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# Academic activism in UK Higher Education: A critical pedagogy perspective

Lindy Syson

A thesis submitted to Durham University as a requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# Abstract

This research investigated academic activism in UK higher education, a marginalised and under-researched area. Universities are subject to increasing privatisation and intensive marketisation, bringing challenges and contradictions for those academics with a social justice agenda who wish to defend the university as a public good and a site for an activist and transformative pedagogy and practice. This work was guided by two questions posed by Blomley (1994) 'Can I be an academic and an activist at the same time? If so, how?' Its general research aim therefore was to investigate the practice and theory of critical pedagogy and academic activism research in UK higher education.

The conceptual framework of the research drew from critical pedagogy literature, particularly the relational ontology of Paulo Freire (1970) which is underpinned by a dialectical materialist analysis which does not separate theory from practice. The research was also informed by theories of contradiction (Ollman, 2015) and of crisis (Harvey, 2014).

Empirical data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 lecturers from a range of UK universities who self-identified as academic activists. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes along with the use of Freire's limit situations as both analytical tool and conceptual framework.

Findings revealed that despite increasingly adverse conditions in the university the participants were committed to enacting an activist and transformative pedagogy and practice. Indeed, their practice often emerged from, and was a challenge, to the contradictions and limitations that they encountered. There was no reductive contrast between theory and practice and the participants were engaged academics (Freedman, 2017) who saw activism, in different forms, as central to their work.

The originality of this research lies in first, its focus on the convergence, and dialectical interplay, of three areas: the neoliberal university, academic activism and critical pedagogy. Second, its use of the concept of the social individual as a method of analysis and to challenge the prevailing discourse of the entrepreneurial individual in higher education. Its findings have relevance for those in higher education attempting an academic activist approach.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and overview**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The aim of this research is to investigate the practice and theory of critical pedagogy and academic activism in UK higher education [1]. In the context of neoliberalism, higher education has undergone significant changes in the last fifty years. These are considered in more detail in chapters 2 and 3, but briefly, the key characteristics of neoliberalism in relation to a higher education in crisis include the move from public funding to a free market, where privatised, corporate universities are seen as competitive businesses and drivers of the knowledge economy (Harvey, 2005). The business model of universities has given rise to a managerial elite and new management strategies with an emphasis on accountability, metrics and measurement (Freedman, 2017). This neoliberal restructuring of capitalism in terms of higher education impacts on students and staff. For academics, this involves changes to their professionalism, autonomy and agency; an increasing casualisation of, and precarity within, the workforce; and being subject to performance metrics in their work and research. It also positions them as responsible for the development of human capital in the knowledge economy, which sees students as consumers and entrepreneurial individuals and sees knowledge as a marketable commodity. It also undercuts the autonomous space for learning (Holborow, 2015). Holborow (2013) also argues that a dominant neoliberal ideology seeks to naturalise and normalise these free market principles.

These are the challenges faced by academic activists in higher education. The approach of this research sees the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2014) as an example of the volatility of the system, not a strength, that offers up the possibility for challenge and transformation. It will consider the transformative aims of critical pedagogy based primarily on interviews with seventeen academics teaching and researching from a critical perspective. It will seek to contextualise this work in the light of the current economic crisis; its implications for higher education and of the renewed upsurge in social movement activity (Sotiris, 2014), particularly focussing on the links between critical pedagogy and academic activism. These two aspects of critical education were an attempt to answer the question posed by Blomley (1994, p383): “So, can I be an academic and an activist at the same time? If

so, how?" Blomley was keen to raise issues of critical theory and academic inquiry in terms of teaching and research as well as his work as a community activist. It is the experience and practice of this dual role, what Blomley (1994, p388) referred to as an '...unexplored bifurcation' between political and academic life, that is investigated in this research. The research offers an original contribution to work on academic activism by bringing together academic activism, critical pedagogy and higher education. These issues are investigated within the context of the increasing neo-liberalisation of higher education, and by using the analytical lens of a Freirean, materialist, relational ontology which foregrounds the concept of the social individual (Freire, 1970, Au, 2007).

It is argued that critical pedagogy is more relevant than ever in the wake of the 2007-2008 crisis and its subsequent and ongoing impact in the UK, Europe and elsewhere via austerity programmes, not only in terms of education, but also the increasing privatisation of all social and welfare provision. Higher education has become much more closely aligned to market forces and it has been argued that, as a result, concepts such as entrepreneurship, leadership and citizenship have all tended to become normalised and lacking critique (Holborow, 2015). Further, McNally (2009) argues that the 2007-8 economic crisis has created a deepening ideological crisis, as well as a crisis of democracy (Giroux, 2010; Green, 2013; Streek, 2013; Mészáros, 2015). There are, however, academic activists in higher education attempting to resist the logic of the market, in their research, teaching and activism. Therefore, it is the general aim of this research to investigate if, and how, this is possible.

## **1.2 Background**

Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2009) suggest that critical pedagogy emerged from a tradition of radical social thought and progressive social movements, both of which linked schooling to democratic principles and transformative social action in the interests of oppressed and exploited groups. The North American academic, Henry Giroux is credited with first using the term critical pedagogy (Macrine, 2009), although in Rikowski's (2007) view, Paulo Freire's (1970) 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' set the scene for Giroux and the 'American critical pedagogy school' of the 1970s onwards.

Those who write from a critical pedagogy perspective tend to agree that critical education involves a challenge to the existing order and to 'taken-for-granted' assumptions and argues that a critical space should be created where students are supported to identify and critique existing ideas. Second, the purpose of education is seen as transformative and emancipatory for individuals and the wider society. The nature and strategy required for social and political change is a contested area, although the imperative of developing a transformative pedagogy and a theory of transformation is characteristic of much critical pedagogy. Third, because critical pedagogy links theory to practice, it speaks to wider themes of knowledge and knowledge creation. Kincheloe (2004) argues that knowledge is not objective and neutral. He and other writers taking a critical perspective (Leistyna, Lavandez & Nelson, 2004; McLaren, 2007) see education as ideological in nature and advocate taking an explicitly political standpoint in their practice and research.

Within this over-arching set of purposes there exists a range of differing viewpoints [2] with distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions in terms of their critique of capitalism; their vision of an alternative education and society; their theories of transformation and the agencies involved in that transformation. In Canaan's view (2013, p33) this is not surprising because left critical pedagogues draw on different philosophical traditions and "occupy different generational, class, gender and racial positions and have different histories and degrees of political activism."

Although Breuing (2011) and Martin (2017) suggest that definitions of critical pedagogy are varied and at times contradictory, Canaan (2013) suggests that it is important to define critical pedagogy because capitalism has a history of co-opting radical ideas. Indeed, according to Kyrlo *et al* (2010) critical pedagogy itself, as a body of knowledge and practice, has a history of accommodating to dominant ideology and losing its radical and transformative potential. In their view it is counter-productive to attempt to define critical pedagogy too rigidly as this would fail to capture a process that is constantly moving and developing, involving both diverse struggles at various times and in different communities. This point speaks to the importance of contextualising critical pedagogy and looking at the wider socio-economic system. Thomas (2014) suggests that the current economic crisis and the associated austerity agenda means that "The conjuncture has thus given rise to a sort of 'fortuitous encounter' between theory and practice" (np). This 'encounter'

between theory and practice forms the framework for this research and investigates the arguments and practices of a number of academics [3] attempting to develop a critical tradition within the university, as well as linking to social and political movements beyond the university (Amsler & Canaan, 2008; Couldry, 2011; Freedman, 2017).

### **1.3 Neoliberalism and the crisis in UK higher education.**

The post-war period saw an expansion in UK higher education as capitalist economies rapidly grew and re-structured, thus requiring increasing numbers of teachers, managers and professionals. This change saw an expansion in the numbers of middle-class students entering higher education along with a small increase in the number of working-class students. However, Walton (2011) cautions against regarding this post war expansion as a 'golden age' of higher education. For example, as early as 1970, Edward Thompson (1970) in 'Warwick University Ltd' was highlighting the clear links between the university and wider corporate and business interests. These links continue, and it is argued that universities themselves are constituted as big businesses as recent legislation has shifted the funding of higher education in the UK from the state to individual students as part of an austerity agenda (McGettigan, 2013).

Faulkner (2011) points to a contradiction between the university as a public good and the role of education within a capitalist economy to reproduce skills necessary for the economy. This point is significant because it speaks to a number of issues within critical pedagogy as it developed as a theory and a practice. These include the extent to which higher education is shaped by the crises and contradictions of the wider capitalist economic system; the extent to which education can be a force for transformative change; and the role of academic activists in this process within and beyond the university. As Holmwood (2011) points out, universities in the UK are both part of the reproduction of inequality and also regarded as a motor of growth for an economy that itself produces inequality.

The restructuring of globalised capitalism since the 1970s has had the effect of greater social and economic inequality (Dorling, 2010; Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Piketty, 2014). Running counter to dominant narratives of opportunity and aspiration, the gap between the rich and poor in the UK continues to widen (Toynbee & Walker, 2009;

McKay & Rowlington, 2011). All of this exacerbates the class nature of education which continues to reproduce social inequality (Boliver, 2017) and where it is still more likely that students from middle-class backgrounds will enter higher education than those from working-class backgrounds (Blanden & Machin, 2013; Hutchinson, Reader & Akhal, 2020).

The re-structuring of higher education is part of a wider process of neo-liberalism [4] which attempts to subject all aspects of social life, for example, housing, health-care and welfare provision, to the logic of the market (Callinicos, 2006; Gamble, 2009). As part of this process, education has been increasingly privatised, with students seen as customers, and where the costs of higher education are moving from the state to individuals, a move that was outlined in the Browne Report (2010) and which is consolidated and developed by the recent Higher Education and Research Act (DBIS, 2017). The development of higher education as part of a process of neo-liberalism has led many writers to adopt terms such as the neo-liberal university (Canaan, 2013) or the corporatized university (Greyser & Weiss, 2012).

It has been argued (Collini, 2012; Canaan, 2013) that these changes have impacted on the nature of the university and the knowledge produced there. First, in terms of the role of academics, Callinicos (2006) notes that lecturers' pay has declined in relative terms; that the emphasis on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has impacted on staff autonomy; the reduction of teaching and contact time; the emergence of knowledge transfer partnerships and the emergence of a managerial elite intent on modelling universities on business models. In McNally's view (Cooke & McNally, 2011), the overall re-structuring of higher education will increasingly result in a tiered system of elite and teaching universities. This, in turn, will impact on the solidarity of academic and non-academic staff within and between the different institutions. Castree (2000) notes a shift to job professionalisation and academisation, at the same time as an increase in the precarity and proletarianisation of staff. This leads Blackmore (2001) to suggest that this changing context requires a re-thinking of the idea of the public academic intellectual, indeed of the very idea of the 'public' and of the university as a public good.

In addition, Canaan (2013) notes the higher fees for overseas students and the role of academics in policing these students in line with the prevent agenda and the requirement to work with the UK Border Agency. One of the most significant

developments for students has been the move away from student grants to loans and, following the Browne Report (2010), the introduction of tuition fees. Canaan (2013) suggests that one implication of this is that students will increasingly have to engage in part time work, with less energy to study.

In any case, the privatisation of higher education has led to "...a...re-configuration of students, lecturers and universities" (Canaan, 2013, p27). The possibility that this reconfiguration can provide the framework for a radical and transformative higher education is debated. Canaan (2011), for example, appears to be pessimistic about the possibility for resistance in the neoliberal university, citing the increasing workload for academics, job insecurity, lack of union activity and the difficulty in establishing programmes that are, or can be, shut down in a short time according to economic imperatives. Blacker (2014) is also pessimistic, not only about the continued crisis of the world economy, but of the ability of critical educators to effect *any* role in a transformative opposition. In terms of the current concrete situation in which critical academics are located, McGovern (2016, p57) suggests that universities' transformation from civic spaces to private financial institutions is one "...in which thought is to be compelled, policed and governed by the logic of neo-liberalism and the market itself."

By contrast, Martin (2009) interprets the close link between ideas and the economy in the knowledge economy as meaning that it is easier for critical pedagogues to challenge taken for granted ideas. Sotiris (2014) is optimistic about continuing, revived student activism in higher education, linking Occupy, the Indignados, the Arab Spring and Greek struggles to "the continuing reproduction of student radicalism" (p10). For Sotiris (2014, p8), issues of commodification, privatisation and entrepreneurship should be viewed as:

aspects of a changing capitalist hegemony. They are contradictory in their role as they can act as strategic nodes in the development of class strategies (both dominant and sub-altern) in the production of subjectivities, in the transformation of collective practice.

Sotiris (2014), drawing on a Gramscian perspective, argues that higher education functions as a "hegemonic apparatus" (p1). He points to the tensions and contradictions inherent in university education, for example, between the constraints of the market and, on the other hand, offering a space for a critique of contemporary society. The complex articulation of coercion and consent that this produces means,

for Sotiris, that the university should be regarded not as a static entity linked to developments in neo-liberalism, but to the changing: "...political and (counter)-hegemonic potential of movements in universities" (p8).

Canaan (2013, p19) argues that critical pedagogy is a response to the current political situation that she terms 'neoliberalisation', seeing critical pedagogy as a vehicle for social change and arguing that:

critical pedagogy offers a way to engage differently with students in teaching, learning, researching and acting than neo-liberalism suggests. Its vision is of education as a relational, outward looking, hopeful, critical, political and transformational process.

Hill (2004) and Giroux (2006; 2010), while explicitly linking education and the wider society, argue for a social justice agenda to challenge the inequality and exploitation generated by neo-liberalism, and agree that the crisis of neo-liberalism has produced a crisis in democracy (Green, 2013). Raduntz (2004) argues that critical educators are caught up in the tension between ideas of academic freedom, new knowledge production and the demands of the wider economy. However, because education is not just about the economy but also about ideology and knowledge production, educators have a key role at the heart of these structural contradictions. Such contradictions may offer up possibilities for critical pedagogy. For educators such as Lynch, Crean & Moran (2010, p298) the university offers to society: "...a space where one can exercise intellectual autonomy, no matter how circumscribed this can be in an age of market led research funding."

#### **1.4 Critical pedagogy and academic activism**

This thesis will consider the relationship between critical pedagogy and academic activism. This is a complex and contested relationship (Barker and Cox, 2002; Croteau et al, 2005) noted by Blomley (1994), Freedman (2017) and also Lambert, Parker & Neary (2007, p529) who argue that within to academic activism "...there is a renewed recognition of the intellectual importance as well as the political necessity of re/connecting the academy into networks of social protest."

While for many writers, critical pedagogy is inherently activist in its orientation (hooks, 1994; Lawless, 2012; Ollis, 2012) critical pedagogues in higher education



face tensions and contradictions in their attempt to be both academic and activist. Movement activists such as Croteau (2015, p32) talk of the “elusive goal of the scholar-activist” mainly because of the differences between an academic role, with its demands of professionalism, objectivity and value-neutrality, and the partisan engagement of the activist.

Whilst there has been some attempt, notably by Rikowski (2001) and Earl (2015), to consider critical pedagogy and social transformation alongside anti-capitalist resistance movements, the link between critical pedagogy and social movements appears to be under-theorised. This research attempts to respond to criticisms that critical pedagogy lacks global thinking and structural analysis (Cho, 2010) and that critical pedagogy is weak when theorising links to social movements (Tarlau, 2014).

The increasing resistance to neo-liberal globalisation throughout the 1990s gave rise to new movements particularly associated with the Seattle and post-Seattle mobilizations and social forums. Writers such as Klein (2001) have documented the rise of grass-roots movements linked to trans-national social movements, which focus on neo-liberal globalisation as the main cause of social injustice, poverty and environmental disaster. Social movement theorists point to significant developments in the late 1960s and 70s where ‘new’ social movements moved from traditional industrial and class-based politics to cultural politics and the politics of identity (Crossley, 2003). Within critical pedagogy, writers such as Giroux (2000; 2004) and Kincheloe (2004) drew on this ‘cultural turn’ to develop their critiques of education and their transformative visions towards social justice.

Molyneaux (2012) notes that a new layer of activists emerged since the Seattle demonstration of 1999. He associates this anti-capitalist activism with theorists such as Klein (2001; 2007), and also Hardt & Negri (2000; 2004) and Holloway (2005). Whilst Brown (2013) notes that these theorists acknowledge the power of a Marxist analysis, Molyneaux (2012) argues that in most of these theorists’ writings, the role of the working class has been displaced by other social groups, most notably by Hardt & Negri’s ‘multitude’.

However, Charlton (2000) suggests that it was the involvement of labour unions that distinguished the Seattle and post-Seattle demonstrations from the social

movements of the 1960s. In addition, in his view, although the range of groups and movements represented different political perspectives and agendas, all were campaigning against the excesses of neo-liberalism and were rooted in the idea that 'Another World is Possible' (Johnston & Goodman, 2006). Furthermore, neo-liberalism as an explicitly political project of capitalist elites (Harvey, 2005) was increasingly the target of the anti-capitalist movement since the 1990s and is a concept widely used since that time by academics and activists (Bordieu, 1999; Holborow, 2015). It is this vision of a transformative politics as part of a wider social justice agenda which provides a link between critical pedagogy and social movement activism, particularly the anti-capitalist activism which appeared at Seattle in 1999. First, from a critical pedagogy perspective, Faramandpur (2009, p113) argues for a 'critical pedagogy of hope' because:

A critical reading of the world involves denouncing the existing oppression and injustices of the world. At the same time, it involves announcing the possibility of a more humane and just world...Reading the world is both a pedagogical-political and a political-pedagogical undertaking. Denouncing the world is an act that involves criticizing, protesting and struggling against domination and domestication. On the other hand, the act of announcing a new world entails hope, possibility and envisioning a new democratic society.

Secondly, educationalists working within a critical pedagogy tradition will often take part in social movement activism. Johnston & Goodman (2006) suggest a constructive dialogue between Freire's pedagogy of hope and social movement struggles so that activists become more engaged in the process of envisaging alternatives. Freire (1998) himself suggested that not enough academics were working beyond academia as cultural workers involving themselves in struggles for social justice demands in the public sphere. Further research in this area (Nygreen, 2006; Brookfield & Holst, 2010; Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Picower, 2012) has documented the commitment and activism of scholar-activists. My research proposes to build on this area of research and interview academic activists regarding the contradictions surrounding their role as academics and activists. This research is, therefore, *about* activists (Falcon, 2016), rather than being 'activist research' (Choudry, 2013).

The role of the academic activist has been variously interpreted in the literature and is often presented as a dichotomy of theory and practice (or 'ivory tower' and 'real

world'), even by those writers who wish to stress the imbricated nature of these sites of knowledge creation and practice.

Mitchell (2008, p450) defends a similar separation approach (referring to himself as a 'desk-bound radical') on the basis that activism and academic work are different aspects of academic-activism. For example, for all its constraints, administrative work, such as writing funding bids, can produce research that supports activism and is: "...an explicitly intellectual project: a project for bringing ideas into popular consciousness". Second, he argues that the role of critical academics is to provide the analytical tools to critique the current economic and political situation and use this to debate future possibilities. He argues that "study, research, thinking, working out analyses: these were the crucial tasks of the historical moment, so that the next historical moment would not be missed"

Other writers such as Greyser & Weiss (2012, p787) examined academia and activism as linked sites in North American higher education. These categories were not linked to the extent that each lost its specificity, nor on the other hand was a simple 'bridging' relationship of academia and activism plausible as this reinforced the view of the distinctiveness of each category. Instead, their edited papers focussed on "...the duality of intellectual and activist or political labor, traced the intersections and gaps of between activist and academic work and historicised dichotomies of theory and practice..."

However, implicit in this approach is the view that activist practice and academic practice are separate but at times, intersect. Although Flood, Martin & Dreher (2013) do not to focus on a critique of the dichotomy of 'activism' and academia' they note that this view is found in some feminist perspectives and critical geography perspectives. An example of this is Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, p245) argument that that:

We need to reject the false distinction between academia and the wider society in conceptualisations of valid sites of struggle and knowledge production, and to find ways to research and engage collectively and politically, rather than individually.

The 'false distinction' mentioned here is also at the heart of the Freirean view (Freire, 1985, p260) following Gramsci, of critical pedagogy as, at one and the same time, theory and practice (or praxis):

So critical pedagogy, in this light, can be described as a philosophy of praxis lived out in everyday social activities that attempt to uncover the congealed, abstract structures that constitute social life materially...Here we are looking to critical pedagogy as a social process, a social product and a social movement that is both grounded in a philosophy of praxis and democratic forms of organisation.”

It is this view of education as both social product and social movement that links the academy to the wider economic system (discussed in more detail in chapter 2) and that underpins the role of the academic-activist.

McNally (Cooke and McNally, 2011), writing from a Marxist perspective, is interested in what he sees as the emergence of anti-capitalist movements in the 1990s and the following development of student occupations after the crisis of 2008, that were not organised or driven by forces on the traditional left (political parties, trades unions and other working-class organisations). Nonetheless, a space was opened up, he argued, where analysis and activism could take place (Mason, 2012).

## **1.5 Research aim and questions**

The overall research aim of this project was to investigate and understand the practice and theory of critical pedagogy and academic activism in UK higher education. Given this broad aim, and on the basis of a literature review, and my own involvement in higher education, the following two general research questions emerged:

To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation?

In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university?

The focus of the empirical research was an analysis of interviews conducted with 17 academics in higher education who identified as critical educators and academic activists who are working within a social justice agenda [5]. A number of research articles and theses have also investigated aspects of critical pedagogy in higher education. This research attempts to develop and critique the work of, for example, Lawrence (2015) and Boudon (2015) who have investigated the lives and classroom practices of academics in Canada and North America. This research, has similarities

with that of Catone (2014), focusing explicitly on the links between higher education and the opportunities to develop links movements beyond the Academy. The theses of both Kuntz (2007) and Earl (2015) use either a Foucauldian or a post-modern 'bricolage' approach while addressing the practices of academic activists in higher education. By contrast, it is suggested that a Marxist framework, using an historical materialist and dialectical methodology, better explains the current challenges and contradictions of higher education.

## **1.6 Position statement**

The choice of research topic is prompted by three interrelated areas [6]. First, at the start of this research, my role as a study advisor in a university in the North-East of England meant that I worked with students often termed 'non-traditional' in their educational background. As an educator, I became increasingly aware of the marketization and privatisation of higher education (Freedman, 2011). I also became aware of an increasing focus on the individual student, and the growing focus on citizenship (Canaan, 2012) and entrepreneurship (Holborow, 2015) agendas, at the expense of wider social structures (Avis, 2006). This was combined with the continued marginalisation of working-class students at a time when social class as a concept appeared to have fallen out of favour both within and beyond the Academy (Burgmann, 2005; Faramandpur, 2009; Gerrard, 2013).

Second, as a trades unionist and activist, my continuing political and theoretical development located Marxism as a theoretical framework with which to analyse and understand, for example, the financial crash of 2007/8, the 'austerity' agenda which followed, notions of a 'democratic deficit' (Marquand, 2004; Giroux, 2010; Nixon, 2011) and where citizens have been de-politicized and lack involvement in formal political processes.

Third, as an activist, I was aware of the wider emergence of activism and resistance in higher education throughout the UK during 2010 (Bailey & Freedman, 2011) in terms of demonstrations and student occupations, primarily against fee increases and other changes outlined in the Browne Report (2010).

## **1.7 Theoretical framework: A theory of contradiction**

This research adopts a Marxist analysis into critical pedagogy and academic activism. Specifically, and following Ollman (1976; 2003; 2015), it adopts a relational ontology and theory of contradiction. Contradiction is used as an analytical tool (Wood, 2001) which can critique the issues researched here such as the role of academic intellectuals, and knowledge production and access to ‘powerful knowledge’.

Further reasons for adopting a Marxist framework are first, it is argued that Marxism’s explanatory potential as a theory and a practice has been marginalised in social theory since the 1960s and 1970s, with the dominance of post-structural and post-modern theories and theories associated with intersectionality (Gardiner, 2000; Castree, 2000). This research offers an alternative to intersectionality theory, using instead, social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; McNally, 2017). This theory uses a Marxian approach that centres the social individual, the relational aspect of experience and practice and the totality of the capitalist system. Although, as McNally (2017) notes, the value of intersectional theory, emerging in the late 1960s is that it raised issues relating to multiple forms of oppression and thus expanded the framework for debate, he criticises intersectionality for its ontological atomism in that the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and other categories, remain discrete entities albeit intersecting ones. Implications of this for academic activism may be a fragmentation of resistance and against a totalising system (Bannerji, 2005). I draw on Bannerji’s (2005) work in my critique of postmodernism and identity politics in section 3.5 and in section 4.8 when I consider the social individual as an ‘ensemble of social relations’ not as an atomised individual so central to neoliberal ideology and education. In this view, experience and subjectivity are part of the material and historical reality of capitalism and cannot be disentangled from, or considered outside of, these relations.

This view of the social individual leads to a related issue concerning the cognitive and the emotional in terms of labour. Some theorists suggest that there is a specific affective or emotional aspect to labour under neoliberal capitalism. Ball (2016, p1046), for example, in suggesting this view appears to argue for a distinction between the personal and emotional and the economic, “I will consider neoliberalism

mainly with a lower-case *n* rather than a capital *N*. That is, rather than the economy and economic policy, I will discuss interpersonal relations, identity and subjectivity...I want to address neoliberalism ‘in here’ – in the head, the heart and the soul – rather than ‘out there’ in politics and the economy.” However, following Barker (2010) and McNally (2017) I understand labour as an assemblage of social practices where there is no distinction between emotionality or cognition - both pre-suppose the other in the totality of capitalist relations. It is argued that at a time of increasing poverty and immiseration (Greaves, Hill & Maisuria, 2007; Stephen, 2011) a classical Marxist approach offers an analysis of the totality of a globalised capitalist system which, as Benton & Craib (2010, p209) suggest:

continues to have overwhelming causal importance in shaping the geographical distribution of economic activity, the life chances of whole categories of people, the available policy options for dealing with pressing economic, social and ecological problems...it remains the case that the Marxian legacy offers the most fully developed and theoretically sophisticated critical account of capitalism as a whole system and its dynamics.

In addition, both Sharp (1980) and Agostinone-Wilson (2013) argue that mainstream research tends to assume an acceptance of the current capitalist global framework particularly through an acceptance that there is no alternative to this system and an emphasises being placed on “possessive individualism” (Edwards, 2011), with its stress on the cognitive and personal rather than the structural.

Second, a Marxist analysis will offer a means by which social class (as a relational and dialectical concept) is located centrally within critical pedagogy and social change. Wrigley, Lingard and Thomas (2012, p98) use social class not as a binary between middle class and working class, which in their view “...allows what we might call a ruling class to escape from view” but as reflecting an overall totality where capitalist social relations, involving both the material and the ideal, are the framework within which education today is located. Writers such as Avis (2006), Aronowitz (2004) and Gerrard (2013), despite conceptualising class differently, all agree that this is a concept which has been sidelined in recent educational research.

Third, Marxism offers a theory of crisis (Freeman, 2010). Following Freeman (2010), but with regard to critical pedagogy, it is argued that any attempts to theorise education and social justice, must engage, not just with the wider economic system,

but with a theory of crisis. To do otherwise would offer only a partial, one-sided approach which would, as Raduntz (2004) suggests, be inadequate to the tasks that critical pedagogues set themselves. Harvey (2010) argues that financial crises such as that of 2007-8, are not only inherent as part of structure of neo-liberal capitalism but are essential as mechanisms for the survival of the system. In a similar way, Klein (2007) has argued that stringent neoliberal 'reforms' are presented by the elite as ways of preventing social collapse. In terms of critical pedagogy, this can begin to explain the ways in which education is seen as both a conservative socialising force and, at the same time, a space for radical social change.

Fourth, Marxism is a theory of contradiction, as capitalism is a system fraught with contradictions. McNally (2009, p45) explains that: "The capitalist mode of production is inherently contradictory at multiple levels; every pattern of capital-accumulation involves self-generated limits"

Key here in term of education and critical pedagogy is the Gramscian view of contradictory consciousness. Mainstream education which generates what Gramsci termed 'common sense', clashes with the 'good sense' of the reality of people's lives in a classed, raced and gendered society. In addition, Marx's theory of contradiction explains why resistance is possible. First, because crisis is inevitable and built into the fabric of capitalism, transformation and the hope of a new society is possible. However, the outcome is not inevitable (Allman, 2001) but is conditioned by a dialectical interplay of systemic conditions, what Harvey (2014) refers to as the 'conditions of possibility', and the social and political forces capable of challenging that system.

## **1.8 The structure of the thesis**

This introductory chapter has offered a critical overview of the neoliberal crisis in higher education and of some current theories of critical pedagogy and academic activism. This sets the context for the overall aim of the research which is to consider the role of critical pedagogy and academic activism in UK higher education.

Specifically, from this aim, I consider two research questions which are: To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation? and in what ways can academia and activism be linked within and



beyond the university? This chapter has raised issues such as the inherent contradictions of neoliberal capitalism; the use of contradiction and relationality as methods of analysis; identity and the meaning of the social individual; and the place of the historical and material in enabling individuals to challenge and transform existing exploitation and oppression.

Chapter 2 considers the changing nature of UK higher education and follows on from sections 1.1 and 1.3 above, discussing in more detail the key characteristics of neoliberal higher education and how they impact on the practices of academics. In Freire's (1970) view, critical pedagogy is lived out in material practices which why higher education can only be considered in the context of the wider economic system. The chapter also consider a central contradiction of universities – their role in sustaining a vision of the social purpose of the university while at the same time being governed by market forces. The implications of this contradiction were clear for the interviewees in this research, in terms of their teaching and research. Therefore, this chapter also sets the background to the analysis of interviews in chapter 7.

Following this, chapter 3 retains a focus on the changing nature of higher education but sets this within the wider economic restructuring of capitalism which has taken place from the 1970s onwards (Barker and Dale, 1998; Harvey, 2005). These changes, which include the rise of the knowledge economy, have had significant impacts on higher education. This chapter critically reviews these impacts and changes by engaging with a range of social and political debates, including theories of critical pedagogy. A Marxist approach is discussed and compared to theories associated with liberalism, post-modernism and autonomism, all of which rest on different epistemological and ontological assumptions, and which are associated with different strands of critical pedagogy. Implications are considered for academic activism.

Chapter 4 follows directly from the theoretical approaches in the previous chapter to provide a critical assessment of their philosophical underpinnings. Moving beyond positivist and interpretivist approaches, this research uses a Marxist approach that is both critical and transformative. It draws on the work of Ollman (1976; 2003; 2015) and Allman (1999; 2010) to argue for an approach grounded in a materialist, dialectical ontology and epistemology. This is an approach that interprets the world

through human agency and activity and is both a methodology and a practice. The implications of this approach for critical pedagogy and academic activism in higher education are discussed. It is also used as an analytical lens for the interview data and findings set out in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 5 outlines the critical research process in detail and in the context of the approach given in the previous chapter, which also includes the Freirean concept of limit situations. The use of case study research and interviews are discussed and justified as appropriate to the research aim and questions. This chapter will also discuss the role of the researcher and will offer a critically reflexive account of my approach and involvement in the research process. I respond to issues of objectivity, validity and rigour in the research process on the basis of the material, relational approach taken here.

The next two chapters, chapters 6 and 7, form the basis of the empirical research. In chapter 6, I use a modified form of thematic analysis combined with a Freirean understanding (Freire, 1970) of the materiality of individuals' lives to analyse the interview data and discusses the findings. Emergent themes relating to the educational background and influences of the interviewees, showed their attempts to problematise their experiences and use both education and activism as ways of framing and understanding the issues that emerged. This 'reading the world' (Freire, 1970) could be seen as an influence on their future academic activism in higher education.

Chapter 7 summarises the key findings of the data analysis. The interview data reflected the views and practices of academic activists working within, and beyond, neoliberal universities. The findings offer a rich, self-reflexive, picture of their assessment of neoliberal education and its contradictions and limitations and of the strategies they used to enact critical pedagogy and academic activism.

The final chapter, chapter 8, concludes by critically discussing the overall findings of the research in the context of the literature which sees higher education as both a progressive and a conservative force, but one with transformative potential. I argue this potential is found within the very contradictions of neoliberal capitalism and the contradictions that arise in the neoliberal university. These contradictions create

situations where academic activists can direct their attention, whether within the classroom or with alliances with social movements and campaigns beyond the university, to challenge continued injustices and inequality.

## **1.9 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the overall research aim and the two research questions that follow from this. It has also set out the key areas of research focus, that is: the neoliberal university and how this has impacted on the role of the academic within it and critical pedagogy and its relationship to academic activism (discussed further in chapter 3). It has also given an overview of the theoretical approach of this research which sees capitalism as an inherently contradictory system which is subject to systemic crises. Higher education plays a significant role in this system, and it can be a conservative one, contributing to the production of an efficient workforce and supporting neoliberal ideology. However, its role is contradictory, and it can also be a force for radical social change if, for example, critical academics within it expose and critique how capitalism works and the inequalities that it produces. If they see that transformation is both necessary and possible and if they relate as activists to students and others within and beyond the university. The next chapter looks in more detail at the changing nature of higher education to set the context for the challenges and opportunities for those working within it.

## **Footnotes**

[1] To provide a manageable area for research and because of huge policy changes, the focus here is UK higher education. It is acknowledged, of course, that education takes place in many different arenas in society (Nixon, 2011). Freire (1985) maintained that education, wherever it took place, was, "... always an effort to clarify, historically, the concrete context in which the teacher-students and student-teachers are united by their presence in action. It will always be a de-mythologising practice" (p140). It is also recognised that there is a lack of parity between formal and informal educational environments. This point was made by two of the lecturers I interviewed. Firstly, Kerem, who had taken part in an occupation on campus was concerned that 'official' university knowledge 'de-legitimises' other forms of knowledge. Secondly, Jim in the context of the Scottish referendum mentioned not only the discussions about independence within the classroom, either formally or informally, but the discussions in 'counter-spaces' such as pubs and bus-stops.

[2] Critical pedagogy is criticised from 'within', for example, Ellsworth (1989) and Webber (2006) from a feminist perspective and Gore (1993) from a post-modern perspective offer critiques of this approach. Some writers (such as Lather, 1991; hooks, 2003; Bruening, 2011) are explicitly critical of what they see as a dominant Marxist perspective in critical pedagogy which in their view does not address issues of race, feminism and post-

colonialism (see Ebert (2009) and Brown (2013) for a response to this claim). In addition, Freire responds to criticisms of his work in 'Pedagogy of Hope' (1992). Further criticisms have suggested that critical pedagogy does not link and work with social movements (Cho, 2010; Tarlau, 2014) and that critical pedagogy does not move out of the university (Lauder, Freeman-Moir and Scott, 1986) but see Castree (2000) for arguments on the importance of a focus within the university as a workplace, and Couldry, (2011) for arguing that that a focus both within and beyond the university is necessary. Critical pedagogy does not have a strategy for transformative change (Hatcher, 2007). Also, the charge that critical pedagogy has been slow to address ecological issues (Bowers & Apffel-Maglin (2004) but see Malott & Porfilio (2011) for a response to this claim.

[3] It is difficult to identify and quantify radical academics or the 'small group of critical pedagogues' (Canaan, 2013) in higher education in the UK. This is because of the 'turnover' of university staff and also because academics involved in critical education may not define themselves as critical pedagogues or indeed define their education/social justice agenda as critical pedagogy. For example, two academics, both key writers within the field of critical pedagogy, Au and Apple (2007, p457) refer to themselves in this way: "Both of us are part of a tradition of critical education that seeks to democratise the ways in which knowledge, teaching, participation, funding, and so much else are now dealt with in education. And both of us see clear relations between acting in the educational arena and acting in the larger society". This view would also characterise the 17 academic participants in this research. All self-identified as academic-activists and all would see themselves as part of the tradition of critical education. Because I adopted this broad definition, I sometimes use terms such as critical educator and critical pedagogue interchangeably.

The following are examples of critical education and critical pedagogy within UK higher education: The Critical Pedagogy Collective (see Canaan, 2013); The Re-invention Centre for Undergraduate Research at Warwick University (Lambert, Parker & Neary (2007) and The Social Science Centre, Lincoln (Earl, 2015). Coventry University hosted a conference in 2016 on 'Jacques Ranciere and Critical Pedagogy'. Postgraduate programmes have been established such as: M.A. in Activism and Social Change at Leeds University (Hodkinson, 2009); and MSc in Social Justice and Community Action at Edinburgh University.

In terms of research, Rikowski (2007) noted that the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council included a 'Critical Pedagogies Project'. More recently, academics at Liverpool University received HEA funding for the project 'Assessing Critical Pedagogy: Non-traditional learning and module assessment' (Martinez Serrano *et al*, 2015). Manchester University's School of Education and Environment outlines on its webpage the research activity of the "Critical pedagogies thematic research programme which focuses on curriculum and pedagogy across the field of education from a critical perspective" and mentions research grants totalling £1.1million in ESRC funded projects.

Rikowski (2007, np) appears sceptical as to the transformatory potential of this type of research. He notes that "...whether this strategy results in critical pedagogy becoming crushed under the hoof of government education agendas, or those agendas becoming radicalised, remains to be seen. The recent research project at Liverpool University led by Martinez Serrano *et al* (2015, p18) concluded that: "It is clear that the marketisation and commoditisation of the British HE system has made it simultaneously more difficult and (we argue) more important to pursue principles of Critical Pedagogy".

[4] Definitions of neo-liberalism are varied (Flew, 2014) and contentious (Saad-Fihlo & Johnston, 2005; Freedman, 2014), but consistent with the theoretical approach of this thesis, it is argued that neo-liberalism is an intrinsic part of capitalism and describes this system (involving the balance of class forces) at a particular stage of historical development

(Harvey, 2005). Further, it is also argued that neoliberalism operates at the level of appearances and that consequently there are always contradictions and tensions between its stated aims, for example 'the free market' and its practices (Holborow, 2015).

[5] Three of the university academics interviewed for this research, work in the field of popular education. Whilst Wiggins (2011) distinguishes between critical pedagogy and popular education as two opposing philosophies and practices, I share the view of Crowther *et al* (2005) which links critical pedagogy and popular education. Second, and in line with the general Gramscian framework of this research, I draw on Mayo's (2014) characterisation of Gramsci's organic intellectual as one broad enough to encompass critical pedagogy in the academy as well as popular educators and cultural workers such as community and social activists. See also Kane (2013) for a critical discussion of the differences and similarities between Marxism and popular education.

[6] I worked as a Study Adviser (sometimes called a Learning Developer) at a Northern University from 2005-2008. For professional development purposes I joined a practitioner-based UK organisation for those working in the area of learning development - the Learning Development in Higher Education and Network (LDHEN). This organisation maintains its own JISC mail list and publishes a journal. Its work generally focusses on students' self-directed learning (Vassallo, 2013) and the use of various models of learning to develop learning strategies often within a narrative of student empowerment. There was, at the time I engaged with the organisation, very little critical analysis of the politics of the curriculum or of learning strategies or any link to critical pedagogy. The dominant narrative at the time was an 'academic literacies' approach (Lea & Street, 1998), which itself was underpinned by a post-modern perspective. See Danvers (2016) for recent doctoral research by someone working in learning development and analysing this area from a feminist perspective.

Secondly, and also for professional development purposes, I completed a Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice. As part of research for this qualification, I discovered the area of critical pedagogy where education is seen as a potential site for transformative social and political change (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). I was introduced to writings on critical pedagogy both in terms of the theoretical underpinnings of various strands of critical pedagogy (postmodern, feminist, Marxist) and also on the implications of critical pedagogy for the classroom. What I did not investigate in any detail at that time (2006-8) was the relationship between critical pedagogy and activism within and beyond the university; a theme taken up in this current research.

## **Chapter 2: The changing nature of UK higher education**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This research centres on the neoliberal university and the role of academic activists within it. The previous chapter considered the characteristics and development of the neoliberal university, and this chapter develops and amplifies further those aspects of higher education that impact on the practices of academics within them. For example, the academic activists in this research, when interviewed, emphasised the limitations on their work as a result of what they saw as neoliberal changes to higher education. This chapter, then, will outline some of those changes and help to set the background to the analysis of interviews in chapter 7.

The first part of the chapter provides some contextual background to developments in UK higher education. Although noting developments since the post-war period, it will particularly focus on the links with the structural changes to the capitalist economy since the early 1970s (McNally, 2009; Harvey, 2010). These changes in higher education are linked to three key developments: the creation of private markets in education (DfE, 2003; DBIS, 2017); that higher education is increasingly defined as a commodity with all that that implies for individuals (Radice, 2013); and the development of prescriptive monitoring regimes that encroach on human agency (Clegg, 2003; 2014; Ball, 2012). Taken together, these issues show the changing relationship between universities, the market and the State. In the light of these developments, the purpose in the second part of the chapter will consider debates around the importance of higher education as a public good (Raduntz, 2004; Martin, 2009; Burawoy, 2011; Giroux, 2011).

### **2.2 The expansion of higher education**

The expansion and massification of higher education can be traced back to the post-war period when, as Calhoun (2014) notes, increased state funding for education was linked to an era of economic growth and prosperity. In the 1960s, the Robbins Report (1963) recommended an expansion in higher education. This expansion was not confined to numbers but entailed the adoption of new approaches and strategies to higher education (Calhoun, 2014). By the 1970s, higher education underwent further significant developments often seen as linked to the rise of the knowledge economy (discussed in more detail in chapter 3). Because Raduntz (2004) sees

higher education as a mode of production which is subject to the same tensions as other spheres of the economy, cost-saving efficiencies will be deployed such as the introduction of fees, thus replacing labour intensive pedagogies with self-directed learning and opening up higher education privatisation.

The neo-liberal re-structuring of higher education has been increasingly harnessed to international competitiveness (DBIS, 2017; Brown and Carusso, 2013) and, within the university, to a 'new public management' (Deem & Brehony, 2005) [1] and individual performance policy focus (Ball, 2012; Radice, 2013). Further constraints on radical academics outlined by Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) include the hierarchical authority of the academy with its focus on knowledge production within the institutional REF (Research Excellence Framework) and a career structure which is linked to publishing and financial reward. These are seen as aspects of social control rather than, as claimed by universities, academic autonomy [2]. Despite the ideology of academic professionalism, Raduntz, (2004) defines educators as 'waged workers' and therefore they are subject to the same pressures as all workers (Ellis *et al*, 2014). This suggests that it would be in their interests to work with other workers to resist neoliberal changes (Lauder *et al*, 1986; Castree, 2000). As Radice (2013) has pointed out, higher education expansion involved a decreased unit of resource and a fall in academic pay in relative terms. McGettigan (2013, p186) also notes the lack of democratic process inside universities, with managers, in his view, more focussed on student feedback than on academics. He argues that the corporatism of universities has undermined academics' ability to act as a "...self-critical community of scholars".

The Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s continued and amended the Robbins Report (1963) principle of higher education expansion by making courses available to wider sections of society (Department for Education & Science, 1985). The higher education sector was expanded by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), following which 30 polytechnics in England and Wales assumed university status. The Act also established various routes to higher education, including vocational qualifications and access courses alongside 'traditional' academic qualifications [3].

Further growth was recommended by the Dearing Report (1997) and subsequently the Labour Government (1997-2010) set a target of 50% of 18–30 year-olds to access higher education by 2010. However, in 1998, the Labour Party abolished maintenance grants and introduced up-front charges in the form of means tested tuition fees up to a maximum of £1,000 per year. Higher education, while seeing an increase in student numbers, was, however, continuing to reproduce existing social inequalities. For example, only 19% of those from disadvantaged backgrounds attend university, while a higher proportion of privately educated pupils go on to 'elite' universities than state educated pupils (Sutton Trust, 2013).

In addition, Kennedy (2010) points to the problematic link between the economy and the expansion of higher education. He cites the fact that the growing service economy since the 1970s has led to a degradation of employed work (Ainley, 2016; 2017). This is currently visible in the growth of precarious labour and low-paid work and the rise of zero-hours contracts [4]. Recent HESA statistics (Labour Research, 2015) for example, show that nearly 1 in 3 (32%) graduates are doing a non-graduate job. In terms of academic work, both Martin (2009) and Radice (2013) note a continuing loss of professionalism and autonomy in higher education.

The Browne Review (2010) was published in the wake of a global economic crisis in 2007/8 where, in the UK and elsewhere, nation states used public money to finance the private debts of the banking system (McNally, 2009). The Review (2010) recommended a withdrawal of most public funding from universities with a shift of financial responsibilities onto students leading to increased tuition fees, re-packaged student loans/debt as deferred payment and "re-designed universities as sites of service provision; consumer activity and commodity exchange" (Freedman, 2011, p1). In Ibrahim's (2011) view, these changes acted as a catalyst provoking student demonstrations and occupations in 2010. This period saw the implementation of austerity as a political policy, which sought to re-structure an economic system beset by systemic crisis by shifting public expenditure to the private sector, an approach criticised by mainstream economists such as Krugman (2015) and Stieglitz (2008; 2016). This context of economic crisis has led some commentators to stress the economic and political volatility of UK universities. Green (2016) for example, underlines this volatility by noting that many universities are 'booming' in terms of income from expansion, borrowing money, income from philanthropy, collaborative



research and intellectual property opportunities. Yet these strategies can also create greater volatility; for example, the more that universities try to maximise income from overseas students, the more vulnerable they are to fluctuations in the money markets. As Holmwood *et al* (2016) point out, the Government's White Paper recognises that opening up a market in higher education will increase the likelihood of institutions going bankrupt.

Universities are expected to compete in a global environment and so are re-defining their nature, purpose and aims. Bassett (2006) notes the influence of organisations such as, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), amongst others, as influencing policy agendas in higher education. Bassett (2006, p4) argues that higher education is being re-defined by global forces:

No longer is international higher education made up of merely national systems that educate citizens for local employment and national service. Instead, higher education is being re-defined at many levels as an international service to be regulated through international trade agreements.

The Browne Review re-affirmed the importance of higher education to the economy and also the re-positioning of the student as a consumer within an education system now seen as a consumer product, rather than a public good. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) has continued the marketization of higher education and sets the scene for greater competition between universities. Re-framing students as consumers, the legislation includes continuing the fee-loan regime, establishing an Office for Students (OfS) and allowing 'for profit' providers to become universities.

Holmwood *et al*'s (2016) detailed criticisms of government changes to higher education include the suggestion that the changes will impact on academic staff conditions. First, academic freedom will be compromised, partly, for example, because research that is critical of manufacturers and corporations, risks losing funding [5]. Linked to this is the effect of the impact agenda, introduced by HEFC and the Research Councils as part of REF 2014. In Holmwood *et al*'s (2016) view, this will involve the government setting priorities for research councils in terms of short-term objectives, place university research at the short-term imperatives of

commercial research and would involve no public funding unless there is a private or government beneficiary.

Second, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will, in their view, increase pressure on academic staff as a result of its problematic metrics and definitions of satisfaction. They see a danger that "...boosting 'satisfaction' involves dumbing down; teaching to test; grade inflation and skewing hiring practice" (p28). Overall, Holmwood *et al* (2016, p4) point to a central contradiction in the government's proposals arguing that: "The regulatory framework that is being introduced...will undermine the declared aims to improve teaching quality, to enhance social mobility and to improve access and achievement."

Another point, made by Danvers (2013) regarding the increasing measurement of education and research quality via the REF and National Students Survey (NSS), is that although these are presented as neutral mechanisms, they reflect existing inequalities. For example, she cites Morley's (2015) view that ideas of research quality in the REF reflects gendered inequalities and also that Marginson & Van de Wende's (2007) research on the apparent objectivity of university league tables privileges "...Western science focussed and research-intensive institutions" (Danvers, 2013, p17).

