'I've Learned to Question Everything': Critical Thinking, or, the Pedagogical Logic of Late Capitalism

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Abstract

While the loss of space for critical engagement has been a primary focus for critics of the neo-liberal transformation of higher education, the recasting of the relationship between education and economy has not meant the death of critical thinking. Instead, I argue that critical thinking has emerged as a binding point in higher education discourse, while at the same time being occupied by an 'employability narrative' that conflates the longstanding division between 'academic' and 'vocational' education: in the knowledge economy, critical graduates are employable graduates. This pedagogical dynamic is part of the logic of late capitalism identified by Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, wherein cultural transgression is not a threat to capital, but the basis for its expansion. In response, I suggest that the question for critical pedagogues is that posed by Žižek and Glyn Daly in regards to capitalism, 'How do you subvert a system that has subversion as its dominant logic?'

Education is a fickle business, one that can swing from elation to exasperation very quickly. I experienced both sides of the spectrum in a single conversation with a graduating student while teaching sociology at a 'plate glass' university

in London. While discussing her university experience, my student proudly asserted that she 'feels like a completely different person' and 'can't watch the news in the same way now'. For a sociologist of a radical bent, this was a wonderful development. In following up these promising lines of enquiry, I asked what she was planning to do next year: 'I'm hoping to get into a career in PR'. Not so wonderful.

Nonetheless, there is no contradiction here. A sociology student with a critical aptitude and strong knowledge of the inner workings of the media is well placed for a career in public relations. Indeed, is this not the ideal type of humanities or social science graduate in the twenty-first century? If our post-industrial knowledge economy – otherwise known as late capitalism – is beset by an abundance of information, skilled workers are valued for their critical and creative capacity to work with knowledge as much as their knowledge base itself. Our collective stores of information have never been more all-encompassing, but cutting through this excess to make informed decisions and, more importantly, to find innovative ways of creating, disrupting and exploiting new markets is the motor of contemporary capitalism within the Western world (especially now that the grubbier aspects of production have been exported away from our material and moral sensibilities).

And yet, despite this apparent need for creative and disruptive graduates, critics have lamented an apparent shift away from the critical role of the university. For example, in Martha Nussbaum's seminal *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010, pp.1-2) she argues that 'We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance…a world-wide crisis in education' as

> Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.

While we might agree with the degree of crisis in higher education and with Nussbaum's identification of the commodification of education as the cause of this predicament, the recasting of the relationship between education and economy has not necessarily meant the absence of critical thinking from educational narratives. Instead, in this paper I will argue that critical thinking has emerged as a binding point in higher education discourse, endorsed by critical pedagogues and career-focused administrators alike, despite the continuing existence of radically divergent practices.

Here an emergent employability narrative, one that suggests that the purpose of higher education is to produce employable graduates for the labour market, has come to dominate the articulation of critical thinking and, consequently, drive pedagogical practices. Within this narrative, the capacity for critical enquiry remains a core characteristic of the university graduate, although it has been reduced to a mode desired by employers and by governments seeking to enable those employers. As a consequence of the presence of this explicit articulation of criticality, those demanding a more critical curriculum in response to neo-liberal impositions find little resistance in official university discourse, even if they face hard managerial limits in practice.

This pedagogical logic where criticality is explicitly demanded but with its subversive dimension elided is most effectively understood as part of the 'cultural logic' of late capitalism identified by literary theorist Fredric Jameson

and by political philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Following Marx, Jameson and Žižek argue that the resilience of capital can be explained by its capacity to integrate resistance into its regular functioning. Just as the ceaseless expansion of capital is propelled by overcoming the limits of the systematic accumulation of capital (see Arrighi 1994; Arrighi 2005b; Arrighi 2005a; Harvey 2006; Harvey 2010), the emergence of transgressive cultural practices have not threatened the smooth reproduction of Western society. Instead, they are translated into new and profitable markets.

Indeed, corporations and those who seek to provide the economic conditions in which they flourish openly encourage the challenging of established practices. Not only do technology companies celebrate disruptive innovation, but the kind of counter-cultural practices created by urban 'hipsters' are readily commodified, providing profitable new markets. Yet, while an 'edgy' and 'high tech' capitalist economy encourages creativity and disruption, it is only to the extent that this mode of criticality enhances profitability: questioning the very principle of profit remains unprofitable.

