

Pedagogy of the Privileged: Elite Universities and Dialectical Contradictions in the UK

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Abstract

This paper considers the role and function of Left academics within ‘elite’ (i.e. Russell Group) universities within the UK. Deploying Marxist theory and critical realism, it analyses the ‘dialectical contradictions’ experienced in such a role and reflects upon productive strategies for resisting the hegemony of neo-liberalism within those milieus.

Keywords: Pedagogy of the Privileged, Elite Universities, Critical Realism, Dialectical Contradiction, Hegemony, Resistance

Introduction

This paper deals with a dilemma – what it characterises as a ‘dialectical contradiction’ – which is rarely addressed within the literatures upon critical pedagogy within higher education and/or, following Gramsci (1971), the ‘role and function’ of Left academics. That contradiction may be succinctly stated. Elite universities historically reproduce class power and privilege – in the sense given by Pierre Bourdieu (2011) that they structurally reproduce the ‘forms of capital’ – yet they offer themselves, also, as sites of struggle and critical pedagogy. The contradiction arises insofar as these twin imperatives appear incompatible – we cannot, it would seem, simultaneously herald the role of the Left academic within an elite university milieu as *both* emancipatory *and* class power-preserving. Our purpose, however, is not to resolve a dialectical contradiction but, rather, to show how it may be ‘lived’, as a ‘lived experience’ (see Harvie, 2006, p.12) of contradiction, under conditions which, to paraphrase Marx (1937), we have to take responsibility for, although they are not of our choosing. The

paper contributes, therefore, to a little-researched phenomenon: the role and function of Left academics within elite university milieus. The periodization covers the UK towards the end of the New Labour administration (2007-10) and the beginning of the current Tory-led coalition (2010-13). In terms of academic disciplinarity, the focus is upon the social sciences.

The paper is structured in the following way. The next section sketches some empirical features of elite universities in the contemporary UK. It then develops the concept of ‘dialectical contradiction’, first in terms of Roy Bhaskar’s Marxism (2008) but, second, in terms of recent developments emanating from the critical realism of Dave Elder-Vass. A final section pulls together the theoretical and empirical strands in an attempt to make sense, not of the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ in the terms of Paolo Freire (1970), but, on the contrary, its diametrically opposed dialectic – the ‘pedagogy of the privileged’ in the context of elite university milieus.

Elite Universities in the UK

Although the historical analysis of elite universities and their role in the reproduction of power elites can be addressed only, as Giddens and Stansworth (1974, p.20) observed, via the compilation of longitudinal data, the empirical evidence remains robustly resilient.

Notwithstanding the utility of Trow’s (2012) well-known thesis that higher education in the twentieth century followed a trajectory from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ to ‘universal’ provision, the power of institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge has persisted into the new millennium. In recent years this power has been couched in policy-relevant terms as erecting barriers to social mobility, reproducing long-lived patterns of social exclusion and vitiating the progressive effects of ‘widening participation’ strategies as aspects of neo-liberal governance. In this latter respect, two recent interventions are especially germane:

First, *Unleashing Aspiration: the Final Report on Fair Access to the Professions* (Milburn, A, 2009) – an off-shoot of the then Labour government’s 2009 White Paper *New Opportunities* (HM Government, 2009) on social inequalities and social mobility – re-affirmed that, ‘[s]ocial class has, and remains, a strong determinant of participation in higher education, and this gap has not closed substantially in the last half century’ whilst simultaneously emphasising that the ‘social gap is most acute at selective universities’. Interestingly, the elite institutions cited were not just the usual Oxbridge suspects but, more expansively, the ‘world

centres of research excellence of the Russell Group'.¹ Obviously, the *raison d'être* of *Unleashing Aspiration* is the linkage between higher education and, more generally, schooling, and the sorts of non-precarious professions (medicine, the law, tenured academia etc.) that secure bourgeois status. In this latter respect the report's conclusion is salutary:

'Britain remains too much a closed shop society...And most alarmingly of all there is strong evidence...that the UK's professions have become more, not less, socially exclusive over time...The data we have seen suggests that tomorrow's professional is today growing up in a family richer than seven in ten of all families in the UK' (p. 6).

Second, the Sutton Trust's² report, *Widening Access to Selective Universities* (2011) substantially buttresses the findings of *Unleashing Aspiration* as we move further into the millennium:

'The proportion of non-privileged students at the UK's most academically selective universities remains depressingly low...Government Performance Indicators in 2002/03, for example, showed that one in five young degree entrants to Russell Group institutions were from the four lower class groups, compared with 28% of students in universities as a whole, and one in two of the wider population. These proportions were essentially unchanged in 2007/08' (p. 6).

Substantively, there are two points to make about these observations. First, in empirical terms, that they need to be illuminated in their historical specificity – the deterministic imaginary of an Oxbridge 'sausage-machine' churning out senior civil servants and judges to order is by no means wholly correct. For instance, in Williams and Filippakou's (2010) quantitative analysis of the establishment's premier directory, A & C Black's *Who's Who*, throughout the twentieth century, an evolutionary shift is detected - the Oxbridge 'machine' being, not supplanted, but, rather, augmented by the Russell Group institutions. Thus, in order to symbolise the contemporary pattern of elite power reproduction in the UK we need to reach, not for the image of a pyramid with an Oxbridge apex but, rather, as Williams and Filippakou contend, 'a series of concentric circles in which elite institutions remain at the centre, but are surrounded by increasingly wide bands of universities...that are less and less likely to set graduates on the road to elite status the further they are from the centre'.