Changes in the funding and re-organisation of higher education has led opponents to argue that the concept of a university has been re-defined. As public education is subordinated to the neo-liberal market, higher education starts to resemble training centres where managerialism, entrepreneurship and citizenship are key concepts (Canaan, 2011, 2013; Holborow, 2015). For example, Ainley (2016) argues that one of the most significant outcomes of the marketization of higher education has been the re-definition of large parts of higher education as further education to create a new tertiary system. This new model of higher education is epitomised, in Ainley's (2016) view, by the 'Business Studies University'. This refers to the fact that around 20% of undergraduates in England choose from a collection of modules associated with programmes with business in their title. In addition, even traditional disciplines and STEM subjects make available modules that are oriented to business, marketing or some form of entrepreneurialism (Holborow, 2015). Ainley (2016) suggests this shift is linked to putting student choice (DBIS, 2011) at the heart of the HE system,

rather than disciplinary knowledge. Edwards (2011) argues that modularisation and accreditation are part of the commodification of knowledge and are in line with the idea of the possessive individualism that she sees as particularly prevalent in the educational reform of the last thirty years.

The next section will consider responses to these changes in higher education and their impact on the concept of the university as a public good.

### **2.3 Defending the university as a public good**

Although East, Stokes & Walker (2014) acknowledge that the public good is a contested concept, they argue that it is broadly used to suggest its importance to higher education, not simply from an individual or instrumental perspective, but in terms of contributing to a wider social and political debate. Critical educators, therefore, defend the idea of the University as a public good, although it has been suggested (Freedman & Bailey 2011; Mayo, 2014) that the introduction of student tuition fees has begun to blur the distinction between the university as a public or private institution. Ball (2012), for example, speaks of Western universities as ‘hybrid’ institutions, where public and private interests inter-twine, but where corporate interests prevail. Collini (2012) and Couldry (2011) suggest a broad vision of a university that has to be constantly struggled for in the face of neo-liberal re-structuring. Couldry (2011, p44) argues for a socially inclusive university where: “a critical and reinvigorated vision of the social purpose of university teaching as a tool for expanding and sustaining public knowledge is at the heart of the struggle.”

However, the Institute for Public Policy Research website (2013, np) sees no contradiction between market-led universities and the concept of a public good, suggesting that: “Over the past 50 years higher education has been transformed from an elite system...our universities provide us with a significant national economic advantage as well as a vital public good.”

For critical educators such as Giroux (2011, p120) higher education had, and still should have, a ‘civic mission’ arguing that the market cancels out social responsibility and the ‘pedagogical imperative of truth telling’. Holmwood *et al*’s (2016, p3) analysis of the then White Paper (2016), now the 2017 Act, notes that it attempts to open up education to the market and present a “new model of higher education that sees investment in human capital as a private benefit”.

The Government's re-definition of universities as corporate entities while at the same time espousing values of freedom of choice, social mobility, personal responsibility and democratic participation, highlights these tensions and contradictions (Freedman, 2011) and opens a debate central to critical education; that is whether the fundamental contradictions of a capitalist economy and the systemic crises of the system will ever be able to deliver promised educational and other social reforms (Mészáros, 2015). This is not to suggest that critical educators should not argue for the university as a public good, as well as resisting those aspects seen as detrimental to encouraging critical thought. Holmwood *et al* (2016) envision higher education as offering a wider public benefit, maintaining an independent area of research and debate and offering a place for critical thought to continue, unfettered by market demands.

Burawoy (2004; 2008; 2011) has championed the idea of a public sociology in an attempt to respond to the pressures of commodification and regulation in higher education. He posits an alternative public university that should not adopt a Western model but be based on a critical engagement with the wider society as well as offering a critical sphere for debate. Burawoy sees the university as having a significant location in a 'deliberative democracy' given that, in his view, the conventional representatives of the public, that is, trades unions, political parties and voluntary organisations, are failing in their democratic functions. For Burawoy (2011) the public university has four functions that are interdependent. The first of these is the production of professional knowledge, evaluated by academics. Second is the involvement in the policy realm and the application of knowledge. Third is the continued development of a community of scholars producing critical knowledge. Finally, is that this critical knowledge is part of a wider public debate regarding the broad direction of society. These four functions formed the basis of Burawoy's (2004; 2011) idea of an organic public sociology [6].

For Giroux (2002; 2006; 2012) reclaiming the links between learning and social democratic change means seeing higher education (and schools) as re-vitalised public spheres. He criticises the current North American education system where a 'bare' pedagogy means that: "...market ideals take precedence over democratic values." (2006, p68). Earlier, however, Giroux (2002, p5) had suggested that academics, in their role as 'public intellectuals' should "nourish the proper balance

between democratic public spheres and commercial power” [7]. This is seen in the context of the development of a ‘radical’ or ‘substantive democracy’ (2012, p10). However, Giroux’s views of substantive or radical democracy have been criticised by educators such as McLaren & Jaramillo (2010) as failing to address fundamental issues of exploitation within capitalism that would require radical transformation. Indeed, Giroux (2006), similar to Apple (2011), tends to discuss higher education in the context of neo-liberalism and globalisation rather than capitalism. This is significant because it suggests that the worst excesses of capitalism, manifested as, and through, neoliberalism and globalisation, can be reformed. Apple (2011, p238) is similarly not challenging capitalism in his analysis as much as neo-liberalism and globalisation. He suggests that: ‘Neoliberal, neo-conservative and managerial impulses can be found throughout the world, cutting across both geographical boundaries and even economic systems.’

For Apple, then, the problem is not capitalism per se, but ‘unfettered capitalism’ (p241). Giroux (2011, p129) emphasises the student as a citizen in a potentially global democracy where the role of academics is to provide them with knowledge to allow them to develop their full potential ‘regardless of family wealth’.

By contrast, Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) offer a detailed critique of the limitations of the role of critical educators in schools and higher education. Writing in the 1980s, they were critical of radical academics who appear incapable of moving beyond ‘scholastic theorising’ (p84) to confront the structural limitations of capitalist education and offer concrete strategies for a move beyond capitalist relations of production. Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986, p93) locate this inability of radical academics to see beyond mainstream academia, in the structural and historical conditions of education under capitalism. This view does not, therefore, implicate individuals within neo-liberal higher education, but they do suggest that “...the solution lies in a self-reflexive critique of the structural constraints under which radical academics labour”.

Raduntz (2004) draws on the ‘education-economy relation’ to outline the contradictory structural role of academics. In her view the fundamental contradiction in a capitalist economy for academics is their location at the interface of a ‘public good/private gain divide’ (p13). This tension revolves around the idea of the

university as a social good and as important for the benefit of the wider society, and the demands of an increasingly privatised and marketised education system.

Raduntz (2004, p2) points to the dilemma of the idea of higher education as a public good in this way:

there is a fundamental opposition within education between the aims of delivering, on the one hand, a socially responsive quality education for the public good, for the population as a whole, and on the other, a delimiting and impoverished education to serve the pursuit of private capital gain by a minority.

For some critical educators (e.g. Canaan, 2012; 2015) the difficulties and limitations of a neo-liberal higher education directs their attention to ways of enacting critical pedagogy beyond the university. Canaan (2012, p13) uses the Freirean concept of hope which she explains as being offered to counter the growing totality of neo-liberalism. It offers students a way of viewing the world beyond neo-liberal ideology. She agrees with Lauder, Freeman-Moir and Scott that training is the focus in Higher Education, rather than critique or knowledge production, and students face a sense of 'immobility' in the face of neo-liberal ideology. She sees critical pedagogy as a mechanism to engage students to see a way forward beyond it as it offers them "hope, agency and a chance to work with others to make a difference to the world".

Canaan (2012, p5) describes her involvement within a university situation and in experiments beyond university, which, although they have their limitations [8] offer a more productive way to educate than the mainstream. Regarding academic knowledge, she states, but does not explain her view that: "For us, as the Critical Pedagogy Collective, academic knowledge production processes differ from, but are not superior to, those developed by progressive grassroots and/or campaigning groups."

One of the projects she is involved in outside the university is the Social Science Centre in Lincoln [9]. Although small scale, the intention, Canaan (2011, p20) claims is: "...to link with other self-funded education outside the mainstream ...contributing to the emergence of a possibly articulated counter-neo-liberalised university."

The Social Science Centre is run as a co-operative, on autonomist principles where "students are collaborators in the production of knowledge" (p23). Another variant of education as collaboration and a way of resisting the neo-liberalisation of higher

education is to enact education on co-operative grounds and see the university as a workers' co-operative. An example of this approach is critically considered in the next section.

## **2.4 Re-imagine the university: set up co-operatives**

Neary & Winn (2017) argue that they analyse higher education from a position that moves beyond the public- private divide. They do this by attempting an alternative model of higher education which draws on the history of the international co-operative movement and the Marxist labour theory of value. Neary & Winn (2017) claim that their work "...recognises academic labour and the academic commons as the organising principle for the production of knowledge" (p117).

Because Neary & Winn (2017) also analyse the university as a factory or workplace, they argue that it can be democratised, which for them means adopting a co-operative structure. Similarly, from an economic democracy perspective, Malleson (2015) argues that the market can be democratised, but requires a separation of politics, economics and the view of a neutral state, which can regulate and re-distribute, using mechanisms of subsidy and taxation. For Malleson (2015, p10) "Extending democracy to finance and investment is in large part about expanding what it means to be an equal citizen of a democratic state."

Winn (2015, p45) argues about the co-operative university that: "at its best such a project becomes a laboratory for the creation of forms of social co-operation and subjectivities that arguably would form the basis of a post capitalist world."

For Winn (2015), like Shukaitis (2010), worker co-operatives are experiments in how students and workers could jointly run society and produce a commodity called knowledge. In addition, worker co-operatives are seen as models of pre-figurative politics [10]. Marcuse (2015) however, suggests that the role of co-operatives should be 'supported but not exaggerated' (np). Mészáros (2015, p29) is also critical of workers decision making in enterprises as a part of direct democracy. This is too limited because challenges to capitalism require radical changes "...to the social metabolisms as a whole, superseding its alienated character and the alienating superimposition of overall decision making by the state over society."

Malleson (2015) also argues for moving beyond the public-private debate by arguing that economic democracy involves a set of reforms which embodies a vision which is market socialism. However, this view is criticised by writers such as Smith (2011, p32) who argues that the concept 'economy' expresses definite social relations of production but that "...the organisation of these relations and their historical character are invisible."

Sotiris (2014) argues that resistance must go beyond seeing the university as just a public social good and that examples of resistance such as occupations or rent strikes on campus must be positioned within broader movements against austerity and for social change. For Sotiris (2014) universities should be seen, in Gramscian terms, as not only part of bourgeois hegemonic apparatus (which includes institutions, agents, practices, ideologies) but as neoliberal institutions which are not just ideological but incorporate disciplinary, economic and political practices. For Sotiris (2014, p11), the university is more than just about content but also about "a complex articulation of practices and strategies". He argues that the university should be thought of in radical new ways in terms of its "counter-hegemonic potential", which refers to not just resistance, but experimentation, involving new forms of collectivity, democracy, and social interaction. He argues: "We need a strategy to defend, re-appropriate and transform the university through struggles and movements" (p12). Universities, he suggests, should offer "concrete examples of critical and emancipatory social and educational practices", with this experimentation beginning here and now. Sotiris calls this a strategy of "dual power" (p13) within universities, that is, creating spaces for new forms of struggle and practices. Examples of this would no doubt include the student demonstrations and occupations that emerged in 2010 and addressed issues such as the re-appropriation of space, new uses of social media; and alternative knowledge practices such as sit-ins and 'teach-outs' (Aitchison, 2012; McCarthy, 2012; Neary & Amsler, 2012).

For academics, this means new ways of research, particularly collective working in and for the wider movement which he terms 'militant research'. This envisages a research community and process involving alternative higher education structures, radical collectives of workers and students and researchers and activists. In his view,



(Sotiris, 2014, p15) "...militant academics have a moral obligation to contribute to the ideas, information and analysis of the conjuncture."

## **2.5 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter set out the argument that changes related to the development of neoliberalism impacted on the nature and structure of higher education and knowledge production. It also critically examined a number of approaches, from a critical education perspective, that consider the 'public-private' debate regarding higher education today. It considered alternative visions of higher education which sought to transform the neoliberal university.

Within all of these issues, there are key concepts that relate to the two inter-related research questions. Those questions are: to what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation? and in what ways can academia be linked within and beyond the university? As this chapter, and the previous chapter, has shown, the neoliberalisation of higher education has resulted in profound changes to education. These changes have impacted on the role of academics in higher education and were reflected in the responses given by the academic activists I interviewed for this research. They referred to some of the issues mentioned here: lack of autonomy and professionalism; precarious and low paid labour; the introduction of fees, student loans and debt; and an individual performance policy focus and cost savings. All would seem to militate against critical, activist work within the university. However, there are issues in this chapter that might suggest a way forward. Universities play a contradictory role and these contradictions can be critiqued by academic activists, within and beyond the academy. A central contradiction is the public/private divide, for example, the university espousing choice, social mobility and democratic participation while at the same time functioning as a business and corporate entity. These contradictions can be critically studied and acted on by academics and students to uncover the underlying neoliberal mechanisms at work.

A second point mentioned in this chapter is that academics are professionals, but also waged workers. Raduntz (2004) uses this argument as a way for academics to link with other workers within and outside the university, to form alliances and become involved with campaigns that would mobilise wider forces in challenging. It

points towards a possible response to the question as to the ways that academia and activism can be linked within and beyond the university.

These issues emerge again in the next chapter where theories of critical pedagogy alongside, and related to, the emergence of a neoliberal phase of capitalism are critically discussed.

## Footnotes

[1] For example, Holmwood *et al* (2016) argue that, following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), academic board responsibilities for strategic direction and objectives increasingly excluded academic staff who have been replaced by managerial teams. Such developments were not specific to higher education but reflected wider changes to the wider public sector, which were all affected by private sector managerialism and the logic of the market.

[2] Canaan (2011, p15) in a description of her attempts to enact Freirean principles of critical pedagogy in an HE programme, updates this with examples of institutional constraints such as the decision not to re-name a module 'Liberation Sociology' as it might have been vetoed by the university management.

[3] This greater accessibility and widening participation led to the emergence of discourses around 'damage' and 'loss' in higher education (Morley, 2003). See also writers such as Haggis (2006) for discussions and critique of ideas of 'dumbing down' in terms of academic standards. Rather, Holmwood, Hickey & Wallis (2016) link 'dumbing down' in higher education to the current White Paper's focus on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the emphasis given to student 'satisfaction'. Similarly, Collini (2013) argues against reducing all "...activity to a common managerial metric" as this will have reductive consequences for knowledge production, thinking, meaning and understanding."

[4] But note Choonara's (2018) research that suggests that precarity is not a new phenomenon but has always been a feature of capitalist economies.

[5] This concern comes at a time when, as Warrell (2016) reports, government funding for British universities has declined but the commercial links between universities and business have increased. For example, the teaching grant that institutions receive from the government will drop from £4.72 billion in 2010-11 to £1.36 billion in 2016-17. Drawing on HEFCE statistics on collaboration between universities and businesses, Warrell (2016) shows that 2014-15 saw a rise of more than 6% year on year to £4.2 billion. This includes joint research, consultancy, involvement in CPD programmes and income from intellectual property.

Steve Smith, Vice chancellor of Exeter University, said that these figures showed how much universities contributed to the economy, given that the combined 6.2% increase in higher education business activity outperformed GDP growth of 2.2% in 2015.

[6] Burawoy contrasted his idea of an organic public sociology with the traditional public sociology of C. Wright Mills (1970), whom Burawoy criticised for his vision of the 'independent intellectual'. In Burawoy's view, this stance was both elitist and pessimistic of the mass society where individuals are atomised and manipulated. By contrast, an organic public sociology moves the academic beyond the academy and into civil society, by which Burawoy means communities, labour movements and associations. Burawoy (2005) has defended the public university and the public intellectual against the pressures of commodification and instrumentalisation. He argues for a public sociology where the 'reflexivity' of public sociology is part of the counter-weight to instrumentality. His four types

of sociology are mutually re-enforcing and would build the university's role as a mediator of deliberative democracy and would strengthen the critical public sphere (Corcoran, p10). Burawoy supported C. Wright Mills (1970) idea of turning private troubles into public ones. O'Connor (2012) also makes this point but in terms of reflecting on a plurality of perspectives. O'Dowd (2012) argues that: The way in which public intellectuals and experts engage with civil society, with the groups that challenge the state and market, and the equation of state, economy and society is crucial' (p101). Zussman *et al* (2007) note that Burawoy's public sociology reaches beyond the university and engages with 'diverse publics' about values. It also involves teaching and engaging students and their lived experience. In terms of an organic public sociology, sociologists work with publics such as the labour movement, communities of faith, immigrants' rights groups to make the private public. Public sociology exists with professional sociology, critical sociology and policy sociology. Public sociology is bound to 'civil society' (associations and movements that stand apart from the state and economy). Burawoy insists that public sociology is politically neutral, but this is criticised by Piven (2007) who argues that it should be critical.

Criticisms of Burawoy's idea of a public sociology are that it compartmentalises society. For some it politicises sociology from an "intellectually rigorous core of the profession". Burawoy's public sociology re-thinks knowledge as he distinguishes between instrumental knowledge (professional and public sociology) and reflexive knowledge (critical and public sociology). But Wallerstein argues that this is a false distinction. In his view all sociologists are public sociologists and should engage in both instrumental and reflexive knowledge.

Interestingly, Canaan (2011) and her colleagues, as critical educators in higher education, developed a programme on public sociology to engage education and learning beyond the university. However, they saw limits to Burawoy's notion of a public sociology. Firstly, in their view it reinforced disciplinary insularity, merely compartmentalising public sociology as a sub-discipline of sociology. Second, public sociology as outlined by Burawoy was not explicit enough in its critique of oppression or of the implications of this opposition. Finally, this public sociology was not as dialogical as it could be, in the Freirean sense of students intervening in the world. For this reason, rather than students moving out of university as critically aware graduates, Canaan's students would engage beyond the university critically and dialectically as part of their studies.

[7] Giroux (2013, p152) focussed attention on students as the new public intellectuals during the Occupy Wall Street protests. Students on university campuses in the US who engaged in occupations were able to use ideas to engage academics as well as other students in discussions on the possibilities of resistance and to reclaim and reinforce higher education as a 'democratic public sphere' where "Rather than reducing learning to a measurable quantity in the service of a narrow institutional rationality, learning can take on a new role, becoming central to developing an education in the service of the public good".

[8] It is acknowledged, for example, that students do not receive university degrees; and are fee-paying.

[9] Earl (2015) and Neary & Winn (2017) assess this project and similar ones in more detail from an autonomist perspective.

[10] De Smet (2011, p341) is critical of pre-figurative politics and pre-figurative institutions and organisations because they lack a coherent and centralised force for change. Second, such institutions can appear static and imposed. By contrast, he argues that a dialectic of radical change means that these forms cannot be pre-determined any more than future societies can be determined. He suggests that "New resistance and collaboration stimulates new goals which are part of a generative process".

## Chapter 3: Critical pedagogy - An overview

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter considered the characteristics and development of the neoliberal university and the contradictions within it. It highlighted issues facing academics in neo-liberal higher education such as the prevalence of prescriptive monitoring regimes, a lack of autonomy, the framework of a business model of higher education and the responsibility of academics for the development of human capital. A central contradiction, the public/private divide of the neoliberal university, was raised as an issue that could provide the focus for academic critique. This concept embodies a key question within theories of critical pedagogy and that is the extent to which neo-liberal universities would ever be capable of delivering on their purported aims of, for example, enhancing social mobility or addressing issues of diversity and lack of inclusion.

The view that education is a *political* concept is central to critical pedagogy, therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to consider the political and philosophical bases of a range of perspectives in critical pedagogy. A background to the development and key themes of critical pedagogy was presented in the first chapter. It is a wide and varied field and here I will note some key characteristics that are particularly relevant to my research area, that of academic activism in neoliberal higher education. First is the view that critical pedagogy is an activist pedagogy, one that connects theory to action. This point would acknowledge the agency of students and also the importance of alliances with academics, activists and other workers within and beyond the university. Second is the role of teachers as transformative intellectuals, using radical critique to uncover hidden mechanisms of dominant power, oppression and exploitation. This also contributes to seeing students as agents recognising their own individual and collective power. Third, critical pedagogy is critically self-reflective, where academic activists see themselves, and their students, as social individuals and work to develop a critical consciousness through Freirean dialogue and engagement with the world.

This chapter is structured in the following way. First the broad structural changes that emerged in advanced capitalist societies in the 1970s are considered. Key to these developments were the rise of the knowledge economy and also the rise of social

movements. Both of these developments are relevant to critical pedagogy theories and to the context of higher education and the academic activist working within it. It then looks at theories of social change, focusing on the role of social class and other agencies in social change. It is argued that in a period of continued economic and political turbulence and inequality, the possibilities exist for those working within the framework of critical pedagogy to resist, in various ways, the neo-liberalisation of higher education. The changes continue to be resisted by academic and non-academic staff and students in higher education, as well as more widely by those campaigns that link all cuts in public spending whether in, for example, education, health, housing, welfare provision. The following section considers the neoliberal re-structuring of capitalism in the 1970s and the rise of the knowledge economy.

### **3.2 Post-industrial society and the knowledge economy**

Barker & Dale (1998) explain that the terms 'post Fordism', 'post-modernity' and the 'post-industrial society' all attempt to describe broad structural changes taking place within advanced capitalist societies since the 1970s. In their view, the early 1970s were a time when capitalism began a process of fundamental re-structuring as it emerged from a crisis of profitability. This re-structuring entailed a move from manufacturing to an information society. Technological development was transforming production and areas such as research, bio-medical development and mass media were becoming central to the economy. Castells (2000) has argued that the crisis of the 1970s resulted in the rise of a networked society, a particular feature of new global, informational capitalism, which meant the digital networking of all human productive activities. The rise of technological innovations was seen to be particularly significant for higher education and research universities (Giddens, 2000; Castells, Caraca & Cardosa, 2012). In the view of Callinicos (2006) these changes also signalled the beginning of the present transformation of UK higher education in terms of changes to the work of academics and the marketization of higher education. Fisher (2009) also argues that an acceptance of the inevitability of market relations, what he terms 'capitalist realism', has led to the establishment of a business ontology for all sectors of the economy including higher education.

The transformation of information (the knowledge economy) was seen as a new mode of production. This term involves several ideas, such as a rapid shift from

physical goods to immaterial goods meaning that production is increasingly becoming 'knowledge-intensive' in terms of the research needed to develop and market them. It follows from this that the success of companies now depends on the 'human capital' of the skills, knowledge and imagination of workers [1].

Second, these changes were said to have led to changes in the class composition of society. Giddens (1994), Castells (1996) and Hoogvelt (2012) all argue that a fundamental change to capitalism was that of space/time compression. By this they refer to the dominance of real time (electronic and instantaneous with the development of technological changes) over clock time (working time for labour). This change undermined the central dichotomy between capital and labour. Hoogvelt (2012) explains that, increasingly, capital works in the globalised hyperspace of circulation and financialisation, whereas labour begins to dissolve as a collective entity into individualised experience. Furthermore, the rise of a salaried class of managers, a new middle class, together with developments in the welfare state and mass education, made theories of class antagonism outmoded. In addition, such changes led to a reconstitution of the working class in a more differentiated and fragmented way. For example, the ties between the working class and a distinct working-class culture have lessened as has the traditional link to class-based politics (Savage et al, 2015) [2].

Finally, the rise of consumerism, especially in the USA, has meant that workers' consciousness has changed and that workers now define themselves more as consumers rather than producers. However, Jones (2004) argues that there cannot be an overall shift from production to consumption, as people can only consume what they can buy. Rather, increased consumption results from increased production. Second, he argues that individual consumption does not define the production process under capitalism which is about the production of surplus value.

From another perspective, Castells, Caraca & Cardoso (2012) suggest that this alternative economy is "...based on a different set of values about the meaning of life" (p12) and give examples such as eco-hackers and an emphasis on ethical production and trading as part of a non-consumerist culture. In their view, the new cultures that emerged were rooted in the social movements of the 1960s and 70s.

However, other writers, such as Callinicos (2006) and Fine *et al* (2010), caution against the idea of the knowledge economy. First, this is because physical goods are at the forefront of profitable developments and, by contrast, companies which invested in the dot.com boom in the 1990s overinvested subsequently leading to the crash of those industries. Second, successful economies today tend to be those such as Germany and China where manufactured goods are exported. Third, neo-liberal economies don't just need skilled, qualified, workers they also need an under-class of unskilled, precarious workers that can be pulled into the economy when needed. In any case, as Brown, Lauder & Aston (2011) point out, although the notion of a knowledge economy involves a flexible workforce without repetitive routines or physical work, modern call centres and mass offices are as alienating and de-skilling as assembly lines in the Fordist model. Finally, competition is part of the knowledge economy and with that comes the potential for some universities to go out of business or at least be underfunded. As Harvey (2010) argues, capitalism is a crisis-ridden system and any transformation to a knowledge economy, existing in a globalised capitalist system, will be subject to periodic crises such as the crisis of 2007/8.

Fine *et al*'s (2010) critique of the 'knowledge economy' argues that knowledge and science have always been central to Marx's theory of capital because the production of surplus value requires constant innovation. They make the point that "Labour both pre-supposes and generates knowledge in co-operative production" (p76). This relationship is constantly evolving and re-defining what is regarded as 'skill' at any moment. Therefore, given that knowledge has always been important for production, they argue that the quantitative growth of knowledge sectors is not sufficient to establish the claim for a knowledge economy [3]. In addition, Holborow (2015) notes that highly skilled knowledge workers are still compelled to sell their skills within the overall system of capitalist relations.

Further tendencies characterise this period of radical transformation according to Harvey (2010) who highlights the following. First is a rise internationally in NGOs espousing progressive ideas, which, although allowing a space for alternative ideas, are often, in his view, easily co-opted.

Second, along with the rise of NGOs, and particularly linked to the rise of the anti-capitalist movement, there has been the pre-dominance of autonomist ideas, particularly emerging from the World Social Forums of the 1980s and 1990s and linked to the writers Hardt & Negri (2000; 2004). Autonomist views share a suspicion of the state and a focus on civil society as a way to enact change. The strategies related to these views involve horizontal networking and localism. Interestingly, Carpenter (2015) links the emphasis on localism, in terms of autonomist ideas, with the importance of the 'local' in liberal democracy. She points to the 'downloading' of public services onto local communities as part of public policy and the narrative of empowerment.

Third, while trades unions and left political parties remain significant, an emphasis on parties which support neo-liberalism emerged with the policies of New Labour, driving forward the neo-liberal agenda adopted by the previous Conservative government. Indeed, in Fine's (2001) view, Giddens' (1998) influential 'Third Way' was a political manifesto for the emerging neo-liberalism of the time.

Fourth, this era saw the rise of social movements for radical social change at a time when the power and significance of trades unions had declined. Harvey (2010) gives examples of the peace movement, the environmental movement, campaigns against privatisation and the Poll Tax demonstrations as well as the rise of anti-capitalist movements after Seattle and the rise of the Occupy movement after the economic crash of 2007/8. McNally (2009) agrees that a new generation of activists emerged at this time in response to, for example, indigenous struggles, migrant rights and opposition to multi-nationals.

Finally, Harvey (2010) points to the rise of identity movements based, for example, on race, gender, and sexuality. In his view, such movements can at times appear antagonistic to class struggle. In addition, he feels that identity politics has tended to form the dominant analytical framework in the academy rather than a political economy or class analysis. I offer a critique of identity politics in section 3.5 below which along, with intersectionality, may have the potential to fragment debate and activism in higher education. These points about the rise of the anti-capitalist movement and other social movements have relevance to this research, particularly



the research question which asks in what ways academia and activism can be linked within and beyond the university. I return to this question in chapters 7 and 8.

In the following sections I engage with, and critique, various perspectives and debates, pointing out the relevance to academic activism in higher education. I consider in turn, a liberal pluralist analysis; a post-modern analysis; autonomism and an attempt at an integrative approach. Finally, I offer a Marxist analysis which introduces concepts of contradiction and relationality which I use, in the next chapter, to outline the theoretical orientation of this research.

### **3.3 Key perspectives relating to critical pedagogy**

This section considers a range of political perspectives in critical education in relation to the concept of the knowledge economy. There are of course dangers in presenting perspectives in this way as it may give the impression that they are static and ahistorical. In fact, there can be found a degree of overlap in these perspectives. In addition, it is important to contextualise these ideas and recognise that a variety of circumstances (economic, political, involving varying levels of resistance) all offer up opportunities and limitations for critical pedagogy and activism that cannot simply be ‘read off’ from a theoretical perspective or set of theoretical statements. Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986), for example, caution that key terms such as ‘resistance’ and ‘social movements’ can only be understood when subjected to strategic and concrete analysis.

Although not writing specifically on critical pedagogy, Thomas’ (2009) comments on perspectives in current radical political thought are relevant here. For example, he points to the limitations of the theories of Hardt and Negri ((2000; 2004) which involve the ‘multitude’ as the agent for transformational change. He also argues that Hallward’s ‘Political Will’ and the communism of Badiou and Zizek, are “too inclusive” in that all sections of society are seen as central to political transformation. He explains (Thomas, 2009a, np):

In a certain sense, the broadly democratic and inclusive dimensions of these...theories constitutes one of their limitations; by trying to be open in principle to all, they misapprehend that politics operates not only on the basis of unifying forces, but also of distinguishing between them, both in terms of their potentials for growth in the future and their concrete capacities for

specific actions in the present, confronting obstacles and opposing forces that are equally determinate.

He also problematizes these different perspectives because of their focus on the current political situation, rather than developing a strategy or programme of transformation. Hatcher (2007) and Mallott (2012) level a similar criticism within critical pedagogy, particularly against those classroom-based educators where criticality is always possible but often confined within the existing socio-political framework. For Hatcher, campaigning work beyond the classroom provides the basis for those with different political traditions to unite in activity. This idea of unity in action and of solidarity is central to any critically transformative project and although I advance a Marxist critical pedagogy, it is one that recognises the importance of building broad based movements involving and uniting those in higher education with others beyond the academy.

### **3.4 Post-industrial society and liberal pluralism**

Writers such as Anthony Giddens (1994; 1998; 2000) and Ulrich Beck (Beck, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2000) have written extensively on the new social world that has emerged as a result of the structural changes to capitalism and the rise of knowledge production. Rosa, Might & Renn (2013) note that both writers share a vision of a risk society that emerged from the process of globalisation. Giddens (1998; 2000) has argued that the politics of the 'Third Way' is a political philosophy where capitalism is consistent with the values of fairness, equality, responsibility and equality of opportunity.

Ulrich Beck's (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2000) 'individualisation thesis' attempted to capture the increasingly dissolving class structures and boundaries that were part of the structural changes in capitalist societies. In this post-class society, individuals no longer feel tied to traditional institutions such as class, community and family. Increasingly, individuals look to themselves to make life choices and decisions and, in doing so, reflexively create their own identities. Both Becks and Giddens emphasised the atomisation of individuals as a part of reflexive modernisation.

Three points could be made here. First, Callinicos (2007) suggests that the theory of reflexive modernisation emerged at a time of the restructuring of capital in the 1980s and where class inequalities were seen more as constituting individual problems

which were better served through personal strategies and life choices. Interestingly, the stress on the individual is found also in anarchist theorising, leading some anarchists e.g. Hercket, 2010 (cited in Blackledge, 2012) to suggest that the personal is political. However, in Blackledge's view this does not point to a strategy capable of building an alternative to capitalism.

Second, O'Boyle (2013) argues that, for Giddens, the knowledge economy means that reflexivity and creativity become the means of engagement for citizens in modern democracies. However, O'Boyle criticises this view on the basis that individualism and 'freedom to choose' in Giddens' theory, is at odds with a crisis-prone neo-liberal system which cannot ultimately deliver the citizenship rights envisaged by Third Way theorists and policy makers. He notes also that Giddens has accepted the inevitability of global capitalism.

Third, Mallot (2010) makes a similar point about the 'end of history' assumption and the inevitability of capitalism. He argues that the fall of the Soviet regime in 1989 marked, for those who equated this regime with 'actually existing socialism', an acceptance that there is no alternative to capitalism. In Mallot's (2010) view the implications for this are that many critical educators see critical pedagogy as limited to involving students in arguing for democratic rights within, not beyond or against, capital.

Indeed, for left liberal educators such as Beetham (2015), arguments against inequality and for social justice focus on the need to democratise society by developing a socialist consciousness to better engage as democratic citizens. In Beetham's (2015) view the 'public realm' is being undermined by neoliberalism. The public realm is based on "...a common citizenship and sense of mutual responsibility when we fall on hard times" (p44). He argues that common citizenship is being undermined by market logic and self-interest and he makes a clear distinction, as is characteristic of much pluralist theorising, between the public sphere and the economy. Beetham (2015, p45) explains: "Instead of the public sphere constituting a separate life domain with its own values, relationships and ways of working, it has become an extension of the market's logic and interests."

His view of the public appears to be based on a view of market socialism, where the capitalist market can exist in very different forms in different nation states. However,

it could be argued (Doogan, 2009), that such views tend to accept market forces as naturalised. Beetham's point is significant though, because, within critical pedagogy, some on the educational left (Apple, 2011; Giroux, 2010) argue that the reversal of neo-liberal policies entails a change in electoral politics or a change in ideology which has been invaded by neo-liberal ideas. On this view, education becomes a central site for the change of politics and ideology, but not necessarily for a fundamental transformation of capitalism as a system. However, as Harvey (2010) argues, the market is a reflection of capitalist, and therefore unequal, social relations, and that, in his view, there cannot be a neutral market. In times of economic crisis such as that of 2007/8, the resultant austerity agenda which emerged in the UK, was part of the targeting of hard won rights such as housing, pensions, health and higher education.

Interestingly, the views outlined above on citizenship and the public realm have parallels with writers such as Henry Giroux, whose writings on critical pedagogy are underpinned by a postmodern, Foucauldian perspective. Giroux's perspectives are outlined below, followed by a section on critical pedagogy and postmodernism.

Giroux's (1992) work marked a break with Marxism and, along with this, the abandonment of class as a defining and analytical feature of society. His postmodern/pluralist view of difference, power and indeterminacy points to a vision of a 'radical democratic social order' (p145) which in turn draws on the work of Hall & Jacques (1989) and Laclau & Mouffe (2001). It is perhaps ironic that Giroux argues for indeterminacy, which has implications for de-centring the subject at the same time that he focuses on individuals and civic responsibility. His view of a 'deliberative' model of democracy assumes that critical citizens will engage in democratic debate, highlighting and negotiating different points of view. Stevenson (2011) suggests that this view can, first, overstate the rationality of decision making and, second, that the ability of students to express different views is distorted by the inequalities in wealth and power in liberal democratic societies. He concludes that there are tensions within the writing of 'Third Way' theorists such as Giddens (1998) and Beck (2000) where democratic structures are characterised by a separation of politics and economics.

Giroux (1992) calls for a transformed education system which will produce citizens for a democratic society. The themes of democracy and citizenship are prevalent in Giroux's writings however, citizenship is a term which appears to be used uncritically, and without acknowledgement of the way in which citizenship and civic responsibility are key concepts in liberal democracy. McLaren (2010), without naming Giroux, rejects the view of those progressive educators who locate the struggle for democracy within the public sphere on the following grounds. First, that it is premised on a respect for 'democratic citizenship' without interrogating the limitations of this concept under neo-liberalism. Second, because it appears to appeal to moral sentiments and to individual consciousness, which under the ideological hegemony of capitalism, is, in McLaren's view (2010), insufficient to challenge capital.

In recent articles, Giroux (2002; 2006; 2010) characterises higher education as a democratic public sphere [4], albeit one which is debased by corporate capitalism. Because of this, Stevenson (2008) highlights similarities between the work of Giroux and Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams in the UK in terms of schools and colleges being spaces of critique. Giroux (2010, p190) argues, for example, that: "Higher education accordingly must become a site of on-going struggle to preserve and extend the conditions in which autonomy of judgement and freedom of action is informed by the democratic imperatives of equality, liberty and justice."

Giroux does not interrogate the terms 'liberty, equality and justice' even within the neo-liberal context of his analysis. There is no acknowledgement that such concepts can be read as central to social democracy and therefore can be contained within the status quo. Indeed, on this account, North American culture is seen as both capitalist and democratic. However, Kumar (2010) argues that terms such as 'justice' and 'freedom' are problematic because neo-liberalism applies these concepts to individuals as if they were autonomous and existed outside of the social relations in which they are embedded.

For Giroux (2010), the idea of a democratic public space is linked to a return to a 'strong democracy'. Quoting Wolin (2008), Giroux believes that the current crisis in democracy has arisen because, first, the power of government is no longer an expression of the collective will of the people; second, citizens have been de-

politicized, and third: "Democracy is now managed by corporations, ruling elites and right-wing fundamentalists" (p189). This view is interesting as it shows a distinction between the political (democracy) and the economic. Nixon (2011, p66) shares a similar view when he argues that "...the legitimacy of democracy cannot be left to the workings of market capitalism but must be based on the participation of the people." Further, a change of personnel (to replace the ruling elites), rather than a radical transformation of existing neo-liberalism, is what is needed for a strong democracy.

Universities, for Giroux (2010) are seen as a safe space where "...reason, understanding, dialogue and critical engagement are available to all faculty and students" (p190). However, this view is similar to many mainstream views on the role of higher education in liberal democracy (see for example, Barnett, 2011). Second, the Hillcole group would argue that there is no 'safe space' to debate ideas, there is no 'beyond capitalism', and that schools and universities are sites of struggle and contestation. Giroux's (2010) work is also focused on the individual:

Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of education, if not democracy itself" (p193).

However, the freedom to question and freedom of speech are central tenets of the same neo-liberal capitalism that Giroux criticises on other grounds. McLaren and Jaramillo (2010, p252) focus on this tendency within the left in general: '...the Left has accommodated itself to the hegemony of capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy, not by fighting against capitalism itself but by fighting capitalism within capitalism's own democratic rules.'

McLaren (McLaren & Rikowski, 2006) sets out his criticisms of civil society in a liberal democracy. First, he points out that civil society is not relatively autonomous from the state, the market and capital. Second, he argues that left liberals make an underlying assumption that civil society is a public space where social justice can be pursued in partnership and civic co-operation. However, he cites Holst (2002) who argues that civil society is not removed from capitalist social relations of inequality. Civil society is compatible with, indeed predicated on, enterprise zones, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship.

In addition, McLaren (2001) argues that it is difficult to bring about structural change by orientating activist politics in the civic sphere because of the role of the state. In liberal democracy this is more of an honest broker mediating between competing pluralistic demands, whereas Greaves, Hill & Maisuria (2007) argue that the state can never be neutral in capitalist society.

Given the debate between the HillCole group and left pluralists such as Giroux, it is important to note that a Marxist approach does not posit a simple reform versus revolutionary distinction. Kelsh & Hill (2006) support reforms under capitalism where they benefit workers but do so from a critical perspective towards reform movements. They acknowledge that reforms materially benefit working people so they are to be supported. However, given that capitalism is a crisis-prone system, those reforms can be dismantled. Also, reforms can point to the limits of capital as being unable to deliver workers' demands for, for example, welfare and education services. Furthermore, it is in the struggle for reforms that people's ideas will become open to change and to challenge the workings of capitalism (Kelsh & Hill, 2006). The next section will consider the postmodern turn in more detail.

### **3.5 Postmodernism and New Times**

The following section will critically consider the postmodern turn within educational theory. In Kellner's (2003) view, the 1970s saw a move from the structuralist theories of capital and education, such as Bowles & Gintis (1976), being replaced by post-structuralist versions which foreground race, gender, class and other subject positions. This cultural or postmodern turn influenced many writers on the educational left who felt that the changing composition of the working class and the increasingly fragmented, complex nature of post-industrial society made the classical Marxist view of society no longer relevant.

Writers within critical pedagogy such as Giroux (2000) turned to cultural studies, particularly the writings of Stuart Hall, and adopted a 'New Times', post-Fordist analysis, seeing in the development of capitalism, fundamental changes in the structure of society. Giroux, following Laclau & Mouffe (2001), views social struggles as not class based, but consisting of elements of different classes whose unity is established by the extent to which they believe in a particular ideology, not on the basis of an objective class position.

Along with economic changes in contemporary society, the New Times theorists drew on the writings of Foucault and other postmodernist theorists. Indeed, Cole & Hill (1995) argue that postmodernism is the ideology that underpins and justifies a neo-liberal phase of capitalism. Howie (2009) agrees with Harvey's (1989) view that the cultural turn made by the New Left connected better to anarchism and libertarianism than with traditional Marxism.

Central to a postmodern approach are two factors: first, a rejection of totality and metanarratives. In particular, as Zavarzedah (1995, p3) notes, capitalism as a "systematic and complex set of interconnected economic, social and cultural and theoretical perspectives" is rejected. Second, discursive and textual practices are not considered to be reflective, but constitutive in the formation of the modern world. Giroux (2000, p142) points to the centrality of culture, which for him is a "substantive and epistemological force" in shaping social identities. He argues that culture is "constitutive of agency(ies) and politics because it provides the resources through which individuals learn how to relate to themselves and others and the world around them" (2000, p141). Culture, for Giroux is a site for struggle on shifting terrain, which is open and indeterminate.

Sears & Mooers (1995) argue that there are implications for the move to indeterminacy. First, it means that society can only be understood in partial and fragmentary terms. Second, it shows an inability to specify the process of social transformation that will lead to emancipation. Third, society is an intersection of many systems, each with its own dynamics, for example, patriarchy, although Cole & Hill (1995) argue that such systems are under-theorised in the work of postmodern critical educators. Bannerji (2005) argues against theories of intersectionality where 'race', class and gender are seen as arising out of their own social sphere and then intersecting at certain moments. She draws on a Marxist approach to argue that social formations under capitalism are far more contradictory than presented by writers such as Giroux and are rooted in Marx's theory of dialectical social production and reproduction.

In the postmodern, fragmentary world, not only is the idea of society de-centred, so is the subject. There appears to be a contradiction at the heart of this perspective. On the one hand the subject is de-centred and postmodernism replaces the subject



with a proliferation of agencies. On the other hand, the rise of consumerism focuses on the role of the individual, though it is an individual driven now by desires rather than needs (Zavarzedah, 1995) and where the individual as consumer, 'freely chooses' subject identities. As Giroux (2000, p139) explains:

the educational force of the culture works to disrupt dominant forms of common sense and provide alternative identifications and subject positions that become crucial pedagogically for providing the categories, maps of meaning and contours of possibility through which people chose to imagine, define or write themselves as political agents or social actors.

It is this suggestion of subjects imagining themselves as social agents that has led to charges of idealism in the work of Giroux (Cole & Hill, 1995). For example, he suggests (2009, p3) that: "Any viable challenge to the culture of neo-liberalism, as well as the current economic crisis *it has generated* (italics added), must address the diffuse operations of power throughout civil society and the globe."

Here Giroux's focus is on the constitutive force of culture as it gives rise to the changing dynamic of capitalism. In Giroux's analysis, multiple sites of power exist. Difference and diversity are emphasised however without, as Wood (1995) claims, allowing these differences to be seen as relations of domination or oppression. The notion of difference becomes central in this perspective and is one used by Giroux to reject a class analysis and to foreground issues of 'race' and gender as well as class (Giroux, 2000). In terms of social identity, Giroux (2000, p139) draws on the work of Stuart Hall to challenge what he sees as a deterministic analysis of capitalist society and points to "the centrality of culture in the formation of subjective and social identities" and that this can provide: "...alternative identifications and subject positions that become critical pedagogically for providing the categories, maps of meaning and contours of possibility through which people choose to imagine, define or write themselves as political agents and social actors."

Here, Giroux is arguing, as do Laclau & Mouffe (2001), that subjects can freely choose and adopt subject positions, and that such positions are the product of cultural discourse, rather than being shaped by social structures. However, as Callinicos (2000) points out, individual choices are themselves context dependent and influenced by the social and economic circumstances in which people find themselves.

Giroux's view could be seen as an example of the cultural tendency to de-centre the subject. What is important on this account is not 'subjects' but 'subject positions'. Indeed, some writers such as Judith Butler (1990) view the category of 'woman' as a discursive construction, seeing the term 'woman' as problematic as it could contain many meanings and facets of identity. Further, Giroux (2004) argues that culture is the terrain of struggle. However, in a Marxist analysis, the cultural terrain is linked to other forms of oppression and exploitation within capitalist social relations. For example, Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren (2004, p185) argue that: "In a proper historical materialist account, 'culture' is not the 'other' of class but rather constitutes part of a more comprehensive theorisation of class rule in different contexts."

Giroux's focus on culture also raises issues of power and agency. For example, he argues (Giroux, 2000, p141) that "Culture is the social field where power repeatedly mutates, identities are constantly in transit, and agency is often located where it is least acknowledged." In Bannerji's view (2005), however, this is cultural determinism as opposed to economic determinism.

However, this points to a paradox which has been noted by Larrain (1995). On the one hand, there is the fragmentary, individualistic, constantly mutating model of power and agency that Giroux draws from aspects of postmodernism; and on the other hand is Giroux's support for social movements based on oppression such as gender, 'race' and sexuality, which are seen to give 'voice' to marginalised groups. In Larrain's (1995) view, social movements such as these can often essentialise difference.

However, Moore & Muller (1999) argue against a view which criticises the hegemonic knowledge of the powerful on the basis of the voices of the marginalised and excluded. In their view such an argument rests on an assumption that knowledge is reduced to experience and "knowledge is dissolved into knowing" What follows from this is that fragmentation and diversity is celebrated, as are identity politics, on the basis of authenticity of experience. The political implication of this, is that the site of social change moves away from class struggle based on relations of production under capitalism to a view of transformation based on identities and difference where class struggle is replaced by a hegemony of loose coalitions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

### **3.6 Autonomism and the rise of informational capitalism.**

Since the rise of anti-capitalist resistance, following Seattle in 1999, there has been a rise in autonomist theorising in radical theory and practice. This increased after the Arab Uprisings and Occupy, where these resistances appeared to exist outside of the mainstream, based on the occupation of public spaces. Some autonomists (for example, Clough & Blumberg, 2012) drew the conclusion that it was this that characterised 21st century politics and that resistance was no longer about electoralism or trades union struggle. Indeed, Alcott & Alcott (2015) refer to autonomism as the dominant strand on the left. It was heavily influenced by horizontalism and the view that there was a strength in confronting capitalism with fragmentation and power dispersal [5].

It has been argued above that changes to capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s led to a New Times perspective, which suggested that new social relations of production had emerged. This view influenced writers such as Giroux and Hall and others associated with post-Marxist thinking. At the same time a similar re-formulation of capitalism was being theorised. Autonomist ideas associated with writers such as Hardt & Negri (2004), Tronti (1965) and Holloway (2005) derives from a re-formulated Marxism and is often referred to as autonomist Marxism, although some writers highlight the close links between autonomism and post-modern thought (Gautney, 2009; Howie, 2009; Harvey, 1989).

For autonomist theorists these changes to capitalism were profound. Roggero (2011) identifies a new paradigm where fundamental changes in capitalist development “transform and rearticulate the prism of capitalist social relations” (p39). For Hardt & Negri (2000) fundamental structural changes in production and the relations of production involves an immaterial economy of signs and affective labour, with a focus on networked organisations and networked communication. Fuchs (2010) notes the rise of knowledge labour, or immaterial labour, which now becomes central to capitalist production. He defines this labour as “...labour that produces and distributes information, communication, social relationships, affects and information and communication technologies” (p141). He explains that there are two types of worker under ‘informational capitalism. First are direct knowledge workers, for example those employed as wage labour in firms or those self-employed that

produce 'knowledge goods' such as consultancy, software and media content. Second are indirect knowledge workers that are involved in unpaid labour as they produce and reproduce the social conditions of wage labour. Included in this category would be domestic labour, e.g. housework, education, relationships, affect and communication.