It is within this logic that critical thinking is thriving within UK universities; employers demand graduates with critical capacities and universities, facing student and government demands to produce graduates that match the needs of the labour market, are happy to oblige. Conversely, by allowing this employability narrative to occupy the place of critical thinking, universities have foreclosed upon the possibility of more radical modes of criticality.

In response, I suggest that the question for critical pedagogues is the same as that posed by Žižek (2004, p.189) and by Glyn Daly (2010, p.6) in regards to capitalism, 'How do you subvert a system that has subversion as its dominant logic?' That is, how can those committed to a system of higher education that

'…is capable of creating possibilities for social transformation' (Giroux 2005, p.150) transgressively engage with a pedagogical grammar that posits transformation at its core?

Constructing criticality

The roots of critical thinking are at the core of the human condition. That is, while other animals engage in problem-solving behaviours, humanity is uniquely able to consciously reflect on how it engages with these problems. Nonetheless, while humanity has the inherent capacity to critically engage with the world, this does not mean that there is a 'natural' way to do so. Nor does it mean that humans are always willing and able to partake in critical thought and practice. Instead, critical thinking occurs within a cultural, economic and political context in which some forms of criticality are privileged over others. Indeed, many human societies have been established with the very purpose of restricting these creative, critical and potentially transformative practices, instead encouraging the acceptance of received wisdom or the authority of an all-powerful leader, real or imagined.

By contrast, what we now call 'critical thinking' is the latest iteration of a long lineage of cultural practices that have attempted to step beyond this suppression of critical being. This specifically critical mode of thought, one that seeks to harness our innate capacity for criticality into a disciplined and systematic process, has its roots in Greek philosophy. Here that same impulses and thought structures that drove Socratic questioning also propelled the creation of universities, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. And yet, while critical thought has a long lineage, there is no linear evolution to critical thinking. Instead, criticality has been instantiated in, and been inspired by, modes of thought as diverse and evolutionary anthropology, behaviourism and critical theory. Indeed, much of what we now consider philosophical

thinking involves the intersection of competing ways of critically interpreting our world.

In providing an institutional framework for inspiring and mediating these modes of enquiry, modern universities are still the core space and place for critical thought. That is, critical thinking is not just a consequence of the university, nor is criticality only a necessary condition for the existence of universities. Instead, criticality is the very reason for the existence of the university (Barnett 1997, p.3).

In providing an institutional framework and setting for critical thought, the modern university is thought to serve a vital function within liberal democracies. Here, as Craig Calhoun (2006) argues, higher education is a public good not just because of its economic effects but because it adds a degree of criticality to the public sphere.

Indeed, the UK's Department of Business, Skills and Innovation (BIS) has highlighted the non-market benefits of higher education, particularly greater social cohesion and reducing crime, more civic engagement and a greater propensity to vote (2013a; 2013b). A similar idea was expressed in a European Science Foundation report (2008), which emphasised the importance of 'critical societies' and the role of higher education in the provision of 'critical space' in which challenging ideas can be expressed in the name of 'speaking truth to power' within the 'construction of knowledge societies'.

Yet, despite this apparent centrality of critical thinking within universities,there remains an ineffability about the concept in educational practices (Geng 2014; Mulnix 2012). We might identify, as Bailin et al. (1999) do, that critical thinking in some way involves thinking about thinking or, as Jenny Moon

(2005, p.5) puts it, 'reprocessing of material that has already been learnt'. Beyond this 'thinking about thinking', thought that is specifically *critical* has a vital element of critique that cannot be reduced to higher order thinking itself (Mulnix 2012, p.468). How the critical in critical thinking is enacted, however, is dependent upon the discourse within which it is articulated and practised.