The second point is familiarly Bourdieusian. As has often been observed, to analyse the reproduction of power elites is synonymous with the analysis of the reproduction of the 'forms of capital'. Recent commentators differ in the stress they place upon specific instantiations of capital: elite universities, for instance, signify cultural capital, by means of

‘performative magic’ (Bourdieu, 2011) – in the form of, at least, a 2:1 degree or a ‘first’, which functions as a credential – whilst endowing already privileged young adults with the requisite symbolic prestige (Williams and Filippakou, 2010). But as Bourdieu’s own formulation makes plain, it is not only the possession of discrete forms of capital that counts but, rather, the *accumulation* of capital in its economic, cultural, social and symbolic forms, which secures the structural reproduction of power. In this respect elite universities function, in Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) terminology as a ‘nodal point’ in the process of such reproduction, as they tend to embody *in situ* all the forms of capital under the imprimatur of symbol and ritual: the degree congregation, the be-gowned formal dinner, the framed parchment of academic achievement etc.

Although it is sometimes claimed that such a ‘reproduction’ theory fails to translate beyond the idiosyncrasies of the French educational system, we would say that it travels effectively over the Channel providing we recognise the ‘Russell Group/concentric circles’ thesis noted above. The more substantial rejoinder is the well-rehearsed structural determinism thought to be immanent to the theory. Despite the fact that the allegation has become something of a truism within Bourdieusian scholarship, it remains of relevance here provided it is contextualised for the paper’s purpose. For structural determinism rears its head precisely to the extent that in the class power-preserving milieu of the elite university, the agency of the Left academic would seem to be something of a logical as well as a ‘lived contradiction’ (see Cresswell and Spandler, 2012). As we provisionally argued, elite universities historically reproduce class power and privilege, yet they simultaneously offer themselves as sites of struggle and critical pedagogy. If this is correct, the question next then must be: what could the agency of critical pedagogy mean within such an environment? We address this question via the resources of critical realism.

Dialectical Contradictions

Space restricts discussion of two such contentious concepts within the Marxist tradition as ‘dialectic’ and ‘contradiction’ – we will be content to provide an abbreviated account drawn from the ‘dialectical critical realism’ of Roy Bhaskar. This has the merit of being rooted firmly within Marxist theory whilst being simultaneously sensitised to the multifarious semantics of the concepts noted above.

As Bhaskar (2008, p. 66) remarks, the concept of ‘dialectic’ possesses a metaphorical, as well as a scientific rendition, referring to an oscillation between forces which may or may not ascend to synthesis. The Marxist canon canvasses a bewildering array of candidate forces ranging from the epistemological (the oscillation between the ‘abstract’ and the ‘concrete’ in thought) to the ontological (the distinction between the ‘forces’ and the ‘relations of production’ as the essence of capitalist social formations). Likewise, the concept of ‘contradiction’ has been extensively treated, most influentially, perhaps, by Mao Zedong (2009). But we wanted to advance the following propositions derived from a simplification of Bhaskar. Thus, dialectical contradictions may:

1. Exist *internal* to a social system such that they place agents within that system in the situation of a ‘double-bind’, as expressed in the colloquial phrase, ‘we’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t!’ More technically, Bhaskar formulates it like this:

‘[a]n internal contradiction is... a *double-bind*... In this case a system, agent or structure S, is *blocked* from performing with one system, rule or principle, R, because it is performing with another, R*...’ (ibid., original emphasis).
2. But dialectical contradictions simultaneously imply the presence of ‘opposition’, ‘antagonism’, or ‘struggle’ (ibid, p. 59) – the oscillation of ‘forces’ noted above – so that any understanding of the process of such contradictions is predicated also upon a theorisation of power. Hence, Bhaskar advances an admixture of sociological theories of structure-agency interaction together with a Foucault-inflected ‘analytics’ of power-relations. He therefore distinguishes between Power#1 – the transformative power of agents and groups – and Power#2: ‘relations expressed in structures of domination... and control, which I will thematize as *generalized master-slave... relations*’ (ibid.: 60, original emphasis). But the apparent gesture in a Hegelian direction is in fact ground through Foucault’s theoretical mill to the extent that the master-slave relations embodied in a dialectical contradiction ‘are seldom completely one-sided and always potentially reversible – as in Foucauldian counter-conduct or strategic-reversal’ (ibid.). As Bhaskar adds, in a Foucauldian vein: ‘Power#1 includes Power#2’ (ibid.).
3. Nevertheless, contra Foucault, for Bhaskar, the dialectic remains unambiguously material and potentially subject to transformative political praxis in accordance with a Marxist theory of embodied action. Thus, through a process of dialectical contradiction, to paraphrase Marx, we may make history (Power#1), although not in circumstances of our choosing (Power#2) insofar as transformative praxis is

predicated upon a political analysis which ‘takes agents to the point where immanent critique registering theory-practice inconsistencies is possible’ (ibid., p. 62) - and it follows, therefore, that so too is effective resistance to Power (#2). In effect, the potentiality of transformative praxis is predicated upon a collective movement of thought whereby Power#1 increasingly registers its ideology-critique of Power#2 whilst simultaneously practicing a ‘reflexive auto-critique’ (Cresswell and Spandler, 2012) vis-à-vis its own potential for action.

At this point, Bhaskar’s meta-theoretical system becomes most fully revealing once transposed back into a politically relevant empirical field. For it is only then that the relations obtaining between dialectical contradictions and transformative praxis fully swing into view. So, pursuing this line of analysis:

1. The dialectical contradiction we canvass presents itself in the first place as internal to an elite system of higher education in which complicity in the reproduction of capital places the Left academic in a double-bind. In terms of Bhaskar’s formulation, their agency is blocked by precisely the structural features flagged up by the Russell Group/concentric circles thesis plus the neo-liberal dictates of contemporary research governance. Teaching thus becomes bureaucratised by the relentless protocols of the individualised ‘student experience’; research impact becomes dominated by what Carlen (2012) has called ‘the pursuit of an imaginary relevance’.
2. This double-bind is constituted by the complex dialectics of Power#1 and Power#2 characteristic of elite milieus. This takes the form of a series of ‘antagonisms’ between the Left academic vis-à-vis:
 - the *student body* (Power#2), which is primarily bourgeois and expectant of the ‘performative magic’ attendant upon the credential of, at least, the 2:1 degree;
 - the *institutional bureaucracy* (Power#2), with its ‘soft’ but inexorable disciplinary mechanisms (see Courpasson and Clegg, 2006) of the National Student Survey (NSS), Research Evaluation Framework (REF), ‘transparency reviews’ (see Harvie, 2006, p. 15) plus career progression seductions etc.;
 - *trade unions and social movements* (Power#1), which may harbour suspicion of the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘elite’ academic, but to which the latter are, nevertheless, irrevocably aligned.

