primary objective of the research and the specific research questions to guide the process, thus, looking for codes around how autonomous learning spaces were created, run, experimented with models of self-organisation and pedagogy, used space and networked with others. I then considered how the themes related to each other, for example, how networking with other autonomous learning spaces helped to develop pedagogy. I then started to consider how the codes from the data supported the literature, or not, critically examining what was interesting or novel about the autonomous learning spaces I had researched. The final stage was using the analysis of the data to write this thesis.

Strengths and Limitations of Methodology and Methods

Methodologically, participatory action research is often criticised over its reliability, which refers to whether the same results would be found if the research was repeated (Bryman 2012). Undoubtedly, with regards to this research, they would not. The data gathered is specific to the people involved in autonomous learning spaces, as well as the context and time it was collected. What is more important is that the research was conducted collaboratively and transparently. As such, reliability is a criterion that is dismissed not only by those who conduct participatory action research, but also by many researchers who conduct qualitative research, as not being relevant or appropriate to qualitative research (Bryman 2012). Thus, reliability is not a concern of this type of research and not one of my considerations when conducting it.

Another methodological concern for social research is validity, which is described as a criterion for assessing the integrity of the conclusions that are generated by a piece of research (Bryman 2012). Lather (1991) argues that the following validation methods should be adopted by participatory action research to ensure that the findings captured are accurate:

1. Triangulation: The use of multiple methods and sources of information and various theoretical schemes to cross-check information and strengthen the trustworthiness of data.
2. Construct validity: This is reflexivity that builds in systematic ways to critically question actions and practice and thereby construct knowledge.
3. Face validity: This is a return of the data to the participants for analysis and interpretation to increase the credibility of the data through a process of respondent validation.
4. Catalytic validity: This is the use of a process that re-orient, focuses, and energizes participants to take actions for transformation.

In an attempt to address the issues raised by Lather (*ibid*) with regards to validity, the research has used triangulation to look at different sources of information, such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of critical documents, such as minutes of meetings, websites and blog posts. Moreover, the research data has been returned to some members of the Social Science Centre for respondent/face validation³⁰ However, what is important to stress is that this research not only provides a detailed insight into the creation and running of autonomous learning spaces, but also that this research has been used to develop the

³⁰ However, not all members of the Social Science Centre were involved in the research, some were no longer members or were not contactable to include in the process of respondent validation.

practice within the project. Thus, in terms of the validity outlined by Smith (*ibid*) the research has a high level of validity.

Another criticism of the research is generalisability, which is made even more difficult by a small sample size, in this case, seven autonomous learning spaces. This means that the findings are unlikely to be representative of autonomous learning spaces in general and thus results cannot be extrapolated beyond the sample group (Bryman 2012; Gray 2014; Henn *et al.* 2006). Nevertheless, the purpose of conducting case study research is not to generalise beyond the case(s) on which it focuses (Thomas 2011), but to provide an intensive examination of a single, or multiple, cases providing a contextually rich and detailed description of the setting under examination and allows for the generation of theory (Bryman 2004). Taking this position with social research is advocated by Burawoy (1998) who refers to this process as an extended case study or extended out from specific cases to challenge and reconstruct existing theory.

This is achieved identifying anomalies between theory and the data found within case studies, which: ‘...leads directly to an analysis of domination and resistance’ (1991, p. 279). The theory developed in this instance is how these autonomous learning spaces functioned as autonomous spaces (Chatterton *et al.* 2008 and 2010) encouraging participants to experiment or prefigure (Graeber 2009) alternative models of higher education provision that operate in, against beyond the neoliberal model of university and wider capitalist social relations more generally (Dinerstein 2014; Holloway 2010). This, then, is the value of using a case study approach, in that its value lies in providing a detailed description of the uniqueness of each case study and develops theory and practice associated with these autonomous learning spaces not in being generalizable to all projects of this nature. Indeed, capturing what is different about them is as important as their similarities because it helps to understand that there are different forms of self-organisation that are appropriate for the contexts within which they emerge.

Ethics

While the nature of the research was low-risk regarding potential harm to respondents and the researcher, some precautions were taken which are outlined below. These precautions were outlined and approved by the University of Lincoln' Ethics Committee in 2012 and included:

Informed Consent – Informed consent is the principle that respondents should be able to consent freely to their involvement in research and that they should be informed about the nature and purpose of the research (Henn *et al.* 2006). In an attempt to ensure that all respondents were able to provide informed consent I provided an outline of the research that addressed the points suggested by Social Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines* (2003, pp. 27-30), which included:

- The purpose of the study in the form of an information sheet (see Appendix B)
- The identity of the funder. In this case that a scholarship was funded by the University of Lincoln.
- The anticipated use of the data and the form the final publication(s) may take. Respondents were told that the work would contribute towards my PhD thesis and there were likely to be publications that would emerge out of this.
- The identity of the researcher and their organisation. Here, I provided information about me (academic interests and publications) and the University of Lincoln.
- How the participant was chosen, i.e., sampling method.
- What the participant's role in the research is.
- Indicate any possible harm or discomfort that may occur as part of the research.
- Assure anonymity and confidentiality.
- Proposed data storage arrangements.

- How long the research will take and the location where it will take place.

Along with providing an overview of the research, participants were also given a permission sheet to sign to indicate their informed consent to participate in the research (see Appendix B). Here participants were informed that they do not have to participate in the research and that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time before the publication of the findings. Participants also went through a process of participant validation wherein they were provided of copies of their contribution to the research to check for accuracy and to consent to their inclusion in the research and subsequent publications (Bryman 2012). Nevertheless, gaining informed consent was not always practicable (Henn *et al.* 2006). For example, during the research, I made some site visits to autonomous learning spaces to observe facilitator training sessions, classes, conferences, and meetings. While I introduced myself and my research to those I spoke to it was not always possible to gain informed consent and a signature on a permission sheet, nor has it been possible for many of these people to be involved in participant validation as I do not have their contact details. To mitigate against potential harm, I have excluded any mention of them and do not use any direct quotes.

Harm – The research was very low-risk concerning causing harm to participants and no children, or vulnerable adults participated in the research. Before conducting the research, a risk assessment was conducted, which assessed the following areas:

- Physical harm – given the nature and setting of the research there was minimal risk of physical harm to respondents or researcher.
- Psychological harm – given the nature and setting of the research there was minimal risk of placing respondents in stressful, embarrassing and anxious situations. Moreover,

respondents were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that they could withdraw from the process at any time.

- Harm through publication – all participants were made aware of possible publications and findings have gone through a process of participant validation. All respondents were informed that they could remove their presence from the research at any time before publication.

Anonymity and Confidentiality – all of the participants have been anonymised and are given a unique research moniker, for example, Respondent 1. The names of the autonomous learning spaces and locations have not been anonymised; however, participants have consented to this. This means that it is possible, in some circumstances, to identify who the participants are. To address this, participants have consented to the publication of the findings through the process of respondent validation (outlined above). Another problem with regards to anonymity and confidentiality is that both of my PhD supervisors are members of the Social Science Centre. This means that when they have read drafts of my research findings it may be possible for them to identify other participants from the Social Science Centre. To address this, I informed all participants who my PhD supervisors are, anonymised participants' names and withheld anything that I thought had the potential to cause any conflict until I could engage in respondent validation. The Data Protection Act regulates all data gathered during the research 1998³¹ and was stored electronically on the University of Lincoln's servers in encrypted files and protected with the highest available security software provided by the University of Lincoln.

³¹ More recently, legislation in this area has been updated by the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 and any data that still existed at the time this legislation came into force adhered to these regulations.

Chapter 5: Participatory Action Research and the Social Science Centre

Introduction

The next two chapters will document and critically analyse seven autonomous learning spaces that agreed to participate in the research for this thesis. Both chapters provide a chronological overview and critical analysis of how the projects were created and run by those involved in them. This critical analysis will examine the types of pedagogy used and developed within autonomous learning spaces, how groups experimented with different forms of self-organisation, how physical space was used, how people networked with other groups involved in similar projects, and what worked and what did not. Both chapters, then, serve to provide a detailed insight into experiences of those involved in developing alternative, no-fee higher education provision and what lessons can be learned from them to create an alternative model of higher education institution that addresses the problems associated with the current neoliberal model.

This chapter focuses specifically on an autonomous learning space that I was an active member³² of between 2012 and 2014, the Social Science Centre. The data was gathered using a mixture of active participant observation, semi-structured interviews and web-based analysis that examined minutes of meetings, blog-posts and study notes³³. Moreover, the research formed part of a participatory action research project which, along with other members of the Social Science Centre, was part of an to reflect on and develop our working practice. This

³² I was general secretary of the Social Science Centre between 2013-2014: *'My responsibilities for general secretary of the Social Science Centre were agreed on 11th May 2013 and included: dealing with all emails, updating the membership list, managing the website, and organising public events.'* (Field Notes 2013).

³³ These notes were taken by scholars during each session within individual courses that document the material we covered and what was discussed. For an example of these notes see: <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/blog/2014/04/04/notes-from-social-science-imagination-week-11-co-operative-learning-1-3/>

chapter explores the main themes that emerged from the data and critical moments in the development of the project, which are: (i) The Roots of the Social Science Centre; (ii) Creating an Autonomous Learning Space Outside of Mainstream Higher Education: The Birth of the Social Science Centre; (iii) Developing an Organisational Form; (iv) Implementation of Democratic and Non-Hierarchical Principles; (v) Student Recruitment and Learning Support; (vi) Adopting a Pedagogical Model: Student as Producer and Critical Pedagogy; (vii) Developing and Delivering a Course: The Co-operation and Education Course 2014; (viii) The Co-operation and Education Conference 2014; (ix) Occupying Space in the City of Lincoln; and, (x) Creating Networks with Others. The chapter draws to a close by discussing what are the key lessons that can be learned from our experience of creating and running the Social Science Centre.

The Roots of the Social Science Centre

The Social Science Centre can trace its roots to a series of radical projects that began with the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick in 2003, as one of the founding members of the Social Science Centre commented: *'The idea of the Social Science Centre began in 2003 at the University of Warwick. What I mean by that is that it is part of a long history and didn't occur to us in 2009 but was something I had been working on for a long time. This was the Reinvention Centre that connected research and teaching as a radical project that connected students and staff.'* (Respondent 17)

The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research was a collaborative project based in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick and the School of the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University (University of Warwick 2014). The project received £3 million of funding over five years by the Higher Education Funding Council for England as part of its Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning initiative launched in 2005 to promote excellence in teaching and learning (*ibid*). The Reinvention Centre was part of an attempt to

better integrate research-based learning into the undergraduate curriculum by enabling undergraduate students to become more involved in the research cultures of their departments (*ibid*).

Student involvement was facilitated through the creation of a bespoke space at the University of Warwick Campus that encouraged collaboration between students and academics. The space, which would become known as the Reinvention Centre, attempted to challenge traditional hierarchical relationships and power differentials between academics and students through spatial design. The space consisted of a heated rubberised floor, moveable seats and beanbags, mobile projectors, and computers and laptops. The point of this was to allow teachers and students to negotiate the layout of the room and changed it each time they used it and part of conscious effort to challenge and question power relations within the room (*ibid*).

The Reinvention Centre was also underpinned by pedagogical principles that encouraged scholarship and greater links between teaching and research (Boyer 1990) and was organised around a version of critical pedagogy which posits that knowledge only emerges through invention and reinvention (Freire 1979). In part, these intellectual ideas were derived from the work of von Humboldt (as discussed above) and his attempts to reconnect teaching and research through the concept of scholarship wherein academics and students would work together on real research projects. Moreover, the work of Walter Benjamin was influential (Neary 2010), especially Benjamin's lecture to the Society of Anti-Fascists in Paris (1934) titled 'Author as Producer'³⁴. The key question for Benjamin was how should radical intellectuals act in a time of crisis and what form should this intervention take? (Benjamin 1934). For Benjamin, it was not enough to merely show support for progressive social change, one had to become involved in the struggle to prefigure alternative forms of social relations

³⁴ This lecture is where Student as Producer derives its name from.

(*ibid*). The Reinvention Centre attempted to do this by involving both academics and students in the process of academic research, and in the negotiation of space, in a way that had the potential to reinvent the process of learning and the university itself (Neary 2010).

This process of trying to refigure the complex relationship between pedagogy and space was also further explored by Lambert (2011) and referred to as a ‘psycho classroom’, wherein teaching and learning are conceptualised as ‘aesthetic encounters’ experienced by teachers and students. Using the Reinvention Centre as an illustrative example, Lambert (*ibid*) argues that psycho classrooms are spaces of creativity and dissensus that can work to disrupt and reconfigure teaching and learning and represent a space of potentiality rather than being fixed beforehand. Thus, different futures are possible. What is important about this process is that it attempts to democratise the classroom, and teaching and learning, within higher education and focus on both teaching and research in a way that begins to radically change the university: ‘*Central to the Reinvention Centre project was reinventing the role and purpose of higher education and not just the future of teaching and learning: reinventing the curriculum as the first stage of reinventing the university*’ (Neary 2010, p. 2)

However, whether, and to what extent, the radical intellectual and political aims of the project were compromised by receiving £3 million of funding from HEFCE is an interesting point. To receive funding from HEFCE to develop a CETL, successful applications had to fulfil five main objectives³⁵ around teaching and learning. These objectives appear more like an attempt

³⁵ We are proposing five main objectives for the funding:

1. To reward practice that demonstrates excellent learning outcomes for students
2. To identify ‘beacons’ of good teaching practice and encourage development of this practice so that the benefits are delivered more widely
3. To enable institutions to develop approaches to teaching and learning that encourage a deeper understanding within the sector of methods of addressing student learning needs
4. To encourage collaboration and sharing of good practice and so enhance the standard of teaching throughout the sector
5. To contribute to the information available to inform student choice.

(HEFCE 2003)

to embed neoliberal principles around value for money and student choice rather than being akin to a radical political project to reinvent the university. Moreover, since 2010 the Reinvention Centre merged with the CAPITAL Centre, which is a partnership between the University of Warwick and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) to utilise theatre skills to enhance student learning and draw upon academic research and resources to shape the development of RSC's companies (University of Warwick 2019). Which seems to be more linked to business than revolutionary social reform. Moreover, the merger has also resulted in a change of name to the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning. While the space still offers academics and students a chance to work together on interdisciplinary projects the teaching space has been transformed into performance areas and the radical and political nature of the project appears to have been lost.

Professor Mike Neary, who was heavily involved in the design and running of the Reinvention Centre at Warwick, carried this work on when he moved to the University of Lincoln as Dean of Teaching and Learning in 2007. This work went under the title Student as Producer, which had first been used as the title of a Reinvention Centre Conference in 2007 (The Reinvention Centre 2010). The concept and practice of Student as Producer underpinned the University of Lincoln's Teaching and Learning Strategy between 2009 and 2014 (Neary *et al.* 2014) and still features in the University of Lincoln's institutional documentation and is used by academics to develop the relationship between teaching and research (Hetherington 2018; Saunders and Gaschino 2019). Moreover, Student as Producer was extended to include academics and students in the collaborative design and use of teaching and learning spaces within higher education as part of a HEFCE funded *Learning Landscapes in Higher Education* project (Neary *et al.* 2009; Neary and Saunders 2010). Again, this was part of an attempt to democratise all aspects of the university and create teaching and learning space that would support scholarly

activities that better connect teaching and research informed by the practice and experiences of students and academics.

Similar to the Reinvention Centre, the aim of Student as Producer has been to better integrate teaching and research across the University of Lincoln's undergraduate provision by engaging students in research or research-like activities with academics (Neary and Winn 2009). Both of these projects have been articulated as radical projects situated inside of mainstream higher education that not only attempt to re-engineer the curriculum but radically change the university's organisational form to create an alternative model of higher education institution (*ibid*). The difference between the two projects was that the Reinvention Centre was created by *ad hoc* funding, whereas Student as Producer became the institutional organising principle at the University of Lincoln (Neary *et al.* 2014; Neary and Saunders 2016). Thus, Student and Producer at the University of Lincoln attempted to encourage all staff and students to work together in a way that embedded research-like activities within the undergraduate curriculum as well as supporting more collaborative relationships between them rather than being located in one particular space on campus like the Reinvention Centre.

Both of these projects have had a lasting impact on their respective institutions. The Reinvention Centre has encouraged staff and students to think critically about their roles as teachers, learners and practitioners and explore new visions for universities (University of Warwick 2014). The work of the Reinvention Centre has also been welcomed for providing a more critical view of the neoliberal student as consumer discourses and encouraged others in the higher education sector to adopt more critical pedagogies in their institutions (*ibid*). Moreover, it has also helped to create an active research environment that has encouraged

undergraduate students to publish their work in an in-house journal called *Reinvention: A Journal of Undergraduate Research*³⁶.

Student as Producer has also had a significant impact on teaching and learning at the University of Lincoln, especially at undergraduate level where it has been used to develop research within the curriculum. Student as Producer also encourages students to work with academics on research projects as part of the institution's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS)³⁷ that provides small bursaries for students involved in these research projects. Student as Producer was also identified as 'good practice' by the QAA in 2012 and has been adopted by other universities both nationally and internationally, including University of Hertfordshire, the University of Central Lancashire, University of Warwick, Vanderbilt University in the United States, the University of British Columbia in Canada and Macquarie University in Australia (Neary *et al.* 2014).

An undergraduate student at the University of Lincoln has conducted more recent research on the impact of Student as Producer as part of their final year dissertation (Hetherington 2018). The research found that while the principles of Student as Producer still existed at the University and within official documentation, there has been an attempt to hijack its radicalism and replace it with a more marketized version using new labels, such as 'student engagement', 'student voice' and 'student as partners'. Hetherington argues that the branding of Student as Producer in this way has resulted in the radical principles of the project being lost at the institutional level and has been co-opted and repurposed by the University for marketing purposes (*ibid*).

³⁶ The journal can be found at:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/reinvention/issues/volume1issue1/yeung

³⁷ For more information about the UROS Scheme at the University of Lincoln see:

<https://alt.lincoln.ac.uk/portfolio/uross/>

Hetherington concludes by arguing that while the principles of Student as Producer still informs the academic practices of some staff at the University, the marketisation of higher education and the way the University is responding to the increased pressure imposed on it by recent reforms to higher education and new quality assurance measures means it is increasingly unlikely that there will be return to Student as Producer, at least in its radical form, as the organisational principle of the University's teaching and learning strategy (*ibid*).

However, what Hetherington's work (*ibid*) overlooks is the way in which Student as Producer has been corrupted within a neoliberal environment. While Student as Producer may have lost its radical edge, it has become the University's unique selling point (USP) or brand which is heavily referred to at open days and within marketing material. For example: *'On many of our courses you will have the opportunity to work in collaboration with academics, some of whom are world-leading researchers, and your fellow students on projects that can make a real difference to society. We call this approach to teaching "Student as Producer" and it makes the Lincoln experience stand out.'* (University of Lincoln 2019) Moreover, Student as Producer is also being used for TEF purposes and was made reference to when the University was awarded 'Gold Standard' by HEFCE in 2017: *'It is particularly pleasing that the TEF Panel recognised the commitment we make to student engagement across the University, including our Student as Producer ethos.'* (University of Lincoln 2017) Coupled with metrics for assessing teaching and learning within universities, such as the NSS, using Student as Producer in this way runs the risk of further embedding the neoliberal logic of student as consumers wherein the customer knows best and could be used as a mechanism for performance related pay and promotion, which the Association of Colleges and University and Colleges Employers' Association have both tried to introduce into national pay negotiations (UCU 2019).

Moreover, the way in which Student as Producer has been corrupted by the logic of neoliberalism runs the risk of exploiting students who become involved in activities

underpinned by its ethos. One example of this is UROS that was outlined above. As part of UROS, undergraduate students can work alongside academics on real research projects and receive a bursary of up to £1,000 to do this over the summer. These projects usually run from July to the end of September and can entail being students involved in research tool design, data collection, data analysis, writing reports and presenting research findings. While students do not often work full-time over this period, the projects can be labour intensive and, thus, UROS, can be used as a way of conducting research that is much cheaper than employing a research assistant. While there are benefits for the students in terms of gaining work experience and having their names on publications, UROS has the potential to be exploitative and offers no guarantee of employment afterwards. Moreover, on UROS projects I have supervised, students have often commented that they felt they did not deserve to be paid at all because the work experience itself was reward enough – a kind of self-reinforcement of the process of exploitation.

Consequently, Hetherington (*ibid*) agrees with Neary and Saunders (2016) that given the pervasiveness of the logic of neoliberalism within mainstream higher education, radical projects such as Student as Producer are being forced outside of the sector into autonomous learning spaces, such as the Social Science Centre. However, the danger with this strategy is that these radical projects become marginalised and of little threat to the neoliberal model of higher education (Saunders 2017). At some stage, what is required is that the lessons learned from these radical projects be brought back into mainstream higher education in a way that offers a genuine alternative to the current neoliberal model (*ibid*).

Creating Autonomous Learning Spaces Outside of Higher Education: The Birth of the Social Science Centre

The idea of creating an autonomous learning space outside of mainstream higher education began in 2010 as a series of informal discussions between two academics who were involved

in developing Student as Producer at the University of Lincoln: *'It was around April 2010 that a colleague and I would regularly talk about critical social issues and upcoming reforms to universities. At the time, I was a member of Transition Lincoln, and I was also writing on my work blog under the theme of resilient education and was interested in exploring the possibility of some kind of alternative higher education.'* (Respondent 12)

Similar to other informal autonomous learning spaces that emerged around this time, the early discussions about creating the Social Science Centre began in response to the suggested reforms to higher education that were outlined within the *Browne Review* (2009) and then subsequently announced by the Coalition Government in 2010: *'The energy to create the Social Science Centre reached critical mass when we saw the writing on the wall for the funding of the social sciences and the further indenture of people wanting an education. The Browne Review was in full swing, Middlesex had lost its Philosophy Department, and we saw an 'urgent need' to build an alternative model of higher education that wasn't subject to the discipline of debt and the market, while at the same time protesting against the Coalition government's actions and fighting for funding to be restored.'* (Social Science Centre 2013). Indeed, those involved in these discussions felt strongly about the reforms: *'When the fees went to £9,000, and public funding was cut from the arts, humanities, business, law and social sciences that felt like an act of intellectual violence and a declaration of war against the concept of critique. Whether it was conscious or not, that is what it felt like to me, and as social scientists, we were on the verge of becoming extinct.'* (Respondent 17)

Initially, the Social Science Centre was envisioned as a small-scale higher education institution that would have no more than 20 students enrolled at any-one-time and would use different spaces in the city of Lincoln to deliver its education provision. The plan was that the Social Science Centre's courses would be written and delivered by academics, who had already expressed an interest in becoming members of the Centre and would volunteer their time for

free with degrees validated by the University of Lincoln. The Social Science Centre would be funded by its members who would contribute a suggested amount of 1 hour of their net salary³⁸, although this was not a requirement. Moreover, it was made clear that those on low wages, unemployed, in receipt of welfare payments or in full-time education were exempt from contributing. The rationale for the running the Social Science Centre in this way was that it would help keep financial overheads low and allow students who were unwilling or unable to pay the £9,000 per annum ‘hard-cap’, suggested by the Coalition Government, to be able to study for a degree. Interestingly, the initial idea was to work with the University of Lincoln and a plan to this effect was written up and submitted to its senior management team through its staff-suggestion scheme:

The proposal is that the University supports the development of an independent Social Science Centre in Lincoln. The Social Science Centre will offer credit-bearing courses in Sociology, Politics and Philosophy, programmes not currently available as part of the University of Lincoln’s portfolio. A key aspect of the Centre is that students would not pay any tuition fees. The Centre would be community-based, utilising already existing public spaces in Lincoln, e.g., libraries, museums, schools, community centres. The Centre will be run as a co-operative, involving local people in the managing and governance of this provision. The courses will be provided by academic members of the co-operative on a voluntary basis. The role of the university will be to provide accreditation for the programmes and an advisory role in establishing the Centre as well as an ongoing supportive input. There will be no direct ongoing costs for which the university will be liable. An important principle for the Centre is that it is sustainable, and, for that reason, the number of students will not exceed twenty in any academic year.

³⁸ The Social Science Centre is still funded in this way. For more information about contribution rates see: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KX5wAeMSNXTRQEljw6EssYbzGd424G--A-7M72pEWPM/edit?authkey=CLa0maoN&hl=en_GB&hl=en_GB&authkey=CLa0maoN#gid=0

It is intended that this model of sustainable, co-operatively run centres for higher education will act as a catalyst for the creation of other centres for higher education.

(Winn 2010)

The staff suggestion submission that documented the original idea for the Social Science Centre was discussed at a core executive meeting where senior managers indicated that they did not want the University to be directly involved in the project. The reason given by the University of Lincoln was that there was a potential conflict of interest with its business model; however, no objections were raised with the project being set-up independently of the University. *'We were given tacit approval to develop the idea of the Social Science Centre further independently and not connected to the University of Lincoln.'* (Respondent 12) Indeed, the Social Science Centre has remained unconnected to the University of Lincoln throughout its existence.

After receiving the University of Lincoln's response at the meeting, an email was sent to other academics, also involved in radical pedagogical projects themselves, who might be interested in becoming members of the Social Science Centre: *'Initially, as you'll see below, we're proposing that courses are run in existing public spaces, with a view to buying or renting a city-centre property further down the line. Attached to this (preferably on the premises) would be some kind of co-operatively run business (I like the idea of a decent bakery – you can't buy real bread in Lincoln), which would bring in an income to help cover running costs and act as a way to connect with local residents apart from and beyond the educational provision of the Centre. If you're interested and in Lincoln, then a few of us are meeting in Lincoln at 5 pm on the 25th September 2010 to discuss the practicalities of this idea further. Members of the Cowley Club and Sumac Centre will be there to talk about their experience setting up their respective Social Centres.'* (Winn 2010) Thus, the idea was to set up the Social Science Centre as part of a self-sustaining business. Even in those very early discussions thought was being

given to adopting a co-operative organisational form and being situated spatially in a way that would be accessible to the general public.

Developing an Organisational Form

In response to the blog post, six people started to meet on a regular basis once a month to discuss setting up the Social Science Centre³⁹. One of the main themes that emerged during these meetings was the importance of adopting an organisational form as way of distinguishing it between simply being a lecture series or a reading group: *'We were always aware that the Social Science Centre should have some kind of institutional form. At the time, there were lots of other projects being set-ups like lecture series and reading groups, but they had no real organisational form and tended to be ephemeral. We knew from the get-go that we wanted to have an organisational form and create a new form of social institution.'* (Respondent 17) Thus, adopting an organisational form was seen as being important for the longevity of the project, but also as part of a more radical political project to create a new form of social institution that had the potential to prefigure post-capitalist ways of being.

Indeed, the adoption of a radical organisational form has been a key feature of the Social Science Centre and the research found that this was one of the main differences between this and other autonomous learning spaces: *'A lot of other free universities set up as a protest, the Social Science Centre is different because it has made a long-term commitment to creating an organisational form, which is incredible. Other groups didn't really set themselves up to think that it might actually go on; they just wanted to see what was going to happen and I think that leads to fatigue and conflict. I think what is unusual and precious about the Social Science Centre, that it is a long-term commitment.'* (Respondent 7) This is an important point as it is part of an attempt to move beyond protests and create an alternative organisational form that

³⁹ I attended some of these early meetings but struggled to do so regularly all as I worked in a further education college in Mansfield so getting to Lincoln for meetings was often difficult.

addresses the problems highlighted with the current neoliberal model of higher education. The Social Science Centre's organisational form is a democratic member-run organisation that is constitutionally the common property of its members meaning it is owned and controlled by them (Neary and Winn 2015). The significance of this is that it allowed the Social Science Centre to function in a similar way to the autonomous spaces outlined in Chapter 2 in that it was not only created as a form of resistance against the Coalition's reforms but also as a space to experiment with alternative organisational forms that are based on democratic and co-operative principles. Moreover, based on these principles that are contra neoliberal ideology, it creates a space that has the potential to prefigure an alternative model of higher education institution.

The push for the Social Science Centre to adopt an organisational form was primarily driven by two academics whose research interests were grounded in radical social theory - particularly a Marxist theoretical perspective. However, the research found that not all those involved in discussions at this time, or indeed later on as the project developed, were of a Marxist persuasion, nor were all members of the Social Science Centre particularly interested in the project having an organisational form. This is an important theme within the research because the push for a Marxist theoretical underpinning of the project, and how it would be articulated in subsequent publications, was a perpetual source of contention among group members who did not always subscribe to this theoretical perspective. This is perhaps not surprising because as Mason (2012) points out, many of those involved in similar projects, and certainly anti-austerity protests, were not only sceptical of theoretical and political doctrines and those that promoted them, but often refused to adhere to any. While some people involved with the Social Science Centre may have fitted Mason's description, it is more accurate to say that members tended to be wedded to different theoretical perspectives rather than none, which could make

conversations about the nature of the Social Science Centre as a radical political project challenging at times.

Nevertheless, in these early stages, those involved in the project started to discuss the importance of the Social Science Centre having an organisational form. Moreover, people started to read related academic literature on the topic out-of-which developed a general consensus that the Social Science Centre needed to be more than a protest or an abstract ideal, but needed to be a recognisable social institution (Bonnett 2013): *'At the time people were theorising their responses to the Coalition's reforms around ideas of post-capitalism and that is particularly important when you think of the Social Science Centre because it is not just about anti this thing or that, but an attempt to be a different kind of productive space where we try and create things.'* (Respondent 1) Thus, from this early stage, it was clear that the Social Science Centre would be more than a protest and would attempt to experiment with alternative higher education provision that had the potential to prefigure a different form of higher education institution.

With regards to these early discussions, it was here that the research found links between autonomous spaces and the Social Science Centre as both were influenced by radical organisational forms that emerged out the social centre movement, which began in Italy in the 1970s and spread across Europe and took root in the UK in the 1980s (Wright 2002). Indeed, the research found that the social centre movement and the idea for the Social Science Centre had a similar ethos in that they were both conceived as radical political projects that developed organisational forms that attempted to challenge the logic of capitalism based on co-operative values and principles to encourage self-help and self-organisation among the people who used these spaces (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006). Indeed, the Social Science Centre derives its name from the movement and acknowledges its influence on the project: *'The Social Science Centre is grounded in forms of organisation that have arisen out of the development of the*

social centre network in the UK and around the world. Social centres have emerged as sites for the development of autonomous politics and resistance to the growing corporate take-over, enclosure and alienation of everyday life. Social centres convert unused local buildings into self-organised sites for the provision of radical community use, social services, music, art and publishing.' (Neary 2011)

Inspired by the social centre movement, those involved in creating the Social Science Centre wanted to try and better understand how different co-operative organisational forms have been used in practice. Here, the research found that the Social Science Centre began to create a network with others involved in projects which had adopted similar models of self-organisation: *'...we invited Radical Roots to one of our monthly meetings to talk about co-operatives regarding education. We also went to SUMA in Nottingham and had a meeting with people in education there. We saw what they look like and how they operate scale, involvement and problems. We did our research, if you like.'* (Respondent 12) Based on what was learned from speaking to people involved in these projects, the group agreed to adopt a co-operative organisational form, which seemed to fit best with the nature of the Social Science Centre as a political project: *'At the time we adopted the co-operative model because it was the best available to us. It was the one that we had most affinity with. It was a political project, and the co-operative gave the model a form.'* (Respondent 12) This is important to note as it shows how the Social Science Centre worked with similar groups to learn from their experiences to develop the project.

Up to this point it seems as if the decision to adopt a co-operative organisational form was straight forward. However, this was not always a smooth process as one respondent pointed out: *'We hadn't had an engagement with co-operative history, co-operative values. We did not have a sense of any of this. We were just trying to find our way. We all knew things that had gone on, such as workers' education associations, a rich tradition of autonomous education and*

social centre for education, but none of us had really engaged with the history of that. We were fumbling in the dark really. It was messy.' (Respondent 1) This is important as it illustrates some of the difficulties in setting up projects like the Social Science Centre. However, the point of documenting this is to help similar projects in an attempt to make the process easier for them.

Those involved with setting up the Social Science Centre at this stage decided to pursue the idea of becoming a co-operative and contacted the Lincolnshire Co-operative Development Agency (LCDA) to provide guidance and help write a draft of a co-operative constitution for the Social Science Centre: *'We went to meet the Lincolnshire Co-operative Development Agency. They went away and drafted a constitution for us based on what we told them, and it was very good. We met once to go through it, tweaked it a bit and then agreed on it. They spoke to a colleague in Manchester to go through the constitution, and the colleague said they were increasingly getting similar requests for help to set up anarchist, non-hierarchical consensus-based forms of co-operative constitution.'* (Respondent 12)

With support from the LCDA, the group drafted a constitution to create a 'non-hierarchical unincorporated co-operative' with the final constitution signed by the co-founding members of the Social Science Centre on the 2nd May 2011⁴⁰. An unincorporated co-operative is a form of co-operative that is not differentiated in law from its members (Co-operatives UK 2018). While this has some benefits, such as very little, if any, start-up costs are required, there is no legal requirement to keep ongoing records of the organisation's activities and members names do not have to be kept on public records. However, being unincorporated does mean that members are personally liable for any debt accrued by the organisation and successful negligence claims brought in civil law (Co-operatives UK 2018). Interestingly, this was not something that was

⁴⁰ You can find a final copy of the constitution here: <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/constitution-final.pdf>

explained to me when I became a member of the Social Science Centre, nor were some of the members I spoke to aware of this legal liability. The reason for this oversight was not only that those involved in creating the Social Science Centre were not experts in law, but also their focus was on the creation of a radical political project. However, perhaps what is required is more legal guidance and expertise in setting these organisations up, especially when it comes to legal requirements and obligations and making members aware of this and their responsibilities before the sign up.

The research found that the decision to adopt a co-operative organisational form has been important for the Social Science Centre because it means that the organisation is both owned and controlled by its members which has encouraged the development of a framework to work in a more democratic and non-hierarchical way. Thus, in a similar manner to autonomous spaces, this has allowed the Social Science Centre to function not only as a critique, or a form of resistance, to the neoliberal university but also a place to experiment with an alternative model of higher education provision as outlined by one respondent: *‘What I think makes the Social Science Centre a distinctive political project is that the idea of having all students as members overcomes the categories of academic and student, it doesn't overcome the differences in knowledge, but it overcomes a division of labour effectively – or it tries to overcome, it does not overcome it overnight. Also, it attempts to overcome the implicit, although these days completely explicit, exchange relationship between the producer and consumer.’* (Respondent 12) Moreover, this is grounded in a Marxist perspective that is critical of the form of production and labour within capitalist social relations and attempts to create an alternative form of being.

Unsurprisingly, there have been difficulties involved in this process. During the period this research was conducted, the Social Science Centre has remained embryonic and fragile and all of us have more of an appreciation of just how much is involved in running this kind of

experiment outside of mainstream higher education: *'It's been a lot of hard work and one of the things that I have realised is how much hard work organising anything outside of the institution takes.'* (Respondent 13). However, the importance of the Social Science Centre's co-operative organisational form is that it has created a space to think critically about the current neoliberal model of higher education and to experiment with alternative forms of self-organisation: *'The Social Science Centre is a critique of a problem in an institutional form. It still seems a necessary one, possibly even more necessary than ever. The Social Science Centre is our way of trying to address it incrementally. It's not the solution; it is a way of thinking it through. It provides a space to work on something, which is a small way is effective.'* (Respondent 12) Thus, as a group, members of the Social Science Centre have struggled not only with some of the practical aspects of creating and running the project, but also developing it theoretically as a radical political project.

Grounded in Democratic and Non-Hierarchical Principles

Like many of those autonomous learning spaces that emerged *circa* 2010, the Social Science Centre was influenced by democratic and non-hierarchical forms of decision-making processes and adopted a style of consensus decision-making as a way of linking practice to its radical theoretical and political standpoint (Bookchin 1982). The research found that the group were keen to adopt this model because it addressed some of the issues people had raised about models of governance currently found in higher education, especially concerning power and hierarchy: *'I think consensus is important because everyone gets to voice their opinion and we all have to agree. It's what undermines hierarchy, and it allows transparency, it allows accountability.'* (Respondent 14) This is further evidence of the way in which the Social Science Centre was experimenting with an alternative organisational form and decision-making process that is contra to the current neoliberal model of higher education.