The ambiguity around critical thinking occurs because the term functions as what post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau (see Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1996; Laclau 2000) called an empty signifier: a nodal point that holds a field together by being stripped of any particular meaning. That is, there is no pre-determined definition of critical thinking. Instead, critical thinking is a place-holder term upon which a multiplicity of meanings can be ascribed. The empty signifier unifies a field of meaning by allowing a range of differences to invest in the same term. For example, 'Hope' worked as an empty political signifier in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign because it allowed a range of actors to invest their own meaning of hope (see McMillan 2012, pp.57–58, 89 for further discussion of this point). Likewise, as Tim Moore (2011) demonstrated, critical thinking acts as a nodal point in academic discourse because disciplines can assert their own reading of what it means to be critical. In Moore's study of academic interpretations of critical thinking given by 17 Australian academics, seven differing readings were posited ranging from the universal-cognitive 'scepticism' and 'rationality' to the more radical 'activist engagement with knowledge' and 'self-reflexivity'.

In this sense, critical thinking as what Ronald Barnett (1997) calls 'critical being', wherein critical persons are more than just critical thinkers; they are able to 'critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge' (1997, p.1), may be entirely different from instrumental or vocational approaches to critical thinking skills, wherein critical thinking is an

advanced expression of human cognitive faculties that are 'universal intellectual values' (Scriven & Paul 2008).Sharing the same term, however, allows a range of socio-political practices to coalesce around critical thinking. Academics and careers department might mean entirely different things when they evoke critical thinking as a core part of the university mission but, because they embrace the same language, the signifier provides a point of commonality that unites disparate aspects of university discourse.

Nonetheless, this fluidity and ubiquity does not mean that all readings of critical thinking have equal status. Instead, its centrality means that critical thinking is the locus of socio-political struggle over pedagogical practice, the function of criticality in higher education, and the value of higher education itself. This struggle is not necessarily anchored by a *true* definition around which other readings fluctuate. We may determine that there exists forms of critical thought and pedagogical practice that are *more* transformative than others. Indeed, this hierarchy is implied in the opening example to this paper, wherein I suggest that the sociological forms of critical thinking that problematise media representations are more critical than those within the public relations field that seek to manipulate those representations. Neither of these practices, however, produces a definition of critical thinking that descends the knowledge practices in which it is embedded. As such, the meaning of critical thinking is established in its discursive articulation; critical thinking in the Frankfurt School is very different than that within chemical engineering firm, but it is critical thinking nonetheless.

Vitally, therefore, the meaning of 'critical thinking' is subject to socio-political struggle that defines the frameworks within which certain pedagogical practices are determined to be valid. Consequently, for those of us seeking to evoke more politically radical forms of pedagogical practice, it is not a question of

demanding the return of critical thinking. Instead, we must question which articulations of critical thinking we are working with.

In the coming sections, I will use this reading of critical thinking as an empty signifier to demonstrate how the articulation of criticality in UK higher education is split between an academically orientated discourse that focuses on education as a public good and a dominant employability narrative that is driven by the emergence of the knowledge economy and the subsequent demands of employers for graduates with critical capacities.

The crisis of the university and the turn to critical thinking

For those engaged in the emerging field of what Jeffrey Williams (2012) has called the field 'critical university studies'(see Bailey & Freedman 2011; Barnett 1997; Blackmore 2001; Cantwell 2013; Davies 2003; Schrecker 2010; Tomlinson 2008; Tuchman 2009), we are in the midst of a 'crisis of the public university[1]'caused by the neo-liberal transformation of higher education and the subsequent focus on instrumental and market-orientated learning. Here, the university no longer serves the needs of the nation-state. Instead, Bill Readings argues that the university is becoming a "transnational bureaucratic corporation" (1997, p.3).

Likewise, in *Killing Thinking*(2005), Mary Evans suggests that universities have become 'a site of battery farming for the mind'. As a consequence, Brendan Cantwell has insisted that '[u]niversities that were once sites of learning and discovery are now engines of economic competitiveness and places where students invest in their human capital' (2013, p.152).

I do not wish to fundamentally question these largely cogent and certainly passionate accounts; the university is certainly in crisis, bureaucratised beyond

any rationality and serving the corporate needs ahead of democratic ones. And yet, the language is criticality, from critical thinking to civic engagement, remains clearly evident in university discourse – perhaps more explicitly than ever. How is it that universities have lost their critical mission but are using the language of criticality more than ever?