3. The upshot of the above is that the Left academic within elite academia – apparently slung between the ‘rock’ of Power#1, on the one hand, and the ‘hard place’ of Power#2, on the other – really is, to all appearances, ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’. Such determinism, however, serves only to elide the possibilities of agency and transformative praxis which inheres in their role. In other words, what we need now to consider is how Left academics may preserve that potential even though they are stuck in a double-bind. In pursuing that purpose, the next section augments Bhaskar’s Marxism with recent developments initiated within the critical realism of Dave Elder-Vass.

Norm Circles of Resistance

We will persist with the schema of Power#1 (the transformative praxis of individuals and groups) and Power#2 (structures of domination and control) whilst being always mindful, as Bhaskar points out, that Power#1 includes Power#2. But how are we to specify this in terms of an interaction between transformative praxis (Left academics) and elite reproduction (pedagogy which re-circulates capital)? With this question in mind, we turn to Elder-Vass’s theory of the ‘norm circle’.

In addressing the sociological problematic of structure and agency in an ‘ontologically rigorous’ (ibid, p. 6) way, Elder-Vass offers the view that ‘social structure is best understood as the causal powers of social groups...it is specific groups of people who have social structural power’. Here, his critical realism expresses itself in the way he both preserves the agency of individuals whilst, nevertheless, providing a persuasive rendition of structure. On this reading, social structure is itself an emergent property of the transformative praxis of individuals and groups, although, contra methodological individualism, it is never reducible to them. At the same time, Elder-Vass’s critical realism differs from Bhaskar’s to the extent that a Durkheimian *moral* imperative to ‘follow-a-rule’ sounds through in the former much more loudly than does the Hegelian dialectic of ‘master’ and ‘slave’. Hence, Elder-Vass coins the concept of the ‘norm circle’ to denote the rule-following and/or rule-resisting praxis of groups the emergent properties of which constitute the ‘normative institutions’ of social structure.

To provide a relevant example: if the Vice Chancellors (VCs) of the Russell Group constitute a norm circle – we know that they periodically meet face-to-face and that they are resourced via a secretariat - then the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology as instantiated, say, in the REF, constitutes an emergent normative institution. This analysis assumes that norm circles intersect with other norm circles (e.g. of the State) to form interlocking networks of power-elites. On the other hand, if the Left academics associated with the Hill/Cole Group (HCG)³ (see Hill, 2004) and the Institute for Education Policy Studies (IEPS)⁴ also constitute a norm circle, then the transformative praxis of anti-capitalism/globalisation together with *its* interlocking networks (trade unions, social movements etc.) constitute that power-elite's 'alter'. Hence, we can see how, as Bhaskar observes, Power#1 includes Power#2, but in nuanced ways: for, in the former example (VCs), the power-preserving praxis of a norm circle (Power#1), which already *includes* Power#2 insofar as VCs are already a power-elite, systematically polices the 'rules-of-the-academic-game' thus securing the reproduction of capital; whilst, in the latter example (HCG/IEPS), the transformative praxis of a norm circle (Power#1) attempts, instead, to resist and radicalise Power#2, to subvert and revolutionise its re-circulation. Ultimately, therefore, the sense in which Power#1 includes Power#2 depends upon whether the praxis of a norm circle attempts to reproduce or transform the latter and upon the decisions to this end it collectively makes about alliance-formation. It is for this reason that we have sought to append to Elder-Vass's notion of the 'norm circle' the subsidiary notions of the 'Hegemonic Norm Circle' (HNC) (e.g. VCs) and the 'Norm Circle of Resistance' (NCR) (e.g. HCG/IEPS) defined in terms of their possession of and differential orientation to Power#2 (see Brock, 2012). The effect is to turn Elder-Vass's Durkheim-inflected theory in a more Marxist direction whilst retaining its significant rule-following/rule-resisting dimensions and, so, to construct a critical realist amalgam between Bhaskar and Elder-Vass.

The theory of the norm circle, in addition, possesses further explanatory value. For, in finessing his classification of norm circles, Elder-Vass also carefully distinguishes between:

1. *Proximal* Norm Circles – those relations of solidarity with individuals with which we have face-to-face contact (and/or contact mediated by information and communication technologies [ICT]);
2. *Actual* Norm Circles – the total empirical population (the 'constituency') of any given political formation;

3. *Imagined* Norm Circles - the ideological underpinnings of any political formation plus the ‘imagined community’ (i.e. ‘utopia’⁵) which sustains them.

So, pursuing the practical example of the Hill/Cole Group/Institute of Education Policy Research (HCG/IEPR), qua Norm Circle of Resistance (NCR):

1. The *proximal* norm circle is constituted materially of the de facto members of HCR/IEPS;
2. The *actual* norm circle is constituted of the total population of academics/teachers in higher education – more broadly, in education/schooling generally;
3. The *imagined* norm circle is constituted of the beliefs and values of democratic socialism plus the utopian imaginary which sustains them.

