CHAPTER 13

Whither Critical Scholarship in the Modern University? Critique, Radical Democracy, and Counter-Hegemony

Cerelia Athanassiou and Jamie Melrose

Introduction

Things are dire in the ivory tower. 'What I would say about the university today', Terry Eagleton gloomily observes, 'is that we're living through an absolutely historic moment—namely the effective end of universities as centres of humane critique, an almost complete capitulation to the philistine and sometimes barbaric values of neo-capitalism' (Schad 2015, p. 43). Sir Keith Thomas notes several ways in which higher education is 'under attack'. These include 'the withdrawal of direct public funding for the humanities and social science', 'a highly-paid executive class' running our universities, and 'the rejection of the idea that higher education might have a non-monetary value' (Thomas 2011).

A worrying corollary is also the case. Opposition within academia is at a profound impasse. There is no Laclauian 'people' possessing a demand (Laclau 2007, p. 74), opposed to the institutional status quo in British

C. Athanassiou (✉) • J. Melrose
University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

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higher education. Neoliberal ascendency and the *katabasis* of the university's mild social–democratic features are hardly disputable (see Evans 2004), yet where is the coordinated response on the part of university workers? Effective resistance has not been forthcoming (see Bhambra 2013). Despite counterblasts (see Collini 2011; Bailey and Freedman 2011) prompted by the latest round of neoliberal entrenchment (see Browne 2010; Willetts 2011), and despite a vibrant student-led attempt to resist this restructuring, 'academics have not, on the whole, mounted strong collective resistance to what most of them see as detrimental changes […]. The sad truth is that despite pockets of resistance and some concerted union action, British academics have acquiesced to harm' (Gopal 2014).

Granted, dissensus in the modern university, as the case of Thomas Docherty (see Morgan 2014) and Marina Warner's *J'accuse* (see Parr 2014) demonstrate, is not easy, nor is it fostered by conditions on the ground. Voices questioning the current direction of travel are marginalised. There is, though, an obvious but remarkable aporia here. Academics live at the apogee of critical thought: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Pierre Bourdieu are some of the most utilised authors in the human sciences (see Times Higher Education 2009). Humanities-oriented staffrooms conform to a certain right-wing echo chamber's picture of trendy leftie posties (see Heath 2015). Aware of his or her continental philosophy, sympathetic to the resurgence in feminism and to the depravities of US imperialism, the critical scholar is alive and well in academia. But this general bias is not reflected in any credible counter-hegemonic movement to reclaim the modern university along the lines of, for example, the student movement in Quebec (see Hallward 2012) or the 2010 student occupations (see Ismail 2011, p. 123). Critical scholarship is depoliticised. The subject of the critical scholar is in crisis.

Taking this impasse as our starting point, we specify what we mean by critique, before moving on to the example of the complex of criticality in the university. We then outline our understanding of counter-hegemony, a notion that offers a neopragmatic articulation of how critical scholarship can authentically build coalitions and foster subject positions. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, we hope to counter possible charges of, first, hyper-subjectivism ('I established a theoretical model of thought. How could I have suspected that people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?' [Adorno 1969, p. 10]), second, materialist justification (why would academics in positions of relative privilege resist the status quo?), and, third, fatalistic anti-volunteerism

(what can we do given the odds?). We then explicate the counter-hegemonic project. We focus on the university as a front, reimaginable as a heterogeneous civil society.

Critique

We suggest deploying critique as an opening crutch to our discussion because it contains two important manoeuvres. Critique is finding fault with regard to a target plus. Not merely thumbs-up or thumbs-down, it reveals why its target—film, psyche, university, and so on—is so malformed. 'A critique', Foucault contends, 'is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest' (Foucault 1988, p. 154). In revealing the constructed specificity of its target, pointing out as opposed to simply offering up a negative judgement, critique has a transformative potential. It has a form of activity, 'a matter of flushing out' (Foucault 1988, p. 154). Such radical criticism aims 'not simply to eliminate one or other abuse' (Horkheimer 2002, p. 207), but also to inform an audience how something far less ridden with abuses is capable of being engendered. In this vein, Henry A. Giroux describes a 'critical literacy' entailing both a 'rigor', an ability to spot abuses, and an intervention-based reading of the critical target, an ethico-political commitment (2013).