Consensus decision-making was suggested by some members of the group who were also part of the Transition Movement⁴¹ in Lincoln and had recently attended a workshop on consensus decision-making ‘*We had a few people who had been involved in the Transition movement and some of the environmental movements that have involved consensus. I had a perception that consensus decision-making might be more deliberative and less liable to co-option and you could begin to do away with hierarchy.*’ (Respondent 1) However, there was a critical awareness that consensus decision-making would not magic away issues around power and hierarchies. Moreover, much to the enlightenment of the group, some members were able to share their experiences of the consensus decision-making process: ‘*Consensus is a radical move away from the way things are usually organised, and I think that was part of the radical thinking of the Social Science Centre from the start. I lived in a radical pacifist anarchist community for a year-and-a-half where the principle was consensus. I’ve seen the problems with it. I like the idea because it’s radical, different and challenging, but it has enormous problems associated with it.*’ (Respondent 6)

Another member commented that they had experienced similar problems with consensus decision-making while they were part of Occupy LSX: ‘*The problem with consensus decision-making is that we all come with different amounts of expertise, competence, skill, practice, social capital and having a professor sitting in the room with a student is not necessarily an equal relationship. You might try to make it so that it is as equitable as possible, but it isn’t an equal relationship. We were trying to overcome that, but it did and did rely heavily on people reigning themselves in. You can lead a session down a direction by the force of your argument, and I saw it at Tent City University. I saw a real example of that in Zuccotti Park where a decision to buy flags for a demonstration was co-opted by the organising committee.*’ (Respondent 1)

⁴¹ More information about the Transition Movement can be found here; <http://transitionlincoln.org.uk/>

However, the research found that being able to draw on people's experience of being involved in political activism and experiments with more participatory forms of democracy helped others to think through the potential uses and abuses of the process and nurtured the group's critical awareness of the challenges that lay ahead in continually addressing the development of informal hierarchies and power within the group as one respondent commented: *'It takes strong individuals and a strong collective will to keep outing power all of the time...to keep pointing out where people are being marginalised or where we are not striving for consensus, or where people are not being heard. Otherwise, people just leave.'* (Respondent 1)

To try and get a better understanding of how consensus might work in practice at the Social Science Centre, the group decided to organise a consensus decision-making training session⁴², which was held in 2012. In preparation for this training session participants read three publications about decision-making process, which were: Starhawk (2002) 'Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising'; Freeman (1970) 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness and Curious George Brigade (2002) 'The End of Arrogance: Decentralization and Anarchist Organizing'. During the training session, some themes were discussed by participants, which had emerged from the literature, such as being aware of people's rhythms and emotions, people's willingness and/or ability to be able to work as part of a group and the potential for people to experience burn-out. By the end of the session the group compiled a list of suggestions to think about when using consensus decision-making, which was: (i) the need to be aware of, and challenge, power with regards to decision-making, which includes rotating jobs roles and duties; (ii) the need to share our values, vision and objectives as an organisation

⁴² For more information about this training events see:
<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/blog/2012/10/13/decision-making-and-organisation-workshop/>

on a regular basis so that we remember them and challenge and change them when necessary; and, (iii) the need to be aware of people's feelings and find a space that allows them to be expressed.

Akin to some of the approaches to decision-making addressed previously, the model adopted by the Social Science Centre means that all members have to agree, or at least decide not to block, a particular course of action. However, one of the main problems we experienced with this model is trying to get all members to engage in discussion. The main reasons for this are that not all members are based in Lincoln so are unable to attend all meetings, so members' level of engagement with the project tends to vary. In reality, decisions at the Social Science Centre tend to be made by a small number of active members, usually around ten people, but this fluctuated depending on people's commitments. Moreover, we found the process does not always run smoothly in practice and there has been dissensus among members on some issues, especially in the early stages of developing education provision. However, as one member of the group rightly pointed out, discussion and dissensus are integral to the democratic process and have been functional in the development of the Social Science Centre *'I think it is a really interesting and important thing and it's messy, but the ding-donging and too-and-froing is the sound of democracy at work. It's evolving, you have to revisit constantly, and certain things are never going to be finished.'* (Respondent 7) Thus, not always agreeing is perhaps a sign that the model is working as people feel confident to disagree and state alternative views. However, what it overlooks is that there can be informal hierarchies within a group such as this, especially with regards to knowledge, experience and the amount of time one can contribute to the project. This is a theme that reoccurs throughout this research and will be addressed in more detail below.

Student Recruitment and Learning Support

Once the Social Science Centre had been formally constituted as an incorporated co-operative, discussion then began to focus on the level of education provision it would offer, the types of students we wanted to recruit, and what learning support we would offer for students. At this stage, some members of the group thought that the Social Science Centre should offer basic literacy and numeracy courses as students were most likely to be mature learners who had been outside of formal education for long periods of time and would thus require support with their studies. Surprisingly, there was some opposition to this suggestion with some members arguing that members were not qualified to provide this kind of support. Indeed, as a way of dealing with this issue, one response was that the Social Science Centre should have an entry test for students. The rationale provided for this was that because the Social Science Centre would deliver courses at the level of higher education, students would require a certain level of education and skills to be able to get the most out its courses: *'The discussion we had considered if we wanted students to have 'HEness' before applying or not as what we are developing is an equivalent to HE.'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2011)

The research found that this was a difficult issue to resolve because, on the one hand, some members of the group thought that studying at higher education requires a certain level of education and/or experience and, on the other hand, some thought having an entry test would exclude some people from attending the Social Science Centre's courses and recreating the elitist nature of mainstream higher education that it appeared to be so critical of as one respondent considered: *'The entry test was not in order to protect the integrity of the Social Science Centre, but that in order to operate within this space there is a threshold set of skills and practices that we can help you work towards, but if you are going to get the most out of this space you probably need... Hhmm, it's difficult. Once you start setting these things you*

then marginalise people and recreate a set of hierarchies you are trying to get rid of.'

(Respondent 1)

Some members suggested asking students to complete an application form that required them to state their highest qualification to assess whether they were suitably qualified to study at the Social Science Centre. Again, the research found that many in the group expressed their discomfort with this as it might put off people who were already among the least likely to study in higher education: *Does the creation of a form asking for highest qualifications make this into a selecting/selective organisation? Several people are uncomfortable with this. How might this affect people who have already been excluded or suffered symbolic violence from mainstream educational institutions? Should we have alternative ways of representing literacies or social science, and conceptualising qualification? The point is not to exclude, and ideally to admit anyone who wants to study, but to avoid setting people up for disappointment.*

(Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2011)

What I found surprising about this discussion was that Social Science Centre had been created to provide an alternative model of higher education for those that were being excluded by the neoliberal model yet were creating barriers for some of those who were likely to attend its courses, especially mature learners and replicate a whole range of education inequalities that we were critical of within mainstream higher education. Nevertheless, after lengthy discussion, it was collectively agreed that there would not be an entry test, nor would applicants be asked to state their highest qualification on an application form. Instead, members sensibly agreed that *'...we will accept anyone who applies to be a member of the Centre – no one will be turned away – and that we will work with people who want to participate to find out what sorts of activities, study and research will be most beneficial for them.'* (Social Science Meeting Notes 2011) Moreover, it was also agreed that the best way to do this would be to have all students together on one course and provide differential support as appropriate rather than streaming

and labelling students which would again reproduce the symbolic violence that perhaps many of these people had already experienced within education: *'While there was some debate about whether the Social Science Centre could deal with 'remedial' (prior to higher) education, there was a strong feeling that we should not use this word or type of language; that we should not subscribe in any way to a deficit model of knowledge and education; that questions of inclusion and 'levels' should instead be pursued through discussions of where people are beginning from and want to go, how to work together collectively across different perspectives and degrees of knowledge/skill/understanding, etc.'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2011)

The research found that, ultimately, the decision to support students in this way has worked well: *'On reflection, some of the scholars who got in wouldn't have if we had set these requirements. They have added a lot to the Social Science Centre and are another piece of the puzzle to the jigsaw that we would not have known without them.'* (Respondent 1) These sentiments were echoed by another member who commented that they would not have been there had there been an entrance test: *'I think the support provided by the Social Science Centre is important. I can cope with the level, but I do need some support with grammar, spelling and my vocabulary. The entrance exam sounds horrible; I don't think I would have passed it, which would be a shame really.'* (Respondent 5) The importance of this is trying to create a space wherein students do not face the same issues as they have in previous education settings.

Adopting a Pedagogical Model: Student as Producer and Critical Pedagogy

Members of the Social Science Centre began to think about how it might deliver its courses and started to discuss different pedagogical models that it could adopt and how they might work in practice. As mentioned previously, some of the group had been involved with the development of Student as Producer at the University of Lincoln, and this was suggested as one possible model for the Social Science Centre to adopt. There was an attempt to explain the main principles of Student as Producer at one of the monthly meetings, especially attempts

to question and challenge the distinction between student and teacher: *'All engaged in the educational process are considered equal in the search for understanding, happiness and knowledge to promote peace, direct democracy and justice. 'Scholar' is not professionalised as much as 'academic' and may help in breaking down the distinction between professional academic members and students.'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2011)

Some members of the group thought that adopting Student as Producer as a pedagogical model was exciting: *'I remember the debate about teacher/pupils, and we decided on the terms scholars. That we view teachers and student together as part of the learning process I think is very exciting.'* (Respondent 6) However, some members were unfamiliar with Student as Producer and found the concept more challenging: *'In those early meetings, it was kind of abstract; we were thinking about the form and thinking about the content; we were thinking about what the curriculum would look like, and that was problematic because there were a number of us from either further education or higher education and you come with a predefined view of what a curriculum should look like rather than having a sense of if it's all going to have to be negotiated. That can be quite threatening I think for people who are used to being controlling in a classroom.'* (Respondent 3) For some members, then, attempting to democratise teaching and learning in this way was not only unfamiliar, but was considered a challenge. Similar to Student as Producer, this approach was different to how many people had experienced education, but something all involved in the discussion saw the benefits of and was thus accepted.

Nevertheless, with some discussion and reassurance by members who were familiar with Student as Producer, the group collectively decided to adopt the philosophy to underpin all the Social Science Centre's courses. Moreover, it was agreed that the Social Science Centre should also adopt elements of critical pedagogy: *'It was suggested that we could adopt a critical pedagogical approach, such as outlined by a basic Freirean methodology where a group of*

learners (in any context) work to create concepts or 'generative themes' that are meaningful for them and relevant for their lives – often with the help of objects, creative productions, images, artefacts, etc. – and that these concepts are developed into pedagogical devices for raising questions and exploring ideas and themes.' (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2012) Based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), critical pedagogy challenges the traditional 'banking model' of teaching wherein the teacher (as expert) imparts knowledge to students who are perceived as 'empty vessels' to be filled with information and, instead, starting from students' understanding of the world works with them to think critically about their experiences.

The group then started to discuss what type of courses should be offered. To help do this a 'Curriculum Working Group' was set up to conduct research about curriculum development and explore what courses might look like and how they might be created collaboratively to reflect the Social Science Centre's co-operative ethos. Members also started to think about how to connect teaching and research within the Social Science Centre's courses and potentially work on issues experienced by the local community: *'What about learning by doing research – identifying social issues in Lincoln and all of us becoming learners (while drawing on expertise of experienced teachers/researchers) in order to generate knowledge and understanding concepts as we proceed: a reading/discussion programme would grow out of research needs. This would involve certain risks – unknown outcomes perhaps – but would be an exciting learning experience. Ideas suggested: homelessness; mental health; social inequality – these could act as a catalyst for further discussion of the curriculum?'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2012)

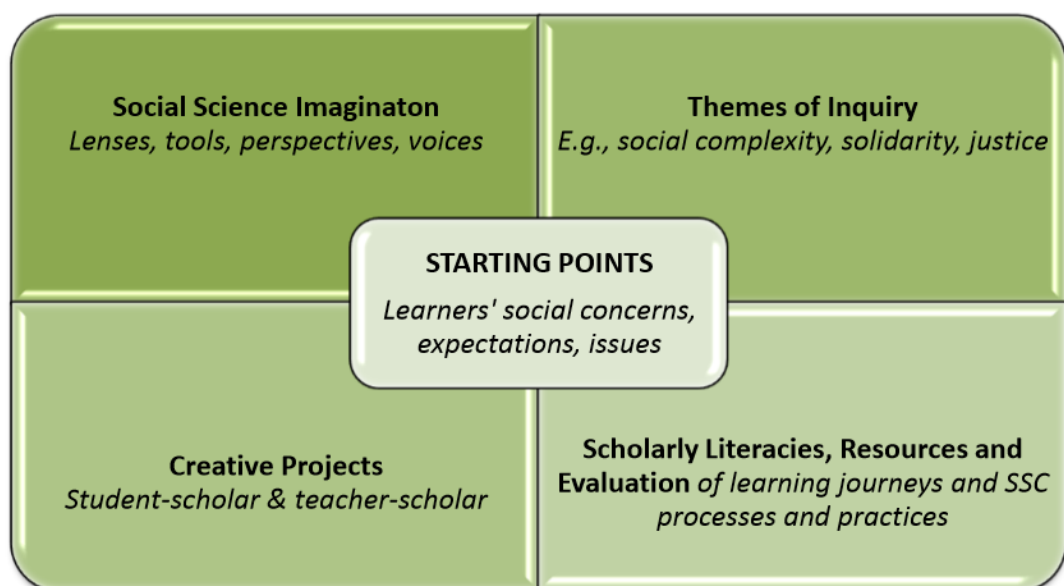
Members agreed that this would be an interesting way to approach teaching and learning and would fit with the Social Science Centre's ethos and the pedagogical philosophy that the group

had started to develop using Student as Producer and critical pedagogy. Accordingly, the group began to discuss ways in which a course could be created that started from issues that affect people's everyday lives: *'It was suggested that we could begin from key concepts rather than disciplines, subjects or themes. These could include, for example, culture, economy, power, and society, with all being (a) localised and explored through experiences of place, and (b) grounded in everyday experiences. Concepts could also include gender, race, class, sexuality, age, the body; these could be explored through a matrix by which people could 'warp and weft' ideas and learning, weave a fabric of a communal experience of learning together, and/or follow 'rhizomatic' routes of knowledge and relationship in new directions.'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2012) These discussions were important and highlights the way in which the Social Science Centre was trying to engage with issues such as social inequality and how they intersected with different identities.

Members had already decided that the Social Science Centre would broadly address the social sciences, so the initial idea was to offer an 'Introduction to Social Science', or 'Investigating the Social Sciences' course that could *'...take the form of a course of short lectures or other forms of introduction, engaged as a group of student-scholars and teacher-scholars at all levels, offering sources of information, etc.'* (Social Science Centre Meeting Notes 2012) In an attempt to try and link together the idea of starting courses from people's own experiences to the social sciences the group started to discuss how C. Wright Mills' 'Sociological Imagination' might provide a useful framework for doing this by allowing scholars to begin the course by exploring their 'personal troubles' and then, using different lenses from the social sciences, begin to see them more like 'social issues'.

To support this process, members of the group developed a visual illustration of the Social Science Centre's Curriculum Framework (see below) that highlights how scholars would start from their concerns, expectations and issues. From this, scholars would then develop themes

of inquiry that would be explored throughout the course. Scholars would then work together to explore these themes of inquiry using the tenets of C. Wright Mills's Sociological Imagination as lenses or tools to think critically about the themes that had been developed. The idea was that these discussions would lead to scholars working on collaborative creative projects that reflected their concerns and issues, but through the lenses of the social sciences to understand them. Scholars would also track their progress and development of scholarly literacies throughout the process through an individual blog that would help them to reflect on their learning at the Social Science Centre. This approach to teaching and learning would be embodied and tested out in the delivery of its first course, the 'Social Science Imagination'.



(The Social Science Curriculum Framework 2012)

The research also found that in an attempt to create a viable alternative to mainstream higher education, the Social Science Centre would give scholars the opportunity to submit work to be assessed and work towards a 'Certificate of Higher Education': *'Students will not leave the Centre with a university degree, they will have a learning experience that is equivalent to the level of a degree. Each student will receive a Certificate of Higher Education with an*

extensively written transcript detailing their academic and intellectual achievements.' (Social Science Centre 2012) This would be done by scholars' work being sent to members of the Social Science Centre (usually academics) to assess it and provide a detailed transcript. While the Social Science Centre does not have degree awarding powers nor is it connected to an institution that does, it was thought that the Certificate of Higher Education in the form of a detailed transcript and portfolio of work could be used by the scholar to help find employment should they so wish. This is important because providing some form of certificate for the students' work differentiates the Social Science Centre's courses from a lecture series or a reading group. Making this distinction was important to members of the Social Science Centre as part of an attempt to create an alternative form of higher education provision. However, it also runs the risk of potentially replicating the current model of higher education with an emphasis on employability and education as a means of securing that.

With regards to developing a pedagogical model, the research found that one of the most important things for the Social Science Centre was aligning it with its ethos of a democratic and non-hierarchical organisational form. This appears to have worked well as one scholar commented: *'I could distinguish between people with different expertise, but I didn't feel like there was any hierarchy. People have their interests and specialisms, so you would look to them rather than looking towards the teacher.'* (Respondent 14) A key feature of this has been for the Social Science Centre to develop its courses collaboratively with scholars who commented that they have been engaged by the themes they have studied and felt part of the process. To some extent, this has questioned power relations within the group, especially around the roles of teacher and student as all are involved in the process of designing the curriculum: *'It felt very democratic to me. We weren't just being told what the reading for the week was. We got to decide. We had a very open discussion about it. Nobody came across as pompous or had an I know better than you attitude. I felt like I was involved in the decisions in*

a meaningful way. It all had a natural flow, and I don't think anyone went away from that session thinking they had been coerced.' (Respondent 2)

One of the ways we tried to make the classes more democratic was to rotate facilitation. It was hoped this would allow different voices to be heard and challenge power, which was successful as one scholar commented: *'I think it is fantastic that people get to be facilitators because you get to be teachers. You pick something that you might not know much about and learn about it which I find really interesting. I've spent hours and hours on the internet, looking at books, it's actually been really fascinating. Although, I felt the pressure when it was my week to facilitate. I feel like I owe it to everybody to do a really good session and to research properly, so I do feel under pressure and under the spotlight a little bit.'* (Respondent 5)

The research found that what helped make the practice of rotating facilitators within the group work has been the support that other scholars have provided both in the preparation of sessions and when they are delivered: *'Rotating note taking, and facilitation has been really great and really quite eye-opening. I think it addresses issues of hierarchy, the distinction between teachers and students. It's a pedagogical principle around different voices and opinions. It deals with power and reduces the burden of teaching from one particular person.'* (Respondent 12) This supportive environment was fostered by the friendship and trust that developed among scholars on Social Science Centre courses and the way in which we have attempted to value and include all scholars in the process of teaching and learning that challenges traditional hierarchical relationships between teachers and students. Here, one scholar outlines how this process worked and the impact it had on them when preparing for their turn to facilitate: *'Other scholars have been really supportive as part of the process. Other scholars sent me literature that I would not have found by myself, which was really useful. I emailed the group in advance to see if everyone was comfortable with what I had planned and whether it was pitched at the right level because I was not really sure what level I should pitch it at.'* (Respondent 5)

As with all these attempts to democratise teaching and learning, which are fundamentally experimental in nature, rotating facilitators has not always been an easy process, especially for those scholars who do not have experience of the teaching or even studying in higher education. However, the research found that scholars have risen to the challenge and learned something from the process. This has encouraged scholars not only to teach others, but to teach themselves as one commented: *'I learned a lot from the process of facilitating the session. Coming to classes normally I get heavily involved in the reading and the notes from the previous reading and preparing something to say about those things is one thing, but to actually go into great detail to make sure that you know the subject inside-out and back-to-front is quite daunting, but can be very refreshing because being under a little bit of pressure to rise above where you are. To spend that much time on the research took me hours and hours, but the result was that I felt on top of the subject at the time and it seemed to go well. I think the subject matter created something I did not expect but led to an open and honest debate.'* (Respondent 2)

This process also encouraged scholars to read more about what they had learned during the sessions as well as in preparation for subsequent sessions so that they could inform discussions: *'I would go away and do research about things I had learned in the Social Science Centre because I was interested, and I wanted to contribute more to the classes.'* (Respondent 14) This is important pedagogically and shows how scholars were engaged with the course in a similar way to that outlined by Freire (1970). Some of this attributable to the fact that the scholars had developed the course themselves and were interested in what was being covered in class as it helped them understand their own lives. Again, the research found that all of this was made possible by the friendship and trust that developed among scholars on Social Science Centre courses, which meant they felt able and supported to facilitate sessions and to add to discussions: *'It's not just the organising principles that are important, but human values like*

faith, value and generosity and respect and courage. Just to go into that space having prepared something and then talk about it and then not to be made to feel inferior is a deeply moving thing.' (Respondent 1) In many ways this connected with the work of hooks (1994) and the creation of safe spaces for scholars.

However what was interesting was that some scholars found it difficult to move away from more traditional approaches to teaching and learning, which they had become accustomed to during their educational experiences. This was explained by one scholar who at the time was studying in higher education: *'I found it hard to get away from the traditional way of learning and I can remember doing a presentation and just talking at people, and I remember somebody saying that it should be more about debate so try to engage people rather than just talking at them.*' (Respondent 15) I also found it hard to relinquish control at times when I was facilitating sessions as it was against the way I had been taught to teach and had been compounded through practice. Discussion would shift and people would draw upon a mix of life experiences and theory. This reminded me of a passage I had read in hooks's (work (1994, p. 39): *'The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained.'* However, I found that once one became accustomed to this method of inquiry it became liberating and humanistic as we were collectively involved in trying to make sense of our lives and the world around us.

The research found that another important aspect of the Social Science Centre's pedagogical approach was the way in which a detailed set of notes were taken about what was covered in each session on its courses and then posted online. This allowed people who were unable to attend the sessions to follow the course and those that did attend to pick up on things they may have missed and study them in more detail. Like the facilitation of sessions, the responsibility for notetaking was shared between scholars and rotated on a weekly basis. The research found

that note taking was important because it kept a record of what was being discussed, but, more importantly, scholars appeared to understand discussions differently, and their notes often provided different insights into the themes and topics that were talked about in the sessions: *'The session notes were useful because it was a record of what people had brought up. It was a record of people mentioning different ideas, explaining ideas and evaluating ideas. Also, when different people wrote the notes each week, you got a different perspective.'* (Respondent 14) While the rationale for doing this originally was to equally share the workload. We found it helped to democratise the production of knowledge as people took turns to capture what was being discussed and adding their own interpretation.

In this sense, even those scholars who knew the subject matter well gained new insights from other scholars. However, the intensity of the process of notetaking meant that it was hard to participate in discussions as one scholar commented: *'With note-taking, because I was concentrating more on what people say I found it less easy to be involved in the class, but that in itself is a very good teaching aid because it allows you to listen more than speak. It was refreshing for me to have that as an experience because it allowed me to pick what I thought were the important points and listen to what people were really saying rather than hear a few words and the comment on that.'* (Respondent 2)

In general, the research found that the Social Science Centre had created an environment where people feel comfortable to engage in group discussion. This was highlighted by one scholar who was studying for an undergraduate degree at a university at the time and compared the two experiences: *'I felt more relaxed than if I had walked into a class in university. I think they are the same in that they are informative, but I think they are different because the Social Science Centre is more co-operative, so people were able to put forward their own views whereas, in a university, there will always be some people who are reluctant to do that.'* (Respondent 14)

What the scholar is describing here is that the approach to teaching and learning at the Social Science Centre has created an environment where people felt safe to offer their views in a way that is not always the case in mainstream higher education. Interestingly, many of us sat in this class taught in a university, which highlights how our pedagogical approach at the Social Science Centre had affected the relationship between teachers and students in a way that might not be possible within mainstream higher education. The same view was offered by another scholar: *'I feel really valued by the group, and even though I have a lack of academic knowledge I feel like I can add as much to discussions as other people. I don't feel less of myself even though I don't know as much. I feel like my opinion is well regarded, and I feel like a valuable member of the group.'* (Respondent 5)

Nevertheless, while the Social Science Centre appears to have learned a lot from running its courses, there is still a great deal of work to do, especially with regards hidden hierarchies and power structures which, during the period this research was conducted, was still a problem. Indeed, the research found that these hidden hierarchies and power structures are not always obvious, but are detectable in the Social Science Centre's course reading lists, for example, as one scholar commented: *'The fact that we have got through this semester knowing that the syllabus is predominantly written by white men and really not doing anything about it; we should be ripping it up because we only have this one perspective. What are we really learning about, we are learning about that one perspective. If you read from another perspective, the world shifts.'* (Respondent 13) The same scholar commented that they thought these power relations, especially around gender, also existed in the Social Science Centre courses: *'I sit there and really beat myself; I wouldn't let this happen at home or in the classroom and the fact that all of the women are sat around laughing as well. It's not right, and it pisses me off and what's worse is that I know intellectually what is going on.'* (Respondent 13) This is an important point and illustrates how the Social Science Centre created different inequalities

while trying to address others. What it also highlights is the importance of challenging power and hierarchies at all times. There has to be an emphasis on challenging all forms of oppression and domination of projects like the Social Science Centre are to be successful.

The research also found that the Social Science Centre's courses tended to focus on a limited range of theoretical perspectives at the expense of others, such as gender, ethnicity and religion, effectively side-lining them leaving some scholars feeling alienated and devalued: *'I think it does more than side-step them, I think it silences them. The way it is articulated it really silences them. That's my experience of the place, you are not allowed to say these things, and you are treated as quite stupid if you say them. Other people have said they feel really devalued, like their missing something and that they felt quite stupid.'* (Respondent 13) These issues are part of a wider movement within mainstream higher education around the decolonisation curriculum, including the assumption of racial and civilization hierarchies that have been used to justify imperialism, the relationship between the academics and those they write about (for example, men writing about women) and also thinking about the implication of an increasingly diverse student body for both teaching and learning and the content of courses themselves (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). Moreover, a key part of the movement is to increase the representation of BAME academics within higher education as there are currently around 14,000 white male professors but only 25 BAME female professors (Muldoon 2019) For a radical political education project such as the Social Science Centre not have addressed these issues is concerning and if it is not to reproduce existing hierarchies then this is something that needs to be addressed for future courses and working practices. If the University of Cambridge can decolonise its English Literature curriculum and students and the University of Manchester can remove Rudyard Kipling's 'IF' poem and replace it with Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise' then the Social Science Centre should be doing much more to address issues of race, gender and imperialism within its courses.

Yet, while these problems remain, the research found a genuine attempt to question them and try to work through them. For example, the research found that in practice some scholars do challenge other people's assumptions and, at times, narrowly focused interpretations of the problems that scholars wish to pursue: *'Having a strong female critical pedagogy voice in that space is important. But also, some of the other people who are not afraid to ask what can be termed as the stupid question, which is never the stupid question, it makes you stop and think what does this mean? There is something important in the fact that the scholars feel courageous enough to ask those questions...it should give the whole group motivation to maintain that space. You know that some weeks that you give more, but some weeks you can't, but you have got a group around you that can give you more.'* (Respondent 1) Moreover, given the make-up of the group that fact that these issues are being raised and questioned as well as that courses are continuing to run is something that should be celebrated in its own right, as one scholar commented: *'Whilst I was there I saw some interesting things going on and it is a constant process of trying to navigate one's power. You've got a professor; you've got a reader; then you've got PhD students, of whom I am one of them – I am surprised it didn't fuck up instantly because that's a lot for an everyday classroom. I think that is really something actually.'* (Respondent 7)

However, these comments refer to interactions within classes and more still needs to be done with regards to the compilation of reading lists and the focus of courses. While compiling the reading lists is done collectively by all scholars this process is often guided by academics among the group who tend to have more knowledge of the relevant literature. Thus, academics and those with experience of developing courses or the subject matter need to be much more aware of the issues outlined above.

An Example of Developing and Delivering a Course: The Co-operation and Education Course 2014⁴³

Between 2011 and 2015, the Social Science Centre ran three different courses, ‘The Social Science Imagination’⁴⁴, ‘Co-operation and Education’⁴⁵ and ‘Know-How: Do-It-Ourselves Research’⁴⁶. All of the courses were heavily influenced by the Social Science Imagination course and began with ‘personal troubles’ that affected the scholars who enrolled on the courses. The reason we kept to this format was because the Social Science Imagination course was generally well received by scholars: *‘When I came along to the Social Science Centre and we were studying C. Wright Mills’s book and it talked about personal troubles I thought, yes we are all aware that we have personal troubles. But then we started to look at the history and social experiences of struggles all around us and I began to see that personal troubles can be interrelated within those struggles and things began to make much more sense. I realised that I wasn’t the only person suffering these feelings of inadequacy or longing for something different. I suppose in my mind I have always understood that, but now to discuss it in an open forum was absolutely wonderful. It was like the best kind of honey that you could ever eat. It*

⁴³ Here is a list of some of the key texts we read:

Facer, K. Thorpe, J and Shaw, L (2011) Co-operative Education and Schools: An old idea for new times? The BERA Conference, September 6th 2011, London, UK

Freire, P. (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed. London: Penguin.

Kadam, P. P. (2010). Role of Cooperative Movement in sustaining Rural Economy in the Context of Economic Reforms: A Case Study of Ahmednagar District. (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Tilak

MacPherson, I. (2007) One Path to Co-operative Studies. Victoria: British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies.

Macpherson, I. and Paz, Y. Concern for Community: The Relevance of Co-operatives to Peace. Turning Times Research and Consulting.

Pusey, Andre (2010) ‘Social Centres and the New Cooperativism of the Common. In: Trapeze Collective’s Do It Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World.

Thomson, A. (1988). Domestic drudgery will be a thing of the past: Co-operative women and the reform of housework. In S. Yeo (Ed.), New views of cooperation London: Routledge, 108-127.

Woodin, T. (2011) Co-operative Education in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: context, identity and learning: In A. Webster et al (Eds) The Hidden Alternative: co-operative values, past, present and future. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 78---95.

⁴⁴ Delivered in 2012-13 and again in autumn 2013.

⁴⁵ Delivered in spring/summer 2014.

⁴⁶ Delivered in autumn 2014/spring 2015.

was soothing and refreshing. I loved it. (Respondent 2) Thus, why we thought this approach was important was because it allows scholars to make links between their personal troubles and social issues through sociological theory in a way that was engaging, meaningful and practical.

The Cooperation and Education Course was the third course delivered by the Social Science Centre and ran between January 2014 and April 2014. The course was an attempt to learn more about co-operative principles and values and the role of education within the co-operative movement. The focus of the course was part of an attempt to help members of the Social Science Centre reflect on its co-operative organisational form and its pedagogical philosophy, including links between the two and to try and further develop them.

The previous two courses had focused solely on the scholars' interests and had operated in almost isolation from the day-to-day running of the Social Science Centre itself: *'At the end of the Social Science Imagination course in 2013, what I became aware of was that the course was effectively independent of the Social Science Centre. That is not an issue from the standpoint of the course, but a problem from the standpoint of the Social Science Centre which, in my mind, is the real project. The real project is creating a new institutional form for higher education. I suggested that the Social Science Imagination take on a particular theme, co-operation and education. My thinking behind that was to try and connect the teaching and learning to the co-operative. I saw it as an opportunity for the course to learn about the co-operative, the co-operative movement and the role of education within the co-operative movement.'* (Respondent 12)

The reasons for this perceived disconnect between the Social Science Centre as an organisation and its courses was that some of the members⁴⁷ studying its courses had not become members. The problem that had been identified here was that some of the founding members had envisioned that those studying courses would also become members because being involved running the Social Science Centre and its courses was seen as part of a critical praxis that would help develop a critical consciousness or conscientization (Friere 1970) that would better allow people to see the contradictions of capitalist social relations: *‘The model of the Social Science Centre, when we set it up, didn’t just conceive that we would have people participating in the courses offered by the Social Science Centre and not be members. That was a key point for me, that people involved in the teaching and learning were also involved in the project of the Social Science Centre. It was a commitment to the politics of the project.* (Respondent 12) The crux of this issue is that if scholars turned up for the no-fee courses and did not become members of the Social Science Centre as a political project then it could have ended up being a reading group or “Big Society” type initiative that provides a public service for which funding has been cut or removed completely.

The idea for the Co-operation and Education course was first raised at one of the Social Science Centre’s monthly meetings and those in attendance agreed that the disconnect between the Social Science Centre as a project and the courses was something we wanted to address and agreed to run the Co-operation and Education from January 2014. Members in attendance also agreed that what was learned about co-operative principles and values and the role of education within the co-operative movement from the course would be used to inform the development of the Social Science Centre itself at the next AGM: *‘We suggest that the new course will start in mid-January, run for 10 weeks, and aim to take arguments and recommendations to the*

⁴⁷ The Social Science Imagination class that Respondent 12 is referring to consisted of a cohort of 11 scholars and only three were members.

AGM in May.' (Field Notes 2013) Thus, what was important about the Cooperation and Education course was that it was not only an attempt to better engage scholars on the course, who were not members, to become more involved in the Social Science Centre as a radical political project, but also an attempt to formally embed a reflective cycle (Reason and Bradbury 2008) into the Social Science Centre's working practice. The cycle would help us reflect on the organisational form and working practices of the Social Science Centre to help us learn from our experience and improve the project.

In preparation for the start of the Co-operation and Education course a small working group, consisting of four people (including myself), was formed. The working group reflected on the lessons learned from delivering the previous two Social Science Imagination courses by reflecting on our past experiences. We agreed that what had worked well in previous courses was the development of a flexible curriculum structure that allowed the scholars to focus on themes they were interested in a similar way to the generative themes outlined in Freire's critical pedagogy (1970). Although the general topic of the course had already been decided by members in advance, scholars would be invited to choose themes within the general topic of co-operation and education they would like to explore further.

The working group agreed that the rotation of facilitating sessions and taking notes had worked well in previous courses and, thus, would be used again. The aim here was to try and make the course more democratic and non-hierarchical in a way that reflected the ethos of the Social Science Centre, but also Student as Producer. Reflecting on previous courses allowed us to develop something that felt much more focused and organised, which was noted by one scholar who had studied on all of the Social Science Centre courses: '*For the third Social Science Centre course [Co-operation and Education], there was more clarity about what we are supposed to be doing. It feels a bit more organised than the others.*' (Respondent 3)

Another difference with this course was that we wanted to recruit more students. In an attempt to do this some members of the Social Science Centre, including me, helped advertise the course on the project's website and distributed posters and flyers around the city. The course was held in the Pathways Centre (a voluntary organisation that works with homeless people in Lincoln⁴⁸) and the turnout for the first session was much better than the previous two Social Science Imagination courses: *'We advertised the course and 16 people showed up at the first session. That first week felt energising because it was such a large group yet crammed into one of the smallest rooms. It felt like there was a critical mass. In that first class, half of the people in the room were new.'* (Respondent 12) This highlighted the importance of making people aware of the Social Science Centre and its education provision.

The first session was facilitated by two scholars (me and another member) and, at the start of the session, scholars were asked to briefly introduce themselves and tell the rest of the group what had motivated them to join the course. The group consisted of four females, twelve males, aged between 18-66, all White British, but from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds: *'There was a fascinating blend of people, which included members of the Social Science Centre, undergraduate students, employees from Framework⁴⁹, academics, people involved in other co-operative projects (Lincoln Hackspace⁵⁰ and Abundant Earth Community⁵¹), members of the local community and some PhD students. It was heartening to see some new faces, and this helped to create a sense of energy, excitement and curiosity as people were interested to learn more about each other.'* (Social Science Centre 2014)

⁴⁸ For more information about the Pathways Centre see:

http://www.frameworkha.org/about/student_placement_directory/placement_roles/630_the_pathways_centre

⁴⁹ Framework is a 'charity delivering housing, health, employment, support and care services to people with a diverse range of needs', which is based in the Pathways Centre (above). For more information about Framework see: <http://www.frameworkha.org/about>

⁵⁰ For more information about Lincoln Hackspace see: <http://www.lincoln-hackspace.org.uk/>

⁵¹ For more information about the Abundant Earth Community see: <http://abundantearthcommunity.blogspot.com/>

This process allowed us to get to know each other and explore different motivations for attending the course. One scholar, who was also an undergraduate student at the University of Lincoln, was quite instrumental in their reason for studying on the course: *‘Having a degree is not enough and extra-curricular activities are important to have on your CV if you want to get a job. I see this course as an extra-curricular activity and can use the time for gain a Volunteer Award⁵², but I can also learn something at the same time.’* (Respondent 15) Some scholars were involved in local voluntary community-based projects and were interested in exploring the potential of working with the Social Science Centre as well as wanting to learn more about co-operatives as a way of reflecting on their own activities for social change: *‘Co-operation and education - it is one of the subjects that I have thought about a lot, but never been able to put together in a constructive way. I believe in cooperatives and the ethics and values and principles that go along with them and if we followed these principles the world be a better place to live in. I am excited about spending time discussing the co-operative movement in more detail, especially the Rochdale Pioneers and looking at more co-operative forms of education. I am also part of other co-operatives so there are all these paths that are coming together and giving me the opportunity to study it in much greater detail for the purpose of using this co-operative knowledge in a more wholesome way to do something that is much more valuable to society.’* (Respondent 2)

Another scholar commented that they were interested in the Co-operation and Education course because they had recently set up a co-operative with colleagues and wanted to learn more about the practical workings of co-operatives in a bid to help them develop their own organisation: *‘A colleague showed me a link to the Co-operation and Education course and I thought I would*

⁵² Here, the respondent is referring to the Lincoln Award, which is awarded by the University of Lincoln’s Careers and Employability department to students who engage in at least 40 hours of extra-curricular activities. For more information about the Lincoln Award see: <http://uolcareers.co.uk/students-graduates/lincoln-award/award-structure/>

really like to attend. I run my own co-operative and I liked the fact that this course was all about co-operatives. I was hoping to get some inspiration from the course because my co-operative is not working very well and hoped to put what I learned from the course into practice.' (Respondent 5)

After the scholars introduced themselves, they were asked to participate in an activity that provided an introduction to the Social Science Centre as a political project, an overview of the types of activities it offered and an insight into how it is run on a day-to-day basis. This was the first time we had gone into detail about the Social Science Centre as a project at the beginning of a course and it gave members an opportunity to better explain the links between it and the course. Of course, the rationale for this was to try and encourage scholars to become members and to make the link between the project's education provision and the Social Science Centre as a radical political project. Rather than telling scholars what the Social Science Centres is and what its aims are, scholars were each given a copy of the Social Science Centre's FAQs, which is two pages long⁵³. The aim was to get the scholars to read about, and collaboratively reflect on, the nature and activities of the Social Science Centre in an attempt to foster a more dialogical form of pedagogy (Freire 1996). Some of the scholars offered to read sections of the text aloud and afterwards the group began to discuss the nature of the Social Science Centre and its potential and limits as a model for an alternative form of higher education. To help scholars with this process they were given six guiding questions or generative themes (Freire 1970), which were:

1. Describe the Social Science Centre in your own words.
2. How is the Social Science Centre organised? What's important about that?