Finally, the above analysis begs an obvious question. If what we are seeking is an *amalgam* of Bhaskar/Elder-Vass, how is the concept of dialectical contradiction imbricated with the theory of the norm circle - and vice versa? The answer is fairly straightforward once we recall that a central aspect of a dialectical contradiction, as we define it, is predicated upon the existence of antagonism and struggle – hence the theorisation of Powers#1 and #2. Always bearing in mind some of the nuances flagged up above (Power#1 *includes* Power#2), this corresponds, in our revisions of Elder-Vass to the subdivision of norm circles into Hegemonic Norm Circles (HNCs) and Norm Circles of Resistance (NCRs) – they exist in a relation of what Bhaskar (2008, pp. 56-72) defines as ‘dialectical *connection*’, which in the case of the Left academic in an elite university milieu manifests itself in a contradictory form (i.e. as a ‘double-bind’). This amalgam, therefore, posits the following theoretical frame:

1. The Left academic within elite academia finds themselves stuck in a double-bind. They experience a dialectical contradiction: seeking to pursue transformative praxis they are, nonetheless, complicit in the reproduction of capital;
2. The elite university is structured as a field of asymmetrical power-relations, consisting of: Power#1 and Power#2. Schematically, Power#1 is the transformative praxis of agents and groups - but we should note the caveat illustrated by the example above (VCs and HCG/IEPR) that where Power#1 is wielded by agents who already possess Power#2 the praxis is likely to be preservative of power rather than transformative. Only rarely, in contingent historical circumstances, do norm circles surrender

- Power#2 when they already possess it. Power#2 emerges structurally from the exercise of Power#1 and signifies master-slave relations of domination and control.
3. Power#1 is wielded by rule-governed/rule-resisting norm circles of which we can classify two: Hegemonic Norm Circles (HNCs) already possess Power#2 and wield Power#1 preservatively; Norm Circles of Resistance (NCRs) are only aspirationally connected to Power#2 which they attempt, through transformative praxis, to subvert, radicalise, revolutionise.
 4. Empirically, and in terms of sociological research programmes, we can study three dimensions of norm circles:
 - The *proximity* of individuals in terms of physical co-presence or via ICT mediations;
 - The *actual* population of those individuals who *would* support and endorse the proximal norm circle (i.e. its ‘constituency’);
 - The *imagined* aspects, including ideologies, values and belief systems, which in the case of NCRs may be democratic socialist and contain utopian visions.

This, then, is the theoretical framework we wish to deploy in considering the dialectical contradictions of the Left academic. With this framework in tow, we return, in the final section, to our original questions. How may the Left academic ‘live’ the contradictions they confront in elite academia? What could the agency of critical pedagogy look like within such a milieu? And, now, given the posited theoretical frame, what is the form a Norm Circle of Resistance (NCR) might take within the context of the elite university? What, finally, do we mean by the phrase, the ‘pedagogy of the privileged’?

Pedagogy of the Privileged

The phrase, the ‘pedagogy of the privileged’ possesses a double referent. In the first place, it refers to the student body, which is primarily bourgeois, and includes all the usual pedagogical elements which we may narrowly conceive as critical pedagogy. It should, however, go without saying that critical pedagogy is simultaneously conceived in its more expansive sense - as concerned with resisting the reproduction of capital and power elites. Obviously, this is as much concerned with activism outside of the university as it is inside it. But, in the second place, the ‘pedagogy of the privileged’ also references the pedagogy *of* – i.e. delivery *by*, the privileged – insofar as the tenured academic enjoys a position of relative

privilege vis-à-vis the labour force generally. The pedagogy of the privileged, therefore, may be defined in terms of relationships with the student body (e.g. critical pedagogy) but also in terms of the, increasingly precarious and intensified, neo-liberal academic labour process (pay, conditions, pensions, bureaucracy, new public management, human resources, research governance etc.) which surround them. There exist, therefore, three axes of antagonism (and/or solidarity) along which the pedagogy of the privileged may be analysed: in terms of 1) the student body; 2) the institutional bureaucracy; 3) trade unions and social movements. Each is now considered in turn.

1. The *student body* is a key component of any effective Norm Circle of Resistance (NCR) in elite universities. This might sound counter-intuitive given that the central thrust of the pedagogy of the privileged thesis concerns the reproduction of *their* accumulated capital. However, modifying Entwistle (2005), we maintain that there is nothing whatsoever to be gained through an orientation based upon ‘blaming the student’ for their own privilege – it personifies a problem that is structurally caused. Moreover, it elides the significant contribution bourgeois radicals have always played within activism on the Left, partly because of what Crossley (2008) has called the potentially ‘politicising effects of campus connections’, but, also, because it is simply an aspect of economic *realpolitik* that the reproduction of capital, when productively aligned to critical pedagogy, creates future ‘resource mobilisation’ (see McCarthy and Zald, 1977) opportunities for social movements. The key phrase here, of course, is ‘when aligned to critical pedagogy’. It is for this reason that the teaching of undergraduates/postgraduates plus PhD supervisions are so significant in elite milieus. This has definite ramifications for the pedagogy of the social sciences including that of the human service professions (nurses, teachers, social workers etc.). Adapting Burawoy’s (2005) well-known typology of the sociologist qua intellectual, we would say that there are two pitfalls facing the Left academic aspiring to critical pedagogy. The first is the modish obsession with theory-lite social policy ‘impact’ in which the social scientist occupies the role of ‘knowledge-worker’ for a ‘client’, sometimes the central State, wielding Power#2. But the second is its diametrical opposite: the retreat into post-modern obscurantism – what E.P. Thompson, polemicising against Althusser, once dubbed ‘theoretical imperialism’ – in which, the concrete elements of the dialectic are cut adrift amidst a sea of indulgent abstraction (see Cresswell, 2013). Critical pedagogy in the social sciences, trafficking dialectically between its concrete

and its abstract dimensions, seeks to inculcate in students the praxis of ideology-critique – and this for the simple reason that, as Marx (1959, p. 570) pointed out, ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’. Mainstream media representations of news events are one obvious example of this ideological chasm and also the real reason why neo-conservatives hate the sub-discipline of ‘Media Studies’. Marx’s insight, therefore, remains as relevant in the case of the elite university milieu as it is for the rest of social reality.