In University College London's (UCL 2015) message to students, for example, they state '[we] are committed to making a difference in the world; our aim is to provide an educational environment that reflects these values and supports our students to develop in the round [sic]', a mission that is supported by the option of taking a two-week 'Global Citizenship Programme'. Likewise, the University of Cambridge's 'core values' includes the 'encouragement of a questioning spirit' (The University of Cambridge 2016) and the University of Oxford's (2016) strategic plan states that 'The University of Oxford aims to lead the world in research and education. We seek to do this in ways which benefit society on a national and a global scale'.

This appeal to the democratic public good is also apparent outside of elite universities. Bath Spa University (2016), for example, offers a 'Certificate in Global Citizenship' that comes with the taglines, 'Space to Challenge' and 'Start your Conversation with the World'. Notably, however, Bath Spa not only states that the course is '…designed to recognise the global perspective of undergraduate studies' but claims it will '…open opportunities for students in the global employment market'. Indeed, even UCL lists 'Develop a Professional Edge' and 'Boost your CV' as some of the advantages of its Citizenship programme (UCL 2016).

These references to employment exemplify a vital shift that has occurred in higher education discourse wherein, as Kathleen Lynch (2006) argues, even if

universities like UCL brand themselves as institutions that foster creativity and critical expression, these attributes are attached to the instrumental benefits for students. Where the value of university education might have been articulated in terms of the public good and informed democratic participation, it is increasingly justified in terms of the demands of employers and the instrumental, economic, benefits to students by developing the 'skills' that suit those demands of the 'knowledge economy' or 'knowledge capitalism' (Burton-Jones 1999).Thus, Gayle Tuchman(2009, p.76) is right to argue that

> Universities are no longer to lead the minds of students to grasp truth; to grapple with intellectual possibilities; to appreciate the best in art, music, and other forms of culture; and to work toward both enlightened politics and public service. Rather they are now to prepare students for jobs. They are not to educate, but to train

Nonetheless, in this final sentence Tuchman perhaps misses the key point. Yes, students are being trained for the job market but this *quasi*-vocational training occurs within the discursive realm of critical education. This turn to critical thinking as an attribute of the employable graduate has only become possible through a larger economic shift to a knowledge economy.

Critical graduates

The emergence of the knowledge or post-industrial economy, defined by the OECD as an economy which is 'directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information' (1996, p.7),signalled the third stage of capitalism, following the transition from its agricultural beginnings to an industrial economy. This information age is certainly characterised by the production of mass data – in 2013 IBM estimated that 90% of all data has been produced since 2011 (2013) – and by scientific know-how; technology

companies rely on the possession of patents relating to the production and manipulation of data.

What Mark Olssen and Michael Peters (2005) call 'knowledge as capital', however, is only half the story. Workers in the STEM field are certainly valued for their capacity to produce information and convert it to knowledge. In terms of translating this know-how into profit, however, it is innovation and the disruption of knowledge that is the key to gaining competitive advantage (Porter 1998).

Thus, in the post-industrial age the conditions for profitability are created not just through the possession of scarce knowledge, say social media user data, but the construction and disruption of abundant information through immaterial labour, like aggregating travel prices from previously disparate sites. In this case, the likes of Skyscanner become valuable not become they are producing information, but because they have changed the way it is presented by 'disrupting' established market practices. In this environment, it is no wonder that *Tech Crunch's* 'disrupt' and 'hackathon' events have become a counter-cultural (if an overtly geeky one) movement that engenders an almost cultish following.

As a result, in what the OECD had once called the 'learning economy' (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 1996, p.3) with its reliance on 'intellectual capabilities [rather] than on physical inputs or natural resources' (Powell & Snellman 2004, p.199), the value of graduates with the capacity to critically engage with knowledge has been transformed (Behar-Horenstein & Niu 2011, p.25). If arts and humanities degrees were once popularly derided for a lack of relevance to the contemporary economy (see Lang 2016), George Anders' (2015) *Forbes* article 'That 'Useless' Liberal Arts

Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket*'* now argues that tech companies from start-ups to 'disruptive juggernauts' such as Facebook are 'discovering' the benefits of American-style liberal arts thinking to generate 'creative ideas and actions in a data-rich world'.