⁵³ The Social Science Centre's FAQs can be found here: <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/about/>

3. How does the Social Science Centre approach teaching and learning? How is it different?
4. What was the context in which the Social Science Centre was created?
5. How can people be engaged in the Social Science Centre? What does it involve?
6. What are the limits to the Social Science Centre as a new model for higher education?

Although our intention had been to create a more dialogical approach to the course by these questions collectively, one scholar thought the activity was overly prescriptive: *'This reminds me of something I did in GCSE English!'* (Respondent 11). While there was an element of truth about what the respondent said, what they did not consider was that some of the scholars had not passed GCSE English. Thus, the issue of differentiation with regards to previous learning experiences was the rationale for the questions. Indeed, they did stimulate an interesting discussion about the nature of the Social Science Centre: *'Interestingly, but not surprisingly, people thought about the Social Science Centre in different ways. Some people thought of it as a "political project", others as a "university without walls" or as a way of "hacking" the best parts of a university form - a form that no longer works and reconstituting one that does. Other words used to describe the Social Science Centre were, "organic", "responsive", and "flexible".'* (Social Science Centre Blog 2014) Nevertheless, while people understood the Social Science Centre in different ways a common theme was that it was experimental and something different to mainstream higher education.

After we had discussed the nature of the Social Science Centre many of the scholars wanted to know how they could become members and what roles they could do once they had joined. Thus, the rationale to discuss the nature of the Social Science Centre had helped recruit new members and made the links between our education provision and membership of the project much clearer. Moreover, the process highlighted that the FAQs on the Social Science Centre's website did not answer all of the questions that potential scholars had about the organisation

and that they needed to be updated and written much more clearly: *‘We discussed how people could get involved in the Social Science Centre with one scholar noting that it was actually unclear in the Social Science Centre’s FAQ how people could engage with the Social Science Centre.’* (Social Science Centre Blog 2014) This lack of clarity might have been one of the reasons why scholars had not become members on previous courses.

In the second half of the session, the scholars were given another activity which was to explore co-operative values and principles in more detail as it is these values and principles that underpin the Social Science Centre as well as the Co-operation and Education course. In a similar fashion to the Social Science Centre’s FAQ task, the group read aloud the International Co-operative Alliance’s Co-operative Identity, Values and Principles Statement (ICA 2017), which were informed by the principles developed by the Rochdale Pioneers Equitable Society (Rochdale Pioneers Trust 2017). The scholars were given time to read and think about the document before discussing it based on three guiding questions:

1. Pick one co-operative value from the text that is important for you and explain why.
2. Pick one co-operative principle from the text that is important for you and explain why.
3. Explain how your chosen value and principle could be used to inform the work of the Social Science Centre?

This proved to be a useful exercise and led to some interesting discussions around the nature of co-operatives, education and democracy: *‘We discussed the importance of education, training and information to help think critically about running a co-operative and organisational forms beyond co-operatives. One scholar stressed the importance of concern for the local community and how co-operatives encouraged this. We considered the nature of democracy and its different forms and how this differed from consensus decision-making. It*

was noted that there is no appreciation of 'class' in the document.' (Social Science Centre 2014) Thus, the discussion lots of opportunities to talk about the nature and importance of co-operatives. Essentially, this was a way to think about the radical political aims of the Social Science Centre and the importance of its organisational form for achieving these aims.

At the end of the session, scholars were set the task in preparation for the second session, which would be dedicated to discussing and deciding the pedagogical approach the group would adopt for the rest of the course and themes that would be explored within it. We had outlined the nature and form of the Social Science Centre now we wanted to pull this ethos through to the teaching and learning on the course using the principles of Student as Producer and critical pedagogy. The task was to:

1. Produce a 300-word statement or equivalent that reflects on the first session and starts to concretise some of the key themes from reading and discussing the Social Science Centre FAQs and the International Co-operative Alliance statement.
2. Read Chapter Two of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and be prepared to discuss.

The second session was held a week later and saw a slight drop in numbers: *'I seem to remember that we lost about four people, something like that, but it still felt sufficient and we still had new members, which was nice.'* (Respondent 12) It is useful to know why people do not return to courses like this, but often this can be difficult to find out because you never see them again. However, one scholar provided some insight into why some people decided not to come back: *'I found the first session I went to quite intimidating. Everyone seemed to be very academic and the language that people were using was not the language I am used to using. I attended with some colleagues and we all felt that maybe it was a little bit too much for our understating and we all felt a little intimidated and that maybe it was a bit too clever for us.'*

My colleagues decided not to come back, but I like to throw myself in at the deep-end, so I thought I would give it another go and just see what happens.' (Respondent 5) Upon reflection, it is easy to see why some people may have felt this way. The first session was intense and covered a lot of ground. Also, the highly political nature of the project might have been off-putting for some people. Moreover, our approach to teaching and learning is very different to what many people may have experienced before. Interestingly, there had be a decline in numbers in some of our previous courses too and this might have also been because people felt like the respondent above. This would be a useful area to conduct further research. This is something I tried to do, but these people never returned to the Social Science Centre and did not respond to emails.

What was also insightful about the scholar's comments was that at the Social Science Centre we had always tried to be welcoming and accommodating. However, it is clear that more thought needed to be given to the nature and complexity of what was being discussed, the language that was used and the texts set as reading as not only might they be difficult to understand but might actually put off scholars from attending. Another scholar commented on how they felt before the first session: *'Before the session I felt a bit uncertain. I also had difficulties finding the building. I felt welcome, but I felt a bit nervous'* (Respondent 8) Speaking to other scholars who had attended that first sessions, it became clear that the Social Science Centre had, at times, pitched the level of the sessions too high as one scholar commented *'When people start using big words and technical jargon, I don't understand it. It's difficult. Sometimes it needs bringing down a level and explaining.'* (Respondent 8) From the perspective of those of us who had organised the course, it can be difficult to see that the level is too high for some scholars when you are right in the middle of the project and engaged in the subject material the way were at the time. This is why reflecting on the course in this way was so important.

Pitching the level of the course was something that had clearly excluded some scholars, and this is something that needs to be addressed if autonomous learning spaces are to offer a form of higher education that is accessible to all. Nevertheless, the scholars who were still attending the course seemed to rise to the challenge and used it as an opportunity to ask what words and terminology meant *‘There needs to be an awareness that not everybody knows what certain words mean, although at the same time it is useful because people can ask what those words mean.’* (Respondent 3) Moreover, another scholar said: ⁵⁴*‘The initial thing for me was the terminology - I had to check the glossary in the back of the book to understand what it means and then became more accustomed to using these terms - there are still a few that are a bit of a mouthful, but I understand what they mean now.’* (Respondent 2)

Indeed, some scholars commented that although they did not understand some of the words and terminology used by other scholars (usually academics), they felt confident enough to ask other scholars to explain what they meant, which showed that the group had been able to build up a good level of trust between scholars: *‘What was really good was that I was able to share my feelings with the rest of the group and say you all seem really clever and you are using really big words that I don’t understand and once I shared that the whole thing completely changed for me. I don’t think people were aware of the language they were using; I don’t think they were aware that they were really big words and that people might not understand.’* (Respondent 5) This highlights that collectively we had created a space where scholars felt comfortable to do this. Moreover, they were starting to think critically and become more independent learners.

As this course progressed, we collectively tried to address this issue by agreeing to change how the sessions ran and there was a genuine attempt from all scholars to explain words and

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concepts when they were introduced into discussions. Moreover, we decided to collectively develop a glossary of all the terms that scholars did not understand to help them, and other scholars, in the future with their learning: *'We decided that we would create a glossary to help with words, and people said they were going to explain what they meant by certain terms.'* (Respondent 5) The group found this useful and made the discussions much more accessible for scholars: *'Clarifying words for others, both in classes and in public, makes scholarly thinking interesting rather than frightening or mysterious, and creates opportunities for everyone to develop a "sociological imagination". Creating a common language of understanding helps us "unpack" the assumptions in our words, understand each other more deeply, and engage in critical and caring dialogue.'* (Respondent 5) Thus, what we were trying to do with this process was to demystify academic processes and language in a way that made it accessible for all scholars. The point of this was to allow scholars to use the process to reflect on the world around them in a critical way and consider how we might address these issues together. Moreover, and this is an important point, that this is done in a caring and nurturing way that supports scholars in their emotional and intellectual development. Consequently, what we were starting to develop was an affective dimension on our course.

The second session began by asking the scholars to read aloud the first part of their task from the previous week, which was to identify key themes from the Social Science Centre's FAQs and the International Cooperative Alliance statement. These generative themes were used to help the group think about what they would like to examine further for the rest of the course and help develop the curriculum. As the scholars read out the themes they had identified, one member of the group wrote them down on a whiteboard to keep track of them *'...we came up with all the keywords and themes and by the end, we had decided upon an outline curriculum that identified a pattern of two-week blocks devoted to co-operative history, co-operative learning.'* (Respondent 12) What was happening was an attempt to embed the democratic ethos

of the Social Science Centre alongside the principles of Student as Producer and critical pedagogy.

Being involved in collaboratively creating the curriculum was something that the scholars commented positively about: *I liked the process of being involved in curriculum design because you have to work out what you want to learn before you learn about it. It felt meaningful and democratic because everyone got a say. I think if everyone is involved in designing it then he or she will be happy.* (Respondent 8) This highlights how effective this approach can be in engaging scholars on courses.

Once the scholars had read their themes out, collectively the group boiled them down into a curriculum with different themes in blocks of two weeks. This was done collaboratively through discussion that lasted about one hour and ensured that all scholars' interests were covered in the curriculum. The themes the group collectively decided to cover were:

1. Mainstream Education x 1 week
2. Alternative Education x 1 week
3. Co-operative Principles and Values x 2 weeks
4. Co-operative History and Movement x 2 weeks
5. Co-operative Learning x 2 weeks
6. Location, Place, Distance and Roots x 1 week

One of the things we had been keen to do at the Social Science Centre was to offer some form of qualification for scholars so that our education provision would function as an alternative to mainstream higher education. Accordingly, scholars were asked if they were considering using what they had learned to work towards the production of some kind of artefact that could be assessed and if so, explained how we could support them with this process: *'If anyone wanted to be assessed on the course, experienced members of the Social Science Centre would help*

design an expanded curriculum and methods of assessment appropriate to the level he or she is interested in. Questions were raised about assessment and about how this might work in practice in terms of supervision, assessment and receiving some form of qualification.' (Social Science Centre 2014) One of the main issues that was raised here was about how assessment might change the nature of the course by making it more instrumentally focused on the assessment rather than an open-ended inquiry into co-operative education. Interestingly, students commented that they preferred the course to have no assessments as they felt this provided some freedom to learn things that were not being assessed and reduced levels of anxiety for those scholars who had not been academically assessed for long periods of time. This last point was interesting and perhaps explains some of the anxiety and mental health issues experienced by students in mainstream education.

The group then moved to the second part of the task, which had been to read Chapter 2 of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and discuss the ways that this might inform teaching and learning on the course. After reading this text, the group agreed that the facilitation of the sessions would be shared among all scholars and rotated at the beginning of each new theme being studied as part of the course: *'Rotating responsibility for teaching/facilitating learning helps us to distribute authority, multiply our range of perspectives, explore different approaches to learning, and transform the 'teacher-student contradiction' into more fluid learning relationships.'* (Social Science Centre Blog 2014) What this evidence is the way in which the Social Science Centre and scholars within it were trying to democratise the curriculum using the main principles of both critical pedagogy and Student as Producer. This was not only in terms of sharing the workload but ensuring different voice were heard.

The final part of the second session was deciding who would facilitate each theme: *'There was a process of negotiating and agreeing how we would teach and learn together. This included facilitation, who would be leading and taking a certain responsibility for each week.'*

(Respondent 12) The scholars collectively agreed that each facilitator would have responsibilities, which included sharing learning materials, e.g., writing, videos, sounds and images, which *'...helps focus our discussions and provides some common ground upon which we can explore diverse experiences and perspectives and gain clarity on our themes of inquiry.'* (Social Science Centre 2014) Interestingly, it was scholars not employed in higher education that recommended the use of a range of different sources for the course. What this did was make the course more accessible, especially for those that found reading difficult. Scholars agreed to ensure learning materials were circulated as early as possible, so people had time to engage with them and think about them: *'Making sure that everyone has time, materials and support to read (or watch or listen or do) and reflect, and to engage in real dialogue about issues with others are equally important. To allow enough time for reading and thinking, we've agreed to circulate or post each week's reading by the previous Saturday morning.'* (Social Science Centre 2014) The importance of this was to give scholars the time to engage with the learning material as this had not always happened on previous courses.

Upon reflection, carving up the themes to be facilitated by different people each week was risky, especially as some scholars had never studied in higher education before, never mind facilitated a session. Moreover, the research found that some scholars did not always get the topic they wanted and were not clear about the decision-making process: *'The session I wanted to do was taken by somebody else. One of the other scholars decided that the other person would be better at doing it than me. I don't know why they thought that, but they did.'*

(Respondent 8) Why this decision was taken and how it was reached was not uncovered by the research, but it certainly went against the democratic principles of the Social Science Centre's consensus decision-making process.

Even though different scholars would facilitate each session, the group agreed that all scholars were still responsible for helping with teaching and learning and we all agreed to support this

process: *'While different scholars will be teaching each session, we can all help each other learn. If you are new to teaching or to a theme, ask around to raise questions, try out ideas, get suggestions for readings or activities, share experiences of teaching and facilitating, etc.'* (Social Science Centre 2014) A key part of making this work was to try to create a safe learning environment where people felt that they were able to articulate their views and that it was OK to make mistakes: *'Giving each other space to explore, make mistakes, make judgements, and try out new ideas and ways of being is an important condition of learning. Remembering that transformative learning is often a courageous activity is important too. Encouraging everyone to ask questions and take risks creates a culture of co-operative critical inquiry through which we can strengthen our independent thinking, practice the arts of critique, challenge our 'fears of freedom', and help others do the same. It also helps us to keep our thinking radically open and 'unfinished'.'* (Social Science Centre 2014b) Again, what we were trying to support was the development of a collective critical process that had an affective dimension to support intellectual and emotional development. What became clear was the importance of that affective element and supporting each other through the course.

Overall, this approach seemed to work, and the scholars seemed to enjoy this experience even if it did not go as expected: *'I went in there with the wrong assumption. I assumed that people would like it as much as me. When I did the session, I thought I fucked up my bit. But even though I fucked it up, I enjoyed it.'* (Respondent 8) Again, this highlights that we were successful in creating an environment where it was OK to make mistakes as this was part of the process and something we could all learn from. This is important a markedly different to mainstream higher education where students are so concerned with assessment, they are anxious about making mistakes.

As with the previous two courses, we reflected on how the Cooperation and Education had gone at the end of the course in April 2014 in an attempt to learn from it. One of the main

things that was learned was that by agreeing the curriculum in the first two weeks meant that people had very little time to prepare for the facilitation of the sessions: *'The problem with the way we ran the course was between agreeing to the curriculum and agreeing responsibilities, there was no space for people to really prepare so the people taking on the first session literally had a couple of weeks to be in a position where they felt confident to lead a session. Of course, for some people this was completely new to them, not just the course, but also the idea of facilitating something. Even the people who were doing stuff 10 weeks later didn't prepare 10 weeks in advance; they prepared a week or two in advance so there was an issue not only in terms of giving people time to prepare, but also people not taking their responsibility seriously enough I suppose. This is a problem with the voluntary nature of the Social Science Centre, it does not take priority over other things we have to do, such as earning a wage or family responsibilities.'* (Respondent 12)

This is an important point, we all worked at the Social Science Centre on a voluntary basis and most of us had competing responsibilities, including paid work, families and social lives. I do not think that people did not take their responsibilities seriously, but that the Social Science Centre was something that could be easily pushed down the list as one member commented: *'I am an academic, a father, a husband and a member of a choir. These all compete for time and my involvement with the Social Science Centre. At some point one has to make a decision with regards to priorities.'* (Respondent 6) This is an important point for projects like the Social Science Centre which are of a voluntary nature and emphasises the need to develop a way to pay people who work within them without blunting their radical political ethos.

In response to this, members agreed to give more time between developing the curriculum and delivering the course to allow scholars to prepare reading lists and allow scholars to engage with the literature: *'What we need is two or three weeks in the summer where we plan it. Then giving ourselves at least a month where we can prepare for things, and when the course starts*

it is 10 or 11-weeks maximum and we reiterate and reinforce the responsibilities of everyone to try and do as much reading outside the course as possible, which could be done through providing an extended reading list. ' (Respondent 12)

Reading was one of the issues that scholars commented on the most, especially the overreliance on academic texts: *'The thing that bothered me in the sessions was that I thought we were far too traditional in our teaching and text-based and we don't have to be. We have to be in other settings, but not here. I think the 'non-academic students' wanted that, they wanted to read those texts, but what about those that didn't attend? Or those that left.'* (Respondent 7) This was made worse by a tendency not to introduce the texts or contextualise them, assuming that scholars would be able to do this for themselves: *'Often the readings were taken out of context with no real introduction and background, which made things more difficult. If we had 15 minutes at the end of each session to introduce the following week and provide background that would be better. One of the problems is that we are given the reading three days before the session and I struggle to read it in that amount of time.'* (Respondent 3)

Consequently, some of the scholars commented that they found reading the texts by themselves difficult, although attending the sessions helped them to better understand them: *'Some texts have been easier to read than others, although some of the language can be quite difficult to understand, especially if you have not read much of the author. When the texts have been difficult the sessions have been really helpful because I can hear the text analysed by someone else in their own way and everybody understand things differently and because you hear so many different analyses of the text you can start building up your own understanding.* (Respondent 5) Although, one scholar commented that they felt overloaded by the difficulty and the number of texts they were required to read: *'I thought I've had enough, I don't want to do it anymore. I had doubts towards the end of the course because there were too many things*

to think about in one go and there were so many texts to read. It takes me a long time to read things and think about stuff.' (Respondent 8)

Conversely, one member commented that it was not the difficulty or volume of the readings *per se*, but that there was no real obligation for scholars to read the texts, in the same way, there might be within mainstream higher education: *'Not only was the preparation for facilitators lacking, in terms of giving themselves and other people enough time, but also I don't think outside of the two-hour seminar apart from the one or two texts, there was very much reading. Unlike a traditional university course where you would effectively set homework and people would feel an obligation because of examinations and assessment to fill up their week with loads of other reading and thinking about the subject. At the Social Science Centre, we had people for a vibrant discussion over two hours and then it would go on the backburner for the rest of the week until we came together again so it ended up being a very skeletal experience in that way. That's because it is very difficult for some people to prioritise when it is voluntary by nature.'* (Respondent 12) The research found that the comments of Respondent 12 were not entirely accurate and that many scholars were attempting to do the readings. What can be taken from this however is that there was still an overreliance on academic texts that were often too complex for many of the scholars. What is required for autonomous learning spaces is a range of different learning materials and more introductory texts.

Scholars commented that one of the things that had helped with learning on the course had been notetaking, not only because it gave a summary of what had been discussed, but that because the notes were written by a different person each week they provided a different view on the subject matter: *'The note taking has been really helpful, although I read the notes from one session and felt like I hadn't been there – I had – but the way the person wrote about it and the language they used; it was just a completely different interpretation of the session, which was really interesting.'* (Respondent 3)

In general, all of the facilitators were commended for their respective sessions and scholars commented that they thought they were very good at ensuring people were included in discussions: *'Facilitators are usually aware and ask good questions to try and bring other scholars in.'* (Respondent 3) Moreover, the course was well received by scholars who, in general, felt that they had learned something about the co-operative movement and the role of education within it. Moreover, facilitating sessions and reading, at times, difficult texts had challenged scholars, but it was a challenge that most of them rose to and enjoyed: *'It worked fine in terms of we had vibrant interesting discussions about our respective themes each week. I never went away thinking that a particular seminar was a waste of time or a complete failure or anything like that. I am sure there were criticisms about some of them, but one or two were superb. I remember coming away from them and thinking this was a wonderful two-hour seminar.'* (Respondent 12)

Thus, what we learned from this course was that we were collectively able to implement the democratic ethos of the Social Science Centre into our education provision by using Student as Producer and critical pedagogy. Moreover, what we had started to uncover was the importance of the affective dimension of the course and how creating a safe space supported the intellectual and emotional development of scholars. However, what the research found was that this was only a safe space for some and much more work was needed to be done to address issues of gender, ethnicity, social class, and additional learning needs. However, one of the main aims of the course had been to reflect upon the co-operative nature of the Social Science Centre and how we could use what we had learned to further develop the radical political nature of the project. This is something we addressed at the Co-operation and Education Conference.

Co-operation and Education Conference 2014

The Co-operation and Education Conference was hosted by the Social Science Centre on Saturday 26th April 2014 at the Collection, Lincoln (UK)⁵⁵. The conference was attended by 36 participants from all over the UK, including Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and Southampton (Social Science Centre 2014c). The Conference was the culmination of the Co-operation and Education course and was a chance for scholars to present what they had learned and reflected on how this might inform the Social Science Centre's working practices. The Conference was also part of an attempt to encourage people to meet and share their experiences and further develop a network of people involved in radical pedagogical projects resisting the neoliberalisation of higher education or the imposition of austerity more generally (Social Science Centre 2014c). The event was advertised nationally and was free for delegates to attend. Those members of the Social Science Centre that were able to offer their own homes as accommodation for delegates and we subsidised travel through Social Science Centre funds to reduce the cost of attending. The conference was split into three sessions, which were: (i) Papers and Presentations; (ii) Panel Session/Q&A, and; (iii) Aspiration and Objectives for Co-operative Higher Education.

Session: 1 Papers and Presentations

In the first session, participants were invited to present a paper around the subject co-operation and education, which was intended to set the scene for the rest of the conference by getting people to think about alternative forms of higher education and the history, principles and values of the co-operative movement. The papers that were delivered were:

⁵⁵ The Collection is local Museum with conferencing facilities. For more information see: <https://www.thecollectionmuseum.com/>

- Aniko Horvath: ‘Researching alternative higher education’ – Aniko described her post-doctoral research around alternative higher education, which included how identities have been negotiated in higher education following the 2010 reforms and how power relations are jointly produced.
- David McAleavey: ‘Building for Co-operative Education’ – David took an evolutionary perspective on cooperative education, posing the question: “How can the built environment lead to pro-social behaviour?”
- Mark Narayan: ‘A sound walk’ – Mark asked: "where is our attention focussed?" People tend to focus on detail and to hear only one thing at a time but pulling back to a wider perspective is difficult and fun.
- Angela Porter: ‘Co-operative values’ – Angela introduced how she works with businesses and organisations to embed the values and principles of cooperation, as defined by the Rochdale Pioneers, giving examples such as the ‘Food to Fork’ programme for schools, and Community Champions to provide funding and volunteer help to local community projects.
- Andreas Wittel: ‘Higher education as a common good’ – Andreas talked to us about education as a journey and how the combination of digital technologies and neo-liberal thinking are having disastrous results.

(Social Science Centre 2014)

Session 2: Panel session/Q&A – reflecting on three years of the Social Science Centre

In this session, a panel of five members of the Social Science Centre gave a short insight into their time at the Social Science Centre. The panel members spoke about the different courses we have delivered, the development of the Social Science Centre’s organisational form and their experiences of being involved in the day-to-day running of the project. This session was

well received and encouraged members of the audience to ask questions about the Social Science Centre. Some members of the audience asked how they could set up similar projects where they live. However, what was apparent from this session was that the Social Science Centre was still very much a work in progress and that we needed to think about how to move the project forward.

Session 3 Aspirations and objectives for co-operative higher education

For the third session, participants moved across to the Usher Art Gallery⁵⁶ and were divided into groups and asked to discuss how they might go about setting up a co-operative university and what it might look like in practice. The discussion was framed by exploring three possible routes: (i) conversion; (ii) dissolution; and, (iii) creation that had been developed by one of the members as part of their academic research on co-operatives (Winn 2015).

- **Conversion** – systematically convert the values, principles and legal form of an existing university to that of a formally constituted co-operative.
- **Dissolution** – dissolve the ‘neoliberal university’ into a co-operative university by creating co-operatives inside the existing university form. e.g. constitute research groups on co-operative values and principles; design, specify and validate modules and degree programmes so that they embed co-operative values and principles; if necessary, outsource services to an increasing number of co-operative providers; establish the terms of reference for new committees on co-operative values and principles. Continue until the university is effectively transformed into a co-operative organisation from the inside out.
- **Creation** – build a co-operative university from scratch in the same way that a new co-operative enterprise might be established, like the Social Science Centre.

⁵⁶ The Usher Art Gallery is a local art gallery in the City of Lincoln with conferencing facilities. For more information see: <https://www.visitlincoln.com/things-to-do/the-usher-gallery>

Delegates were split into four groups and seated at separate tables. The tables were covered in flip-chart paper and we were given pens so that they could write down what they discussed. The general themes that emerged out of the discussion were the recent reforms to higher education, how education had become commodified, the lack of collegiality in universities, precarious and intensified working conditions within the sector and the need to create an alternative that addressed these points. As a 'take-away' question participants were asked to think about what they were going to after the conference to work towards creating an alternative model of the university.

Overall, the conference was successful and the feedback we received from participants was positive '*The co-operative education conference was a success. The feedback we got from people was good, a number of them were very positive and they felt very inspired by it.*' (Respondent 12) However, one of the key things after a conference like this is to keep the momentum going and I thought the final session encouraged us to think about how we would do this. With the benefit of hindsight I can see how important this conference was in moving from the Social Science Centre, which was based on voluntary labour, to a institutionalising the lessons learned from the project into an organisational form that had the potential to embody its principles and at the same time awards degrees and pay people for their work – this would become the idea of the a co-operative university. Indeed, this was an important moment for the project and what happened after this event was the decline of the Social Science Centre as some key members of the group's energies started to be directed towards the development of a co-operative university.

Annual General Meeting 2014

Our AGM was held on the 24th May 2014 at the Grandstand in Lincoln. Despite what we perceived to be a successful Co-operation and Education Conference the AGM marked a point where people involved in running the project had started to become fatigued and/or switched

their focus. The AGM itself was poorly organised and it felt like we were going through the motions and lacking the enthusiasm of previous AGMs: *'It was a wet, dark and miserable day and people arrived at the conference venue wet and downbeat. We are sat in a cold room in the back of the Grandstand. There are seven of us. Less than previous AGMs. The agenda for the meeting lay in the middle of the table written on a scrap of paper torn from a notepad and agreed there and then. Usually, we have agreed on an agenda before and circulate by email and bring printed copies. The chairperson for the AGM had not been selected in advance, nor had a minute taker and it felt disorganised – not like us.* (Field Notes 2014)

Those members who attended revisited what had been learned from both the course and the conference. The key point that was discussed was the importance of membership and that scholars who study on the course should become members of the Social Science Centre and be involved in running of the project in some way. The group also spoke about the need to critically reflect upon the Social Science Centre's consensus decision-making process and how it was working in practice: *'We discussed what we meant by democracy and how this is reflected in our current decision-making process. We agreed that while theoretically, we have a consensus decision-making process it may not work as well as we had hoped in practice. What we meant was is that while we always gave people the opportunity to be involved in decision-making only a core of us were actually ever involved in a meaningful way. We were interested in exploring why there was a lack of engagement and agreed we would explore this further.'* (Field Notes 2014)

This was the last AGM I attended before ending my active involvement with the project. I was coming towards the end of my PhD and needed to dedicate more time to writing my thesis. Also, I was starting to become fatigued and working at the Social Science Centre, study for a PhD, working at the University and having my first child meant that something had to give. I also felt that enthusiasm for the Social Science Centre was starting to wane among others who

had been core members in running the project. This was evidenced not only by the lack of organisation with regards to the AGM but also when thinking about the future of the project: *‘We put aside some time to think about the Future of the Social Science Centre but there was little attempt or appetite to do this. Generally, it seems that those of us who have been heavily involved in running the project are tired and have competing priorities.’* (Field Notes 2014) This was exemplified by one member who left halfway through the AGM to present a conference paper at the University of Lincoln, which sucked the life out of the AGM. One member after the meeting said to me and another member: *‘What the fuck is going on? We are trying to keep the Social Science Centre going but it feels like is slipping away.’* (Field Notes 2014). Again, with the benefit of hindsight this was the beginning of the end of the Social Science as a project and our focus and energy would be shift towards other projects. For me, it was my PhD. For others, it was starting to work with the Co-operative College and the creation of a co-operative university. While at the time this was upsetting, with the clarity of hindsight it is possible to understand that we were moving to the next phase of the radical political project we began in 2011, the creation of an alternative model of higher education.

Occupying Space in the City of Lincoln

One of the key features of the student protests and anti-austerity movement was the way in which people occupied space. Inspired by this, the Social Science Centre has used different physical spaces within the City of Lincoln to deliver its education provision, to host conferences and to hold meetings (monthly and AGMs), which have included community centres, libraries, museums, cafes, common land and even pubs. The use of physical spaces has always been important for the Social Science Centre both theoretically and practically. During the early stages of the development of the project members discussed the potential of delivering courses online, similar to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a way of sharing the knowledge produced at the Social Science Centre. However, it was agreed by members during

the early stages of development in 2012 that it was important that the Social Science Centre's education provision should be primarily face-to-face: *'The Social Science Centre recognises the importance of the virtual environment, but the project is not a form of online provision: an essential characteristic of its activities is that it is based on direct personal engagement.'* (Neary 2014, p. 213)

The Social Science Centre courses do have an online presence, so people can follow if they are unable to attend. However, in general, the Social Science Centre has found that face-to-face contact between scholars has been important and help create a bond between scholars that would be difficult to achieve through distance or online learning (Bonnett 2013). This has helped with scholars' learning and providing a sense of solidarity and belonging to the project as well as developing friendship and trust. Moreover, inspired by the Social Science Centre movement, members of the Social Science Centre wanted to create a space in the city of Lincoln, where people could go to access no-fee higher education and to meet other people involved other similar radical projects based in the local community: *'It was felt that the Social Science Centre was a site-specific project, the City of Lincoln and that programmes and courses should be based in the City.'* (Social Science Centre 2012). The importance of this was that we understood the significance of face-to-face connections that are required to build solidarity for a radical political project like the Social Science Centre. Moreover, it means the project is not just another online learning package, but part of an attempt to rethink and prefigure an alternative model of higher education.

Originally, members had discussed the possibility of buying or renting a property for the Social Science Centre: *'At the time, I was baking a lot of bread. In my head, I imagined a place in the City Centre with a shop front that sold bread, books that kind of thing and then upstairs would be a place where education took place. People would come off the High Street get to know the Social Science Centre because they wanted to buy something, sit down and have a coffee and*

realise that there was other stuff they could get involved in.’ (Respondent 12) The idea was to situate the Social Science Centre within a business that would fund the project. However, we did not have the financial resources to start the business. , instead of being based in one location, members agreed that it might be more effective to be located in a variety of different places as part of an attempt to ‘occupy the city’ (Neary and Amsler 2012), in a similar way to how the Occupy Movement had occupied public spaces across the world: *‘It was also agreed that the Social Science Centre intends to use other public, community and common spaces: to ‘occupy’ the City, and, therefore, would not want to be too closely associated with any one site.’* (Social Science Centre 2012)

Thus, rather than renting or owning a space, the Social Science Centre uses various public spaces offering the following rationale: *‘...the importance of grounding our [the Social Science Centre] work in the heart of a capitalist city and the everyday lives of its population...the Social Science Centre does not have to invent new spaces, rather seeks to expand and intensify the already existing different sites across the city.’* (Neary 2014, p. 213) The Social Science Centre is trying to situate itself as an active part of the city rather than a discrete entity like traditional universities (Bonnett 2013): *‘We didn’t want to be based or associated in one place. We wanted to be everywhere in the City. To be nomadic.’* (Respondent 17)

Theoretically, the Social Science Centre has conceptualised the way it used these spaces as: *‘autonomous counter-spaces of education within which the production of emancipatory knowledge is accomplished through the re-appropriation and, where necessary and possible, the production of social spaces, times and relations of learning.’* (Neary and Amsler 2012). Like its courses, the Social Science Centre wanted to be grounded in the lived experiences of the people of Lincoln and open up spaces for them to think critically about the problems they faced in their everyday lives and use this as the basis for informing the types of courses it delivers. Members hoped that using space and the Social Science Centre’s education provision

in this way would allow scholars to think critically about traditional methods of teaching and learning and; moreover, apply the same levels of critical thought to the everyday problems that people faced with the hope of re-imagining alternative ways of being that try to get beyond these problems. This was a key feature of the radical political project of the Social Science Centre and the use of space was seen as one of the ways in which we could connect with people in Lincoln. Moreover, it was an attempt to connect with other political activists and to encourage and support others to think in this way.

Occupying a variety of different spaces in the City of Lincoln has been beneficial in a number of ways. Not only has it kept running costs low, but it has allowed the Social Science Centre to connect with other organisations and groups who are using property in a similar way allowing the project to build up a network of contacts and resources, which has always been one of the aims of the project: *'We are seeking to build a network of support within the City that will enable us to do things and increase access to resources.'* (Social Science Centre 2012) These have included working with the Pathways Centre, which is a homeless charity, to host a photography course, called 'Our Place, Our Priorities'⁵⁷. This course attempted to question the relationship of the university to the local community by turning a series of predetermined walks across the City into a photo-essay that critically examines social exclusion (Bonnett 2013). Also, the Social Science Centre occupied space in a local initiative called 'Lincolnshare', which part of an attempt to bring local charitable organisations together to provide free education and services to people in the City of Lincoln⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ For more information about 'Our Place; Our Priorities' see: http://www.frameworkha.org/blog/1105_our_places_our_priorities_-_a_photo_exhibition_by_homeless_people

⁵⁸ The Lincolnshare project lasted six months before closing down. The reasons for this was they were no longer able to afford the rent of the property.

Moreover, by occupying different spaces across the City of Lincoln, the Social Science Centre has been able not only to provide access to a form of free education to people who are either unable or unwilling to pay £9,000 tuition fees, but have engaged in a process of collaboration that has allowed them to recreate the idea of a university in a way that reflects their needs (for example, the collaborative creation of the Social Science Centre's courses outlined above) as well the project itself (through membership and consensus decision-making). The importance of using space has allowed the Social Science Centre to experiment with a different kind of learning environment that encourages conversations and critical thought that might not happen in a traditional university: *'Would the conversations happening in that space happen elsewhere? This question is important; it is unlegislated space.'* (Respondent 7) Thus, using different space, many of which were not designed for education purposes, meant that collectively we had to negotiate the space which challenged power and encouraged a more collaborative form of education.

Nevertheless, using space in this way has not been without problems. One of the aims of using space this way was to work more closely with people in Lincoln on projects that are of importance to them. While the 'Our Place; Our Priorities' project was an example of where this worked well, in general, the Social Science Centre has not worked with people in the local community in the way we had envisioned: *'We would like to be better linked with people in the City and conduct research with them about real issues, but we have failed to do that.'* (Respondent 17) However, while the Social Science Centre felt it was important to work with the local community in this way, really the rationale for the project was to create an alternative model of higher education institution. While working with the local community in some ways might be a part of that, its main aim is to provide higher education for those that either can not or will not pay increased levels of tuition fees. This raises an interesting question about the political nature of projects like the Social Science Centre. Are they there to engage with local

political activists? Or is the political project to prefigure an alternative form of higher education provision? My view is that it is not only possible, but necessary, to do both if we are to engage critically with the world around us. However, the problem with this is the voluntary nature of autonomous learning spaces and that it is difficult for those involved to get the time and resources to address both of these issues in a meaningful way.

Moreover, some of the locations did not have adequate heating and were cold in the winter. Some of the spaces we have used have closed down: one because the lease expired and the other due to a fire. Some of the spaces we used were not always suitable for teaching and lacked appropriate technology, which meant media-based learning resources could not be used in these spaces. Other spaces were better suited for education provision but charged for their usage and were unsustainable for the Social Science Centre to use on a regular basis because of the cost. Moreover, they were not really occupied in the same as student and anti-austerity protesters had done so. During the period this research was conducted (2012-2014), discussions were still ongoing among members about the Social Science Centre having its own space and what that would mean for the project: *'I really think that we need a place of our own and that will change the nature of the Social Science Centre positively and part of that is seriously trying to raise funds.'* (Respondent 12) The difficulty is raising sufficient funds to rent or buy a property along with its associated upkeep and paying people to look after the property and that this might reduce the presence of the Social Science Centre in different public spaces around the City of Lincoln. Moreover, these financial obligations might also blunt the Social Science Centre's radical edge as the focus becomes more about making the business work than on pursuing a radical political agenda. Thus, the use of space is a critical issue for projects like the Social Science Centre. While occupation appears to work in the early stages, any attempt to create an alternative model of higher education will require permanent and appropriate space and resources. The issue with is funding, how to access this, and the impact this might have on the

radical political nature of the project. The fear is that accessing funding blunts the political edge of the project and that it becomes another capitalist institution. However, the importance is the development of an organisational form that functions in, against and beyond capitalist social relations in a way that the project can survive but prefigures post-capitalist ways of being.