Knowledge, on this account, is a productive force, but it is no longer produced within the capital/labour relation. Instead, it is produced in all aspects of life. As this knowledge is still appropriated by the capitalist class, all knowledge workers are part of an exploited class. The significance of this development is that there is a fundamental change in class relationships. Hardt & Negri referred to this as a move from the mass worker to the social worker, given that exploitation is now a societal issue as the production of value is no longer linked to wage labour. The use of the term 'Multitude' (Hardt & Negri, 2004) expresses this view of a broadening of class which would include students, housewives, the unemployed, knowledge workers and migrants.

These changes are linked to the concept of autonomy which has a number of meanings. First is the view that labour in the 1970s was becoming more autonomous from capital as the crisis of profitability meant that capital started to look outside of the production process to the 'social factory' of production and reproduction, areas which it cannot fully control (Martin-Cabrera, 2012). Hardt & Negri (2004) refer to the autonomy of workers from formal institutions and organisations, be it the State or workers organisations. Further, Marks (2012) notes that different fractions of the class are autonomous from each other. However, Fuchs (2010, p144) argues that these relational changes in production mean that "...there is no clear-cut separation between the multitude and the capitalist class." The central form of exploitation in the informational economy is the exploitation of the 'commons' (resources that are produced such as commodities, knowledge, services and public infrastructure) by capital. It is this exploitation of the commons which has been central in the process of capitalist accumulation.

The idea of autonomy from institutions has given rise to the idea of self-reliant activity as well as the suggestion that resistance is part of all aspects of life not just waged work and that struggles therefore can emerge everywhere and at all times

(Marks, 2012). However, Alcott & Alcott (2015) caution that the autonomist view of a re-formulation of the working class, together with notions of self-reliant activity can lead to an overly romanticised and idealistic view of a defiance of capital at a time of cuts to living standards, attacks on trades unions and the ability of the State to forcibly evict those from occupied spaces. It leads them to argue that anarchism has been unable to develop effective anti-capitalist strategies. Linked to the idea of autonomy is that of 'refusal'. The proletariat is no longer just defined by its productive capacity but by its potential to refuse work, which itself undermines capitalism (Shukaitis, 2014; Tronti, 1965).

For Roggero (2011) it is not the internal logic of capitalism that has pushed these changes but rather the autonomous actions of labour. This is associated with the idea of the composition and re-composition of capital which involves the movement and dispossession of workers, now increasingly unstable and precarious, on a global scale. This movement acts, in itself, as a motor force for capitalist re-composition. As Marks (2012, p476) explains: "Immediately prior to the onset of the crisis in 2007/8, a wave of labor actions circled the globe in 2005/6 centered on the booming low organic composition sectors of construction, consumer goods manufacturing, retail and education."

Another aspect of this view is the suggestion that resistances and disturbances, whenever they occur, are inherent in the process of capitalist development, not part of an organised plan. Marks (2012, p476) explains 'eruptions' as arising from "...an incipient recomposition of segments of the global proletariat." Although for Marks this view should not be seen as deterministic and he is clear about the need for organisation and collective action, other writers, such as Martin-Cabrera (2012) are critical of what they see as the inevitability of the end of the capitalist mode of production.

Fine *et al* (2010) would argue that neoliberalism as a recent phase of capitalist development has brought continued changes and re-formulations nationally and internationally, but that this is part of the internal logic of capitalism on a global scale and has not changed the fundamental capital-labour relation. In their view, value theory remains central to an understanding of capitalist relations of production. By contrast, the autonomist view renders the law of value no longer relevant because

exploitation arises from all facets of production, reproduction and circulation, and where the skills required by cognitive capitalism such as care, affect and nurturing cannot be subordinated to the law of value.

In Lewis's (2009, p99) view, autonomist Marxism is a variation of Marxist educational practice in that it is "...one that shifts from epistemology...to ontological production." The 'multitude' is a new social actor capable of realising democracy. The multitude is also networked and has collective and distributive techniques of problem solving without centralised control or the provision of a global model. Empire (Hardt & Negri, 2004) is composed of transnational global networks. The multitude can move beyond Empire and rule in a state of absolute democracy. Struggle moves beyond the factory and the nation state and to the 'global commons'. Its new mode of political activism is exodus thus migrants are key political actors by undermining geographical barriers.

Lewis (2009) argues that Hardt & Negri have little to say about education and pedagogy and, in his view, they can only offer a theory of learning as "the only true teacher is the experience of exodus itself" (p110). However, he notes that in their work 'Commonwealth' (2009) the immanent capabilities of the global poor have to be developed and: "That is why basic and advanced education is even more important in the bio-political economy than previously" (p110). Without, as Lewis points out, an explanation of how this education will be organised if civil society has withered as Hardt & Negri predict.

### **3.7 An 'integrative approach' to critical education**

Apple (2010) and others, for example, McArthur (2010), Lewis (2012) and Carroll (2015), argue for an integrative approach to critical education. For Apple (2010) this integrative approach attempts to bring together two theoretical approaches, neo-Gramscian and post-structuralist. This is because in Apple's view they offer differing analytical approaches. He explains this as the neo-Gramscian view which can focus on social alliances and social movements and where the post-structuralist part of the approach can focus on the local and on identity. Apple is not attempting to merge these two approaches or collapse them into one another, rather he points to the tensions between the approaches as a positive source of ideas and insight, arguing

that “It is ‘where the sparks fly’ when these critical traditions are rubbed together that progress can be made” (p153).

Similarly, McArthur (2010, p494) argues that critical pedagogy should be a movement that welcomes disagreement and diversity given “... the importance of conflict and difference to creative and successful change.” Echoing the views of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on radical democracy, McArthur refers not to class conflict, but to the conflict of diverse opinions and views, which, I argue below in the section on Marxism, reflects essentially a pluralist view of society.

This eclectic drawing together of theories is also present in the work of Lewis (2012, p99) who draws on Walter Benjamin’s theory of constellation to argue that different theories of Marxism:

gain meaning through a differential relationship with the other, neighbouring theories. This constellation does not resolve tensions between competing theories, but rather realizes that such tensions are productive indexes that both connect and disconnect singular theoretical registers.

The competing theories mentioned in his article are Marxism, Laclau & Mouffe’s radical democracy and Hardt & Negri’s autonomism. What appears to motivate Apple, McArthur and Lewis in their search for eclecticism is a reading of Marxism which sees it as incapable of addressing issues such as gender and race oppression and localism; rather Marxism is seen as addressing the realm of political economy as distinct from cultural and social issues. However, despite Lewis’s argument that juxtaposing experiences and ideas produces a ‘constellation’ which theorists such as Benjamin and Adorno were able to use “...to illuminate the missing totality”, this research argues that Marx’s theory of totality, with its focus on the dialectical relationship between theory and practice (praxis) does not allow for a distinction between subject/object or other seeming dichotomies such as local/global.

Carroll’s (2015) version of this eclectic mix of theoretical approaches attempts to knit together four radical modalities: the resistant; the analytical; the pre-figurative and the subversive. He argues that this serves to link, pragmatically, social campaigns and movements. He explains:

The counter-hegemonic war of position implicit in this perspective is distinct from incremental reformism, from vanguardism, from autonomism, from localism and from micro-politics – although it incorporates elements of these

in an ongoing struggle to democratise all aspects of state and civil society through popular participation.

A number of points could be made here. The first, already mentioned, is that these views tend to rest on distorted readings of Marx and Gramsci which overlook the concepts of dialectical change, internal relations and totality that are implicit in a Marxist approach [6].

Second, Carpenter (2015) uses the example of the politics of localism (as a key issue in autonomist, radical democratic, and participatory politics) to argue that in a capitalist world economy the 'local' is never just local, but always part of the global sphere. She argues that the local is "the site where global relations become enacted in specific ways, organised through local social relations" (p139). This is a very different analysis to that of McArthur's (2010) 'critical pedagogy of difference', which sees the local as part of different levels in society and in organisations, micro, macro and miso which are interdependent. Although no overall theoretical framework is offered explicitly within which these levels are located, her view of transformative change is summed up by seeing critical pedagogy as developing a critical mass at various levels and for the "exchange of ideas – through both consensus and conflict – between different educational and different levels, and different contexts" (p91).

This analysis of a pluralistic world of independent but interrelated parts fails, I would argue, to adequately address the power differentials within capitalist society and underplays the strengths of a capitalist class to block, ideologically or physically, the development of a critical mass, in terms of transformative change. In addition, contrary to a Gramscian analysis of aspects of civil society, politics and the state which are internally and dialectically related according to historical and situational dynamics, McArthur's micro, miso and macro levels are related as separate and independent parts.

Third, in terms of practical resistance and struggle, there is often debate as to the basis on which social movements and organisations at the local, national and global level can work collectively for transformative change. For Apple (2010), this appears to manifest itself in drawing on a range of theories as the basis for activism. For Chatterton and Pickerill (2010), writing from an autonomist perspective, the embracing of different perspectives (or, for some, the rejection of political ideals), gave a pragmatism and confidence for political activism among those they



interviewed. By contrast, Mallott (2012) is keen to stress that his defence of a classical Marxist perspective and critique of both autonomism and liberal critical education is "...centred on building affinity with horizontal, non-hierarchical anarchists and other radicals who do not believe in party politics or any form of working-class centralization" (p164). Here strategy and tactics are emphasised to build solidarity in practice, despite theoretical disagreements, which may themselves change in the course of activity. This is consistent with the Marxist approach I advance in this research, and which is so important for academic activism in higher education. The academic activists that I interviewed developed, in different ways and in different circumstances, activist strategies for enacting their commitment to social justice and transformative change.

### **3.8 A Marxist approach to critical pedagogy**

The 1970s saw a dominant strand of radical educational theory emerge and develop. Rikowski (2008) refers to this as a first wave of Marxist educational theory built on the works of writers such as Althusser (1971), Sarup (1978), Willis (1977) and Bowles & Gintis (1976), which reached a peak in the early 1980s [7]. Kohan (2005) notes that Marxism and particularly the Marxist theory of alienation lost credibility in academic research with the rise of the structuralist anti-humanism of Althusser (1971) and also with the dominance of post-Marxism and post-modernism over the last thirty years where the 'subject' was replaced by a multiplicity of agencies. To this could be added the development of autonomist thinking where Marxism is also rejected as economistic and deterministic, and where the working class is re-formulated to encompass the wider concept of social labour (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Marxist critical educators such as Hill *et al* (1999) whilst accepting that Post-Fordist changes in production and consumption have taken place (Hall & Jacques, 1989) see this as part of the development of neo-liberal capitalism, not as a qualitative break with it. Cole & Hill (1995) and Rikowski (2001) argue that such changes have not altered workers' relations to the means of production. They also point to evidence that the working class is growing on an international scale, not shrinking, as a consequence of increased globalisation. Furthermore, capitalism as a dynamic system, constantly in flux, develops methods of production which gives rise to changes in structural and employment practices. These include the move from

manufacturing to service industries and the increase in part-time and precarious work [8]. However, according to Cole & Hill (1995) these changes do not signify changes in the mode of production under capitalism. Similarly, writers such as Harvey (1989) and Wood (1998) argue that more flexible modes of capitalist production and post-modernist cultural forms are shifts in the surface appearances of capitalism, reflecting a phase of capitalist development rather than an epochal shift in the nature of capitalism.

Allman, McLaren & Rikowski (2000) contrast a Marxist analysis of class, with the labour-capital relation at its heart, with a neo-Weberian, pluralist analysis based on social stratification. From their Marxist perspective, it is not the labour that is performed that determines class position but one's dialectical relation with capital. In Allman's (1999) view, concepts such as class have little explanatory meaning unless they are understood as part of the social relations of production. Social class, on this view, is not a thing or a category, it is a social relation. For Marx, labour is not a technical activity, it always takes place historically and is socially constructed. Through praxis, people create and transform the social and natural world around them. A Marxist analysis offers a means by which social class (as a relational and dialectical concept) is located centrally within critical pedagogy and social change. Kelsh & Hill (2006) argue that mainstream views of class simply, first, underpin liberal views of meritocracy and individual endeavour and second, serve to justify class differentiations as a-historical and natural. Third, Kelsh & Hill (2006) argue that the revisionist left (and the work of Giroux would be located here in their view) blocks the critique of capitalism by refusing to use class in Marxist terms and therefore blocks the development of proletarian class consciousness. Finally, they argue that consumer-based views of social class hide the antagonistic relationship between the working class and the capitalist class.

The significance of the Marxist view of class is that it claims a revolutionary role for the working class on the basis of its relationship to the means of production. Cole & Hill (1995) and Kelsh & Hill (2006) argue that the work of writers such as Giroux and Aronowitz (1991), underestimate the power and logic of capital and the ability of the capitalist class to accommodate critical thinking and imaginings. Where class is invoked in Giroux's work it is usually as part of a triptych of 'race', class and gender, where class is seen as another form of difference. However, Scatamburlo-

D'Annibale & McLaren (2004, p188), argue that Marxists conceptualise difference by drawing on materialist and historical formulations and that "...categories of difference are...refracted through material relations of power and privilege, linked to the relations of production."

Boucher (2008) notes that Giroux's view on the centrality of class assumes that classical Marxism excludes culture from political economy. For example, Giroux (2000) challenges the work of Todd Gitlin for using a totalizing concept of class, where either a class analysis or a cultural analysis is possible. Whilst this may reflect Gitlin's view, it does not reflect the dialectical Marxist perspective of the Hillcole group. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren (2004, p226) argue that "...exploitation and oppression are related internally to the extent that they are located in the same totality – one which is defined by capitalist social relations."

In their view, the difference of, for example, 'race' or gender is encapsulated in the labour-capital productive process. This in turn, as Greaves, Hill & Maisuria (2007) point out, ensures that the labour market is cut across 'race', class and gender lines. This fragmentation is encouraged by divide and rule policies and undermines solidarity in challenging the capitalist system. In their view, it is when workers enter into struggle that there is the greatest opportunity for the subjective recognition of the objective basis of their exploitation and oppression, and for seeing the connections between themselves and others. By contrast, if difference is seen as existing primarily at a cultural level, then the implication is that it should be challenged at a discursive level without any fundamental changes in the relations of production.

Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren (2004) caution that often the answer to oppression based on difference is to propose creating a greater space for incorporating marginalised or excluded groups. Thus, in a liberal pluralist society, inclusion becomes a central concept. Further, inclusion can lead to an incorporation that can co-exist within capitalism without challenging the dynamics of the system. Eisenstein (2010) makes the case that this has happened with many feminist projects, particularly with regard to women in the developing world. Thus, capitalism can incorporate a vast array of cultural differences and practices.

Hill (2001) argues that it is conceivable that capitalism could survive with gender and 'race' equality, and indeed these are seen desirable in liberal democracies. However,

he argues that capitalism could not exist without class exploitation. It is this analysis which leads Kohan (2005) to argue that although class is not the only subject position in society, it is unique in that the working class ('raced' and gendered as it is) at the point of production can challenge the capital-labour relation and transform society.

Thus, McLaren rejects the social contingency of post-structuralist writers as this obscures the material practices of capitalism which shape and give rise to patriarchal and sexist ideology. He draws on the work of Ebert & Zavarzedah (2008) to argue that class position is determined by the social relations of production, and to argue that the cultural turn in postmodern writing is a feature of late capitalism. The focus on the individual, for example, sees the citizen as the source of social practices. The politics of consumption and the politics of desire appear in much post-modern writing. McLaren is critical of the way that this work acts as an ideological justification for the exploitative structure of capital, which is mystified.

### **3.9 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter has outlined and discussed changes to the socio-economic structure of capitalist societies and a range of theoretical responses to these changes. What all these theories have in common are views on the possibility of societal transformation and, also, of the individual subject within this potential for transformation. These issues are central to critical pedagogy and academic activism in neoliberal higher education as they relate to questions of agency, of a critique of the existing system and of strategies and alliances for challenging existing conditions.

Ideas of social change and social responsibility are a focal point in these theories but are seen as a result of the actions of individual subjects in a complex world of risk, responsibility and personal challenge (Giddens, 1998; Beck, 2000). The theories outlined in this chapter, such as liberal pluralism and postmodernism, are predicated on concepts of difference and diversity. This tends to present a world of fragmentation and therefore has the potential to make solidarity activism difficult as well as the possibility to generalise issues and their interconnections and to offer a totalising view of the world (Malott, 2011). This chimes with prevailing neo-liberal ideology and can therefore undercut higher education as a potential radical collective

force for transformation; rather it remains as a mechanism for individual advancement.

The rise of the knowledge economy is particularly significant in terms of neoliberal higher education as it situates the university as a driver of the economy and foregrounds the production of knowledge. This idea has implications for academic activists in higher education because first, it illustrates the contradictory nature of their role (Holborow, 2015), that is: that they have responsibility for the development of human capital and the individual subject, yet their activism often involves students as active agents and social individuals (a concept I discuss further in the following chapter). Second, the centrality of neoliberal higher education to the knowledge economy links academic-activists, possibly in action and joint campaigns, within the university to other workers and colleagues beyond the university particularly those subjected to the same performance management regimes and lack of autonomy.

Third, Hatcher (2007) notes that it is through collective action that consciousness can be changed. A Freirean critical pedagogy would emphasise the social production of knowledge and the importance of developing a critical consciousness in students which challenges dominant ideology and sees concepts (such as democracy or social justice) not as fixed a-historical entities, but arising from a dialectically constituted social world and, therefore, transformable. This is linked to Fisher's (2009) view that dominant political theories all accept the inevitability of the capitalist market. In addition, the theories outlined and critiqued in this chapter, with a focus more on the current situation, as Thomas (2009a) suggests in his discussion on currents in radical political thought, risks a framework which is constantly caught in the present. The theories, like those outlined earlier at section 3.7, are broad and inclusive without a sense of strategy and of understanding specific actions that could be taken to challenge injustices. This aspect of the importance of developing a strategic vision emerged in the participants interviews and is discussed in more detail in section 7.3.3.

The academic activists in this research revealed their own reflexive understanding of neoliberalism and of the contradictions and limit situations that arise in higher education; the need to develop a critical consciousness in the classroom and at alternative sites of learning. They sought to create activist environments so that,

rather than accepting that theories existed only at the level of ideas, they acknowledged that when students are in activist situations, they can be more open to challenge prevailing ideas.

This thesis argues that the possibility for critical pedagogy and academic activism to act as forces for transformative within the neoliberal university arises precisely because the underlying structural contradictions of neo-liberal capitalism give rise to periodic crises and volatility. Such contradictions give rise to uneven forms of consciousness which means that higher education become an important site for challenge and contestation, more so at times of crisis than of stability. Therefore, theories which focus only on the stability and inevitability of capitalism as a prevailing world system and fail to acknowledge fundamental contradictions (Freeman, 2010; Freedman, 2017; Wrigley, 2019) are limited in their transformative potential.

This chapter has outlined, and critiqued, theories relevant to critical pedagogy and its socially and politically transformative potential. The following two chapters outline the relational, materialist approach that I adopt and apply to the collection and analysis of the empirical data.

## Footnotes

[1] The concept of the knowledge economy was key to New Labour's policies in higher education (DTI, 1998) as it linked economic growth with the knowledge economy.

[2] However, it should be noted that social class is theorised very differently within different political perspectives. The issue of social class was considered by Allman, McLaren & Rikowski (2000) in their debates with post-modern writers within the critical pedagogy tradition where cultural factors and subjective factors were seen to play a dominant role in terms of class analysis. This Weberian view of class continues to be dominant in the academy (and among those adopting a critical perspective e.g. Atkinson, Roberts & Savage, 2012). It is significant to discussion of critical pedagogy as it is a view that is closely linked to theories of social mobility, and therefore of higher education, as a key motor in enabling individual social mobility (but see Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011 for a critical response to this idea).

Two recent examples of social class from different perspectives illustrate a Weberian approach to class where income, subjective tastes, activities, networks and association are said to have blurred the capital-labour relation of classical Marxist theory. The first is the research by Savage et al (2015), where it is argued that social classes arise from three distinct kinds of capital: economic capital; cultural capital and social capital. Drawing on Bourdieurian perspective, they conclude that while social class and inequality remain key features within the UK, the hierarchical system consists of a wealthy elite, "fuzzy and complex middle layers" (p4) and a precariat at the bottom of this system.

However, Bourdieu's analysis has itself been criticised. Holborow (2015), for example, notes that Bourdieu's (2003) critique of neo-liberalism rests on the extension of the economic into all areas of social and personal life. In her view, this downplays the importance of the economic and gives dominance to the symbolic and cultural in reproducing neoliberalism. Fine (2001) takes issue with the term social capital as he argues that capital is always social and historical. He argues against counter-posing the social (non-economic) to the economic as he argues that capital is always 'social', for example in its requirement for social reproduction. Similarly, Desan (2013) criticises Bourdieu's 'extension model' as reflecting an attempt to distance his work from an 'economistic' Marxism. However, Desan (2013) argues that, on the contrary, capital in Marxist terms is "an historically specific mode of extracting and appropriating surplus labour" (p337) which involves social production and reproduction and is far from economistic.

The second example is that of Standing (2014) as he himself notes that Savage et al (2015) offer a variant of his (Standing, 2011) view of class and class structure (although with significant differences). His view is that the globalisation of the 1980s engendered an emerging class structure superimposed on an earlier model. That is, an elite; a salariat; an old 'core' working class; a precariat; the unemployed and an under-class. His views are relevant to critical pedagogy in at least two ways: in his location of teachers as being increasingly pushed into the category of 'precariat' and in his view of the possibilities for political change which involve the precariat as a: "...potentially dangerous transformative class' (Standing, 2014, p13).

[3] Fine *et al* (2010) distinguish between the knowledge economy and 'cognitive' capitalism, which is argued to be a fundamental qualitative change in the underlying social relations of capitalism. This view, similar to the work of Hardt & Negri, suggests that cognitive and material labour is increasingly dominant to, and autonomous from, industrial labour. This has implications, for example, labour becomes more autonomous from capital as it produces not only commodities, but immaterial products such as knowledge, communication, collaboration and relationships, is 'social and common' and therefore expands what people share in common. However, Fine *et al* (2010) argue against this view because cognitive and knowledge labour are not independent forms of labour where knowledge labour is dominant.

[4] Nixon (2001) points to the highly contested nature of the term 'public'. One notion is of the republican citizen where the 'public' is a body politic with citizens 'endowed with will and purpose'. Another view is of a post-republican informed electorate, critical and committed to the ideal of individual freedom.

[5] It should be noted that some writers tend to use the terms autonomism and anarchism interchangeably. Gautney (2009) claims that both autonomism and anarchism reject private property and recognise the idea of the "commons" which refers to the idea that any resource should be collectively shared. Alcott & Alcott (2015) whilst noting the similarities between anarchism and autonomism, do not use the terms interchangeably. In their view the similarities are that both autonomists and anarchists reject formal, central organisation and that they both coalesce around the idea of pre-figurative politics and around anti-authoritarianism and anti-capitalism. However, they point out that for autonomists, unlike anarchists, "...autonomy is understood to be a social relation, not an individual self - generated capacity or intrinsic moral or political value (p231)

Clough & Blumberg (2015) suggest that although anarchisms are difficult and contentious to define as there are many strands within them, this should be regarded as a strength. However, they all tend to denounce, not just exploitation, but domination which can exist in all social relationships. Gautney (2009) and Graeber (2009) suggest that anarchisms are

differentiated more by their practice than by any wider theoretical questions but these writers still argue that these practices are rooted in certain theoretical perspectives.

[6] See Thomas (2009b) and Rosengarten (2015) for analyses of Gramsci's Marxism that highlight its anti-determinism.

[7] The second wave developed from the end of the 1990s, when writers such as Neary & Dinerstein (1992) and Harris (1994) opened up new areas of Marxist educational theory, and subsequently, from 2000 onwards McLaren, Allman, Hill and Rikowski, amongst others, have continued to develop, using a Marxist analysis, a range of educational policy issues and theoretical concerns including globalisation and educational marketisation.

[8] Doogan (2009) has challenged the view that there have been significant changes in structural and employment practices, such as a move to greater precarity, the increased movement of global corporations or a diminished role for the nation state. Rather, neo-liberalism has ushered in an ideological offensive which creates uncertainty and anxiety and can contribute to a subdued and weakened workforce.



## **Chapter 4: Theoretical framework and research position: An historical materialist approach**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter considered the broad structural changes that emerged in advanced capitalist societies in the 1970s. Key to these developments, and relevant to critical pedagogy theories, were the rise of the knowledge economy and also the rise of social movements. I outlined and critiqued a number of theories of social change, positing a Marxist alternative which is underpinned by a materialist, relational ontology. This chapter critically considers this philosophical approach and argues that it provides an appropriate framework which can analyse academic activism and critical pedagogy, in a theory/praxis relationship.

The various strands of critical pedagogy and social justice education outlined within chapters 1, 2 and 3 rest on different epistemological and ontological assumptions. The significance of this, as Heinrich (2012) suggests, is that how we see the world determines what strategies we adopt to change it. This research draws on the works of Gramsci (1971, 1985, 1995), Freire (1998; 2005), Ollman (2003; 2015) and Allman (1999; 2010) to consider theories of knowledge, agency and social transformation.

This approach explains and underpins key issues that are central in radical research into critical pedagogy and academic activism because a Marxist approach is not only critical, but transformative. Raduntz (2006), for example, asserts that Marxism is the only perspective where social and political transformation is immanent within the theory itself. Second, the use of immanent critique (Stillman, 1983) in this approach is necessary because Marx (1846/1971) argued that there is no direct access to reality; we live in a world of surface appearances. 'Facts' in this world of appearances mask the essential relations of capital involving the appropriation of surplus value. Third, as Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) and Allman (2010) and argue, what is needed is a political economy of education linked to a theory of crisis (Freeman, 2010). Finally, Marxism offers a theory of knowledge production, consciousness and experience that is a key aspect to understanding critical pedagogy and academic activism.

Marxism has two predominant epistemological themes (Allman, 2010). The first is the independent reality of the world that gives rise to a realist epistemology. The second theme is the emphasis on the role of labour and intentional human activity; it is a philosophy of praxis. Therefore, Marxism is at one and the same time a theory; a methodology and a practice (Raduntz, 2006). Hill (2009) argues that the dialectic is both an epistemology and an ontology. It is a theory of knowledge (epistemology) and an ontology that is historicist and materialist. Loftus (2009) argues that Marx's early humanist works and particularly the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845/1969) offer a foundation for a materialist, dialectical approach where, in acting upon the world, individuals change themselves in the process. Marxism is, therefore, a philosophy of praxis that sees the world through human activity. This methodological approach foregrounds, in terms of critical pedagogy, the centrality of knowledge production in capitalist society and the centrality of class and class exploitation. It therefore transcends the qualitative/quantitative divide in methodological discourse (Scott, 2007). Before discussing this theory in more detail (below), the next section considers what Pring (2000) sees as the two main paradigms in educational research: positivism and interpretivism.

## **4.2 Positivism**

In Pring's (2000) view, the recent history of educational research has been dominated by two main paradigms: the positivist and the interpretivist traditions. The divide between the two rests on underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions about theories of knowing, truth claims and verification. The positivist paradigm, traditionally regarded as scientific and empiricist, assumes an underlying epistemology that posits an external world where facts and causal laws can be uncovered in the research process. The methodologies that link to this approach tend to reflect those of the natural sciences that in turn stress the neutrality and objectivity of this approach [1].

Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) view positivism as the dominant philosophy of the academy, and point to its constraints, which includes an emphasis on individual knowledge, the need to build knowledge on the basis of 'facts', the 'knowing subject' and the compartmentalisation of knowledge which they argue works against an overview of the wider society. Edwards (2011) links the rise of what she terms

'transmission-acquisition' education to long before the epoch of neo-liberalism. In her view the Enlightenment, based on a specific set of social and historical relations, brought forth an epistemology of individualism; a juridical system of individuals engaging with an external world, and science legitimating truth claims (Skourdoulis, 2016). This epoch also involved the privileging of mental over manual labour and the separation of knowing from doing.

According to Levins & Lewontin (2009), the positivist approach underpins current mainstream theorising and views society as made up of constituent parts. They regard this "cartesian reductionism" (p2) as an impoverished way of viewing the world, as it assumes 'causality' between the various parts which are autonomous and interdependent. Levins & Lewontin (2009, p268) argue that: "Ideas of cause and effect, subject and object, part and whole, form an intellectual frame that de-limits our construction of reality, although we are barely aware of its existence, or, if we are, we re-affirm it as a self-evident reality that must constrain all thought."

On this view, the method of investigation itself is a reflection of, and continuing commitment to, the existing structure of society. The implicit starting point is that both in science and the social sciences, there are separate systems that interact. Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) and Levins & Lewontin (2009), however, make the point that positivism is a theory of knowledge linked to liberal social theory and the rise of capitalism. In liberal democracy, this is seen in the distinction between the social and economic realms and the political realm. This is far from the Gramscian view of totality with its spatial, historical, social and political dimensions in dialectical interplay:

Philosophy-politics-economics. If these are constitutive elements of a single conception of the world, there must be, in the theoretical principles, convertibility from one to the others, a reciprocal translation into the specific languages of each constitutive part: each element is implicit in the others and all of the together form a homogenous circle. (Gramsci, 1971, p403)

In addition, positivism is a theory that posits the ontology of the individual as superior to that of society. Such a social world is constructed by individual activities and the aggregate of those activities. Carpenter and Mojab (2009) argue that in mainstream social theory and 'common sense', "...experience is valorised as unique to each individual" (p120). The common-sense view is that the individual is seen as the

source of social practices, so collectivity, and collective behaviour, is marginalised and the singularity of individuals is celebrated. A Marxist approach would view this as a contrived, fetishized starting point. Marx's view of human nature represented a critique of traditional forms of enlightenment humanism. For Marx, there are no universal character traits, no essence. Instead, as Ollman (1976) argues, human nature is historically and spatially situated, socially produced and relational. With this dialectical approach, as Levins & Lewontin (2009, p263) argue "...neither the individual nor society has ontological priority."

This in turn raises issues for critical pedagogy and radical educators. Mainstream thought and theory tends to take an ahistorical, generic individual as the starting point for social theory and research. Raduntz (2006), when criticising the work of Brossio (2000), argues that some critical educators have a tendency to abstract concepts, such as 'democracy' and 'scientific enquiry', which results in them losing their context-specific function. Such concepts are not universal, existing over and above the social relations of production. It is this, argues Raduntz (2006) that limits their power as a force for radical transformation. Similarly, Smith (2011) suggests that analyses must be historically based. To not do this means that categories and concepts discussed in higher education, for example, democracy, truth; post-truth, oppression and social class, are discussed as abstract concepts without viewing them as reflective, dialectically, of the social relations of production. An example of this is the issue of measurement. Rather than seeing this as fixed and a-historical, McNally (2009, p71) argues that as capitalism is inherently unstable this undermines predictive models, particularly economic models, in the positivist and empiricist tradition. He notes that:

these models involve violent abstractions, to use Marx's term, insofar as they reduce concrete social, political, climatological and economic relations to a single scale of measurement...the process of abstraction these models undertake involves treating space and time as mathematical, as no more than different points on a grid. This homogenization of space and time assumes that what applied in any one spacio-temporal moment, applies in principle at any other. But crises destroy any bases for such assumptions.

In terms of research, this also means, as Smith (2011) argues, that thinkers cannot stand outside of society and look down on it. The subject and the researcher are both situated, and active in, the same process that constitutes the social world. The

world, or nature, is not given and therefore a product of inquiry. It can only be seen as a part of the social development of the society they are embedded in or as an ongoing historical process. She states: "The object of contemplation is as much a product of 'sensuous human activity' as are the conditions that provide for philosophical contemplation" (p250)

Carpenter & Mojab (2009) point to other techniques used in mainstream thought, which naturalise capitalist social relations. One is conflation; that is eliminating history and internal contradiction and abstracting component parts. An example is the a-historical nature of market-based social relations, or where the complexity of life is broken up into social parts and re-united in a mystical way such that, for example, gender, race, sexuality and class are presented as autonomous and divorced from one another. The common-sense view is that the individual is mistakenly seen as the source of social practices so collectivity is marginalised and the singularity of individuals is celebrated. Marxist theory, however, begins with the totality of society and the material productive forces that give rise to the social relations within that society.

Carpenter & Mojab (2009, p137) believe that because of the nature of individuality it becomes, in many approaches, non-theoretical. They argue that:

the theorisation of consciousness for critical and radical educators cannot rest solely on notions of 'counter-hegemony' or 'oppositional knowledge'. It is not only the content of knowledge that is important, but the methods that we use to generate this understanding and access our social reality.

For example, Carpenter (2015, p138) suggests that educators cannot describe or conceptualise a situation without "adequately explaining where the problem came from...or what larger ideological challenge is contained within it."

McLaren cites Mészáros' (2008) view that it is problematic to appeal to individual consciousness in terms of putting forward liberal democratic ideas of citizenship and critical reasoning, because consciousness is socially and historically produced and currently this means within the social relations of capitalism. Consciousness, therefore, is dialectically produced. Radical educationalists and social theorists, such as Callinicos (2006), Smith (2011), and Carpenter & Mojab (2011), point to the limits of current social theory to transcend traditional theoretical paradigms. For example,

Carpenter & Mojab (2011) see their critical research on adult education as being limited by dominant constructs such as the knowledge economy, and human capital theory which increasingly set the terms of the debate.

### **4.3 An interpretivist paradigm**

By way of contrast to positivism, a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm is linked to a subjectivist epistemology. Part of the interpretivist paradigm is the perspective of social constructivism. This is an umbrella term which would include approaches such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology and phenomenology. What these views have in common, Smith (1990) suggests, is that they are non-realist; social reality is not seen as independent but as constructed. Meanings and purposes, within this view of social reality, are established by interpretation and there are no immutable laws of cause and effect to be discovered. The focus is on interaction and negotiated meanings and the distinction between the researcher and the subject of the research is blurred.

Within a relativist/constructivist paradigm, there is not one single reality, but multiple realities. Smith (1990, p187) argues that constructivism can address the issue of criteria and judgements about inquiry because it is based on "...a rationality that emphasises judgemental interpretation, exemplars and the norms that guide social discourse and agreement" (p187).

Truth could be seen as either a result of consensus (Hammersley, 2007) or, in a more relativist position, of competing truth paradigms (Stronach & MacLure, 1997). For constructivists, therefore, research would tend not to be generalisable as it is context specific. Qualitative methods, such as observation and in-depth interviews produce rich data from a social world that is seen as being constituted by the interactions and negotiations of reflexive and intentional individuals. In Brookfield's (2000) view much of what he terms 'constructive pragmatism' presages postmodernism in its focus on the unpredictable and contingent.

The new sociology of education that emerged in the 1970s (Young, 1971; Sharp & Green, 1975) drew on theories of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology to study classroom situations. Sharp & Green (1975) criticise phenomenology's inability to analyse and explain the relationship between structure and agency and this micro-

politics of the classroom was criticised for its failure to consider wider socio-economic factors (Sarup, 1982), its idealist assumptions (Sharp & Green, 1975), and its tendency towards methodological individualism, despite its purported radicalism (Banfield, 2016). Even critical pedagogues lapse into phenomenological approaches but Carpenter and Mojab (2011, p7) claim that: "To the extent that phenomenology allows for meaning making, it detaches interpretive processes from social and material conditions."

Smith (1990) notes that a key criticism of the constructivist perspective, from a critical approach, is that it is seen as inherently conservative. This is because, if there is no objective understanding of ideological distortion, it becomes difficult to see knowledge used for collective empowerment.

Moore (2007) raises a similar criticism of postmodern perspectives in that, although able to name dominant knowledge(s) or those whose interests are represented by dominant knowledge, the approach does not have a strategy to move beyond this in terms of social transformation. However, Moore is critical of some examples of post-structuralism where, in his view, knowledge becomes circular. If knowledge does not correspond to an external reality and is socially constructed, then any reality we can have knowledge of, is socially constructed. Moore (2007, p31) challenges the constructivist approach to knowledge as subjectivist. Knowledge, on this account, is experiential, shaped by discourse and located "...within the consciousness and subjectivity of knowing subjects sharing an intersubjective world." Moore's concern is that in this approach knowledge is defined by who knows it rather than what is known. In his view, this tends to reduce knowledge to the experiences and interests ('voices') of certain groups. The problem, then, is that: "knowledge is conflated with knowing" (p25) which is not only reductionist, in his view, but leads to a relativism that denies "... an epistemologically independent basis for knowledge claims" (p25). He argues that the issue of the sociality of knowledge remains an unresolved issue in many critical approaches. A further point, made by Cole & Hill (1995) and Cole (2003), is that the conservative variants of postmodernism simply disguise capitalism's inequalities and do not challenge the nature of the economic system.

Finally, Moore argues that all knowledge relations, in a critical approach, are seen as power relations. However, if all knowledge is standpoint relative there is no basis on

which to challenge exploitation and oppression; nor is there a basis for the creation of critical knowledge that can transcend culture and base itself on objective rationality.

#### **4.4 Adopting a critical approach**

Furlong & March (2010) note that all research is bound up with the researcher's epistemological and ontological positions and that these should be made explicit and defended as part of the research process. Given that this research topic involves critical pedagogy and academic activism, it is appropriate that this research adopts a critical methodological approach. Mertens (2009) uses the term 'transformative research' rather than critical research to encompass a wide range of critical approaches which include feminist, critical theory, critical race theory (CRT), disability and gender issues and emancipatory approaches. For Merriam & Tisdell (2016) what is central to critical research is the analysis of power relations in the wider society (and indeed within specific research situations) and the theoretical framework adopted. They refer to this framework as a 'worldview' that can form the context of qualitative research.

One attempt to move beyond mainstream positivist and interpretivist research and point to a critical paradigm which gives rise to a critical research methodology, is that of Cecez-Kecmanovic (2011). She is keen to distinguish between positivist and interpretivist approaches as both imply significantly different methodological strategies and produce different types of knowledge. The basis for this critical research methodology is the goal of socially transformative research that is openly ideological and partisan; an approach which underpins the research objectives of this thesis. She follows Myers & Klein (2011) in supporting a set of principles for conducting critical research which comprise four analytically separate, but intertwined, dimensions. These are: first, critical understanding and in-depth examination; second, critical explanation and comparative generalisation; and third, open discourse and transformative re-definition or action and a reflexive-dialectic augmentation (p452).

Within this very general set of dimensions, Cecez-Kecmanovic (2011) cautions that this is a critical framework to assist researchers in their key methodological choices as it is acknowledged that there remains a diversity of critical approaches in terms of



ethics, ontology and epistemology. She uses the term 'critical' in a socially transformative, counter-hegemonic sense. In her view, a critical research methodology should reveal and explain hidden agendas and interests and consider power differentials. Both Harris (1979) and Parker (2005; 2009) caution against research that is supposedly critical but does not fundamentally challenge the dominant paradigm of the existing socio-economic relations of capitalism. Harris (1979) gives the example of assessment in education, where debates over the nature and efficacy of assessment rarely challenge the premise that assessment is necessary. He argues that much critical rhetoric supports the received view and ultimately reinforces it and, in his view, this is "supportive rhetoric masquerading as critique" (p85).

#### **4.5 Epistemological eclecticism**

The critical educator, Michael Apple (2010) proposes that critical educators draw on a range of theories, each with their different epistemological and ontological underpinnings; what he terms an integrative approach. These include post-colonial approaches; feminist theories; various forms of post modernism; queer theories and critical race theories. Apple (2010,p154) argues that his integrative approach marries theoretical approaches to combine a focus on both wider social issues and on the local and particular. He uses a neo-Gramscian approach with:

its focus on the state, on the formation of hegemonic blocs, on new social alliances and social movements, all within an economic crisis and post structuralism with its focus on the local, on the formation of subjectivity, identity and the creation of subject positions – can creatively work together to uncover organisational, political and cultural struggles over education.

However, first, as writers have argued, these theories can be criticised for their inability to set out theories for transformative change. Cole (2003), for example, argues that postmodernism is a theory that is incapable of transformative change as it lacks a vision of class power. Second, Freeman argues (2010) that even within a Marxist perspective some views are predicated on equilibrium. However, he argues that crises are systemic and cannot be transformed within its own parameters given that capitalism is the cause of its own instability (Harvey, 2014).

Another point is that Apple, as well as writers from an autonomist perspective (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; De Leon, 2006), suggest that theories such as Marxism

with its emphasis on totality, is incapable of theorising at the micro or local level. However, Kilminster (1979), Mojab (2006) and Carpenter (2015) point out that capitalist social relations are grounded in the materiality of everyday life and that the local and global are aspects of an integrated world system. Apple (2010, p153) argues for a theoretically integrated approach:

Even though structural and post-structural analyses may often rest on different epistemological traditions and hence cannot easily be merged, it is the tensions between and amongst them that produce important insights. It is 'where the sparks fly' when these critical traditions are rubbed together that progress can be made.

A limitation with this integrated approach, which is congruent with a pluralist epistemology, is that it serves to limit or put a break on intellectual/practical development. Apple and others are arguing for a mixed methods approach, but in the realm of theoretical ideas. This runs counter to a Gramscian approach where the practical and theoretical are dialectically linked. In this view, the focus is the structure of the wider society that gives rise to, and shapes, theoretical constructs. Carpenter & Mojab (2011, p254) argue that however complex a theory, it is hollow if it is cut off "from the social relations in which it acquires its meaning."

In this research, critical pedagogy and its variants, for example: postmodernism, feminism, anarchism and left liberalism, cannot be debated only in the realm of educational theory, as an academic exercise, but as part of the social realities which produce the theories and the historical life processes of individuals. This is why, as this research shows, academics as activists can play such a significant role in the development of critical pedagogy.

Lewis (2012, p99) argues for a constellations approach where different theories of Marxism:

gain meaning through a differential relationship with the other, neighbouring theories. This constellation does not resolve tensions between competing theories, but rather realizes that such tensions are productive indexes that both connect and disconnect singular theoretical registers.

He draws on Walter Benjamin's theory of constellation, suggesting that 'totality' consists of a "complex synthesis" (p112) of experiences and ideas. This offers, I would argue, an idealist approach given his argument that (p115):

Marxist education would thus become a representation of the field as an image as a constellation of elements where some stars grow brightly and others grow dim, yet all illuminate the parameters of a problematic which only comes into being through the careful orchestration of fragments of thought.

What is missing here is any sense of praxis, where activity, strategy and the active involvement of subjects acting on the world can change it [2]

In a similar attempt to integrate different theoretical approaches, McArthur's (2012) view of transformative change is summed up by seeing critical pedagogy as developing a critical mass at various levels and for an exchange of ideas that recognise a multiplicity of identities.

Carroll (2015) also talks about knitting together 'radical modalities' (the resistant, the analytical, the pre-figurative and the subversive) in a way that pragmatically links social campaigns and movements that recognise the need for leadership (of sorts) and a type of party. He employs both Marxian and post-modern aspects of power to build a 'counter-power'. However, Brookfield (2000), noting epistemological differences and contradictions in theories of social justice and transformation, cautions against a 'naïve eclecticism', which draws unreflectively from a range of theories. The idea of bricolage is associated with the critical educator, Joe Kincheloe. Drawing on post-modernism, his 'critical-complex' epistemology (2004, p110) posits a chaotic, contingent world: "As critical complex researchers come to recognise the complexity of the lived world with its maze of uncontrollable variables, irrationality, non-linearity and unpredictable interaction of wholes and parts, they begin to see also the interpretive dimension of reality."

Although this offers a critique of positivist and empiricist thought, it reflects a postmodern view which itself has been criticised by other critical educators for underplaying agency, for a lack of social class analysis (McLaren, 2005; Kelsh & Hill, 2006) and because, as Paolucci (2003, p87) argues "...life in capitalism is not haphazard and unpredictable, even if it is chaotic." In addition, Fine's (2004) critique of methodological eclecticism in the field of economics is not necessarily critical of the number of competing (or complementary) theories, but that these theories appear to be abstracted from the structures and practices of the capitalist economy in which they are rooted.

## **4.6 Critical realism**

Moore (2007) adopts a critical realist approach and raises two main concerns with critical research. First is that within the tradition of critical education, there are so many diverse orientations and foundations that this has diluted the meaning of 'critical'. Second, he argues that many critical approaches in research run the risk of being co-opted into the mainstream. Eisenstein (2010) makes the case that this has happened with many feminist projects, particularly with regard to women in the developing world. Thus, capitalism can incorporate a vast array of cultural differences and practices.

Moore (2007) argues that there are a number of common principles underlying critical research. He lists these as a scepticism towards knowledge claims, which takes the form of challenging official knowledge to reveal its ideological character. Against both postmodernism and positivism, he posits a critical realist paradigm. While some Marxist writers (Allman, 1999 and 2010; Banfield, 2004) argue that a Marxist epistemology is consistent with critical realism, I am more persuaded by Fine's (2004) view that it is an approach that insufficiently attends to capitalist social relations of production, class relations, or the specific nature of the social practices of which knowledge is an emergent product.

Although Moore appears dismissive of Marxist theory, there are aspects of his approach that are consistent with a Marxist view of knowledge and truth claims. His realism detaches knowledge from knowing; that is, from the consciousness of the knowing subject. He posits, as does a classical Marxist epistemology, an objective material world in which truth is fallible. Far from being deterministic, truth claims are open to revision and the view that some ways of producing knowledge are more reliable than others.

## **4.7 The materialist method of enquiry**

The challenge for this critical research was to link subjectivity in a way that explains activity and knowledge production in a non-deterministic way. I draw on the work of Allman (2010) and her interpretation of praxis, which she explains as operating at two levels in capitalist society. The first is 'reproductive' or uncritical praxis, where the effects of capitalist social relations can be described but are not interrogated

further to show the roots of exploitation and oppression. Reproductive praxis engages in the phenomenal forms of capitalism or the surface appearance of capital. So, common-sense ways of thinking distort understanding as the dialectical contradictions of capitalist social relations are hidden. The second is critical or revolutionary praxis. This interrogates the essences and the dialectical contradictions of social forms of everyday life.

Another key epistemological theme in her work is the emphasis on the role of labour and intentional human activity. As Allman (2010) explains, Marxism is a philosophy of praxis. This methodological approach foregrounds, in terms of critical pedagogy, the centrality of knowledge production in capitalist society and the centrality of class and class exploitation. Drawing on the approach outlined in Allman (2010) this research will involve a focus on key methodological issues such as: an historical perspective; a materialist and relational ontology, the centrality of human agency in transformation, and a dialectical approach to researching theory and practice.

Central to a Marxist theoretical framework is the materialist conception of history. Marx's materialist analysis begins with his assertion in *The German Ideology* (1846/1974, p42) that:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are...The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.

This is why, for Allman (1999), Marxism is fundamentally a relational ontology. In her view, concepts such as class have little explanatory meaning unless they are understood as part of the social relations of production. Marx's materialism, set out for example, in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1986/1974), understood activity as practical sensuous activity, not as Feuerbach saw it, human activity as objective activity, separated from thought. For Marx, materialism is 'practical-critical' activity or praxis, the dialectical interplay of thought and action. Matter, for Marx, can never exist independently of thought, just as no thought can exist in a vacuum (Jal, 2010).

Reality, for Marx is practical activity as people interact with the natural and social world around them, thus changing themselves and that world in the process.

This is a view often criticised, within critical pedagogy, for its teleological and determinist assumptions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). However, the development of these stages historically is complex and dialectical. Present day capitalism contains within it the same contradictions as it is based on the tendency for accumulation and constant expansion such that the system will be unable to maintain itself (Harvey, 2014). This does not imply a mechanistic move towards socialism; the situation is open-ended (Paolucci, 2003) so the fight for a world beyond capitalism is an important part of the education and social justice of critical pedagogy (Wrigley, 2006; Fisher, 2009; Harvey, 2014).

Heinrich (2012) argues that Marx's Capital rejects 'world-view' Marxism which was a simplistic mechanical Marxism which developed from the late 1880s in German social democracy. Marx's view was dialectical, this avers a determinist view as it explains that as people act on their world they change it and change themselves in the process. Au (2009) argues that the neo-Marxist rejection of classical Marxism is based on an erroneous conflation of Marxism with economic determinism. For example, Blackledge (2006, p22) explains that:

Throughout his life Marx insisted that it was *production* understood as a social, political and historical process that was at the centre of social totality. He repeatedly distinguished his theory of history from all others by placing the production process, not the 'economy' at its centre." (emphasis in the original).