Moreover, as Theodor Adorno posits, critique can be conceived transcendentally, immanently, or dialectically. The transcendent critique 'assumes as it were an Archimedean position'. It 'speaks the language of false escape', conjuring up an exo-reality, which negating the target of critique can bring about. On the other hand, immanent critique 'cannot take comfort in its own idea'; it immerses itself in the object of its criticism, exposing that object's intrinsic flaws: 'the logic of its aporias' (Adorno 1982, pp. 31–33). When faced with the object of their critique, immanent critics do not baulk from criticising it on and from the grounds on which both it and they are situated. Situation is not to be risen above, as is the case with the idealist imperative of transcendental critique (Marcuse 2001, p. 57).

Immanent critique, though, in its commitment to start from somewhere, can, for Adorno, give too much credit to the object of criticism, critique as a response to the object. More dialectically conceived, immanent critique maintains *creatio ex materia* while introducing an antipathy

to its error-ridden object, thus ensuring that critique is both part of that which it moves away from and that which it moves to. 'The dialectical critic of culture', writes Adorno, 'must participate in culture and not participate. Only then does he do justice to his object and to himself' (Adorno 1982, p. 33).

Today, this commitment is echoed, for example, by Peter Hallward's notion of dialectical voluntarism (see Hallward 2009, p. 17). This non-reifying notion of critique can also be found in Jacques Derrida's definition of deconstruction and in Judith Butler's critique of sexuality. Derrida casts deconstruction as subjecting its target to a sustained bout of deflation: 'One of the gestures of deconstruction is not to naturalize what isn't natural, to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions or society is natural' (Dick and Kofman 2002). Suggesting an immanent–dialectical approach, Derrida's strategic suspension of the certainty of the object of criticism, the removal of its taken-for-grantedness, is not the same thing as the emancipatory displacement of the object by an *ex nihilo* other. '[T]he very condition of a deconstruction', Derrida observes, 'may be at work in the work […]. One might then be inclined to reach this conclusion: deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day' (Derrida 1989, p. 73). The internalist and the externalist fold in on one another. Butler notes how criticism 'presumes […] that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination' (Butler 1990, p. 42).

This tradition of critique we have sketched and associate ourselves with haunts critical theory in the academy. Opposed to neoliberal strictures, critical scholars, in their institutional form as academic actors, are presumably aware of their embeddedness. They must proceed from the given to effect the 'new', be that given the crony capitalist confines of the academic publishing industry (see Monbiot 2011) or philistine funding mechanisms (see J. Gill 2014). Or are they aware? Are they cognizant of the commodification of their work into objects of exchange? Are critical academics engaged in the recognition of their situation that takes its terms immanently dialectically into account? In the case of organisations in the UK opposed to current policy in higher education—the Campaign for the Public University and Council for the Defence of British Universities, for example—these groups are external sources of dissent, not designed to alter academic behaviour, to mobilise and effect radically different relations of university production. While representatives from such organisations may point to salient reasons for their current status—membership

or lack thereof, misconstrual of purpose, professional responsibilities, and so on—the absence of frank critique makes it hard to see how demand-orientated struggle is to be engendered unless the organisational aspect of political struggle is stressed more coherently by those who bemoan neoliberalism and all its works.

Present here on our part is a certain expectation. Of course, expectation can be a self-defeating state of mind. To have a theoretical disposition; to have an affirmative relationship with a body of propositions; to have bookshelves groaning under the weight of Marx, Deleuze, Chomsky, and Butler; to write an opinion piece in an establishment organ—none of these guarantees that a certain set of action-directed praxis ensues. One can recollect the famous case of Adorno in 1968, or the more prosaic example of Labour politician and academic Tristram Hunt crossing a picket line to lecture on Marx (see BBC 2014). There is no necessary self-contradiction at play here. There is a very tenuous link between philosophical conceptions and concrete political attitudes (see Foucault 1984, p. 374). The issue, then, is one of reflexivity. Are critical scholars aware of what they are doing, not in the sense that they are fully conscious of their actions, but rather, are they aware that what they are doing is reproducing the status quo? Questioning is important, we contend, for critical literacy; complacency, to be avoided.