Creating Links Between Autonomous Learning Spaces

In a similar way to that exhorted by Chatterton (2012), the Social Science Centre has attempted to create stronger links with other autonomous learning spaces. The research found that networking with others involved in similar projects has been mutually beneficial for the Social Science Centre and for other autonomous learning spaces. It has helped provide a sense of solidarity between people involved in these projects and allowed for experiences and lessons learned from developing autonomous learning spaces to be shared. Sharing our experiences in this way was one of the key aims of the Social Science Centre. Our hope was that this would inspire others to set up similar projects and support them in this process: *‘While the Centre is located in Lincoln and based around the social sciences it is hoped and expected that this model of small-scale, self-funded higher education provision will be adopted for different subject areas and in different locations nationally and internationally. These multi-various centres will provide a supportive and co-operative network to further advance this radical model for higher education in the UK and around the world.’* (Neary 2011)

To support this process, members of the Social Science Centre have visited, or have been visited by, members of a number of different autonomous learning spaces. This process of working together and creating a network of solidarity has been something we have continually worked on. Making links with other autonomous learning spaces has always been one of the key aims of the Social Science Centre *‘How can we make meaningful and impactful links between the current work of the Social Science Centre and work that other alternative higher education groups are doing?’* (Social Science Centre 2013) Perhaps the most systematic

approach to visiting other autonomous learning spaces has been undertaken as part of the research for this thesis, which has entailed visiting or interviewing members of six autonomous learning spaces based in the UK. From this research, we have developed working relationships with several different autonomous learning spaces in the UK and worked closely with some of them to help develop our respective projects. Perhaps the most significant relationships have been with the Free University Brighton, People's Political Economy and the Ragged University (see *Chapter Six: Case Studies* for more detail).

Moreover, as part of this research I created an 'Alternative Education Counter-Cartography'⁵⁹ on Google Maps (see Appendix G). The Counter-Cartography identifies over 120 different learning spaces worldwide and provides information about each of them. The Counter-Cartography is a public map, and the setting allowed people to add and edit information about their own autonomous learning spaces as a collaborative document and an attempt to develop a co-research project. The Counter-Cartography has been viewed over 5,400 times and has been useful for others to find out more about the autonomous learning spaces listed on it. For example, the Ragged University used this map to create a similar one⁶⁰ with a more user-friendly interface: *'Much of the data for the map is constituted of the work carefully collated by Gary Saunders at the Lincoln Social Science Centre with a few other additions and an interface which links out to the various websites.'* (Ragged University 2018) Moreover, the Counter-Cartography also features on Free University Brighton's website.⁶¹

⁵⁹ The Alternative Education Counter-Cartography can be found here:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?hl=en&mid=1NqScqpNo2fAa2AEA33cwaK7fuXw&ll=4.806056653224381%2C-75.212402&z=3>

⁶⁰ The Ragged University's map can be found here: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/worldwide/>

⁶¹ The link to the Counter-Cartography can be found on Free University Brighton's website here: <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/resources/>

The Social Science Centre has also networked with other groups through attending and hosting conferences. Since 2012 there have been two conferences hosted by other autonomous learning spaces that have focused specifically on the development of free higher education in the UK. Both of these conferences have been hosted under the moniker of the “Free University Network”, which was a network made up of people involved in autonomous learning spaces. The first Free University Network conference was held in Birmingham on the 25th February 2012 and the second in Oxford between the 1st and 2nd of December 2012.

The Social Science Centre has also hosted a number of different open days and conferences since its inception in 2011. The events have been held to raise awareness of the Social Science Centre, to make links with other autonomous learning spaces and like-minded organisations and to increase membership numbers. The first public event that the Social Science Centre hosted was an ‘Open Day’ in April 2012, which was held at the Collection and the Usher Art Gallery in Lincoln with an informal get-together at the Angel Café, a café in the centre of Lincoln, arranged for the evening *‘People are invited to an ‘open day’ to find out about plans for the Social Science Centre and to come and talk about membership of the Centre, studying, researching and designing curricula. Social Science Centre members will introduce the major ideas of the Centre and discuss some of the current challenges facing higher education.’* (Social Science Centre 2012)

Traditionally, the Social Science Centre has held a conference on the same day as its AGM. The format of the day has been to deal with the Social Science Centre business in the morning session and then move into the conference in the afternoon session. The rationale for this has been to make the Social Science Centre’s decision-making processes transparent and open and encourage potential new members to attend the event. Here is an insight into our first AGM: *‘The first AGM got a lot of people there and half the room were people we had never seen before...The first AGM we went around and read the constitution. The second half was much*

more informal and was all around curriculum design. That's where the original seed from what the original SSI course came out of. Identifying the needs of what people are looking for.' (Respondent 12)

The Social Science Centre's second conference and AGM was held in the Education Suite in the Usher Art Gallery on May 11th, 2013. Again, here is an insight into this event: *'Fourteen people in attendance from a range of different backgrounds (academic, locals, university students and some students from France) but the conference speakers were all white men. The AGM is being held in one of the sub-rooms in the Usher Art Gallery, Lincoln. The aim is to complete the AGM in thirty minutes.'* (Field Notes 2013) The morning session was used as the AGM and dealt with formal Social Science Centre matters. The meeting itself was formal, inclusive and over quite quickly: *'The meeting itself is very much like a formal meeting at a university. The style is formal with a chairperson and an agenda. However, the meeting is, or at least feels, inclusive and everybody has an opportunity to participate and most people take this opportunity.'* (Field Notes 2013).

The afternoon session, which was the conference proper was facilitated by three speakers, First, Mike Ward led a workshop on ethnographic research, based on his doctoral work documenting the lives of young men in South Wales. Then, Joel Lazarus spoke about his project, the People's Political Economy, which has a number of similarities to the Social Science Centre. Finally, Mervyn Wilson, from the Co-operative College, spoke about the increasing number of state schools which are converting to co-operatives and his vision for FE and HE to do the same (Social Science Centre 2013). Overall, the AGM and conference provoked some interesting discussions about possible alternative models of higher education, especially the development of a co-operative university. Moreover, it served as a good opportunity to meet others who were involved in other education projects and hear about the work they are doing. These, then, are examples (along with the Co-operation and Education Conference) of where the Social

Science Centre has tried to network with others. As outlined above, these approaches have been quite successful in creating networks between others involved in similar projects. So, after

What can be learned from the Social Science Centre?

So, after two years of participatory action research, 17 interviews with members of the Social Science Centre and documentary analysis of key organisational documents what can be learned from this project?

- 1. It was important for the Social Science Centre to be grounded within a theoretical framework that allowed it to be articulated as a radical political project but more needed to be done to encourage a diversity of different perspective:** One of strengths of the Social Science Centre has been its theoretical framework which is linked to two radical education projects within mainstream higher education. The development of this theoretical framework began at the Reinvention Centre at the University of Warwick and drew upon the work of Walter Benjamin and Wilhelm von Humboldt as part of an attempt to radically re-engineer the idea of the university in a way that attempted to connected teaching and research and create a critical and democratic pedagogy. This work was further developed at the University of Lincoln through Student as Producer which embodied the values of the Reinvention Centre and made them the organising principle of the institution's Teaching and Learning Strategy between 2009-2014. Both of these projects provided a theoretical framework to think critically about the idea of the university and how it might develop differently to the current neoliberal model and was drawn upon when developing the Social Science Centre. Moreover, the Social Science Centre was also grounded in Marxist social theory, however, this was not the viewpoint of all members of the project and could be divisive as it tended side-line alternative theoretical perspectives in group discussions and on courses. Nevertheless, the development, and use, of this theoretical framework has been important for the Social Science Centre and has helped members make a compelling case

for its existence and why it should be considered as a radical political project rather than a 'Big Society' initiative or a reading group. It is hard to know whether Marxism being the dominant theoretical perspective at the Social Science Centre has put others off joining or resulted in people leaving, although some members have commented that it marginalised some people's points of views and political and theoretical affiliations. However, a more inclusive approach to different theoretical perspectives would have been less divisive among members and; moreover, would have reflected a wider trend in anti-capitalist protests that has shifted away from allegiances to a particular theoretical perspective to embrace a multitude of different ways of theorising and articulating them. This would also fit more closely with attempts to develop some form of left-wing convergence.

- 2. The development of an organisational form was important for the longevity of the Social Science Centre and embodied the principles of the project:** The Social Science Centre's co-operative organisational form was perhaps the most important feature on this autonomous learning space. It allowed the Social Science Centre to exist as a legal entity with a bank account, which is meant it could receive funding, pay for things and be insured. The Social Science Centre received funds from its members usually in the form of a small monthly donation; however, this was important as these funds allowed the project to hire spaces, run a website and produce marketing material. Moreover, the Social Science Centre's organisational form also put into place a framework so the project could continue to exist even if original members decided to leave. This was one of the reasons the project continued to exist long after other autonomous learning spaces were disbanded as new members of the Social Science Centre had an organisational framework to operate within that did not require a particular person, or group of people, to be present for it to function. Moreover, the decision to adopt a co-operative organisational form was also important

because it was part of an attempt to embody the ethos of communal ownership and collective decision-making that emerged out of the 2010 student and anti-austerity protests. The co-operative form also fit with the Social Science Centre Marxist theoretical grounding as Marx saw producer co-operatives as having the potential to ‘attack the groundwork’ of capitalist social relations (Marx 1866). Thus, there was a conscious attempt to align the theoretical framework of the Social Science Centre with its organisational form. Moreover, it was the experimentation with a co-operative organisational form that resulted in the development of the co-operative university (this will be addressed in more detail in the post-script).

- 3. Experimenting with more collective forms of decision-making was important as it was part of an attempt to prefigure post-capitalist social relations:** The Social Science Centre’s consensus decision-making process was part of an attempt to democratise the running of the project and was inspired by the student, anti-austerity and anti-capitalist protests that had emerged in the 21st Century. Using a consensus decision-making process was part of a conscious effort to align the Social Science Centre’s theoretical grounding and co-operative organisational form; however, it was not without its problems. The research found that many members of the Social Science Centre were not involved in the decision-making process either because they were unable to attend due to geographical constraints or expressed that they did not want to be involved running the project in this way. To address this, we sent out regular emails to all members so that those who could not attend could contribute to the decision-making process. Also, we had different categories of membership that meant people could choose how involved they wanted to be in running the project. Nevertheless, the reality was that most decisions were made by a small group of people who attended the monthly meetings regularly. While there was an attempt to

employ consensus decision-making at these meetings there were informal hierarchies that meant that some members had more power to shape discussions and decisions than others. These hierarchies developed along lines of knowledge, experience and time that dedicated to working at the Social Science Centre. Moreover, the research also found that consensus also gives power to one or a small group of people as they have the power to block decisions made by the majority. There are other models that could have been employed, such as one-person-one-vote; however, consensus decision-making was an important feature of this autonomous learning space and while it was not perfect, the research found that members who did engage with it learned the importance of listening, engaging, and questioning people. The most important thing is to continually discuss, question and challenge how and why decisions are being made. This process does not have to be emotive but trying to do what is best for the project through a process of critical discussion. Accepting that there will be dissensus and that this useful can help this process. Moreover, processes of consensus decision-making are starting to develop in a way that allows for the resolution of some of the problems that were experienced at the Social Science Centre.

4. Having a pedagogical model that embodies the democratic and non-hierarchical principles of the Social Science Centre was important and well received by scholars:

The Social Science Centre's approach to teaching and learning attempted to align itself with the project's theoretical framework, organisational form and decision-making process. It did this by embodying democratic and non-hierarchical principles within its education provision. The research found that blending the principles of Student as Producer and critical pedagogy achieved this alignment and scholars enjoyed being able to collectively decide curriculum themes and found it helped them to become more engaged in the courses they studied. Rotating facilitators also worked well and provided a base for challenging and

questioning power in the classroom and providing different insights into the topics covered within courses. This approach to teaching and learning was not without its problems and some scholars struggled to prepare and facilitate session; however, the research found that when this happened other scholars helped with this process. Moreover, given the differences in knowledge and experience it is unlikely that education in a context like the Social Science Centre can ever be fully democratic in the sense that people have an equal input into the process. Often groups consisted of mature learners who had been out of education for some time as well as professors, lecturers and PhD students and it was often those involved in higher education who tended to lead sessions. However, what the Social Science Centre tried to do to address this is to let scholars decide collectively about the content and direction of the courses and where this was not possible be transparent about why certain directions or decisions needed to be made. While this did not overcome these differences, it was part of an ongoing attempt to try and question and challenge them. Another thing that the Social Science Centre should be commended for is allowing anyone who wishes to attend their courses attend. This is a way of beginning to address many of the exclusionary practices of the current neoliberal model of higher education. While this has not been without its problems, we have tried to provide appropriate support in place for scholars.

5. **The development of bonds of friendship and trust made the Social Science Centre work, but people did not always get on:** The development of friendship and trust within the Social Science Centre was one of the main reasons it was successful and lasted as long as it did. It encouraged scholars to help each other in courses and allowed members to face difficulties with running the project together. Examples of this included challenging hierarchies and theoretical perspectives within courses and asking for clarification on ideas

and concepts that scholars did not understand. The research also found that members would meet outside of courses for coffee and supported each other to find employment, start businesses or provide emotional support for issues people faced in their lives. Members would also donate resources to the Social Science Centre and its scholars, such as old laptops, books and DVDs. Thus, the Social Science Centre developed an affective dimension that was not envisioned by people when the project was first created. This is important as it shows that the Social Science Centre has helped develop types of relationships that might not happen in mainstream higher education and, thus, could be considered evidence of the prefiguration of post-capitalist social relations. However, that is not to say that all members got on with each other all of the time. The research found examples of fraught relationships between people, whether this was being accused of ‘strip-mining’, feeling like one’s views were being side-lined or changing decisions without consultation there was plenty of times when people were annoyed with each other. Trying to overcome these issues was always difficult; however, many of us were able to work through them and most of us are still in contact with each other even if we are no longer involved in the project. Where these differences could not be resolved people tended to avoid each other by not attending the same courses or meetings or in some cases simply left. While these there were very few of these kinds of disputes it would have been better if they could have been resolved. Members of the Social Science Centre did discuss having mediation training to help us resolve these kinds of problems, but this never happened. This would have been helpful and supported us to work together better and resolve issues so that people did have to avoid people or leave the project.

6. **The use of physical space was important as the Social Science Centre did not have its own property; however, this its use tended to be more practical than political.** The

research found that the Social Science Centre's ability to be able to use different spaces within the city of Lincoln was important as it meant it had somewhere to deliver its courses and hold its meetings. The Social Science Centre usually paid to use these spaces and, thus, funding was an important part of being able to run the project and rent different locations. Despite earlier stated aims and articulations of the Social Science Centre indicating that space would be occupied or hacked in a similar way to the student occupations and the Occupy Movement, the research found no evidence of this. Instead, the way in which the Social Science Centre used space was practical rather than political. Moreover, because the Social Science Centre only had a small amount of financial resources the spaces we hired tended to be of poor quality. This did have an impact upon the Social Science Centre's courses as there were often no computers, projectors, Wi-Fi and some spaces were freezing cold in the winter. However, despite these practical limitations these spaces tended to bring the group closer together. This was because we collectively negotiated the space to fit our needs. This meant it became our space and helped challenge power relations between teachers and students that tend to be reaffirmed in the set-up of most classrooms.

- 7. Course material needs to be diverse, accessible and understandable - the Social Science Centre did not always get this right:** One of the main problems with the Social Science Centre was with its course material. Even though this tended to be selected collectively by scholars on courses many of the texts tended to be written by white males at the exclusion of other perspectives and voices. This was surprising given that the Social Science Centre was supposed to be a radical political project and; moreover, there has been a movement in mainstream higher education to decolonise the curriculum to include a more diverse range of perspectives. What was required here was more critical discussions about course material that could have been led by more experienced members of the project. Moreover, the research found that some of the texts selected were too difficult for scholars

to access and read. To address this the types of sources used by the Social Science Centre is something that needs to be considered, especially as some scholars may have additional learning needs or have not been in education for a lengthy period of time. To address this, more videos, documentaries, podcasts or music could be used to explore the themes explored within courses. Moreover, more voices from different perspectives and backgrounds need to be included otherwise we run the risk of re-imposing different forms of oppression and privileges.

8. The Social Science Centre made useful connections with other autonomous learning spaces, but never really established itself with other political groups in the city of

Lincoln: The Social Science Centre made lots of useful connections with other autonomous learning spaces. This was achieved by attending conferences, such as the Free University Network and connections that members had – usually formed as part of the academic roles outside of the project. These connections allowed us to share knowledge and information about our experiences of creating and running an autonomous learning space, which was helpful in developing practice at our respective projects. Moreover, the Social Science Centre worked with others at different autonomous learning spaces to write publications together. The Social Science Centre did try to make connections with networks of resistance and political groups, but this never really took off. Much of this can be attributed to very few of these types of groups existing in Lincoln at the time this research was conducted. However, I think the Social Science Centre could have made more to connect with the local community and been more accessible to different groups of people. We did not do enough to promote the project or work with others and the issues they face.

9. **Imbedding a reflective cycle into the project provided a mechanism for thinking critically and improving the working practices of the Social Science Centre:** Taking the time to reflect on the how the Social Science Centre was run and how its courses were experienced was an important process for the project. The research found that members gave themselves space to do this at AGMs and at the end of the courses to reflect on what worked well and what did not. For example, this process encouraged members to think critically about the project's organisational form and the importance of membership. Moreover, it allowed members to examine what worked well with courses and use this process to improve its education provision. There were attempts to collectively reflect on the Social Science Centre as part of a participatory action research project. However, the problems with this were that not all members wanted to be involved in this process. Also, because active involvement in the project tended to fluctuate as people came and went over time it made it difficult to collectively reflect in this way. Moreover, this was exacerbated by the voluntary nature of the Social Science Centre, which meant that people had other responsibilities as well as their duties at the project that were already burdensome. This PhD was an attempt to do that as I had funding, time and space to document and reflect on the running of the Social Science Centre.

Chapter 6: Case Study Research with Six Autonomous Learning

Spaces in the UK

Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings of research conducted with six autonomous learning spaces based in the UK using a case study approach. The six autonomous learning spaces, which are presented in alphabetical order, are: (i) Birmingham Radical Education (BRE(A)D); (ii) Free University Brighton; (iii) People's Political Economy (Oxford); (iv) Ragged University (Edinburgh); (v) The IF Project (London); and, (vi) The Really Open University (Leeds). This part of the research is an extension of the participatory action research developed at the Social Science Centre as outlined in Chapter 5. The rationale for this part of the research was to learn from the experiences of others involved in autonomous learning spaces and attempt to create a network of solidarity between those involved in similar projects. The chapter is divided into six different sections, each of which provides an outline of the different autonomous learning spaces I visited. Within these sections I attempt to document how these projects were created, how they are organised, what their educational provision looked like and the problems people encountered. At the end of each section I attempt to boil these experiences down into several key points that outline what can be learned from each of the autonomous learning spaces. While these lists may not capture all of the lessons learned by people who engaged with these projects (I was not able to interview everyone) I hope they will serve as a useful for starting point for others who are interested in autonomous learning spaces or developing education provision with a similar ethos I found within the autonomous learning spaces that I conducted research with. The data for each of the case studies was gathered using a mixture of semi-structured interviews (either face-to-face or through Skype) with people who were involved in creating,

or running, each of the autonomous learning spaces, participant observation⁶² and documentary analysis of minutes of meetings, blog posts, websites and publications.

Birmingham Radical Education (BRE(A)D): We Will Rise...

Birmingham Radical Education, or BRE(A)D, was an autonomous learning space based in the City of Birmingham (UK) and was active between 2013 and 2014⁶³. In June 2014, I went to Birmingham to visit two people involved in creating BRE(A)D and find out more about the project. Like other autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis, the respondents told me that BRE(A)D was created in response to the imposition of a neoliberal model of higher education and was part of an attempt to think about how education might be organised differently: *'The project was a critical response to the imposition of the current neoliberal model of higher education and aims to create an alternative education experience that is not consumerist, indebted, authoritarian or judging of individual worth.'* (BRE(A)D 2013) The respondents told me that they saw BRE(A)D as part of struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education with the express aim to create a more democratic and critical model of provision. This aim was clearly stated on the project's website: *'BRE(A)D is a newly created group seeking to build and participate in a more democratic educational process. We, therefore, seek to work collectively against the principles that now shape the so-called public university.'* (BRE(A)D 2013)

When I asked the two respondents how BRE(A)D had been created, they told me the project had been set up by three academics (two of which I interviewed; however, the other one was unable to attend the meeting). They went on to tell me that all three had *'...expertise and*

⁶² Where possible I attended autonomous learning spaces' classes (Ragged University and the IF Project) or facilitator training (People's Political Economy), but this was not always possible as classes were not running when I visited (Free University Brighton and BRE(A)D) or the project no longer existed (Really Open University).

⁶³ When I contacted the project in 2017, it had ceased to exist. However, its blog page is still live, although has not been updated since 2014. See: <https://bread4brum.wordpress.com/>

experience of working in community education and critical pedagogical projects both inside and outside mainstream higher education.' (Respondent 17) The respondents commented that BRE(A)D was informed by their experiences of working in community education and critical pedagogical projects. Furthermore, they hoped to use what they had learned to create an autonomous learning space wherein experimentation with critical pedagogy would be encouraged: *'The intention was to create a space where all learning and teaching is critical by questioning the world as it is and exploring how it could be otherwise.'* (Respondent 16). Having this experience and expertise in education gave the project an advantage as it meant that BRE(A)D could develop a clear pedagogical philosophy as well as being able to deliver courses themselves without having to rely on other academics to volunteer their time.

However, before respondents started to discuss BRE(A)D in more detail, they said it would make sense to make me aware of the precursor to this project - Birmingham Free University. Birmingham Free University was created in 2010 and the two respondents I spoke to were heavily involved in trying to set up this project too. They told me the project was inspired by the waves of student protests, organised strikes and occupation of university property that emerged during this period as one of the respondents commented: *'The key for me was the student demonstrations. There was a moment of igniting.'* (Respondent 16) However, the same respondent, informed by their academic research, pointed out that they viewed the Coalition's reforms as part of a much longer history of changes to higher education that have been influenced by the logic of neoliberalism: *'The Coalitions reforms were part of a process of neoliberalisation. A process that began in the 1970s but has been intensified since 2010.'* (Respondent 16) The respondent's comments provide context for the Coalition's reforms and highlights that the creation of Birmingham Free University (and later BRE(A)D) is more than about protesting against tuition fees, but part of a political project against neoliberalism more generally and higher education policy reform that has been informed by its logic.

One of the respondents, who at that time of the Coalition's reforms had held a senior academic position at a university, told me that the ongoing neoliberalisation of higher education had made them feel that their position was untenable, and they quit their job as a consequence: '*Fed-up with the university I ended up leaving. It felt like the spaces for critical and radical scholarly activities were being closed-down.*' (Respondent 16) They went on to comment that the way higher education was being remodelled by neoliberal ideology had: '*...left me deeply damaged, but no longer working in it has freed me to labour in non-capitalist ways. What I am free to do is imagine what education can be about.*' (Respondent 16) The respondent's comments highlight the impact that reforms to higher education have had on some members of academic staff, especially with regards to mental health and de-professionalisation. Moreover, the respondent also underlines the importance of autonomous learning spaces and the potential they have provide an environment wherein people can experiment with more critical and popular forms of pedagogy away from the scrutiny and intensity of teaching and research experienced by many academics in mainstream higher education.

The respondents then went on to give me an insight into how Birmingham Free University was set up. They told me that members of the project came from what they described as: '*Disparate backgrounds, including academics and activists. There were some people from the Occupy Movement and some people from the co-operative movement.*' (Respondent 17) The respondents commented that having this blend of people was both beneficial and detrimental to the development of the project because while: '*...the group was diverse and could draw upon on a wealth of experience, it also made agreeing on the strategic direction of the project difficult and time-consuming.*' (Respondent 16) This became a problem for the project because the group found it difficult to reach consensus about the nature and purpose of Birmingham Free University: '*These conversations gravitated around asking what is this space? Is it a university? Is it a free university? And what should it be doing?*' (Respondent 17) Ultimately,

the respondents told me that those involved in the development of the project agreed that Birmingham Free University should be overtly political and makes links between education and political activism: *'We agreed that it should be overtly political and encourage participants to think critically about issues affecting their lives and try to 'link doing in the classroom to doing as an activist.'* (Respondent 16) The decision to be overtly political in this way was one of the factors that made this project different to most of the other autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. Moreover, the overtly political nature of the project would be something that would endure and continue with BRE(A)D.

In an attempt to realise this aim, the group wanted to work with people involved in political activism in Birmingham. As such, Birmingham Free University hosted an 'open event' and potential participants were encouraged to read an introductory text on critical pedagogy in preparation (Chapter 2 of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). However, this event did not go as planned: *'Originally, we had a one-off event to talk about Chapter 2 of Pedagogy of the Oppressed – only five people turned up. We publicised it to loads of people and we thought we would get 50, 60 people. We got five!'* (Respondent 16) The respondents were unsure why the attendance for the event was so low; however, it may have been because the focus on critical pedagogy was not appealing to political activists or members of the public. Perhaps people were more interested in political protests than creating an alternative form of higher education provision at this time.

The low attendance at the open event was a disappointment for the group and one of the many setbacks they would face over the coming years. However, the respondents I spoke to said that they tried to remain positive about the low turnout and told me the event was not a complete waste of time: *'We still had a fruitful discussion about Freire's work and the nature and purpose of education.'* (Respondent 17). Nevertheless, what was required at this stage of development was more interest in the project to get it started and recruit students for its

education provision otherwise it would run the risk of becoming a reading group for a small number of like-minded people.

The respondents told me that the lack in interest in Birmingham Free University continued and the group decided to disband the project in 2010: *'It was really disappointing, so we had a big meeting in the December of that year and decided we would forget about higher education.'* (Respondent 17) Again, the respondents were unsure why Birmingham Free University failed to gain much interest. The only thing they could think of was the idea of the project was too big and too ambitious. So, after a period of critical reflection (the respondents tell me two years' worth), some members of the group decided to create another autonomous learning space, but this time on a much smaller scale. The new project would become known as Birmingham Radical Education (BRE(A)D) with the tag-line 'We Will Rise' to demonstrate the group's determination to make it work this time.

The respondents told me that they felt like they had learned a lot from the failure of Birmingham Free University and were using this experience to develop BRE(A)D. The respondents told me that this time they had a much clearer philosophy which was inspired by critical pedagogy, especially Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Folley's Learning in Social Action. When I asked the respondents what the project's philosophy was, they told me BRE(A)D was an: *'Overtly political project connected to a socialist agenda.'* (Respondent 16) The respondents went on to tell me that they did not just have a clearer philosophy, but also a better plan for how the project would work. The respondents outlined this in some detail and told me that BRE(A)D would function as a space to: (i) work alongside activists to plan and reflect on political action; and, (ii) to encourage people, or what one respondent referred to as 'potential activists', to think more critically about the problems they face, for example *'how the bedroom tax is affecting people.'* (Respondent 16) Thus, BRE(A)D continued the development of the overtly political project that had been articulated in Birmingham Free University.

In an attempt to make these plans a reality, one of the respondents, who was involved in several political activist groups in Birmingham and other critical education projects, started to speak to other activists about using BRE(A)D as an educational resource or space to rethink radical politics to plan and reflect on their campaigns. This respondent went to a city-wide meeting, which was part of an attempt to set up a federation of anti-cuts groups and activists in Birmingham: *'I went to a meeting where we tried to set up a federation of anti-cuts groups, and that's why we tried to set up a space for re-thinking radical politics in the city of Birmingham. I said we should try and set up a space for reflecting on the political activism we were involved in. I know that when I am working on a campaign, I do not always know the issues as well as I should do and I don't think we always have the space to reflect on if it was effective, why it was effective and how we should move forward.'* (Respondent 16) Thus, the intention was to use BRE(A)D as a space wherein political activists could become better informed about the issues related to their particular campaign and then reflect on the success of their political activism after the event.

The respondents told me that while the idea to use BRE(A)D in this way was initially well received by activists in Birmingham, nothing ever materialised: *'Originally, people said yes, but what has happened is zero. Initially, there was excitement about a space for reflection and developing theory and practice.'* (Respondent 16) The respondents were unsure why this initial interest did not amount to anything. One respondent thought that in a similar way to Birmingham Free University it was hard to get consensus about what the nature and purpose of the autonomous learning space should be: *'There was a non-meeting of minds about the need for such as space and the realities of how it would work in practice.'* (Respondent 16) This might indicate that converging different political viewpoints and activist campaigns was too difficult to do. Or it may have been that the political activists the respondents spoke to thought that they did not need supporting with issues connected to their campaigns. However, given

that this engagement with political activism was one of the main aims of the project it was another bitter disappointment for the group.

However, seemingly undeterred by this setback, BRE(A)D hosted a seminar by Norma Bermudez on the use of popular education with displaced Afro-Colombian and shanty town women community members as a tool of empowerment and liberation⁶⁴, and a short course on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*⁶⁵. The respondents commented that these events were more successful. They were well attended and created some interesting discussions about the role of popular and critical forms of pedagogy. Buoyed by the success of these events, the group decided to host a larger public event about Greek politics and the rise of the far-right group Golden Dawn in Greece in an attempt to recruit more people to the BRE(A)D. This event was also well attended, and the respondents told me between 50 and 60 people turned up.

This event was aimed to showcase the project's pedagogical philosophy and ethos by facilitating an open, participatory and critical discussion within which people would feel safe to talk about issues relating to the topic. However, one respondent commented that: *'What transpired was an emotionally charged argument about fascism, monopolised by a vocal minority, which had the effect of excluding many of those who attended from participating in the discussion.'* (Respondent 16) The respondents told me that the arguments that occurred at the event were the polar opposite of the type of learning environment they were trying to create. Consequently, many of those that attended the event did not show any interest of being involved with BRE(A)D. The respondents told me that they thought this lack of interest was attributable to the way in which the event had been facilitated. This was another setback for

⁶⁴ For more details about this event see: <https://bread4brum.wordpress.com/2012/12/24/norma-bermudez-professor-and-womens-rights-activist-colombia-28th-march-2012/>

⁶⁵ For more information about this event see: <https://bread4brum.wordpress.com/2012/12/24/october-2012-meetings-events/>

the group, which was made worse by the fact that their previous two events had been so successful.

Hearing the respondents talk about the failure of this event, I got the sense they never really recovered it. However, they decided to give it another go. This time a short course in a local further education college for adult learners. However, this time no one turned up. I asked the respondents why they thought this had happened and they said there might have been some confusion about the date or perhaps it had not been advertised particularly well at the college. Again, this was a bitter disappointment for members of BRE(A)D. Coupled with the failure of the Greek politics events it proved to be too much for the group. This would be the last event they organised in the guise of BRE(A)D.

Despite its lack of success in providing regular education provision, one of the important things about BRE(A)D has been the way its members have worked with other autonomous learning spaces. One example of this is how one member of BRE(A)D had interviewed people from several autonomous learning spaces based in the UK as part of a research project that examined the rise of autonomous learning spaces in Britain since 2010 (Canaan et al. 2013). These connections had been useful for BRE(A)D and helped inform their pedagogical philosophy. For example, the principles of Student as Producer used at the Social Science Centre had been adopted by BRE(A)D which is clearly stated on its website: *‘Central to the educational experiences we want to create is the idea that students and teachers have much to learn from one another. Thus, all who participate are scholars: student-scholars and teacher-scholars.’* (BRE(A)D 2013).

These connections have also pollinated other autonomous learning spaces, especially People’s Political Economy and the Social Science Centre where one member of BRE(A)D has attended organising meetings and shared their experience of working on radical education projects with

them. As well as the research being conducted by one member of BRE(A)D, the group also attended the Free University Network conferences in Birmingham and Oxford in 2012⁶⁶ and made contacts with others involved in similar education projects in the UK - highlighting the development of networks between people involved in autonomous learning spaces.

Given the small-scale of BRE(A)D, I was not surprised to learn that the project had no formal organisational structure or decision-making process. Indeed, the respondents told me that they had made: *'A conscious effort not to become institutionalised and stratified.'* (Respondent 16) The reasons for this they told me was because they were trying not to replicate the hierarchical structures of mainstream universities and, instead, create something much collegiate. However, like other autonomous learning spaces, the group had been influenced by democratic and non-hierarchical principles and employed them to keep an open dialogue and reach decisions through consensus, mainly by meeting and talking on a regular basis. The research found that this worked well at BRE(A)D because of the small size of the group and because of the friendship between them as one respondent commented: *'We are friends, first and foremost, and speak to each other on a regular basis.'* (Respondent 17) Indeed, this friendship was an important factor for the continued existence of the project despite all the setbacks it suffered.

Why BRE(A)D failed despite repeated and sustained attempts by members to make the project work is difficult to know without interviewing the people who did not engage with the project or who stopped coming to its education provision and these people proved impossible to track down. However, when the project got the focus right it experienced some bad luck both in terms of how the event on Greek politics transpired as well as the non-attendance at the local

⁶⁶ This event was advertised on BRE(A)D's website as an event:
<https://bread4brum.wordpress.com/2012/12/24/uk-free-university-network-fun/>

further education college. By this time the enthusiasm for the project appeared to have fizzled out.

I went for a meal with one of the respondents after the interview had finished and asked them why they thought BRE(A)D had failed. While they were unable to put their finger on the reasons why too, they told me: *'...an important thing to remember is that not all projects like this are going to be successful, but it is important to keep experimenting and to learn from these projects and to celebrate the productiveness that things do not always work because failure can be productive.'* (Respondent 16) What I took from this was the importance of documenting the experiences of those involved in BRE(A)D and trying to learn from them.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- BRE(A)D tried to work closely with political activists on issues of local and national concern. While ultimately this did not work, it highlights the potential that autonomous learning spaces have to work alongside political activists and shift the focus of higher education towards being a site for engaging theoretically and practically on issues of concern. In fact, if an autonomous learning space is going to adopt a critical pedagogical approach to teaching and learning then it is necessary that it must address engage with these kinds of issues.
- Members of BRE(A)D have networked with other autonomous learning spaces and radical education projects. This has been important for both BRE(A)D and others because it has encouraged the dissemination of ideas and experiences between groups and helped developed practice. For example, the use and development of critical pedagogy and the ethos of Student as Producer have been done in collaboration with other autonomous learning spaces. This illustrates the importance of creating a radical network of people

involved in similar projects and how experiences can be shared to improve working practices.

- BRE(A)D illustrates the importance of friendship in keeping autonomous learning spaces together, especially in the developmental stages. Undoubtedly, it was the friendship of the group and their ability to be able to discuss and reach consensus that has kept the project going through all the difficulties and setbacks they experienced. This illustrates the affective dimension of autonomous learning spaces and how important these friendships and caring for each other are for projects such as this.
- BRE(A)D highlights the importance of making sure people are aware of your project's educational provision and that this provision is open and supportive for potential students. BRE(A)D failed to do both of these things with regards to the course at the local further education college and their Greek politics event. The project never really recovered from the failure of these two events. It is absolutely key to get these things correct as the wrong experience can put people off, especially if they have not been in education for some time. The last they want to be involved in is a heavyweight political contest.
- BRE(A)D demonstrates that education experiments are not always successful, but that it is important to keep experimenting and learning from these projects. Indeed, given their voluntary nature and lack of resources it is likely they most of them will fail eventually. However, this is only a failure if we do not learn from them; thus, it makes it all the more important to document these experiences and reflect on them.

Free University Brighton: Education for Love, Not Money

Free University Brighton⁶⁷ is situated in Brighton (UK) and was set up in 2010 by five individuals as what they describe as: *‘A living protest to the Coalition’s reforms to higher education.’* (Respondent 1) I visited Free University Brighton in March 2013 and spoke to one of the people who set up the project and who was responsible for running it on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, I was unable to observe any classes as none were running while I was in Brighton⁶⁸ and have not revisited the project subsequently. When asked to describe the project, the respondent I spoke to said: *‘Free University Brighton organises free courses, workshops and education events across the city to develop an alternative education system that will benefit everyone regardless of their income.’* (Respondent 1) Furthermore, the respondent told me that the project wanted to be democratic and grounded within the local community: *‘Free University Brighton’s rationale is to create a democratic educational experience where students and teachers learn from each other while what is learned is decided by local people at the heart of the community.’* (Respondent 1). However, this is more than about being democratic and grounded in the local community. The notion of students and teachers learning from each other is much more radical and is part of an attempt to question the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students found in mainstream higher education and challenge power within the classroom.

When asked why the project had been created, the respondent I spoke to commented: *‘We set up the Free University of Brighton as we were concerned about the cuts and creeping privatisation of education. I feel strongly that everyone should have the experience and opportunities of higher education without getting into massive debt. Moreover, we were inspired by the long history of struggle over the nature of education, especially the 1968*

⁶⁷ More information about Free University Brighton and its education provision can be found on its website: <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/about/>

⁶⁸ I had intended to observe one Free University of Brighton’s classes, but it was cancelled due to heavy snow.