Returning to Elder-Vass’s typology of norm circles, we would say that the student body qua element of the NCR, possesses *proximal*, *actual* and *utopian* elements. *Proximally*, the day-to-day, face-to-face and ICT-mediated contact with students is crucial for the Left academic - for their dedication to students remains the sine qua non of a productive NCR. Moreover, we place a particular emphasis on the role of ICT in the form of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), notwithstanding well-known critiques to the effect that it constitutes a ‘class-technology-from-above’ for transforming critical intellectuals into subservient ‘knowledge-workers’ (see Pavlidis, 2012). We are inspired here by the use of ICT in anti-globalisation/anti-capitalist activism post-9/11 (i.e. the ‘movement of movements’ [see Cox and Nilssen, 2007]) in the form of ‘Techno-Political Tools’ (TPTs) (see Wainright et al, 2008). We treat the concept of TPTs, delivered via digital platforms, as normatively neutral, not subordinate to processes of technological determinism, and, therefore, deployable to augment the agency of the Left academic. What is being supplemented here is precisely the capacity to *network* dialogically with the student body – singly and en masse – so that the functioning of the proximal NCR becomes effectively a form of TPT-mediated ‘network politics’ and a crucial component of critical pedagogy.

Topically, the *actual* norm circle – the total empirical population of students in the UK (the NCRs ‘constituency’) – exists against the backdrop of neo-liberal hegemony including league tabling, ballooning fees, student indebtedness, student protest etc. Such a large constituency is one of the reasons why the Left academic’s activism is orientated as much outside as inside the university. Here, fee-hikes and the ‘market-driven politics’ (see Leys, 2003) of higher education, more generally the public sector, is a critical theatre of struggle. This observation, though, raises the thorny issue of the role and function of the National Union of Students (NUS) - qua component of the

NCR. Whilst we concede that the actuality of the NUS is ambivalent – its role as a ‘finishing school’ for New Labour politicians is well attested (e.g. Roberts, 2001) – its existence illustrates perfectly the empirical imbrication of Elder-Vass’s *proximal*, *actual* and *imaginary* norm circles. For, whatever its imperfections, the NUS retains two potentialities: first, the sheer size of its actual constituency – because, as Lenin once said, ‘politics is where the masses are’ (in Carr, 1964) – but, second, the *utopian* ‘political imaginaries’ of the Left and social movements which surround the praxis of student protest itself. Historical events such as ‘Mai’ 68’ in Paris plus, to give a more recent example from the UK, the occupation of the Tory HQ at Millbank Tower on 10/11/10, function as what Crossley (1999) calls a ‘working utopia’ – a cognitive reservoir of ideology and praxis which, existing as acts of collective remembrance, inspire and animate future protests to come. The final argument as to why the NUS should be a part of the NCR within elite milieus is the danger of right-wing elements of the student ‘habitus’ disaffiliating and, thereby, repudiating the principle of universality upon which democratic socialism depends.

2. The *institutional bureaucracy* poses a related but different threat: how NCRs within an elite university may be constructed in a milieu so thoroughly pervaded by neo-liberalism and new public management. That the question posed is one of *bureaucracy* – and not just of marketisation - arises insofar as, contra the arguments of 1980s ‘new managerialists’, new public management is not antithetical to bureaucracy but, rather, exists alongside it like an ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’.

Courpasson (2000) coined the term “‘soft’ bureaucracy’ to refer to an institutional process whereby Power#2, in the form of bureaucratic hegemony, constitutes ‘an ambivalent structure of governance, within which domination is not essentially exerted by means of...violence, direct punishment, or local hierarchical supervision, but through sophisticated managerial strategies’ (ibid.: 142). Two illustrations exemplify ‘soft’ bureaucracy in action:

- First, academic governance and National Health Service (NHS) research. Given the recent findings of the Francis Report⁶ into the failings of NHS care, independent research into the patient’s experience of services, even covert research (see Calvey, 2008), has become more than ever significant – yet the bureaucratic obstacles placed in the path of the would-be researcher have increased exponentially. The main culprit is the unwieldy process of securing ethical approval to research NHS ‘human

subjects', including those receiving health services in prison environments (see Ward, 2012). Despite the fact that most social science research in such settings involves well-developed methodologies and the professional ethics of, say, the British Sociological Association (BSA) is well-established, the computerised ethics pro-forma runs to 30 pages and takes up to 12 months to wind its way to Research Ethics Committee (REC) approval – if, indeed, it ever does. It is little wonder that researchers either shelve projects prematurely or else turn to methodologies (e.g. textual analysis) which circumvent the bureaucratic procedures entirely (see Dingwall, 2008) yet fail to disclose the subjectivity of the patient-experience. This is 'soft', rather than 'tough', bureaucracy because there is no direct coercion involved – the pressure emanates entirely from within faceless bureaucratic procedures for which no single person, in Kafkaesque fashion, is ever responsible.

- Second, the plethora of protocols which surrounds the act of teaching itself. There are too many of these to explicate here but De Angelis and Harvie (2009, p. 10) have captured well the sheer workload burden of these minutiae-piled-upon-minutiae mechanisms. In the context of teaching preparation and delivery, an academic is now subjected to the following 'surveillance and standardisation' techniques:

'For each module, the 'module leader' (i.e., lecturer) must complete various paperwork, in particular a 'module specification' (at the module's start) which lists the module's 'aims and objectives'... 'modes and methods of assessment'... and a 'module review' document... Across a degree programme as a whole (say BA [Hons] Economics) this information is collated into two important documents with similar structures. First, a 'programme specification', which will include the module specs for all of a programme's constituent modules, plus rationale for the degree as a whole, its overall 'aims and objectives' and learning outcomes, and an inventory of the resources (academic staff, library and other facilities, etc.) available to 'deliver' the programme. Second, annual programme reports, which collate module reviews and summarise overall performance of a cohort of students, in terms of 'progression rates', 'withdrawal rates', location and spread of marks, etc... Before any degree programme can be offered, it must be 'validated'. The validation process involves scrutiny of the 'programme specification' and/or a 'validation document' by both committees internal to the university and, at a final validation meeting, a panel which will include two or three external validators. These scrutineers will judge the proposed degree on the basis of its internal consistency...'