Yet, where American liberal arts institutions like Hamilton College (2016) might promote themselves as 'a national leader in teaching students to write effectively, learn from each other and think for themselves', the function of these benefits (in the UK at least) are more effectively demonstrated by a 2009 Universities UK ('The Voice of Universities')/CBI ('The Voice of Business) report on '*Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work*'. This report highlighted the importance of 'employability skills', that linked 'problem solving' and 'customer service' while noting that 'employers value the skills and attributes that graduates develop through higher education – fresh knowledge, critical thinking, the capacity to be excited by ideas and challenge assumptions' (2009).

I do not wish here to suggest that a liberal arts degree (or a humanities one in the UK) has become *the* hot ticket to employment, or that the regularly asserted government and industry demands for highly skilled STEM graduates (Adkins 2012; Gov.uk 2014; The White House 2016) are somehow misleading, but that the value of critically thinking graduates to employers and to capital has begun to shift. Indeed, there is an increasing desire for scientific know-how to be attached to the more creative and critically disruptive thinking associated with humanities or liberal arts education (Jackson-Hayes 2016). Steve Jobs (2011), for example, had argued that 'It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough — it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing'.

These industry demands for critical thinking students are reflected in the 'graduate attributes' that were used publicised by universities to justify their benefits to potential students and to the public after the rise of austerity politics and the associated tripling of university tuition fees in England in 2010 (Morrison 2013). Edinburgh Napier University (2015) defines these graduate attributes as

> … the qualities, skills and understandings that a student should develop as a consequence of the learning they engage with on their programme of study. This sense of 'graduateness' is therefore what distinguishes them from individuals who have not studied at degree level and is the added value they offer to employers and society generally. Graduate attributes have the potential to outlast the knowledge and contexts in which they were originally acquired. Moreover, they provide a framework for engaging with the world and with ongoing learning of new knowledge. As such they transcend the disciplinary contexts in which they were originally acquired.

Criticality (if not the term 'critical thinking') is clearly evident within these attributes: universities are eager to demonstrate that the benefit of a university education is not what you know, but how you know it. As such, few committed to criticality in higher education would take issue with many of the graduate attributes that Queen Mary University London (QMUL) defines as part of their 'commitment to students', such as 'evaluating information critically', as well as having a 'global perspective' and 'learning continuously in a changing world' (QMUL 2015). This emphasis on criticality is shared by Imperial College London (2015) which states that 'Imperial graduates are individuals who 'are able to retrieve, analyse and assimilate complex information', 'are able to manage complexity and ambiguity', are 'independent learners and critical thinkers' and 'have critical judgement'.

Crucially, however, these attributes are articulated in terms of the personal benefits to students as future workers and the suitability of graduates for the needs of capital. Imperial, for example, go on to highlight their desire for graduates to 'know their personal impact and how it can contribute most effectively in the workplace' and QMUL state that 'we believe this approach will add value to our graduates and enable them to compete in an unpredictable marketplace'. Likewise, the eight employer-driven graduate attributes that form the basis for Brunel University's first year 'Ready for Work, Ready for Life' (2015) programme included 'commercial awareness' and 'financial and data analysis'.

This occupation of the place of criticality in UK higher education by an employment-focused agenda has conflated the longstanding division between 'academic' and 'professional/vocational' education: in the contemporary knowledge economy, critical graduates are employable graduates. As such, the employability agenda has come to prominence not only because of the emergence of the knowledge economy but because it has been able to conscript the traditional language of critical thought into the core 'graduate attributes' that are the student-facing foundations of the employability agenda. There remains a radical, transformative, political potential in critical thinking, but it has been subsumed within this employability narrative.

As an illustration, in his discussion of critical education, Henry Giroux (2009, p.250) argues that 'Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, curious, reflective and independent – qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgement and choices about participating in and shaping decisions'. If this is a primary demand of those engaged in critical pedagogy, even the most corporatised and managerial university would agree. The reference to democratic participation might not be

as overt, but the production of curious-reflective-independent students is a core element of most sets of graduate attributes.