Another key aspect of this historical development, in terms of capitalist production, is the inherent need for the system to accumulate and expand. This dynamic tendency is inbuilt into the fabric of capitalist production (Cole, 2008; Choonara, 2009). As part of this expansion, capitalism must extract more and more surplus value, which is the source of profit for capitalists. To argue that conflict is inherent in a capitalist system is to point to its on-going vulnerability and the inherent possibility of transformation.

Torres (1989), in his work on educational policy, argues that educational discourse and policy debates should be viewed in a wider socio-political context. He draws on Gramsci's idea of 'conjuncture' (Gramsci, 1971, p3) to clarify this wider context:

A common error in historical-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to presenting causes as immediately operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones...In the first case there is an overestimation of mechanical causes, in the second an exaggeration of the voluntarist or individual element...The dialectical nexus between the two categories of movement, and therefore research, is hard to establish. [3]

#### **4.8 Implications of this theoretical approach for critical pedagogy and critical research**

From a Freirean, or Gramscian, perspective, activity in educational settings must be linked to the wider society. Here truth does not unfold with increased knowledge in a rationalist way, as an external world waiting to be discovered, but is waiting to happen in a world acted upon by: “beings in the process of becoming” (Freire, 1970, p36). Instead of an individual subject confronting an external world, the subject and object are continually re-formulated and re-constituted in dialectical practice.

Totality is also a central concept that attempts to overcome individual fragmentation and the ability to move from individual or local issues to the totality. It also means for Freire (1985) and Ebert (1996), moving from a focus on personal experience to an understanding of the specificity of domination and oppression. This requires an education system capable of revealing what is happening beneath the surface relations of, for example, a liberal pluralist society or ideology. To do this we need (Ebert, 1996; Edwards, 2011) not just critical thinking or criticism, but tools of critique, which would include seeing disconnected or abstracted ideas and theories as part of a totality. It is only when social relations are visible that it becomes possible to transform them (Brookfield, 2003). In a classroom situation, this occlusion of structural inequalities often results in what Ebert (1996) terms the ‘trans-social individual’ (p806) and what Edwards (2011) calls the ‘acquisitive individualism’ of contemporary education. Ebert (1996) argues that students as individuals are seen, and see themselves, as having unique, personal experiences, when in fact experience is historical and material. Critical education in her view should equip students with tools of critique to help analyses and explain their own individual difficulties.

The next section discusses in more detail two ideas: transformation and contradiction, that are central to this research into critical pedagogy and academic activism.

#### **4.9 Transformation**

It is important to be clear about the definition of the term transformation for a number of reasons. First, it is a word or an idea that is widely used in the critical pedagogy and activist literature to indicate the need for a project to move beyond the existing social economic and political system (capitalist, imperialist, neo-liberal, patriarchal) to develop a more socially-just world without the current levels of inequality, oppression and exploitation. Second, both Brookfield (2003) and Smith (2011) are wary of the reification of terms such as transformation and empowerment. Smith (2011) argues that words are part of a discourse that appears to have an independent existence from the social relations under which they are produced and used. For example, Holborow (2015) suggests that words such as 'impact' and 'empowerment' are taken for granted. That is why defining terms is not just a matter of precision or clarity but to understand that language is enmeshed and created by social relations.

Brookfield (2003, p141) argues that critical pedagogy has an "...explicitly transformative dimension" because critical education is directed towards understanding and unmasking a society that is unfairly organised. Critical pedagogy will teach people to recognise and resist, to unmask the dominant ideology and to discover and create alternative social forms of organisation that are genuinely democratic. It is transformative also, he argues, because it is involved in forms of resistance and visions of a future beyond capital. The term transformative to Brookfield points to profoundly different social formations. He explains (p142):

transformative learning and education entail a fundamental re-ordering of social relations and practices...and because social practices are ideologically embedded, transformation requires a fundamental change to the political economy of capitalism and its ideological manifestations.

Brookfield (2003) is critical of the word transformative used to simply address changes in individual lifestyle and of classroom practices, such as re-arranging chairs. He says that, from a Marxist perspective there could not be a purely personal transformation because capitalist social relations pervade emotional lives; personal



transformation is the ideology of capitalism. Adult education has been criticised (Brookfield, 2003; Holst, 2007; Harvey, 2014) as being personally transformative, rather than focussing on wider societal transformation.

If, as Brookfield (2001) notes, change can reflect levels of personal change or political change, it can, from a Gramscian perspective, be both personal and political because human nature is seen as relational, and geographically and historically situated. Gramsci (1971, p352) writes of:

the active man (*sic*) who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensemble of social relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one's own individuality is the ensemble of these relations, to create one's own personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations.

A key aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which higher education could be a site for transformation. This requires an interrogation of higher education's role within the wider socio-economic system. As Ollman (1999) notes, education is not a neutral entity. It has a role to play in, for example, producing an efficient workforce (Ebert, 1996) and social control (Ainley, 2016), and supporting neoliberalism ideologically (Neale, 2008). It exists in a contradictory relationship with a capitalist system which, as Harvey (2014, p4) notes, is constantly transforming and re-inventing itself: "Crises are moments of transformation in which capital typically re-invents itself and morphs into something else...crises are also moments of danger when the reproduction of capital is threatened by the underlying contradictions."

The next section looks in more detail at the concept of contradiction as it is used in the theoretical approach to this research.

#### **4.10 A note on contradiction**

As noted above regarding the definition of the term transformation, the term contradiction in the relational ontology used in this research refers to the internal contradictions inherent in capitalism and the many contradictions that arise from that. (Harvey, 2014). Freedman (2014) draws a distinction between theories of conflict or contradiction as part of the social structure, for example Giddens (1979) structuration theory or the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) where conflict is based on group or status rather than social class. Instead, he argues from a Marxist perspective that:

“Contradiction, then does not just refer to the underlying ‘chaos’ of a complex society or to the multiple, and seemingly irreconcilable, perspectives on power in the contemporary world, but to a productive process in which conflicting systemic pressures create the conditions for constant disruption.” (p120)

Harvey (2014) examines the internal contradictions within capital that create periodic crises, a way in which, as already noted, capital attempts to re-configure itself. For Harvey, the most important contradiction of all is that between appearance and reality. He draws on the Marxist concept of fetishism to point to the ways in which crises are either deflected or naturalised. Relevant here is Gramsci’s (1985) idea of a dual or contradictory consciousness. This illustrates his distinction between ‘common sense’, that is dominant hegemonic ideas that are uncritically accepted and ‘good sense’, that is ideas generated when the dominant ideas conflict with the materiality and practical reality of people’s lives. This reflects Gramsci’s view that hegemony is not totalising and that it can be constantly challenged, particularly at moments of crisis and instability. In this way, crises offer moments and spaces to challenge dominant power.

Contradictions are, however, inherent in the social relations of production and include the contradiction between use-value and exchange value, and between capital and labour. In terms of education, Harvey (2014) notes a contradiction between critical thinking and capital’s need for conformity and social control. Au (2009) makes a similar point, highlighting the contradiction between education reproducing social and material inequalities within society, while at the same time using the discourse of individualism and meritocracy. The concept of human capital (Holborow, 2015) reflects this view of individual students entering a job market on different terms and rates of return based on their capital, for example, their investment in a degree. To these contradictions could be added those relating to the role of academics. For example, the contradiction between academics as workers selling their labour power, and their academic professional role. Finally, as mentioned in chapter 2, there is the contradiction between the university as a ‘public good’ and universities as private corporations.

For Ollman (2015) contradiction is a relational term and is linked to his view of Marxism as a theory of internal relations. Internal relations, argues Ollman, are the

overall starting point within the totality and other analytical concepts such as alienation develop within this. He draws a distinction between the 'popular' view of a 'paradox' and Marx's view of 'contradiction'. Ollman defines a paradox as consisting of two or more 'developments that seems incompatible but are found together at the same time' (p21). For example, poverty in society is seen as a paradox when poverty and increasing wealth exist side by side as separate issues. However, from a Marxist perspective they are internally related - the poor are poor *because* the rich are rich.

Ollman (2015) argues that the differences between paradoxes and contradictions are: first, that paradoxes involve factors such as poverty and wealth that are separate and independent, whereas a contradiction is "internally related to one another and to the whole to which they belong" (p21). Second, paradoxes are seen as static and unchanging but contradictions unfold over time. Third, people see themselves as standing outside of paradoxes and therefore often feel powerless but people are, in fact, inside contradictions and that puts them in a position to understand a problem, particularly, how they, as a class, are affected by a problem and what can be done about it. As a Marxist academic his view is that education should encourage students to see paradoxes as contradictions and therefore unmask surface appearances and create the conditions for social transformation.

#### **4.11 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the use of a Marxist perspective in this research. This has been justified based on Marxism's explanatory potential as a theory and a practice that has been marginalised in social theory since the 1960s and 1970s, with the dominance of post-structural and post-modern theories and theories associated with intersectionality (Gardiner, 2000). As Bannerji (2005) notes, theorising the social in this way is not an abstract exercise; it has political implications and outcomes.

In terms of this research, this philosophical approach can respond to the research questions regarding the neoliberal university's potential as a site for resistance and transformation and the ways in which academia and activism can be linked within and beyond the university. First, this is because, central to higher education is its transformative potential and the transformative potential of human agency.

Key to understanding agency from this perspective, I argue, is the concept of the social individual as an ensemble of social relations. This view runs counter to the individualistic assumptions that underpin the theories discussed in the previous chapter (as well as different strands of critical pedagogy associated with those theories). The idea of the social individual sees people acting on their world to change it and at the same time being changed by this process. It is this Freirean concept which links critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on developing critical consciousness, with activism and engagement with the world. The social individual links to the potential of academic activism in higher education to develop a sense of agency and critical consciousness among students, where students can intervene in their world by involving themselves in activism. The student occupations and demonstrations over fee increases and student debt that took place as this research was conducted, opened a space for wider critique of those issues as part of the development of the neoliberal university and of alternative to it.

Second, Wrigley (2019) argues that reductionist approaches to educational theory and practice, which reflect the positivist approach set out in section 4.2 above, can treat situations in closed mechanistic ways and therefore miss the complexity of educational situations. This point also links to the individual performance policy focus of the neoliberal university with its individual risk management and measurement of research outputs, the commodification of ideas and lack of autonomy mentioned previously at sections 1.1 and 2.2. By contrast, Wrigley (2009) points to the contradictions inherent in capitalism and academic activists have the potential to unmask conflicts and contradictions in such a way that alternatives to neo-liberal higher education and the wider society can be considered.

Third, a relational, materialist ontology allows academic activists to resist lifting the contradictions of everyday life out of their socio-political context and seeing them as de-contextualised issues. This becomes less difficult when activists (academics and students) are located and see themselves as part of the neo-liberal university as a contradictory institution with a contradictory relationship to the wider society. Gramsci (1970) and Freire's (1970) notion of the person is not the individual subject of current higher education but a spatially and historically located individual working, researching and learning in very specific circumstances. This relationship between

this specificity and wider relationality is revealed in the participants interviews in chapter 6 and 7.

In the following chapter, I discuss how the research approach set out here is used to underpin the research methods that I adopted to locate, interview and analyse the responses of a group of academic activists in higher education. I also set out the approach's implications for truth claims and validity, the role of the activist-researcher and the evaluation of the research.

## **Footnotes**

[1] There is a debate about the extent to which a positivist scientific paradigm is 'scientific' in the sense of producing factual, objective evidence (Wellington, 1996). For example, writers in the positivist tradition such as Popper (1970) have argued for the fallibility of scientific research, while Kuhn (1970), has argued that there is no absolute scientific method which exists outside of the dominant consensus of the scientific community at a given time in history.

[2] Malott (2012), by contrast, argues that the key to integration has to work at the practical level of alliances on the left i.e. a strategic position of movements and organisations working together, despite political or theoretical differences.

## **Chapter 5: Research methods**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The theoretical approach set out in chapter 4, an historical and materialist perspective (Allman, 1999; 2010; Ollman, 2003; 2015), has implications for the methodological approach and methods used to gather and analyse research data. As this research topic is focussed on critical pedagogy and academic activism, it is appropriate that the research adopts a critical methodological approach. For this research, it was necessary to develop a research framework that captures the interaction between the social world and the embodied agency and practices of the participants.

The previous chapter outlined the philosophical approach taken in this research; that of a materialist, relational ontology (Marx 1845/1969; Freire, 1970) implicit within which is the potential for transformation as opposed to simply analysis. It is this transformational aspect that makes it directly relevant to the tradition of critical transformative research (Mertens, 2009; Agostinone-Wilson, 2013) within which this work is located. It is also relevant to the research questions which focus on the transformative potential of higher education and the possibility that academia and activism can be linked within and beyond the neo-liberal university.

This chapter sets out the research strategy which aligns to the epistemological approach discussed in the previous chapter. It is structured in the following way: first, a critical research framework is discussed, followed by a justification for the use of case study research and in-depth interviews. I then outline the data-gathering process, involving the selection of participants and the analysis of the data. Following that, my role as a researcher is considered in terms of positioning, self-reflexivity and ethical approach. Finally, the rigour and credibility of the research is discussed and evaluated.

### **5.2 A critical research approach**

The research questions were:

- To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation?

- In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university?

A critical research approach challenges much mainstream contemporary research, particularly in education, which as Nygreen (2006) argues, is often de-contextualised and de-historicised and may indeed, contribute to the reproduction of wider structural inequalities. Gitlin (1994) argues that rather than focus on the differences or complementarity of research methods, what is often missed is the part that research plays in the wider society. In his view, research should be re-conceptualised to specifically address power relations and to ask questions such as: “in the research context, what are the limits and possibilities of producing critical research?” and “what role can political activism play in the research process?” [1]. Similarly, Merriam & Tisdell (2016, p59) argue that what makes research critical is the aim of challenging the existing social order with its embedded power relations. They argue that: “...critical research is not a ‘type’ of qualitative research...rather, critical research is about a worldview and this worldview and the tools of analysis from this perspective can be applied to many aspects of qualitative research.”

In their view, different types of research methods can be used to investigate the world from a critical approach, such as interviews, case studies, and participant observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Agostonine-Wilson, 2013; Brookfield & Holst, 2010; Burawoy, 1998; Mertens, 2009). Further, Parker (2005) notes that no research method is inherently more progressive than others [2].

However, other writers would suggest that a particular philosophical standpoint does impact on the methods of research. For example, Gramsci’s political philosophy and activity, discussed in the previous chapter, gives rise to identifiable research *methods* (Hill, 2009). In Hill’s view, this involved, firstly, Gramsci mapping the current political situation or conjuncture, secondly, the historicising of contemporary thought and thirdly, he attacked reified concepts such as culture and intellectuals.

### **5.3 The research design**

A number of methods were used to gather data for this research. First, a review of the literature on critical pedagogy and academic activism was undertaken, which was on-going throughout the research and gave rise to the interview questions in

section 5.11. Second, as part of the literature review, policy documents, government websites and organisational websites relating to the funding and strategic direction of HE were considered (contributing to chapter 2). Third, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, drawing on a life history approach (Armstrong, 1987) to elicit rich data on the critical educator participants. Once transcribed, a thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which allowed both for an inductive and deductive approach to the data. Fourth, interview data were theorised using a Freirean critical framework informed by a Gramscian, relational methodology (outlined in chapter 4).

This research, similar to the work of Falcon (2016) is not activist research (Choudry, 2013) in that I was unable to immerse myself in ethnographic fieldwork (Burawoy, 1998; Carspecken, 1996), but is research *about* activists. It was decided to use a modified case study approach and gather data through semi-structured interviews. These methods are discussed and justified in more detail below.

#### **5.4 Case study research**

Within a critical framework, this research proposed to use a case study method to address the overall research aim and to answer the research questions. Agostinone-Wilson (2013) suggests that case studies can form part of critical research. Ollis (2012) conducted interviews with individual activists in Australia to investigate their learning practices. She describes her participants, individually, as cases studies and, collectively, as constituting a multiple case approach (Stake, 2005). What ultimately defines a case is a single instance, entity or situation where data are collected using a number of methods. In this research, for example, the aim was to interview a number of academics, a case, who identified as critical educators and academic-activists. Boundedness is an important issue in the selection of a case (Denscombe, 2014). In my research, the case comprised of a selection of 17 academics, bounded by their role in HE in the UK (England and Scotland) and who self-identified as academic-activists. I outline the selection of these academic activist and their position in relation to their colleagues in 5.10 below.

Verschuren (2003) and Tight (2010) prefer the term case research rather than case study. This is because it is a research strategy in its own right, holistic and useful for complex situations. It also implies using a range of methods. Verschuren (2003,



p122) suggests that: "Research strategy, as the concept is used here, refers to a coherent set of methods, techniques and procedures for generating and analysing the research material as well as the way the researcher looks at reality and conceptually designs the research project."

### **5.5 Burawoy's extended case method**

Working within a neo-Marxian framework, Burawoy's writings on the importance of a public sociology has used what he describes as an extended case method (ECM) to link research in and beyond academia. This approach has relevance to my research area because first, it connects the area under investigation to the broader historical and political world context. Burawoy suggests that his approach can link the micro to the macro and can "extract the general from the unique" (1998, p6). Smith (2005) argues against the criticism that Marxism only works at the level of grand narrative as it is a theory that can grasp change at both micro and macro level, given that capitalism and crisis is lived and revisited in the fabric of everyday life. A similar point is made by Mathers & Novelli (2007) who stress the importance of totality in the research approach and the danger of seeing issues as isolated and so fragmented that they have little explanatory potential.

Second, Cox and Neilson (2007) criticise much social movement research for failing to look at the *process* of activism. Burawoy's reflexive science responds to this by regarding the everyday world as shaped by and shaping the external world, and as located within wider social, special and historical forces. Burawoy's (1998) extended case method (ECM) would respond to this as it is a methodology which "...navigates a terrain that moves and shifts as we attempt to traverse it" (p4). So the dialectical aspect of the research topic is reflected in this method.

Third, it acknowledges that research needs a theoretical framework to theorise participation in the world and to guide dialogue with participants. Burawoy (1998) suggests that "At this level, theorising is compiling situational knowledge into an account of social process" (p15). Burawoy also stresses the importance of research and theory development, of extending theory, and of challenging the theoretical basis of research.

## **5.6 Limitations of case study research**

In terms of the limitations of case study research, Verschuren (2003) notes the question of the researcher's independence because of the interactive nature of many case studies (particularly participant observation and in-depth interviews). Others question the low generalizability of case study research. However, Denzin (2009) draws on Yin (1989) to argue that case study research is not generalizable to populations; rather the goal is to expand and generalise theories. Stake (2005); Lincoln & Guba (2011) and Donmoyer (1990) respond to criticisms of generalizability by suggesting that cases can build on personal, individual knowledge; particularly the tacit knowledge defined by Polyani (1965). Further issues regarding generalizability in qualitative research are discussed below. Edwards (2011) makes an interesting point about the purposes of studying individual cases or biographies. She suggests (Edwards, 2011, p54) that the cases or holistic stories of educators such as Dewey or Vygotsky, can be useful for educators because they offer "...insights from the stories these educators have told about their own attempts to deal with contradictions in education." [3]

## **5.7 The interview in qualitative research**

Interviews are contentious (Alvesson, 2011) and political in nature (Parker, (2005). Alvesson (2011) criticises the view that interviews generally function to transmit knowledge from participants to researcher. Rather, he argues that interviews are complex social situations with researchers being aware of their own positionality and reflexivity. However, in this research, and consistent with the epistemological approach on the social individual and the concept of totality outlined in the previous chapter, this approach sees interviews as useful to simultaneously focus on individual agency and social structure, rather than an aggregate of individuals' idiosyncratic experiences. This is not to deny agency, but rather to see agency as praxis. My aim was not to interview critical educators for their individual voice or in a traditional life history sense which could be seen to valorise individual personal experience, nor to capture an essential self, or to investigate the construction of identity. Rather, the participants' stories were seen in the context of the concept of the 'social individual' outlined in more detail in the last chapter and central to the epistemological approach of this research.

Gramsci's relational view of personality, as Hill (2009) explains, sees consciousness as made up of nature, social formation and world view in a dialectical and relational way. Gramsci's concept of contradictory consciousness is part of this idea, with its non-deterministic conception of the human subject.

Also, it was hoped that the interviews would reflect discussion with individuals which reflected 'moments' politically and historically and the dynamics of their response to these changes in higher education. It was noteworthy that many of the respondents reflected on, and analysed, their own practice during the course of the interviews. Many respondents focused explicitly on the changes they had seen in their working conditions; the students they taught, and the changing nature of higher education as enacted in the classroom.

### **5.8 Limitations of interview research**

Interviews are criticised for offering a 'snapshot' view of an individual and are therefore limited in what they can convey (Hammersley, 2015). However, the use of life history as an interview approach, together with the understanding of the concept of the social individual (outlined in the previous chapter), militates against the view of an isolated individual offering personal opinions without context. It positioned the interviews as part of a life histories approach (Armstrong, 1987). Locating interviews and life histories within a dialectical materialist theoretical framework, sees participants in their broader socio-historical backgrounds. Jubas (2010, p353) explains that Gramsci discussed temporality in this way:

It is not enough to know the ensemble of relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be known genetically in the moment of their formation. For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of those relations. He (sic) is a precis of the past.

I was also aware that the research interview did not represent a dialogue between participant and interviewer in the Freirean sense. In his interview with Pepe Leistyna (2004) Freire explains their 'dialogue' should not be seen as a conversation but as located in much wider issues that could form the basis of debate.

This research also drew on a modified life histories approach (Armstrong, 1987) as this can locate individuals in their overall life experience as well as the broader socio-historical background which they inhabit. Although the participants were recounting,

and offering insights into their personal practice and experience, the research aim was not to look at this data as a collection of individual or psychological conversations, but rather as Mills (1957/1970, p207) suggested: "...to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals."

Parker (2005) in his work on psychologists as a professional group, makes the point that the key issue is to see psychologists as political actors rather than a collection of individuals or as a group in-itself. This is perhaps a more useful view and would be congruent with my research approach, which focuses on the relationship between agency and structure when looking at the role of academic activists.

Armstrong (1987) explicitly links a life history approach to a Gramscian, historical materialist methodology, which would also make this method relevant and congruent to my overall research epistemology. He argues that it is a valuable technique which can encourage the adoption of a critical perspective. He argues that a life history approach can probe beneath the surface of appearances. It can make connections between individuals and society and the interplay of these connections. In Armstrong's (1987, p61) view, life history research can "...encourage critical reflectiveness on social structural constraints through the understanding of individual biography". It is, therefore, suited to an approach which emphasises change and process, as well as the relationship between theory and practice.

## **5.9 Insider/outsider research**

As I work within higher education, though not as an academic member of staff, I could be viewed as an 'insider' in terms of conducting research. Within social science research, there are different ways of approaching the concept of insider-outsider contingent on the overall approach taken to research. It is often a concept associated with action research and participant observation and brings to the process of research both advantages and disadvantages. For example, insider research can easily establish rapport; interviewees may be more open and therefore communication is more successful and productive (Humphrey, 2007). However, too much familiarity may mean problems with interpretability (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). It may be that the researcher presumes to understand complex issues or

interviewees may assume that the researcher understands those issues (Clegg & Stephenson, 2013).

Outsider research, argue Couture, Zaidi & Maticka-Tyndale (2012), may achieve a greater clarity as the researcher needs to question the research. It may be more objective as there is no loyalty to those being studied. Finally, a lack of closeness suggests that the research will be free from political bias. However, for Choudry (2013), the key to conducting activist research is building relationships at every stage of the research and of working collaboratively. He notes Speed's (2006) view that activist research always contains a tension between political commitment and critical analysis but argues that such a tension is present in all research.

According to Corbyn Dwyer & Buckle (2009, p61) there exists a liminal space, where "We cannot retreat to a distant researcher role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so too the analysis affects our personhood." However, in contrast to strands of critical research (for example, Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009), where the voice of the researcher is pivotal and a reflexive account becomes central to the research, Parker argues (2005) that integral to research should be widening out of the role of the researcher and the purpose and usefulness of the research. Choudry (2013) makes a related point when he notes that research and activism in the academic world often reinforces a distinction between research within the academy and activism which exist 'out there' beyond the academy. Against this, he points to Marx's view of praxis where practical action in the material world is the link between consciousness and the objective world.

## **5.10 Selecting the participants**

This research investigated the following two research questions:

- To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation?
- In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university?

I had, therefore, to recruit a group of academics in higher education whose views, experiences and practices addressed these particular research questions. The

following section outlines this selection process, following Yardley's (2000) advice that the transparency of the selection process adds to the validity of research. The neo-liberal university provided the backdrop and context to the research and to the teaching and practice of critical educators. Within this context, I needed to select or sample from a group of critical educators. I faced two challenges. The first was that my reading, literature search and personal experience suggested that academics who saw themselves as academic-activists and critical pedagogy appeared to be in a minority in higher education. Canaan (2013) explicitly refers to a small group of critical pedagogues. This may be because engagement with academic-activism is fraught with difficulties within the neo-liberal university (indeed a number of the participants mentioned or alluded to difficult or dismissive exchanges with colleagues or issues with management which were related to their academic activism.)

Freedman (2007, p9) notes the 'flack' associated with being an academic activist, giving examples of his own media research. In these ways, the academic-activists in this research were dissimilar to their colleagues, however, they were not a group so bounded or sealed that that there was no blurring of characteristics. This raises a conceptual issue, congruent with this research approach, which adds further complexity to the idea of a bounded group of participants. The academic-activist participants in this research are not fixed entities, rather, as Freire (1970) argues, they are in a constant process of 'becoming' where, as social individuals, they engage with the world to intervene and change it in various ways, being themselves changed in the process. It is also important to note that, congruent with the relational methodology of this research, the group was seen as a collective actor (Parker, 2005; Hatcher, 2007) rather than an aggregate of individual subjects.

This is why self-identification became a key strategy in locating participants, often on the basis of their published work and also why snowball sampling was deemed appropriate in this research. This identified a group of academics in higher education who were bounded by their activism, but at the same time, not sealed off from their colleagues who may have, to a certain extent and at certain times, involved in specific activity (for example, trades union activity).

I was also aware that the locating of participants in this qualitative research had positivist overtones. I have in 4.2 and in this chapter, rejected that approach with its emphasis on, for example, a relationality which refers to a relation between two or

more objects of study or variables. This is linked to mainstream concepts of measurement in research and policy in higher education and which runs counter to the approach of this work. Because this research falls within the tradition of critical transformative research it cannot be viewed and assessed on the same criteria applied to positivist research (Hammersley, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 2011). Neither can it be subject to the issue of generalisability is regarded in positivist research. I discuss issues around the issue of generalisability in sections 5.5, 5.6, 5.10 and 5.16 where the aim of this research, although not generalising findings in a way understood in positivist research, still has relevance to wider situations, lessons and outcomes that can be analysed and considered and applied to different activist situations.

Given that the research aimed to investigate the possibility of higher education as a site for transformative change and the role of critical academics within that, the selection criteria were:

- academics currently teaching or researching in UK higher education [4]
- academics who self-identified as critical educators and academic activists.

For Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbin (2015), sampling in qualitative research can be broadly defined as "...the selection of specific data sources from which data are collected to address the research objectives" (p175). They note, however, that the concept of sampling in qualitative research is subject to debate and suggest that different research traditions within a qualitative framework take differing approaches to sampling. Burawoy (1998), for example, argues that critical research approaches which prioritise the social over the individual would not regard sampling in the same way as a more positivist orientated approach. In fact, Yin (2014) uses the term selection, avoiding altogether the language of sampling, which for him implies the attainment of statistical generalizability. For Luborsky & Rubinstein (1995), the power of sampling in qualitative research should be its "qualitative clarity" (p91). By this, they mean making explicit the details of the theoretical background and assumptions of the research; how the sample was selected and what influenced the sampling process.

The next stage was to locate potential participants. I consulted the literature review, journals on critical education, networks of academics involved in critical pedagogy and academics who had spoken at public events on the subject of my research. In this way I would reach those who could discuss the issues being researched (Nygreen, 2006; Ritchie, 2012). On this basis, a number of possible participants emerged. At this point, I attempted some variation within the sample in terms of geographical location; type of institution; and for the participants, a gender balance and a selection of academics from those who were new to academia to those who had many years' experience, and from a variety of disciplines, to introduce voices and experiences from a diversity of academic backgrounds.

The interview participants were approached using a combination of purposive and referral sampling (Robinson, 2014). Patton's (2015, p264) view of purposeful sampling is influential in qualitative research. He argues that: "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which we can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry...studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding."

I initially targeted fourteen academics in UK universities from the group identified. The nature of this initial contact was an email that explained my research and a request that they might consider being interviewed. I attached an information sheet explaining that the research had ethical approval from the University and outlining my research aims and interview questions. It was made clear that I had no expectations of a reply to my speculative approach. On this basis, eight academics replied, agreeing to be interviewed on the basis of the information I had forwarded. This response was followed up with arrangements to meet face to face or to use Skype for an interview.

Those responding could be regarded as a self-selecting group, however, this approach ensured that I was reaching those academics most able to offer information and insights into the research topic. Robinson (2014) notes that self-selection bias is often unavoidable in interview-based research as "voluntary participation is central to ethical good practice". He also suggests that researcher awareness and self-reflexivity is part of responding to, and considering, the research



findings. In addition, it was not my intention for the findings of the research to be made generalizable to a wider population in any statistically-valid way. Given the wide range of issues and theoretical approaches within critical pedagogy it was not possible to select a comprehensive cross section. However, variations within the sample offered a spectrum of opinion. For example, five of the participants had been directly involved in the 2010 student occupations on university campuses; three of the participants taught at Scottish universities within the tradition of 'popular education' and had close ties to community education and three of the participants researched and published within the tradition of radical geography. The heterogeneity of the sample emerged further as the interviews took place and participants discussed their political and theoretical background and influences in more depth.

Ongoing selection of participants took place alongside the interviews that began in 2015 and I contacted a further 13 academics mentioned to me by those I interviewed. This allowed me to extend the initial purposive sample with a referral technique or 'snowball' sampling' (Patton, 2015). I contacted the named academics in the same way as for the purposive sample and nine responded agreeing to be interviewed. Of the remaining four: two did not respond and two were interested in being interviewed but logistically it was not possible to arrange the interviews. In total, 17 participants were interviewed and their responses formed the empirical data for this research. Their biographies are at annex 1.

### **5.11 Data collection - the interviews**

The 17 interviews took place during 2015-16 in a range of locations determined by the interviewees. They often took place on campus, but sometimes in the interviewee's home or in a public place such as a library or café.

Before the interviews took place, I began the research by speaking to a local school-teacher/activist. This in-depth interview was not included in the final coding and analysis as it fell outside of higher education. However, it was invaluable, not just to test out the mechanics of the interview situation, but for the insight and rich description that emerged and which fed into my consideration of the interview questions.

At the start of each interview, I discussed whether participants wished to be named in the research. Only one participant requested anonymity. Although Grinyer (2002) and Banks *et al* (2003) point out that anonymity is the default position in social science research, I was not surprised by this response because the participants were published authors, often writing from a critical pedagogy and/or activist perspective and most were known in local campaigns and spoke at public meetings. They were engaged and committed academics and known in activist communities. This chimes with Banks *et al*'s (2003) research into community-based activity and political campaigns in which they found that anonymity was always partial. I agree with Banks *et al*'s (2003, p266) suggestion that anonymity in research, as part of a range of ethical issues, is a more complex issue than rule-based protocols assume. They reject the 'ethics of regulation' which they see as an institutionally based regulatory code of practice embodying abstract principles. Instead, they argue, on the basis of their community based participatory research, for an 'everyday ethics' which reflects a complex negotiation of ethical issues.

From Parker's (2005) perspective anonymity can assume the 'fragility' of the subject rather than their resilience. He, interestingly, also makes the point that confidentiality may be more about the researcher than the research, as identified participants make it easier for the researcher's interpretations to be challenged. Grinyer's (2002) research notes that her participants felt that they had lost ownership of their responses once they had been anonymised.

The participants were told that they could review the typed transcript of the interview, which was requested by three of the participants. The participants were asked to sign a consent form and were advised that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes and were semi-structured to allow for a full and informal discussion. The interview questions, below, were deliberately crafted to capture a wide range of experiences and understandings. Responses often moved between these key questions in the course of the discussion.

- Tell me about your background in education
- What drew you to activism?

- Tell me about your role as an academic and as an activist and how these areas link together (or not).
- To what extent do you think that education can be a site for transformation/resistance/the development of a critical consciousness?
- Are alliances possible for activists in education with wider social movements?

### **5.12 Analysis: Transcribing, coding and interpreting the interview data**

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis method drawn from the work of Braun and Clark (2006, 2014), Carspecken (1996) and Saldana (2009). It is worth noting here some criticisms of coding as a method of analysis and also the fact that some researchers choose not to code interview data but to read, for example, for familiarisation of details. Whilst not working from a post-modern perspective (as argued in chapter 3), I was sympathetic to the views of those researchers who are hesitant to codify data (Danvers, 2016; MacLure, 2013). MacLure (2013), for example, use modified coding consistent with a post-modern epistemology. She enumerates the problems with coding. First, coding analysis puts the researcher in a powerful position with regard to interviewees (a “colonial relation”, p168). Second, it assumes ideas are fixed as codes and that there is a hierarchical logic to these fixed relations. Third, her view of a fragmented, changing, chaotic world is one that does not align easily with codes. Finally, codification and analysis assumes that everything is explicable and discoverable, with attendant causes and explanations.

Coding assumes discrete categories, which is problematic in research such as this, which takes a dialectical and praxis approach. Not only were the respondents acting and teaching in terms of what was happening outside of academia, they were changing themselves in the process. The analysis of the interview data often felt as if I was unpicking complex ideas to codify and then attempting to put them back together along with other ideas grouped thematically. At times this very process seemed predicated on de-contextualising the discussion and the respondent’s own

analysis of their position and praxis in higher education. In some ways this process of coding ideas, unpicking and putting back together, seemed to reflect a positivist notion of ideas and ideology. There is not necessarily an answer to this problem, in the context of this particular research project, but I was aware of it as part of the complexity of the research process. However, Braun and Clarke (2014, np) argue that one advantage of thematic analysis is its interpretive depth due to its use of coding interview data and identifying patterns or themes across the data set. Also, that:

The questions of what level patterns are sought at, and what interpretations are made of these patterns, are left to the researcher. This is because the techniques are separate from the theoretical orientation of the research.

However, Braun and Clarke (2006) have also argued that thematic analysis is a method of analysis that is appropriate to research within a critical epistemological framework. Thematic analysis allows for contradictions between interviews as well as what appeared to be contradictory views within some of the interviews.

Thematic analysis, then, was chosen, although narrative analysis of data and critical discourse analysis (CDA), were initially considered. Marshall and Rosman (2006) note that narrative analysis assumes individuals construct the reality of their lives. It elicits 'voice' and has been used for feminist research and critical theory. It also implies a collaboration between researcher and researched to co-construct meanings. Marshall and Rosman (2006) note the criticisms of this approach as being focused on the individual at the expense of social context. It may also, like any method that relies on individual accounts, reflect a re-interpretation of the past as well as selective recall. I considered narrative analysis to be too closely aligned to a social constructivist approach which I contrasted in the previous chapter with the materialist methodology adopted in this research.

I also considered whether to use critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach seemed relevant to this research because CDA has an engaged agenda, sees language as a form of social practice (Jones, 2004), and is a method for studying social change (Fairclough, 1999; 2012). I chose, however, not to use this method as it would be inconsistent with the approach taken in this research. I was influenced by Jones (2004) and Holborow's (2015) criticism of discourse analysis as part of the 'turn to language'. Even critical CDA is challenged by Jones (2004) for running

counter to "...the principles, and methodology of historical analysis from a materialist perspective" (p97). Indeed, he argues that CDA and historical materialism are incompatible because discourse is analysed without recourse to the concrete social processes that are constitutive of discourse. There is, in addition, says Jones a lack of "empirical context" (p121). This is important because rather than approaching politics as language:

By contrast, Marx and Engels approached language *as politics* or *as political economy* or *as philosophy*; that is they approached the discourses of politics, political economy or philosophy as specific forms of social consciousness in and through which the real being of people was expressed, reflected and refracted in the most diverse and contradictory ways.

Therefore, despite its explicitly political agenda (Fairclough, 2012), CDA gives primacy to discourse and looks on language as a mode of action.

Thematic analysis was chosen because, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p81) suggest, this is a way of analysing textual material that can be used from different epistemological perspectives, mentioning critical realism as an example where:

individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings while retaining focus on the material and other limits of 'reality'. Therefore, thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'.

Sharp and Green (1975, p234) note the: "...need to operate simultaneously at the epistemological, theoretical and empirical levels, with self-awareness, given that there is no ready-made formula for producing knowledge."

Braun and Clarke (2006) remind researchers that using thematic analysis to interpret data is not a neutral exercise and should be linked to the theoretical perspective of the researcher, which should be made explicit and involve ongoing reflexive dialogue on their part. Saldana (2009) refers to coding filters which is the researcher's analytic lens that influences not just the coding stage, but the questions asked and the data documentation. It refers to the ontological, epistemological, and methodological influences which affect the coding decision. He quotes Merriam (1998, p48): "... our analysis and interpretation – our study's findings - will reflect the constructs, concepts and language models that structured the study in the first place."

Saldana (2009) argues that how data is interpreted is linked to the researcher's interpretive analysis, hence the need for openness and integrity in the approach. As I am interpreting the interview data, the next section offers a detailed explanation of how this was done so that readers can judge the veracity and credibility of this work.

### **5.13 Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis.**

I followed the thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2014) and also drew on the coding advice of Saldana (2009) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017). As the analysis progressed, I also drew on Freire's (1970) dialectical ontology, using his concepts of problem-solving, problem-posing and dialogue regarding the backgrounds of the participants. This is explained in more detail in the following chapter.

The data analysis was informed by the research questions, the literature on critical pedagogy and the conceptual and theoretical framework of this research. The research questions were:

- To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation?
- In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university?

It became clear, as I was analysing the interviews, that respondents didn't just describe their experiences and developments, but analysed them at one and the same time [5]. The interviews took place over the course of 2015 and the transcribing and initial coding of themes began at the start and continued throughout the process. The preliminary data analysis overlapped with the data collection process, which was ongoing and involved continual refinement and re-coding of the data. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006; 2014) was used as a framework for the stages of this process and a step- by-step explanation of this process is given to ensure clarity and accountability in the coding and analysis, adding to the validity of the research.

However, where Braun and Clarke (2006) appear to distinguish between and inductive or theoretical analysis, this analysis used both an inductive and deductive

approach. It was deductive, because the research is guided by an overarching epistemological and ontological approach which, in turn, will manifest according to Saldana (2009) as a coding filter or lens through which to code and analyse the meanings within the data. But an inductive approach was also as this allowed me to stay close to the transcripts, reading, re-reading and looking for meanings or patterns within the data. Thematic analysis allowed for contradictions between the interviews as well as what appeared to be contradictory views within issues. A limitation was that these contradictions, which were noted after the interview situation when reading a transcript, were not followed up with participants; the dialogue existed within the interview situation only. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and three people asked for this. However, no amendments were made. A reflexive log was kept after interviews (Parker, 2005; Ortlipp, 2008) where I noted points of particular interest or that were new to me.

#### Stage 1: Familiarisation with the data

The interviews were transcribed and then typed up verbatim, although some small changes were made, for example to avoid repetition of words within a sentence. They were then checked again against the original tape recording. The analysis began with my reading and re-reading the transcripts many times to gain an overview of the ideas that were emerging. At this point, I began to use analytic memos (Saldana, 2009) to pick up on initial issues and ideas. As Armstrong (1987) notes, the data collection and analysis are not sequential but are interconnected with constant movement between the two. The analytic memos (Saldana, 2009), whilst not coded data, were used to guide the analytic process, for example if any concepts and patterns emerged in the re-coding of the data. The transcripts were then read against the interview tapes to ensure accuracy. There was also a sense of constant comparison as inevitably I found I was making links between the transcripts when reading through.

#### Stage 2: Generate the initial codes

Saldana (2009) suggests that a code in qualitative research is “most often a word, a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing an attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p3). He explains that coding doesn’t just reduce data but summarises it. Saldana’s initial codes involve an open-

ended process involving first impressions, so that codes at this stage are provisional and tentative. I read each interview in turn across the data set. I then analysed the data and coded for the specific research questions (Ritchie, 2012). The initial codes were generated manually by using codes at the sides of sentences or larger segments of data. This initial coding used open coding to allow themes to emerge. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that at this stage it is important to code for any inconsistencies and tensions.

Saldana (2009) suggests manually marking pages of text first. I did this repeatedly, spreading out the pages to see the to try and see the interconnections between smaller chunks of words and the larger picture, which could then be transferred to a word document.

A modified form of comparative analysis was used so that points of similarity and comprehension could be identified. Frequency itself was not a consideration as salience was given greater consideration in the analysis in terms of the meaning given by the participants. Salience foregrounds themes that appear to be particularly important across the interview data. In the context of this research, salience should be seen within a dialectical research tradition as a relational category. I found Bourdieu's (2003) research approach useful in this respect. Because knowledge is a social and historical context, a researcher should use a relational approach to analyse the data. Naidoo (2014) considers aspects of Bourdieu's relational ontology that are relevant for questions of validity, given that all knowledge, and therefore 'truths' are located in specific historical contexts. A relational way of thinking would involve an analysis which attends to the inter-relation of subjective issues (in this case, the interview themes) and objective conditions, particularly the current crisis in higher education. Thinking relationally and reflexively to produce more valid accounts means seeing research problems within the totality of the social structure. Reflexivity is central to producing valid accounts of the world, it is collective rather than individual and foregrounds concrete problems to be solved. Following from this it reflects an awareness of those issues that were particularly important for the participants in the context of their backgrounds and their involvement with activism in the context of neo-liberal higher education. The issues and themes that were important in this research at the time the interviews were carried out, many not be the same as issues that would emerge in a different time period and context.



It is an approach, similar to much interviewing in qualitative research, where my own role in interpreting the data comes under scrutiny. My background knowledge, literature search, personal experience of activism and links to academic activists aside from the participants in this research, could not be separated from my ability to interpret the data. This is linked to validity in social science research and the significance of self-reflexivity to strengthen the validity of the research.

I used a thematic analysis and Freire's relational concepts of problem posing, problem solving and dialogue to analyse the data. I strengthened validity with my own self reflexivity which included a position statement in section 1.6 and an exposition and justification of the research approach in section 1.8 as well as in this and the previous chapter. My research analysis follows on from the overall perspective and involves relationality and reflexivity. I discuss these issues further in relation to self-reflexivity and validity in 5.14 and 5.16.

I then worked through each of the transcripts, highlighted words and ideas and generated initial codes, coding every segment of text that appeared relevant. This was continued throughout the interviews. The codes and coded segments were then compared to ensure consistency and modified, if necessary. Working through the transcripts in this way generated new codes and modified existing codes. Saldana (2009) argues that a theme is "an outcome of coding categorization *and* analytic reflection" (p13) (emphasis in the original). At this point of generating codes, I cut and pasted the codes into a word document and further re-checked to ensure the consistency of the codes used. Luborsky (1994, p208) argues for the importance of coding that encapsulates the meaning of the interviewee in the context of the interview. He is aware of the limitations of coding interview data as: "By their very nature as condensed meaning, themes carry us towards a reductionism or simplification that strips away the explicit contexts, complexity and richness of the original expression."

This is an issue for all qualitative researchers and one way to approach this would have been to have allowed more negotiation of the transcripts. All that was possible in this research was my offering all of the interviewees the opportunity to see and comment on a copy of their transcript. Three people asked to see their transcript, but no changes were made. Saldana (2009) reminds us that coding is not only iterative

but cyclical, where cycles of coding and re-coding continues to highlight, focus and re-focus the data as it allows for the generation of categories, and themes.

### Stage 3: Identifying themes

Braun & Clarke (2006) argue that themes are not embedded and waiting to be found (data does not speak), but that they are interpreted by the researcher. This stage begins when a long list of codes have been generated and checked and these codes are analysed to group them into different potential themes. This is the beginning of the analysis of the codes to combine them into themes. Saldana (2009) adds a separate step of categorising codes in his codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (p12) which allows reflection on the relationship between the codes, categories and themes; that is to identify similarities and differences, with possible sub-themes. At this point I was also looking back at the literature and using any analytic memos to illuminate any of these preliminary thematic codes.

### Stage 4: Review the themes

I used Word to cut and paste and gather all the data relevant to each theme (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), reviewing the data extracts associated with each theme. Themes were reviewed at this stage for possible over-lap and the need to create separate themes. In this stage, the themes are refined to identify any overarching themes or sub-themes. Following Patton (2015), I checked for internal homogeneity, which refers to the extent to which the collated data within a theme hold together in a coherent and meaningful way. I checked for external heterogeneity, that is the extent to which a theme is clearly differentiated and mutually exclusive to the others. At this stage, I again checked the codes and if applicable, moved them into different themes. Then the data and all of the codes were re-visited and reviewed again to avoid overlooking any meaningful data from earlier stages. I moved codes to try for a better fit. This reviewing of the themes was a rearranging process and took place re-cursively using the literature. I made a number of changes at this stage and looked at these themes in the context of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Stage 5: Define and name the themes

This stage involved writing an analysis which encompasses the essence of each over-arching theme and to look at these themes in the context of the overall discussion that addresses the research questions. This detailed interpretive analysis of themes captures the essence and latent meanings of the codes by using relevant, illustrative quotations to corroborate the arguments and opinions of the interviewees. This thematic analysis and the resultant themes are the basis of an interpretive and conceptual discussion in the following three chapters, illustrating the complexity of the experiences, views and practices of the critical pedagogues. By using a praxis conceptual framework, it offers insights into dialectical and ongoing possibilities.

### **5.14 Critical reflection and self-reflexivity in critical research**

The importance of personal reflexivity in the research process stems partly from the understanding that personal beliefs and values shape the direction and outcomes of the research. Brookfield (2009, p296) notes that reflexivity is a contested concept and argues that what we understand by the concept of critical reflection depends on “often conflicting intellectual traditions informing its use.”

Both Chiu (2006) and Clegg (2000) caution against seeing reflection as an aspect of best practice that is incorporated uncritically into the research process. A deeper insight is needed into the concept of reflexivity in qualitative research in its role in the construction of meaning and in underpinning ethical practice.

It is often the case, as Tatli (2012) points out, that critical reflexivity appears in research on a personalized, subjective basis. Parker (2005) suggests that subjectivity is often caricatured as the opinion of the researcher and is therefore biased and should carry little weight. In contrast, he suggests drawing on theoretical frameworks to better understand subjectivity and “...to think of reflexivity as part of the collective activity that takes place in all research” (p26). Parker refers to Adorno and his colleagues who said that “every claim to objective truth is also simultaneously the reflection of the historically embedded subjective position of the researcher in what they are studying” (p27). Tatli (2012) cites Rhodes (2009), who claims that reflexivity that produces meta-commentary about researchers and their work tends to pathologise and individualise what are, in fact, institutional, social and

political structures which, in turn, shape their position as researcher selves. Burowoy (1998) refers to his extended case method (ECM) as reflexive science (as opposed to positive science). Self-reflexivity becomes an important part of the research process. For Bourdieu (2003) 'self-critical reflexivity' is a pre-requisite to enable constant scrutiny of any distortion or mystification that is part of the social relations in which the researcher is located. Darlington & Dobson (2013, p294) argue that:

to ensure that partisan research is 'objective' it should not only be grounded in a self-critical and self-examination of the basic value commitments that inform research in order to understand how they relate to the enquiry at hand, with the researcher the first to find flaws in his or her interpretation, so as to avoid the danger of bias.