Student Movement.' (Respondent 1) Similar to other autonomous learning spaces, then, Free University Brighton had been created in response to the imposition of a neoliberal model of higher education and the amounts of debt that students have to accrue to participate in it. What was also interesting was the way the respondent grounded the project within a much longer struggle over the nature of education. For them, Free University of Brighton was a continuation of that struggle rather than concerned solely with the increase in tuition fees initiated by the Coalition Government. Free University Brighton, then, is part of an ongoing struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education.

The respondent also told me that Free University Brighton had been inspired by the work of critical pedagogy, especially Paulo Freire⁶⁹. However, the project has not formally adopted a specific pedagogical philosophy. This, the respondent told me, was because Free University Brighton did not want to impose a particular model on those delivering courses or workshops (usually locally based academics or members of the local community who volunteer their time for free). This appeared to be a practical measure as the respondent commented: *'We did not want to impose a model of teaching and learning and people who take the classes usually tend to teach how they want to.'* (Respondent 1) There was an understanding here that academics not familiar or aligned to a particular pedagogical approach may be put off from volunteering their time at the project. While this makes sense practically, it does potentially dilute any attempt to provide critical or radical pedagogy unless the volunteers are already persuaded to engage with these pedagogies. Thus, an over reliance of volunteer academics may compromise the autonomy of the project or at least blunt any attempt to develop teaching and learning along more critical pedagogical lines.

⁶⁹ There are numerous references to Freire's work on the FUB website.

As part of the project's attempt to be more democratic, the respondent told me that Free University Brighton's courses and workshops are driven by the local community who submit requests for specific topics, subjects or skills through Free University's website which has a 'wish-list' page⁷⁰. These requests are then compiled and presented by Free University Brighton on the wish-list page, which shows potential workshops or short courses that people would either like to study or which they could facilitate. The consequence of this, the respondent tells me, is that: *'Our courses are attended by those who are interested in the subject or have a love of learning.'* (Respondent 1) Courses are listed under the categories of 'practical', 'walks', 'discussion', 'academic', 'family' and 'film' and people can then sign-up to study a workshop or short course. Once a workshop or short course garners enough interest, Free University Brighton helps participants organise the event by providing support to book space and to advertise the event.

The respondent I spoke told me that Free University Brighton sees this process as democratic and better suited to respond to the needs of the local community, which in one of the primary goals of the project. Free University Brighton also attempts to make its educational provision more accessible by: *'Using titles for workshops and short courses that sound more appealing, inclusive and fun'⁷¹ rather than intimidating and exclusively academic'* (Respondent 1). Moreover, all of the project's education provision is provided on a no-fee basis. People can donate money to the project if they want to, however, there is no expectation that students will. These attempts to make Free University Brighton's courses more accessible has been among the main reasons for its continued success in attracting students. However, one of the problems with this is that while the project is run on no-fee principles it is not free to provide courses.

⁷⁰ For more information about Free University Brighton's 'wish list' page see:

<http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/wish-list/>

⁷¹ 'Critical knitting' is an example of an interestingly named workshop that seemed to pique people's interest

Time needs to be volunteered by organisers and academics to provide workshops and courses and run the project and this raises questions about the sustainability of the project as well as exploitation of volunteers who work for no remuneration. This is one of the main problems for all autonomous learning spaces unless they are able to secure some kind of funding for the project.

The respondent told me that while anyone can study at the Free University Brighton and the project is particularly keen to recruit people who have no experience of higher education. The respondent explained that this is part of an attempt to connect with those people most likely to be affected by the Coalitions' reforms to higher education: *'Mainly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature students who would have traditionally studied part-time who are either unable or unwilling to take on large amounts of debt to fund studying in higher education.'* (Respondent 1) What Free University Brighton is attempting to do is not become a middle-class reading group for those who have already been privileged enough to attend higher education. Instead, they are attempting to create provision for those who are unable or unwilling to pay the current levels of fees for the current neoliberal model of higher education. However, the research found that one of the main problems that Free University Brighton has had is connecting with those people that are least likely to attend higher education as the respondent explained: *'Usually, it is the "same old suspects", and it is often difficult to connect with those from the more deprived areas of Brighton that would probably benefit the most from the Free University of Brighton.'* (Respondent 1)

The respondent I spoke to said one of the reasons for this might be that in the current labour market having a degree is becoming a minimum expectation by employers. Thus, potential students may not see the value of attending courses unless there is some form of accreditation for their efforts that could be used to secure or improve employment prospects. I did ask the

respondent I spoke to how many people attended these classes and they commented: *‘It varies from class to class. Also, because many classes happen in different places across Brighton, I am not always sure exactly how many people attend, but people are turning up.’* (Respondent 1)

In an attempt to address this issue, in 2016, Free University Brighton ran its first ‘degree level’ course; the Social Science and Humanities degree⁷². The aim of this degree level course is described on the project’s website as: *‘This course is pitched at the level of higher education and is part of an attempt to offer ‘a genuine alternative to degrees offered by British universities.’* (Free University Brighton 2018) Free University of Brighton also make clear the nature and purpose of this course: *‘Ethos of encouraging educational curiosity, discovery, self-development, building intellectual self-confidence, learning for pleasure and the provision of an education that is accessible for all.’* (Free University Brighton 2018) The course is run on a part-time basis and Free University Brighton envisions it will take between three to four years to complete. There are no entry requirements and the course is open to everyone regardless of previous educational experience and qualifications, and academic support is available for those who require it to make the course more accessible for those with additional learning needs and/or have been out of education for some time (Free University Brighton 2018).

In an attempt to remain true to the community-centred ethos of the project, the Social Science and Humanities degree covers a range of different topics and aims to ensure that those who take part will explore real-world issues through a range of disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, economics, history and criminology⁷³. The course is mainly delivered by lecturers

⁷² For more detailed information about this course see the course handbook:

<http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Social-Science-Freegree-Modules.pdf>

⁷³ Current classes within this course have included, ‘Inequalities in Education’, ‘Crime, Inequalities and Justice’, ‘Equalities and Human Rights’, ‘Changes in Legal Aid’, ‘Alternative Economics’, ‘Feminism and Agenda’, ‘Women: The Greatest Story Never Told’, ‘Introduction to Philosophy: Knowing and Doing – Problems and

from local universities who volunteer their time for free because they support the project's aims of providing an alternative form of no-fee higher education. The course itself is informally validated by a panel of independent academics in a similar fashion to mainstream higher education through a process of peer-review by external examiners who scrutinise the content of the course and provide academic feedback to ensure the quality of provision and that it is at the level of higher education (Free University Brighton 2018). In 2018, the Free University Brighton added another two 'freegree'⁷⁴ courses Philosophy and Feminism, Gender and Sexuality⁷⁵.

Returning to an earlier point about trying to generate interest from potential students by providing some kind of accreditation for studying, the freegrees do offer students the option of being assessed. Students can choose to be assessed either by: (i) attendance and no assessment; or, (ii) assessment on a pass/fail basis. Free University Brighton are flexible about the method of assessment, which includes presentations, face-to-face discussions, vivas, essays, poster presentations or video/voice recordings. This is an important feature of Free University Brighton because it is offering the option for students to gain a qualification that validates what they have learned and could be used to find employment, although this is not the main reasons for Free University of Brighton's education provision. Moreover, to help the course be more inclusive and support those with different educational needs, Free University Brighton employ a variety of different teaching and learning methods, including group discussion, video clips, radio programmes as well as more traditional academic readings. Again, this is an attempt to

Possibilities', 'International Relations of the Middle East', 'Contemporary Theory in the Political Economy of Africa Development', 'Thinking Sociologically and the Sociology of Thinking' and 'Alternative Societies'.

⁷⁴ A splicing of the words free and degree is to describe the no-fee nature of the courses. As addressed, previously, this is not without its problems because the courses are not free and require labour time to create and deliver them that is given on a voluntary basis.

⁷⁵ For more information about these courses see: <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Freegree-Courses-2018-19.pdf>

make Free University of Brighton's education provision more accessible and more likely to attract the types of students that the project is trying to reach.

Another important feature of Free University of Brighton is that it is not located in one specific place but occupies several different public and private spaces in, and around, the city of Brighton that allow the Free University Brighton to use their premises for free or for a small charge. These spaces have included cafes, libraries, pubs, caravans, universities, unused buildings and even a bandstand. However, the way Free University of Brighton uses spaces is not to occupy them in the political sense like the student occupations or the Occupy Movement for example. Instead, Free University Brighton uses space in the city as part of an attempt to connect with people in a way that universities usually do not as the respondent I spoke to explained: *'the idea was to weave a free university into the places where people go.'* (Respondent 1) Thus, the way Free University Brighton uses space functions not only as a way of making its education provision more visible but also more accessible. Moreover, another important feature of the way in which Free University Brighton uses space is to ensure all venues are wheelchair accessible and easy to get to by public transport. This is the only autonomous space that acknowledged making these provisions in an attempt to make its education provision more accessible to people, especially those that might find travelling more difficult.

Free University Brighton's physical education provision is also supplemented by a strong internet presence, and its website acts as a hub for people to connect and engage in discussions about current affairs and events in Brighton. The website also provides people with a list of public and private spaces the Free University Brighton regularly uses to encourage people running workshops or short courses to book the spaces themselves. In return, Free University

Brighton promotes these spaces, such as social centres, local businesses and organisations by providing links to them on their website⁷⁶. Also, the Free University Brighton's logo has been designed to be a sticker that can be displayed in these spaces to show solidarity with Free University Brighton and its aim of providing alternative, no-fee higher education (see Appendix E). These initiatives are an important feature of this autonomous space and the development of these reciprocal relationships between Free University Brighton and other local organisations appear to have played a significant part in ensuring that people in Brighton know about the project and that the project can use spaces in the city centre.

While the Free University Brighton has not adopted a formal organisational structure, it has been inspired by forms of direct democracy and consensus decision making, especially those used during Occupy LSX. The respondent I spoke to told me that the main reason the Free University Brighton has not adopted a formal organisational structure is that it is still relatively small-scale: *'...although there are a number of people involved in the project, much of the work is done by one person.'* (Respondent 1) However, organising a project based on the labour of one person and raises questions about the sustainability of Brighton Free University should that person leave or become unable to volunteer their time. Whether that will change now that the Free University Brighton is offering its Sociology and Humanities, Philosophy, and Feminism, Gender and Sexuality free courses remain to be seen. More recently, Free University Brighton has had discussions with members of the Social Science Centre about the possibility of adopting a co-operative organisational form, which would provide an organisational form that could embody the democratic ethos of the project and mean that it would be less reliant on one person.

⁷⁶ For more information of the spaces that Free University Brighton has used see: <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/venue-locations/>

Like many of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis, the research found that Free University Brighton had worked with other groups involved in similar projects and had shared experiences and what they had learned in an attempt to improve their own project. These autonomous learning spaces included People's Political Economy, Ragged University, The IF Project and the Social Science Centre and, thus, were part of an informal network of similar projects. The respondent told me that working in this way has helped Free University Brighton develop its educational provision, especially its Social Science and Humanities course which was developed with support from the Social Science Centre and modelled on the latter's Social Science Imagination Course. Moreover, Free University Brighton have worked with the Social Science Centre to write an article about the emergence of autonomous learning spaces in the UK that outlined the relationship between these autonomous learning spaces and how they have worked together (see Saunders and Ghanimi 2013).

While in Brighton, I got the sense that Free University Brighton was a project that people were interested in. Indeed, when I spoke to people in local shops, cafes and bars about my research many people had heard of the project and some had attended classes⁷⁷. When I asked further questions about this, I found that many had heard about the project through either the internet, the window stickers or friends. So, it appears that Free University Brighton's marketing strategy had been successful in raising awareness of the project. I also felt that Free University Brighton fit with the progressive politics of the city⁷⁸. By addressing issues such as environmentalism, LGBTQ+ and homelessness that also seem to be on the local political agenda. By connecting with these local issues, and wider ones, such as inequality, austerity and

⁷⁷ The topic of Free University Brighton came up in natural conversation. When I told people I was from Lincoln, they asked why I was in Brighton, and I told them about my research.

⁷⁸ The constituency of Brighton Pavilion has been held by Caroline Lucas of the Green Party since 2010, which is a progressive left-wing and eco-socialist political party.

tuition fees, Free University Brighton has made itself relevant to the local community and this has been an important factor in its success.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- Free University Brighton has helped create and promote a network of local private and public organisations within Brighton that offer workshops and short courses - many of which are free of charge. The importance of this is that it has encouraged more people to organise these types of events, creating a greater awareness of these activities and helping to develop an alternative education system that benefits everyone regardless of their income. This illustrates the importance of working with local organisations in this way to ensure people become aware of the autonomous learning space and its education provision.
- Working with local organisations has meant that the Free University Brighton has helped to organise educational provision that is embedded in spaces, mainly located within the city centre, that are frequently used by members of the local community, such as cafes, bars and libraries. This is part of a deliberate strategy by Free University Brighton and is important because it makes educational provision much more accessible to members of the local community with attention given to public transport and disability access.
- While Free University Brighton has mainly organised workshops and short courses, the launch of its Social Science and Humanities degree course marks a significant milestone in the development of this autonomous learning space. The Social Science and Humanities degree course is an important experiment because it is an attempt to develop a viable alternative to studying in mainstream higher education on a no-fee basis and accessible to people regardless of previous education experiences.
- The Free University Brighton has made connections with other autonomous learning spaces, such as People's Political Economy, Ragged University, The IF Project and the

Social Science Centre. These connections have been important because they have allowed these autonomous learning spaces to share ideas and experiences. This is particularly evident with the way Free University Brighton has worked with the Social Science Centre to help develop the its Social Science and Humanities degree course and has also had discussions about becoming a constituted co-operative.

- Focusing on local issues and tapping into the political energy of Brighton have also been important factors in the success of the project. This has made Free University Brighton interesting and relevant to people in the local community and resulted in more people attending its courses.
- Free University Brighton has been too reliant on the time and energy of one person. Thus, the project is at risk of ending should this person become unable to devote themselves to it in the way they have been doing since its inception. This illustrates the importance of not only having other people involved in running the project, but also trying to create an organisational form that means the project is not reliant on one or a small group of people. To this end, Free University Brighton has discussed the potential of adopting a co-operative organisational form that would address this issue and embed its democratic ethos.

People's Political Economy – Oxford

People's Political Economy⁷⁹ is an autonomous learning space based in Oxford (UK). I visited People's Political Economy in October 2013 and attended one of its facilitator training sessions⁸⁰ in Oxford, although I was unable to attend any of their courses. People's Political Economy was created by four people in 2012 who have backgrounds in academia and political activism - two of them meeting at Tent City University (part of the Occupy LSX in 2012). Initially, founded as Political Economic Literacy, the respondent I spoke to said the group never really felt comfortable with the name, so they decided to change it to People's Political Economy. The group thought the new name better reflected its participatory and democratic ethos: *'It [the name] speaks to the deeply democratic beliefs we hold and seek to embody. Additionally, PPE is an acronym for Oxford University's most famous course - Philosophy, Politics and Economics. We see our parody as an act of reclamation and a direct subversive challenge to the elitist model of education associated with Oxford University.'* (Respondent 2) When asked to describe the project, the respondent I spoke to told me that: *'People's Political Economy is an attempt to provide a basic introduction to politics and economics to people in Oxford in the belief that this will strengthen the democratic process by equipping people with the knowledge and skills to think critically about the current political economic situation and work towards creating more egalitarian alternatives.'* (Respondent 2) The sense I got from speaking to the respondent, and visiting the project, was that People's Political Economy was part of conscious political project that attempts to encourage, and enable, people to think critically about the current political context in the hope of creating greater democratic

⁷⁹ Although People's Political Economy is no longer active a link to their inaugural report that provides an insightful overview and evaluation of the project still works:

<https://agentofhistory.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/ppe-report-2013.pdf>

⁸⁰ This is where People's Political Economy trained people to facilitate their education provision.

engagement among those who participate in its courses in a similar vein to the ethos of critical pedagogy.

When I asked the respondent why the project had been created, they told me: *'In part, as a response to the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 which symbolises a much deeper systemic crisis of politics, economics and a lack of imagination to think of alternatives to global capitalism. People's Political Economy view this systemic crisis as both challenging and exciting.'* (Respondent 2) The respondent went on to explain what they meant and commented that this crisis is challenging because: *'...of the levels of poverty that increasing numbers of people are experiencing in the face of the imposition of austerity.* However, they also thought the crisis presented an opportunity to expose the failings of neoliberalism: *It's exciting because the crisis has exposed the economic and democratic deficiencies of neoliberalism and allows its legitimacy to be challenged.'* (Respondent 2). From this interview I got a sense that People's Political Economy was more than about simply providing a form of higher education. Instead, it appeared to be more akin to a political project that was critical of neoliberal ideology and the imposition of austerity measures that were being imposed in the UK (and beyond) at the time the group was formed. Again, this is similar to the ethos of critical pedagogy and attempts to create spaces to think critically about oppression, exploitation that are considered inherent within capitalist social relations.

However, when I asked the respondent about the Coalition's reforms to higher education, they commented that this was also one of the main reasons the project was created: *'We considered these reforms as having the potential to exclude people from deprived backgrounds, especially the trebling of student fees. Also, the reforms have shifted the nature of higher education towards becoming much more instrumental focusing on employment rather than encouraging people to think critically about the world around them.'* (Respondent 2) Thus, similar to other autonomous learning spaces, the research found that one of the main reasons for the creation

of People's Political Economy was the perceived attack on the idea of the public university through the imposition of neoliberal model of provision. Thus, People's Political Economy takes aim not only at the Coalition Government's reforms to higher education, but also the neoliberal logic that underpins them.

In an attempt to embody this ethos, People's Political Economy have developed an organisational form and is run by a small group of volunteers that consists of a core organising committee who are responsible for organising day-to-day activities, facilitators who deliver workshops and short-courses, and a board of advisors (mainly consisting of people with expertise in education and/or involved in other autonomous learning spaces) (People's Political Economy 2014). When I asked the respondent to provide more detail about how this worked in practice, they told me: *'In reality, most decisions are made by a small number of us that comprise the organising committee using some kind of consensus model. Although there is sometimes input from the board of advisors regarding developing curricula for short-courses.'* (Respondent 2) Thus, the reality is that the project is run by a small group of people which does not require the formal organisational structure that has been developed. However, like most other autonomous learning spaces, the research found that People's Political Economy has been influenced by experiments with non-hierarchical and consensus decision-making processes. The importance of this is that People's Political Economy are attempting to develop an organisational form that embodies its critical and democratic ethos.

Indeed, People's Political Economy is trying to make this process work and members want to not only involve the board of advisors much more in its decision-making process, but also extend this invite to members of the public. This, the respondent tells me, is part of an attempt to reflect the group's participatory democratic principles and better engage with people in the local community. People's Political Economy has attempted to facilitate this process through the use of social media, especially Facebook, where the group has its own page and forums for

discussions. The Facebook page is followed by 156 users; however, engagement in discussions tend to be from those involved running the project or closely associated with it (usually facilitators). Looking at the Facebook page, I found very little evidence of this being used as a tool for including members of the public in People's Political Economy's decision-making processes. However, it was not for lack of trying by those involved in the project as I am told that friend requests and tags have been used to create more interest in the project's Facebook page; however, creating wider interest in alternative education provision is something that all autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis have found difficult.

A key feature of People's Political Economy is their approach to teaching and learning, which they refer to as the '*democratic classroom*' (Respondent 2). Again, an attempt to put their democratic ethos into practice. The research found that this approach to teaching and learning, unsurprisingly, is inspired by critical pedagogy, especially the work of Paulo Freire. The respondent I spoke to told me that when the group were first setting up People's Political Economy, they became familiar with the work of the Critical Pedagogy Collective⁸¹ and series of podcasts on critical pedagogy⁸²: '*We were enthused by the work others were doing around critical pedagogy and wanted to adopt a similar approach that would allow us to question more traditional models of teaching and learning, which Freire referred to as the 'banking method' of education, where students are considered as passive, empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge rather than having the potential to participate in the construction of knowledge.*' (Respondent 2) People's Political Economy have also adopted this model in an attempt to: '*...create learning where people felt safe and supported to express their views and experiences and develop their thinking.*' (Respondent 2). The research found that People's

⁸¹ The Critical Pedagogy Collective was a group of academics that included Joyce Canaan, Sarah Amsler, Steve Cowden and Gurnam Singh. For more information about the Critical Pedagogy Collective see:

<https://critped.wordpress.com/about/our-aims-and-questions/>

⁸² These podcasts are available at: <https://critped.wordpress.com/resources-3/talks-and-interviews/>

Political Economy had also been influenced by how Student as Producer had been used at the Social Science Centre and emphasises the way in which knowledge is co-produced, and labels of 'teacher' and 'student' are dispensed with and, instead, referred to as 'participants'.

Most of People's Political Economy's courses have a core syllabus, but group facilitators can modify the content to fit with the nature of the participants so that: *'Learning is structured by the groups themselves in a locally-relevant fashion.'* (Respondent 2) This is an attempt to imbue the principles of critical pedagogy and Student as Producer and democratise teaching and learning. The respondent I spoke to told me that facilitators also try to ensure that no one political or ideological view is promoted to the exclusion of any other. However, because I was unable to attend any of their classes, it was difficult to know whether this was an aim rather than the reality. Given the overtly radical political nature of the project it would be interesting to see, and how, this was achieved. In preparation for delivering People's Political Economy's courses, new facilitators are offered 'facilitator training' to give them an insight into the theory and practice of critical education. These training sessions are usually delivered over two days (usually weekends) and consist of a range of group activities facilitated by an experienced critical pedagogy facilitator who illustrates how participants can use critical pedagogy to examine political and economic issues.

I attended one of these training sessions in Oxford in October 2013. The session was attended by eighteen people who were mainly undergraduates or postgraduates at the University of Oxford. None of them were academics like at most of the autonomous learning spaces I visited as part of this research. The sessions started with an introductory activity that asked us to share our most loved and most hated public figure with the person next to us. I thought this was quite a useful icebreaker and seemed to work: *'The task worked well, and it was not long before people were talking to each other.'* (Field Notes October 2013). We then participated in several tasks that facilitators would use when delivering People's Political Economy's courses: *'I think*

what I learned from those activities was the importance of structure; visual prompts and a good facilitator. The idea with all of the activities was to start with people's everyday experiences, which seemed to provide energy and the start of themes that could be explored later.' (Field Notes 2013). Thus, I found there was a clear link between the way People Political Economy articulated their pedagogical philosophy and what I saw in the facilitator training, which was based on principles of critical pedagogy. This was the only autonomous learning space where people were trained in this way, and those I spoke to said they found the training useful. This was because all of the facilitators received the same training and were familiar with project's teaching and learning ethos. Moreover, all facilitators had a working knowledge of how to facilitate sessions in a way that many academics working higher education might not.

Implementing People's Political Economy's pedagogical approach in practice has been difficult, as the respondent I spoke to told me: *'Developing courses has been difficult because there are two conflicting objectives with what we are trying to achieve. We are committed to the provision of democratic learning but are trying to familiarise people with key political economy ideas. This means it can be difficult to be faithful to the democratic classroom while being overly prescriptive regarding content.'* (Respondent 2). This begs the question of how democratic learning can be, especially when an autonomous learning space sees itself as a political project that wants to teach people to think in a particular way or understand a particular body of knowledge.

The research found that the People' Political Economy have attempted to resolve this problem by creating a core syllabus which acts as an overarching framework and includes the following themes (i) crisis of the economy; (ii) crisis of politics, and; (iii) crisis of the imagination. The group hopes that the core syllabus will permit a high degree of flexibility and let participants

explore issues they are interested in but, at the same time, allow the facilitators to relate them to the framework outlined above. The respondent I spoke to said they thought this approach had worked well in practice; however, they still thought it was too prescriptive. It would have been interesting to find out whether people who had studied these courses felt this way; however, I was unable to interview any of People's Political Economy's students. However, this is something that can be resolved within critical pedagogy which is focused on the processes of thinking critically about all forms of oppression rather than politically indoctrinating people. Thus, the context and outcome of the courses can be left to participants while the facilitators focus on the processes.

The research found that People's Political Economy have also been in contact with other autonomous learning spaces that emerge around 2010, including the Really Open University, The Free University of Liverpool, the London Free University, BRE(A)D, Cardiff People's University⁸³. The respondent I spoke to had visited on the Social Science Centre's workshops in 2011 and made the following comment: *'The Social Science Centre has been inspirational in the development of People's Political Economy. The experience of the Social Science Centre left a lasting impression on me. Perhaps this was my very first experience of being in a truly, radically democratic space.'* (Respondent 2) The research also found that People's Political Economy has also played a significant role in developing connections between other autonomous learning spaces through hosting the Free University Network in Oxford in December 2012⁸⁴. This two-day conference brought together over 40 educators and members of other autonomous learning spaces to discuss the problems with the current model of higher education and what an alternative model might look like. Thus, the research found evidence

⁸³ Cardiff People's University were contacted to participate in the research, but never responded.

⁸⁴ For more information about the Free University Network Conference see: <https://sustainingalternatives.wordpress.com/>

that People's Political Economy has been involved in the development of a network of autonomous learning spaces that appeared to peak in 2012.

Before I left Oxford, my final question to the respondent I spoke to was, "what have you have learned from running the project?" The respondent told me one of the most important things is to get your message out there and try to get people involved: *'You've just got to get out there and meet with the local community – there is no substitute for it. You've got to be assertive in selling what you do. Getting people involved can be difficult, and I have had workshops where seven people have enrolled, but only one person has turned up.* (Respondent 2) The respondent told me that they had been accused of being too assertive in trying to get people to attend courses and while this level of forcefulness is probably not appropriate, the research found that that being proactive in promoting the group was one of the reasons that People's Political Economy had been successful in terms of people attending its courses and its longevity. Indeed, People's Political Economy has delivered several political and economic literacy classes for groups in Oxford, such as My Life My Choice⁸⁵, secondary school students from Cheney School, Crisis Skylight Oxford⁸⁶ and Restore⁸⁷.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- People's Political Economy has spent time and effort developing a pedagogical model that it thinks will provide people with the tools to think critically about the current political and economic crisis and attempt to imagine alternatives. This is important because it provides an insight into what alternative and more critical forms of pedagogy look like in practice.

The respondent I spoke to commented that, anecdotally, participants have enjoyed the way

⁸⁵ My Life My Choice is a user-led self-advocacy group that provides training, employment, volunteering and social opportunities for people with learning disabilities. For more information see: <https://www.mylifemychoice.org.uk/>

⁸⁶ Crisis Skylight Oxford is part of a national charity for homeless people. For more information see: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/get-help/oxford/>

⁸⁷ Restore is an Oxford-based mental health charity. For more information see: <https://www.restore.org.uk/>

its courses have been delivered and; moreover, some had felt empowered to engage in discussions with others about politics and economics in way that they had not been able to do before participating on the course.

- People's Political Economy has been able to connect with other organisations in the local community, including the local authority, schools and charitable organisations in Oxford. What is important about this is that shows how autonomous learning spaces can play an important role within local communities to provide a form of critical education that encourages debates and critical thought about politics and economics. It also illustrates the importance of raising awareness autonomous spaces within the local community and making sure people know about the education provision it offers.
- People's Political Economy has been able to recruit and train a large pool of facilitators for its courses, mainly students from the University of Oxford. This is important because it means that People's Political Economy have a bank of facilitators that understand the content, purpose and pedagogical philosophy of its courses. This has given People's Political Economy the ability to develop a particular pedagogical philosophy, which has been more difficult to do at other autonomous learning spaces that rely on academics who volunteer their time.
- People's Political Economy is also well connected with other education experiments in the UK. Many of these contacts were made by hosting a Free University Network Conference in Oxford in December 2012. This conference was important because it brought together people who were involved in other education experiments to share ideas and experiences and think about what the future of these projects might be. Here, the research found evidence of the development of a network between these projects and this had been useful in sharing experiences and learning from each other.

The IF Project – London (UK)

The IF Project is an autonomous learning space based in London (UK). It describes itself as *'...using public cultural resources and the donation of intellectual expertise to provide free humanities education to young people.'* (IF Project 2015) The IF Project was created by two people, one a former senior journalist at the Observer and the other a musician, both of whom have been involved in several community-based projects within the arts and the humanities in London. I visited the IF Project in June 2015 to interview one of the people involved in creating and running the project and to observe a session on one of their courses. The research found that similar to other autonomous learning spaces, the IF Project was created in response to the Coalition's reforms to higher education, which is clearly articulated on its website⁸⁸ and further explained by the respondent I spoke to: *'The hinge of why we started thinking about this project was that there appeared to be a political disaster on the horizon by creating a marketized higher education landscape and that seems to be hitting the humanities subject particularly hard.'* (Respondent 27) The respondent I spoke to told me that they saw the IF Project as part of a longer struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education: *'There is a patchwork history pockets of resistance over higher education. The struggles in May 68 and that sense of direct action that emerged out of them and the kind of ripple effect that it had. I am inclined to believe that that kind of cultural moment is significant today.'* (Respondent 27) However, after speaking to respondent I was left with the impression that this struggle is perceived as being about access to higher education rather than the nature and purpose or form it takes.

⁸⁸ We have created the IF project because we believe that:

- In today's higher education landscape, humanities subjects risk becoming an education for the wealthy as the current political emphasis on the future salary advantages of university degrees, coupled with fear of debt, is pushing school-leavers to opt for vocational courses.
- Access to basic education in the humanities is a human right.
- Giving young people the opportunity to study humanities subjects will enrich their lives and society as a whole.

(IF Project 2015)

When asked how the IF Project was created, the respondent told me that the group began by researching other autonomous learning spaces which had been: *'...useful for thinking about what the IF Project might look like in practice and what problems they might face in setting up.'* (Respondent 27) The respondent cited two autonomous learning spaces in particular that had been helpful, People's Political Economy and Melbourne Free University (an autonomous learning space based in Melbourne, Australia⁸⁹). The respondent went on to tell me what had been particularly useful were the reports they had written about how they had set up their respective projects (People's Political Economy 2013 and Melbourne Free University 2013). What I found interesting about this was that this interview took place five years after the first autonomous learning spaces started to emerge and it highlighted how important the documentation of these experiences could be in helping others to create similar projects.

The IF Project ran its first course, the IF Humanities Summer School Pilot⁹⁰, in 2014, which was explicitly aimed at 18-30-year-olds with no previous experience of higher education. The respondent I spoke to told me that they focused on this age group because: *'We didn't want to just provide another middle-class reading group. We wanted to provide a place for those most affected by the Coalition's reforms to be able to study higher education.'* (Respondent (27) In an attempt to reach this demographic, the IF Project worked in partnership with some charities who are engaged with young people in London, such as IdeasTap⁹¹, The Creative Society⁹²,

⁸⁹ I spoke to one member of Melbourne Free University in 2014 about their experience of being involved in the project and their views on autonomous learning spaces. I also contacted others at the project, but no one responded and appeared to no longer be active in 2018.

⁹⁰ For more information about this course see: <http://www.ifproject.co.uk/blog/2014/11/17/if-summer-school-2014>

⁹¹ Ideas Tap is an arts charity for young, creative people at the start of their careers. For more information about this organisation see: www.ideastap.com

⁹² The Creative Society is an arts employment charity that helps young people into jobs in the creative and cultural industries. For more information about this organisation see: <http://www.thecreativesociety.co.uk/>

YMCA, Refugee Support Network⁹³, Institute of International Visual Arts⁹⁴, Tricycle Theatre⁹⁵ and six form colleges, such as BSix Hackney⁹⁶. The IF Project received around seventy-five applications for its first Summer School Pilot from people who wanted to study on the course of which it accepted 33 applicants based on the criteria outlined above. Of these 33, 24 registered to study on the course and 11 of those formally completed the course. The pilot offered a taster course in core humanities subjects, which included English Literature, History, Political Philosophy, Visual Arts and Classics. The IF Project evaluated this course through an online questionnaire and found that all 11 students⁹⁷ said they would welcome more IF Project courses. Moreover, 50% said they had become confident about engaging in university-level education as a consequence of the course. According to the evaluation, the course had successfully helped some of its students to develop the skills and confidence required to study at the level of higher education.

Given the success of the first pilot course, the IF Project has subsequently delivered a series of regular summer schools. I did not attend these courses but provide an overview of them based on the information given on the IF Project's website. In 2015, the IF Project delivered its second Humanities Summer School⁹⁸. The course aimed to provide students with a foundation for studying in the humanities which consisted of a series of introductory sessions at the level of higher education. In 2016, the IF Project delivered its 'A Free Introduction to Thinking'

⁹³ Refugee Support Network is an organisation that provides support to refugee and asylum children and young people to access educational opportunities. For more information about the project see: <https://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/>

⁹⁴ Institute of International Visual Arts is an evolving, radical visual arts organisation dedicated to developing an artistic programme that reflects on the social and political impact of globalisation. For more information about this organisation see: <https://www.iniva.org/about/institute-of-international-visual-arts/>

⁹⁵ Now renamed the Kiln Theatre: <https://kilntheatre.com/>

⁹⁶ <https://www.bsix.ac.uk/>

⁹⁷ The respondent told me that these students were mainly young black males from deprived areas of London, but also some students had come from the Refugee Support Network.

⁹⁸ For more information about this course see: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52a72a77e4b07aa6d0d249f7/t/59a03fe9ebbd1afc60f4a857/1503674346515/IF+2015+Summer+School+Programme.pdf>

course⁹⁹. The stated aims of the course were to equip students with basic research skills concerning analysing historical sources, presenting arguments based on evidence, thinking critically and studying independently. In 2017, the IF Project delivered a course which focused on the themes of immigration and human movement called ‘Thinking Without Borders: A Short History of the Present’¹⁰⁰. The course provided an introduction to what the IF Project considered contemporary concerns in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the USA, such as truth, lies, power, freedom, nations, rights, culture and identity. The most recent course delivered by the IF Project was called “The Brief History of Inequality” in 2018¹⁰¹. The course provided an introduction into how writers, historical and contemporary, have written about inequality and the issue of creating more egalitarian societies.

The respondent I spoke told me that all the IF Project’s courses are delivered by academics who volunteer their time: *We wondered if it would be possible to try this networked idea whereby you put a call out and say, ‘are you an academic and willing to donate one hour’s worth of time?’ We at IF are the admin hub and will bring them all together and make them into a course.* (Respondent 27) While the research found that the IF Project had not adopted a specific pedagogical model, the respondent I spoke to commented that the general aim was to *‘...encourage students to develop a deeper understanding of the humanities and apply critical thinking skills used within these disciplines to everyday life.’* (Respondent 27). One of the reasons for not adopting a particular pedagogical model was because that it had the potential to put off volunteer academics. This was because the academics might not be familiar with a particular approach or might not be aligned to it either pedagogically or politically: *‘While*

⁹⁹ For more information about this course see:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52a72a77e4b07aa6d0d249f7/t/5899ad7ae4fcb57ac15e12f1/1486466426999/Thinking+AFI+Course+Outline.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ For more information about this course see:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52a72a77e4b07aa6d0d249f7/t/5899ad7ae4fcb57ac15e12f1/1486466426999/Thinking+AFI+Course+Outline.pdf>

¹⁰¹ For more information about this course see: <http://www.ifproject.co.uk/inequality/>

there were some initial conversations about the use of critical pedagogy, the reason we did not adopt a particular approach to teaching was that it might be too onerous on academics who volunteer a small amount of their time for free. Instead, we encourage academics to be aware that students attending their courses are likely to have had different educational experiences and, thus, will need to adapt their sessions accordingly.’ (Respondent 27) Here, there was some effort to provide additional learning support for those students that needed it, although this was basic. While the research found there had been no problems with regards to additional learning support, given that most of the learning materials were text-based, there is the potential for some students to find accessing them difficult, especially given that the IF Project is attempting to engage students with no experience of participating in higher education.

In practice, the research found that there is nothing radical about the IF Project’s courses and they tend to be more akin to a traditional university lecture and seminar format: *‘I suppose we recreate a traditional higher education in a humanities department way of teaching, which is underpinned by trying to give people an inspiring entry level root into the humanities.’* (Respondent 27) As part of this process, students attend a lecture each week which is delivered by an IF Project volunteer and then asked to either read, research or watch supporting additional material which is suggested by the academic to help introduce students to the subject. For example, as part of the first pilot course, the students would have a lecture and associated seminar introducing the core humanities subjects followed by a three-part seminar series on Reading Homer’s *Odyssey* and two interactive seminars on criticisms of the visual arts. The respondent I spoke to told me that while this approach to teaching and learning may not be that radical the importance of the IF Project was that it offered a form of free higher education to those that might not have studied at this level otherwise: *‘We believe that by studying the humanities young people also develop the capacity to be creative and critical; discover tools for textual, visual and musical analysis and understand the basics of ethical and rational*

thinking. Such skills will make them involved and informed citizens, workers and decision-makers. ' (Respondent 27) Thus, the IF Project appears to be more of a defence of the idea of the public university, in that it sees higher education as a public good, rather than an attempt to create a radical alternative in the way that some of the autonomous learning spaces attempt to do. However, the respondent I spoke to was honest and open about the aims of the IF Project and was made it clear that the project was probably not as radical as other autonomous learning spaces I might have visited but is important in its own right for its provision of no-fee humanities-based courses.