This conflation of employability and critical thought marks a significant shift in higher education in the UK. Howard Hotson (2016), for example, has argued that 'corporate models of the university represent a betrayal of a tradition stretching back over 900 years'. Noting the historical 'dual purpose' of universities, Hotson goes on to suggest that this privileging of corporate needs above the 'community at large'

> rests ultimately on the redefinition of the purposes of human life as coinciding with those of the corporation: *Homo economicus*, like the legal person of the corporation, is a purely selfish and purely materialistic entity, single-mindedly devoted to maximising its material rewards

Perhaps the strongest illustration of this turn is the existence of BIS itself. Foregrounded by successive government reports into higher education and economic growth (Skills 2003; Lambert 2003; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997), in 2007 the Labour government in the UK created the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, combining the previous Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Trade and Industry. In 2009 this Department was again retitled and became the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, while retaining higher education within its remit. The 'About Us' section of the Departmental website clearly articulated the new degree to which higher education has been subsumed within an economic narrative

> The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) is the department for economic growth. The department invests in skills and education to promote trade,

boost innovation and help people to start and grow a business. BIS also protects consumers and reduces the impact of regulation (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2013a).

This overt positioning of universities as training grounds for human capital to suit the demands of employers has subsumed the radical transformative potential of critical thinking: critical graduates might be employable graduates but this doesn't mean that they will have the capacity or the desire for critical engagement with knowledge beyond university assessments and the demands of employers. Students are being urged to think and write critically, but this energy is then reduced to assessments and fulfilling learning outcomes, a tension Emily Danvers (2016) productively highlights. In this environment, as a range of research has reported (Danvers 2015; Morrison 2013; Morrissey 2015), students come to see critical thinking as something of value to obtain, a performance on the path to employability and, as Danvers argues, a 'passport to self-improvement' (2016, 178) particularly suited to life in a knowledge economy. Universities' producing graduates with critical attributes is thus not a threat to the interests of capital: it is at the heart of a flourishing post-industrial economy. Giroux (2009, p.245), evoking Jacques Rancière, had argued that critical education requires a 'loosening of the co-ordinates of the sensible through a constant re-examination of the boundaries that distinguish the sensible from the subversive'. The neo-liberalisation of higher education in the UK has achieved exactly that: the subversive has become the sensible.

Forbes' Jacob Morgan (2014), for example, has argued that the future of work will be defined by 'challenging convention' rather than accumulating knowledge or following established authority. Challenging authority, however, does not mean challenging the framework within authority exists nor what Zygmunt Bauman (2001, p.4, cited in Giroux, 2009, 251) identifies as the core

of critical education, a 'disgust for all forms of socially produced injustice'. Critical thinking certainly still exists in UK Higher Education, but its very ubiquity has only served to marginalise its radical potential.

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to argue that the conflation of the interests of capital and higher education is not only a pedagogical logic but reflects a larger political-economic dynamic. Transgressive or counter-cultural movements are not the challenge to capital that they might be to an authoritarian society: contemporary capitalism relies on creativity, disruption and innovation to forge new markets. Likewise, the solidity of the employability agenda that dominates neo-liberalised higher education occurs because it has been able to co-opt the language of criticality while confining the emancipatory impulse it might once have engendered. As such, just as late-capitalism relies on exploiting cultural disruption without engendering political subversion, the pedagogical logic of the neo-liberal university is critical thinking without a critical edge.

Critical thinking and the logic of late capitalism

This identification of the changing relationship between capitalism and critique has been most prominently made by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In this seminal text, Jameson argues that the changes identified as part of an emergent postmodernity – a loss of historicity, the death of critical distance, depthlessness and the breakdown in the distinction between high and low culture, as well as the development of new technologies – are more effectively read as a super-structural response to systematic changes in what he calls late capitalism.

Evoking a reading of capitalism popularised by Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel (1975) (although the term was first developed by the Frankfurt School),

Jameson's conceptualisation of late capitalism includes many of the same characteristics that characterise the knowledge economy, but with a greater (and more critical) focus on commodification, financialisation and multi-national capital. Moreover, Jameson links the depthlessness and pastiche of postmodernity with our superficial and repetitive consumptive habits, positing that the rise of a distinctly *post* modern culture marked not just a super-structural response to changes in the economic base, but a collapse in the distinction between economics and culture.