Similarly, Burawoy (1998, p14) argues that: "Recognising our own place within the disciplinary field enables us to objectify our relation to those we study, which will make us better scientists."

Indeed, given the epistemological and political assumptions underpinning this research it is important that reflexivity is focussed at the level of practice and is not just about individual reflexivity. Archer's (2010) notion of 'relational reflexivity' suggests a similar situation where meaning making and knowledge creation cannot be understood in terms of individual knowledge, but instead is found in the dialectic or dialogue between individuals or groups. Similarly, Parker (2005) suggests that "reflexively relational immanent critique" requires a focus on the role of subjectivity in research. Not, however, to endorse individual experience, but to scrutinize and critique it. In his (2005, p29) view: "This reflexive activity does not turn inward to a simple first-person account confession, but outward to the social relations that have enabled someone to experience themselves as an individual in relation to others."

Reflexivity and critical reflection recognise the role of the researcher and participant and see research, as with teaching and learning within critical pedagogy, as dialogic, knowledge producing, transformative activities rather than just transmission learning or research. Furthermore, the process of reflection is historical and has to be seen and understood in a specific historical conjuncture not part of an individual's experience and abstracted from social relations. For example, McLaren (2010, np) argues: "A pedagogy of desire sees oppression as a question of identity – the

experience of being black, gay, but oppression cannot be explained by experience. We need an analysis of experience.”

For Carr & Kemmis (2004) this would involve acknowledging that researchers have a role in meaning making and knowledge production. Therefore, value stance has to be made explicit, as well as the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of research. Following the Gramscian methodology of this research, I must also view myself as a researcher embodying social locations and acknowledge where these may have influenced the questions asked, and how the data were produced and analysed. Sotiris’ (2014, np) point about individual subjectivity is relevant here. He explains that Gramsci talked of the democratic philosopher who: “...is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active relationship of modification to the cultural environment.”

The responses of participants in this research, working within their own theoretical frameworks and political standpoints, showed differences and contradictions. However, taken together as a range of experiences, insights and analyses and within a wider context, the interviews offered themes, issues and the dynamics of the role of critical educators which could contribute to wider issues and debates. Ideas are located historically; they are therefore not limited to individual perceptions. Their subjective views, which in some interpretivist traditions are seen as ends in themselves are, from the materialist perspective of this research, located in a wider social context, and are a means to understand the interrelationships between material interests, activity and consciousness.

It is worth noting that, for some researchers (Adkins, 2003; Adams, 2006), reflexivity is so incorporated into the continuity of social structures that it cannot be used to transform them. Indeed, Adkins (2003) argues that reflexivity is constitutive of inequality, particularly gendered identities. This is because the self-reflective subject is a reflection of the neo-liberal individual subject. In Adams’ (2006) view, reflexivity is becoming a “normative state” (p520), moving into more and more areas of life, reflecting hidden regulatory processes. He questions whether there is any link necessarily between reflexivity and social transformation. He points to the way in which Giddens’ (1991) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim’s (2011) theories of individualization and modernity have individualised the subject and linked this to self-

identity in late modernity. Adams (2006) points to this extended reflexivity theory where self-reflexivity is increasingly constitutive of self-identity, where individuals turn in on themselves and their own resources and where change is assumed to emerge at the level of the individual.

By contrast, Parker (2005) suggests drawing on theoretical frameworks to better understand subjectivity and "...to think of reflexivity as part of the collective activity that takes place in all research" (p26). Similarly, Pepperell's (2007) view of 'self-reflexivity beyond the self' suggests that self-reflexivity as a concept should be used at the level of theory. In her view, critical theory is self-reflective when it can outline potentials for transformation, where it can move beyond critique and identify the resources to move beyond existing society and where it focuses on action. It is about conceptualising the social field, not the reflective subject. Smith (2001, p26) suggests that the work of philosophers (which I interpret to mean academics and researchers):

divorces concepts from the activities of individuals themselves embedded dialectically in the relations of production...They experience the separation of ideas from practice as an effect of their work and the relations in which it is embedded. Ideology, as a practice of reasoning about society and history, elaborates on their experience of working in language as an independent realm.

Following Smith's view, my analysis of the interview data saw it as embedded in the history and experiences of the participants as social individuals. I remained aware of the findings as arising from the material world from which they emerged.

### **5.15 Partisanship in critical research**

In Levin & Lewontin's (2009) view, it is not only critical educators whose work is political. Following on from their analysis of the dominant discourse of objective science, all educators are involved in political work. They discuss science (which could be taken to mean all forms of investigation into the world) in this way:

We believe that science in all its senses is a social process that both causes and is caused by social organisation. To do science is to be a social actor engaged, whether one likes it or not, in political activity. The denial of the interpenetration of the scientific and the social is itself a political act (p4)

Parker (2005) suggests that researchers will find that they need to locate themselves as researchers within different layers of academic research. First is, the historical assumptions about what research is and who should conduct it. Second is, the institutional constraints on what and how to research and what sort of questions to ask. Choudry's (2013) involvement with social movement struggles leads him to argue that activist research privileges particular aspects of scholarship and research. For example, building relationships and collaborative research is significant. So is recognising the creation of knowledge as part of the 'knowledge-practice' of social movements and groups and how this knowledge is mobilised and disseminated for effective action and organising

Mainstream research is often concerned with negating or minimising bias, but as Sharp (1980) notes, this is, in itself, an ideological position. She contrasts the liberal search for knowledge with the Marxist. In her view, this is the Marxist concept of ideology versus a notion of 'bias'. From a liberal perspective, the search for knowledge involves the avoidance of bias and the search for truth, i.e. there are many different points of view, some legitimate, others distorted, so the object is to remove either the bias and distortion because of political or moral position and come as close to the truth as possible. Another position would be that all truths are acceptable or that truth resides nowhere, which is a relativist position and where the only valid measure of truth certainty is each individual's experience and that the subjective constructs of individuals are equally valid. Raduntz (2006) comments on the basis of Brossio's critical democratic pedagogy where the basis of truth claims appear to reside in the democratic will of the people. This, claims Raduntz, amounts to an aggregation of individual subjective judgements (p7). The problem here is that such individuals are locked into existing capitalist social relations. In her view, locating the onus of proof in the socio-political arena ignores the issues of dominant ideology and class inequalities. Such a perspective can serve to undermine solidarity and underpin a balance between capitalism and democracy, which upholds the status quo.

By contrast, Marxist theory does not exist at the level of ideas but, as Sharpe (1980, p87) suggests:

the concept of ideology in Marxist theory refers not simply to the level of ideas but to the whole range of social practices which reproduce and transfigure in ideological form, the relations of production which, in class societies, are social relations of domination.

Canella and Lincoln (2009) suggest that critical research asks certain fundamental questions about who is privileged and who is oppressed, although their views on critical research reflect an implicit reliance on issues within postmodern theory such as the importance of inquiry into language and discourse and how this shapes social life. Brooke and Darlington (2013, p233) argue that not all critical research is partisan. They state: "The key question is the degree to which the scholar goes beyond using their work to critique conservative, common-sense knowledge and socio-economic domination...to ally openly with a social group or cause thereby engaging in an oppositional form of critical study."

Kincheloe & McLaren (2000, p280) argue from within the critical pedagogy and critical research tradition in terms of openly political research. From their perspective:

Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research thus must become a transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label political and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world.

Brook and Darlington (2013) compare the research approaches of Gramsci and Bourdieu in the context of a left-radical organic public sociology of work. Bourdieu's approach is rejected in favour of that of Gramsci as a model for researchers who want to engage with marginalised groups in the labour movement in their own struggles. Their criticism of Bourdieu's research, centres around his view that because capitalist ideology is all pervasive, people internalise the discourses of the powerful (Doxa) to form a 'habitus', cultural behaviours and attitudes that are all-consuming. The implication of this is that only a qualified researcher can provide effective critique of dominant discourses. In terms of my own research, I interviewed academic activists whose own political perspectives were part of personal and political critiques of existing social and educational inequalities. It would not be appropriate therefore for my interpretation of research data to reflect the view of Bourdieu where, as Brook and Darlington (2013, p235) point out: "...valid



interpretation can only come from an expert intellectual who occupies a separate epistemological space from the social movement activist.”

It could be argued (Bourdieu, 2003) that all scholarship is partisan as the information is filtered through a personal viewpoint in a particular socio-political and historical timeframe. Brook and Darlington (2013) discuss the importance of reflexivity in critical ethnographic research. They argue for an approach to critical emancipatory research that, in the tradition of Burawoy’s organic public sociology, is both partisan and scholarly and rigorous. They use participatory action research to pursue openly partisan research in labour studies, on the side of workers as well as the unemployed and un-organised. They explain (Brook and Darlington, 2013, p233): “By drawing on PARs practices and critical realism’s materialist epistemology, partisan organic scholars can ensure that their research is rigorous, valid and representative through being reflexive, accountable to agents, and relevant to their struggles.”

This research is openly ideological or partisan research, and has to be justified in terms of validity, rigour and scholarship. Darlington & Dobson (2013), for example, argue that research can be both objective and partisan. The mechanisms for ensuring this include: striving for transparency; for example, not only clarity of the political, epistemological and ontological assumptions of the research, but my membership of political organisations, so that readers of this research will be better able to judge whether these factors have impacted on the research. Hammersley (2007), however, suggests that criticisms regarding a lack of rigour and validity are based on flawed assumptions about educational research resting on positivist assumptions where empirical research attempts to discover facts about the social world. He also makes the point there is often an assumption made that criteria for quality are already available for quantitative research.

Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual is premised on the view that the capacity to reason and think rigorously is not confined to academics. Traditional academics, for Gramsci, are cut off from the dominant social group, speaking on behalf of the group. This is the pattern for much ethnographic research on behalf of the marginalised, the sub-altern as studied by researchers and there is then much stress on reflexivity which acknowledges what distinguished the ‘lone researcher’, for

example her background, gender, social class, from the researched group (Mertens, 2009).

However, for Gramsci, every social group, movement, political party can contain its own organic intellectuals. Brooke and Darlington (2013, p236) explain the relationship between the organic intellectual and the group in this way: "The organic intellectual relates to the sub-altern groups not as an autonomous tribune but as the intellectual manifestation of their collective voice in counter-hegemonic struggle."

They are also, as Callinicos (1999, p10) suggests: "...caught up in a constant dialogue in which intellectual practice, rather than belonging to the exclusive domain of cultural production is, through interrogation into broader political activity, continually put to the test and thereby critically scrutinised and revised."

### **5.16 Evaluation and rigour in critical research - validity and truth claims**

This research has attempted to maximise rigour in the research process by developing a clear theoretical framework, a notion of critical reflexivity, the choice of research tools and a robust strategy for data analysis. Evaluation of rigour is debated, as it entails asking questions about the nature of the research and the use to which it is put. Brookfield and Holst's (2010, p184) view of critical, transformative research focuses on constantly changing reality and the change between the subjective and the objective, arguing that: "Reality is not static, nor is knowledge...there is a relationship between the objective and the subjective in which one cannot be understood outside of the relationship with the other."

Rejecting a positivist paradigm, Lincoln & Guba (1989) replaced evaluative criteria that appeared more relevant to interpretivist research, with categories such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. For example, Donmoyer (1990) notes that case studies, rather than being suitable for generalisation, can offer 'vicarious' experiences, and are useful because it takes the reader to new situations or views that might augment or challenge their perspective. In any case, Donmoyer (1990, p149) notes that because research is based on: "...rival interpretations...adequacy can be assessed in terms of particular purposes in particular contexts."

In terms of evaluation, Eason (2010) adopts a pragmatic rather than a political approach. Because observation is fallible, there are no criteria to determine the truth of a situation. In his view, critical realist research should collect data to differentiate between explanations, and that a community of researchers should debate these interpretations thoroughly (p123). This consensus view of research is similar to that of Hammersley's (2007) of the evaluation and value of educational research. Eason (2010, p123) suggests that: "As a result, criticality within a discipline becomes essential since only by seeing the data through the different theoretical lenses employed by different researchers can understanding of some features of the real world occur."

Anderson (1989) claims that critical ethnographers engage in procedures that will ensure the trustworthiness of research, citing Lather's (1986) three overlapping traditions of critical research: a reformulated construct validity; face validity and catalytic validity. Anderson makes the point that what is different for critical ethnographers is that they subject their analytical categories, such as 'family' and 'property', to scrutiny as implicitly ideological in presenting a particular view of the world and as reproducing social relationships. Anderson (1989, p253) argues that: "The apparent contradiction of [such] value-based research from traditional definitions of validity has left critical ethnography open to criticism from both within and outside the ethnographic tradition."

Yet Darlington and Dobson (2013, p294) argue that: "Far from being some kind of unwelcome intruder, partisanship is an essential ingredient of research that can produce real insights and value to all." They are clear, however, to reject bias in research. By this they mean a tendency to draw conclusions for research which reflects the political views of the researcher rather than being grounded in verifiable evidence. This is similar to Lincoln and Guba's (2000) view of authenticity. By this they do not mean fairness and a balanced view, such that only surface relations are considered. But rather, the question is, has the researcher presented views correctly and not misrepresented them.

Darlington and Dobson (2013, p288) explain their view of objectivity in research:

It is objective because it produces knowledge on the basis of research that is scholarly and rigorous in its methodology, in terms of measures such as reliability, validity, representativeness and verification and which

systematically assess any formulated hypotheses in the light of the evidence, as opposed to 'biased' research in which subjective evaluations are expressed independently of such evidence.

They then introduce the term 'objective partisanship' where research is committed to serving the goals of social justice and democracy, not a particular political group or party. In terms of the evaluation of research and research outcomes, Darlington and Dobson (2013) reject both the objectivist approach of positivism as well as the subjectivist position, which they see as central to social constructivism and postmodern approaches, where all research is selective and partial and where all versions are equally valid. In contrast they argue for an objective, external world existing independently of the researcher, but reflecting a praxis methodology. As such, the researcher and researched are mutually interdependent such that: "It is impossible to assign primacy to facts or interpretation; both subject and object are in a continual process in which the researcher moulds facts to interpretation and interpretation to facts" (p288).

Three points follow from this. The first is that the researcher brings a particular interpretation and perspective to the research and research outcomes, which is why a meta-theory is needed to mediate and account for the relationship between structure and agency. Second, some theories are more likely than others to have greater accuracy and explanatory power than others. Finally, because knowledge is mediated and contingent it is also fallible and provisional.

### **5.17 Ethics and politics in the research process**

The importance of personal reflexivity in the research process stems partly from the understanding that personal beliefs and values shape the direction and outcomes of the research. Darlington & Dobson (2013, p294) argue that:

to ensure that partisan research is 'objective' it should not only be grounded in a self-critical and self-examination of the basic value commitments that inform research in order to understand how they relate to the enquiry at hand, with the researcher the first to find flaws in his or her interpretation, so as to avoid the danger of bias.

Similarly, Burawoy (1998, p14) argues that "Recognising our own place within the disciplinary field enables us to objectify our relation to those we study, which will make us better scientists." Lindisfarne (2008) notes that 'taking sides' can also

involve a political decision to favour the status quo. Her fieldwork research has seen field work used to better manage oppressive and exploitative situations.

Indeed, given the epistemological and political assumptions underpinning this research it is important that reflexivity is focussed at the level of practice and is not just about individual reflexivity. Archer's (2010) notion of relational reflexivity suggests a similar situation where meaning making and knowledge creation cannot be understood in terms of individual knowledge, but in the dialectic or dialogue between individuals or groups.

The point is that the process of reflection is historical and has to be seen and understood in a specific historical conjuncture, not part of an individual's experience abstracted from social relations. For Carr & Kemmis (1986) this would involve acknowledging that researchers have a role in meaning making and knowledge production. Therefore, value stance has to be made explicit, as well as the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of research.

Flick (2009) argues that researchers are confronted by ethical issues at every stage of the research process beginning with the choice of research topic. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) as well as individual universities produce their own code of ethics and this research will comply with these guidelines. It has ethical approval from Durham University. However, this should not be seen as taking a 'checklist' approach as ethical considerations should be the starting point of all research and suffuse the entire research process (Armbruster, 2008). More than this, argue Hamersley & Traianou (2014), researchers must actively subject existing ethical ideas and institutional requirements and guidelines to critical scrutiny.

Hartas (2010) suggests that no research is neutral or value-free and that it is therefore important for researchers to locate themselves within a philosophical paradigm. In doing so, the researcher is contributing to the rigour of the research by ensuring transparency of approach at the outset. In this research, it means being explicit about the research aims and perspectives and about how, where and when the research findings are disseminated.

Nor are ethics just about being respectful to participants as a tactic. Those involved in qualitative research (Parker, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2011) argue that research is a

moral and political activity which is always linked to wider economic, social and political structures. When we participate in the world it is transformed with our activity. In Parker's (2005) view an ethical approach to research involves the transparent standpoint of the researcher, particularly, how this is made explicit in the way that we position ourselves in relation to those we research and to the reports that we eventually write and disseminate, edit, review, develop and so on. It is also about taking responsibility for the outcome of the research and the approach taken. In addition, Hammersly & Traianou (2014) link research ethics to the idea of researcher autonomy. In their view, only when researchers can use their judgement on *how* to research, can they then be held to account for the decisions they have made. This links back to the need for a high level of self-reflexivity and clarity in the research process.

### **5.18 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter set out a research design and framework, with methods of data collection and analysis congruent with the overall philosophical approach set out in the previous chapter. The interviews were small in number and could not be said to speak on behalf of all academic-activists, but the insights and the views and analysis that emerged contribute to wider issues and debates. The chapter has reinforced the political nature of research and the hidden assumptions that underly research methodologies that are seen as objective and neutral. This research is located in a wider tradition of critical research which I have argued in this, and the previous, chapter is no less rigorous and where findings are no less valid than in mainstream research.

Unlike much mainstream research in education, this research is contextualised and rooted in the neo-liberal university at a time of economic crisis. To appropriately answer the research questions in 5.2, I have drawn on, and elaborated, a number of key concepts to offer an original contribution to research into academic activism by using a modified data analysis which uses Freire's relational ontology. The research approach challenges standard views of reflexivity, drawing instead on critical self-reflexivity which should be understood as a social phenomenon, not an individual one.

The academic-activists in this research are studied in the context of the neo-liberal university and their contradictory role within that. The research approach and offers a way to see both structure and agency and the interplay between the two concepts. Social individuals are seen as capable of being involved in transformative action and as being changed by that activity. The next chapter looks at the background of the participants as social individuals and their relationship to education and to activism.

## Footnotes

[1] Clegg (2014) writing about research in a further education context, notes that even research that is critical in intent has its limitations and is: "...fraught with contradictions and tensions and that the translation from research to action is far from straightforward since agents (ourselves, students and teachers) confront situations not of their own choosing" (p1)

[2] This is not without contention. Some researchers argue that differing epistemological approaches to research (Guba, 1990) are more appropriately aligned with different research methods. For example, much research within a critical, emancipatory perspective uses participatory action research (PAR) as a relevant method. Brookfield & Holst (2010) view this as a 'democratic' method. Although they suggest that specific data collection techniques are less important than the partisan nature of research, they advocate PAR as a way for researchers to 'co-research' with others in order to stay with the constantly changing nature of reality. For them PAR isn't just investigatory but pedagogical. However, Kapoor & Jordan (2009) claim that participatory action research may be used by organisations with progressive, but far from radical, agendas.

[3] Waterman, Wood & Cox (2016) note the value of biography for (activist) research. They offer three reasons for this: First, a key problem in activism and activist research is 'keeping going' and autobiography "...is a powerful tool for seeing one's life in perspective" (p2). Second, much practical knowledge is transmitted by activists' reflection on other activists' lives and practice, their strategies, successes and failures. Finally, autobiographical genre generates: "...ethical messages and dilemmas...it can provide vital feedback and raw materials for interested activists and researchers." (p3)

The interviews in this research were thematically analysed across the data set, but that is not to dismiss the possibility of seeing and using the individual stories and anecdotes in the way that Waterman, Wood & Cox (2016) describe.

[4] I decided to include an FE lecturer in the selected group on the basis that the lines between FE and HE are blurring. This is apparent, for example, in the close partnership between the HEFC and the LSC in England and the merging of the Scottish Higher and Further Education Councils into one body.

[5] For example, Gary's view that:

"...the class privilege that I enjoyed in later life, dis-enjoyed in earlier life, was one of the things that kind of fractured everything for me..."

"I mean I remember a particular penny-dropping moment when I was doing an exercise with Theatre of the Oppressed...the penny-dropping moment for me was that a lot of my activism was solidarity activism, but not ever based on the experience of my own oppression and the importance of starting from the experience of my own oppression. As an academic, I'm reasonably well paid, reasonably secure job and all the rest of it, so you kind of think I'm not

all that oppressed, but actually you are by being in employment you're in a relationship of exploitation (Eurig)

"So my hope really was to try to devise a set of questions and a set of events that spoke directly to the experiences of academic labourers or academic labour, academic workers, lecturers, adjuncts, researchers and so on, as a way of turning the critical gaze on ourselves and allowing for some self-criticism and some self-reflection which academics often simply don't do". (Kerem).



## **Chapter 6: Analysis and commentary on the respondents' educational background and influences**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous two chapters set out the research approach and methodology. Key to this approach was a conceptualisation of change as a dialectical, rather than simply a linear progression. On this account, people are seen as active participants - as social individuals - rather than atomised individuals in society. It is an approach drawn from Freire's praxis methodology outlined in section 6.4. and is important for its relevance to the research questions in terms of the extent to which higher education can be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation and secondly, the ways in which academia and activism can be linked within and beyond the university.

This research focuses on critical pedagogy and academic activism (Blomley, 1994; Lambert, Parker & Neary, 2007). It encompasses, therefore, two interrelated issues: viewing the respondents as *both* critical educators and as activists. It also considers the links between these two aspects of the respondents' lives. This is an under-researched area as most of the literature presents the experience and theorisation of academics' approaches and practice within classroom situations (for example, Shor, 1996; King, 2004; Braa and Callero, 2006; Canaan, 2013). Some recent doctoral research has looked at the backgrounds of critical educators and the significance this might have on their subsequent teaching and research. For example, Ritchie (2010) looked at the backgrounds of critical schoolteachers in North America, Catone (2004) looked at the backgrounds of academic-activist teachers in North America and Connelly (2009) looked at the life histories of critical pedagogues in the adult education sector in Northern Ireland. This research looks at another aspect of academic activism, focusing on academic activists in UK higher education and using an explicitly dialectical materialist research framework to analyse the data.

I posed two broad, inter-related, interview questions that attempted to set the context for the views of the respondents:

- Tell me about your background and education
- What drew you to activism?

The questions were congruent with the conceptual framework adopted in this research (and outlined in greater detail in Chapter 4: Research approach). If, as Parker suggests (2005), interview research should allow for investigation of the links between individuals and contexts to locate accounts of experience in wider social relations, then, the interview questions posed allowed for, firstly, a deeper social, economic and political context for the responses. Mészáros (2008, p233) notes that education should be viewed in the widest sense. So, in his view, the personal and political history of the respondents is significant because it will: "...embrace everything, from our budding critical responses vis-à-vis the more or less deprived material surroundings of our early childhood, as well as our first encounter with poetry, of art...work experience...to our involvement in many different ways, in conflicts and confrontations throughout life..."

Secondly, these broad questions also allowed the respondents the opportunity to offer reflexive accounts drawing on their history, changing life experiences and political and theoretical influences. The respondents' journeys linked them to collective critical consciousness, connecting their practice with a wider social and political context.

It became clear, as the analysis of responses developed, that it was not possible to discern a clear 'mapping' of background influences to the respondents' political views. Half of the respondents mentioned specific theorists as having an influence on their work. For example, Cassie mentioned John Holloway and autonomist Marxism. Gurnam cited Franz Fanon, Bourdieu and the North American critical pedagogue Henry Giroux as particular influences. Gramsci was mentioned by Jim, Eurig and Sarah. Gary cited the educationalist Stephen Ball and his views on performativity and subjectivity as having influenced his ideas. Raymond Williams was mentioned by Sarah and Jim. Freire was mentioned by Gary, Jim, Gurnam, Sean, Sarah and Cassie.

Nor was there a clear link between the respondents' political views and influences and their later approaches to critical pedagogy within their academic careers. These findings are congruent with the overall conceptual framework of this research. A dialectical approach sees people in a process of 'becoming' as they engage with the world and are changed by that engagement (Freire, 1970; Allman, 1994). The

development of critical consciousness is not fixed and linear, but partial and contradictory (Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971). This also means that it is rarely straightforward to map economic interests to forms of political consciousness; the picture is more complex. One implication of this for the analysis of the data is that the themes that were discerned were overlapping and fed into one another.

Conceptually, it is difficult to attempt to disentangle stages or responses to specific issues given the thought/praxis dichotomy that is critiqued in this research. In a similar way to the critical educators in Connolly's (2009) research, the respondents reflected on specific insights that influenced their political consciousness. These insights could be focussed on an influential individual in their past or by early involvement with politics and activism. These were not necessarily epiphanies (Connolly, 2009; Ritchie, 2010) but could be a gradual exposure to thinking, studying and practice [1]. It soon became clear that the interview data would offer much more beyond narrative description of background or chronological narrative, particularly as this was analysed through the lens of praxis; that is a dialectical move between acting on the world, changing it and being changed by it. In particular, respondents offered, within their answers, a greater level of self-reflexivity and critical reflection on their own political and activist development than I had anticipated.

Even when the respondents presented a linear set of chronological events, what was still clear was the interplay of issues and events happening in the world and how the understanding and theorising of these events changed the perceptions and activity of those involved, often within different timescales [2].

## **6.2 Structure of the chapter**

The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, two over-arching themes are stated and explained: issues and questions and looking for answers. Second, Freire's praxis philosophy is discussed briefly as it is used as an analytical framework for the findings in this chapter. Third, the themes are then analysed in the context of this praxis approach. Fourth, a pattern (rather than a theme) of the respondents' journeys from activist to academic or vice-versa is considered and discussed as it reveals a more complex picture than previous literature has suggested (Croteau, Hoynes and Ryan, 2005). The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings, and possible implications for the respondents in their

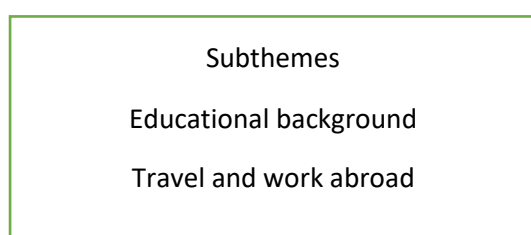
roles as academic activists within UK higher education (taken up further in the next findings chapter). The next section discusses the findings of the thematic analysis.

### 6.3 Section one: The key themes

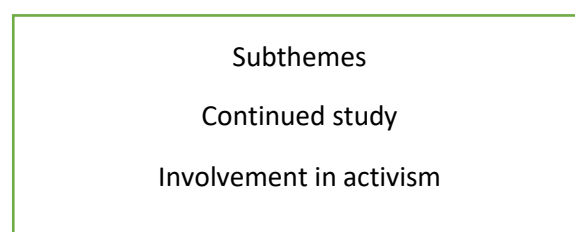
The responses were coded using a modified thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) outlined in detail in Chapter 5 (Research methods), which also drew on Freire's dialectical, relational ontology. The codes were grouped into two overarching themes, with sub-themes, that capture the key influences, motivations and development of the respondents. These are:

**Figure 1: Thematic findings**

Theme one: Issues and questions



Theme two: Looking for answers



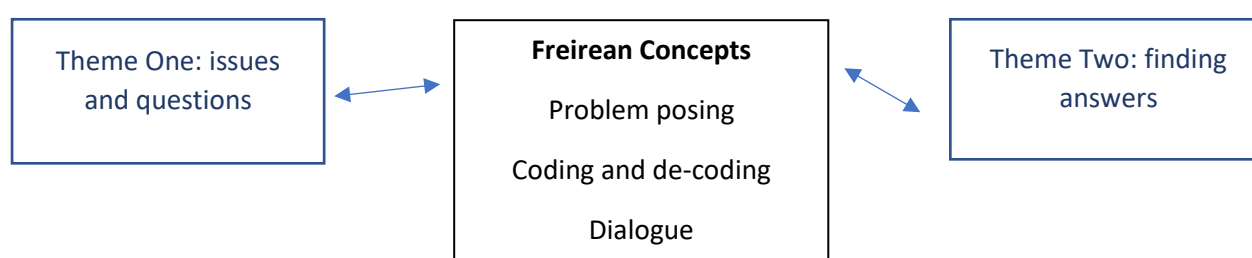
### 6.4 Section two: The use of Freire's dialectical ontology to analyse the themes

The themes were analysed using the lens of Freirean praxis. When Freire himself was interviewed (Freire, 1985) about his background and influences, he explained that his involvement in literacy campaigns in Brazil in the 1970s exposed him to wider social injustices. His response was to apply the same pedagogical methods used in his literacy teaching to his personal questioning and reflection on issues of poverty, exclusion and exploitation. However, Allman and Wallis (1997) are keen to point out that a Freirean approach is not limited or relevant to only one site of practice. Freire's philosophical approach to education can be applied to all learning and knowledge-creation situations and is therefore a useful approach to analyse the backgrounds of the respondents. While Johnston and Goodman (2011) argue that researchers should use these Freirean concepts to guide their activist research, I am

not aware of their use as a type of modified thematic analysis in other research, in the way presented here.

Within Freire's overall praxis methodology, Au (2007) outlines three key aspects of Freire's critical pedagogy, which are: problem posing, de-coding and dialogue. These are part of Freire's idea of looking at reality, critically reflecting on that reality and taking action to transform that reality. Freire's Marxist critical pedagogy was outlined in the research approach chapter (Chapter 4). The next section outlines the Freirean concepts of problem posing, problem de-coding and dialogue as a way of illuminating and understanding the interview data. It became clear, as the data were analysed, that the insights and themes that emerged from the coding could be mapped closely to Freire's three concepts mentioned above, which in turn illustrate Freire's understanding of reading the world (Freire, 1970).

**Figure 2: Data themes linked to Freirean concepts**



The next section outlines Freire's concepts in more detail and uses them to frame and analyse the themes from the data.

#### **6.4.1 Freire's problem posing**

Linked to this view of people existing as subjects in the world and questioning the world is Freire's idea of 'generative themes'. In a teaching context, generative themes are those that develop or emerge from the contextuality of individuals' lives and experiences; problems or issues that they are interested in and in which they are looking for answers. By problem posing, Freire is referring to a problem situation or difficulty often presented by students as an area that educators could focus on.

These problems or generative themes are part of all learners' experiences. Freire (1985) explained that his experience of confronting injustices in Brazil as part of his literacy work led him to ask more fundamental questions such as: What is

underdevelopment? What is nationalism? What is democracy? These questions arose from his attempt to contextualise these issues in a wider socio-political context. Problems or generative themes are ones that cannot be explained without an historical understanding that is related to the social whole. For example, poor schooling experiences cannot be understood without contextualising the experiences, understandings and purposes of education. Crucially, in Freire's view, problem posing isn't just about finding or answering questions, it is about perceiving the world dialectically, not as fixed or static, and in its totality. It is this which gives people the possibility of developing a critical consciousness and awareness of their agency as social individuals. Freire (1970, p70) argued that: "In problem-posing education, humans develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves, they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."

The importance of this approach, as Au (2007) suggests is that it is a means by which the material world can be seen as not static, but changing and therefore transformable, or as Freire would have it "a reality in process, in transformation" (1970, p70). In addition, Freire links problem posing to action, or rather, problem posing *is* action. He explains (Freire, 1982, p154):

The process of problematisation implies a critical return to action...The process of problematisation is basically someone's reflection on a content which results from an act or a reflection on the act itself in order to act better together with others within the framework of reality.

The next section looks at Freire's related ideas of coding and de-coding.

#### **6.4.2 Freire's coding and de-coding**

These concepts are linked to problem posing as they refer to the problem situation as being coded, mystified or only partially grasped. The situation must then be de-coded. The idea is closely linked to Gramsci's ideas of contradictory consciousness (1971) and the Marxist idea that surface appearances mask the reality of social relations. Relationships of inequality, for example, in Marxist terms, between those who sell their labour and those who purchase it for profit, is communicated in a 'common sense' way as one of individual exchange in the labour market.

Freire's critical pedagogy involves the development of a critically conscious understanding of the world and, importantly, people's relationship to the world. In this way the agency of teachers and students come to see themselves as subjects capable of transforming their reality (within what Freire terms the 'limit situations' of their reality) not as passive recipients of that reality. Freire argues against an individual, psychologised view of the world as does Parker (2010) who, from a critical psychology perspective, challenges the "grip of psychologization" (p213) where problems are presented as part of individual difference and consciousness, rather than as reflecting wider ideological assumptions.

Coding and de-coding is part of the development of a critical consciousness for social transformation, both within an educational setting and within a wider social context. It involves an understanding of the totality of, as well as the specificity of, a situation. For example, it may be that students can understand the reasons behind a particular event, such as student action against fee increases or the recent school-student demonstration against climate change, but still might not grasp the relationship between the event and the wider social totality. De-coding is part of this political understanding and is linked to another key Freirean term, that of conscientization. Conscientization is more than just critical thinking and Freire was critical of those educators who saw conscientization as just a pedagogic tool or as a process lacking in any political dimension. It is linked to his view of people as active subjects, being in the world and creating the world. He explained (1985, p169): "While one is in the act of revealing the social reality in the process of conscientization, one must apprehend the real world as something that exists but also as something that is to be, something that is being."

Problem-posing and codification and de-codification are linked to the concept of dialogue, which is discussed in the next section.

#### **6.4.3 Freire's concept of dialogue**

When Leistryna (2004), in her interview with Freire, asked him to explain his concept of dialogue, he was clear to distinguish between dialogue and talking or discussion. Allman (1994, p136), drawing on her experience as a lecturer in adult education, illuminates the difference between dialogue and discussion this way: "Discussion is

an ordered and managed communication of monologues...there is some knowledge which it is the objective to know, and to correctly express and/or to apply.”

By contrast, she explains, dialogue involves the critical examination of *knowledge itself*; the problematisation and critical analysis of knowledge in its historical and material context. Learning and knowledge, in this view, is not so much about what we know but why we think as we do and hold the views and assumptions that we do. It involves a deeper understanding of reality but, more than this, it involves a vision of an alternative society and the understanding that another society is possible. For Allman (1994, 1999, 2010) as for Freire, this is realisable only in praxis, in activity. However important theory is, change cannot come about through reading and ideas only. Theory exists dialectically in relation to practice, not as a linear sequence of, for example, action – reflection – action. Indeed, for Freire, dialogue *is* social action - the ability to act to transform reality as part of human consciousness. As Au (2007, np) explains: “Because dialogue entails active reflection in relation to other human beings, it is fundamentally social, grounded in the material world (society included) and therefore requires critical thinking.”

Dialogue, therefore, is about encounters with others and those encounters, critically reflected upon, can lead to new knowledge and experiences that might open up opportunities for, not only greater political awareness, but simultaneously for social and political activism.

This section has outlined a number of key concepts in Freire’s radical epistemology. It serves as a framework for the next section that sets out, in thematic terms, the main issues that the respondents raised, discussed and reflected upon when asked the questions: ‘Tell me about your background and education’; and ‘what drew you to activism?’ It should be noted, again, that in presenting a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts it has proved difficult to separate out discrete categories or themes. This is reflective of the Freirean, dialogic approach explicated in the previous section. Accessing the backgrounds of the participants or their journeys through the world, involved questioning their reality and becoming aware of issues (theme one) while also searching for answers to those same issues (theme two). In addition, both of these broad themes could be seen as interacting with, and



theorised within, Freire's key concepts of problem posing, coding and de-coding and dialogue.

### 6.5 Section three: Theme one: Issues and questions

It became clear, as the interview data were interrogated many times, that the respondents' background influences and the issues that they remembered as significant to their own political development and critical consciousness, could be seen as examples of Freire's problems or generative themes. In Freire's terms, generative themes are not necessarily positive or negative experiences, but experiences that raise issues and questions that matter to those involved and that provoke responses from them. One of the key findings in this research was the way in which respondents reflected on the issues that influenced their politicisation and developing critical consciousness. At the same time, respondents were looking for answers to the problems, concerns or injustices that they became aware of. Again, it is difficult to disentangle the sub-themes in this section, involvement in study and activism, as the means by which they were 'reading the world' (Freire, 1970).

**Figure 3: Participants' influences and issues seen as Freire's generative themes**

Participant	Generative themes
Kerem	Student anti-fees activity in 2010
Fayzi	Disillusionment with NGO work
Andy	Disillusionment with NGO work
Sarah	The politics of education; colonialism
Gary	Complicity in re-producing neo-liberalism
Gurnam	Antagonism to school; racism
Nina	Student anti-fees activity in 2010
Matthew	Reading about the history of political movements
Nick	Nationalism and anti-war issues
Lucy	Environmentalism
Eurig	Environmentalism; liberation theology
Liam	Learning about Latin America challenged his outlook
Rachel	Workers' rights

Jenny	Environmentalism
Cassie	Antagonism to school

Within the first theme of asking questions, the respondents referred to firstly, their education at school and university and secondly their experiences when travelling, studying or working abroad.

### 6.5.1 Sub-theme: Educational background

Five of the respondents (Cassie, Sarah, Gurnam, Gary and Nick) focussed on their school experiences. Their views differed as for some, education was a site of opportunity and interest and for others it was a site of constraint and limitation. Some respondents expressed a hatred, or a 'love-hate' relationship, or a disappointment with school. In Cassie and Sarah's responses, they expressed surprise that they had remained in education to pursue a career:

my history with school is absolutely dreadful...education was the bane of my existence, or what I thought of then as education, which I now know is 'schooling', was the bane of my life as a young person and as a young teenager and I never thought, for one minute, back in the 70s and 80s, that I would be looking now at educational activism (Cassie)

Very briefly, there was a long process of loving school and education; hating school and education; dropping out of school and going to university very early because it was either that or get a job somewhere and do something else... (Sarah)

In terms of way back, I left school with very few qualifications – I failed at everything! So I had to go through all the further education stuff and re-do the qualifications and re-sits and all the rest of it. And then I went away to university and it was OK after that. But that...first encounter with formal education wasn't a very productive one for me (Gary).

For Nick, an 'electrifying' teacher added to his understanding of war and nationalism; issues that he pursued later in his studies, academic career and political activism:

As a child I was always fascinated by borders; I'm a Geographer. I'd look at a map of the world and there's France in red and there's Germany in green – what colour are the people who live on the line and where did that line come from? As a small child, that's what I was interested in...but I think the key for me was studying the poetry of Wilfred Owen in school who was taught by an electrifying teacher and it made me think about nationalism and all those things.

Gurnam, who later trained as a social worker before moving into academia, remembers school as a contradictory environment:

And I used to do a lot of truanting, but the truanting wasn't to do the classic things like stealing or smoking cigarettes or drinking. It was just to have the space to reflect. I used to go to the library a lot, which is ironic...at the age of thirteen I'd be reading history and politics and I read a lot of Indian history at the library. Began to read Marx...and I got involved in, not a reading group, it was just a bunch of us used to hang around the library and we'd talk about politics and things...so I got drawn into this extra-curricular 'gang' and counter education.

Matthew pointed to his own reading and understanding rather than formal schooling for his developing ideas:

I was 13 in 1968. In 1968 I had claimed to be kind of leftist from a very early age. I was disillusioned in 1968 with the Prague Spring and moving over to a kind of confused anarchist position which I maintained; but I suppose frankly, more and more Marxist. I joined the Anti-Nazi League in 1977...I'd already kind of read a lot about Marxism and the history of the movements. So that's my background and I consider myself quite eclectic in my influences, but Marxism would come to the fore"

There is no suggestion in the quotations above that the respondents' teachers offered a critical perspective within the classroom. The experiences themselves were enough to interest the respondents and they would later start to look for ways of making sense of these experiences. It was the critical reflection of the respondents, as well as their developing involvement in activism, that would allow them to point to issues that were part of their own critical and political development. Freire (1970) was clear that an understanding of the world involved commitment and engagement. In his view, there is no consciousness of the world and of reality at the level of experience or spontaneity.

Some of the respondents focussed on their post-school education (Rachel, Liam, Nina, Kerem and Fayzi), where their experiences reflected various generative themes.

For Rachel, who returned to university as a mature student, her studies revealed the exploitative work conditions of her partner:

I was living with my partner who was working in the building industry. There were lots of things like employment regulations that I had no idea existed and I found that my partner was being underpaid. His health and safety was being ignored...his life was in danger on several occasions.

University was a time in the political development of the respondents both as graduate and postgraduate students. The politicisation described in this section relates particularly to the opportunity to read, think and reflect critically while studying, yet it was involvement with activism at university that brought together theory and practice – a praxis situation (noted below in Theme two: Finding answers).

Kerem was influenced as a student by critical reading:

it was through reading; it was in the classroom; it was being exposed to – how to describe it – critical texts, radical texts, that slowly I gathered an interest. It wasn't so much through struggle as such, even though there were things going on.

Nina explains:

I was doing my PhD at Middlesex. I was then in the philosophy department. I graduated in 2007 but I was still very much in touch with the University and I'd worked there a bit when I was doing my PhD and so on and I knew a lot of people there. I was quite involved in the occupation and the politics around it and I wrote articles about what was happening and the attempts to kind of shut down the philosophy department at Middlesex. I guess Middlesex was a kind of political place in terms of what we were reading and what was happening.

For Jenny, research into environmentalism raised issues about the links between her theoretical work on protest and her involvement with environmental activism:

I don't think I became an activist actually until I was in my early twenties. Up until then I would say I was left wing and I had been interested in Greenpeace and environmental campaigns but I hadn't done anything about it. Then I went and did a Geography degree at Newcastle and stayed on to do a PhD on internet access in environmental protest. So through that research I realised this is what I'm passionate about and through all the interviews I did with people I could see that it was possible to actually just get involved with activism and feel like you were making a change.

Researching into science and the environment raised issues about the privatisation of science and the involvement of business in science, and raised questions and concerns for Eurig:

I was also involved in environmental issues, my Botany/Zoology degree was part of that. But then I became more involved in the politics of the environment. And when I was doing my PhD, this was early 80s, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and doing her radical neo-liberal reforms and I was very concerned about the role science plays in the environment in terms

of health...what Margaret Thatcher was doing was to essentially privatise science.

This section has considered the responses that exemplified the ways in which respondents acknowledged that their educational background raised issues that they may not have previously been aware of, or ideas that were progressing and developing through their studies. These emergent issues can be considered through the Freirean lens used in this research. For example, the respondents' educational experiences are raising generative themes that will continue to interest and involve them as they move into academia. Second, their responses are beginning to show a dialogic engagement with the world, which in many examples appears to be a contradictory engagement where there can be a positive, negative or ambivalent relationship to education and what it can explain and reveal. Third, an emerging level of self-reflexivity can be discerned in the responses. Not simply in terms of recounting past experiences, but a critical self-reflexivity where their experiences are seen as linked to their reading of the world as they move through the world (Freire, 1970). Finally, the challenges or issues they faced could be considered examples of Freire's (1970) limit situations and how to move beyond them.

The next section looks at the influences on respondents of travelling and involvement in new cultures.

### **6.5.2 Sub-theme: Travel and work abroad**

Exposure to different cultures and perspectives when travelling was mentioned as being influential by four of the respondents (Sarah, Liam, Andy and Fayzi) although other respondents had also studied abroad (Nick and Gary). All of the six referred, albeit at times implicitly, to critically reflecting on their situation, their work or their study as a significant development in their own personal and political journey.

The experiences of both Sarah and Andy illustrated their understanding of colonialism and also, as mentioned above, showed the way in which the problem-posing that their travels raised, for example, the role of western knowledge and the role of NGOs, led to a search for answers the questions that this raised for them:

Sarah explains:

I got very politicised travelling around Europe, meeting lots of people, realising how stupid I was and how insular I had been and how much I didn't know

about the world and how much more there was to politics and how unfair things were. ...I didn't discover Freire or Giroux and McLaren...any of the critical pedagogues...until I had gone to Central Asia to work and then looked for things that would help me understand what was wrong with the situation I was in...there was this enormous attraction to western knowledge, so-called western knowledge, western universities. Just a really colonial frame for the whole thing.

After I did my undergraduate degree, I took a couple of years out...and in that two years, I spent six months volunteering in Southern India, in Bangalore doing non formal education in a slum so providing basic level education in terms of English, Maths, things like that...and it was during that time that there were numerous issues with how development was playing out over there. So for instance, the charity that I was based with, the NGO I was based within Bangalore was sponsored by a large UK based charity which was providing scholarships for students. (Andy)

Working abroad also raised questions for Fayzi that emerged from her disillusionment with NGOs:

I was working in the NGO sector, mostly in Nepal, became quite disillusioned with the NGO sector and what this particular organisation was doing in Nepal; I didn't agree with. I was very frustrated so I left and got involved in Stop the War...and it gave me the confidence to then say OK actually I think I want to go and do a PhD and reflect on those experiences I had working in the NGO sector.

Liam's experience also highlights the different perspective he gained through his travels in Latin America. His experience of development education was very different to that of Andy (above). It was played out in a more radical political context and involved a particular educational pedagogy, popular education, which he later embraced as a critical educator:

I started to study Latin American Literature and that kind of challenged my viewpoint. I was brought up in a Catholic household in the West of Scotland...so it was a real challenge to me to learn a different perspective from Latin America – about some of the pretty bad things that the Catholic Church had been involved in. When I finished I lived in Mexico and travelled about in Latin America and was becoming quite politicised by this time... Then I got a job working in Oxfam to talk about development education...I think Oxfam was quite radical and its programme in Latin America was quite radical.

Nick's interest in national borders:

took me to be a political geographer at University. I spent an Erasmus year in Denmark. I wrote my dissertation about the Danish Schleswig-Holstein question and the Danish minority living in Germany, and it's an extraordinary story.

What drew me to activism was a sense of frustration with the training I had received, this super-privileged training. I went to Leeds University and did English and Philosophy and then I went to university in Bratislava and did film directing there and then sort of walked around the world a bit in further education settings and then realised that I wanted to do a PhD. (Gary)

And then I went to do a post-doc in Australia, on activism in Australia and participated while I was there – so doing a lot of activism while being a post-doc. (Jenny)

The issues that the respondents raised in this section appeared to be closely linked to their emotions. For example, a sense of disillusionment or frustration with their current situations; being challenged by different cultures and world-views. This was often linked in turn to a process of politicisation and a greater need for engagement with their work or study to find answers. As is shown in the next chapter, the respondents (particularly, but not only, the geographers), would use their academic discipline to move students physically beyond their immediate world. The use of study trips abroad, invitations to public meetings; trades union meetings, anti-racist meetings, was a conscious way of locating a space within higher education and using this as a form of engagement in their, and their students, academic work and activism beyond the university.

## **6.6 Theme two: Looking for answers**

### **6.6.1 Sub-theme: Continued study**

Half of the respondents explicitly looked to engage with further study, in the form of Masters' or PhD research, to find answers (de-code) the issues they described as being influential in their background. For example, Nick's interest in borders and nationalism as a child was pursued as an undergraduate with a degree in political geography and a PhD on central Asian boundaries and nationalism. He explains the:

fascination with nationalism and problems of boundaries and dividing up communities in different ways. Well, what can we do about it?

Linked to this looking for answers would appear to be his involvement as an activist in Stop the War and the links he maintained with this organisation when he became an academic.

Cassie:

I was working as a community educator...I was working with some of the most deprived people in the country. I mean, I've worked with young people in inner-city youth clubs; I worked with refugees seeking asylum; I worked with homeless people; people with substance abuse issues... So I went away to do my PhD and originally I was going to do something around liberalization of community work and what it was doing; was it just teaching people to stay in their place or was it actually doing something more radical as it said it was? Because that was something that was beginning to weigh on my mind. And then Occupy happened and...I decided to look at Occupy as a pedagogical movement rather than a political movement although obviously it was both.