This litany represents a classic case of 'soft' bureaucracy simply because, as Courpasson remarks, there is no gun pressed against the temple of the academic but, rather a 'drip, drip, drip' of Power#2 to the forehead, in the form of surveillance/control. Yet, Power#2 includes

Power#1 precisely to the extent that the *proximal* norm circles which police ‘soft’ bureaucracy manifests ambivalent forms of critical and, potentially at least, transformative agency. For this analysis, however, everything turns upon the empirical identities of such proximal norm circles. Who are their members? What are their functions and roles? We classify four ‘ideal-types’:

1. University managers (Professorial academics) at faculty level and above.
2. Departmental managers – senior academics (Heads of Schools, Directors of Education etc.) tasked specifically with pedagogical delivery and research governance.
3. Formal bureaucrats (administrators, programme secretaries etc.) who initiate an audit trail – De Angelis and Harvie’s litany sketched out above – then place it under surveillance.
4. Lecturers and ‘precarious’ teachers (e.g. postgraduate teaching assistants) who labour daily on the ‘shop-floor’.

This typology allows us to finesse Elder-Vass’s theory of the ‘norm circle’. For it is empirically obvious that none of the four types noted above belongs definitively, a priori, in either the HNC or, alternatively, the NCR. The extremes of the spectrum (Types #1 and #4.) are the simplest to analyse. But even here there are nuances. As we have shown above, Vice-Chancellors (VCs) (Type#1) are unequivocally members of the HNC, wielding and reproducing Power#2. But what about the formerly Left-wing academic, now risen to a high-ranking, research governance role? It may be that, long ago, she ‘enrolled’ in Type#4. and still intra-psychically harbours the political imaginary – the ‘imagined’ norm circle in Elder-Vass’s terminology - that belongs with the NCR. Or: what about the Left-leaning, but ambitious, post-graduate teaching assistant close to completion of a PhD, or the ‘precarious’ contract researcher who understandably aspires to tenure? These examples illustrate two analytical motifs: first that HNCs and NCRs may cross-cut and overlap each other in unpredictable ways such that it is empirically possible to be *both* a member of a HNC for *one* purpose and an NCR for *another*; and, related to this point, it is possible to ‘live’ a dialectical contradiction between one’s external behaviour - say, the Type#2 Head of School outwardly ‘toing the faculty line’ – and one’s internal psychical commitment to an ‘imagined’ community. This is simply the intra-psychical dimension of Bhaskar’s definition of the contradiction:

‘[a]n internal contradiction is...a *double-bind*...In this case a system, agent or structure S, is *blocked* from performing with one system, rule or principle, R, because it is performing with another, R*...’.

Thus, it proves to be the case that dialectical contradictions and their characteristic double-binds are not unique to the Left academic in elite milieus but may traverse the typology sketched out above. This has ramifications for alliance-formation and NCRs. For it is undoubtedly true that, in contingent historical circumstances – say, in pursuing campaigns for ‘widening participation’ or against ‘cuts’ – the constituent members of an NCR may be heterogeneous, traverse typologies#1 through #4, and evince diverse ‘double binds’ which may be, nevertheless, strategically useful. It follows from this that NCRs, in the context of practical struggles, must be neither closed caucuses nor consist solely of ultra-radicals.

Two further refinements may be made to the theory of the NCR vis-à-vis the institutional bureaucracy. The first concerns those intra-psychical double binds faced by Types#3 and #4 – senior academics-cum-managers at departmental level and above. Here we would identify two psychological sub-types for dealing with these double binds. The first may be called the Stepford Wives Syndrome (SWS), after Bryan Forbes’ well-known movie *The Stepford Wives* (1975).⁷ In SWS the individual attempts to obliterate the double bind through an agential act of will: if the contradiction manifests itself as a dislocation between intra-psychical state (a ‘political imaginary’) and external behaviour (toing the faculty line, say, at a departmental Board of Studies) then the agential act attempts to obliterate the ‘offending’ intra-psychical state in its entirety. Thus, external behaviour and intra-psychical state outwardly coincide – but only at the cost of a habitually ‘robotic’ demeanour. Such senior academics-cum-managers, however, may still be of strategic value to NCRs, in the context of specific struggles, either through the mobilisation of their entrepreneurialism, or else, in the improbable but possible circumstance of a ‘Road-to-Damascus’ experience.

The second psychological sub-type is more subtle than SWS – it is, in fact, an elite university manifestation of what Slavoj Žižek (1989) dubs ‘cynical ideology’: an ideological form and an intra-psychical state which is no longer characterised, as in the case of classical Marxism, by mystification but, instead, by resigned acquiescence. Following Bhaskar (also Fisher, 2009), we would define this as a TINA Compromise-Solution (TCS), where TINA, as is well known, stands for There Is No Alternative to capitalism, or, in the context which occupies us here, neo-liberal penetration of higher education. In marked contrast to the automatism

characteristic of SWS, the senior academic-cum-manager manifesting TCS is decidedly 'cool'. The intra-psychical referent of the 'imagined community' is not obliterated this time but is, on the contrary, outwardly flaunted. Thus, the characteristic demeanour of TCS is not that of a robot but, rather, that of a nod-and-a-wink and a shrug-of-the-shoulders, where the wink cynically signifies, 'I know what's really going on here, (e.g. that we're not *really* widening participation to the working class)', whilst the shrug-of-the-shoulders simultaneously concedes, 'But what can we do?!' TCS, we would argue, is pervasive within elite academia - precisely because it *is* a 'cool' resolution of the double-bind. All the same, like SWS, TCS is not devoid of strategic potential for the NCR on account of the fact that the compromise-solution itself represents a species of what Bhaskar terms 'theory-practice inconsistencies' for which the wink and the shrug signify, for example, the following phrase e.g. 'In principle, of course, I'm against dismantling the Media Studies programme, but, in practice, it's been decided at faculty, so what can we do?!' The detection of theory-practice inconsistencies, for Bhaskar, is a significant aspect of transformative praxis and a contextual specification of ideology-critique: their exposure and transcendence is always a critical function of the NCR.