I attended one of the IF Project's courses in June 2015 on its second Humanities Summer School which was held in a seminar room in the University of Arts London on High Holborn, London. The session was titled 'Political Philosophy' and delivered by Professor Glen Newey (Professor of Political Theory at Universite Libre de Bruxelles). We were asked to prepare for the session by reading Chapter 1 of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. The session was attended by 12 people who consisted of six young black males (aged between 18-19 years-old) from Hackney (London) four refugees and a volunteer from the Refugees Support Network, and a member of the IF Project. Professor Newey gave a lecture on Mill's work (50 minutes) before asking us to comment on the chapter we had read. What followed was an insightful conversation about oppression, totalitarian states and liberty some of which was based on personal experiences, but always grounded in Mill's work.

Everybody participated in the discussion and seemed engaged by the topic. What I found interesting was that if people did not understand something in Mill's work, they were willing to ask for clarification and support. Thus, not only had all the students read the work, but it appeared that the IF Project had been able to create a safe environment for people to ask these questions. Given the mixture of the group and the content they were studying I thought this highlighted how well the course was being run. Some of us went to the pub afterwards, and I

spoke to some of the people from Hackney who told me they had found out about the IF Project through Hackney WickED¹⁰², which is an annual community DIY art festival in Hackney Wick, London and invited me to attend the next one. I thought this highlighted how well the IF Project had been able to engage with local community projects, which has been an important feature in the success of the project, especially ensuring that their courses are well attended.

The research found that while an awarding body does not validate the IF Project's courses, students are given a certificate of attendance and participation when they finish the course. Students also have the option of submitting a short reflective statement about their experience on the course in the form of either a 600-word written statement, a short film (approximately one-minute-long), photographs, a presentation (five minutes that can be recorded on a mobile phone and emailed to the IF Project) or any other artistic medium. While the IF Project has considered pursuing the option of granting formal qualifications, the cost and regulation associated with doing this were seen as potentially limiting to the freedom the group currently enjoys developing its own courses. However, while the IF Project's courses are not validated, the fact that students can do some form of assessment and gain a certificate of attendance and participation has been an important factor in the project's success and students feel like they are getting something from the courses they attend that could be useful for gaining future employment.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about the IF Project is the way it uses space. As part of its courses: *'The IF Project uses London as a 'giant lecture hall' 'hacking' a range of different public and cultural spaces across the city.'* (The IF Project 2015) The respondent I spoke to thought that many of the people who study on its courses (mainly young people from deprived backgrounds) are unlikely to access these spaces by themselves: *'We thought, London*

¹⁰² For more information about this festival see: <http://www.hackneywicked.co.uk/>

and cities, in general, are full of public culture that you can access and have an educational experience, but some people might not do that of their own accord. We thought there is an opportunity here to ask academics to take people through the doors of these cultural institutions and contextualise what's happening within them as free events.' (Respondent 27)

Students who participate on the IF Projects' courses are either directed to attend free events or they meet a volunteer academic at these spaces, such as an exhibition in an art gallery or museum or a performance in a theatre or concert hall, who acts as a curator explaining the significance of the space and how it fits with the courses they are studying. As part of this process, the IF Project has worked closely with the Southbank Centre¹⁰³, Tate Modern¹⁰⁴, Gresham College¹⁰⁵ and the Courtauld Gallery¹⁰⁶ to help facilitate these types of activities. However, an important thing to note here is that the IF Project does not 'hack' these spaces in the common sense of the word by reclaiming restricted space and using it for different purposes. Instead, the IF Project uses spaces that are either free to the general public or the use of them has already been agreed by the owners of that space. Again, there is nothing radical about this; however, that is not to overlook the importance of encouraging and guiding people to, and around, these cultural resources who might not use them otherwise. As the IF Project points out, much can be learned from attending these spaces and thinking critically about the artefacts and activities within them.

One of the most important features of the IF Project is that it has been able to secure funding. The project has formally registered as a charity and has received funding from a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign for its first pilot course and, subsequently, the Big Lottery Fund. To

¹⁰³ For more information about the Southbank Centre see: <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/>

¹⁰⁴ For more information about the Tate Modern see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern>

¹⁰⁵ For more information about the Gresham College see: <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/>

¹⁰⁶ For more information about the Courtauld Gallery see: <https://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery>

what extent receiving these funds limits the radical potential of a project like this is an interesting question, although the Big Lottery Fund's criteria for small grants does not appear preclude this¹⁰⁷. The IF Project has a formal organisational structure that is made up of trustees, project advisors and an academic advisory board. The creation of courses, and their content, are decided by the board, which is made up of volunteers (mainly academics from local universities) who discuss potential courses and offer suggestions for how they might be run: *'The academic board is quite informal and naturally close working groups informally develop within larger boards. If someone is going to be responsible for a part of the course then, to an extent, there is a natural thing where he or she go out and meet a series of people and broker personal relationships and make the environment of that coursework.'* (Respondent 27) The respondent went on to say that essentially the board provides 'academic rigour' by acting as a form of 'in-house quality assurance' for courses and projects delivered by the IF Project. Like other autonomous learning spaces, the research found that decision-making had been informed by participatory democratic and non-hierarchical principles and there had been an attempt to imbed some form of consensus approach. However, given the small size of the board. The respondent I spoke to said there was no need to embed this formally as the group were small enough not to require it at this stage of development.

The IF Project has also been in close contact with other autonomous learning spaces, especially Free University Brighton, Free University Melbourne, Ragged University and the Social

¹⁰⁷ We are most interested in projects that:

1. Are led or directed by those with lived experience of the social issue being addressed.
2. Tackle the root causes of social issues, not just the symptoms, by identifying structural barriers and long-term failures in order to change systems.
3. Are informed by diverse perspectives and multiple stakeholders, to ensure that the solutions created can achieve outcomes for all.
4. Develop collaboration and collective responses between organisations.
5. Focus on continuous experimentation, learning and adaptation.
6. Take action to address issues at the earliest possible stage.

If your project does not meet one or more of the above criteria, we are unlikely to be able to fund it.

Science Centre who have all provided guidance and support as the project has developed. The IF Project has also consulted with academics to help develop their education provision. This was initially facilitated through the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce's¹⁰⁸ academic mailing list, which was used to gather ideas about the types of courses the IF Project might offer and how they might be delivered. The Royal Society also encouraged the IF Project to apply for funding to support the project through its Catalyst Fund and although the project did not receive any direct funding it did win an award to start a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign (mentioned above), which enabled it to raise some funds to start the project.

Through the use of public spaces and funding from different charities, the IF Project has been able to provide an alternative to mainstream higher education. While the IF Project's approach is not politically radical and more akin to teaching and learning models used in most universities, it has been successful in recruiting students who would probably have not participated in higher education otherwise. Moreover, in the session I attended, there were some interesting conversations and a genuine enthusiasm for learning. On the train back to Lincoln I thought the IF Project was different to all of the other projects I had visited. The session I attended felt more like being at university than some kind of radical political project to rethink the nature and purpose of higher education or to engage with political activists. However, despite its lack of radicalism, or perhaps because of this, it has been one of the most successful autonomous learning spaces I have visited.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- The IF Project has been able to draw upon a wealth of public cultural spaces to help enrich its courses, such as museums, art galleries and concert halls. What is important about this

¹⁰⁸ For more information about this organisation see: <https://www.thersa.org/>

is the way the IF Project has been able to make these spaces, and the activities within them, more accessible to the people who study its courses. While there is nothing radical about this, it illustrates how spaces can be used to support learning within an autonomous learning space.

- The IF Project has been successful in gaining funding through a Kickstarter campaign and the Big Lottery Fund. Gaining this funding has been one of the most important factors for the IF Project's success. What is important about this is that it shows there is funding available for autonomous learning spaces and that people and organisations are interested in supporting these types of projects. However, to what extent this compromises the radical potential of these projects and/or their autonomy is an interesting point to consider. Undoubtedly, funding will come with some strings attached. However, the conditions of the Big Lottery Fund did not appear to preclude the type of work that many autonomous learning spaces are engaged in.
- The IF Project has worked closely with other autonomous learning spaces, especially Free University Brighton, Free University Melbourne, People's Political Economy and Ragged University. What is important about this is the way that the IF Project has learned from the experiences of these other autonomous learning spaces and highlights the importance that these projects have in helping to develop alternative forms of education provision. This illustrates the importance of documenting the experience of autonomous learning spaces and using the lessons learned from these experiments to inform future projects.
- The IF Project has good connections with local community projects, especially in the arts. This has meant that the IF Project has been able to create awareness of the project and recruit interest in its courses. This has been an important factor in the IF Project's success and its ability to attract students to its courses.

- While the IF Project places value on the humanities and the critical thinking skills developed within them, it has not adopted a specific pedagogical model. This has been a practical measure so that volunteer academics are not put off working at the project. The importance of this is that it shows that a more flexible approach to teaching and learning can be just as successful for autonomous learning spaces, especially when relying on volunteers to deliver courses. However, this may dilute the radical political nature of autonomous learning spaces, especially if there is a desire to use more critical and radical pedagogies.
- The IF Project has an academic advisory board that helps to develop its courses. The importance of this is that not only is it a rich source of ideas, but it scrutinises the IF Project's courses proving academic rigour to its educational provision. Coupled with the decision to offer certificates for participation on its courses, it means that students feel like they are receiving something of value that represents their learning on the courses and can potentially be used for future employment.

The Ragged University: Knowledge is power, but only when it is shared....

The Ragged University¹⁰⁹ is an autonomous learning space based in the city of Edinburgh (UK)¹¹⁰. I visited the Ragged University in November 2013 to interview one of their members and to observe a Ragged Talk. The respondent I spoke to told me that the Ragged University was set up in 2010 by: *'...a small group of people in response to the Global Economic Crisis of 2008 and the Coalition's reforms to higher education – both of which were by seen as having the potential to reduce access to higher education, especially for those from deprived areas.'* (Respondent 26) My understanding of this was that the respondent was concerned about access to higher education rather than its nature and purpose and form it takes. What is interesting about this is that the Coalition's reforms did not apply to higher education in Scotland (authority has been devolved to Holyrood) and was still free to attend when I visited this project. Thus, what this highlighted was a sense of solidarity that appeared to extend beyond self-interest and connect with those affected by the Coalition Government's reforms to higher education. When asked to describe the Ragged University, the respondent commented: *'It's an informal collection of people, efforts and interests brought together to create a free environment to enjoy sharing knowledge in. Basically, it's about getting people who love what they do to share it.'* (Respondent 26) The way the respondent articulated the aims of the Ragged University made it seem less radical than some of the other autonomous learning spaces I have visited. Generally, I did not get the impression that this was about creating a radical, alternative model of higher education, but more about facilitating education opportunities for people in the local community and standing in solidarity with those affected by higher education reforms in England.

¹⁰⁹ For more information about the Ragged University see: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/about/>

¹¹⁰ There is also a Ragged University in Manchester, but I did not visit this one. For more information about Manchester Ragged see: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/manchester-4/>

The Ragged University draws its inspiration from the Ragged Schools and the Ragged Schools' Union (RSU), and key individuals involved in the RSU, such as Thomas Cranfield, John Pounds and Thomas Guthrie. In 19th Century Britain, the RSU sought to provide free education, food, clothing and shelter for the poor, or the "ragged", working-class children; an initiative that was supported through the receipt of philanthropic contributions and the pooling of community-based resources (Roberts 1997). This is the approach the Ragged University appears to take with regards to its education provision. Indeed, the respondent I spoke told me: *'In the moment of economic crisis that emerged in 2008 and the ensuing funding cuts to higher education, the Ragged University attempts to revive these philanthropic and resource sharing traditions by bringing people, groups and organisations in the local community together.'* (Respondent 26) Again, nothing radical about this in terms of creating an alternative model of higher education or challenging the capitalist social relations that led to the economic crisis the respondent spoke of. Instead, the project seems to be more about making these conditions more bearable by bringing together charitable resources for those that need them. The respondent referred to this process as: *'Tankers and tugboats – we nudge people and opportunities together that otherwise might not meet.'* (Respondent 26) However, this is not to undermine the importance of the project or its education provision, which is excellent. What is important about this project is that it is providing a form of higher education to people during a period of intense pressure on mainstream higher education that may exclude certain sections of society attending.

The Ragged University does not have a formal organisation form and its decision-making process was described to me as: *'More of an approach, than a model.'* (Respondent 26). Like most autonomous learning spaces, the lack of an organisational form and decision-making processes is due the small size of the project which tend to be run by a handful of people. However, the respondent I spoke to said they tried to make decisions in the spirit of consensus decision-making. In practice, the Ragged University is run by two people who are good friends

and refer to themselves as janitors. The term janitor is used because the pair think it best describes their role at the Ragged University, which is: *'...that we take care of the project and maintain it for the benefit of others.'* (Respondent 26) This was an interesting point and when I asked the respondent to provide further explanation about this, they told me that the project did not belong to them, but to the local community. Although they created it, they did not see it as being theirs, but a communal project owned and controlled by its users. However, the Ragged University does have aspirations of gaining charitable status, which may change the way it is run in the future but would help institutionalise its ethos of collective ownership and control.

While there is no single pedagogical model, the respondent I spoke to told me that the Ragged University takes teaching and learning seriously and in the early stages of its development members of the group: *'...spoke with some retired university professors about how best to do this'*. (Respondent 26) Rather than being prescriptive about a specific pedagogical model, Ragged University draws upon a range of different pedagogical philosophies inspired by people, such as Paulo Freire, John Dewey and Aristotle with the overarching aim of: *'Bringing the community together to learn from each other and improve people's lives for the better.'* (Ragged University 2018) While there is a radical undertone to its education provision (mainly Freire's influence), the Ragged University sees education as a form of public good that needs to be defended rather than something that has the potential to radically change social relations more generally.

Indeed, much of what the Ragged University does is similar to a traditional university. Its main educational provision is a series of regular free lectures, which are called 'Ragged Talks'¹¹¹. The Ragged Talks invite people to deliver a session about something they know and share it

¹¹¹ The Ragged Talks are a series of one-off talks that are hosted by the Ragged University across Edinburgh. For more information about the Ragged Talks see: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/ragged-talks/>

with others. The Ragged Talks operate on a no-fee basis and are open to everyone as part of an attempt to bring different people to together from the local community. Talks are given by a variety of different people, which have included university professors, educationalists, people involved in local charitable projects and members of the local community. The Ragged Talks tend to be held in a function room above a local pub and are: *'...well attended generating a free-flowing discussion among the audience. Free food is provided (any leftovers are given to a local homeless charity) and the bar is open if people want to have a drink.'* (Respondent 26)

The session I attended was based in the Counting House above the Pear Tree Pub in Edinburgh which, even during the day, is a space awash with ideas and conversation, *'The Pear Tree Pub is like a classroom. I hear people talking all the time about politics, history, law and football.'*

(Respondent 26) The session consisted of two talks, *Noumenal Contouring: The Secret of Science, The Secret of Skills* by Ciaran Healy and *To Sleep, Perchance to Dream: 30 Years in the Land of Morpheus* by Professor Ray Miller. The session was well attended with over 30 people there on the night, which consisted of a mix of academics, university students and denizens of the pub: *The Ragged University provided free food, and the bar was open upstairs so the people could buy drinks. Speaking to people in the crowd between the talks it appeared that most attended regularly and enjoyed the sessions. Both talks were well received, and people engaged with both speakers afterwards asking questions and inquiring where they could find out more about each topic.* (Field Notes November 2013) While the talks were interesting, they were pitched at a high level somewhere between the level of undergraduate and postgraduate. For people with no previous experience in higher education I imagine they would have been difficult to follow. Given the number of people that attended it was hard to successfully gauge the socio-demographics of those who attended. However, talking to as many people as I could at the end of the final talk, I found there was a tendency for participants to be white, middle-aged and middle-class, although there appeared to be an equal split of

males and females. Thus, during my visit I found no evidence to suggest the Ragged University's education provision connected with the people who unlikely to attend higher education. Although, it did seem to appeal to mature students – a socio-demographic that has been among the most affected by the Coalition's reforms to higher education in England.

As well as the Ragged Talks, the Ragged University has a strong internet presence which attempts to connect people to other educational, cultural and online resources and has an interactive map that shows where these events are taking place in Edinburgh¹¹². Moreover, the Ragged University's website also acts as a digital archive for numerous Edinburgh University Settlement community projects¹¹³, which were unable to continue running after falling into financial difficulties and was liquidated in 2011. The Edinburgh University Settlement project was, in part, an education outreach programme that attempted to link the University of Edinburgh with the local community to improve the conditions that many people lived in¹¹⁴. Thus, Ragged University can be seen as part of an informal attempt to keep this programme going.

There are also the Ragged Podcasts¹¹⁵, which are recordings of some of the free talks that are given and are shared on the Ragged University's website. Another aspect of how the Ragged University has attempted to connect with the local community is the way it uses what it refers to as 'third spaces' around the city of Edinburgh, which includes pubs, cafes and libraries¹¹⁶:

'We use third places, such as meeting in pubs, cafes and libraries - our thought was that if it

¹¹² For more details about these events and to access the map see:

<https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/edinburgh-3/>

¹¹³ For more details and to access this digital archive see:

<https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/?s=edinburgh+university+settlement>

¹¹⁴ While this project no longer runs and its website is no longer available, information about the Edinburgh University Settlement project can be found on Wikipedia, which also has some useful links to information about it: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edinburgh_University_Settlement

¹¹⁵ For a list of available Ragged Podcasts see: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/ragged-podcasts/>

¹¹⁶ For a detailed list of the spaces that Ragged University has used see:

<https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/music/local-venues/>

shows sport then we can use it as a classroom.' (Respondent 26) Many of these spaces form part of its 'Ragged Library', which hold a selection of books¹¹⁷ and academic journals that have been donated by people involved in the project and are 'held in common'¹¹⁸ in spaces, such as the Blind Poet¹¹⁹ However, there is nothing radical about the way Ragged University uses space and, like most autonomous learning spaces, it tends to be more practical than political, but is appreciated by those attend its education provision.

The Ragged University has worked several autonomous learning spaces, including the Free University Brighton, IF Project, People's Political Economy and the Social Science Centre. One of the main ways the Ragged University has worked with other autonomous learning

¹¹⁷ These books include:

- Braungart, M. and McDonough, W. (2009) *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* was recommended by John Morrison. London: Vintage Books.
- Chrisman, M., Pritchard, D., Fletcher, G., Lavelle, J.S., Mason, E., Massimi, M., Richmond, A. and Ward, D. (2016). *Philosophy for Everyone*. Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Christikas, N. and Fowler, J. (2009) *Connected: The Amazing Power of Our Social Networks*. London: Harper Press.
- Davie, G. E. and Paterson, L. (2013) *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Feminist Alternatives. (2011) *My Dream is to Be Bold: Our Work To End Patriarchy* suggested by Jane Quin. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- MacKay, D. (2009) *Sustainable Energy: Without the Hot Air*. Cambridge: UIT Cambridge.
- Mayer, R. (2009) *Multimedia Learning* suggested. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Molseworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (2010) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and Student as Consumer*.
- Orwell, G. (2001) *Road to Wigan Pier*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Pinker, S. (2015) *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*. New York; Basic Books
- Ramachandran, V. S. and Blaklee, S. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Scott Fitzgerald, F. (1993) *The Great Gatsby*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics.
- Scott, J. (1999) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New York: Yale University Press.
- Smith, K. (2011) *How to be an Explorer of the World*. London: Penguin.
- Solnit, R. (2004) *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. New York: Nation Books.
- Stevenson, R. L. (2017) *The Ebb Tide*. Hastings: Delphi Classics.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better For Everyone*.
- Words And Rules: The Ingredients of Language* was suggested by Dr Sarah Anderson. London: Penguin.

¹¹⁸ For more information about the Ragged Library and a list of books contained within it see:

<https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/ragged-library/>

¹¹⁹ The Blind Poet is a pub in Edinburgh named after Thomas Blacklock, whose poems decorate the walls. For more information about the Blind Poet see: <http://www.blindpoet.co.uk/>

spaces is to try and create a Free Education Network (FEN) online. As part of this, the Ragged University has asked people involved in other autonomous learning spaces to write a short article to describe who they are and what they offer and share this information with others¹²⁰. The research found that sharing information in this way had been useful for connecting people involved in autonomous learning spaces or interested in researching them. However, the impetus for the Free Education Network appeared to wane after 2012 when many of the autonomous learning spaces started to close.

I enjoyed visiting the Ragged University and there was a real buzz about the session I attended. Given the number of people who attended the session (30ish, which is similar to other talks hosted by the Ragged University I was told by the respondent) I can see this is a successful project. One of the main reasons for this is the respondents I met when I visited. They have developed a large network of organisations and people within the local community, which has allowed them to promote the project and to access space either for free or for very little expense. This network also means that they can recruit speakers that people are interested in listening to which means they come back for subsequent talks. However, I found that the people who were attracted to these talks tended to be white, middle-class and middle aged rather than those from deprived backgrounds who might be put off from attending university who the respondent had alluded to earlier on, but certainly appealed to mature learners. Perhaps this was because higher education was still free in Scotland. On the train back to Lincoln I thought about whether the Ragged University was really just a lecture series rather than an autonomous learning space. While it is accurate to say that its main provision is a lecture series, its Ragged Libraries and website make it something more than that. It is a form of higher education that is based on creating a network of organisations, people and resources that can share knowledge and skills

¹²⁰ For example, here is a link to the article I wrote about the Social Science Centre for Ragged University: <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/2013/09/17/social-science-centre-gary-saunders/>

that do not rely on a single institution such as a university to do this. In this way it is somewhat similar to the Ragged Schools it takes its name from.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- While the Ragged University offers a range of different educational opportunities, including the Ragged Talks, podcasts and academic literature in its Ragged Libraries, it does not offer courses like some of the other autonomous learning spaces. What is important about this is that the Ragged University has been successful (in terms of longevity and attracting people to attend its Ragged Talks) by offering educational opportunities that do not attempt to replicate those in a university and, instead, has developed a different approach that is based on bringing people together to share knowledge and skills. There might not be anything radical about this, but it works. This could be because higher education is still free in Scotland so an alternative to it is not as pressing as it is in England.
- The Ragged University has a well-developed website that functions as a hub for people to access information, such as the Ragged Talks for those that cannot attend and other educational activities that are happening in Edinburgh. Moreover, the website hosts a variety of different educational material, such as podcasts and digitised readings. This is important because it provides access to educational material for those that might not be able to engage otherwise (although it still excludes those without access to the internet). It also means that the project is more than just a series of lectures.
- The Ragged University is well connected with other autonomous learning spaces, including the Free University Brighton, IF Project, People's Political Economy and the Social Science Centre. Much of this has been down to the janitors who have tried to develop a 'Free Education Network'. The importance of this is that it has allowed education

experiments to share ideas and experiences gained through creating and running these projects. Again, there is an attempt to develop a network of people involved in autonomous learning spaces, although it appears the energy for this has waned since 2012.

- The Ragged University uses a number of different what it refers to as third spaces to better connect with the local community, such as pubs and cafes. This is important because it makes the Ragged University's educational provision more accessible to people in the local community. This is also further supported by the way in which the janitors have an extensive network of connections in the local community. These connections have helped them raise awareness of the project which has been successful for recruiting people to deliver and attend its Ragged Talks.
- The session I attended tended to be made up of white, middle-aged and middle-class people. If this is the usual socio-demographic, then more needs to be done to make Ragged University more diverse and inclusive. The respondent indicated that the project had been created for those students from deprived backgrounds who least likely to attend university. However, the provision I saw did little to attract or include this demographic, except mature learners.

The Really Open University: Strike – Occupy - Transform

The Really Open University was an autonomous learning space based in the city of Leeds (UK), which was active between 2009 and 2012. This is perhaps the most radical autonomous learning space that features in this research and embodied the ethos of both the student and anti-austerity protests that emerged when the project was first created in 2009. Sadly, the project came to an end before I started my research (2012), but I was able to interview two people who had been involved in setting up and running the project. The Really Open University also had a blog, so I was able to conduct web-based analysis too.

The Really Open University was created by a group of students and academics in response to the Coalition's announced reforms to higher education in 2010. One of the respondents I spoke to told me that the group were also inspired by student occupations of university campuses in California (USA) and the UK: *'We were inspired some of the occupations that were happening at the time in the UK and California. There was also lots of things going on globally around education, so we tried to feed into that.'* (Respondent 24) Thus, from the start there was a sense of radicalism about the group and what it was aiming to do. Indeed, when I asked one of the respondents to describe the Really Open University to me, they said: *'It is a laboratory for subversion and part of an ongoing process of transformation by those who challenge the higher education system and its role in society.'* (Respondent 25). This sentiment is also contained in the Really Open University's '3 Reforms' document¹²¹. The group's emphasis is on transforming the idea of the university as part of an overtly political project which is encapsulated in its slogan 'strike-occupy-transform'. The sense I got from discussing this with

¹²¹ The three reforms are: Reform #1 – The Abolition of all Fees and the Institution of a Living Wage; Reform #2 – A debt jubilee for all past students; and, Reform #3 – The abolition of the Research Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey. For more information about the Really Open University's 3 Reforms see: <https://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com/3-alternative-reforms/>

the respondents was that the aim of the project was not to defend the idea of the public university but develop an alternative model of higher education provision.

After the announcement of the Coalition's reforms to higher education, the group organised a series of meetings about how to respond. These meetings were attended by around 50 people consisting of students, academics and local activists. One of the respondents told me that during these meetings the group discussed what an alternative university might look like. Here, the group tried to embody an ethos of openness and participation to encourage people to share their ideas about how best to respond to the reforms to higher education: *'Initially, there was a core group of people who put out a call out, which was an invitation for people to attend a meeting, which was open and structured with a loose agenda set beforehand. We wanted it to be open regarding what kind of ideas people wanted to raise, but also making sure it was focused around trying to politicise the responses to these education cuts and potential fee vote.'* (Respondent 25)

It was out of these discussions that the group decided to host an open event entitled, "Reimagine the University" (see Appendix E for a copy of the event flyer). The event was held over a three-days and coincided with a national student walkout on the 23rd November 2010. This was a conscious attempt to align with political activists while also giving people a space to think about the nature and purpose of higher education. Indeed, what was notable about the Really Open University event was that it was not just an attempt to defend the public university but to imagine what an alternative model might look like. In accordance with this aim, one of the respondents I spoke to said that the public university was not without its problems and so instead of defending it was important to think about creating an alternative model that would address these problems: *'We were trying to challenge this idea that we wanted the university to stay how it was before the Coalition's reforms because the university had always been based on a hierarchical system and we didn't want just to defend the University of the past. We wanted*

to ask what education could mean and what we wanted it to open that discussion up and rather than saying that all we want as consumers is for education to be cheaper. We were trying to challenge that as the rhetoric.' (Respondent 25) Thus, the Really Open University was more than about fees, it was about the idea of the university and how we might collectively prefigure alternative models of higher education provision.

Initially, the group used higher education institutions in Leeds to host its activities through a formal room booking system. However, and this is where the Really Open University differs to the other alternative learning spaces that feature in this thesis, it occupied university property during the student demonstrations. The rationale for this, one of the respondents told me, is to *'...challenge or politicise the way space was being used which excluded certain groups of people accessing higher education.'* (Respondent 25) However, once the group started to attract people who were not associated with the university they found that the space on campus was no longer suitable for the project: *'Once the group started connecting with people outside of university, it became clear that university campuses were not accessible to all either because of geographical distances and/or people did not feel comfortable being on university property.'* (Respondent 25)

To address, this the group started to think about creating a space of their own away from the University. The group were also spurred on by what they saw as a closing down of the type of space they wanted to create in the city, such as the Social Centre and Common Place, which were radical and independently organised community spaces. The group decided to rent out an abandoned warehouse close to the city centre to create the Space Project. This project was conceived of as a temporary experiment where different groups based in Leeds could set up their own courses and events and cross-pollinate ideas: *'We were trying to set up a space where we could put into practice those conversations we had had about education. So different rules of access, much more open than a regular university. We wanted a space where people could*

come and organise, just having a bit of a physical base or space.' (Respondent 24) The Space Project ran from October 2011 to March 2012 and was provided with short-term funding by an organisation called Change Makers.

To help organise these events, the group held regular meetings, which were sometimes attended by up to 20 people, including academics, students and members of the local community. These meetings tended to be about the day-to-day running of the project and how to better connect with local people: *'We had organising meetings. At some points, we had one a day. Sometimes there were up to 20 people there, and sometimes they would be much smaller.'* (Respondent 25) A lot of those meetings were *'...about the day-to-day operations and how we could improve engagement with other people.'* While there were often a range of different views about the content, location and purpose of these free education events the group tried to be sensitive to other people's interests and perspectives by using an approach: *'...loosely based on non-hierarchical and consensus decision making processes. Most people involved were conscious of consensus decision making. That was the default model for making a decision, but it was not a formal policy. In general, we just tried to negotiate through meetings, and we just tried to be sensitive to other people's interests and perspectives.'* (Respondent 25)

While this generally worked well, some members of the group commented that this process did not always run smoothly and was often exacerbated by informal power dynamics that had developed within the group, usually based on how much time people could dedicate to the project: *'How do we facilitate and discuss these difficult things that we cannot necessarily just get over by using consensus. There will always be people who are very persuasive in their arguments. Some people might also be natural leaders, and others defer to them, which can annoy other people in the group who feel like their voices are not being heard. One of the things that I found disappointing by the end of the project was that we didn't find a way to facilitate those differences.'* (Respondent 25) It is not unusual for these kinds of hierarchies to

develop within autonomous learning spaces and, like other groups that feature in this thesis, the Really Open University found it difficult to resolve these issues. However, acknowledging the difficulties with this process is important and makes those involved in the similar projects aware of some of the limitations of more participatory democratic models of decision-making.

While the Really Open University and Space Project's educational provision did not adopt a specific pedagogical model, the group commented that they had been influenced by '*...currents of radical democratic education, such as critical pedagogy and Student as Producer and attempted to encourage people to think critically about the world around them and to question the distinction between teacher and student.*' (Respondent 25) These currents had been gathered by working with people involved at the Social Science Centre, especially Student as Producer. The Really Open University and Space Project offered some short courses (which would not be assessed) on subjects, such as the miners' strike, which was run by an ex-miner, and course on critical pedagogy. The group also ran an 'Economic Crisis Reading Group' that attempted to provide basic economic literacy and provide a space to discuss how people could respond to an economic crisis. The project also hosted a series of guest lectures. Perhaps the most notable one was by Professor John Holloway – a Marxist scholar. Another short course the Really Open University offered was a 'Radical Issue Walk' around Leeds which would take people to historical sites of struggle in Leeds: '*There was a radical issue walk around Leeds taking in sites of political history like Luddite history and the Chartist Movement. That format works really well if you can have somebody who can take you around and knows about local history and shows you these places of conflict and struggle and can bring it alive for you in a way that studying a classroom wouldn't.*' (Respondent 24) Thus, while the group's pedagogical approach was not radical, the subject matter of its provision often was.

The demise of the Really Open University and Space Project was largely down to the fact that the funding expired: '*Because of the way the Space Project was funded it was only ever going*

to be for six months unless there could have been some more funding found, but there wasn't any. We did quite a bit of fundraising to try and support it.' (Respondent 25) The group were unable to secure more funding and, thus, they were unable to renew the lease of the warehouse they had been using. From speaking to the respondents I got the sense that they might have been able to carry on with the project using various spaces in Leeds; however, people started to feel burnt-out: *'The day-to-day running of the space starts to wear you down and the things that we were interested in doing writing courses, teaching and reading things became less and less. It was an immense stress of trying to get that done, and that makes people turn against each other.'* (Respondent 25)

Many of those involved in the project were PhD students and as they started to write up their theses they had less time to dedicate to the Space Project, so they had to scale back the project as people's time became more pressured. During this period relationships within the group started to become strained and as one member commented *'...there were interpersonal problems and disagreements as there usually are in these types of groups, which led to a drop-off in enthusiasm for the project.'* (Respondent 24) This is one of the problems when an autonomous learning space relies on volunteers. They often have other responsibilities that tend to have priority over working at the project. Thus, the crunch-time for the group was when key members of the project had to focus on their doctoral studies. This underlines the importance of funding and being able to pay people for their time.

While I did not get to visit this autonomous learning space, talking to the respondents and conducting web-based analysis I get a sense of how radical and intense the project must have been at the time. The project was short-lived; however, for a fleeting moment of time it functioned as not only a critique of the current model of higher education, but also a space within which people were thinking about and experimenting with post-capitalist alternatives.

What can be learned from this autonomous learning space?

- The Really Open University hosted a high-profile event, the *Reimagining the University* conference. The importance of this was not only did it receive national recognition, but also facilitated the coming together of people involved in other autonomous learning spaces from around the UK allowing people to share ideas and experiences. This was an early attempt to create a network between autonomous learning spaces and people involved in similar projects.
- The Really Open University was not only a form of protest against the Coalition's reforms to higher education, but also tried to imagine what the university could be and how this might encourage people to think about wider social change. Thus, the Really Open University was not only part of a struggle over the nature and purpose of higher education, but also wider social change. This was one of the most radical autonomous learning spaces and through the Space Project it attempted to make links with other political activists in Leeds.
- The Really Open University was the only autonomous learning space to occupy space in a similar way to the student occupations and the Occupy Movement. However, the group found that occupying space on university campuses excluded those that were not in higher education. To address this, they tried to find a space that was more centrally located and not connected to a university. However, the space they ended up using raised different issues, specifically how it would be paid for once the funding ended and the time and energy required to manage it which was often at the expense of developing its education provision and the project itself.
- The Really Open University were able to secure a small amount of funding, which was an important factor in the project's early success. This funding was used to rent warehouse

space to run its meetings and education provision. This illustrates the importance of funding for as once the funding ran out the project ceased to exist.

- After six months key people involved in the Really Open University starting to feel fatigued with running the project. Some of this was attributable to trying to juggle running the project, paid-work and study; however, this ultimately led to the demise of the project. The respondents I spoke to said what they learned was that the project was too ambitious for such as a small group to manage and they should have started off with something much smaller. Again, it also raises the problems with a reliance on voluntary labour.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an outline of the main findings from research conducted with six autonomous learning spaces based in the UK and explored the key themes that emerged from the data. The research found that all of the autonomous learning spaces had been created as a form of protest in response to the Coalition's reforms to higher education that were announced in 2010. All of the respondents considered these reforms as part of an attempt to impose a neoliberal model of higher education on the sector. The research found that some respondents saw this process of neoliberalisation having a longer history, which began in the late 1970s and initiated by Margret Thatcher's Conservative Government. All respondents thought that these reforms have had a negative impact on higher education that have marketized and financialised the sector. However, perhaps the biggest concern expressed by respondents was that increased tuition fees were likely to exclude people from studying in higher education, especially those from deprived backgrounds.

The research found that all of the autonomous learning spaces had taken inspiration from the 2010 UK student protests as well the occupation of university property that occurred around that time. Some respondents went back further in history and saw connections between their

projects and the 1968 Student Movement functioning as pockets of resistance against reforms to higher education. However, the research found that some of these autonomous learning spaces were more than pockets of resistance or some attempt to defend the idea of the university. Instead, these autonomous learning spaces function as places of both resistance and creation and are part of an attempt to prefigure an alternative idea of the university. For example, this was clearly articulated at the Really Open University who described themselves as an attempt to experiment and reimagine what the university could be and also how this might support broader social change.

The two main areas of experimentation the research found were with pedagogical models and autonomous self-organisation. The research found that all of the autonomous learning spaces had considered adopting some form of popular or critical pedagogy that would encourage people to think critically about the world around them. Where this was most articulated was at BRE(A)D whose model of education provision was based explicitly on the work of Paulo Freire. This was also true of People's Political Economy who trained its facilitators to be able to run its courses based on the principles of critical pedagogy. While Free University Brighton and the IF Project did not impose a particular pedagogical model on academics who deliver its courses, the research found evidence that both had been influenced by critical pedagogy. The research also found that most of the autonomous learning spaces had tried to create their own courses to provide an alternative to studying in mainstream higher education. Where this was most developed was at the IF Project with its series of annual summer school courses and at Free University Brighton with its freefree courses.

The research also found that all of the autonomous learning spaces had been influenced by models of autonomous self-organisation that were based on democratic and non-hierarchical principles. While not all of the autonomous learning had formally adopted a particular model, mainly because of the small numbers of people involved in running the projects, some had

attempted to embed principles of collective ownership and control within an organisational form. Both People's Political Economy and the IF Project, for example, had created academic boards that were involved in the projects decision-making processes. The Really Open University had experimented with non-hierarchical decision-making processes but often ran into problems when people were trying to juggle paid work with the project leading to fatigue and disagreements within the group. The research found that where people had tried to work in a more democratic and non-hierarchical way, the development of friendship had been an important factor in facilitating this approach by allowing difficult topics to be discussed and helping to work through difficult time, such as BRE(A)D that experienced several setbacks before ceasing to exist.

