

# **Resisting the English neoliberalising university: what critical pedagogy can offer<sup>i</sup>**

**Joyce E Canaan**

*Birmingham City University, Birmingham, England, UK*

## **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to contribute to current efforts of left academics to shift the English public university away from its present state of what I below call 'deep neoliberalisation'. I utilise the concept of neoliberalisation rather than the more common concept of neoliberalism to frame what was an initially gradual and, under the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, a deepening reorganisation of the university as a marketised, commodified and financialised entity. I then explore the key tenets of critical pedagogy that a small and growing number of academics are adapting to develop a left counter to this process. I conclude by suggesting that there are limits to realising critical pedagogy in the university that is leading some academics to seek its realisation outside.*

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, neoliberalisation, neoliberalism, the English public university

The UK's higher education system is . . . [being] transformed into a patchwork of academic supermarkets with, at one end, research-led . . . universities continuing to super-serve wealthier customers with a wide range of niche offerings while, at the other end, former Polytechnics. . . [being] forced to clear their shelves of distinctive or idiosyncratic goods and to focus on those products for which there is already a clearly defined (mass) market. All shoppers, meanwhile, will have to pay higher prices (Freedman, 2011:1-2).

Our being is a *being with*. So to be in the world without making history, without being made by it, without creating culture, without a sensibility toward one's presence in the world, without a dream, . . . without any opinion about the world . . . without learning, instruction, teaching, without ideas on education, without being political, is a total impossibility (Freire, 2001:58).

### **Introductory remarks**

The first of the two epigraphs captures the process of restructuring now taking place in English universities as indicated partly by state-funded tuition costs being nearly eliminated and, concomitantly, as student tuition payments doubled or trebled in autumn 2012 and are likely to increase further in future. One consequence of this restructuring is that the already advantaged group of universities, which recently expanded represent themselves as the kind of luxury supermarkets of which Freedman speaks, that can prepare (student) 'customers' for professional jobs<sup>ii</sup>. The least advantaged former polytechnics, originally established in the 1960s to enable working class students to gain a university degree, are increasingly 'branding' themselves as offering their 'customers' training for supposedly more vocationally oriented jobs.

Student-led demonstrations and occupations of universities occurred in autumn 2010 and winter 2011 in response to the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's (hereafter called 'the Coalition

government') initial proposed (autumn 2010) and rapidly passed into law within two months of the near privatisation of the English public university. These actions contributed to wider strike action by many unions (including that of university lecturers, UCU<sup>iii</sup>) against raised retirement age, higher pension contributions and lower pensions. Since autumn 2010 academics have set up campaigning groups<sup>iv</sup> and a growing literature on the effect of government policy on universities is emerging, of which the book that Freedman co-edited is a notable example.

However, this tide of resistance within universities has since been ebbing in Higher Education (hereafter HE). HE lecturers<sup>v</sup> now face higher student numbers<sup>vi</sup> and greater insecurity due to programme closures and cuts to academic and administrative staff. University lecturers are being disciplined to accept their worsening conditions through the imposition of regimes of accountability since the late 1980s that have permeated and regulated HE lecturers' practices (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000, Canaan 2010). The cutting of state funded public higher education is not being done in isolation; it is part of a wider government programme of funding cuts across the public sector, and is mirrored by similar, so-called 'austerity cuts' in countries around the world:

brutal austerity policies are spreading throughout Europe, as the European Union more and more openly turns into a vehicle of neoliberal policies that deepen the economic crisis, while also dismantling welfare states and a social model that had supposedly tamed and humanized capitalism . . . Just as in the United States, European political and economic elites are clearly determined to 'solve' the crisis on the backs of those least responsible for it. Let teachers and firefighters, students and retirees, workers, and the unemployed pay!  
(Panayotakis, in Themelis, in press).

In this dispiriting context I ask: what signs of resistance are there to the

destruction of the public university? This paper focuses on one such sign, the development of critical pedagogy theory and practice in and outside the classroom. As the second epigraph above indicates, critical pedagogy offers a way to engage differently with students in teaching, learning, researching and acting than neoliberalisation suggests. Its vision is of education as a relational, outward looking, hopeful, critical, political and transformational process.

This paper has four sections. I first suggest that neoliberalisation can be helpfully conceptualised as a process established during the past 40 years that can be dislodged from its current dominance. Section two uses this framing device to highlight what has happened to English HE during this time period. In section three I synthesise key features of critical pedagogy that can be used to think and act against the neoliberalisation of the public university. Here I build upon work that colleagues and I in the Critical Pedagogy Group, or the Critical Pedagogy Collective, as we now call ourselves, have been doing during the past five years<sup>vii</sup>. The concluding fourth section suggests that critical pedagogy faces considerable challenges at a time when intellectual life is being so fully subordinated ‘to instrumental values and, most brutally, to the measure of money’ (Thorpe, 2008:103).

## **1. Neoliberalisation *not* neoliberalism<sup>viii</sup>**

I frame this analysis with the concept of neoliberalisation not neoliberalism. Many researchers have utilised the latter concept to assess the transformation of the public sector in particular nations and across the globe. However, in recent years others have observed that this concept is so overused and under-explained that, as Clarke, for example notes (2008:135), it seems “‘omnipresent’, ‘promiscuous’ and ‘omnipotent’”. It

thus respectively is found in multiple ‘sites, institutions, processes, and practices’, takes different forms and consequently has diverse, sometimes contradictory, meanings that together present this process as an unstoppable, all-powerful, force (2008:138). Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009:3) speak of neoliberalism as ‘a rascal concept--promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested’. They build on Harvey’s (2005:198) critical analysis of how prior and current neoliberal structures and processes have developed and extended across the world. Their aim is to conceptualise neoliberalisation as a 337) suggest that it might be more helpful to speak of *neoliberalisation* as a *process* that started in the 1970s as a series of ‘disarticulated’ ‘regulatory experiments’ aiming to counter Keynesian ‘state interventionist and redistributive regulatory agendas’ (Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010: 336). The Keynesian agenda and policies presumed:

that the state should focus on full employment, economic growth and the welfare of its citizens, and that state power should be freely deployed, alongside of or . . . substituting for market processes to achieve these ends (Harvey, 2005:10).