It remains, finally, for this section to elucidate the role and function of Type#3 – those personnel that formally occupy the 'bureaucrat' role (departmental administrators, programme secretaries etc.), These are the workers that 'oil' the institutional 'cogs'. A long tradition on the Left holds up the 'bureaucrat', as Beetham (1996) remarks, as the figure we all 'love to hate', as the embodiment of the 'banality of evil' (Arendt, 1977) or as having been prescribed and willingly imbibed a 'moral sleeping pill' (Bauman, 1989). But in the context of the elite university such hyperbole seems wide of the mark. We far prefer the nuanced analyses provided by, respectively, Lefort (1986, 1988) and Du Gay (2000) for which the function of the bureaucrat in neo-liberal societies must be parcelled out from those in state-socialist and totalitarian ones; whilst a certain 'ethos of office' – in classic Weberian fashion – should still be accorded the role. Weber's original point, which Du Gay's analysis tends to endorse, was that the role of the bureaucrat was constitutionally *ambivalent*: it was, at one and the same time, necessary for the functioning of modern, complex democracies on account of its efficacy, whilst it, nevertheless, because of a relentless reification of calculable rationality, imprisons us within the 'unintended consequences' of its 'iron cage'. The point, then, which will be further developed in the final section, is not a blanket condemnation of bureaucracy and bureaucrats but a resistance to its hyper-inflation and its subordination to

managerial control. As we shall see, this resistance has ramifications for the role of *trade unions* within elite universities and, in particular, strategies of productive *industrial action*.

3) *Trade unions and social movements*. Picking up on this last thread, we take it as axiomatic that industrial action is both an integral feature of a flourishing democracy and a strategic challenge for the Left academic facing dialectical contradictions. But just as the relationship of the NCR to the student body led us to the ‘thorny’ issue of the role and function of the NUS, so the question of the contemporary neo-liberal labour process inevitably leads to the question of the efficacy of the University and College Union (UCU) - the academic’s trade union in the UK. In this respect Mark Fisher’s recent remarks on both the potentialities and limitations of the ‘strike weapon’ in higher education are replete with what Brown (2000) has called ‘perils and possibilities’.

Fisher contends that the ‘strike weapon’ should be considered defunct in terms of higher education on account of the lack of ‘constituency’ it finds amongst both tenured and ‘precarious’ workers. In the main he is referencing the purely symbolic function of the *one-day strike* as a mostly meaningless form of industrial action which is, paradoxically, also the maximal form of protest most academics seem willing to take. In terms of our theoretical framework, this analysis assumes that the *proximal* norm circles of an NCR are radically dislocated both from the *actual* norm circle of a wider ‘constituency’ and the ‘imagined community’ of historical trade union consciousness (see Thompson, 1963). This is the rationale Fisher deploys in arguing against strikes and, instead, for a strategy of industrial action based upon the boycotting of hyper-inflated bureaucracy. Echoing the previously noted analyses of Courpasson and De Angelis and Harvie, the strategy is partially welcome:

‘in the case of teachers and lecturers, the tactic of strikes (or even of marking bans) should be abandoned, because they only hurt students and members... What is needed is the strategic withdrawal of forms of labour which will only be noticed by management: all of the machineries of self-surveillance that have no effect whatsoever on the delivery of education, but which managerialism could not exist without... it’s time that teaching unions got far more immanent, and take the opportunity opened up by the crisis to begin to rid public services of business ontology’ (Fisher, 2009, pp. 79-80).

Yet, there is a right and a wrong way to establish this point. If the ‘possibility’ it raises is of realistic and relevant action then we could not agree more. One-day strikes are only meaningful as part of a ‘rolling’ programme and recent ‘action-short-of-strike’ such as the lawful campaign of ‘working-to-contract’ in defence of pension rights (see UCU, 2011) was a

manifest failure, running aground upon the twin reefs of deficient trade union consciousness and the vagueness of the contract of academic employment. Clearly, a ‘work-to-rule’ in the public sector is not analogous to one within manufacturing and the withdrawal of ‘surplus value’ which the action entails requires an analysis that is sector-specific and transcends sloganeering. We agree, then, that bureaucracy should be a target for industrial action but, here, there are ‘perils’ as well as ‘possibilities’: for it would be naïve to conclude from this that ‘management’ (Types #4, #3 and #2 of our classification) would concede it, *pace* Fisher, as ‘having no effect whatsoever on the delivery of education’. Boycotts, like strikes, therefore, would have to be accompanied by what Bhaskar terms a ‘hermeneutic-hegemonic struggle’ over precisely *which* bureaucratic procedures are considered (un)necessary. For instance, it is hard to object to the compilation of seminar or tutorial registers as a means of monitoring student progression and identifying issues of pastoral concern; but a quite different matter is the duplication of such registers, under the dictates of the UK Border Agency, for purposes of immigration control (see UCU, 2009) for non-European Economic Area (EEA) students. Furthermore, Fisher’s injunction against ‘strikes’ and ‘bans’ – ‘because they only hurt students and members’ – seems, to us, fallacious. Leaving aside here the question of the ‘members’, the issue about whether industrial action ‘hurts’ students is a sub-species of the generic question of the ethics and efficacy of such action within the public sector and the human service professions (teachers, social workers, nurses etc.). In this respect, the higher education sector has a great deal to learn and Mckeown’s (2009) recent analysis, in particular, is salutary.