The research also found that all of the autonomous learning had attempted to use space in a way that allowed the projects to be situated within their local communities. Using space in this way was driven by a desire to better connect with local communities, especially those people who might not study in higher education. One example of this is Free University Brighton which has helped to organise education provision that is embedded in spaces, mainly located in the city centre, which is frequently used by members of the general public, such as cafes, bars and libraries. Ragged University is another example, and the way it uses what it refers to as 'third spaces', such as pubs and cafes to host its education provision is part of an attempt to better connect with the local community. The most exciting use of space was the IF Project who have drawn upon a wealth of cultural spaces in London, such as museums, art galleries and concert halls as part of its courses. The research found that by doing this, the IF Project had made these spaces more accessible to people who study its courses.

The research also found that all of the autonomous learning spaces had attempted to network with others involved in similar projects. The research found examples of people sharing their experiences from running an autonomous learning space and that these had helped develop

their respective projects. The IF Project, for example, had found People's Political Economy 'Inaugural Report (2013) and Free University Melbourne's 'How to Start a Free University' (2013) documents helpful when setting up their project. Free University Brighton worked closely with the Social Science Centre to develop its Social Science and Humanities degree course and has had discussions about the potential of becoming a co-operative. Also, both projects have worked together to write an article about autonomous learning spaces (Gurnami and Saunders 2013). Ragged University has also acted as a hub for sharing information about autonomous learning spaces as part of an attempt to put groups in contact with each other. It has used its website to do this and asked people to write a summary of their respective projects to be shared with others. The research found that two autonomous learning spaces had attempted to create links with other people involved in similar projects by holding a national conference. The first do to this was the Really Open University with its 'Reimagining the University' conference in 2010. The second was People's Political Economy which created the Free University Network Conference in 2012.

Overall, it is clear that those involved in autonomous learning spaces have learned valuable lessons about organising alternative higher education provision. Not only is it important to document these experiences but also to learn from them to inform the creation of an alternative model of higher education that addresses the deficiencies of the current neoliberal model. This is the focus of the next chapter which discusses the main lessons that can be learned from these autonomous learning spaces in an attempt to re-imagine the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society.

Chapter 7: What can be learned from these autonomous learning spaces? Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for a Post-Capitalist Society

Introduction

This chapter will critically examine the practical and theoretical significance of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. The previous two chapters have documented in detail the experiences of those involved in creating and running these spaces as well as the key lessons that can be learned from each autonomous learning space, including what worked and what did not work. While many of these autonomous learning spaces no longer exist, the documentation of these experiences is important because the stories of the people within them can help to inspire and support others who may be thinking of setting up similar projects either now or in the future. To that end, this chapter begins by providing ten practical points of advice that people setting up similar projects might find useful. These points of practical advice have emerged out of the research and from reflecting on my own experience of being a member of an autonomous learning space. While this advice is no guarantee of survival in a hostile neoliberal environment, it does give similar projects a greater chance by learning from the successes and failures of those who have attempted to create alternative models of higher education provision.

While these practical points of advice are important for anyone interested in developing similar projects, the aim of this research has not been solely on the creation of autonomous learning spaces that can survive within capitalist social relations. Here, it is worth returning to the title of the thesis, *Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for Post-Capitalist Society* which is the focus of the second part of this chapter. The argument I have outlined in this thesis is that the reforms to higher education in England made since from at least the late 1970s onwards are

part of an ongoing process to restructure capitalism and increase the economic growth and profits for capitalists (Harvey 2005). This restructuring process is based on embedding free market principles, deregulation of the financial sector and the privatisation of publicly funded services (Gamble 2001), of which higher education is an example of (Brown and Carasso 2013). This neoliberal restructuring is an attempt to reduce the gains made by the working-class after the Second World War through the creation of the Welfare State, Keynesian economic policies and the trade union movement (Harvey 2005). This process has gained momentum since the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008 and been sped up in the form of austerity by governments across the Eurozone and the North America in an attempt to resolve this crisis (Harman 2010). However, as outlined in Chapter 3, the crisis tendency of capitalist social relations caused by structural contradictions and class struggle cannot be resolved within capitalism but requires its abolition and the transition towards a post-capitalist society (Postone 2003; Bonfeld *et al.* 1992a) that is grounded in the principles of collective ownership and control, and the nurturing the development of humanity and nature instead of their exploitation (Clever 2017).

My argument is that these autonomous learning spaces provide hope that there are alternatives to the current neoliberal model of higher education provision and that post-capitalist futures are possible. This is because these autonomous learning spaces, and other similar projects, function as cracks within capitalist social relations that have the potential to rupture them and point to alternative, non-capitalist ways of being (Clever 2017; Holloway 2002 and 2010; Dinerstein 2014). What is required is to connect these cracks and an important part of this process is for people to overcome their ideological, theoretical, practical and cultural differences and uniting a fragmented political left (Prichard and Worth 2016). Working on concrete political projects, such as these autonomous learning spaces, has the potential to bring people together in this way and indicates the potential for a left-wing convergence (Prichard

and Worth 2016). Moreover, by grounding these autonomous learning spaces practically and theoretically in Open Marxism provides a compelling critique of capitalist social relations but is grounded within libertarian forms of self-organisation that address all forms of oppression, domination and exploitation (Holloway 2002 and 2010; Dinerstein 2014) in a way that supports the development of left-wing convergence. While trying to transcend these ideological trappings is not without its problems one of the key findings of the research is that it might be possible to do this within a concrete political project a grounded more participatory forms of democracy and non-hierarchical organisational forms.

The chapter argues that one possible organisational form that has the potential to do this is the emerging idea of the co-operative university (Cook 2013; Matthews 2013; Neary and Winn 2017; Neary and Winn 2019; Somerville and Saunders 2013; Sperlinger 2014; Winn 2015a). The idea of the co-operative university has the potential to function as a new form of social institution that has as its basis the creation and dissemination of knowledge that is socially useful (Neary and Winn 2019) or grounded in development and nurturing of humans, non-human animals and the environment and based on democratic and non-horizontal principles in a way that allow it to function in, against beyond capitalist social relations (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979) and prefigure and post-capitalist idea of the university (Saunders 2019).

Practical Point of Advice 1: You need to secure some kind of financial funding or access to resources to support the running of your autonomous learning space – The research found that one of the most important factors in the success of autonomous learning spaces was their ability to secure some form of financial funding or gain access to resources for their projects. Receiving financial funding meant that autonomous learning spaces could raise awareness of their project through advertising or hosting public events. This is important because if people do not know about your autonomous learning space then they will not attend

your education provision or become involved with your project. Moreover, being in receipt of financial funding or having access to resources like physical space is important for the delivery of your education provision. If you are unable to gain access to suitable spaces, then you are unable to run your education provision. There were a number of ways in which autonomous learning spaces addressed the issues of access to financial funding and gaining access to resources.

For example, the Social Science Centre recommended that its members pay a fee of the equivalent of one hour's pay per month. However, this was not mandatory and those who were unemployed, low-waged, full-time students or were in receipt of welfare benefits were exempt from membership fees. Using this method, the Social Science Centre was able to raise enough funds to run the project for nine years. While membership fees did not generate enough to pay members who worked at the Social Science Centre, it did cover renting spaces to deliver education provision and conferences as well as advertising those events. Both of these points were important factors in the Social Science Centre's ability to attract scholars and for longevity. Moreover, because members tended to be like-minded people, and support the aims and objectives of the project, it meant that the Social Science Centre could remain true to its radical political ethos without the influence of funding bodies that might be reluctant to offer financial resources to a project of this nature.

Another example is the IF Project, which received financial funding through two different sources. The first was a crowdfunding initiative which relied on financial backers being interested and sympathetic to the project. This is something that anyone involved in an autonomous learning space could attempt to do and guidance can be found to support this

process¹²². Another way in which the IF Project received financial funding and the Big Lottery Fund. Again, anyone involved in an autonomous learning space can apply for this funding and the Big Lottery Fund does support education initiatives¹²³. However, the thing to keep in mind when applying for external funding is that backers may be reluctant to support radical political projects which may mean that your project might struggle to attract funding, or it may have to blunt its radicalism. While the Big Lottery Fund appears, in principle, to support the activities of autonomous learning spaces, the IF Project was one of the least radical projects to feature in this research which may be the reason why it was successful with its bid. Nevertheless, accessing financial funding has been an important part of the success of the IF Project and has meant that it can raise awareness of its education provision, provide learning materials, develop its website and hire appropriate learning spaces with technology to support teaching and learning.

Another example of accessing resources has been the way that some autonomous learning spaces have been able to utilise public space free of charge. Once again, the IF Project serves as an example and uses its members' links in the local community to enable it to use museums, art galleries and concert halls to support its education provision. However, much of this is made possible by the IF Project being based in London meaning it has access to a wealth of public cultural spaces that others in different geographical locations may not. Other examples include Free University Brighton and Ragged University and, like the IF Project, their ability to do this is based on being located in big cities and the connections individuals have made by working within the local community. Both projects have achieved this by promoting their projects through advertising (Free University Brighton's window sticker) or creating websites. Both of

¹²² For example, here is a link to a Kick Starter Handbook that provides guidance on all aspects of this process: <https://www.kickstarter.com/help/handbook>

¹²³ Guidance on how to apply to the Big Lottery Fund can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/big-lottery-fund>

the strategies were useful is raising awareness and interest in the projects. Consequently, this often meant that more people offered support (usually through volunteering) and that more people were interested in attending courses leading to the longevity and success of both projects.

Another issue that autonomous learning spaces experienced was that people working within them tended to burn out or leave the project to focus on other things. For example, one of the main reasons that The Really Open University ceased to exist was because key members of the project began to feel burnt out and; moreover, many of them needed to focus their energies elsewhere – in this case their doctoral studies. While none of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis were able to do this, one factor that could make these projects more successful is being able to pay people who work there. Relying on voluntary labour is not only exploitative but is likely to be short-term. This is an issue that sustained funding might be able to address. Moreover, it would provide members of these groups with experience of organising space, finances and people that are important organising tools for political education within projects such as these (Chatterton 2012).

Thus, deciding which income streams to chase is a difficult issue for those involved in autonomous learning spaces and much depends on how willing members are to dilute their radical political aims. For example, the IF Project has been successful in receiving funding, regularly recruits students, developed its education provision and still exist; however, it is perhaps the least radical of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. Alternatively, Birmingham Radical Education was one of the most radical in its aims but received very little in the way of funding and was perhaps the least successful autonomous learning space. What the research found was that the most successful autonomous learning spaces became less radical and received funding (IF Project) or relied on membership subscriptions and maintained their radical ethos (Social Science Centre) or used a mixture of

volunteer academics and free space to facilitate their education provision (Free University Brighton, People's Political Economy and Ragged University). The research also found that even with funding, or effective use of volunteers and free spaces, autonomous learning spaces tended to be small scale and wane quickly as volunteers became exhausted or were faced with competing priorities. Therefore, what is clear is that without significant funding that has few conditions attached (which looks unlikely but could be provided by a rich philanthropist perhaps), then these autonomous learning spaces can only operate on a small scale and/or for a short amount of time.

Practical Point of Advice 2: You need to establish connections with the local community within which your autonomous learning space is situated – The research found that establishing connections within the local community was an important factor in the success of autonomous learning spaces. Unless, you have considerable financial support to rent or buy property your autonomous learning space will require some form of physical space to be able to deliver its education provision. Autonomous learning spaces did this in a number of different ways. The Social Science Centre paid a small amount of rent to several different organisations in return for using their spaces, which was funded through their membership fees. Ragged University developed good relationships with several different cafes and pubs that allowed them to use their space as it increased their trade. Moreover, Ragged University has set up its Ragged Library in some of these spaces that provides books, magazines and journals that people can read while using the facilities within them. This relationship is reciprocal as it raises the awareness of the Ragged University but also encourages people to use the spaces where the Ragged Libraries are located. There is nothing radical about this but encourages local organisations to support each other in a way that is mutually beneficial.

Another important aspect of establishing good connections with the local community is to be able to raise awareness of your autonomous learning space and recruit students for your project.

The research found that when autonomous learning spaces were able to connect with the local community within which they were situated they were more likely to be successful. For example, Birmingham Radical Education tried to connect with the local community in Birmingham but were unable to do this with any great success, which is one of the main reasons the project was not as successful as others. Perhaps the most successful attempt to connect with the local community has been Free University Brighton, which has not only acted as a hub to connect local people to already existing education provision but has also worked closely with local organisations to promote the project through its use of Free University Brighton stickers. Moreover, Free University Brighton has offered workshops and courses that people in the local community are interested in and, thus, have been able to avoid looking like a ghettoised anarchist squat space and more appealing to the general public (Chatterton 2012). This has resulted in Free University Brighton's courses being well attended and one of the main reasons that it has continued to exist. Another example of this is People's Political Economy which had good connections with the University of Oxford and were able to recruit facilitators from among its student population. Moreover, members of People's Political Economy also pushed the project within the local community to recruit students for their courses, which included working with homeless charities, local council and schools. Working with the local organisations in this way was one of the main reasons for People Political Economy's success.

Another reason to establish connections with the local community is to try and work together on political projects of local and national concern. Birmingham Radical Education attempted to work with political activists in Birmingham, although this did not work out in the end it highlights to potential for autonomous learning spaces to work with others in this way and shift the focus of higher education to work with people on these issues (McLaren 2000). The Really Open University was another autonomous learning space that tried to connect with political activists. The Really Open University were successful in doing this by engaging with student

protests and academic strike action in response to the Coalition's reforms to higher education (Pusey 2017). Moreover, the Really Open University was part of a political project to re-imagine the idea of the university that connected with people on a national level by hosting a conference on this issue. Free University Brighton were also successful because they tapped into the political energy in Brighton, which has a history of progressive politics. Engaging with local issues that were of concern to the community was one of the reasons that Free University Brighton was so successful. The reasons for doing this is to try and create wider networks of resistance that have the potential to prefigure post-capitalist alternatives in a way that connect cracks within capitalist social relations (Holloway 2002 and 2010). Moreover, it helps develop a form of scholar-activism that encourages academics and members of the public to work together on research projects that affect them (Chatterton *et al.* 2006) and develop a public sociology that blurs the boundaries between academics and activists by both becoming involved in concrete political projects (Burawoy 2004).

Practical Point of Advice 3: You need to make connections with other autonomous learning spaces, or people involved in similar projects, so that you can learn from each other's experiences and create networks of resistance – The research found that an important element in the development of autonomous learning spaces was the way they connected with each other and learned from their experiences. One way in which this was done was by autonomous learning spaces documenting their experiences to share with others involved in similar projects (Free University Brighton, People's Political Economy, Ragged University, Social Science Centre and The Really Open University). The research found that these documents had been useful for others involved in creating autonomous learning spaces. For example, members of the IF Project found reading documents about the experiences of setting up People's Political Economy and Melbourne Free University useful for developing its own project. Moreover, the research found that many of those involved in autonomous

learning spaces were in contact with each other and visited different projects to learn from their experiences. For example, BRE(A)D worked closely with People's Political Economy and the Social Science Centre to develop critical pedagogy and Student as Producer. Another example is Free University Brighton that has worked closely with the Social Science Centre to develop its Humanities and Social Science Course and discussed the potential of adopting a co-operative organisational form. Another example is the Ragged University which was in contact with other members of autonomous learning spaces and raised awareness of these projects on its website. The research found that members of autonomous learning spaces found this process useful and meant they could learn what works well and what does not and avoid mistakes made by others in the past.

Moreover, having connections with like-minded people involved in similar projects helps develop networks of resistance (Chatterton 2012) that not only share experiences and lessons learned but also support each other through difficult times. For many involved in autonomous spaces drawing on this network of resistance has helped keep projects running and improved education provision. For example, Ragged University tried to develop a Free Education Network that connected groups involved in providing alternative forms of higher education provision. It has attempted to do this online; however, the energy to keep this network going appears to have waned since 2012.

Another example was the national event organised by The Really Open called *Re-Imagining the University* that brought together people who thought critically about the Coalition's reforms to higher education and/or were involved in radical education projects. This was an important attempt to create a network among people involved in these kinds of projects. However, perhaps the most notable attempt to create links between autonomous learning spaces was the Free University Network Conference in 2012 that was hosted by People's Political Economy in Oxford. This event provided a space wherein people involved in autonomous learning spaces

could meet and share their experiences. I attended the event and found the experience insightful and allowed me to develop a network of people who were involved in similar projects.

Thus, the importance of working with others involved in similar projects is not only learning from each other's experiences, but also developing networks of resistance (Chatterton 2012). These networks not create a sense of solidarity among those involved in autonomous learning spaces, but also people space to discuss and experiment with ways of confronting neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, working together in this way also highlights the potential for left-wing convergence by bringing together a fragmented political left by working together on concrete political projects that are against all forms of oppression (Prichard and Worth 2016). Developing this network of resistance, then, is important not only for the development of autonomous learning spaces but also for prefiguring post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009).

Practical Point of Advice 4: A strong internet presence is helpful to raise awareness of your autonomous learning space and to share education provision – The research found that those autonomous learning spaces that were more successful tended to have a strong internet presence. Most autonomous learning spaces did this by having a front-facing website or blog with details about the project, what its aims were, details about education provision and who was involved in running the project. Often, autonomous learning spaces uploaded photographs and videos of education provision so that people who were interested in participating had some idea about what it would entail. Also, it is important web content is updated on a regular basis otherwise people will think that the project is no longer running. Moreover, most autonomous learning spaces had maps and details about where their provision was located so that people could easily find it. This is important as some people may feel anxious about attending autonomous learning spaces so providing this detail is something that can help reduce this stress and increase the possibility of students attending your education provision. Raising awareness in this way can also be supported by social media (Facebook and

Twitter) which can be used to organise meetings and education provision, raise awareness about the project, and to engage in political discussions which helps to connect with people associated with these issues. Both Free University of Brighton and Ragged University used their internet presence to good effect to raise the awareness of their projects and is one of the reasons for their respective success and longevity. Again, all of these initiatives attempt to raise awareness of your project and highlight what autonomous learning spaces are doing and connect with the public (Chatterton 2012).

Another way in which a strong internet presence was important was to make learning materials and education provision accessible to people who are unable to physically attend sessions. This has been done in a number of ways. For example, Ragged University often recorded (video and audio) its Ragged Talks and posts them on its website. Ragged University has also uploaded books and journals that can be accessed free of charge. Another example is the Social Science Centre which posted class notes taken by scholars on its courses that outlined what was covered within individual sessions. This was not only useful for people who could not attend the sessions, but also for people who did so that they had a record of what was discussed to help with their learning. Moreover, the Social Science Centre also produced an audio version of its courses. This was done in collaboration with Siren FM and each week different scholars would record a one-hour radio show that covered the themes that were covered on the course. The rationale for this was to provide an alternative way in which scholars could learn about the Social Science Centre's courses if they were unable to attend.

Thus, using the internet in this way helps to raise awareness of your autonomous learning space and means that it is more likely that people will be interested in joining your project or attending your education provision. Both of these are important if your autonomous learning space is to be successful otherwise there will be no interest and your project will begin to wane as Birmingham Radical Education found out. Moreover, uploading your learning material online

not only raises awareness of your project, but means that there are different ways in which people can access it. This is important for those that are unable to attend education provision in person or feel more comfortable learning online.

Practical Point of Advice 5: It is important to develop an organisational form and a set of organising principles that embodies the ethos your autonomous learning space – The research found that adopting an organisational form was important not only for the longevity of the project, but also as a way prefiguring alternative forms of self-organisation based on democratic and non-hierarchical principles (Graeber 2009; Maeckelbergh 2012; Sitrin 2007). For example, the Social Science Centre, which was one of the longest functioning autonomous learning spaces, adopted an unincorporated co-operative organisational form (Neary and Winn 2017). Consequently, it existed as a legal entity with a bank account which meant it could receive funding, pay for things and be insured. Another reason the Social Science Centre's organisational form was so important was because as people came and left the project, the organisational form remained along with decision-making processes that underpinned it. Consequently, the project did not wane when some of the original members of the Social Science Centre left. Moreover, what was important about the Social Science Centre's co-operative organisational form was that it attempted to embed and develop the ethos of collective ownership and control and direct democratic and non-hierarchical principles. With regards to controlling the project, the Social Science Centre used a form of consensus decision-making process so that all members could be involved in running the project and that their voices would be listened to.

In practice, this did not always work as planned as many members could not attend meetings or did not want to be involved in this process. Moreover, people did not always agree, which did lead to some people's voices being marginalised. Moreover, there were invisible hierarchies that developed along the lines of knowledge, experience and time dedicated to the project through

this use of decision-making (Alcoff and Alcoff 2015; Freeman 1972). However, trying to be aware of them and challenge them is important and difficult, but something autonomous learning spaces must do if they are to be successful. Despite this, the use of consensus was important and encapsulated the ethos of the project and overall was successful. This is because involving members of the Social Science Centre in this way made them feel more valued and part of the project and, thus, should be a key feature of post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009).

The practical and theoretical significance of the Social Science Centre's organisational form is that it has allowed the project to function in, against and beyond capitalist social relations by adopting an organisational form that has the potential to challenge the groundwork of capitalism (Holloway 2002 and 2010; Dinerstein 2014). However, this was not without its problems and not all members of the Social Science Centre subscribed to the Marxist theory that underpinned the project. This did cause disagreements and some people's views and theoretical affiliations to be side-lined. There were attempts to address this, such as reading the organising principles of the Social Science Centre at AGMs and providing an opportunity for members to discuss these and make changes were possible.

If autonomous learning spaces, and similar projects, want to be more inclusive and work towards developing a left-wing convergence (Prichard and Worth 2016), then different perspectives and voices need to be heard and incorporated into the ethos and practices of the project. Thus, there needs to be meaningful consultation with all involved about the aims and objectives when the project is being created that embodies these different perspectives. Moreover, these aims and objects need to be written up in a document as a set of organising principles or mission statement that guides action and is reviewed on a regular basis so that the project can develop and include different perspectives as the group grows or changes.

While it not essential for an autonomous learning space to have an organisational form (only the Social Science Centre did) it is an important part of prefiguring alternative forms of being that point towards post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009; Kaldor *et al.* 2012; Maeckelbergh 2012; Sitrin 2007). Thus, to be a radical political project, this is something that those involved in autonomous spaces should think about adopting. This has the potential to develop into a much bigger project, for example the Social Science Centre ceased to exist in 2019, but the lessons learned from this project have been used to develop a co-operative university through the Co-operative College, which will be based on co-operative values and principles and will begin offering courses from January 2020 for £5,500 per annum.

Practical Point of Advice 6: Nurture the affective dimension of your autonomous learning space through the development of friendship, trust and caring – One of the key findings of the research was that autonomous learning spaces had an affective dimension among the people who participated in them. This manifested itself in the development of friendship and bonds of trust that created a caring environment for those who were involved in the projects. For example, one of the key features of Birmingham Radical Education, despite all of its setbacks, was that the friendship that developed among the three people who tried to get the project up and running. Friendship and trust was also an important feature at the Social Science Centre among members and scholars and was one of the reasons that the project lasted as long as it did. Friendship and trust were also important within the Social Science Centre's education provision and meant that scholars felt more confident and engaged in their learning and, thus, were similar to the safe and caring spaces of education advocated by hooks (1994).

Of course, the development friendship and trust is not something that will automatically exist but requires development. Indeed, it is not always possible for people to get on and there were instances when people did not see eye-to-eye within some of the autonomous learning spaces. Sometimes this disagreement were left unresolved and either were not discussed again, or

people left. Something that could be used to address this is mediation training so that as a group these disagreements could be addressed as resolved. What is important to remember is that if autonomous learning spaces are engaged in prefiguring post-capitalist futures then that should include developing more caring relationships that foster friendship and trust rather than individual competition and distrust. Thus, the notion of be the change you want to see (Graeber 2009) is important in the development of autonomous learning spaces. It is the development of friendship and trust that allows people to work through their differences and create a sense of solidarity within projects and develop networks of resistance (Chatterton 2012). Moreover, friendship and trust also encourages the development of a collective desire for collectively (Dean 2012) that is important for the potential of left-wing convergence (Prichard and Worth 2016) and the prefiguration of post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009).

Practical Point of Advice 7: Use and develop critical forms of pedagogy that help people understand the problems they experience in everyday life and what they can do to change them

– One of the most important features of autonomous learning spaces was the way they adopted and experimented with forms of critical pedagogy that was based on democratic principles. Not only was this form of pedagogy adopted in response to the more consumerist model found within mainstream higher education (Neary and Winn 2009; Neary and Saunders 2017; Saunders 2017), but as a way of developing a critical mind-set among people who attended (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; McLaren 2000). Critical pedagogy fits with the radical political ethos of many of these autonomous learning spaces and was used in a way that allowed participants to understand the forms of oppression, exploitation and inequality they experienced in their everyday lives while working together collectively to think about what could done be done to change them. This made the education provision in most of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis serve as a critique of neoliberal capitalism (McLaren 2000) and focus on all forms of oppression and the way they intersect (hooks 1994)

For example, People's Political Economy used a form of critical pedagogy that helped to develop political and economic literacy among people who participated in its courses so that they could better understand current political and economic issues, how they impact on their lives and how they can attempt to change them. This was supported by offering facilitators of its education provision training on how to use this form of critical pedagogy. The research found this training was useful because it meant that facilitators had the same understanding about the ethos of the project and had a working-knowledge of how to run courses using critical pedagogical methods. Thus, People's Political Economy's organisational ethos was linked to its teaching and learning both in the way it was delivered and the content of its courses.

Moreover, the forms of critical pedagogy developed within these autonomous spaces also attempted to embed the democratic and non-hierarchical principles of the projects themselves. For example, using Student as Producer (Neary and Saunders 2017), the Social Science Centre tried to challenge the distinction between teacher and student by referring to all as scholars who have much to learn from each other (Neary and Winn 2009). Moreover, within its courses, scholars collaboratively developed the curriculum, including which themes they would examine and which theories they would use. Scholars also took it in turns to facilitate sessions in attempt to challenge power that usually resides within the teacher (Neary and Winn 2009). However, what made Student as Producer work was that it was grounded within a theoretical framework that provided a powerful argument for why this approach was being taken using the work of Walter Benjamin (1934) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (2018). Moreover, it was also grounded in practical experimentation with this approach which started at the Re-Invention Centre and the University of Warwick (University of Warwick 2014) and Student as Producer at the University of Lincoln (Neary *et al* 2014).

Thus, the importance of adopting a form of critical pedagogy means that your autonomous learning space can develop as a radical political project that creates a space for people to

develop their skills and think critically about the world around them and the problems that humanity currently faces. Moreover, adopting forms of critical pedagogy also allows members of the project to think critically about all forms of oppression that they not only face in society, but also that develop within autonomous learning spaces themselves (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; McLaren 2000). Any potential left-wing convergence depends on our ability to overcome differences that fragment the political left and learning more about them within your education provision can be a good way of addressing them and prefiguring post-capitalist futures.

Practical Point of Advice 8: You need to create a safe space where students feel supported in their learning and confident to discuss a broad range of different issues – The research found that it is important to create safe space (hooks 1994) within your project that supports students in their learning and helps them feel confident to discuss and engage with ideas and theories. Again, it is important to note that many of those who participated in education provision offered by autonomous learning spaces had no experience of higher education and/or had been out of education for some time. While those of us involved in creating and running autonomous learning spaces might be keen to grapple with complex issues others might find this difficult and off-putting. For example, the experience of Birmingham Radical Education with their Greek Politics event highlights how political debate of this nature can put off potential students from attending further courses.

Free University Brighton were better at addressing this issue and its education provision uses a range of different learning materials that better suit a range of different additional learning needs that students may have. Moreover, it has also considered the accessibility of the spaces it uses to deliver its education provision making sure they are wheelchair accessible and are on major bus routes. What is important about this is that Free University Brighton is not just attempting to create safe spaces in terms of an affective element, but also with regards to special educational needs and disability. Whether it is possible to address these needs in a meaningful

way within autonomous learning spaces that tend to have little or no funding is unlikely, but it is important to acknowledge this and make efforts to support students in this way while acknowledging the limitations your project might have to be able to do this. Another example of this is Ragged University's Ragged Talks which are an open invite for people to share their skills and knowledge. This allows the Ragged University to cover a broad range of topics that people are interested in. The Ragged Talks are well attended and there is a chance for questions and discussion at the end. The session I attended resulted in a vibrant discussion in which most people engaged in. To support this process one of the janitors organises the running order of speakers and facilitates questions and group discussions.

The Social Science Centre was also able to create a safe space within which scholars felt comfortable to ask questions and ask for clarification if they did not understand. Undoubtedly, this was supported by the development of friendship and trust, and caring for each other, which was created at the project and on its courses (hooks 1994). However, the project did not always get this right for example there tended to be an overemphasis on Marxism at the expense of other theories and perspectives (Chatterton 2012). Moreover, the reading lists tended to be mainly written of white men excluding other perspectives. Here, there needed to be a more critical discussion about decolonising the curriculum and thinking more critically about all forms of oppression, discrimination and exploitation (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). Moreover, this would have fit with the project's ethos and wider political movements.

Thus, what is important about creating a safe space for students is that they feel comfortable to attend and contribute to discussions. This can include making efforts to ensure that space is accessible for disabled students and that workshops and courses have some provision for special educational needs. While this is likely to be difficult for many autonomous learning spaces given their lack of resources it is something that projects need to address, or you risk discriminating against those with a range of special educational needs and disabilities.

Moreover, it is important that workshops and course material cover a range of different perspectives and voices rather than excluding them. This not only helps to examine different forms of discrimination but may also highlight our own unconscious biases with regards to a range of socio-demographics, including ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation and age (Dorking and Tomlinson 2019) and how they intersect (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; McLaren 2000) Addressing these issues within a safe space not only allows us to address these issues in a more informed way within the project, but also encourages students to better engage with education provision as they feel more confident to ask questions and participate in discussions.

Practical Point of Advice 9: Develop your courses and qualifications so that they can function as a genuine alternative to mainstream higher education – Many of the autonomous learning spaces offered the possibility of receiving some kind of recognition for participating in their courses. Some like the Ragged University do not offer courses but one-off workshops or lectures so it makes little sense to offer any form of qualification. However, those autonomous learning spaces that have been more successful have all offered the chance for students to receive formal recognition of their studies. For example, the Social Science Centre gave its scholars the opportunity to work towards gaining a Certificate of Higher Education that members thought would be the equivalent of an undergraduate degree. To obtain this, scholars would work on projects that would be assessed by external examiners (academic members of the Social Science Centre) at the level of higher education.

Another example is Brighton Free University which has developed its freegreens that are at the level of higher education. Here, students can opt to submit work to be assessed or gain recognition of their participation through attendance only. Another example is the IF Project who also gives students the option of gaining a certificate for participating on its courses. All students receive a certificate of attendance, but they also have the option to submit a short

reflective statement, a short film, photographs or a presentation that reflects on their experience during their time at the project.

Offering some form of qualification allows your autonomous learning space to function as a genuine alternative to mainstream higher education by validating what students have learned and what they have done while attending your education provision. While this may leave the project open to the criticism of recreating mainstream higher education, especially the commodification of education by trying to quantify it, what must be considered is the reality of the social relations we live in. Within capitalism one must enter into capitalist work to survive and entry into paid employment is more likely if one has qualifications. Thus, if your autonomous learning space is to function as a genuine alternative to mainstream higher education it needs to offer some form of qualification otherwise it will run the risk of not appealing to people or only to those that already have qualifications. The ways in which autonomous learning spaces have tried to address this issue is making assessment optional or by attendance so that people can choose whether, and how, do to this. Moreover, while offering some form of qualification may appear to recreate mainstream higher education, adopting forms of critical pedagogy and more democratic and non-hierarchical organisational forms means that the project can retain its radical political nature by functioning in, against and beyond capitalist social relations (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979) and prefigure post-capitalist futures (Graeber 2009).

Practical Point of Advice 10: You need to reflect on how your autonomous learning space is being run and on your education provision – This is important for two reasons. The first is because reflecting on your autonomous learning space and documenting it can be helpful for other groups that are thinking of creating similar projects either now or in the future. For example, the research found that the reflective evaluations of both People’s Political Economy and Melbourne Free University was used by the IF Project when they were creating their

project. Second, embedding a reflective cycle allows you to evaluate how your project is working in practice and how well your education provision is being received (Chatterton 2012). This process allows you to make improvements to your projects and its education provision. Moreover, making this process part of a participatory action research project is also important because it means that members of the group are involved in this process in a way that embodies the democratic and non-hierarchical principles that these autonomous learning spaces have embraced (Fals-Borda 1991).

Thus, reflecting and evaluating your own practice is important to support the development of autonomous learning spaces. This includes how the project itself is run including the use of more participatory democratic decision-making processes as well as developing education provision. This process is not only useful for your own project but can be used by others involved in the development of autonomous learning spaces. Again, it allows people to learn from each other's experiences and develop a network of resistance of people who are involved in similar projects encouraging the connection of cracks or ruptures within capitalist social relations (Holloway 2002 and 2010).

Re-Imaging the Idea of the University for a Post-Capitalist Society: Towards a Co-operative University?

While the practical points of advice above are intended to support those involved in developing autonomous learning spaces, the objective of this thesis is to examine what can be learned from them to create an alternative model of higher education provision rather than make them work within capitalist social relations. As argued above, the contradictory nature of capitalist social relations and the class antagonisms within them are irresolvable within capitalism and require its abolition. Moreover, the concepts of private and public are both forms of capitalist accumulation so what is required is a social form that has the potential to get beyond them and

prefigure post-capitalist social relations. One model that emerged from the research and has the potential to do this is the use of a co-operative organisational form (Somerville and Saunders 2013).

The idea of a co-operative university for developing is part of growing academic literature (Cook 2013; Matthews 2013; Somerville and Saunders 2013; Sperlinger 2014; Winn 2015). While the idea of a cooperative university is not new, there are very few actually existing examples of this model around the world (see Mondragon in the Basque Region of Northern Spain and UNICOOP in Mexico as existing examples). There are a number of different co-operative models that could be used to inform the development of a co-operative university, including worker co-operatives (Winn 2015), social co-operatives (CICOPA 2011), trust universities (Boden et al. 2012) and the commons university (Halffman and Radder 2015). The model that is explored here is the idea of a social co-operative university, which is the most appropriate for an alternative model of higher education provision. This is because while the other models tend to focus on the production of goods and services, and worker ownership and control; the social solidarity model explicitly defines a social need or general interest mission as its primary purpose. In this case, it could be teaching and learning in higher education for the creation and dissemination of knowledge that is socially useful (Neary and Winn 2019), or the development and nurturing of humanity and nature, and carries out this mission through the production of goods and services (CICOPA 2011). Moreover, rather than focusing solely on worker ownership and control, social co-operatives tend to have a multi-stakeholder membership, which better reflects the university community, which is made up of different stakeholders, such as academics, professional staff, students and local community (CICOPA 2011).

The idea of a social co-operative university also fits well with the concept of prefiguration and creates a model of higher education institution now that embodies the autonomous practices

desired in a post-capitalist idea of the university. Moreover, it functions in, against and beyond the neoliberal model of higher education (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979) by exposing the limitations and contradictions of centralized and hierarchical leadership while proposing an alternative model that attempts to address its shortcomings.

The principles of the co-operative movement have been a source of inspiration for many organisations not just in Britain, but around the world (Somerville 2007). Yet, the co-operative movement has been much maligned as a model for radical social change. This critique is aimed mainly at consumer co-operatives which, under the aegis of the Co-operative Group in Britain, have not only been at the centre of a number of high profile scandals (Boffey and Treanor 2013), but also appear provide little hope as a site for radical social change (Somerville 2007). Nevertheless, this pessimism overlooks the potential that producer co-operatives have as a force for creating radical social change by providing a model within which workers both own and control the means of production. To fully appreciate this radical potential it is important to go back to early history of the co-operative movement, which was much more radical and placed more of an emphasis on the importance of producer co-operatives.

Whilst the earliest known co-operative was registered in 1489 in Aberdeen (UK), the co-operative movement started to gather momentum as a force for radical social change at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Britain. During this period most of the population lived in squalor and, if they worked, were employed in perilous conditions (Engels 1999). As most of the population were disenfranchised and, thus had no democratically elected representative in Parliament, for many, mutual aid was the only way of relieving the conditions they lived in (Fairbairn 1994). Yet, the co-operative movement became more than the provision of mutual aid and, at its height, was part of a radical attempt to transform British capitalist society into a “Co-operative Commonwealth” that aspired to unite trade unions and disparate co-operative movements into a triumphant coalition of workers (Gregg 1982) 163). By 1832 in Britain the

co-operative movement had grown considerably and consisted of nearly 500 registered co-operative societies and held its first national Co-operative Congress in 1831 (Gregg 1982).

Much of the early success of the co-operative movement can be attributed to Robert Owen - a Welsh social reformer and often dubbed the “Grandfather of the Co-operatives” (Thornes 1981). When Owen first wrote about “villages of co-operation” as a way of providing relief from the conditions the working-class faced his vision was of isolated self-supporting communities made up of labouring poor. Nevertheless, his vision rapidly broadened in scope and he soon began to see co-operative communities not only as the answer to the problem of poverty and unemployment, but as model for a new, fairer and egalitarian society (Thornes 1981).