Critical Scholarship: State of Play

The neoliberal reform of British universities has been on the government agenda for a while, specifically since the mid- to late 1990s (see Callinicos 2006). In the face of such developments within the university, critical scholarship has been steadily developing an agenda of reclaiming space for critique. Stefan Collini's counterblasts concerning higher education policy (see 2010, 2011, 2013) are indicative of a consensus in critical academic circles on the shortcomings in higher education. Equally, however, Collini's case is ultimately disingenuous in its inability to harness and use the necessary tools for counter-organising. It fails to go beyond general calls for outrage at what is being imposed by a seemingly distant and all-powerful government. Despite demonstrating a clear awareness of the shortcomings (and their complexity), the sense is that, nevertheless, they originate in successive governments' attempts to commercialise universities, and that is where critique is levelled. There is no sense in this critical narrative that the commercialisation of British universities does not

proceed in one fell linear swoop from a defined 'root cause' situated in the upper echelons of higher education governance, but rather operates and is implemented at a multiplicity of levels, middle management within universities being a key such level: one could draw attention to deciding and implementing budgets that dictate redundancies, casual contracts, and privileging the chasing of research grants over more 'mundane' teaching. Where is the sense that this managerial aspect of the critical scholar's institutional existence has to be reconciled with critical consensus on the status quo in higher education?

Our very own School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS) milieu of the University of Bristol can point to a tradition of critical inquiry, with the development of specialised courses that emphasise critical approaches to mainstream teaching, as well as carving out a space for research projects that do not conform to mainstream strictures. This space focuses on the value of 'activist […] scholarship' (Herring 2006), the pedagogical need for universities that provide alternative modes of thought (see McLennan 2008), as well as the crucial role for 'public intellectuals [to] resist […] global violence' (Pollock and Evans 2013). This is not intended as a grand project, but rather as a necessary attitude as regards change.

At the time of the student occupations at Bristol, there was significant worry among critical scholars about the policies being rushed through (see McLennan 2010; Vostal et al. 2011) and university management's disregard for dissent. In the spirit of opposition at the time, there were the possible outlines of a common front on campus, forming hitherto underdeveloped alliances between staff and students; in a nutshell, a common counter-hegemonic cause against the 'repugnant philosophy underlying the Browne Report' (Thomas 2011, p. 10) and its recommendations of fees and cuts. And yet, 5 years after this moment, there has been no credible staff effort to build a front. We have experienced in our own institution a prevailing disregard for local politics and 'stirring up trouble' on one's doorstep. The awareness of and commitment to concepts such as reflexivity in relation to research fieldwork (see Higate and Cameron 2006), the questioning of the wider orientation of international studies (see Rowley and Weldes 2013), or the preoccupation with 'counter-hegemony' (Christie 2010, p. 171) stand in contrast to any critique of neoliberalism's effects on the university doorstep.

In 2012, in SPAIS, this took the form of a redundancy of a long-serving staff member, a 'freeing up' of space to hire more teaching staff on a more

'flexible' basis, required to manage funding streams that vary from year to year. Effectively, there was a lack of 'critical' solidarity: a defensive campaign was the order of the day (see The 'Keep Maggie' Campaign Group 2012). SPAIS are not alone in confronting such challenges, but such challenges illustrate how local action is not just about localised outcomes, and thus particular and distinct from a more general critical position concerning higher education, but also about resisting the wider forces at work in the specific misfortune. This is a connection that critical scholars fail to recognise when they disassociate themselves and their politics from specific cases that are preferably seen as personal or one-offs.

Counter-Hegemony

We have identified a key challenge: mediating critical thinking with radical political activism and vice versa. In this respect, counter-hegemony is a useful concept, as it grasps 'practices which [...] disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony' (Mouffe 2005, p. 18). We argue that counter-hegemonic intent links in well with the current conjuncture in universities, in which there is plenty of opposition but no sedimented opposition (see Scott 2014), no profound course of action in front of any 'us'. Theoretically, it clarifies the non-essentialist, open notion of identity integral to the critical tradition. To be clear, campus hegemony belongs to what Laclau and Mouffe describe as 'basically metonymical' (2001, p. 141). One can think of how a vice chancellor in a university becomes, rather than simply represents, the university in discourse. Undoing the ties that bind managers as universities, students as consumers, academics as producers of commodities, and so on, and thus prefiguring a dissociative alternative to these associations is a first step in any form of campus resistance: it is possible to redraw the naturalised linkage, for example, of management with the university. In terms of the lack of critical action that we have identified, in counter-hegemonic efforts, the centrality of the construction of a subject gives lie to passivism. Counter-hegemony is predicated on bringing to bear intensional political activism.