I came back really disillusioned with some of those ideas and was more critical in terms of thinking and I hadn't really encountered post-colonial ideas at that point. So I came here [university] to do a Masters in 2004. After that, I was given the chance to do a PhD which was on Tibetan activism, so resisting Chinese colonialism and not just anti-colonialism in the past but styles of learning and styles of politics that seek to actively de-construct colonial discourses that are still ongoing. (Andy).

I applied for a job as a social worker; it was unqualified, Post-Scarman, 1981. But I never became part of the system. I kept doing more education...I did a Masters degree in Social and Economic Studies. I was reading Fanon and the tutor on the course was really crucial when he helped us understand how you internalise the dominant consciousness of the oppressor. (Gurnam).

Rachel's return to higher education meant she uncovered issues that directly impacted on her family:

No holiday pay, no sick pay, nothing. And when I found out that all of this was actually illegal, I wrote to my MP and laid out exactly what was going on and got a reply back saying, well if you feel there is a grievance, take it to ACAS. Well, I'd already explained in the original letter that we felt that this was quite difficult to do because he would be blacklisted, he would never work again. And I think it was then that I realised that actually to put a stop to any of this, the political system was not doing anything, there was no protection for ordinary people anymore, no-one was actually looking out for us.

When I was a student it was not a time necessarily like of high struggle in the student movement...but there's always stuff going on and there was stuff going on around course cuts, courses like Chemistry and stuff like that. But it wasn't anything like the student movements have been since 2010, I guess, when there was a real surge. (Kerem)

University was an opportunity for the political development of the respondents both as graduate and post-graduate students. The politicisation described in this section relates particularly to the opportunity to read, think and reflect critically while



studying, yet it was involvement in activism at university that brought together theory and practice – a praxis situation (noted below in Theme two: Finding answers).

For Jenny, research into environmentalism raised issues about the links between her theoretical work on protest and her involvement with environmental activism:

I don't think I became an activist actually, until I was in my early twenties. Up until then I would say I was left-wing and I had been interested in Greenpeace and environmental campaigns but I hadn't done anything about it. Then I went and did a geography degree at Newcastle and stayed on to do a PhD...on internet access in environmental protest. So through that research I realised this is what I was passionate about and through all the interviews I did with people I could see that it was possible to actually just get involved with activism and feel like you were making a change.

Researching into science and the environment raised issues about the privatisation of science and the involvement of business in science for Eurig:

Science shouldn't be serving the profit making of business, whereas for me it had to serve those who were being disenfranchised; oppressed; damaged; whatever. In 1984, when I was in the middle of my PhD, the Bhopal gas disaster happened. That was a very big influence on me at the time and I got involved in the radical science movement, various things like that.

This section has considered the responses that exemplified the ways in which respondents acknowledged that their educational background raised issues that they may have previously been unaware of, or ideas that were progressing and developing through their studies. It is important to restate, in practice, that it is very difficult to disentangle the earlier question on problem posing and finding answers. From a Freirean perspective they are part of the same process of engagement and becoming. In this section, the respondents were drawing on their experiences in education as part of a process of structuring their ideas and of addressing and clarifying the challenging issues and emotions that was noted in the previous section 6.5.2. This has implications for their future as academic activists as their own critical analysis of issues led them to activism as a response. This was a development that they would use in higher education – as the next chapter shows – as a constant clarification and development of issues but also as a way of incorporating activism into their role in higher education.

### 6.6.2 Sub-theme: involvement with activism

A number of the respondents looked more directly to activism to find answers to issues. When Rachel returned to university and became aware, for the first time, about safety regulations at work, she found it difficult to get advice or a response from her MP. She described her increasing politicisation and anger at this injustice and how this anger found expression in activity on campus in the anti-fees movement, which then widened beyond that to include other campaigns:

I think it was then that I realised that actually to put a stop to any of this, the political system was not doing anything, there was no protection for ordinary people anymore, no-one was actually looking out for us. And that's really how I became active I suppose, until the coalition government was elected and I became very active in the anti-fees movement when the fees were trebled. I'd been active in the original fees movement but started speaking at public meetings and joining anti-cuts groups and got involved with the People's Assembly, Coalition of Resistance before that, all of those kinds of things.

This quote is significant because it illustrates the links that can develop (though not inevitably) between awareness of an injustice and the means to take some control in responding to this. The quote illustrates not only Freire's problem-posing concept, but also that of coding and de-coding as it was a deeper understanding of exploitation and powerlessness and lack of agency of ordinary people that influenced Rachel's subsequent activity. The fact that this activity involved anti-fees and anti-cuts groups also appears to reflect Freire's dialogic action and his stress on totality, as links were drawn between different issues and campaigns.

Gary was drawn to an activist group in 2006 as he was coming to the end of his PhD and had been questioning his own position in reproducing neoliberalism as a filmmaker:

I started looking at which particular groups around the UK were asking themselves similar questions about their own privileges and things like that...a London based group called 'Platform' had been going for about 25 years in different guises...they were always really eager to look at their own positions in relation to what it was that they were producing as individuals and as a collective and as an artists' group and as a campaigning group. So they were always engaging in critical reflexivity...and we'd engage in all sorts of critical questions about our positions in relation to what we produced, what the world is like; how we are involved in activism?; should we speed up/should we slow down? And all this stuff was just absolutely fascinating for me and that just opened the whole world of activism for me.

Both Kerem and Nina were postgraduate students involved in the student fees campaigns in 2010. Their involvement with activism underpinned and influenced their research:

I think it was going on those protests and seeing what was happening; and then the fee increases in December of that year and then the really punitive response to the people who were arrested at the protest that got me involved.  
(Nina)

Kerem, who explained that he became interested in political activism by reading texts rather than by activity was able to point to a moment when wider economic change and student activity influenced his own political consciousness:

It really started to accelerate after 2008, when everything started falling apart!...everything started happening and there were clear links between my lived experience and the stuff I'd been reading I guess that's really what drew me to activism.

Kerem's quote, alongside Rachel's, offers another example of Freire's 'being in the world' and how his own developing critical consciousness involved both theoretical understandings and the importance of activism to challenge the then government's changes to higher education.

This section has summarised two related ways that the respondents described their search for answers to the issues, interests and injustices that they reflected on in their background. This second theme resonates with Freire's idea of de-coding a generative theme. That is, by studying, activity and involvement, an issue can be de-mystified, thus facilitating an awareness of the links between theory and activity (praxis) as well as giving a focus to the wider socio-political context. This has implications for their later academic activism in higher education, where activism – their own and their involvement with students – was used as a method of dialogue (Freire, 1970); a way in which activism could offer a dialogic response, a greater understanding of the issues that were part of the higher education environment.

The next section considers whether the respondents' answers on their educational background highlighted their move from academic to activist or vice versa.

## **6.7 Section four: Prior activism and the academic-activist**

The interview question “What drew you to activism?” was initially formulated as a general introductory question to get the interview underway and also as a way of gathering contextual background to the individual narratives. However, subsequently, the question gained greater significance when analysing the responses in terms of what activists might bring to academia and, conversely, within academia, what opportunities and restrictions did academics confront when attempting to develop an activist approach. These two main patterns were visible in the interview analysis, even though it was difficult to draw clear distinctions between the two trajectories (activist to academic or academic to activist).

Two thirds of the interviewees (Lucy, Gurnam, Eurig, Matthew, Andy, Feyzi, Liam, Gary, Cassie, Kerem and Nina) explained their move from an involvement with activism and campaigning. Within that group, a number of the interviewees explained how their initial work in activist environments (either paid or unpaid) had influenced their approach and practice once they had moved into the university.

The following quotes are indicative of this move from activist to academic in higher education:

My background isn't in the higher education sector. I worked first of all in homeless shelters for several years and then I worked in mental health... campaigning was what I did a lot; environmental activism...then a job came up teaching, so a lot of training in these kinds of jobs before I became an academic was around listening skills, facilitation, group work, conflict resolution. (Lucy)

Gurnam also pointed to the influence of his activism as a young man in the 1980s and its link to his later academic work:

I was 18 years old and in London...and I got involved with activists down in Camden, just being part of that scene. In 1981, there were riots in Brixton and Southall and I was there at the time, became politicised, and was quite involved in activism...so...my journey into intellectual work was very much from practice. Gramsci talks about praxis and much of the knowledge I was getting was directly linked to experience, if that makes sense, it wasn't abstract at all.

Liam worked at Oxfam before becoming an academic and was introduced to popular education, which he subsequently studied at PhD level and used as the basis for his research and teaching:

Every project you supported had to have a kind of popular education slant on it and they sent me out as a Spanish speaker. Development education had a lot of links with popular education...I didn't take to it right away...but the more I got into it, I became quite interested in it from then on and then when I moved to university where I still teach languages, I just chose to keep with that, the idea that there was a lot we could learn from Latin America. And I'm totally committed to it...I think it's the only way to think about education now.

Eurig's background involved environmental campaigning and he worked for a time for Greenpeace:

My interest in political activism came from various angles...I became involved in the politics of the environment; and I got involved in the radical science movement...I was reading Paulo Freire, I was reading Antonio Gramsci, a lot of that kind of political stuff – and I got a place on the Community Education course on that basis, because that's exactly the kind of stuff that community education aspires to be...so that course meant that I really started identifying myself as an educator; that education was the tool that I felt I could use as my contribution to political activism.

Eurig's quote chimes with writers in the literature (Martin, 2009; Catone, 2004) who consciously entered education as an arena that would allow teaching and research for social change as well as for activist work. For example, Catone (2014, p6) explained that: "I saw my activism and my decision to become a teacher as inextricably linked...I identified school as a site for social justice struggle and also felt it natural for teachers to be involved in community activism."

Other interviewees in this category were younger academics, particularly those whose doctoral research either focussed on activism (Cassie) or where their graduate studies prior to taking up an academic position, overlapped and interacted with activism on or off campus (Feyzi, Kerem, Nina and Andy). Nina referred to the 2010 student demonstrations and occupations as a 'flashpoint':

I was doing my PhD at Middlesex. I graduated in 2007 but I was still very much in touch with the University...so I was quite involved in the occupation and the politics around it and I wrote articles about what was happening and the attempts to kind of shut down the philosophy department at Middlesex. So, I guess Middlesex was kind of a political place in terms of what we were reading and what was happening...but I think 2010 was a kind of flashpoint in many ways. It set the agenda for what's happening now. So yeah, I think it was going on those protests mainly and seeing what was happening and then the fee increases in December of that year and then the really punitive response to the people who were arrested at the protest that got me more involved.

Meanwhile, Kerem also pointed to his involvement in student politics and activism around the anti-cuts and fees movements:

I was at Sussex, which is well known for its student activism so there's always stuff going on and there was stuff going on around course cuts...but it wasn't anything like the student movements have been since 2010 when there was a real surge...it really started to accelerate after 2008, when everything started falling apart!...everything started happening and there were clear links between my lived experience and the stuff I'd been reading I guess that's really what drew me to activism. I've been in education – through a PhD; then subsequently becoming a worker in the University, now a lecturer but before that an adjunct. And...there's always been a strong link in the sense that I've always been, in my teaching, trying to push for more critical stuff and to be teaching stuff in a critical way.

The prior activism of critical educators and their move into academia is noted by Mitchell (2008) as a concern in that they are seen as retreating into the ivory tower of the academy. Overall, this was not the case with the interviewees in this research. They were committed to activist work within higher education, or they saw clear links between the two. There was no retreat from activist work. There was, however, a general view (apart from Nick) that there were limitations on their critical approach to education and their activism (outlined in more detail in the next chapter). Their views would not align with those of Roth (2016), who suggests that academia offers activists the opportunity to research, develop networks and reflect on their role as academic activists. She recognises that the academy can "...support and sustain as well as legitimate and professionalise activism" (p49).

The remaining third of the interviewees (Sean, Sarah, Jim, Nick, Jenny and Rachel) were critical academics without having an activist background. Indeed, Rachel had been politicised *by her experience* of higher education:

When I first started my degree I would have put myself as a slightly left leaning liberal; by the time I'd finished my degree I would have put myself down as a Marxist. The things, the knowledge that you gain, the initial awareness of what's going on is invaluable and it completely changes the way you look at the world.

For Jenny, the move into academia offered her the opportunity to continue her activism, making links with activist groups beyond the university but also theorising activism as well as undertaking activist research:

I don't think I became an activist actually, until I was in my early twenties. Up until then I would say I was left-wing and I had been interested in Greenpeace and environmental campaigns but I hadn't done anything about it. And then I went and did a geography degree...and stayed on to do a PhD...and through all the interviews I did with people I could see that it was possible to actually just get involved with activism and feel like you were making a change....I was very lucky to get a permanent lectureship straight after my post doc and that's when I started to really try and understand the relationship between my activism and my academic work...I'd started as an academic, but I ended up being an activist who wrote about activism.

However, the theoretical framework of this research suggests that the relationship between activism and academia is more complex than the examples above, which tend to suggest a linear move from activism to the academy as a site for activism. Freire's dialectical ontology does not allow for a theory-practice distinction, but rather sees social individuals as active agents in creating their world and being changed by their active involvement. Rather than a linear move in their activist and academic careers, the respondents reflected on backgrounds in which their activism emerged, deepened or receded, depending on the wider political context.

## **6.8 Summary and conclusion**

This section has summarised the influences, political development and experiences of the respondents. These reflections were located in the social and political conditions in which the respondents found themselves. Although the influences mentioned included flashpoints or specific incidents, more often they suggested a lengthy journey of many insights and understandings, where educational influences and activism intertwined. Education was pivotal in the respondents' development even when it was not a positive experience. Indeed, the respondents' experiences could be seen as examples of limit situations, where issues or concerns led to further understanding, for example through further education or through activist situations. One of the key findings in this research was the way in which respondents critically reflected on the issues that influenced their politicisation and developing political consciousness.

For the respondents, their movement through the world involved a process of problem posing, de-coding and dialogue (Freire, 1972; Au, 2007). These processes

were found to be part of the life history of the respondents before, as well as part of, their role as critical educators in higher education. They therefore experienced the process of 'reading the world' as praxis and as part of their own development as a social individual. These insights relate to the two research questions in a number of ways. The first research question focused on the extent to which higher education could be a site for the development of resistance and social transformation. Taken together, the backgrounds of the respondents highlighted not just their personal change and development, but the development of a critical self-reflexivity which offered a perception of themselves as part of a wider social world. In turn, this wider world that they were engaged with, which did not necessarily involve travel abroad but could be any new or challenging situation, offered them alternative perspectives. A sense that the world is radically transformable and that 'another world is possible' is a key element within critical pedagogy in understanding education as a possible site for social transformation.

The respondents' experiences with other groups and individuals were part of the development of their politicisation and critical consciousness. Their reflections exemplified Freire's idea of dialogue by which he meant encounters with others to develop greater awareness and to move towards political activism. Many of the respondents were drawn to activism to answer issues or generative themes that interested them, intrigued them or worried them. Their experiences were answering the second research question about the ways in which academia and activism could be linked within and beyond the university and this was something that they would take with them, in different ways, when they became academics in higher education.

The following chapter analyses, using a Freirean perspective, the respondents' views on their role as academic-activists in the neo-liberal university; the issues that they confront and the ways and extent to which they are able to enact a critical pedagogy in the higher education context.

## **Footnotes**

[1] This did not always mean, however, greater political involvement or activism. For example, burnout or disillusionment can cause activists to move out of activity. Cassie's quote, which exemplifies this point, is also an example of re-counting personal history and critically reflecting on this at the same time:



“When I left school, I felt a bit disillusioned with activism because I’m a child of the Thatcher era. Then we went from Thatcher to New Labour, it kind of quashed my enthusiasm in a way for any form of politics, so I kind of stepped out for a while.”

[2] Gurnam’s view exemplifies the different levels and development of political consciousness of the respondents:

“I think that people are waiting to be awoken; that can happen. I came across a wonderful quote from Audrey Lorde, and she said that critical education is like lighting a fire and if you can light it then that fire can start blazing quite quickly. And I found that with radical education. This whole thing about political consciousness; it can be a singular moment. For some people it can be a long drawn out process and for some people it can be an event, it happens all of a sudden.”

## **Chapter 7: Findings**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter used a Freirean lens to analyse the accounts of the respondents before they moved into their academic roles in higher education. In this chapter, the focus is on the ways in which critical educators, working within the context of a neo-liberal university (discussed in Chapter 2), enact radical practice and activism and the opportunities and limitations within which they work. The blurring of lines between the public and private within higher education (Ball, Raduntz, 2004); the increasing privatisation and outsourcing of resources in education; knowledge defined increasingly as a commodity and the development of prescriptive monitoring regimes that encroach on the agency of the participants, created a particular context for their academic activism.

This chapter presents an analysis of the interview findings as they relate to the two broad research questions:

- To what extent can higher education be a site for the development of resistance and transformation?
- In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university?

Specifically, following Freire, I argue that the limit situations identified by the respondents contain within them the possibilities for critical education and activism. All of the respondents discussed their role within the university as encompassing, in different ways, both their academic (teaching and scholarship) and activist role, not only beyond, but within, the academy. They discussed and reflected on these issues in the context of the neo-liberal university.

The themes critically analysed in this chapter are drawn from a thematic analysis (outlined in the research methodology chapter) of responses across all the interview questions [1]. The chapter is structured in the following way. First the conceptual framework of the research is briefly restated. Second, the key themes are outlined and discussed. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings, and the key issues associated with them, which are discussed in the context of the literature on the neoliberal university found in chapters 2 and 3.

## 7.2 A return to the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework used in this research (outlined in greater detail in the research methodology chapter and the previous findings chapter), draws on a Freirean approach to ontology and epistemology. “Limit situations” is a term used by Freire (1970;1985) to describe the constraints that critical educators work within. In his view it can refer to any situation that academics in higher education confront that they feel affects their teaching and research. However, the significance of the term, seen within Freire’s relational ontology, is that limit situations are always contradictory because they contain the potential for challenge and change. This stands in contrast to writers (Grey, 2013; Rose, 2017) who write about ‘barriers’ or ‘issues’ as always static, negative problems to be overcome.

The concept of limit situations remains a useful approach to consider the themes and issues that were visible to me as I analysed the data. The difficulty with this concept is that it has at its core, a dialectical element. In their work and activism, the respondents were both changing and were changed by their world, including the Higher Education institution within which they work and the wider society. While this makes it difficult to capture a picture of the life of the academic activist, it has the value of particularly highlighting the contradictions that emerged in the respondents’ accounts. In this research, the respondents described the various ways in which their academic and activist roles were combined, or at times separated, and the tensions this could invoke.

Linked to these concepts, I use Ollman’s (2015) and Allman’s (1999, 2010) exposition of a theory of “internal relations” to conceptualise the contradictions that arise in the analysis of the interview data. I use ‘contradiction, following Wood (2012) as an explanatory concept. Ollman (1999) and Raduntz (2004) remind us that when we scrutinise universities we should do so as institutions that exist within the dynamics of a class-based, capitalist system. In Martin’s (2016) view, the requirements of the State to involve higher education institutions in the implementation of legislation impacts on the role and position of all academics. This means that as institutions, universities play particular contradictory roles. For example, Holborow (2015) notes the part that universities play ideologically within a society where the dominant common-sense view that all individuals can benefit from equality and social mobility, is undercut by structured and widening levels of

inequality. Specifically, with regard to the contradictory role of critical educators, Greyser and Weiss (2012, p787) point to the “...challenge of pursuing transforming politics within an institution that threatens to reproduce precisely the oppressions that left intellectuals seek to confront.” In relation to the interview data, a theory of contradiction (outlined in the research methodology chapter) could explain why, despite the constraints mentioned by the respondents, they also spoke of the possibilities that existed for critical pedagogy within higher education. The rest of this chapter looks at some key contradictions that reflect, and give rise to, constraints and possibilities.

### **7.3 Key themes**

Three key themes or issues, with related sub-themes, predominated in the analysis of the data. The analysis found that the themes not only overlapped but were related to one another both theoretically and practically.

#### **First theme: The workplace - perceptions of the neo-liberal university**

Sub-theme: Limit situations in the neo-liberal university

Sub-theme: A worsening situation - within and beyond the university

Sub-theme: A pedagogy of hope - possibilities for change

#### **Second theme: The critical classroom - the critical educator as academic activist**

Sub-theme: The significance of academic disciplines

Sub-theme: Developing a critical consciousness

Sub-theme: Relationship to students – leader or facilitator?

Sub-theme: Alternative classrooms

#### **Third theme: Beyond the critical classroom**

Sub-theme: Links between academia and activism – the role of the public intellectual

Sub-theme: Splitting activism and academic work

Sub-theme: ‘Moments’ and activism.

### **7.3.1 First theme: The workplace – perceptions of the neo-liberal university**

#### **Introduction**

This section draws on the context of the neoliberal higher education outlined in chapter 2. Although Castree (2000) supports academic engagement beyond the university, he focuses on academic labour and work conditions within universities as institutions that both “enable and constrain” (p960). He notes the issues that academics face within higher education such as the pressure to publish and build reputation, increased workload and the Research Excellence Framework. Castree also acknowledges that activism is time consuming but offers a manifesto for “in-here” activism (p967). For example, how academic staff can support students’ resistance to fees or how they might agitate on behalf of non-academic labour within the institution.

Castree (2000) and Gill (2009; 2017) have highlighted the structural constraints of neoliberal academia including: precarity; intensification of workloads; the breaking down of boundaries between work and non-work; and the effects on individuals which act against efforts at resistance. All of the respondents mentioned limit situations or constraints on their work reflecting Gill’s (2009) view that academic staff are increasingly overworked and demoralised; experience a distinction between research and teaching; need to gain grants and private funding and exist within a higher education system that is developing increasingly into a tiered system of research universities and teaching institutions (NAO, 2017). It is worth noting that only one of the respondents, Nick, took the view that there were no fundamental barriers in his experience to enacting critical pedagogy although he did mention time constraints and top-down direction from senior management as issues within the university. All of the remaining respondents raised a range of issues when answering questions about their role as a critical educator and their views on the socially transformative potential of higher education.

The overwhelming focus of the responses was on the outcomes of current government policies and changing higher education policy agendas and the impact of these on their role as critical educators. The respondents commented on the effect that changing policy agendas had on their practice as academics. Universities were seen as spaces where academics had to negotiate the tensions between their

involvement in policy initiatives and retaining a critical approach to their work. Their responses reflected wider understandings of economic and political developments and resonated with the views of Martin (2009) and Raduntz (2009) that the ideology and practice of neo-liberalism intensifies the commodification of education in different ways. Particularly, that education is increasingly reduced to “marketable, packaged knowledge” (p251), that space in higher education is commodified, that disciplines are ascribed a market value and the view that ideas and creativity have an intrinsic value is increasingly marginalised (Raduntz, 2009).

### **Sub-theme: limit situations in the neo-liberal university**

All of the respondents referred to a range of limits or constraints within their work in higher education. Two particular areas were noted by the respondents. The first was developments in legislation and policy issues. This included: the Prevent Agenda (Kerem, Jim, Matthew, Fayzi and Kerem); the UK Border Agency (Jim and Matthew); vocational education and training (Rachel, Jim and Cassie); the Research Excellence Framework (Andy, Kerem, Jim, Cassie, Feyzi and Liam); and fees legislation, linked to the impact of student debt (Nina, Cassie, Lucy and Andy).

The second area was linked to the wider issue of marketisation in higher education and included: the commodification of physical space and academic precarity (Jenny, Kerem, Feyzi, Sara, Andy and Gurnam). Taken together, these issues present a vision of current experience from respondents who identified as academic-activists [2]. The following indicative quotes highlight these issues as they impact on the role and position of the respondents.

#### *The Prevent Agenda [3] and Border Control legislation [4]*

There's been huge changes taking place. The Border Agencies have a huge impact on what we do here in terms of surveillance of students and I don't think it's been really made explicit. There's some legal requirements on universities to track their Tier 4 students outside the EU but this can be interpreted in different ways. Here, all the students, any class, have to sign in. I used to call these registers ...I call them surveillance sheets now...If a student was just not attending any class, then there was some requirement in order for them to participate in the assessment of the course, but it was very light touch. But now it's extreme and this is all driven by the University's interpretation of the Border Agency's requirements. (Jim)

I'm organising Shami Chakrobarty from Liberty to come and speak. And the speak about academic freedom but also about the Prevent Agenda and

controls over what people can say and think. And the issues that raises for Islamic students, you know, are quite difficult and fits into the spread of Islamaphobia. (Matthew)

Four of the interviewees (Nina, Matthew, Fayzi; and Kerem) spoke about the Prevent strategy and its effect on Muslim and/or BME students. Both Kerem and Fayzi recounted how Muslim students involved in the 2010 and 2012 occupations at SOAS felt that they were excluded from the occupations because they were disproportionately monitored on campus. Another aspect of occupations and student activity was, as Nina mentions, the involvement of the police on campus:

You know, the university is the site of struggle, and even though we lost the fees battle there's still quite a lot of anger about lots of things to do with money at universities and also policing on campus and also the fact that academics have to spy on their students, particularly Muslim students and so on; there's a lot of issues in teaching at a university that are ongoing.

These quotes reflect the increasing level of legislative state intervention in universities. This reflects a contradiction between the ideas of academic autonomy and freedom, as against academics' roles in implementing government legislation. The respondents were particularly aware of the racist implications of the Prevent agenda and Border Control legislation. The comments about Muslim students and Islamophobia also point to a further contradiction between the university as an open meritocratic public institution yet enacting legislation that targets certain groups who may feel themselves under particular scrutiny.

In addition to citing these legislative interventions in higher education, the respondents, not only here, but in other sections, raise the possibility of using these developments as generative themes or issues for discussion with students (Foley *et al*, 2015). In this way, the context of the university becomes a source of debate and research for students.

### *Vocational education and training*

It appeared that in a number of vocational areas, such as teacher education and health care, the curriculum, and therefore arguably another space for critical education, was much more circumscribed. However, Martin (2009) points out that universities' links with organisations beyond the campus, such as NHS Trusts and Teacher training organisations points to 'campus questions' being linked to broader political concerns even though these links may be far from straightforward.

Yes, education, employment or training. These are very disabling kinds of contexts to work in...and very dispiriting. (Jim)

The troubling thing really is that we've now had all these policy courses cut from most of health care degrees because they don't need to know about policy we've been told! (Rachel)

Some of my colleagues in Early Years...were saying that they are actually teaching something akin to the national curriculum. They are handed by their line manager a lesson plan with every five minutes accounted for. They are teaching the teachers of children and surely they should be saying: here's what you could do, let's experiment with this. Then you can get a development day when people are asked to be creative, but none of that translates into the classroom! (Cassie)

These comments link back to, and illuminate, the increasingly vocational nature of university courses, particularly Ainsley's (2016) analysis of the business university where training is prioritised within the knowledge economy. The responses also highlight a lack of autonomy and of creativity and shows the difficulties faced by academic activists in attempting to work outside of these regulatory frameworks and agendas.

#### *The Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the 'impact' agenda*

Couldry (2011), Freedman (2017) and Sayer (2017) all note the distorting effect of the REF on research areas and outputs. This issue was discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The respondents mentioned the REF agenda as a key issue in their work and the demands placed on them, although Nina was less concerned about this as, in her view, academics have always been judged on their research outputs.

I'm trying to develop and network there; carry on doing engaged work with the city. So to me that's impact, but to the institution and to the REF guidelines, impact is measured...reading the instructions - one; international impact is better than national impact, which is better than local impact. (Andy)

We've got to promote ourselves, promote the School, and it all comes down to how we've done in the REF...it's bad on the REF I think that [there are] 8 Development Studies departments in the UK and we got 8! But someone was saying, rightly pointing out, we are a heterodox department that's trying to compete in an orthodox world, so we don't publish in journals like 'World Development' which is basically mainstream and broadly not critical. And the REF shows those really highly, so we're never going to be able to compete with those and so it's totally unfair. So, you're not allowed to be critical, you can be, but it has a cost. And then not being in the REF as you know you potentially lose money, so there's all of that. (Fayzi)



Jim used the same language of metrics to describe the research outputs and quality measurement, a trend criticized by Freedman (2017) and Holmwood *et al* (2016) given its potential to limit research areas:

Most of the Principals in Scotland would have welcomed tuition fees, Universities PLC, quite apt really; everything driven by that model of, it's a kind of metrics measurement of quality. Quality linked to outputs and journals. Criticality itself, they're neither interested nor disinterested in it as long as it can be linked to some metric which can be seen in their eyes as significant. (Jim)

You're hoping that whatever you write will be accessible, even if you're playing the game of the research assessment exercise and you've got to write in august journals or whatever. I would still argue that your writing has got to be accessible to people – to a public that would be interested in it and not just some academic exercise to fulfil some assessment criteria. (Liam)

I sometimes think of this in terms of the REF and how on the one hand you can argue that its ruining academic research in that it puts pressure on researchers to publish, how to publish ahead of time; how to publish stuff that's not that great and can prioritise certain forms of knowledge over others. So high impact would be prioritised over what you might call more marginal forms of knowledge. But at the same time, it will also mean that if you're a critical scholar and you're getting impactful research that's super-critical you might be able to get ahead better than you would have been otherwise to university management. (Kerem)

Reflected in these quotes are issues of measurement and metrics as central issues in neoliberal higher education which links also to the wider issue of the rise of the knowledge economy and the new managerialism (section 2.2). It points to the ways in which research and critique have been commodified by measurement and metrics (Martin, 2009). Freedman (2017) and Wrigley (2019) argue that this commodification constrains the potential for critical research and fails to capture the nuance and complexity of the social world. Interestingly, in these quotes, the respondents are clear about the constraints of the REF and yet they also refer to ways of working withing this regime, for example, that critical research might still be produced within the context of research metrics. This raises interesting questions about critical academics responding to possible pressures of co-optation and the extent to which research exists as part of an academic exercise. As Clegg (2014) argues, the possibility of researching in certain areas or disseminating and applying research is not straightforward and is fraught with tensions and contradictions within the university and beyond. Academics and students, she reminds us, work in

circumstances not of their choosing as neo-liberal subjects suggesting a loss of criticality of which we should be aware. By contrast, the concept of relationality might be a useful approach to take. If research is seen by academics as part of a wider activist project, linked to wider movements beyond the academy, there is the potential for research to move beyond the constraints of simply being an academic exercise. In this way, research outputs wouldn't be seen as discrete products but as part of wider social and political issues (Freedman, 2017).

### *Fees Legislation*

Following a review of higher education funding (Brown, 2010), the Coalition government announced that it would reform student finance and higher education. This was part of a wider, radical re-organisation of health, education and social housing. Taylor-Gooby (2012) and Collini (2012) suggest that although the stated aim of the government was to reduce levels of national debt, its longer-term goal was to re-structure higher education, reduce state intervention and allow market forces to intervene in social welfare provision. Respondents' views on the fees increases highlighted the anger and despair of students and the view that the nature of universities, and the relationships between students and lecturers would be negatively affected:

The university has to be a site of opposition, on the other hand the Tory government is making it that much harder and we're feeling it, you know. Just with the REF and the relationship between students and teachers has changed because of the fees. (Feyzi)

Obviously, people have been graduating with like 40-50 grands worth of debt which seems kind of unthinkable. I mean I was the last year that didn't pay fees when I went to university and you know when I tell my students that now they can't believe it and they are very angry about the situation but also sometimes, you know, resigned to it because it is a very depressing situation. (Nina).

It's interesting especially since the £9,000 fees have come in because traditionally Liverpool has had quite high rates of widening participation and bringing in students from diverse backgrounds... Since the £9,000 fees I don't have any actual figures, my sense is that we are losing that cohort of very local students and increasingly getting London based students and South-East based students coming here because Liverpool is a cheap city compared to even Manchester or other Northern cities. Liverpool's cost of living is very cheap. (Andy)

A number of points emerge in these quotes. First, fees are part of the re-structuring of the capitalist economy in the move from less public funding for higher education and greater involvement in private business. Second, it touches on the changed relationship between staff and students where students as consumers are part of the production of human capital. The liberal theories in chapter 3 and variants of critical pedagogy that work within the existing neo-liberal framework tend to view individuals in this way, but if using the concept of the social individual outlined in chapter 4, it offers the potential for transformative change because fee campaigns which developed at the time of the interviews, offer a way for students and academics to involve themselves in activism and challenge and question wider interrelated issues.

#### *The commodification of physical space*

But increasingly, the neo-liberal agenda turns these problems into another arena. I mean...this seems trivial it's about booking a room...but it's driven by a kind of system of metrics around room spaces, room use. Every academic from professor to doctoral student has a space allocation. As an academic, I count as certain cubic metres of space ...space has been commodified! (Jim)

One of the issues is about the marketisation of space. The University's realised that it's got the space and they can make money out of it. (Matthew)

In the context where students have occupied academic buildings...it has to be an educational space above all else...In the SOAS occupation [students] occupied commercial spaces, spaces used by the university for corporate events and so on, and turned them into educational spaces, so they said, look this is what university is for; It's not about money, it's about education, so we're taking back this space for purposes of education. (Kerem)

All of the respondents were very aware of the marketisation of the university and this again highlights the contradiction mentioned by Faulkner (2011) and Holmwood (2011) in chapter 2 of the public university as a public good with a social mission, against an institution that is central to the growth of an economy that itself produces inequalities.

#### *Academic precarity*

Precarity was mentioned, referring to the increasing use of fixed term contracts [5] which disproportionately impacted on early career academics (Gill, 2017).

Interestingly, Gurnam, an established senior academic, provided another view on precarity which highlighted the challenge of being a critical academic within the academy (Freedman, 2017; Gill, 2017):

I don't know at one level it's a precarious existence, you're always at war with the system, you stand out a bit, you're always a bit of a threat, so that risky stance means that I have to work much harder than I would have to do if I'd been more of a 'yes' man. (Gurnam)

It was often the most precarious members of staff, the ones that had most to lose, the ones whose positions were most precarious, like PhD students who were teaching at the time such as myself, other precarious members of staff, adjuncts, people who weren't doing their PhDs but also teaching, also non-academic staff whose contracts were less water-tight. (Kerem)

It's not easy...if you're coming through the system at the moment, especially in terms of doing a PhD and you want to go into academia, there's so many part-time contracts, the whole adjunct stuff, that if you don't keep jumping through hoops, you won't stay. (Lucy)

If I had a permanent job, I'd be much more comfortable about speaking out. (Feyzi)

Precarity is a key characteristic of the crisis in higher education, although as Doogan (2009) and Choonara (2018) have argued it is not a new phenomenon arising only with the knowledge economy, rather it is built into the fabric of capitalism. It is an issue, however, that has impacted on higher education in terms of the casualisation of the workforce, which in turn undermines professionalism and autonomy.

The use of Freire's limit situations, I would argue, suggests that issues that arose within the findings such as concern over precarity, increasing workload, pressure to publish, should not be seen as tensions or problems, in and of themselves, but arose from the structural contradictions of capitalism (Ollman, 2015). Gill (2017) usefully proposes an enlarged idea of precarity that includes many forms of insecurity and precarity and includes, not only students, but university workers such as cleaners and caterers. This section on limit situations in the neo-liberal university reflects the increasing difficulty in engaging and disrupting those aspects of neoliberal higher education that the respondents brought up in the interviews.

### **Sub-theme: A worsening situation**

When commenting on their experiences of higher education, highlighted above, the majority of the respondents also made the point that the situation was getting worse. The significance of this for academic activists is that it foregrounds the wider economic context of neo-liberalism. As economic crises worsen, and grievances

develop, for example, students' responses to tuition fees, then academic activists are faced with arenas for challenge both within and outside the university. What is happening outside the university in economic and political terms will influence and provide context for what might be possible for academic activists *within* the university; there is a relationship between the two. To be active in, for example, anti-education cuts campaigns, anti-austerity campaigns and trades union work against changes in higher education offers an opportunity to engage as academic activists. For some respondents this meant finding ways of incorporating their activism in the classroom (discussed below in theme two).

Respondents gave the following examples of worsening conditions:

I thought I should get more involved in the union; that's very clearly the locus of struggle against exploitation where I am...so that's led me to various struggles within the workplace. Lots of stuff around bullying, because bullying is accompanying this *increasing managerialism, productivity increases* and so on. (Eurig) (emphasis added)

There's been a bunch of us in education, critical geography circles that I know fighting against neo-liberalism in the universities for over a decade and it's *getting worse*. So what do we do now? What's next? (Lucy) (emphasis added)

In the context that I find myself there's *increasing regulation* of what you do. *Increasing demands* that you specify what you are going to do in advance...so I think that that seriously curtails what is possible to do in classrooms. I think we're in a *much more conformed* setting than we used to be. (Matthew) (emphasis added)

There are real constraints that we can trace to the Browne Review, to the REF, to the introduction of tuition fees, tripling of tuition fees, to the new Green Paper. We can see all of these and I've talked about the way that it does trickle down and we actually feel it as academics. (Feyzi)

Yeah, I would say that year by year it gets more and more difficult. I'm finding that at college, courses are being trimmed down all the time. Last year we lost philosophy...general Studies went the year before that, so that year by year the provision is being trimmed. (Sean)

These quotes show that the respondents discussed their role as critical academics in higher education in the context of an increasingly commodified neo-liberal university. They focussed on a range of issues prevalent in the literature (Castree, 2000; Gill, 2009 and 2017; Martin, 2009; Raduntz, 2009) regarding the impact of marketisation and commodification. Only two of the respondents (Sarah and Lucy) raised the issue of whether the pressures on them would lead to them leaving higher education.

However, even they argued that it was still possible to find opportunities for activist work within the university. This apparent contradiction, of the *increasingly* constrained role of the academic and the opportunity for activism and critical challenge, is a key finding. It illustrates Freire's view of limit situations as offering the potential for critique and activism. This is because, as Freedman (2014) suggests, at times of economic crisis rather than stability, transformative action becomes more meaningful because existing narratives - such as social mobility, individual achievement and entrepreneurship - come up against the reality of people's lives. Academic activists have a role to play in opening up a space for wider critique at a structural level, particularly when students are actively seeking alternative perspectives to answer the circumstances given in this section.

### **Sub-theme – A pedagogy of hope**

This is not a utopian or idealistic vision but rather, a critical hope that emerges through critical engagement with challenges and contradictions and is rooted in practice. Giroux (2011) refers to this idea as Freire's 'concrete utopianism'. Although at face value, the comments below could be seen as simply positive, personal, assessments of a complex and challenging situation, seen from this Freirean perspective they embody a view of the future based on concrete imperatives in which the respondents are involved as academic-activists:

Is there a risk that everything we're doing is being enacted so successfully that we're helping the neo-liberal machine? I don't think that we are, on balance, and there are still lots of things you can do, ad-hoc, under the wire, while remaining in post. (Lucy)

My understanding of what the university should be and could be is quite perpetually utopian and also grounded in some of my experiences of working in universities...where very transformative things have happened, where I think there have been really critical spaces that you couldn't find anywhere else. (Sarah)

I remember this quote from Raymond Williams, 'to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing'. And it's quite easy to be in despair, you can get the view, which is quite convincing, that nothing can be done. So always essential as austerity bites...that people need to be able to think positively that there's a way beyond that. (Jim)

There's a potential there in the classroom and I've found that's changed me politically as well in quite strong ways. My experiences in the classroom and engaging with students and listening to how they engage with the material. Me making mistakes as a teacher has really transformed the way I think about

politics...and I think on that interpersonal level and on that practical level how you do politics, how you do activism. I think the classroom has informed my thinking and interactions with students has informed my thinking much more than research. (Kerem)

A lot of the students started the module saying that they felt they had no power because they were students, I very explicitly worked that through with them...kind of behavioural change stuff but very politically based to make some of them feel empowered.....I just want students to feel hope and optimism because hopefully they've got a long life left and I want them to feel they can do something! (Jenny)

I've seen many colleagues who have gone through a sense of rejection or failure or a sense of alienation from what they thought they came into the university to do...It re-affirmed my view that you can resist but there is a price. What you do need to do is form alliances with people inside and outside. That has been really crucial. From the beginning, I've always been involved in activist networks or attending conferences is really crucial, I find...you have to exercise some agency over what conferences you attend; but attending conferences that renew your sense of possibility and hope. Freire's concept of hope, I think that's really important. (Gurnam).

A range of slightly different ideas about hope are visible in these examples, but the differences serve to illustrate more clearly a distinction between individual hope at a time of difficulty and Freire's view of hope as an ontological imperative. Giroux (2004) draws on Freire's pedagogy of hope as an analytical tool to reframe questions of agency, ethics and discussions about the meaning of democracy. For him, 'hope is subversive' (p38) and linked to progressive social change, particularly through social movement activism where the present and future can be linked by opening up a space for dissent and progressive social transformation. Freire (2014, p2) believed that 'hope is an ontological need' and that it could be used against the neoliberal university itself as a form of critique, or ontological hope, or critical hope, but one rooted in material and historical reality. It is this critical hope that academic-activists can use, first because hope is a form of critique of the existing system. Freire (2014, p30) explained "one of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be." This is not an individual hope but is linked to concrete practice as part of strategies to transform education. Freire's concept of critical hope is linked to his idea of untested feasibility (I discuss this concept below in 8.3.2) that is, the

opportunity to work under given historical circumstances to, for example, uncover inequalities; challenge those inequalities and offer an alternative.

## **Summary**

This section considered the respondents' views of their role and position in higher education as critical educators and academic-activists. Analysis of the data showed that while the respondents worked within an increasingly marketized university which impacted on their role and position, they also acknowledged that possibilities existed to challenge those changes, as well as to engage in critical pedagogy in various ways.

This contradiction could be seen as an example of Freire's limit-situation, discussed in chapter 6, where problem posing and problem solving were parts of the same process. A process which sees material reality not as fixed but dialectically unfolding; where reality is always in process and transformation is always possible. For Radutz (2004) all academics inhabit a contradictory position given their structural position "at the interface of the relation between the public good and private gain" (p13). In her view, academics can negotiate a way through the contradictions that the privatisation of higher education creates, but only if they challenge the causes of economic constraints and develop a strategy of practical, political action. What this also requires is a critical self-reflexivity, discussed previously at section 5.14, in terms of analysing concrete situations and assessing the potential for activism. The academic-activists in this research discussed the ways that they were able to link political action and academic work. To this extent, the respondents' views did not align with the pessimistic ideas of Caanan (2011); Blacker (2014) and McGovern (2016) that were set out earlier in section 1.3. Their views reflected the idea of the university as a public good (Raduntz, 2004; Martin, 2009; Burowoy, 2011; Giroux) and their activism within it was part of a challenge to the increased marketization of higher education.

### **7.3.2 Second theme: The critical classroom – the critical educator as academic activist.**

#### **Introduction**

For some educators, as Breuing's (2001) research suggests, adopting a critical pedagogy perspective means that their focus is the classroom situation and the



curriculum (Braa & Callero, 2006; King, 2004; Langan & Davidson, 2005; Martin & Brown, 2013). This involves attempts to challenge oppressive behaviour and give voice to marginalised groups. Some aspects of the literature are written from the perspective of educators who attempt to create a critical environment which challenges existing assumptions and creates a space where alternative perspectives are possible. For example, Shor (1996) outlines the democratic environment that he attempted to create in the programme he developed, or co-developed, with students at a North American community college. In another example, Braa & Callero (2006) attempted to link the curriculum and assessment of a sociology module to the students' involvement with community groups outside the college.

There are aspects of the critical pedagogy literature which focus on the importance of intervening to change the classroom; for example, enacting a feminist classroom (Sanchez-Casal & MacDonald, 2002), an anarchist classroom (De Leon, 2006; Rouhani, 2012), a democratic classroom (Shor, 1996)) and an activist classroom (Bettez, 2008; Beck, Moore and Solga, 2011). While it is true that, as Foley *et al* (2016) note, critical academics will attempt to "implement educational practices that shape their students as active citizens" (p116), the opportunity for this can be limited in the higher education classroom as this research has indicated (in the first theme, discussed above).

When discussing universities' transformative potential, all of the respondents reflected on their understanding of the classroom as a site of transformation and resistance (McLaren, 2007; Foley et al, 2016; Catone, 2014). However, the extent to which the classroom could explicitly exemplify critical ideas and practices was debated. Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) are critical of the focus of much critical pedagogy on the classroom experience, and on the specific relationships between teacher and students. They refer to the classroom-level pedagogy that was the focus of the new sociology of education in the 1970s. Research in this field, at the micro-level of interaction in the classroom and influenced by symbolic interactionism and phenomenology (Banfield, 2017) was criticised by writers such as Sarup (1978) and Sharp (1980) for a number of reasons. For example, that although teachers sought radical social change, their approach was not explicitly political. By failing to locate the classroom situation in the wider economic and political context, transformation was limited to that of individual consciousness: that it can be

personally transformative (for both the student and teacher) but not politically transformative. In addition, Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) argue that these classroom interactions start with the concept of education as a fixed entity, rather than a system which changes historically within, and related to, the context of capitalist relations of production. Indeed, their argument is that all radical education should locate itself within a Marxist analysis of the wider society and the role of education in that society especially at times of economic crisis, where a concrete analysis of the situation is necessary to formulate the tactics and strategy that they claim are missing in radical education.

Although there was no specific interview question about the classroom as a site for their work, all respondents focused on their classroom practices and approach as central to their role and as the arena in which they could enact a critical approach. The academic activists that Kuntz (2007) interviewed for his research didn't emphasise their teaching role when discussing their activist practices. However, in this research, the respondents were keen to focus on their teaching as mechanisms to enact academic activism both within and beyond the university. Analysis of the data showed that this could be seen in two interrelated areas. First, *what* is taught in the critical classroom and second, *how* critical pedagogy is enacted. Respondents tended to talk about the content of their teaching and the strategies that they used to enact criticality within the classroom as separate issues. The commonalities and differences in approaches shown by the interview data are analysed below. Overall, the interview findings showed an awareness of the significance of the classroom environment for developing a critical consciousness among students, while at the same time acknowledging constraints and contradictions that limited the transformative space of the classroom.

### **Sub-theme: The significance of academic disciplines**

A number of issues were visible in the data regarding the respondents' academic disciplines and their role as critical educators. In general, disciplines were seen as ways in which critical perspectives and alternative views could be part of the curriculum. For two particular groups of respondents, their subject disciplines [6] allowed them the opportunity to make explicit links beyond the classroom. The first group was of educators with a Popular Education background, working in community

education (Jim, Eurig and Liam); the second were those from a political geography background (Lucy, Jenny, Andy, Nick).

### *Example 1: Community Education*

The three respondents identifying as popular educators worked at universities in Scotland and within the area of community education (Jim, Eurig and Liam). They had developed links with community practitioners and engaged with community activists and this context appeared to offer the opportunity to teach within an explicitly political framework. Jim explained the political nature of community education in this way:

I work in the area of community education and community education is training people working in communities and we have a very kind of political analysis of the nature of that work. And so most of my teaching would always be about the kind of politics of engagement in communities; the politics of problems and their social construction, ideological construction and how educators have to avoid being trapped by policy initiated from above. (Jim)

Jim went on to explain how the links and networks that had been made with activist groups meant that he was able to invite community activists into the classroom to offer their perspectives and experiences on issues such as disability rights or poverty. The activists were seen as the 'experts' in whatever areas they were working within.

In another example of developing education and training for community workers, Eurig explained partnerships and links with organisations such as Women's Aid:

A partnership between Queen Margaret University and Scottish Women's Aid. We...run a course – initially it was called: Gender, Justice, Masculinities and Violence, looking at the whole field of violence against women and gendered violence. And that emerged because by that time I was in Queen Margaret University as a lecturer. The person in Scottish Women's Aid, it was her job to identify training needs, training opportunities in various different sectors. She was quite keen that could include something that was academically validated. So we worked together...to develop this module and we came up with the idea that it would be for activists and professionals who want to improve their knowledge of theory, feminist theory etc...it's a module that's actually part of a programme within the University.