In our late capitalist society, culture has been penetrated and colonised by the commodity form; culture, including or especially in its most transgressive forms, is now an essential element of contemporary capitalism. In the cultural and financial industries that define late capitalism, 'All that is solid melts into air' is no longer a critique of capital, but a marketing strategy for an economy that relies as much on the 1960s counter-culture and the 'post-1968' spirit as on information technology (Thrift, 2009). Here, in what Jim McGuigan(2006; 2012) calls 'Cool Capitalism'–the marriage of counter-culture and capitalism–disaffection is incorporated into capitalism itself.

We see this dialectical relationship between transgression and profitability in the 'pop-up' entrepreneurship that thrives in the 'experiential' cities (see Degen et al. 2015) of the developed world. Here the selling points of 'Secret Cinema' events or the momentary presence of a London gin bar are both the newness and the temporariness of the experience so that, according to *The Nudge: Popup London*, '…there'll always be innovative chefs, designers, musicians, bartenders, artists, actors and more turning up in unexpected locations to do what they do best: making life more random and enjoyable for everyone'(2016). Even political activism has become an opportunity for profit, creating a troubling loop in which radical energies are the fuel for new marketplaces.

Naomi Klein's magnificent *No Logo* (1999) might have identified the disconcerting presence of advertising and the commodification of public space, driving a desire for alternative occupations of public space exemplified by the rise of streetart, but this energy is now also reflected in 'anti-advertising' advertising campaigns, like the 'Shoreditch Art Wall' (2016), which allows street-art style advertising in the heart of hipster London for £2,000 per panel per week.

This inclusion of counter-culture within capitalism is an extension of the elementary logic of capitalism identified by Marx, who had long admired capital's ability to turn obstacles to progress into the driver of profit so that '[e]very limit appears as a barrier to be overcome'(Marx 1939). That is, if the inherent force that propels capital is the ceaselessly drive to expand (see Harvey 2006; Harvey 2010; Harvey 2014), this drive soon confronts barriers that thwart this continual expansion of the accumulation of capital (Arrighi 1994). When faced with a 'crisis of over accumulation', for instance, in which capital essentially out-grows itself and is unable to find an outlet for its surplus product, capital expands through a 'spatial fix' that subsuming new space or by disrupting existing markets (Arrighi 2005b, pp.34–36).

Here, as Žižek (2013, p.651)argues, capitalism has a perpetual self-revolutionary dynamic wherein capitalism 'reproduces itself through permanent self-revolutionising through the integration of the excess into the "normal" functioning [of capitalism]' (Žižek 2006a, p.298).Resistance is thus not only contained within the circuit of capital but is the basis for its expansion. The resilience of capitalism can then be explained by its recuperative capacity to not only include that which transgresses its established boundaries, but to profit from it. Hipster culture, for example, began as a sub-culture in the cities of the Western world characterised by rebuffing the 'mainstream' lifestyles of its

typically middle-class environment (Horning 2009). While still (often pejoratively) defined by an overt, often pretentious, rejection of cultural norms, hipster culture is now most commonly distinguished by the gentrification of once 'gritty' neighbourhoods and the kind of entrepreneurial economy that makes 'Cat Cafes' and 'Treehouse Offices' thriving (or at least newsworthy) businesses (Shaw 2015). In this case, is East London's 'Cereal Killer' café (a café selling an infinite variety of bowls of cereal for £3.50 a pop) an example of subversive counter-culture or innovative pop-up entrepreneurship? Jameson, no doubt, would suggest both.

The existence of market-driven subversion is part of the socio-political struggle of our time, whereby, as Glyn Daly (2010, p.6) puts it

> What appears on the surface as contestation and challenge against a social totality may in reality become caught up in the latter and actually serve to reinforce and stabilise it: e.g. democratic subversion as an outlet for protest and good conscience but which implicitly accepts, and legitimises, the rules/grammar of political encounter.