Counter-hegemony disregards a type of 'sociologico-teleological hypothesis' (Laclau 2000, p. 45). This hypothesis claims that we are either to be doomed or to be saved, to be limited to or liberated from our current conjuncture, on the fatalistic basis of external factors outside our ken (i.e., the enlightened despotism of rational university managers or a Labour government). Moreover, it holds no truck with a Jacobin decisionism that

our oppositional approach may imply; that is, ignoring conditions on the ground in order to advance righteous ethical principles, believing that if enough agents behave as they only would if granted the opportunity to, good will follow. Instead, 'power and political mediation are inherent to any universal emancipatory identity' (Laclau 2000, p. 46). In Laclau and Mouffe's phraseology (2001, pp. 178–179), there is 'no common core' at which 'a priori agents of change', such as the university worker unvarnished or the untainted undergraduate, along with 'privileged points and moments of rupture', such as the demotion of leaders or thwarted strikes, coalesce.

As expounded by Laclau and Mouffe, counter-hegemony assumes conflict, difference, and the desire to deal with plurality by promoting a particularity: for example, in the context of higher education, supporting the student-led campaign to abolish tuition fees, or furthering staff-backed initiatives for more resources in terms of pay and pensions, while being aware that in these initiatives success can only be achieved at the cost of another marked interest, the university managerial class or the government. This pro-particularity, backing a certain horse, is, however, not tantamount to being besotted with the individuality in question, with the potential universal status of the particularity. For example, one cannot, in the case of staff and management within a university, suggest that these identities are truly self-serving, or that one group has a monopoly on truth. Rather, the counter-hegemonic conception of the political has the Machiavellian insight (see Mouffe 2005, p. 7) that if a we wants to formulate a we, a professed multiplicity of agents in a plural war of interests, we can effect stability in this flux. We can impose our will upon other wills in a territory or time, thus engendering 'a series of universalising effects' (Laclau 2000, p. 49). 'Investment is the cornerstone', Laclau notes, 'of the operation called hegemony' (2000, p. 85).

In developing a neo-Gramscian understanding of specific groups' political articulation of differing demands and outlooks to achieve dominance, Laclau and Mouffe 'see hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecideable terrain' (2001, p. xi). Contrary to common-sense mantras, alternatives always exist; any totality is nothing more than an ever-changing constitution. Thus, hegemonic constructs such as the current mode found in higher education have to be seen as partial if in fact dominant. Their contestability is not straightforward and external, as implied in the sociologico-teleological normative framing, but it is within the medium of the hegemonic interplay that we find the tools to challenge the

hegemonic order and to build our alternative. One does not leave or fall back from the university front because it is lost or unintelligible—'even in order to differ, to subvert meanings, there has to be *a* meaning' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 112)—if one is adhering to a different interpretation, one stays there and works with what one has got.

In recent times, there have been attempts to build counter-hegemonic projects, to construct a subject. In Laclau and Mouffe's vocabulary, this would be akin to a chain of equivalence, something to which Hallward refers with regard to the successful CLASSE student mobilisation in Quebec (see Hallward 2012). Forming a 'collective will', drawing together groups opposed to the 'they' (Mouffe 2005, pp. 52–53) of our aloof neoliberal managerial adversaries, is the task at hand. At first, this may appear trite. If you are opposed to how the university is being run, you agitate for all individuals and groups—unions, societies, departments, and activist groups—to form a common front: '[t]he presence of the [counter-hegemonic, radical] imaginary as a set of symbolic meanings which totalize as negativity a certain social order […] essential for the constitution of all left-wing thought' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 190).

Yet there is a radical democratic understanding of a robust civil society that qualifies such constructions of them and us. When Mouffe describes legitimising enemies (see Mouffe 2005, p. 52), that is, the agonistic mode of conceiving political contestation, she admits of a conflict that is only partially halted by the type of hegemonic commitment that we have discussed. Political conflict is also predicated on heightened debate being taken as the norm of things, an understanding that competing groups and individuals are in it together as much as they are legitimately opposed. One is not violating any code if one wants to draw attention to and organise around difference; acknowledging difference is not antithetical to constructive dialogue, nor is it a personal statement on an individual's quintessential being (as vice chancellor or professor). In acknowledging difference, our universities are political spaces where victories are not the vanquishing of a deadly foe, but the establishment of a loser for the time being: 'we have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion' (Mouffe 2000, p. 104).

In establishing our counter-hegemonic collectivity, the formation of a democratic equivalence, which relies on the construction of a new 'common sense', we would expect to see a shift in the identity of the different individuals involved. The coming together of our staff–student group is no

given experience. The demands of each are articulated equivalently with those of the others, so that, in the words of *The Communist Manifesto*, 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx and Engels 2012, p. 62). Our equivalence is relational: built on the recognition that demands are not inalienable rights but ones that have to be fought for, bringing with them not only many possibilities but also responsibilities. Work is required to construct the substance of counter-hegemony; this is not a quality that exists, but one that has to be made. It is not found. Complacency in counter-hegemonic discourse, as in the case of critique, is not to be countenanced.