The nature of community education also had implications in terms of the students who enrolled on the course. They were community educators and activists. This also

appeared to allow a blurring of lines between academia and activism. Liam explained his view of the activist students in his classroom:

I teach on the degree course in Community Education, in fact, I start on Monday. So these are kind of non-traditional students, mature students who don't have good qualifications but they're coming in from their experience and are all activists of some description. That's quite a challenge...these are students who I think are great. They've got lots of good ideas; good experiences and they don't hesitate for a moment to disagree with you and to contribute to discussions.

In these examples, the interplay between theory and practice was visible. At times this was a challenge to the respondents particularly where activist students were unfamiliar with, or did not see the importance of, a theoretical basis to their political activity. In Freirean terms, however, there would be no practice without theory and vice versa, illustrating his understanding of dialectical change in society.

### *Example 2: Geography*

A second example of respondents whose disciplinary background was conducive to arranging students to move beyond the university and also where there was an explicitly political aspect to the discipline, were those respondents who were geographers. Castree (2000) notes that there has always been strands of critical and radical geography, while Blomley (1994) suggests that geography has always been "intently activist" (p385). Four of the respondents (Andy, Nick, Jenny and Lucy) were geographers.

I think there's strength in human geography to be open to ideas that are political or feminist and to think carefully about subjectivity and reflexivity; the personal is political...there's a massive Marxist and anarchist current that's quite strong in the discipline. (Jenny)

It seemed that the geography respondents' disciplinary background was conducive to organising students to visit sites or communities outside the institution and to link their academic work, their teaching and research, with activism and activist opportunities. Andy, for example, included in his teaching, the 1911 transport workers' strike in Liverpool:

In 1911 there was a huge transport workers' strike which centred on St George's Hall, opposite Lime Street Station...and there was a police-instigated riot, which became known as Bloody Sunday. So we get the students to go down there on a sort of guided tour and think about what that

space would now look like compared to years ago with a thousand people crammed into it listening to one man speaking with no amplification and the importance of that and getting them to think through what it means to be part of a political protest... That transport workers strike was why there's national insurance, that's why there is a welfare state because people got beaten up outside here and part of that whole process around that time, developing welfare institutions. And then you can take that a step further by saying well, what's the current government doing to protect those welfare institutions?

Jenny described how:

Within my daily teaching I've tried to get students to understand the possibility of action by taking them to places where they get to meet those people, see the example. I taught a module called 'Ecological Futures' in the third year of geography... we went to an eco-community in Oxfordshire and we did the tour and we looked at possibilities. At the end I got them to think about their own actions and they did an exercise reflecting on their own potential. So a lot of them started the module saying they felt like they had no power because they were students; because they were renting; because they were broke – all of those things. And I very explicitly worked through that with them; kind of behavioural change stuff but very politically based to make some of them feel empowered.

Using a different strategy, Nick arranged public events, either on or off campus, to which he invited his students:

I was in a research group called: Power, Space, Politics, so we put on joint events, public meetings and this basically works. What happens is, I invite my students along, they often form a good constituent part of the audience. So we had a recent election time, foreign policy question time which was good. We had local MP. A lot of students came to that, but when we do that sort of thing normally, I like to invite an academic speaker as well.

For the majority of the respondents, their disciplinary background, research and teaching offered them a space to critically examine wider social and political issues. For many, such as the community educators and geographers already mentioned, their disciplinary framework allowed a close alignment to their critical approach and activism. Other respondents mentioned that their academic discipline enabled them to discuss current affairs and to pick up on issues that would allow a greater critical engagement with students. This aspect was mentioned by Rachel (teaching social policy to nursing students); Sean and Matthew (teaching politics) and Fayzi and Kerem (teaching development studies). However, it is worth noting that Kerem was also sceptical about the extent to which the critique of dominant ideas and ideology was possible:

But in disciplinary terms there's something that's typically not been part of questions being asked. Can we talk critically? Can we investigate our own workplace? For example, if you are in an economics department here, do you study the university's accounts? Do you try to develop alternative accounts? Those sorts of things we don't get to do for a variety of reasons.

This comment raises interesting issues about disciplinarity and critical pedagogy. First, Martin & Dreher (2013) advance the importance of disciplines such as sociology particularly due to its greater commitment to public debate (see for example, Burawoy's (2005) call for a public sociology) as well as areas such as peace studies and environmental studies. However, Parker (2009, p78) is not only wary of the limits of disciplinary boundaries but is also wary of 'critical' versions of disciplines, for example: critical psychology; critical pedagogy; critical law and radical philosophy. This is because disciplines themselves are not set bodies of knowledge but are related to the social and political context. He makes the point that disciplines are historical phenomena and: "...the appearance of critical arguments in the discipline have always been a function of the political struggles outside it."

This comment explicitly points to a relational aspect of the development of disciplinary knowledge and its dialectical links to wider political contexts and levels of struggle. Skourdoulis (2016) makes a related point in terms of science research when he argues that the development of new knowledge isn't internal to a community of scientists but should be seen as a wider process involving the totality of productive forces in any given society at any particular time.

Second, a further issue is the contradiction between a discipline that has shown itself to be open to critical ideas and ideology yet is also part of the compartmentalising of knowledge and the fragmentation of knowledge. Neale (2008, p231) argues that: "Disciplines create blinkers and disciplinary boundaries justify ignorance of vast areas of knowledge prohibiting critical questions and hiding connections."

In Sharp's (1975, p53) view, the division and sub-division of social sciences into more discrete and narrow fields: "... serves the purpose of the academic structure of social knowledge." For Flood, Martin & Dreher (2013, p22) it is the drive to publish and pursue promotions that can constrain the role of the academic. They claim that: "...disciplines are inward-looking...they are not havens for community engagement but more commonly vessels for building frameworks that are obscure to outsiders."

A further point made by Eagleton (2008) is that academic work is usually restricted to narrow fields of research. He contrasts this with the need for public intellectuals to be fluent in more than one discipline if they wish to impact on wider public discourse. This is also linked to the important point for academic activist to generalise by making links wherever possible between the university and students' lives beyond that, and to work at the national and international level (Hill, 2004; McLaren & Faramandpur, 2001)

This section has noted the extent to which the respondents' disciplinary context enabled them to look outwards beyond the university and engage with students and the wider community. It also noted a contradiction that critical academics may encounter between this approach and the inward-looking nature of disciplinary knowledge. The next section looks at the ways in which respondents spoke about developing a critical consciousness among students.

### **Sub-theme: Developing a critical consciousness in the classroom**

This section discusses the interviewees' responses towards the possibility of developing a critical consciousness among students and the role of the critical educator as part of this process. Freire (1970) uses the term conscientization and argues for its centrality in education. Conscientization is what Leinstyna (2004) refers to as "presence of mind", not reflecting the world or understanding at a surface level but historicising knowledge and seeing the world as individuals being not just in the world but with the world. It is about being able to shape and be shaped by the external world in a dialectical relationship. It involves both praxis and dialogue. However, Freire is keen to point out that dialogue does not mean communication between individuals, or a discussion involving different voices in the classroom. Nor should it be seen as simply a teaching technique or strategy [7]. For Freire, dialogue should be viewed as an epistemological relation and as a 'way of knowing'. Freire explains the difference between dialogue and conversation this way:

Dialogue presupposes curiosity; it doesn't exist without epistemological curiosity; without the desire to understand the world around us. That is what differentiates dialogue from simple conversation. Such curiosity embodies the conscious willingness to engage in the search for the meaning of an object to clarify or apprehend the full meaning. (Leinstyna, 2004, p19)

One central aspect of critical education is the extent to which critical academics can influence students by creating a critical and questioning climate within the classroom.

This point was viewed in different ways by the interviewees. Two main approaches were suggested by the data: first, that of offering a plurality of views and second, developing students' critical consciousness (Freire, 1972).

First, respondents enabled a range of perspectives to be debated and alternatives offered to students:

I will say to students, when I set up a lecture, I say this view, this perspective. I think this; you are free to think what you like. I try not to, in lectures, I don't push particular interpretations. I give lectures on the war on terror but I don't give particular interpretations. I'll say this is a realist view, this is George Bush's view, this is Chomsky's view. And I'll try to tell each of them as compellingly as I can. I think the value of ideas, of studying ideas is to try and see yourself in others' shoes. How does the world look from someone else's perspective? So I try and do that as fully as I can. (Nick)

So you have to engage with them constructively. But I have also played Devil's Advocate for people who are arguing, not right-wing social views like racism and homophobia, but more economically right-wing views when they've been... I've played Devil's Advocate and supported them in a debate with students just because I think that they need to know all sides of it. (Rachel)

For example, we had three readings today, one was Milton Friedman; one was on David Harvey, very much critique, and then one kind of in the middle a World Bank report which is obviously more to the neo-liberal, but it's basically saying there's a role for the State, but the State should be playing a role in facilitating markets. With those materials you can get students to think in a much more critical way. (Feyzi).

Liam drew on his experiences as a critical educator in Latin America and how his approach in the popular education tradition was to work with different groups where:

Different people have got different knowledge and education is about bringing those knowledges together in dialogue.

Eurig explained how programmes for activists in campaign groups in Scotland brought their experiences and campaigning skills into the classroom:

And you know there were other kinds of knowledge that they were teaching us. There was one campaign against fish-farming, for example on the west coast of Scotland. And the activists there didn't have any access to higher education but had dug into the Internet and found a whole lot of stuff about the kinds of pollutants that's caused by the chemicals they put on the fish. So they had a lot of knowledge that we didn't have.

It is interesting to note, however, that Ollman (1993) is more critical of the idea of offering a plurality of views in the classroom. In his view, this strategy allows universities to "rationalize the status quo" (p124) by giving the appearance of



allowing all points of view including those offering a critique of capitalism. In fact, what may be happening is that certain views are silenced (Brookfield, 2009). Plurality may also provide a semblance of neutrality, but what is regarded as neutral is itself a political construct. In the views of Ollman (1993) and Ebert (1996), what is crucial is not criticism or critical thinking (concepts taken for granted in mainstream higher education) but a more fundamental *critique* of contradictions which are themselves manifestations of wider, social and structural contradictions. In Freire's (1972) view, limit situations can be issues that are discussed in a classroom situation. For example, at the start of this research, the tripling of fees for a university degree, could be critiqued by revealing the economic and political decisions that gave rise to this change in policy; to offer alternatives to this decision (and by so doing, question its inevitability); and to reflect on ways of responding to this situation within and beyond the university. The value of a wider critique of social issues, according to Ebert (1996), is that limits that appear to be personal to individual students in mainstream education, whether it be generally accepted views of success, hard work, talent or 'drive' should not be seen as personal limits or faults that are internal to individuals but as concepts that are historically situated. Therefore, they are transient and capable of transformation.

Second, the respondents questioned and challenged students:

I feel I have the freedom to attempt to come at things from different directions in the hope of just trying to make them think; just trying to question their assumptions about politics. Question their acceptance of the British Nation State; just asking them why? Students haven't really thought about that. So just kind of critical in the sense of trying to get people to think what they...well, to think about the issues. (Matthew)

We do a systematic introduction to key ways of thinking ideologically and they are related to the constructions of problems and interventions. So all that to me is about ensuring students have a critical capacity to do something different from what policy generally guides them should be done. So that is a kind of fundamental basis; the political nature of education is Freire's education is politics, there's no neutrality. (Jim)

I'm not there to tell the students what they should learn, some kinds of facts they should learn. That's not what I do. It's about pushing a little bit and challenging a little bit in as safe a way as possible, so that students start interrogating their own ways of learning and what they thought before and that can be very uncomfortable at times, so you have to be quite careful about it. (Lucy)

It's also challenging in terms of teaching because you have quite homogenous views within that. I try to unsettle that and challenge it, which was the tricky aspect. (Andy)

These quotes show that the respondents used a variety of approaches to develop a critical awareness. Some, like Jim's approach, was more openly ideological but all sought to find ways to challenge students' thinking.

Both of the previous sections on disciplinarity and the process of developing a critical consciousness would seem to imply a dichotomy between content and form.

However, as Harris (1984) argues, from a Marxist perspective, there is epistemologically no distinction between form and content. Allman (1999) argues that incorporating activism and activist practices in the classroom (as can be seen in the responses above) is one way to address this dichotomy. Ebert's (1996) use of critique (mentioned above) is useful here as an approach to developing critical consciousness because it has a material and collective basis. It enables students to make relational connections in the subjects they are studying (e.g. the poor are poor *because* the rich are rich). It can reveal underlying material, structural conditions that social theories often conceal.

### **Sub-theme: Relationship to students – leader or facilitator?**

The majority of the respondents (14 out of 17) appeared to see themselves in a more facilitating role in classroom situations. It may also be the case that within a classroom situation the respondents moved from a facilitating situation to a leadership one. Rouhani (2012, p1734) when talking of the anarchist classroom explained his higher education reading groups and seminars as: "...structured in an anti-hierarchical format with me as the professor acting primarily as a participant. I found my simultaneous roles as active participant, facilitator/moderator, mentor/guide and leader during conversational lulls to be challenging but also very rewarding."

The role of the critical academic as a facilitator is a key concept in Freirean critical pedagogy, linked to Freire's view of traditional education as 'banking' where learning was a one-way process with educators transferring objective knowledge to students.

The issue of leadership is contentious in critical pedagogy and often reflects the political and theoretical orientation of academics. Those, for example, taking a more

autonomist approach may emphasise horizontal forms of classroom structure and discussion. In addition, a Freirean approach also stresses the dialogic relationship between educator and educated. This was raised by respondents in the following ways:

Well, the people who got involved with the Live Art Development Agency... one of the first things we did was have a long set of discussions about what's a teacher and what's a student and then we decided that there's no such thing. That there aren't students and there aren't teachers; we're first people and people in a room who can share and we're all learning all the time and we're teaching all the time...We were thinking things through with them. (Gary)

We started out with student scholars and teacher scholars but then we've reverted back to just scholars as part of a way of trying to equalise that as part of an intention, but just because you call everyone scholars it doesn't mean they are or see themselves as scholars or want to be that... There was recently a class called: 'Know-How: Do it ourselves higher education' in which there was no real teacher or facilitator. My view is that doesn't work very well...unless you're a very tight group already with a sense of direction. If no-one has any sense of direction, but there are informal relations of hierarchy within the group then that either reproduces those things or things don't tend to get talked about or done. (Sarah)

Lucy explained that her role was to facilitate in a classroom situation:

Actually, I don't really talk about teaching, I talk about facilitation because I want, I think university education is about that stuff that universities say that it is but aren't actually very good in supporting us in doing which is enabling the active learner. So, I'm not there to tell students what it is they should learn, some kind of facts they could learn, that's not what I do. It's about pushing a little bit and challenging a little bit but in as safe a way as possible so that students start interrogating their own ways of learning and what they thought before and that can be very uncomfortable at times so you have to be quite careful about it.

Radical educators, people engaged in transformative pedagogy, cannot do that without situating themselves in their own pedagogy and so, therefore, I do share some of these experiences, not least because I'm trying to enable the students who feel 'othered' to be academic and to make them realise that actually there's not that much distinction between the two of us as human beings...The work of critical pedagogy; Henry Giroux's writings about teachers as intellectuals was very influential for me and the democratization of intellectuality. The idea that everybody who writes is a writer and anybody who thinks is a thinker and we shouldn't succumb to this idea that somehow there are privileged groups of people who are allowed to do these things. And that formed an underpinning to my work with students. (Gurnam)

By contrast, Liam was clear that his role was far more than just a facilitator:

It wouldn't be that you just sit back and facilitate. I would say a popular educator, a Freirean educator does not facilitate, that would be a really limited view...at various times you would take on the role of facilitator, but you're much more, you're openly making an intervention in social reality to use the kind of jargon, but you're not apologising for it, you're not pretending that you're not doing it. But you'd be trying to bring it out into the open so it's not manipulative. Neo-liberal educators are intervening, but they'll tell you that they are being neutral when that's just nonsense, you know.

This 'intervention', as Liam described it, is not always overt:

My academic things would be an introduction to politics; political ideologies; and globalisation and I think my general leftism would come over in what I said without pinning it down to anything in particular. (Matthew)

Sean's teaching in a formal classroom situation in an FE/HE college, limited overt critical approaches to pedagogy, but his political views are known:

I teach things like Coalition policy; Coalition economic policy; austerity; etc. When I'm teaching in what we might call a non-activist context in the lessons, inevitably the activist implications are there, and the left orientated students pick up on that. Obviously, everyone at college is aware of my political view, so the students ask me what I think about this or what I think about that.

The data appeared to show that respondents thought of themselves as either facilitating or leading in teaching situations, with little focus on the potential to move between these roles. However, the respondents also made reference to situations where students moved out of classroom situations and where there was at least the potential for students to assume a leadership role or at least to disrupt the traditional role of teacher and student. Sean, for example, arranged for students to speak at a UCU meeting in support of academics considering strike action; Nina described meeting her students on fees demonstrations; Nick invited students to Stop the War meetings off campus.

As Rouhani's (2012) quote at the beginning of this section suggested, critical educators can move between roles as, for example, leader, facilitator or mentor. In this research, the fact that the respondents are activists as well as academics adds another dimension to the issue of leadership and facilitation. As we have seen earlier in the section (theme two, above) respondents invited students to events *outside* of the classroom (Nick and Matthew) and invited community activists *into* the classroom

(Jim and Eurig). This second situation would impact on, and undermine, the role of the academic as the 'expert'; a role that would be assumed by the community activists. There is a similar relational aspect to this issue as has been already mentioned by Parker regarding disciplines. That is, to emphasise the influence that wider, outside factors have on the contingent relationships between academics and students. Both Gramsci (Thomas, 2007) and Freire (1970) saw educators and educated in a reciprocal relationship, where the distance between educated and educators was limited as far as possible and both could take the lead at different times. Barker, Johnson and Lavallette (2001) also suggest that leadership is relational and that it resides in dynamic situations. While such a view of leadership would be difficult to maintain in a classroom situation, it would more likely emerge on those occasions, described in this chapter, where students and academics meet in academic or political events beyond the classroom.

Freire (Freire and Shor, 1987) has his own view of the role of the critical academic, which is to be "directive" but not manipulative (p175). He draws a distinction between authority and authoritarianism. Rejecting the latter, he believes that educators shouldn't separate research from teaching and are, therefore, authoritative in their own subject disciplines. In a further dimension to Freire's work, Allman (1999) suggests that Freire sees learners and teachers as a "unity of opposites" (p87) and that teaching and learning are internally related. Allman (1999) suggests that knowledge is not a commodity to be acquired (Freire's idea of banking education) but involves a practice of constantly questioning and challenging whatever is under discussion. This applies as much to teachers as to students.

### **Sub-theme: Alternative classrooms**

The next section sets out examples of first, where respondents involved themselves in 'classrooms' as part of campus occupations and, second, where respondents attempted to establish classrooms outside of their higher education institution.

First, at the time of the research interviews, the increase in student fees had generated student demonstrations and occupations [8] on university campuses. A number of the respondents were involved in this activity and found themselves in situations where they as educators supported students taking direct action against the university management and the government more widely.

Rachel, Kerem, Fayzi, Cassie, Lucy and Nina all either spoke at occupations, visited to offer support, or organised discussion sessions within occupations:

In contexts where students have occupied academic buildings where teaching and learning takes place, it's a necessity that you maintain that as an educational space...similarly with the SOAS occupation and with the Sussex occupation, one of the central ways in which they were politicised was that they occupied commercial spaces, spaces used by the university for corporate events and so on, and turned them into educational spaces, so they said, look this is what university is for. It's not about making money; it's about education, so we're taking this space back for purposes of education. (Kerem)

I took food and I went to the 'teach-ins' ...I was guest lecturing so I would bring that into my classroom and say; do you know this is going on? What do you think it is? Is it something you would support? I think that we don't need to be in the occupation but we don't need to 'invisiblise' it in our own teaching. That's the issue, that we 'invisibilise' these things by not bringing them up...there's the rent strikes in London, so there are all these things that nobody's talking about. (Cassie)

There was one event on Wednesday which was: 'What is the relationship between activism and academic labour' and that was a great event. It was really, I found it really interesting the way it happened because this was when Security was still on the door so what happened was we gathered everyone on the steps of the Brunei Gallery, the bulk of which were, this time, academics, many of which were academics, either PhD students and graduate teaching assistants or permanent members of staff. We got about fifty people to forcibly enter the occupation and go through Security. And it was really interesting to begin a meeting on the relationship between academic labour and activism by having this direct action! We can open up the occupation. And it was interesting to see how different academics who were participating, how they related to that. (Kerem)

I was at Middlesex and they threatened to close down the philosophy department, that was April 2010 and so there was a 13-day occupation there...I went to the occupation to speak, I wrote about it a lot. (Nina)

Lucy mentioned the Newcastle University occupations in 2010 (Hopkins, Todd *et al*, 2013)

It was something I brought into the debate in several different modules in the geography curriculum because it was very live and because they can speak about it and they can think about it, relating it to their own geographies.

In a further example, not linked to the occupations, Sean explained how some of the college students he taught, involved themselves with a campaign on, and beyond, campus:

Last year one of our colleagues had a very public campaign against the management about bullying in college and the students really got involved in

that. There was a huge Facebook campaign. There were demonstrations outside college, and the students were really the backbone of that and in many ways the students were more willing to get involved than the staff which in some ways is understandable because the students have less to lose, but I think they interpreted it as a sort of, a contest between a narrow vision of education and a broader vision of education and they saw what was at stake in that dispute.

In this example, the students' activities (Facebook, demonstrations) moved beyond support for an individual lecturer and began to make links between a seemingly isolated dispute with the college, locating this in a wider view of education in society.

In these examples, the respondents as academic-activists were supporting the actions of students, where the students themselves were taking on a leadership role in the occupations. To look at this situation in a wider relational context, the anger generated by the fee increases created an opportunity for the respondents to involve themselves in that particular activity. The general support for occupations among the respondents was not uncritical, however. Keren highlighted the issue of maintaining and escalating the occupation in the face of hostility from other students as well as the university administration. Fayzi noted the lack of strategic direction in the occupations. Nina was critical of the lack of solidarity and support from academics whose privileged position could have helped, for example, in the court cases of students who had been arrested.

A second group of respondents had also worked to establish classrooms beyond the university - those respondents who analysed their work through an autonomist or pre-figurative lens. In particular, Gary, Sarah and Cassie were all involved, and had been over the course of their careers, with teaching and learning in educational spaces beyond the university. For example, Sarah was involved in a co-operative space, the Lincoln Social Science Centre (Neary & Amsler, 2012; Earl, 2015) where more horizontal approaches to the classroom situation were tried with greater or lesser success. What united their approaches was scepticism that higher education could offer a radical challenge to existing social relations.

Sarah explained the Social Science Centre as:

A higher education cooperative so we are inclusive. We are established as a cooperative, self-managed, self-funded, self-organised and we run courses in higher education, courses in social science. We've only ever run one a term and in this coming term we'll probably run a few more with some workshops

and activities...people can study but they are also involved in creating curriculum, creating pedagogy, working out all of the complexities that go along with co-operative learning.

We applied to the Live Art Development Agency...for support and they were really happy to give the support and then from there we got about thirty or forty people involved. And then we ran our – don't know what you'd call it – self education courses...we tried to run it along horizontal lines and everyone had a say and people would come and learn or teach. (Gary)

In a slightly different example of a 'classroom' outside of the formal structures of the institution, Sean established the Socialist Society at his higher education college:

But then about two years ago we noticed that there was a really significant increase in political consciousness from the students, so we decided to set up something a bit broader and called it a Socialist Society and over the past 2 years this has been a quite remarkable success really. I mean at its peak we have about 40-50 students coming, and they want to discuss quite advanced theoretical questions...we meet once a week for about half an hour. What we do is we get the students themselves to volunteer to research a question. So we might get a student for example who wants to do a ten-minute presentation on something like Podemos. So that student will talk for about ten minutes and then we will open it up for discussion for about fifteen, twenty minutes. So it's been a really great success, the Socialist Society.

To summarise, theme two has considered the work of critical academics within classroom situations. The issues that emerged from the data were those of the significance of disciplinarity; the ways in which the respondents sought to enact criticality within different classroom situations; and the perceptions of the respondents' role as either a teacher or facilitator and how these roles can change, particularly in times of activity and resistance. All of these themes emerged within the context of the neoliberal university at a time of continued economic crisis. The respondents were not just teachers in the critical classroom but were positioned as public intellectuals with the potential, as part of this role, to make links with campaigns and organisations beyond the university, and to use activism as a mechanism to enact this link.

### **7.3.3 Third theme: Beyond the critical classroom**

#### **Introduction**

It is acknowledged that to title this section 'beyond the classroom' could be seen to engage in the binary - between academia and activism - that I have earlier argued against. However, the issues raised in this section; the role of the public intellectual



and the alliances the respondents formed with those beyond the university embodied both aspects of academia and activism.

Raduntz (2004) argues that critical educators are caught up in the tensions between the demands of the wider economy, new knowledge production and ideas of academic freedom. However, because education is not just about the economy but about ideology and knowledge production, educators have a key role at the heart of these structural contradictions. Freire (1970) recognised such structural contradictions as linked to 'limit situations'. I outlined Freire's concept of limit situations in more detail in the previous chapter. Using the lens of limit situations to analyse the data, I showed, in theme one above, that the respondents faced contradictions and constraints in their work, and yet were able to still maintain a commitment to critical, transformative education.

In the next section the interview data shows that the contradictions of neo-liberal higher education opens up spaces where it is more likely that academic activists can make links between their academic work and their activism. Although the wider economic and political system provides the context for activism, this is not enough in itself. It requires the agency of academics (with students and other workers) to intervene in ways that attempt to transform and move beyond those contradictions. Despite the quotations used from the interview data tending to present a snap-shot or static examples of the respondents' activism, taken as a whole and analysed through a wider, relational, lens, it is possible to see the respondents' activism in the context of social movements such as fees campaigns; Occupy; the Scottish referendum and the deliberate prior cultivation of networks and alliances.

### **Sub-theme: linking academia and activism – the role of the public intellectual**

The relationship between academia and activism is complex (Barker & Cox, 2002). They are not two static categories but exist in a dialectical relationship in a world that does not move forward in a neat, linear way (Gould, 1996; Wrigley, 2019) and that is punctuated by crises (Harvey, 2015). In the next section, the data reveals how the respondents negotiated the contradictions of higher education to enact their activism as public intellectuals (Apple, 2011; Giroux, 2002, 2012)

Although only four of the interviewees specifically mentioned the term 'public intellectual' (Eurig, Matthew, Andy and Gurnam), all of the interviewees described

aspects of their academic and activist roles that would define them as public intellectuals. Giroux (2006) has argued that educators should see themselves as 'public intellectuals' who provide "an indispensable service to the nation" (p64). He has written (Giroux, 2012) in support of the Chicago teachers' strike in 2012. In his view, the teachers in their industrial action were assuming the role of engaged intellectuals and fighting for schools as democratic public spheres. Giroux (2006) cites as examples of public, engaged intellectuals, the late Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Zygmunt Bauman, Howard Zinn, Pierre Bourdieu and Arundati Roy, all of whom enter into sustained critique of existing social and political conditions. This involves having a responsibility to fight injustice and 'make truth prevail in the world' (Giroux, 2012, p92). Giroux appears to be adopting a similar role to that envisaged by Edward Thompson (Bailey, 2011). Thompson publicly criticised Warwick University's link with industry, which in Bailey's view constituted a "moral obligation to speak the truth" (p92).

Bailey (2011) argues, in a similar way to Giroux, that higher education should strike a fine balance between the acquisition of objective knowledge and helping students to fulfil their own potential for the greater good. The interview data presented a rich and detailed picture of the ways in which the respondents worked with organisations beyond the university. Giroux's (2002; 2006) focus on the intervention of academic intellectuals to 'address new forms of citizenship and civic education' (2002, p5), reflects not just the position of autonomous, independent citizens in a pluralist democracy, but of academics who, he argues, should regard themselves as public intellectuals with civic duties and obligations. In this role, academics should address issues of 'civic engagement' and 'expand the critical capacities of students' (p64). For Giroux (2012) educators can, for example, expand the critical vision of students who, as informed citizens are empowered to become social agents and critical intellectuals. He does not however, speak only to the individual's sense of ethics and their contribution to the moral life of the nation. His vision of an alternative society is linked to the ability to: "...collectively address material inequalities involving resources, accessibility and power in both education and the broader global society." (Giroux, 2006, p66).

However, Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) suggest that the required professionalism of academics to be neutral in their role as experts will tend to see

the pursuit of knowledge as being set apart from that of the wider society. Couldry (2011, p9) suggests that the privilege that academics hold, is derived from their “...relative influence over symbolic production.” Interestingly, he feels that this situation militates against solidarity work and alliances with other workers who are facing similar neo-liberal transformations such as health workers, teachers, and other professionals. Zinn (1997, np) argues that the academic world has its own ‘culture of conformity’ and of the need to be professional. In his view: “Being professional means not being committed. It’s unprofessional to be a teacher who goes out on a picket line or who invites students out on a picket line”

For critical educators, this view highlights a contradiction within the academy between the idea of the objective, neutral scholar and the committed, engaged academic (Freedman, 2017). Some critical educators (this is discussed further in the section on splitting, below) might respond to this contradiction by maintaining a distance between their academic and activist selves. Indeed, this is a tactic that is advocated by Flood, Martin & Dreher (2013) as one way to mitigate the obstacles that activists face in higher education.

### *Community groups and wider campaigns*

When the respondents discussed their academic work beyond the university, they pointed to engagement with a variety of community groups and wider campaigns and also links they had made with trades unions:

So that’s a connection between being an academic and a kind of movement outside as it were. So that’s one way in which they would be enacted. Again it’s very important you have the networks outside, the contacts because if you don’t have those, if you’re not interested in having those then you can’t do all that kind of stuff. So the academic inside the institution has got to be thinking what’s going on outside and be involved in various kinds of activities outside. So I do that; I’m connected with groups that, not necessarily regularly, but would support their events and go along to their community conferences against poverty and that kind of thing. So you’re supporting them and then you keep those contacts and they will come and support stuff going on here. (Jim)

Doing this sort of thing, facilitating intellectual academic discussion about political issues I think is important. I also work on that through a group called Leeds Taking Soundings where we put on regular meetings using the University space. I can book it for free at the moment for a regular discussion on political issues for the Left. Now, in Taking Soundings, I work with other people and it’s, I’m facing social democrats when I’m doing this and you know

we have a discussion and they want more social democratic things but it's still work worthwhile doing. (Matthew)

It was a great event. We had Stop the War and their constituency. Then we had our guy; the Martin Luther King Peace Committee provided a human side to the story and it worked very well. We also have a Peace Studies day with Benfield School. We get speakers, activists, academics from round the country and then they'll bring the kids from the school and we do workshops, plenaries called 'Making a difference in a Violent World – how can young people make a difference'. (Nick)

I'm working with a community organisation about half a mile that way at the moment and they do; they're basically a creative writing group for charity, but it's creative writing as a means of social and personal development and they've had a project running about a sailor from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Britain and he was involved in national level labour organisations...and they've had a project running where a number of people, community of people creating an archive with all of his left over writings. So, this kind of really interesting character and they've been doing that kind of thing and I'm trying to develop and network there; carry on doing engaged work with the city. (Andy)

I organised an event with some practitioners which was about political education in Scotland, where I was talking about understanding what political education means and then we had three practitioners talking about their involvement in political education and the idea there was during the referendum in Scotland there were many things that were happening. Some of it was rooted in movements, the Radical Independence Campaign; Women's Campaign for Independence. There were lots of other kinds of special groupings that wanted to develop their case within the big referendum debate. And I was interested in what educators were doing, political, in political education so I did a bit of research around that and we held an event...it's focussed on practitioners in community education. (Jim)

Did a session on popular education at the Radical Independence Campaign rally after the referendum and there were more than 3,000 people at that event. (Liam)

But also as an academic I've been involved...three times with academic seminar blockades. So you're taking direct action to block, to directly affect as part of a wider protest. But you do seminars, so it's an academic activity as part of the blockade practice...the last one was at Faslane. (Lucy)

The respondents' links to community groups were made at a number of levels as circumstances allowed. For example, activists were invited onto campus as part of educational events or programmes. In other examples, the respondents moved beyond the university to connect with wider networks of activists. These links were consistent with their view of their role as academic activists, indeed, Jim in the first

quote is emphatic that the academic inside the university has got to be aware and involved in what is happening outside. The areas of activist work in which the respondents were involved could be seen as examples of Freire's generative themes, discussed in the previous chapter, where particular issues or questions generated critical analysis and research and activism. Wider themes mentioned here included work around poverty, the anti-war movement, anti-racism and Scottish independence.

What is also clear from the responses is the way in which it was possible to develop spaces for activist work in the neoliberal university with its increased commodification (Radice, 2013) and prescriptive monitoring regimes (Clegg, 2014; Ball, 2012) outlined in chapter 2. I have argued in 7.3.1 above that to view these tensions and limitations as Freirean limit situations can explain why there exists the potential for critique and challenge to the existing system. Unlike theories of liberal pluralism and postmodernism outlined in chapter 3, which focus on consciousness and the individual subject, this research would see the activist work in this section as relational and involving others in a praxis approach with the potential to generalise the issues that are raised in the context of neoliberalism.

### *Links to Trades Unions*

The majority of the respondents mentioned their membership of, and involvement with, the higher education union UCU. A number of the respondents were union 'reps' in their workplace (Sean, Matthew, Eurig and Rachel). A general point that emerged in the interviews regarding trades unions was of their lack of political power and the union's perceived general weakness in leading and directing disputes [9]. Both Sarah and Cassie had been directly involved in disputes with their universities over course closures and redundancies and were critical of the union's ability to respond to these issues.

They are extraordinarily weak, they are very de-politicised, massively de-politicised even in times of trouble, they're de-politicised. We just had a long struggle...the union being in solidarity with us and when push came to shove, they were more like liaisons (sic) and more on the side of management I think. (Sarah)

We kept trying to make stronger links with the Students' Union but they've been consistently uninterested in making links. They're a strange Student Union here. They're extremely a-political and it's only recently when we had a

ban on a debate on Free Education that was supposed to take place at Teesside, and that was stopped apparently by the Student Union themselves because of Charity Commission laws. When we've looked into it, it turns out that they have been under some pressure from university management but have come up with this ridiculous statement from the Students' Union saying that they don't believe that free education is plausible or possible and therefore they are not happy to host debates on it. (Rachel)

UCU along with other trades unions have a role, I think, in education. UCU Scotland, along with EIS in particular, have run a series of conferences around the future of higher education; higher education governance; the democratic intellect of the kind of idea from George Davis, the idea of the democratic intellect being a particularly Scottish approach to higher education which has dried out in the 19th century but trying to re-invent what democratic intellect means for today, these kinds of ideas. (Eurig)

I'm a union rep. at College and it's interesting because in some ways the students are a lot more politically courageous than the staff. The staff at College, like most workplaces, a lot of FE unions have been battered, so we find that morale amongst the staff, particularly amongst union members is quite low. They're quite reluctant to get involved in any sort of confrontation with management. Whereas the students are the opposite; they're quite willing to get involved. They take an interest. When staff do get involved in disciplinary situations, the students take an interest. (Sean)

These responses showed a range of opinions about the role of trades unions in higher education and the potential, or otherwise, for academic activists to work with them in an educational capacity and as part of wider social movements to challenge a range of issues that are wider than just a defence of higher education.

Post-industrial society theories outlined at section 3.4, posited a gradually declining trades union movement as a result of the underlying structural changes to capitalism and the rise of the knowledge economy. However, the picture is more complex. Trades unions are not static organisations playing a specific and bounded role within civil society. Rather, like universities, they have a complex and contradictory role within neo-liberal capitalism. For example, Darlington (2014) suggests that trades unions can work to contain their members opposition to economic crises and to act as a brake on organisation and political action. Brady (2019) points to the 1970s 'Social Contract' between the unions and the Labour government which situated the unions as partners of government supporting economic 'reforms' which involved holding down wages.

However, such a strategy is never straightforward or automatic. Barker (2010) argues that, as with all social movements, trades unions develop dialectically. Given the interplay of objective material conditions and inner organisation and strategy, trades unions can potentially make significant changes at certain times as part of a process of social change. This suggests that academic activists with a less positive view of trades union activity in specific situations in higher education, could still acknowledge their wider, organisational capacity and ability to link struggles in higher education with other workers subjected to the same neoliberal constraints on jobs and living standards. In Darlington's (2014) view, trades union involvement in resistance and struggle is returning and he links this to the rise of the Occupy and other anti-capitalist movements particularly since the economic crash of 2007/8.

### **Sub-theme: splitting activism and academic work**

The literature review and the interview data show the belief that academia and activism constitute different worlds. Various reasons are given for this. For example, Flood, Martin & Dreher (2013) offer the 'separate worlds' strategy when discussing academic activism as a way of avoiding the demands of operating within the neo-liberal academy. Neale (2008) explains that he consciously splits his academic work and his activist work in terms of his writing. This is because of the difficulty of writing for what he sees as two different audiences, the different timescales involved and the different objects of study and research. Eagleton (2008) interestingly refers to the divide between being an academic and a political actor, by which he means someone involved in politics and political campaigns outside of academia. So too does Allman (1999) despite her views on internal relations which were discussed earlier. She suggests that formal education is one element of struggle for a transformed society and political work is another important area.

A similar argument is advanced by Mitchell (2008) who argues that both activism and academic work are part of a 'revolutionary praxis'. He points to his intellectual work and bureaucratic work within the academy, although not part of direct engagement, as part of activism. He explains that his intellectual work is preparing the groundwork for future struggles when the political climate beyond the university is more conducive to activism. This view assumes, however, a fairly straightforward, linear view of societal progression, not one that is, as is argued in this research, inherently

unstable and dialectical (McNally, 2009; Harvey, 2014; Freedman, 2017) where crises are endemic. Mitchell's (2008) deterministic view also downplays the agency of social individuals to intervene at strategic moments in political activity. A further problem with this view is that in cutting off intellectual work from practical struggles, ideas can become detached and reside in the academy as bodies of knowledge. The opportunity to, as Neale (2008) suggests, review, assess and correct knowledge relative to activity beyond the academy is lost.

Whatever can be said of the links between academia and activism, they are complex and dialectical and can take a number of different forms. The respondents mentioned their political activity and affiliations outside of their academic work [10] but this did not define the limits of their involvement with politics. They were academic activists and spoke of the ways that they were able to link academic and activist work within and beyond the university.

The way I think about it, there's lots of different routes through the different links between teaching and activism. So there are those who see their activism as teaching and aren't engaged particularly with groups outside the Academy; but their job is to open up those ideas through a more engaged side of things with people taking students out to particular groups or inviting people from outside in; through to those who do research and use that as their teaching. (Andy)

Yes of course you can be an activist and an academic. From a feminist perspective we are both/and at the same time. (Lucy)

Some people can separate the issues from the intellect but other people can't and...we're actually dealing with education as a theoretical concept as well as actually practicing it. That's where I think it's so strange people can separate it. And sometimes I think maybe I should just write about activism outside of HE and separate my work from that, but you still couldn't do it, I think. (Cassie)

My role as an academic and an activist? As I say...you can't disconnect them...and it was very clear that activism and education were two parts of the same thing in that our job was to use education to make activism more effective by deepening understanding. (Eurig)

I think because they both began at the same time, my passion for academia and my activism, it's very difficult for me to separate them. I think both of them are pretty essential to who I am. (Rachel)

I do what I can relatively speaking because I am an activist outside of academia. My activism within academia is much more than the average academic but it's much less than it could be really...If I had a permanent job, I



would feel much more comfortable about speaking out and there's always some battle that we're facing. (Fayzi)

I think the Social Science Centre and my work in the university are probably less connected directly with other social movements, other kinds of work I'm involved in. And there's also more of a tension between some quite general work I'm involved in around gender and feminism and university where there's still difficulties. (Sarah)

These responses highlighted the close links between academic and activist, rather than a focus on splitting of these roles. The responses of those interviewed showed that their activist work outside of the university, linked to and informed their work as academics. For example, Sean and his involvement with students on a trades union demonstration; Nina meeting her students at an anti-fees demonstration; Nick inviting interested students to be part of the audience at Stop the War meetings off campus; Fayzi inviting students to Stop the War meetings as speakers from the campus occupation, to enable the possibility of the making links between students and other activists. The ways in which this happened showed that the majority of the respondents didn't 'split' their activist selves and academic selves (although some, particularly the younger 'early career' academics were conscious of their precarious role in the university and were perhaps more cautious of explicit activism because of this). Overall, the findings show a rich experience of academic activism, with a range of overlapping approaches used by the respondents to work within and beyond the academy.

The context of neoliberal higher education examined in chapter 2, did present tensions and difficulties for the respondents which I characterised in section 7.3.1 as limit situations. The increasingly marketized and commodified university (Holborow, 2015; Freedman, 2017) with its focus on human capital presents particular challenges for academic activists. Yet, the respondents used their critical approach and activism to address the constraints of the university. The diverse ways in which they enacted a critical approach all appeared to reflect the view of Allman and Wallis, (1997) that students can be successful in education and yet still be informed by criticality. This can be achieved in education by 'making problematic the very process itself and the contradictions it displays'. (p42). The concept of contradiction is central to a Freirean critical perspective but one that is not found or is downplayed in left liberal and postmodern perspectives in the literature. The pluralism of writers such as Giddens (1996, 200) and Beck (2000) reflects the view of students as

making individual life choices and adopting personal strategies. These theories do not offer any transformative possibilities on a wider structural level.

Freirean critical pedagogy with its focus on the development of critical consciousness as a process, rather than the fragmented view of learning in higher education. This idea links critical pedagogy and the focus on developing a critical consciousness with activism in attempts to engage with the world to transform it. The potential for societal transformation is at the heart of this view which can be enacted within, indeed, because of, the limit situations that the respondents found themselves in in the neo-liberal university. It is also interesting to note that the splitting of thought and activity (Allman and Wallis, 1997) in mainstream thinking has a parallel with the split between the economic and the political as separate domains in liberal democracy.

I found the concept of the social individual useful in the analysis of the responses in this section. This concept underpins Freire's praxis methodology and was discussed in more detail in chapter 4. The social individual – an ensemble of social relations – is in a dialectical relationship with the world, acting on it and being changed in the process. In this way, human thought and action is inter-related and cannot be set apart. This theory is closely linked to Barker's (2010) view of the emotional as thoroughly social. He explains that emotions are not permanent or stable but are open and capable of being transformed. Not at the level of individual psychology, which is pervasive in higher education in the individual subject, but by seeing the emotional as a feature of practical relationships between people in the material world.

### **Sub-theme: Moments and activism**

In contrast to Mitchell's (2008) linear view of political development (mentioned above), Freire (1970) advances a dialectical approach where practical activity is part of a process of 'becoming' and where people interact with the world to change it as they are changed by it. This relational philosophy situates social individuals in a contradictory and crisis prone world, where limit situations embody the idea of potentiality and transformation. Gramsci's (Thomas, 2007; Freedman, 2014) concept of conjuncture refers to temporal moments when different economic, political, philosophical forces combine and where, depending on the balance of wider class

forces, new forms of political activity and transformation are possible. Freedman (2014) uses this Gramscian concept to characterise moments when social and political tensions become exaggerated, such as austerity measures, increases in poverty, chronic lack of social housing and homelessness. It is at such moments that there is a greater potential, but not inevitability, for transformative activities to become clearer and more meaningful; when it is more possible to challenge prevailing ideas and consider alternatives.

Another definition of moment is found in Lukacs (2000, p55):

A situation whose duration may be longer or shorter but which is distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process and demands that a decision be taken over the future direction of the process. That is to say, the tendencies reach a sort of zenith and depending on how the situation concerned is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the 'moment'.

In such a situation, the underlying contradictions of capitalism become more visible and, once made visible, can offer opportunities to consider new forms of action. Lukacs' quote also refers to ideas of strategy (decisions need to be taken) and agency (as part of the 'essential tendencies' of the process). In Barker, Johnson and Lavallette's view (2001), all decisions involve strategizing and many of the respondents talked of the strategic decisions they made in terms of the interaction of the time available to them and the current, wider, political context. Their activism and teaching would change focus as circumstances changed. Of course, many of these decisions and strategies were pragmatic rather than strategic in terms of wider political transformation, but the responses showed a clear link between the limit situations as they existed and came together within and outside the academy.

At the time of the research interviews, the government was a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats, austerity was a political theme, the Scottish referendum campaign was taking place; and the introduction of students' fees gave rise to demonstrations and occupations in universities and colleges.

Liam, for example, focussed on the strategic 'moment' in terms of the focus for academic activism or as he saw it academic work or activist work, whichever is relevant:

Yes, they're both different areas of the same thing, kind of political commitment/activism and in my own personal case that varies on the

moment; where I feel it's more productive for me to put my limited time and talents. At times I've done a lot more outside the University and at times I've done a lot more inside the University. I think probably it's a kind of balance between the two. Even where it happened outside the University will depend. It's a very popular education thing. In Latin America they talk about 'conjunctural analysis'...it's basically analysing the political moment; just analyse what's going on and see where it's best to commit your energies. (Liam)

I think 2010 was a kind of flashpoint in many ways. It set the agenda for what's happening now. So yeah, I think it was going on those protests mainly and seeing what was happening and then the fee increases in December of that year. (Nina)

And I became active...then the coalition government was elected and I became very active in the anti-fees movement when the fees were trebled. I'd been active in the original fees movement but started speaking at public meetings and joining anti-cuts groups and got involved with the People's Assembly, Coalition of Resistance before that, all of those kinds of things. And then I joined the Green Party and became active on their behalf. (Rachel)

And in 2013 we decided that we'd had enough then and that particular protest movement, from my perspective, the particular protest movement then had gone and that we should try and take what we learnt and what we've given to the Free University and into our everyday lives. For me that meant taking it into my work at Liverpool Hope University as a Drama teacher. (Gary)

You can go into the city, where I do most of my historical research...to say well what can the power that my title has, actually do to stop injustice happening within the city or whatever; or speaking at public meetings. So there's all these kinds of varieties of activism in terms of what you can actually do and what you are best placed to do; what strategically is the most effective thing; which is an interesting debate to have. (Andy)

You know I think that the number of students who've been interested in radical causes and participated in movements, it's always been a minority; the late 60s it was a minority and it's still a minority. And there were times when that minority looks bigger, is bigger and is livelier and around 2010 it was as well. I could easily image that coming back. I mean one of the things is the enthusiasm for Corbyn. It's noticeable in the young people signing up for that. I think that must have an impact on the next few years of teaching, of education. So I would generally expect the radical minority to be larger than it has been but we'll see. (Matthew)

The respondents, as academic activists, saw their work in terms of the limit situations of both the academy and wider society. Unlike much critical pedagogy literature, where the focus is often on classroom or institutional policy issues which are severed from wider economic and political contexts, the respondents discussed

and critically analysed their work in in the context of the political situation at the time. Writers such as Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott (1986) and Hatcher (2007) are critical of those critical academics who engage in activism but lack a wider sense of strategic vision. Whether decisions regarding links with campaigns and social movement organisations in this research could be seen as pragmatic or strategic can only be considered relationally, in praxis. This is because, as Barker (2010) suggests, all social movements develop in relation to other groups and movements often involving complex networks of organisations with different histories and traditions. Activists become part of the dialectical development of movements and strategy becomes a key factor in decision on the future direction of activity. Some of the issues discussed in the interviews, such as the student occupations, had a spontaneous element but even then, the respondents who supported these events were able to discuss this in wider contexts (in their trades union or in the classroom).

#### **7.4 Summary and conclusion**

Contrary to Castree's (2000) view of the: "...relative detachment of academia from the ordinary public..." this research found academics in various ways responding to Giroux's (2002) argument that academics should join with other cultural workers and trades unionists to defend the university as a public good. Giroux (2002; 2004, p22) argues that public intellectuals need to "expand the meaning and purpose" of the university, re-think the nature of the public and "enter into public conversations."

Explicitly or implicitly, respondents saw the conditions they face in the university as contradictory and as offering at least the opportunity to challenge or subvert particular constraints. Even a worsening of their academic environment allowed for continued work as an academic activist.