For example, Apple's ground-breaking 'Think Different' advertising campaign mobilised the images of 'troublemakers' like Martin Luther King Jr. in association with a range of ground-breaking scientists and the 'crazy ones' or 'change-makers' like Gandhi (Creative Criminals 2016). In doing so, Apple positioned it itself as defiantly rebellious at the same time as imperiously expanding its market, ruthlessly exploiting its workforce and producing obscene profits.

As I have suggested, critical thinking in UK higher education operates according to the same structural dynamic, advertising the 'Space to Challenge'

to students (Bath Spa University 2016) but with the purpose of developing a 'professional edge' and improving opportunities in the 'global employment market'. Here, by officially encouraging critical thinking while simultaneously reducing the conditions under which it can occur – say by clamping down on student activism and ensuring that students encounter criticality primarily in terms of assessments and employability – the interests of capital have been able to thrive in higher education.

As a consequence, as Danvers (2016) suggests, while critical thinking is overtly present in higher education discourse, the most transformative aspects of criticality in the academy have been squeezed, becoming the kind of critical thinking Ronald Barnett had warned of: 'thinking without a critical edge' (1997, p.17).

Thus, if the language of subversion and even revolution is being used by entrepreneurial hipsters and career advisors as much as activists, what is the value of emancipatory politics and radical thought? As a consequence of this corporate occupation, Žižek suggests that the question faced by those involved in Leftist politics is not how to revolutionise capitalism, but how can we revolutionise a system that relies upon its self-revolutionary capacity? (Žižek 2004, p.189). Put differently by Daly, we must ask '…whether forms of subversion can be developed that are capable of subverting the very logics of existing subversion' (Daly, 2011, 14).

Turning back to critical thinking, for those committed to more transformative forms of critical thought, the question becomes: how can we return a radical political edge to critical thinking and to university education in the UK if critical thinking is expressly included within the curriculum?

The act of speaking truth to power – what Giroux says separates 'an authoritarian from an emancipatory notion of education' (2009, p.245) – remains evident in UK universities in much academic scholarship (despite managerial injunctions to produce research 'outputs' relevant to industry and to government demands) and student activism which, as Danvers (2016) posits, suggests a critical impulse is alive and well, on campus at least. If the task is to decouple it from the employability narrative that I have identified, the first act is not to demand more critical thinking, but to engage in the discursive and material struggle to reoccupy the place of critical thought.

Concluding reflections

In this paper, I have not sought to outline the kinds of critical pedagogical practice that can reassert the transformative foundations of higher education. Instead, I follow Slavoj Žižek's assertion that – contrary to Marx's 'Thesis 11' – the purpose of philosophy (and of social theory) in an age in which critical activity is subsumed into the dominant order is to ask the right questions rather than leap into ineffective conclusions (Žižek 2006b, p.238). That is, if the administrative response to Mary Evans' (2005) claim that 'critical thinking is dead, we need more critical thinking' is to point to the stated values of the institution and the presence of criticality in the correspondent graduate attributes as evidence of its agreement, it is necessary to attempt to reframe the debate to allow for a questioning of the conditions under which criticality is allowed to exist.

Vitally, university life explicitly allows the space for this challenge to occur. Like both late-capitalism and liberal democracy, the excitation of subversive thought in universities allows for disruption to occur before it is integrated into the system. Yet, where Jameson had argued that culture is entirely infused with the commodity form, by existing outside of the (explicit) demand for profit,

universities offer spaces for critical engagement beyond that allowed in the employment-focused and assessment-driven curriculum. For every 'career fair' and 'Ready for Work, Ready for Life' programme (Brunel University 2015) there is a radical symposium or conversation between peers outside of the classroom (whether between lecturers or students or both) and, indeed, papers on the limitations of critical thinking.

The key for critical pedagogies is to detach this energy from the mechanisms within which it is currently contained. When this containment comes in the form of open encouragement, the politics of critical pedagogy should be to accept this invitation while rejecting the framework within which it is offered; we must use the freedoms we are granted to ask questions that cannot be accounted for within this space. If universities provide lecturers and students with the freedom to ask critical questions, our primary question should be, 'What is critical about the critical thinking you are offering?'

Notes

[1] 'Public' university is a reference to the distinction in the US between private and publically funded institutions. This paper will specifically focus on higher education in the UK where the vast majority of universities are publically funded.

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