How Does This Work in the Academy?

Crucially, reflexivity with regard to the critical scholar's implication in the system of neoliberal higher education is lacking. Where critique of the status quo in British higher education is currently externalised, critical scholars could instead focus their attention on how the neoliberal complex maps locally. This requires willingness to act. Contrary to suggestions that newer thinking is required—that universities should don more radical identities (see Castree 2010, p. 240), or that academics should resist neoliberalism's imposition of new modes of labour (see R. Gill 2014) with their own versions of democratic utopianism (see Castree 2010; Giroux 2002; Collini 2013)—the tools to be used in the rethinking of the university can be found, reformed, and re-used in the infrastructures already existing, such as universities' committee governance and trade union-centred collective bargaining. We are bound to start from somewhere, from within Butler's matrix of power, that which we find ourselves in, and work from there. The question is not what project of reformation we apply going forward, but rather whether we decide to go forward, articulating the path as we traverse it.

This requires a step away from current tendencies to disallow the subject of the critical scholar any power, tendencies that render this figure a passive recipient of decisions. This is not to dispute the dire conditions defining the working life of increasing numbers of academics, nor the necessity of bringing these working conditions to light (see R. Gill 2014); it is to challenge a victimisation that denies the possibility of change. Where the subjectivity of the victim prevails, problems are individualised, both in their impact and in the 'how' of their solutions. No matter that when analysed, in the re-tweeting or sharing of a generalised rant about the

modern academia, through anecdotes mentioned in passing to colleagues on the way to a school meeting, there lies the grounds for a clear common understanding that there are serious structural issues to be overcome if one's, and others', situation is to be improved.

The realisation, then, of the critical scholar as a political figure is required, where critique is mobilised for the formation of a counter-hegemony that aims to be general, and finds alliances that reach beyond the immediate interests of the academy, admitting wider concerns and struggles. As in the case of the student occupations, both past and present, that have been fought not only on student issues but also in solidarity with teaching staff (see University of Bristol Students' Union, 2014) and wider struggles in neoliberal society (see University of Bristol Students' Union 2010), there would be recognition that the university is not defined by a specific constituency; rather, it is composed of multiple subjects, voices, and interests; a civil society that exists as a collectivity of individual moments (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 105) that can be seized upon in aid of counter-hegemonic re-articulation.

Political accountability is central to the formation of the kind of counter-hegemonic civil society we want to outline here. As must be clear by now, our complaint is not necessarily with the content of critical scholars' questioning of contemporary higher education, but with the lack of follow-through on this at all levels—collegial, departmental, university-wide. As Andrew McGettigan observes, 'over the last few years, attention has been on fees and loans, and understandably so, but there is a pressing need to assert democratic governance at individual institutions' (McGettigan 2014). The general problematic of the neoliberalised academy can manifest and be opposed to in local struggles to re-assert democratic control. Political awareness of the potential offered by critical scholarship—to relate the particular struggles of the workplace to the material conditions of higher education, and beyond—should be a key starting point for overcoming the critical impasse we have identified here.

Conclusion

As things stand, there has not been any real effort to deploy counter-hegemony, where critique would be used to highlight key aspects of negativity so as to enable new orders to be built. We—as a collectivity of critical scholars, a collectivity that we are adamant has to be articulated rather than assumed—have remained static in relation to the common sense

that the neoliberal university is a heartless business, that it builds itself on exploiting the most vulnerable, and that it undermines pedagogy as well as research. We have shown how such a constellation of radical knowledge and complete lack of action can hold strong, even in the face of aggressive efforts of the neoliberalisation of education in the UK.

If critical scholarship and its dedication to progressive change can only be articulated in research grants or to progress one's career; if it cannot be brought back to one's immediate reality so as to challenge the very same relations of power and their more parochial effects; if it fails to expose its own internal contradictions so as to move beyond them—then it cannot have any value at all. The complicity of critical scholarship in the higher-education establishment has to be recognised. This would be done not just through apologetic awareness of the existence of contradictions (see Research and Destroy, 2009), but through the willingness to hold oneself accountable in forums of equal participants who can begin together to redefine and re-make the conditions on which the university is built. The crisis of critical scholarship is one of depoliticisation. Instant change cannot be expected, nor is it easy to confront one's own implication in a system to which one is also totally opposed. But if critique of the neoliberal university is to mean anything, this is the work that has to be done.

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