In emphasising a neglected but, nonetheless, historical ‘strand of militancy’ in *nursing* disputes within the NHS, Mckeown demonstrates the legitimacy and, sometimes, efficacy of industrial action up to and including strikes. Cox (2009), Cresswell (2009) and Mckeown, Cresswell and Spandler (2014) have likewise highlighted industrial action’s potential within local authority social services. Edwards (2007, 2008) has extended the analysis to primary and secondary schooling; also, to fire-fighters. What characterises these analyses is that none are gung-ho – they entirely recognise that the conditions of possibility of industrial action are contingent and multi-factorial. But if their analysis holds for these segments of the public sector – where the ethical issues consequent upon the withdrawal of labour are severely acute – why should it not hold for higher education, where they are not? Moreover, the thrust of these analyses stress *the* crucial factor which Fisher tends to elide: that actions-short-of-strike, including bureaucracy boycotts, marking bans etc. derive their ultimate force only via

the threat of strike action. And this must always be so because of the ever-present danger of management bullying – characteristically ‘soft’ in nature in elite academia – victimisation, docked-pay and ‘lock-outs’. The lesson, then, remains clear: Power#1 should never voluntarily disarm itself of the ‘strike weapon’ in the face of Power#2.

Mckeown’s analysis is also noteworthy for the way in which it eschews insularity – whilst strikes are countenanced it is never at the expense of alliance-formation between trade unions and *social movements*. Hence, following Sedgwick’s (1982) seminal work, Mckeown is sceptical both of a ‘workerist’ attitude amongst trade unionists – defensively concerned solely with their ‘terms and conditions’ – as well as the move to an exclusively ‘consumerist’ model of organisation which stresses the union as a ‘servicer’ of members’ individual needs (car insurance, holiday homes etc.). Instead, following the lead of Tattersall (2010) and Wills and Simms (2004), Mckeown advocates a move to ‘Reciprocal Community Trade Unionism’ (RCTU) in which public sector unionists proactively construct alliances between service users, the social movements which represent them, and workers. Spandler (2006), persuasively, has documented the historical efficacy of one such alliance.

So, the question remaining is this: can the transformative praxis of RCTU be transposed to higher education in general and elite universities in particular? What would the move towards such alliances mean for the constitution of NCRs? We argue that RCTU can and must so transfer but that the praxis which would support such a move must be sector-specific. We emphasise, in conclusion, three salient points:

- That the main social movement ‘constituency’ – the *actual* norm circle – is clearly the student movement. Here, we would reiterate the comments advanced under point 1. above – but would only add that RCTU is by definition reciprocal and this reciprocity needs to be embodied proximally and in praxis. This requires the painstaking work of alliance-formation at local and national levels – not just attempts to conjure alliances at crisis-points (see Mckeown, Spandler and Cresswell, 2008) - plus the constant groundwork of critical pedagogy and the inculcation of ideology-critique within a student body that remains primarily bourgeois. At the current historical juncture the quid pro quo of alliance politics is combatting, on the one hand, student fees and, on the other, academic workloads, including the boycotting of hyper-inflated bureaucracy noted above. Such alliances, though, in and of themselves, cannot erase the dialectical contradictions of the Left academic – they remain stuck in the double

bind of deploying critical agency in the service of democratic socialism whilst remaining complicit in the reproduction of capital. Yet they ‘live’ this contradiction daily through the constitution of NCRs and resistance to HNCs.

- Students, however, are not the only social movement with which Left academics should seek alliance. We are inspired by the work of solidarity conducted in post-92 universities in the UK (e.g. McKeown et al, 2011) and in Canada (e.g. Reville and Church, 2012) in which the critical pedagogy of health and disability social movements are incorporated into the curricula of the social sciences including that of the human service professions. This brings in its train dialectical contradictions all of its own but is full of possibilities. Additionally, we have elsewhere explored the particular contradictions encountered by social scientists who *both* research *and* are active within the social movements which they themselves research (Cresswell and Spandler, 2012).
- Finally, we should specify both the ‘perils’ and the ‘possibilities’ of RCTU for the Left academic in elite milieus. Following up on our last point, the imperative towards the accumulation of symbolic capital via ‘esteem indicators’, ‘high impact’ publications and research grant income – later ‘cashed-in’ for economic capital - places the social scientist within elite academia in peril of objectifying social movement activism and recuperating it, parasitically, for entrepreneurial gain. We have recently argued (McKeown, Cresswell and Spandler, 2014) that genuinely democratic RCTU involves a form of reciprocity which is asymmetrical – which involves the engaged social scientist giving far more than they take from the movement. This is just one way of addressing the double-bind. Another is the recognition that the impulse towards RCTU emerges as much from our status as trade union members as from our role and function as academics in ‘posh’ universities. Ultimately, it is as trade unionists and engaged intellectuals that we constitute Norm Circles of Resistance (Power#1); likewise, it is as trade unionists and engaged intellectuals that we resist Hegemonic Norm Circles (Power#2).

¹ See URL: <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/>. The universities are (alphabetically): Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial College (London), King’s College (London), Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen Mary, Queen’s (Belfast), Sheffield, Southampton, University College (London), Warwick and York.

² See URL: <http://www.suttontrust.com/home/>.

³ See URL: <http://www.ieps.org.uk/hillcole.php>

⁴ See URL: <http://www.ieps.org.uk>

⁵ The linkage between democratic socialism and ‘utopia’ is being deployed here in Oscar Wilde’s (2001) sense in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*: ‘A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.’

⁶ See URL: <http://www.midstaffsinquiry.com/pressrelease.html>

⁷ We would hasten to add that whilst the Stepford Wives analogy is meant to be appropriately bourgeois we do not intend any sexist connotations. On the contrary, in the context of the elite university this ‘pathology’ is just as likely to be manifested by men as well, or more, than women because of the gender inequality which is such a pervasive feature of the sector.

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