Owen developed his co-operative philosophy along three lines: (i) education; (ii) consumer co-operatives, and; (iii) producer co-operatives. The importance that Owen placed on education as a way of improving society cannot be overstated. Owen petitioned tirelessly for the inclusion of education for workers in the Factory Acts and created schools within his co-operative social experiments, especially New Lanark where children went to school as soon as they could walk (Donnachie 2011). This ethos was continued by many of Owen’s followers, the Owenites, who aimed to raise the standards of practical education, especially improving their knowledge of politics and economics. The Owenites’ educational initiatives were supported by libraries, reading rooms and, in Rochdale, weekly lectures at a pub, The Weaver’s Arms, which was taken over by an Owenite group (Fairbairn 1994)

Owen also supported the development of consumer co-operatives, which were owned and run by workers and attempted to provide goods and services to its members at a cheaper. The price was reduced by cutting out the ‘middleman’ man with regards to consumer. Nevertheless, at the heart of Owen’s co-operative philosophy was producer co-operatives, which were owned

and democratically controlled production by the workers (Gregg 1982). Producer or worker co-operatives are enterprises within which the workers produce goods or services rather than just buying and selling as in a consumer co-operative. Moreover, producer co-operatives are owned and controlled by their workers through either representative or direct democracy or a combination of both (Egan 1990). Decisions are made by the collective body of workers or those who have been voted in to represent them on the basis of one person-one vote (ibid). Worker co-operatives are distinct from attempts to involve workers in production process, but without giving up any real authority on the part of management because the workers own the enterprise, essentially hiring managers to work for them rather than the other way around (Egan 1990).

Owen experimented with different models of co-operative societies with perhaps the most famous being that in New Lanark (Donnachie 2011). New Lanark highlighted that adopting co-operative principles was not only beneficial to the health, education and well-being of the working population, but actually increased the efficiency of the workers (ibid). Owen received a lot of interest from around the world after New Lanark and tried to establish a similar model called New Harmony in the USA, but which subsequently failed (ibid). After the failure of New Harmony, Owen returned to Britain and tried to harness the political energy that was being put into the Reform Bill 1831 into the co-operative movement and further develop co-operative enterprises that already exist (Gregg 1982).

As part of this, Owen created a number of “Equitable Labour Exchanges” or “Bazaars” where workers could exchange the goods they produced with each other. At this point it is important to understand the Owen believed that labour was the source of value and that capitalists’ profits were derived from paying workers less than the value they added to the products they worked (Donnachie 2011). The rationale of the Equitable Labour Exchanges was that workers would receive the full value they added to the products they produced and, moreover, that this method

of exchange would reduce the price of goods by removing the profits taken by “middlemen” whilst at the same time furthering the co-operative movement by allowing co-operative production and co-operative exchange joined hands (Gregg 1982).

The first Equitable Labour Exchange was situated in a rented property in Gray’s Inn Road, London and was supported by ceaseless propaganda, including weekly lectures and a weekly paper, *The Crises*. Shortly afterwards, others were opened in Birmingham followed by Liverpool, Glasgow and other towns (Gregg 1982). The workers’ at the Equitable Labour Exchange were priced in accordance to the cost of the raw materials and the amount of labour incorporated into them (Gregg 1982). Special labour notes were printed expressing, in the place of money, a number of labour hours. The producer would deposit their goods and be given a labour note, which they could exchange for other goods (Gregg 1982). When first opened there was a rush of depositors, especially tailors, cabinet-makers and shoemakers who could operate without a large capital or intervention of the capitalist (Gregg 1982). Goods were bought by the public and shopkeepers even accepted the labour notes across the counter (Gregg 1982).

Nevertheless, the Equitable Labour Exchange’ soon ran into difficulties because the goods were not always in line with commercial prices meaning that when they were cheaper they sold quickly and when they were more expensive they remained in the hands of the organisers (Gregg, 1982). Poorer workers could not afford the initial outlay to begin production and the uncertainty caused by the ambiguity of whether goods would sell at the labour exchange means that richer workers were often reluctant to commit to production (Gregg 1982). Moreover, the scheme was based on the workers’ estimates of how long it had taken them to produce the goods meaning that the products produced by slower workers were valued more than the more productive – Owen was not familiar with Marx’s concept of socially necessary labour time (Gregg 1982).

By 1834, the Equitable Labour Exchanges closed and the hopes of creating a Co-operative Commonwealth had started to dwindle after employers and the state united against workers and the working-class movement lay crushed (Gregg 1982). Nonetheless, the philosophy of the Co-operative Movement endured with many groups adopting co-operative principles. These co-operative principles were further articulated in by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844 and are known as the Rochdale Principles (Gregg 1982). Nevertheless, the Rochdale Pioneers marked an important rupture in the history of the co-operative movement, placing the emphasis on the creation of consumer co-operatives, which are the mainstay of modern mainstream co-operatives. With the emphasis having been placed on consumer co-operatives it has meant that often producer co-operatives were overlooked as a model for radical social change.

The strength of the co-operative movement is its model of producer co-operatives that allow workers to own and control the production process in a democratic way. This is radically different to capitalist society where democracy only exists in the political sphere but is not extended to the workplace or the economy (Egan 1990, p. 67). The weaknesses of the co-operative movement is its tendency to be co-opted to the logic of capitalism and turned into capitalist enterprises (Somerville 2007). The problems that worker co-operatives face is that they operate within a capitalist system still producing goods for exchange value. They also produce for the market, which means that co-operatives are forced into competition with each other (Egan 1990). Competition in a capitalist labour market requires increasing labour productivity, which can be accomplished by a worker co-operative by either increasingly exploiting its own members or exploiting the labour power of hired (non-members) wage workers (Egan 1990). Despite their best intentions worker co-operatives soon become subordinated to the logic of the market, which reduce the possibilities for democratic innovation (Egan 1990). Worker-controlled co-operatives are usually deemed as being

inefficient due to incentive and collective action (Toms 2012) and have fundamental structural problems which lead to failure or its denigration into a capitalist style firm (Egan 1990).

Moreover, Marx was critical of the consumer co-operatives of the utopian socialists because it was divorced from class consciousness (Egan 1990,). However, Marx was more positive about worker-co-operatives which are created by the working-class themselves, not the state or the bourgeoisie. The importance of this is that if worker co-operatives are not part of a class struggle they are more likely to compete with each other and denigrate into capitalist firms. “Unity of action and unity of interest” means worker co-operatives are more likely to work together to develop national dimension (Marx, cited in Egan 1990, p. 74). The way to develop this is for worker co-operatives to be part of a class struggle towards socialism rather than making an organisation work within capitalist social relations (Egan 1990,).

Marx provided guidance to stop worker co-operatives from denigration: (i) all workers must share the firm to stop it degenerating into joint stock firms; (ii) co-operatives should belong to a national organisation to provide a connecting bond; (iii) A proportion of the surplus should go towards funding new co-operatives. This ways, co-operatives would not only be connected through membership, but also have a material relationship with each other. This would mean they would see each other not as competitors but organisations coming together in order to survive in a hostile environment (Egan 1990). Thus, despite some of the problems with co-operatives, producer co-operatives have the potential to function in, against and beyond capitalist social relations and prefigure alternative form of self-organisation.

Moreover, world-wide co-operatives employ over 100 million people and has over a billion members worldwide (Birchall 1994; Nolan et al. 2013), it means that the idea of a social co-operative university would have strong backing and is less likely to wane like many of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. This is because being a social co-

operative would have the potential to receive funding meaning it could afford learning space and resources and pay its staff – something that has not been possible within autonomous learning spaces.

In practice, a social co-operative university would be owned by its workers and controlled by both its workers and users using a multi-stakeholder membership structure. This could be organized in a similar way to Mondragon University using a “General Assembly” to make general decisions (e.g. finances, investment, infrastructure projects) and decide the strategic direction of the university, which would consist of the following: (i) academic and professional staff, (ii) students and (iii) participants (local community local councils and other organizations) (Wright et al. 2011). As part of this model academic and professional staff would both own and control the university while students and participants would have a different membership that would preclude them from ownership but involve them in the decision-making process.

This seems to be the most logical approach given that the academic and professional staff have a long-term interest in the university whereas students and participants may have more short-term interests, although local councils might be an exception to this rule. Although each member would have a vote in the decision-making process, votes would be weighted so as to equally represent the three different categories of membership (outlined above) otherwise students, who are likely to be the greater number, would have more of a say in running the university. The outcomes of the General Assembly would be actioned by a Governing Board and Executive Board which are made up of representatives from each category of membership. Those on both boards would be elected at the General Assembly by members and accountable to them. Members of both boards may be recalled at any time and have restricted remuneration differences. At Mondragon, this has resulted in significant information sharing, discussion, debate and conflict. This encourages an attitude of dissensus towards the idea of the neoliberal

university (Readings 1997) and would help develop more democratic and participatory leadership and governance in response to carrying out the mission of teaching and research in higher education.

Nevertheless, creating a social co-operative university is not without its problems. To receive university status and have degree awarding powers would mean that a social co-operative university would still be subject to the same bureaucracy as other higher education institutions (e.g. Office for Students, Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework) and compete for student numbers based on NSS, key information sets (KIS) and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE). Although external quality mechanisms might be something a social co-operative university might want to move away from in the future (especially when they are connected to the state), at least how to respond to these demands in the short-term could be decided more democratically. Moreover, including students in the decision-making process and running of a university as members of the co-operative could improve student satisfaction.

Moreover, it is not clear how a social co-operative university would be funded (publicly, privately or philanthropically) and whether students would still have to pay tuition fees (in part or in full). One option is that a social co-operative university could be funded in a similar way to Mondragon University, which receives funding from three different sources: (i) investment from new members, (ii) a levy paid by all Mondragon co-operatives towards education and (iii) student fees. In the UK, a social co-operative university could be funded, in part, by Co-operatives UK which acts a network for co-operative businesses and could potentially agree with members to charge a levy to fund a university. Students could also pay a reduced fee that could be subsidized through the levies raised by Co-operatives UK and possibly the Co-operative College, a reallocation of a percentage of surplus profits with any shortfall being made up by payments from students using the current student loans system. Any tuition fees

paid by the students could be considered as an investment into the social co-operative university, but how this would work in practice is an area that requires further research.

While in terms of its implementation and maintenance the idea of a social co-operative is still embryonic, there is a growing body of research under way into how it might work in practice (Cook 2013; Neary and Winn 2016; Neary and Winn 2019; Saunders 2017). The importance of the idea of the social co-operative university is that it challenges current university leadership and governance models and offers an alternative possibility. This not only fosters more co-operative and democratic forms of leadership, but also promotes the production and dissemination of forms of socially useful knowledge (Neary and Winn 2019). Thus, part of its general interest mission would be to create and disseminate knowledge that develops and nurtures humanity and nature rather than exploit and alienate them. Harvey (2014) refers to this as a form of revolutionary humanism which entails not only the abolition of capitalist social relations but also the conscious development of the world we live in and ourselves for the better by encouraging dignity, compassion, love and respect for others. This requires not only understanding the contradictions of capitalist social relations and the domination, exploitation and alienation this inflicts on humans and nature, but also developing autonomous practices that seek to abolish them. Harvey (*ibid*) argues that this form of revolutionary humanism rejects the idea of an unchanging or pre-given essence of what it means to be human and that it will require us to think hard about what type of humans we want to be and what kind of world we want to live in. This is something that humanity needs to do collectively and once again re-emphasises the importance of prefigurative practices that experiment with alternative ways of being that are against all forms of oppression, exploitation and domination and attempt to develop post-capitalist futures that are grounded in a form of radical humanism (Graeber 2009). Moreover, it highlights the need for the political left to unite and overcome its difference to prefigure these post-capitalist futures. Given the challenges that humanity and nature face

through the crisis tendencies of capitalist social relations, global conflicts and climate change it has never been more important for people to work together in way that prefigures a more nurturing and sustainable post-capitalist futures.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the theoretical and practical significance of the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis. The chapter has argued that the documentation of these autonomous learning spaces is important because it provides hope, support and guidance for those who are involved in the development of autonomous learning spaces based on the successes and failures of those in similar projects. The chapter has presented these experiences as ten practical points of advice that pick out the key lessons learned from the autonomous learning spaces. The chapter also argued that these autonomous learning spaces are theoretically important because they are radical political projects that are in the process of prefiguring not only alternative forms of higher education provision but also post-capitalist futures. This process involves the experimentation with forms of collective ownership and control that are grounded in participatory democratic and non-hierarchical principles. These autonomous learning spaces, and other autonomous spaces, function as cracks or ruptures that challenge and questions capitalist social relations (Clever 2017; Holloway 2002 and 2010; Dinerstein 2014). The chapter drew to an end by arguing that an organisational form that emerged out of the research and has the potential to prefigure the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society is the idea of a social co-operative university and outlined how this might work in practice. Furthermore, that the aim of the social-co-operative has the potential to prefigure post-capitalist futures based on the production socially useful knowledge (Neary and Winn 2019) or a radical humanism (Harvey 2014) based on the development and nurturing of humans and nature.

Conclusion

In 2012 the Coalition Government made a series of reforms to higher education that have intensified the neoliberalisation of higher education in England – a process that began in the late 1970s (Shattock 2012). The reforms have subsequently been added to by consecutive Conservative governments (2015-17 and 2017-2019) and further reforms look likely by the newly elected Conservative Government (2019-) in response to the *Augur Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (2019). The Augur Review recommends that tuition fees be reduced to £7,500 per annum and that means-tested maintenance grants be restored for students who are eligible (*ibid*). However, there is no intention for the government to plug the financial shortfall from the reduction in student tuition fees meaning that higher education institutions will have to absorb a loss of around £1.79 billion per cohort (Universities UK 2019).

This is likely to have a negative impact on working conditions for academic staff in higher education as they will be expected to do the same job with less resources at a time when they are already experiencing increased workloads, stress and mental health problems (Kinman and Wray 2013; UCU 2020). Thus, academics are likely to see further intensification of working practices and increasing levels of exploitation (de Angelis and Harvie 2009) that will exacerbate the feelings of alienation and hopelessness already experienced by many in the sector (Hall 2018). Moreover, it makes it even more likely that some universities will not be able to operate sustainably raising questions about the survival of some institutions in what will become an increasingly hostile neoliberal environment with increased competition for student numbers. Furthermore, the sector is already in a precarious financial state with over 25% of institutions UK higher education institutions posting a deficit last in 2018 (Baker 2019) and the reforms to the sector since 2010 means that failing universities will not be bailed out by the government.

While reduced fees and the reintroduction of maintenance grants may seem like a step in the right direction, the proposed funding model will be worse for those students who are unable to pay the entirety of their loans back (Lewis 2020). This is because Augur has recommended that the threshold for when students begin to pay their debts back will be reduced from £25,000 to £23,000 and the payment window increased from 30 to 40 years. Thus, what may seem like a better deal for students is likely to mean those with lower incomes will pay more for their degrees as the government attempts to further shift payment of higher education from the state to individuals (Universities UK 2019). Furthermore, it will be those with higher salaries or the means to either pay off debts or pay upfront that will benefit most from these changes to tuition fees (*ibid*).

Reforms to higher education since 2012 have also attempted to level the playing field and make it easier for private providers to enter the sector (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). Indeed, the level of private investment in higher education is already far above the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average (UCU 2020). Of course, the rationale for this has been to create greater competition between higher education providers in an attempt to increase value for money, which is heavily influenced by neoliberal logic (Brown and Carasso 2013). However, the increase of private providers has not been without its problems. For example, in July 2019 England's biggest private provider of higher education, Greenwich School of Management (London), went into administration making a net loss of £9.9 million in 2018 and accruing £26 million worth of debt (UCU 2020). Greenwich School of Management also featured in a Panorama investigation which found that "education agents", often used by private providers, were offering to enrol "bogus students" on their courses, amend attendance records and use essay mills to write their assessments so they did not have to attend the courses, but could gain a student visa and access to student loans (BBC 2017). Questions have also been raised about the quality of the courses

offered by private providers with claims of chaotic organisation, lack of teaching resources and disruptive students being kept on the books to receive the income attached to them (Malik, McGettigan and Domokos 2014). Also, there have been claims that attendance at some private providers is low with students using them as a way of accessing student loans rather than gaining a degree (Malik, McGettigan and Domokos 2014).

Thus, despite the efforts of all those involved in the student protests, strike action, occupations of university property in 2010-11 and the experiments with alternative forms of higher education provision within autonomous learning spaces, it appears as though the struggle for the idea of the university has been lost (Myers 2017) and we are now starting to see the neoliberal model of higher education in full swing. This struggle against neoliberalisation continues with disputes over changes to UCU pensions and working conditions for academic staff which resulted in eight days of strike action at 60 universities in England between 25th November and 4th December 2019 (UCU 2019). There are further ballots for strike action planned for early 2020. Moreover, despite the rhetoric of “student as consumer” and “students at the heart of the system” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010) we are now seeing record numbers of students reporting mental health problems and accessing wellbeing services for academic study related issues (Complete University Guide 2018). This can be linked to the intensification of workloads that students face in higher education as they participate in their studies while often working part-time to support themselves financially and engaging in voluntary work to improve their chances of employment. This is further exacerbated by the decline in graduate jobs and the prospect that students will be lumbered with increasing amount of debt and declining opportunities for graduate employment (Giroux 2013; Mason 2012).

Yet, despite the failure to stop these reforms and the impact they have had on the sector there is hope. The problems outlined above highlight some of the failings with the neoliberal model

of higher education and the struggles against them provide optimism that they can be questioned and challenged and that we can develop an alternative model of higher education. This can be understood by applying a Marxist theoretical framework to comprehend that the neoliberal reforms are part of attempt to re-impose and intensify the conditions for capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2005; Somerville and Saunders 2013). Within higher education this entails intensifying working conditions to further exploit academic labour to add value to the commodities of students' labour-power and research that adds to the general intellect (de Angelis and Harvie 2009; Marx 2005). Combined with privatisation and competition for student numbers through the imposition of a market conditions, the intensification of academic labour is part of an attempt to reduce the cost of higher education and extract profit from the sector.

As argued in this thesis, creating an alternative model of higher education does not mean defending or returning to the idea of the public university but developing a model that is able to get past the dichotomy of public and private. This is because both public and private are models of capitalist accumulation (Somerville and Saunders 2013; Neary and Winn 2019) and the contradictions of capitalism are not resolvable within capitalist social relations (Harvey 2014). Thus, what is required is a model that can help prefigure post-capitalist futures.

So how do we go about prefiguring the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society? Well, we must continue to develop autonomous spaces that resist neoliberal capitalism and experiment with alternative forms of self-organisations that have the potential to prefigure alternative forms of self-organisation (Chatterton 2012; Graeber 2009). It is the development of these autonomous spaces and creating links between them that has the potential to crack and rupture capitalist social relations and prefigure post-capitalist futures (Cleverly 2017; Holloway 2002 and 2010; Dinerstein 2014) However, this requires people to work together on concrete political projects in ways that are able to overcome political, ideological, theoretical and

cultural differences that have traditionally fragmented the political left (Prichard and Worth 2016) and develop a collective desire for collectively (Dean 2012). While the research found some evidence to suggest this has been attempted within the autonomous learning spaces that feature in this thesis, whether this can be done on a larger scale is something that remains embryonic and fragile. However, given that projects such as the autonomous learning spaces tend to be ephemeral and wane there needs to be an attempt to institutionalise their ethos and lessons learned from them into an organisational form that has the potential to prefigure post-capitalist alternatives.

There is some hope that this is beginning to happen. For example, politically, many of those involved in student protests and university occupations created the grassroots activist wing of the Labour Party, Momentum, in 2015. Momentum has three express aims: (i) to win elections for Labour; (ii) create a socialist Labour Government, and; (iii) help build a wider socialist social movement (Lott-Lavigna 2019). Momentum has been instrumental in reforming the democratic processes within the party in an attempt to make it more participatory and non-hierarchical. Indeed, it was these reforms and the support of Momentum that helped elect Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader in 2015 and the resultant “Corbynism” that provided hope that it was possible to change society to benefit the many not the few (Bolton and Pitts 2018). Furthermore, Corbynism is part of a movement that has been able to bring together different elements of the political left and is grounded in more recent tendencies of Marxism (Bolton and Pitts 2018) and, thus, illustrates the potential for left-wing convergence within a concrete political project (Prichard and Worth 2016). Momentum, and a significant proportion of young voters, backed Corbyn and the Labour Party in the 2017 General Election because of the party’s vow to abolish tuition fees and fund the higher education sector by raising top rate tax, and end austerity measures, which resulted in wiping out the Conservative’s majority in Parliament and signalled the end of Theresa May’s days as Prime Minister.

While the 2019 General Election resulted in a disappointing defeat for Jeremy Corbyn, there was general public support for his policies, but Brexit appeared to be the main focus of the electorate and Corbyn's stance was a key reason for the heavy losses suffered by the Party. However, Corbyn's legacy is likely to be continued by either Rebecca Long-Bailey, Keir Starmer or Clive Lewis both seen as continuity candidates in the upcoming Labour Party leadership contest with both Angela Rayner and John McDonald (also closely aligned to Corbyn) likely to have high profile roles within the party. While gaining power through the state and political parties is something that is dismissed by many of those involved in autonomous spaces (Graeber 2009; Sitrin 2007; Holloway 2002 and 2010), the Labour Party does support the co-operative movement and has highlighted the potential of a co-operative university as an alternative model to the current neoliberal one (Inge 2019). Moreover, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Angela Rayner, added a much more radical socialist understanding of the potential of the co-operative university, which she said at the Labour Party Conference in 2019 would: "...introduce common ownership to the production, distribution and exchange of knowledge itself." (Inge 2019). Thus, Momentum and Labour's connection to the co-operative movement and the idea of a co-operative university have the potential to embody the ethos of autonomous learning spaces and to prefigure the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society.

There have also been an ongoing series of strikes around the globe that also provide hope that change is possible. For example, protests against climate change by school children inspired by social activist Greta Thunberg and by extinction rebellion are sites of struggle against industrial capitalism and its effects on the environment. There have also been protests for political freedom in Hong Kong in response to attempts to erode democracy and against brutal police violence that has been used to try and deter protesters. In Lebanon, there have been protests about inequality and political corruption by leaders who have used their power to

enrich themselves. On International Women's Day in 2018, more than 5 million female workers took part in a feminist strike to highlight the sexual discrimination, domestic violence and the gender pay gap. In France, Mouvement des gilets jaunes has continued to protest about inequality arguing minimum wage increase, redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation, lower fuel taxes and citizen initiative referendums allowing citizens to petition for a referendum without the consent of parliament or the president. These are all struggles against the oppression, exploitation, domination and alienation of humans and nature.

Moreover, autonomous learning spaces provide hope that it is possible to prefigure a post-capitalist idea of the university. As of 7th January 2020, the research found that three of the seven autonomous learning spaces were still running. Free University Brighton now offers three free courses: Social Science and Humanities, Philosophy, and Feminism, Gender & Sexuality. Ragged University is still hosting its Ragged Talks with its most recent one entitled: *The Art of Not Knowing* by James Clegg¹²⁴. The IF Project is still running too with its most recent course *Thinking Without Borders: A Short History of the Present* running earlier this year. While the Social Science Centre ceased to exist in 2019, members helped to set up a similar project in Manchester, which is called Social Science Centre Manchester¹²⁵ in 2016.

There have also been efforts to use what has been learned from creating and running these autonomous learning spaces to develop a co-operative university in the UK which has been supported by the Co-operative College through the Co-operative University Working Group, which hosted the Making the Co-operative University¹²⁶ in 2017 out of which has emerged the

¹²⁴ For more information see: https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/event/ragged-university-the-art-of-not-knowing-plus-medical-imaging-physics/?instance_id=26846

¹²⁵ For more detail about Social Science Centre Manchester see: <https://sscmanchester.wordpress.com/>

¹²⁶ For more information about the Making the Co-operative University Conference see: <http://iosswinn.org/2017/07/27/making-the-co-operative-university-conference/>

Co-operative Higher Education Network¹²⁷. The Co-operative College submitted its application for degree awarding powers to the Office for Students in August 2018 and is hoping to run courses from January 2020. This work has been supported, in part, by some members of the Social Science Centre and others who have been involved in autonomous learning spaces. This organisational form has emerged out of the autonomous learning spaces, and others involved in the development of autonomous practices, has the potential to prefigure the idea of the university for a post-capitalist society. This idea of the co-operative university is grounded in the principles of collective ownership and control and the development of the production of a new type of knowledge, or social knowing (Neary and Winn 2019), that focuses on the development and nurturing of human beings and nature rather than their exploitation. Harvey (2014) refers to this as a form of revolutionary humanism that through conscious thought and action changes the world we live in and ourselves for the better by developing dignity, tolerance, compassion, love and respect for others.

¹²⁷ For more information about the Co-operative Higher Education Network see: <http://josswinn.org/tag/co-operative-university/>

Postscript

On 5th March 2019 I attended a Co-operative University Information Day in Manchester at the Co-operative College¹²⁸. The event was attended by over 100 people, including academics, people from the Co-operative UK, activists and those involved in other co-operative projects. The co-operative university has already appointed an academic board to oversee its inception and running and is working on quality assurance to begin courses in January 2020. The co-operative university was described at the event as being an alternative form of education not on the margins, but in the mainstream. The co-operative university will also be supported by a number of federated partners, including Red Learning Co-operative, Centre for Human Ecology, Feral Art School, Leicester Vaughan College and Preston Co-operative Education Centre. The creation of the co-operative university working together in this way was referred to as the “New Lucas Plan”, which is a movement to create a new economy that serves the needs of society, individuals and respects environmental limits (New Lucas Plan 2020). The Original Lucas Plan was created in 1976 by a group of workers at Lucas Aerospace Corporation in response to the announcement that thousands of jobs would be cut (Wainwright 1981). Instead, workers offered an alternative plan to develop socially useful products rather than military equipment. Furthermore, the plan would democratise the organisation and help develop human potential within the organisation (*ibid*). While the plan was never put into place it highlighted the potential to develop an alternative organisational form that has the potential to prefigure post-capitalist futures. The idea of the co-operative university is being organised along the same lines the New Lucas Plan and fits closely with the notion of producing socially

¹²⁸ More information about the day including a video is available on the Co-operative College’s website: <https://www.co-op.ac.uk/News/co-operative-university-moves-a-step-closer>

useful knowledge that aims to develop and nurture humanity and nature through a form of revolutionary humanism (Harvey 2014).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Re-Imagining the Idea of the University Interview Schedule

1. How and why did you become involved in the autonomous learning space (how did you hear about it? How long have you been involved? What is your background? Have you been involved in similar projects?)?
2. How and why was the autonomous learning space created (what motivated people to create it? Who was involved in setting it up?)?
3. Describe how the autonomous learning space operates in practice (do you have meetings? How are decisions made? Is it based on volunteer workers? Do you receive any finances? What people roles are there? Do people swap roles?).
4. Describe the different courses/workshops/classes you have/will deliver (how are they advertised? How many people attend? Are they well received? Do you do any kind of evaluation? Have you used or been influenced by any pedagogical philosophies?).
5. Where do your courses/workshops/classes take place (what types of spaces have you used? Why have you used them? Were they effective? Were they used for practical reasons? Political/ideological? Mixture of both?)?
6. Have you been in contact with others involved in similar projects (how did you meet them? Have you supported each other? If so, how? Has this been useful?)?
7. What advice or support would you give to others thinking about or involved in an autonomous learning space?



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Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for a Post-Capitalist Society

Further Information

Name: Gary Saunders
(researcher)
E: gsaunders@lincoln.ac.uk

Name: Mike Neary (supervisor)
T: +44 (0)1522 886015
E: mneary@lincoln.ac.uk

I would like to invite you to participate in a doctoral research project that explores autonomous learning spaces. Whether you decide to be involved in the research is completely up to you. Before deciding whether you want to be involved it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve and what will be done with the findings. Please take the time to read the following information and discuss it with others if you wish. I will go through this information sheet with you and will answer any questions you might have. Do ask if anything is unclear. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the research about?

The research examines autonomous learning spaces that emerged out of the Student Protest in 2010. The research will examine why and how these spaces were created and they operate in practice. The research will also examine the ways in which autonomous spaces have experimented with different models of self-organisation and pedagogy. The research will also explore how these projects have used space and networked with others involved in similar autonomous learning spaces. The research will use the findings to explore the creation of an alternative model of higher education provision.



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What will the research involve?

The research will entail a site visit to observe education provision at each of the autonomous learning spaces. Also, if you agree to participate in the research you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will explore topics about the creation and day-to-day running of the project. You can choose not to answer questions, stop the interview at any time or remove yourself from the research up to two months after your interview has taken place. You will also be given the opportunity to read through your interview transcript for accuracy as well as a summary of the final report.

What will be done with the research findings?

If all of the participants consent, the final report (dissertation) will be published in the University of Lincoln Library and potentially be used to inform further publication on this topic.

Will people be able to identify me in the research?

The research will anonymise all of the participants and locations so that you cannot be identified unless requested otherwise. All research data will be stored securely and confidentially and not shared with anyone else (unless you disclose harmful and/or illegal behaviour, which will be reported to the authorities).

Who has approved this research?

The research has been approved by the School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Lincoln. The research is being conducted as part of a final year dissertation.

What happens if I have a concern or something goes wrong?

If you are concerned about the research or something goes wrong you can contact my supervisor, Mike Neary, in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln (mneary@lincoln.ac.uk)



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CONSENT FORM

Study title: Re-Imagining the Idea of the University for a Post-capitalist Society

Name of Researcher: Gary Saunders (gsaunders@lincoln.ac.uk)

Participant identification number for this study:

If you have decided to take part in the research please read and sign this consent form.

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study.

I confirm that if I have been given the chance to ask questions about the study.

I consent to my personal data being held and processed for the purpose of the above study.

I understand that my involvement is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up to two months after the research has been conducted, without giving any reason, and without my medical or legal rights being affected.

I understand that the interview is confidential and my identity will be protected. However, I also know that there are certain situations where the interviewer will have to break confidentiality, e.g. imminent harm to myself, or on-going harm to others.

I agree for the interview to be recorded.

I agree to take part in the above study.

.....



Name of Participant

Date

Signature

.....
Name of Researcher


Date

Signature

1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher

Appendix D

Re: Ph.D Research

 Follow up. Start by 02 March 2017. Due by 02 March 2017.
You replied to this message on 01/03/2017 18:45.

Action Items

+ Get more ap

Hi gary

Sorry for slow reply.

I think it's a very favourable take. It makes PPE sound more organised and developed and institutionalised than it was. It was experimental and so many sub-optimal approaches were taken, of course. The Board of Advisors were, in reality, not really present. We went with a curriculum, but then scrapped it quite quickly for various reasons. One of those reasons was, as you say, not wanting to be too prescriptive. But, above all, we realised we were working with people who couldn't really engage with texts very often. They didn't have the time or even literacy...or confidence sometimes.

The most important parts for me are how it was very difficult indeed to sustain and to grow cos: students and organisers moved on and everyone was so busy. It was also hard to maintain regular group participants over time.

I think funds are probably vital if something like PPE is to be maintained, grow, institutionalise. SSC is doing this very slowly but is alive now for quite some years already!

I'm not sure what the next step is. I'm moving to Bristol in the summer. My wife got a consultant job there. We're excited. There are great people in the education dept there including Cassie Earl and Keri Facer. I'll be meeting up with them later this month.

What's the latest with you? Still on for a Nov completion? Bet you can't wait to be done!!

Thanks again

Appendix E



Appendix F

24TH – 26TH NOVEMBER 2010. PROGRAMME OF EVENTS AIMED AT THE REIMAGINATION OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Starting with the national walkout on the 24th, a series of workshops, lectures, events and 'interventions' are going to be happening across Leeds – at the Music and Art Colleges, the MET, and the University of Leeds.

For a long time the university has been undergoing a process of privatisation. Universities are now run as businesses, with students as consumers and lecturers as creators of products – knowledge has become a commodity that can be bought and sold. The overwhelming purpose of the university has become to train docile workers to perform functions within a capitalist system, to contribute to the enrichment of the few rather than the collective social improvement of all.

The recent Spending Review and Brown Review takes this process to a whole new level – proposing a removal of the cap on fees which will create an even more hierarchical edu-

cation system, reducing research funding, and raising fees to an estimated £3,000 a year. All this results in students taking on more debt for a hollowed-out education, lecturers being forced to carry out 'economies exercises' and staff working longer and harder hours for less money.

It is clear that the university system is bankrupt and in need of profound change, but no-one can see an alternative, a solution, a way out. We need to resist the threatened cuts and the ongoing onslaught on education – but we also need a transformation.

As workers and students at different places within the university system, we are putting on this event to facilitate the process of reimagining higher education. We don't have all the answers, but we have many ideas and are sure that there are many more out there. We will explore how universities can become a place where creative and critical thought is fostered, where partici-

pants teach what inspires them, learn what they are passionate about, and strive to create a more equitable and sustainable world, not simply for jobs and profit.

How could we transform the university, how could students and lecturers learn differently through more creative, critical and empowering processes, is it even possible to transform the university without transforming the society in which it is embedded?

All these events have been organized autonomously in a decentralised manner by students and staff from across the higher education institutions of Leeds. We look to challenge the state of education, its role in society, and the capitalist crisis, whilst acting on our desire to create a different world.

We don't want to defend the university, we want to transform it!

JOIN THE WALK-OUT! – WED 11AM

A national student walkout on Wednesday 24th! Leave your classes at 11am, & meet outside LULU. Bring banners & noise-makers for a march into town!

FOR FULL WORKSHOP DETAILS

VISIT: WWW.REALLYOPENUNIVERSITY.ORG

EVERYDAY: GENERAL SPACE: LULU Lobby - Flashmob, Films, T-Shirts, Put on an event, Posters, and general info point!
 REALLY OPEN ART EXHIBITION: EB Library - All day, everyday, outside EB Library. Add your own art from Wednesday 24th.
 CREATING CLOCKS: Creative Interventions throughout the week. Find out more at the Central Space
 ONGOING ZINE PRODUCTION: LULU Lobby - Typewriter lab – rant, reflect, share thoughts and ideas, we provide the space...

W 24TH	Opening event w/ Mikael Arfur - 3-6pm Roger Stevens LT 22 The Really Open University & Mikael Arfur open the 'Reimagine the University' event! Join us	Gainful Unemployment - 6.30-7.30pm Packhorse Pub, Upstairs A skills share workshop exploring practical suggestions for using our talents outside of the workplace, especially as we face the highest graduate unemployment rates in recent history.	There's Power in a Union 6pm ARC Mt. Room 2 It is time to reject the divide-and-rule techniques in the workplace. We need united and effective unionism in education, without it there can be no reimagined university.	Calais: S'Informer - 6pm Pearl Gallery; LULU Films and talks about asylum. Beyond Commodified Education - 6-8pm Broadcasting House CCBPAS12 Discussing alternatives both to our current universities and education in general.
	T 25TH	Student-Led Learning - 10-12am ARC Meeting Room 2 An opportunity for students to present their research and ideas to each other. Got something to say? Say it here!	Student as Producer - 2-3pm ARC Meeting Room 2 A presentation and discussion about how the University of Lincoln is reinventing its curriculum following radical and critical pedagogical forms.	Popular Education with Trapese - 3-4pm ARC Mt. Room 2 This workshop will look at the origins and some of the tools and techniques of popular education and how they can be used to transform our university.
F 26TH	Pecha Kucha - 6-7pm Geography Lecture Theatre Pecha Kucha is Japanese for chatter. In this event each participant will have 6 minutes 40 seconds (20 seconds per slide) for 20 Powerpoint slides) to talk on a topic of their choice.	Graffiti Stenciling - 6pm Meet at Central Space From Bristol to Buenos Aires stencil graffiti has been used to subvert mechanisms of control and communicate ideas through an unauthorised medium. Learn how to create stencils and explore ways they can be used.	Leeds Against Cuts Public Meeting - 7pm Leeds Civic Hall City-wide meeting for reacting cuts in Leeds. Includes feedback from today's UCU conference.	Film: Universities in Transformation - 8-10pm Pearl Gallery; LULU A series of films and discussions about students and staff seeking to transform their universities across the world.
	Italian Wave - 11-12pm ARC Mt. Room 2 In this session we will hear a report from recent education struggles in Italy. What commonalities and what differences do they have with struggles here in England? What can we learn from them?	Logic of Occupation - 2-3pm ARC Mt. Room 2 We will be exploring the political importance of seizing space and reclaiming it for our own ends. What sort of possibilities do occupations open up for both resistive and affirmative politics?	Pedagogies of Resistance - 3-4pm Parkinson B.08 This workshop explores the role of education in shaping the anti-capitalist politics of three Latin America social movements. We ask what these experiences mean in a time when our own education is in crisis.	University of Utopia - 3-6pm Parkinson B.09 The University of Utopia invites you to join their institution and develop the university as a social form, transforming the 'knowledge society' into the 'knowing society.' We will discuss what this means and how we'll do it.
	Counter Mapping - 4-6pm Geography 141 By counter-mapping the university, we hope to depict, where we are (especially in light of the recent cuts and Brown Review), where we came from, and where we wish to go, putting ourselves on the map, and imagining our way out...	Off with the REF! - 5-7pm Geography Lecture Theatre This panel and participatory discussion explores how metric systems have been responsible for creating a condition of 'academic unfreedom', where teaching and research have come to be dominated by the market.	'Science: Myth and Reality' - TBC Leeds Met We will question dominant 'scientific' assumptions about nature and the modern world, focusing on the assertions that technology is seamlessly connected to science and that science can 'disprove' religious or political ideas.	Where next for the transformation? - TBC TBC At the close of the 'Reimagine the Uni' event, we must come together to explore where next for the transformation of the university? How do we work together to create a different future?

Appendix G