These findings confirm research on the challenges and contradictions within higher education (Raduntz, 2004; Kumar, 2010; Apple, 2011; Gill, 2017; Ball, 2012) but suggests that it is the contradictions and emerging hidden tensions that allow a greater insight into the relationship between the academy and the wider system. What happens outside the university influences what happens inside the neo-liberal university in terms of how critical pedagogues can work within higher education and remain committed to social justice and change. In this respect the key issues mentioned should be seen as relational and this has implications for linking the

issues that the respondents raised within the university, and the potential for change, with their role as activists beyond the university. All of the respondents, as academic activists, were involved in a process of transformation and their responses showed their commitment, in various ways – within and beyond the classroom, to intervene in campaigns and social movements to challenge social injustice.

The respondents' involvement in particular campaigns and their own critical approach reflected different political views and experiences. As section 1. 2 noted, critical pedagogy contains many different perspectives (Macrine, 2009; Malott, 2012), some of which link closely with left liberal and liberal pluralist views of social change, some with autonomist views and some with variants of postmodernism and identity politics. Malott (2012), for example, points to the rise of identity theory in the academy as a potential force for the fragmentation of activity rather than contributing to wider social movements. Hatcher (2007) would be critical of those activists who do not appear to have a wider strategic vision beyond immediate campaigns. These debates and critical discussions will continue but what all would agree is important is a willingness for academic activists to unite with other campaigns and workers within, and beyond, the university to strengthen opposition to the increasing marketization of higher education (Foley *et al* (2015); Malott, 2012). Issues of strategy and future developments can only be answered, in praxis, at the level of continued political and educational activism, it cannot be a theoretical exercise.

This chapter and the preceding chapter have critically considered the possibility of higher education as a site for the development of resistance and social transformation. Central to this question is the role of academic activists and the strategies they use to link their teaching and research within and beyond the university. The final chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of the findings set out here and suggests that concepts of crisis and contradiction as part of neoliberal capitalism set the limits and potentials for resistance to social injustice.

## Footnotes

[1] It has been difficult to separate out the emergent themes in this research (using the thematic analysis outlined in chapter 4). In part, this reflects the interviewees' responses to the broad interview questions, moving between the questions, making links and analysing their approaches as well as offering rich descriptions of their roles as academic activists. It is also consistent with the research approach, outlined in chapter 4, which is underpinned by a relational ontology suggesting linkages and relationships at all levels in the interview data.

[2] This research is about academic activism and therefore it is worth noting that two of the respondents Jim and Nina began by questioning what being an activist meant. Nina suggested that:

“I don’t really like using the word ‘activist’ particularly I mean the emphasis is, you know, a casual shorthand for something. I think it implies other people aren’t doing anything which I don’t think is true. So, yeah, it just seems to me to be consistent, if you have politics, I mean, we were all against the fee increase so it just seems to me to be politically consistent that you would defend people who were arrested and punished and so on...”

Jim was keen to distinguish, in terms of his own experience, between ‘street activism’ and activism as radical politics that are present in critical education:

“...the idea of activism for me has a kind of particular connotation and it is much more sort of ‘on the streets’ kind of thing which is probably a narrow way of thinking about it and although I go on Trades Union strikes and actions and demonstrations and so on, either connected through work, or just generally, I wouldn’t say that I’m an activist in that mould in particular. But if you said something like activism as a kind of radical politics that you would enact in your daily professional life and outside of that, then ...I would say I fulfil that that sense of being an activist because I work in the area of community education and community education is training people working in communities and we have a very kind of political analysis of the nature of that work.”

[3] The UK Prevent Strategy is controversial in its professed aims. Elshimi (2017) suggests that it is not so much about countering terrorism and de-radicalisation, as an attempt to construct a so-called ‘British identity’. As such it is bound up with wider discourses such as subjectivity, identity and citizenship. Carpenter’s (2015) concept of the ‘local’ would offer a way of seeing the classroom in a wider socio-political and dialectical context. Drawing on the Marxist concept of ‘fetish’ (Marx, 1867/1992), Carpenter refers to the ‘local trap’ where ‘local’ becomes fixed in ‘space’, ‘time’, and ‘identity’ rather than “remaining as process and relations that shift in space and time...The local is not just the local; it is also the global. It is the site where global relations become enacted in specific ways, organised through local social relations”. (p139, italics in the original). Following Carpenter’s analysis, legal requirements on universities such as those made by the Border Agency and the Prevent strategy could be seen as reflecting power inequalities at the global level. For Carpenter, the link to critical education is her view that:

“We live as always as present in our everyday relations and on this terrain our thinking and being are inseparable...the question for critical educators is *how we come to know* the constitution of those relations and how we understand our localities in relation to others.” (p141, italics in the original).

[4] The UK Border Agency (UKBA) was established in April 2008 but was superseded by UK Visas and Immigration; UK Border Force and Immigration Enforcement in April 2013. The agency was criticised for the high levels of complaints levelled against it mainly from asylum and immigration applicants. It was also criticised for its inconsistent management of student visas under Tier 4 of the Points-Based System and the fact that the ethos of universities are impacted by the devolution of responsibilities for monitoring students from UKBA to universities themselves (Jenkins, 2014; Dear, 2018).

[5] A recent report from the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) (2020) notes the increasing casualisation of the higher education workforce. The report stated that that one-third of academics in UK universities are employed on fixed-term contracts. This rose to

almost half for teaching only staff and over two-thirds for research staff. The report refers to data from HESA 2017-18 showing that 30% of institutions use zero-hours contracts.

[6] All of the respondents in this research teach and research within the fields of humanities and social sciences. This was an unintentional aspect of the research design and no doubt arose out of the 'snowball' aspect of the sampling procedure. However, this situation raises interesting questions about disciplinarity in terms of critical education. The critical pedagogy literature is not focused only on the social sciences and humanities. For example, radical perspectives and views on critical education are part of the content of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics* (2016) which states that: "the aim of the journal is to foster a transformative global academic space in mathematics that embraces critical research, emancipatory pedagogy and scholarship of engagement in urban communities". Skourdoulis' (2016) research offers a Marxist perspective on the history of science; and Werskey (2006) has written on the history of the radical science movement in Great Britain.

[7] Critical pedagogy does not necessarily preclude teaching 'techniques' Freire (Freire and Shor, 1989) describes how he used twelve hours of seminar time with a graduate class to explain a process of how to read a text critically.

[8] Swain (2011) suggests that, far from appearing out of nowhere (Aitchison, 2012) the mass student movement that emerged in 2010, involving demonstrations and occupations, was prefigured by the anti-capitalist movements from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, the student Occupy movement should be seen in the wider political context of the neo-liberal restructuring of higher education where the nature of university education has changed and is increasingly harnessed to international competitiveness and where students have become

Within the literature on Student Occupy, the campus as a space for learning and activity is seen as significant. For example, in the US, Welland, Guzman & O'Meara (2013) view the campus as an environment amenable to protest as students are experimenting with new ways of living. Similarly, Ibrahim (2011) suggests that the political dynamics of the protests should focus not simply on cuts to education and the lifting of the cap on tuition fees, but also on the campus itself, as it is conducive to activity such as occupations because of the network-like structure of students' unions and political societies. However, Swain (2011) is less optimistic about the role of students' unions and political societies. He suggests that Labour students' leadership and reluctance to challenge New Labour acted as a barrier to building opposition within the student movement, although he acknowledges the key role played by the Students' Union in November 2010. Also, the conservative trend in students' unions led to them seeing themselves as providing services to students and, the legal changes since the 1970s onwards resulted in students' unions becoming registered charities, a move which Swain believes has restricted their role.

Aitchison (2012, p44) has argued that the campus occupations: "... involve the creation of autonomous social and political spaces to re-imagine the role of education along more democratic, egalitarian lines. In his view the horizontal structure and loose networked organisation that generally characterised the campus occupations was a positive feature as it pre-figured a different way of organising society and of learning. However, McCarthy (2012) is critical of Student Occupy in the US as its loose network failed to provide a clear set of demands and targets necessary for a national campaign. In the UK, Robinson (2013) offers similar criticisms of Student Occupy and outlines the limitations of the network form. This includes that "...the absence of formal structure does not equate to the presence of democracy and accountability" (p437). Instead, the use of social media can give the appearance of democratic discussion even when only a self-selecting group is involved. To counter this, Robinson suggests the importance of accountability to wider forums and ensuring a wide input of ideas to debates.



Hopkins, Todd and Newcastle Occupation (2013) explain that the claiming of space in the University was more than a place to meet to plan strategy but was also about constructing an alternative community and was bound up with a vision of what a future society should look like. According to Neary & Amsler (2012) the opening up of a space in which relationships and learning can be re-configured was one of the most positive aspects of Student Occupy. They refer to the projects in which they are involved which attempt to re-envision what critical education is and how those involved can engage in “critical practical reflexivity” (Neary & Amsler, 2012, p128) regarding the present and the future.

[9] Trades Union membership in Britain has declined significantly since the late 1970s from around 12 million in 1979 to around 6 million today. Terry (2003) links this decline in membership - alongside a concomitant weakening of union power - to a re-structuring of international capital that weakened the bargaining power of unions and secondly, the rise of managerialism in terms of organisation and the nature of work which he claims has impacted the role of trades unions. Brady (2019) also suggests that Labour’s Social Contract with unions in the 1970s; the employment ‘reforms’ of Thatcherism in the 1980s and mass unemployment and de-industrialisation in the 1980s have contributed to the decline of the trades union movement.

[10] All of the interviewees were politically active outside of their academic role (as members of political parties and organisations; as members of social movements and as trades unionists). Interviewees mentioned their role in trades unions, often as UCU ‘reps’ in their institution (Sean; Rachel; Eurig; Matthew; Gary; Jim). They spoke also of their involvement in political parties. Rachel and Eurig mentioned their activity within the Green Party. Sean is a member of a radical left organisation Counterfire. Matthew is involved in Left Unity. Nick and Feyzi are active members of Stop the War Coalition. Liam explained his political closeness to the Scottish Socialist Party.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion and concluding comments**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This study investigated academic activism in higher education in the UK, which is an under-researched and marginalised area in education. The research focused on an education sector in crisis. It is argued that the crisis in UK higher education should be analysed as part of a wider systemic crisis of capitalism as this has implications for socially just transformation and the role of academic activists as part of this transformation. Specifically, I have argued the need to view higher education as part of a totality and of a system that is fraught with inherent contradictions. Within this context the role of academic activists in this study was viewed and analysed through the construction and meaning of the social individual. It is this analysis that is best able to explain issues of identity as opposed to Foucauldian analyses that are prevalent in the literature. From this relational perspective, the idea of the 'social individual' as opposed to the atomised individual under capitalist relations of production, offers a way of viewing the respondents as capable of combining academia and activism in their own teaching and research in such a way that they can move beyond the contradictions and limit situations that they encountered in their work.

The research interviewed 17 academics who self-identified as academic activists to investigate and analyse activism in the context of UK higher education. This research used the analytical concepts of limit situations and contradictions to analyse the interview data. Higher education plays a contradictory role in neoliberal society as both a progressive and a conservative force (Ollman, 1999; Raduntz, 2004; Freedman, 2017). The literature has highlighted some key contradictions in higher education. For example, the contradiction between:

- education as reproducing capitalist social and material relations against education to maintain consent by appeals to meritocracy and individualism (Au, 2009)
- the public-private divide where higher education institutions are run on business models but position themselves as for the public good (Hill, 2004; 2014; Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Raduntz, 2004)

- the idea of academic autonomy and the professionalism of the academic and limit situations such as precarity and the demands of increased managerialism (Gill, 2009)

In this context, contradictions emerged in the way that the respondents were able to enact their radical practice in the academy. I analysed these constraints through the lens of limit situations to argue that the constraints and opportunities seen by the respondents within the academy should be seen as complex interconnections not separate categories. Secondly, that limit situations embody contradictions (Ollman, 2015) that are dynamic and which give rise to the possibility of challenge and resistance. The research set out to answer two broad research questions: First; to what extent can higher education be a site of resistance and transformation? Second; In what ways can academia and activism be linked within and beyond the university? These research questions are also interconnected. Attempting to answer the question on the extent to which higher education can be a site of transformation, necessitates a consideration of the *potential* for academic activism, in its various forms, and how these can be realised.

This chapter is set out in the following way: The first section summarises the key findings of the research. The second section revisits the concept of transformation in light of the findings and raises two related issues, those of measurement and feasibility. The third section considers the findings in more detail in the context of previous research on academic activists. The fourth section considers some implications of a Freirean approach for critical educators in higher education. The final section considers the limitations of the research, ideas for future research and outlines the contributions of the research.

## **8.2 Summary of the findings**

There are four key research findings. The first was an overall finding. It is that critical education and academic activism are taking place in higher education in a variety of ways. Although this may sound obvious, in the context of economic austerity and general pessimism (Lawless, 2012), this finding is significant. It challenges those writers who point to a quiescence or lack of commitment among academics (Giroux, 2006; Couldry, 2011; Radice, 2013; Martin, 2016). By contrast, the respondents in

this research were engaged academics (Freedman, 2017) who saw activism, in different forms, as central to their work.

Some writers are sceptical of the view that activism has a role to play in the academy (Pinar, 2009). Some (Harris, 1994; Blacker, 2014; McGovern, 2016) appear to assume that capitalist ideology is too entrenched for critical educators to make much difference. By contrast, other writers (Banfield, 2003; Martin, 2009) point to the contradictions of higher education which allow for challenge and contestation. Banfield (2003) argues that as knowledge is a social product, and education institutions are sites of contestation and struggle, universities have to work hard at presenting a distorted, normalising view of reality and equality. In addition, the position of universities as central to the knowledge economy, makes the possibility of challenge and disruption more likely (Martin, 2009).

The second finding was that the respondents appeared to hold the contradictory view that although conditions in the academy were worsening, they still felt that it was possible to enact critical education and activism. I argue that an explanation for this can be found using Freire's (1970) concept of limit situations which sees problems or tensions as contradictions and which have a structural basis and which contain the potential to be transformed (Freire, 1970). I also use Freire's concept of a pedagogy of hope (1985) to characterise the respondents' continued commitment to academic activism. Even those respondents who took a more horizontalist approach and were supportive of, or worked within, formal education structures beyond the academy (Sarah; Cassie; Andy and Gary), continued to engage with, and develop, opportunities for activist work. This offers a counter-narrative to research which often reflects a one-sided view of the negative circumstances of higher education.

Third, the respondents created activist environments that relationally linked the classroom space with activity beyond the academy. These links were enacted using disciplinary content, strategies to develop a critical consciousness among students and offering alternative perspectives of the issues in the curriculum. The findings did not support a reductive contrast between theory and practice that is often found in the critical pedagogy literature. The findings also offer a counter-view to much research that focuses *only* on classroom pedagogy or that appears to detach

knowledge from the social forces outside that give rise to and shape that knowledge (Lauder, Freeman-Moir & Scott, 1986).

The fourth finding is that the respondents attempted to take strategic decisions as to where to focus their activist attention, for example, by supporting existing struggles such as student occupations or developing links with campaigns and community groups beyond the academy. This is significant because it points to a dialectical relationship between the respondents' academic-activism, a sense of 'reading the world' (Freire, 1970) and intervening critically in events around them.

The next section looks in more detail about the transformative nature of education and its potential for social change.

### **8.3 The transformative potential of higher education**

The idea that higher education - or education more generally - can have a transformative impact on society is central to the literature on critical pedagogy. Brookfield (2003) argues that critical pedagogy has an: "...explicitly transformative dimension" (p141) because it is directed at analysing and unmasking the workings of the wider socio-economic system that is unequal and exploitative. However, Brookfield (2003) also makes the point, as do Smith, (1999) and Holborow (2015), that terms such as 'transformation' are reified within a system of capitalist social relations and can appear to have an independent and static meaning outside of the social relations in which they are used and produced. On this view, universities can appear to be static, neutral organisations that are transformed by legislation and policy decisions.

The idea of education as being a site for transformation means looking again at the contradictory role played by education (Freedman, 2014) and its structural location under neo-liberalism (Raduntz, 2004). Harvey (2014) characterises capitalism as a transformative system, constantly re-forming and reinventing itself. Education exists, alongside other public provision such as health and housing, in this unstable and volatile system. One implication of this is that, as Freire notes (1970), education cannot be separated off from the wider totality and second, this suggests that it is in the interests of education workers to be part of social movements for fundamental transformation. Because capitalism is an unstable and volatile system, Apple (2010)

reminds critical educators that progressive movements can retreat or be co-opted and their gains can be lost. There is nothing inevitable about transformation for social justice as it involves issues that are situationally and conjuncturally specific. What needs to be considered are the structural limitations of capitalism, the contradictory aims of higher education, the contradictory role of academics and particularly critical academics within that, the dominance of capitalist common sense ideas, but with an understanding of the partiality of those ideas. This needs to be taken forward with debates about strategies for transformative education that links education inside and outside the academy and with wider political struggles.

When analysing the data in the context of transformation, two over-arching themes became visible, measurement and feasibility and they are discussed in turn below.

### **8.3.1 Measurement and its impact on higher education**

Measurement was implicit in the research question that asked *to what extent* can higher education be a site of transformation. It became clear as this research progressed just how pervasive measurement is in all areas of education. In fact, measurement is so pervasive it appears normalised and is a category that academics and staff appear not to question.

Measurement is central to commodifying knowledge, to packaging it into smaller units of knowledge. Stages and levels of learning, through which students are assessed and should progress, are measured. For academics, measurement is central to research outputs (Couldry, 2011). Universities and their provision feature in national and international league tables. Some of the respondents raised the issue of measurement in terms of the commodification of education, not only in terms of research (the REF), but the commodification of physical space. Such as the dividing up and renting out of campus space often for corporate purposes.

One finding of this research was that the majority of respondents felt that the difficulties and tensions in their academic roles were getting worse. While these worsening conditions can be quantified, this type of measurement fails to capture the complexity of a system where people create and re-create their world. It is an approach that downplays agency and contingency as it assumes stability and predictability (Wrigley, 2019). The finding in this research - that the conditions in higher education were 'worsening' (for example: increasing commodification;

increasing managerialism) linked with the finding that the respondents found opportunities or 'moments' when it became more possible to engage in activism either within or beyond the university as a way of resisting the neo-liberal direction of the academy. But the opportunities described were not automatically linked in a deterministic way and were not two points on a grid, to use McNally's (2009) term. They reflected more a 'balance of forces' view of wider power relations (Harvey, 2015) and the ability of groups or social movements to take action at any given time. Wrigley (2019, p148) suggests that reductionism in educational theory and policy can result in a loss of complexity in social processes. He points out the need to acknowledge temporal changes as not regular and predictable as: "... the multiple factors involved in a complex situation do not simply combine additively but can result in exponential or qualitative change. He also argues against theories that downplay contradictions.

Kelsh (2001) points to an ideological underpinning to measurements of progress which posit a straightforward increase or decrease situation, within the same social and political system. In her view, transformation cannot be seen as an equation that sees more possibilities outweighing limitations as evidence of measuring a way forward. This leads Kelsh (2001) to argue that change on this account is that which underwrites reformist liberal democracy.

Capitalism is a crisis ridden and contradictory system (Fine, 2006; McNally, 2009; Harvey, 2014) and McNally (2009) argues that there is an underling problem with the idea of measurement presented as static, balanced and uncontroversial in a system that is inherently unstable. He criticises mainstream economic modelling as treating space and time as reducible to mathematical equations and where complex social political and economic relations can be subject to a single scale of measurement. These measurements, or variables, can then be compared (getting better/getting worse). But these positivist concepts of measurement come up against the reality of life in a dialectical world. For Freire, education was seen as a *process*, not a commodity that was passed from educator to student in what he described as the banking model of education. Academics and students are in a dialectical relationship with each other and in terms of knowledge creation.

Even writers who work within a Freirean approach can adopt a seemingly straightforward linear model of education. For example, Shudak & Avoseh (2015) speak of poles between limit situations and critical transivity. They see Freire's critical transformative pedagogy as comprised of two poles, at one side, limit situations and at the other side critical transivity with education as the conduit connecting both. This is a gradual, linear and individualistic approach that seems to chime with mainstream thinking rather than Freire's dialectical view of the world. It has similarities with Giroux's writings (2004; 2010) that often appear to assume an enlightened view of incremental education as he links education to citizenship for a substantive democracy.

Measurement also assumes neutrality and objectivity. But as Clegg (2014, p2) argues, research projects in higher education do not take place, nor are the results disseminated, in a neutral space. On the contrary, research takes place within the contradictory dynamics of the academy particularly at institutional level. She explains that: "Making a difference inside a system inevitably involves a compromise whereby a bracket is effectively placed around the things which are not under the control of the particular actors in concrete situations."

These institutional and national level priorities make critical research particularly difficult for academics. Because of this Clegg (2014) argues for an orientation that looks beyond the academy, to larger networks and new social movements, to validate and disseminate research. In this research it is difficult to see an effective measure of activist activity beyond the dominant paradigm of current research and funding imperatives. Castree (2000) has argued that much activist work is simply not recognised by the academy. Even what is recognised cannot be effectively measured in the terms used in the mainstream because this involves measurement freighted with assumptions that are philosophically incompatible with the study of a dialectical world which requires a different conception of time and moment (Mészáros, 2008). This section has highlighted the problematic notion of measurement in a dialectical and relational world. This can serve to make invisible activist work which doesn't necessarily lend itself to measurement in institutional terms. Avis (2006) and Freedman (2014) suggests that in the wider realm of public policy there is a fixation on economic value and instrumental rationality and this will tend to result in the suppression or silencing of alternative or oppositional views.



It also means that there is no straightforward answer to the research question about the extent to which higher education can be socially transformative. The answer is open and plays out in practice in different contexts involving different political actors. The next section considers this in more detail at the possibilities for socially transformative change.

### **8.3.2 Feasibility and transformation**

Freire (1970;1985; 2005) and Gramsci (1971) are theorists for whom theory and practice are inextricably linked to form the basis of a theory of knowledge. This dialectical linking of theory and practice also necessarily implies limits to the feasibility or actuality (Bensaid, 2002; Parker, 2005) of possibilities for alternative arguments within education. For example, Freire (1985, p160) argues that “...conscientization cannot escape...from the limits historical reality imposes on it.” This was consistent with Marx’s idea that it was futile to make abstract predictions about the future (Kliminster,1979). There is no teleological end point to which actors could strive, rather historical development is seen as an endless process, where each stage of development offers different potentials for realising aims.

The idea of feasibility highlights a possibility for change that is bound by historical context. This view is antithetical to the points mentioned in the section above on transformation where ideas and research projects appeared to be ahistorical, neutral commodities arising from, but disconnected to, the wider society. This has led Clegg (2014) to argue against an evidence-based approach that is common in medical models of research (and is also prevalent in education practice) and is underpinned methodologically by positivist assumptions that look for the connections between variables as against an open relational approach as an explanatory framework. It also assumes a simple dissemination model which can be applied to a variety of situations to promote effectiveness. For Clegg (2014) what is more important for the outcomes of research is not what works but *why* does it work. This point links back to Freirean critical pedagogy where surface appearances (for example, gender differences and differences in skills and abilities) should be interrogated to make visible the underlying social relations of production that give rise to inequalities in these areas.

In addition, what is necessary is an understanding of the inter-dependence of knowledge and of the possibility that activity and involvement in social campaigns and movements can unite praxis and theory, action and reflection. This view would suggest that critical educators have a role to play not just in offering alternative or counter narratives to those of the mainstream, but that their activism offers students an input into this unifying process. It suggests that a critical education approach can totalise and historicise and realise that hegemony is partial and that contradictions can be used to open up the possibility for transformative activity. However, transformative activity takes place at certain social political and economic conjunctures. The dialectical interplay between these conditions and the active intervention of social individuals and social movements set out the terrain of transformative possibility. The central question for academic activists, then, is whether transformative activity is feasible in the historical moment (Mészáros, 2015). In Friere's (1970) view this 'untested feasibility' is linked to what he calls the 'constructible future'. People can intervene in their world and work to change it, but he also suggests (Freire, 1985) that any transforming knowledge is limited in people's day to day lives and involves the difficulty of moving beyond the spontaneity of daily life. In this view, critical educators and academic activists have a role to play in confronting the spontaneity of everyday life in their work.

Freire (1970) cautions against seeing education as the key site for social transformation. The inextricable link between politics and economics, which is the context for this research, means that acknowledging the concrete historical conditions means not falling into pessimism or into opportunism. According to Lauder, Freeman-Moir and Scott (1986) it is not so much whether critical education and educational struggles can effect change, but rather, their significance in practical terms at any given moment. The neo-liberal agenda contains a key element of inevitability; that there is no alternative to economic re-structuring and privatisation. The criticisms of some within critical pedagogy (Malott, 2012) is that those on the left, critical educators who have accepted this inevitability fail to see that there is a world beyond capital, let alone how to theorise this world and the transformation towards it. It also assumes a powerlessness of agency against globalised forces.

For critical academics such as Neale (2008), Eagleton (2008) and McNally (2011) the political and economic climate influences, but does not mechanically determine,

the kind of critical work that academics can do inside the academy. For example, McNally (2011) argues that the level of militancy, and the strength of trades unions and social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s (at least in Europe and North America) meant that political and academic activists found it easier to develop their critical research and teaching. As this militancy declined and managerialism and marketization increasingly pervaded higher education, the ability of critical educators to work in the academy was curtailed. However, it is also important to note that changes in the socio-economic sphere do not move forward in a simple linear way of seeming political stability but can be punctuated by elements of resistance. For example, shortly before this research was undertaken the legislation to increase student fees and to abolish the Education Maintenance Allowance sparked a number of student occupations in higher education. Six of the respondents mentioned the occupations and fees demonstrations in their interviews and the opportunity it gave them as activists to relate to this new movement.

Neale's (2008, p237) reflections on his academic career throughout the 60s and 70s also highlights the relationship between teaching and the wider society by arguing that it was easier to be a radical teacher in times of militancy: "The larger the independent struggle in the wider society, the greater the space for radicals. The space is real but it is also defensive and beleaguered."

In his view it was easier to be a radical teacher in the 60s because in militant periods, ideas can change and students are more able to challenge and question existing educational institutions and processes. Conversely: "In times of reaction, the radical teacher loses hope" (p237). Ollman (1993, p132) agrees, suggesting that attempts to enact critical pedagogy and activism inside the university are contingent on events in the wider society: "How these conflicting tendencies will finally work themselves out, of course, will depend far more on the social and political struggles of the larger society than on the positions we take within the university."

Only by challenging this underlying economic and political system of production in whatever different ways are possible at any given time, will the contradictions be resolved. Implicit in this view is that the academic activists who were interviewed as part of this research were involved with, and discussed in interviews, issues that

were not fundamentally resolvable within the institution or within their role as academics.

For Freire (1970), the potential to resist levels of co-option in educational institutions was to be deeply involved in social movement struggles and other forms of political activity *outside* the education. The political activism of academics beyond the academy was, in many ways, a counter-weight to the limits and constraints the existed within.

#### **8.4 Academic activists as transformative intellectuals**

McLaren in his book “Life in Schools” (2007) talks of critical pedagogues striving for a ‘pedagogy of transformation’ in their engagement with students within and beyond education. He emphasises the need to focus on the reality of the lives of staff and students so that change is shaped by their interaction and their engagement with issues beyond the university. Rather than critical academics offering a blueprint of what a socially just society would look like, McLaren (2007, p310) argues that: “We need to talk about a transformation of the social through the form of the concrete, as opposed to metaphysical transcendence...our quest for the transformation of the present into a new social order is not utopian but utopian-concrete.”

Related to this view of critical, transformatory pedagogy is Gramsci’s view (1971) that at certain historical moments of crisis or uncertainty, there is greater potential for people to begin to question their taken for granted views. Implicit in this view is that radical social change is possible, but that academics and students are both agents of social change. All respondents were of the view that higher education was capable of being a site with transformative potential although they also spoke of the contradictions in their role as critical academics which were related to changes in the neo-liberal university (as discussed in the earlier section on limit situations).

Hill (2004; 2014) sees a similar role for radical educators whom he names ‘critical cultural workers’. Although he does not necessarily agree with Rikowski (2008) that teachers are the most dangerous workers, he does accept that their significance in the shaping of the next generation of workers is why the state intervenes in educational training, research and curriculum development. Citing Freire (1998) who argued that teachers as cultural workers should work in both public and political

domains, Hill (2004) outlines three areas of activity for 'critical intellectuals and oppositional educators'. The first is in education. Here, Hill agrees with Allman (2001) that education has the 'potential to fan the flames of resistance'. Yet he is cautious about the extent of the transformative potential of education given the real limits on the autonomy and agency available to individual teachers.

The second area of resistance for Hill is working outside of the classroom. Joining together the struggles of groups such as parents, students, community activists and trades unionists. Hill acknowledges that education is not neutral but a site of economic and social contestation.

The final area of resistance is even broader and links struggles and issues within different economic and social sectors, nationally and internationally. He cites the protests against the WTO in Seattle, Genoa, London and Barcelona as opportunities to link critical education with broader movements for social and economic justice.

What the findings of this research show is that the respondents fulfilled all three of the above categories in their role as academic-activists. Because their autonomy and agency were contingent on wider structural factors, as well as on institutional policy and culture, there was more potential for transformative activism than Hill suggests and that a more dialectical relationship was at play between education and wider struggles than is suggested here.

The respondents in this research (either implicitly or explicitly) saw the contradictions that they faced in their academic role, as offering the potential for enacting critical pedagogy and activism, both within and beyond the academy. Importantly, the Freirean concepts of limit situations and of being and becoming allowed for an analysis of the interview data which highlighted the dialectical relationship between theory and practice in the approach of the respondents. The limit situations, described in the findings chapter, offered, *in themselves* the potential for a wider critique of the role and function of higher education.

There was no clear, or consistent splitting of the respondents' roles between academic teaching and research on the one hand, and activism beyond the academy on the other (Neale, 2008). Although the majority of the respondents mentioned their political affiliations and involvement in political campaigns beyond the university, this was not presented as a split but as part of their activist orientation.

Their role as academic activists was seen in the classroom in two main ways. Many of the respondents described how they established modules or programmes; and second, were able to use the discipline to offer alternative approaches and to blur the lines between on and off campus for the students. The possible contradiction between the insularity of disciplines and a wider, historizing perspective was only mentioned by one respondent. This may well have been because the activist approaches taken within classrooms (for example, bringing activists in, taking students out) was a mechanism to link the discipline with wider issues.

The findings revealed the extent to which academics enacted their activism in a disciplinary context. Academic work can, however, narrow perspectives when part of an education system built on disciplinary foundations. Disciplines can fragment knowledge, for example, into ever smaller sub-disciplines. Eagleton (2008) points out that this can raise contradictions for academic activists because, whereas academics focus on disciples, activists need to generalise as a strategy to produce greater levels of resistance and solidarity. The findings showed that the respondents generalised in two main ways: the disciplines of political geography and community education were able to use opportunities to either take students out of the classroom as part of teaching and learning or invite activists into the classroom. Even respondents who taught more structured vocational courses or traditional disciplines involved themselves in the current student occupations on campus and made links between the various student groups that they came into contact with.

The findings that related to the limits or restrictions that the respondents talked about during the interviews could be seen within an overall debate about academic freedom. Although not a term used by the respondents, it was implicit in their views regarding constraints and limitations in the academy. The respondents explained the ways in which their role in higher education had been increasingly constrained by developments such as marketisation and levels of accountability.

Traianou (2015) defines academic freedom as the autonomy that academics have to do their work, a freedom that, she argues, has become more constrained due to increasing government intervention from the 1980s onwards [1]. She notes two aspects of autonomy. First the relationship of the government to individual higher education institutions, and second, the autonomy that academics have within the

context of the university and the contradictions in each case. Although Traianou (2015) poses the problem in terms of contradictions; the government, the institution and academic staff appear to be static elements of higher education which interact with one another. What is missing from her analysis is a focus on the wider economic context. For educators such as Lynch, Cream and Moran (2010, p298) the university offers to society: "...a space where one can exercise intellectual autonomy no matter how circumscribed this can be in an age of market led research funding." However, this view doesn't address the extent of autonomy and offers a static view of this rather than a relational view.

Ollman (1993), by contrast, provides a view of academic freedom as a relational concept, not a static one. Indeed, in his view, it is important that academic freedom is not seen as an ideal to which academics should aspire because this conceptualisation may play a role in maintaining a fixed gap between the ideal and the actual. For Ollman (1993), academic freedom has a material basis and is linked to capitalist power relations. He, therefore, broadens out the understanding of academic freedom to include students, workers and campaigners as well as academics. This expanded, relational view of academic freedom offers a useful way in which to consider the academic activism of the respondents in this research. Their activism, overwhelmingly, focussed as much beyond the university as within it. They were able to engage with students, colleagues, practitioners and campaigners not for narrowly defined educational purposes but as part of a wider resistance against neoliberalism. Such activism would be seen in Freirean terms, as praxis: a unity of theory and practice. The following section sets out a summary of some of Freire's views as they might relate to current higher education and as they were reflected in the activist practice of the respondents. Of course, the conceptual dialectical framework of this research precludes offering these insights as blue-prints for critical educators and academic-activists.

## **8.5 Some implications of a Freirean approach in higher education**

First, Freire's epistemology (1970) sees tensions or conflicts as limit situations. These are contradictions (Ollman, 2015) that are not necessarily negative, in fact they are dynamic and contain the potential for radical change. It was clear that some of the respondents were able to make links with organisations that had the potential

to link at a number of levels and in a number of situations such as the popular educators and the community organisations that they worked with, developed courses with and researched with. Freire was clear that education alone, however central to people's lives and development, cannot transform society.

Second, in educational situations Ollman (2015), following Freire, would advise critical educators to *teach* the contradictions that are part of the fabric of neoliberalism. That is, offer students a framework of critique so that they can see tensions and paradoxes in their lives and in their studies as contradictions, as historically situated and therefore transformable. For many students in higher education, criticism is judgemental or a way of balancing opposing views. In Freire's (1970) and Ebert's (1996) relational, materialist view, what is needed is critique. This is not part of a process of individual enlightenment but is a collective tool where students can, by totalising and historicising, develop a greater understand of the everyday practices and disciplines that are studying.

As inequality continues to grow these inequities can be made more obvious to students and contradictions in their own educational situation will allow for discussions. For example, where students are having difficulties with debt and are perhaps part of the part-time workforce there exists the potential to critique a view of students as individual learners with the same opportunities at university. The contradictions in their position as students can be amplified and critically discussed as part of the curriculum. The students' lived experience and activity within and beyond the academy offers the potential to question their experience and to be part of activity to change it.

Third, if, as Freire argues, thought and activity are dialectically linked, then to change thought necessitates changed or altered practices. This is what the academic activists in this research were attempting in their work. Opportunities to move beyond the classroom were, and should be more generally, encouraged. How critical educators approach this will depend on a range of factors some that will constrain them such as bureaucratic and workload demands but can also be influenced by solidarity with other academics and contacts outside the academy. In this research, organisational forms such as campus occupations had developed that some of the respondents in this research were able to support and link into their classroom



discussions. Some of the respondents created their own organisational forms (Sean established the Socialist Society to give a less formal arena for student discussion; Lucy established a small Amnesty International letter writing group on campus; Andy worked closely with a community writing group).

Fourth, another implication of a Freirean approach would be to focus on collectivity, not individualised work or learning. Gill (2017) cites the individualisation of universities (on a number of competing levels, for example as institutions as well as individual students and academics) as one of the more debilitating issues for academics. It is normalised and pervades the education system. Activist work in the academy, and linked beyond it, is a way of challenging this pervading ideology and engaging and supporting students to see beyond this.

Fifth, academics (and students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate) who are committed to a social justice agenda and want to 'make a difference' (Clegg, 2014) should see research relationally involving wider communities and social networks and not contained within an academic community. This commitment to a praxis approach to research and dissemination is one way of addressing what Clegg sees as the contradictions of higher education where attempts at change are mediated by existing dynamics of departmental and disciplinary cultures, policies and expectations.

Sixth, a Freirean approach would foreground the agency of students. Agency is not a commodity to be offered to students by academics, or an issue to be facilitated. Instead, as Neale (2008) argues, agency is a relational concept because it is always a lived question and therefore partial and dynamic. Closely linked to this is the importance, and challenge, to engage students in activism wherever possible. The respondents did this in various ways. In the curriculum, developing modules, and establishing programmes that would link academic work with activism by allowing for encounters between practitioners, activists and students (not mutually exclusive categories).

## 8.6 Limitations of the research, next steps and contribution of the research

### 8.6.1 Limitations of the research

This research sought to investigate academic activism in UK higher education. Although the research method could be criticised on the basis that the sample size was small, the aim of the research was not to generalise from this sample to make wider claims regarding all academic activists. Instead, the research sought to gain insights that would contribute to a deeper understanding of academic activism.

Second, the interpretations of the interview data were my responsibility as a researcher and as I have been involved in academic activism previously, my understandings and interpretations may have been influenced by my prior experiences and knowledge. I was aware of a tension in the research between my attempt to stand apart from the research yet at the same time being aware of my own views and assumptions about the activist practice the respondents were describing. There is no way, in qualitative research of this nature, to resolve this tension. I responded to it by being as transparent as possible in the data analysis. I also, however, raised the issue of partisan research in the research methods chapter which I became aware of the first time when I began the interviews. However, this research isn't activist, but rather, research *about* activism. However, I raised the issue of partisan research in chapter 4 arguing that research can be both rigorous and partisan.

Third, the empirical data consisted of a number of interviews and I had no further communication with the respondents after the interviews. The interviews were self-reflective and drew on past experiences and developments in the respondents political and academic lives and provided a source of rich data. Nonetheless they were snapshots of a point in time in 2015. I was aware of a methodological contradiction between the use snapshot data and the philosophical approach that saw the world as relational, dialectical and in constant movement. It seemed difficult, at times, to capture the *process* of academic activism given the snapshot nature of the interview research. It became clear, however, at the data analysis stage that to focus on the contradictions highlighted by the respondents was a valid way of seeing the hidden aspect of processes that existed within their activist practice. I also used

the background information in chapter 2 to historicise the interview data such that it did not appear simply as decontextualised individual stories.

Finally, I came across Fine's (2006, p134) view of the link between theory, method and empirical research. He explains that when researching into capitalism and questioning the relationships between cultural, economic, political and ideological power: "Such questions...straddle the methodological, the theoretical, the empirical, the comparative and the historical. There is a corresponding danger of offering quick analytical fixes – over-ambitious, premature and/or simple judgements." I see this view as a reason to offer the research findings as a contribution to wider social movement research and activity, so that ideas and ideas-in-action continue to develop dialectically.

### **8.6.2 Suggestions for future research**

First, this research focussed on academic activists rather than students, although, of course, students as learners and activists featured in all of the interview responses. There were numerous examples in the data of respondents meeting students at demonstrations or inviting them to political meetings either on or off campus. An interesting area of further research might build on these experiences and look at case studies of solidarity and collaborative activity between academic and student activists. Given that academic activity in education, such as strike action, has the potential to alienate students as consumers, it would be useful to look at further research into the potential for academic staff and students to form alliances at times of industrial action or to organise and attend political events on campus (and beyond). This might also expand into research on the joint work of academics and students to research and publish on their collaborative activism.

Second, this research focussed, unintentionally, on academics who researched and taught in the humanities. Given that disciplinarity played such a feature as activist practice in this research, it may be interesting to widen any future research to include academic activists in science and technology disciplines, looking at the relationship between science and activism.

Third, limited and small-scale research highlighted academic activism in theory and practice in higher education as it is an under researched area. It would be useful to

continue this type of activist research because as Hatcher argues, critical education is marginalised and constitutes a 'hidden history', which need excavating.

### **8.6.3 Contribution of the research**

Against much current research and writing on critical pedagogy, which focuses on the classroom as an arena to be democratised and which sees critical theories as bodies of knowledge to be either taught or imposed on situations, this research shows that Freire's limit situations – which are also Ollman's contradictions – are part of the process of critical pedagogy.

The use of a dialectical research approach (explained and discussed chapter 4) has enabled insights into the relationship between the respondents' activity and their teaching and theoretical work (Freire, 1970,1985; McLaren, 2010; Au, 2007). This research draws on a Marxist approach, drawing particularly on Freire (1970) and Gramsci's theory of praxis (Gramsci, 1995), where a dialectical approach to transformative critical pedagogy is seen as reflecting the contradictory essence of capitalism.

It offers a contribution to ideas of measurement in higher education in all its various forms in teaching, assessment and research. It rejects determinism in educational theory (Wrigley, 2019) and also the 'continuum' descriptions (Shulak, 2015) as both are anti-dialectical approaches. What links both of these approaches is an underlying enlightenment view of moving towards better knowledge and understanding as if these were fixed entities that develop in a linear way.

We need more examples (Edwards, 2011) of the approach of critical educators in the classroom and beyond because this area is marginalised and because other educators or novice educators can learn that a different, radical approach is possible. It could raise awareness of the possibility of critical education within the university and inform those educators who are trying to enact their own activist practice and engage with the contradictions in both higher education and their own position as educators. Its insights can offer academic activists support in building campaigns and movements as part of a generalised resistance to wider social injustice [2].

The results of this research are offered as a contribution to on-going debates about the role of academic activists and the potential of the neoliberal university to be a site for the resistance of the increasingly privatised university. Martin (2004); De Smet (2011); Clegg (2014) and Maisuria (2018), all invoke a commitment to the production of knowledge which does not exist as 'bodies of knowledge' within the confines of academia but is linked to wider social movements. This is the terrain on which theories and concepts can be tested, modified and developed. A focus on the role of academic activists in the way the world is made and re-made can open up possibilities for radical social change.

### **8.7 Concluding remarks**

This research, drawing on Ollman's (2003, 2015) and Freire's (1972) relational theory of praxis, highlights the contingent and contradictory relationship between the wider neoliberal system, wider social movement activity, the neo-liberal university, and the spaces that the respondents had to enact critical pedagogy and activism. The Gramscian moment was used to argue that at a time of crisis and austerity the opportunities exist for critical educators to offer both analyses of it, and possibilities of alternative visions of the future.

It remains the case that the developments in the neo-liberal agenda for education discussed throughout this thesis, have presented limits on the practical and theoretical work that critical educators and those that involved themselves in activism, can do. However, as has also been suggested, within these constraints – and *because of* the structural contradictions of neo-liberalism, academic activism and its contribution to a wider transformative agenda is possible. In this research, respondents enacted this through practically engaged knowledge (on and off campus) and the encouragement of a critical understanding the focus of study. However, ironically, the critique and creativity of academic activists can often be co-opted within the higher education system and contribute to the underlying aims of the education system, that is to reproduce social inequality.

Higher education can be part of a transformative project but should be seen as contradictory as a starting point and with a relational ontology in terms of its relationship to the wider society. Through this lens it is possible to see the

transformative *potential* of higher education and where academic activists can position themselves in this.

Academic activism is part of higher education and higher education can contribute to social transformation, broadly defined, But the limit situations and contradictions faced by the respondents means that it requires political commitment and engagement (Wrigley et al, 2012; Freire, 1985; Freedman, 2017) and this will come up against the contradictions outlined in this chapter and the findings chapter.

The overall philosophical approach taken in this research precludes finality. It cannot offer a blue-print or a set of 'off the shelf' strategies that can be applied in all situations. Whilst the study and outcomes may be useful for other critical educators, it cannot offer any definitive outcomes as a result which would undermine the epistemological foundation of the research. Freeman-Moir make this point when they explain that the dialectical approach means that strategies for critical pedagogy and activism are linked to context and historical moment and cannot be prescribed in advance. This doesn't mean that creating programmes and modules and/or teaching to pre-set learning objectives necessarily precludes radical critique, in fact, many of the participants discussed what they were able to achieve even in the context of the constraints and contradictions of the neo-liberal university.

Similar issues were raised by the respondents although there may have been differences of approach, consistent with a plurality of views within critical education itself (Malott, 2011; Macrine, 2009; Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). The respondents negotiated the contradictions they faced through a range of approaches. When discussing progressive struggles and strategies, Green (2013) notes the underlying theoretical ontologies and epistemologies for conceptualising social transformation. A key point for him it that "...each of [these] remains *critically open*, just as they do in the uncompleted and restlessly productive totality of Marx's own writings, analyses, and practices and material and historical legacy in struggle...*to be remade for our own time*. (pxix) (italics in the original).

## Footnotes

[1] Leathwood & Reed (2013) note that academics appear to be complicit in this, rather than directly working to challenge it. They suggest that complicity and collusion are contested terms and it is often difficult to distinguish between them in the complexity of higher education work. They suggest though, a distinction between routine compliance, which

would include compiling funding bids, and complicity, which would involve being a 'knowing accomplice' in neoliberal change within the institution.

[2] See as an example of an activist programme, the M.A. in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism established by Laurence Cox and his colleagues at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Cox (2014) discusses, and reflects on, the establishment and aims of the programme and its continuing challenges.

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## Annex 1

### The interviewees (at 15/4/2017)

**Andy Davis** is a lecturer in Human Geography at Liverpool University. He researches into transnational activism and is Chair of the Geographies of Justice Research Group

**Cassie Earl** is a lecturer in education studies at the university of Bristol and Co-Director of the Centre for Knowledge Culture and Society. Her research areas include critical pedagogy, popular education, public pedagogy, Open Marxist and autonomist studies and community and home education.

**Eurig Scandrett** works at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. He lectures in Sociology and is the co-ordinator of programmes in Social Justice. His research interests are learning processes in social movements.

**Fayzi Ismail** is a Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Development Studies at SOA, London. Her research interests include NGOs and social movements, politics in Nepal and South Asia, global protest and change and change, alternatives to neo-liberalism and imperialism.

**Gary Anderson** is a Senior Lecturer in Drama in the Department of Dance and Performance Studies at Liverpool Hope University. His research focuses on critical education, social justice and activist performance practice.

**Gurnam Singh** is Principal Lecturer in Social Work at Coventry University and Visiting Professor of Social Work at Chester University. On the university website he describes himself as an academic activist, where the desire to transform individuals and society informs his teaching and research.

**Jenny Pickerill** is Professor in Environmental Geography at Sheffield University with research interests in the environment, the importance of social justice, inequality, colonialism, racism and neo-liberalism in how the environment is understood, and inspiring grassroots solutions to environmental problems

**Jim Crowther** is a Senior Lecturer in Community Education at Moray House School of Education. He researches into popular education and his work is centred on engagement with community groups and adult community education.

**Kerem Nisancioglu** works at SOAS in the Department of Politics and International Relations where he teaches on courses including: De-colonising the world, globalisation and global governance and International Theory. He was involved in the 2010 student occupations as a research student.

**Lucy** teaches at a university in Scotland\*

**Liam Kane** is a senior Lecturer in the Centre for Open Studies at Glasgow University where he teaches on the MSc in Adult & Continuing Education as well as teaching languages. His research interests include popular education, particularly with regard to Latin America.

**Matthew Caygill** teaches at Leeds Beckett University in the School of Cultural Studies and Humanities. He is a political activist and UCU rep.

**Nick Megoran** is a reader in Political Geography in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University. He is a member of the Stop the War Coalition. His activism and academic work draws on Christian theology.

**Nina Power** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Humanities at the University of Roehampton. She is a founder member of Defend the Right to Protest, a campaign group set up in the wake of the student protests in 2010.

**Rachel Featherstone** returned to study as a mature student and became active in the anti-fees movement. She is currently Senior Lecturer in Research Methods at Teeside University and is a UCU rep.

**Sarah Amsler** is a Reader in Education at the University of Lincoln. Her subject specialisms are in critical pedagogies, critical theory, sociology, the sociology of knowledge and the politics of education. She joined the staff in Lincoln to develop critical education studies in the teaching programmes.

**Sean Ledwith** teaches history and Politics at York College and is a UCU rep.

**Alex Snowden** is a teacher at a school in Ponteland and a local political activist and blogger (pilot interview)

\*Requested pseudonym