Harvey called this process predominant in the early post-war era ‘embedded liberalism’<sup>ix</sup> (2005: 11). At that time ‘market processes and entrepreneurial activities’ were surrounded by a constraining net or network of state support (2005:10). Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) and Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) thus conceptualise neoliberalisation as challenging embedded liberalism, seeking ‘the withering away of the state’ so that the ‘market’ might ‘reign’ supreme (Bourdieu, 2004: 25) as ‘collective structures which may impede the market logic’ are eroded (Bourdieu, 1998).

Thus early experiments of dis-articulated neoliberalisation of which Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) and Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) can be construed as a first step in a process that introduced:

privatization, financialization, liberalization, workfare and urban entrepreneurialism [and] subsequently acquired “prototypical” status, and became key reference points<sup>x</sup> for subsequent projects . . . (2010:337).

Subsequent projects built upon insights gained from reflecting on the successes and failures of these early experiments so that ‘patterns of reciprocal influence, coordination and exchange’ could be more effectively elaborated thereafter. This reflective implementation of neoliberalisation enabled the fuller embedding of market relations and the market logic within and between states

In the 1990s ‘market-disciplinary, reform agendas were institutionalized on a world scale, using world-wide, multilateral, multilevel and supranational juridico-institutional arrangements’ of organisations like the IMF, WTO and World Bank (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009:10). These institutions began using the power they were granted to more fully realise neoliberalising policies. From the 1990s to the financial crisis that began in 2007 and 2008, Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) argue that neoliberalisation is thought to have widened and deepened within and between nations. These authors emphasise, however, that neoliberalisation has been introduced differently in each nation, given national histories of economic, political and military power and development that led to their consequently different national responses to neoliberalisation.

These authors further suggest that at present neoliberalising regulatory and institutional arrangements have reached a ‘zombie’ situation in which

“putative ‘solutions’ to persistent regulatory dilemmas across scales, territories and contexts” (Brenner et al, 2010: 340) are being imposed. Thus although neoliberalising processes provide ‘the rules of the game’ more fully than previously within and between nations and supra-nationally, these rules are not working as effectively as they had done. Consider, for example, ‘bailouts’ now being ‘offered’ to a growing number of peripheral European nations’ banks, with different sets of strings attached in each country, that are resulting in governments cutting back and gradually eliminating the public sector and the welfare state. These bailouts not only do not seem to be resolving the dilemmas<sup>xi</sup>, but, as some researchers suggest, deepening them and spreading them to core European nations (Lapavitsas, 2012; Mason, 2012).

There is life, albeit counter neoliberalised life, in the next phase that Brenner et al propose starts to undo neoliberalisation. This phase, that they call ‘disarticulated counter-neoliberalization’, entails *progressive or reactionary* experiments of disparate, local redistributive regulatory alternatives. These alternatives could, like the first phase of neoliberalisation, lead to a more ‘orchestrated counter-neoliberalisation’ (Brenner et al, 2010:340) that links, extends and reworks these experiments and their underpinning logic. Finally, counter-neoliberalisation could lead to the deepening of these processes as progressive or reactionary alternatives predominate.

Thus Brenner et al (2010) and Peck et al (2009) provide an analytical framework with which to rethink the recent past, present and future. If competitive, individualising market forces have superseded those of embedded liberalism, then what could follow might be a collective logic, of left or right orientation. Neoliberalisation is thus a radically contingent process that could open onto something else, whether for better or

worse<sup>xii</sup>. Thus there is space—and, I would argue, hope and possibility—for left action and activism at present that I shall discuss more extensively in sections three below.

One difficulty in realising this alternative stems from the powerful ways that neoliberalising policies reshape peoples' conscious and unconscious minds alongside their re-shaping of external structures. Neoliberalisation thus impacts on peoples' 'desires, aspirations and hopes' (Fisher 2009: 13), which in turn get into their minds and souls, 'into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others' (Ball, 2012:18; Ball, 2003). '[C]apitalist realism' (as Fisher put it (2009:13) recasts 'all dimensions of human life . . . in terms of a market rationality' (Brown 2005:40), and 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable', colonising even 'the dreaming life of the population' (Fisher 2009:8). On the one hand, the concept of capitalist realism captures the current 'widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher, 2009:2).

Fisher here refers to the work of Jameson and Žižek who both discuss the ways that, at present, 'it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than it does the end of capitalism' (Fisher 2009:2). Thatcher's phrase that 'there is no alternative' (known in England by its acronym TINA) to neoliberalising capitalism captures this sentiment.

The work of Brenner et al and Peck et al offers a heuristic device with which to begin to conceptualise left alternatives to neoliberalisation. Their recognition that such an alternative is not guaranteed indicates the need to critically re-contextualise the present,



## 2. The neoliberalisation of English HE<sup>xiii</sup>

This section uses the concept of neoliberalisation enumerated in section 1 to make sense of changes in English HE since the late 1960s and early 1970s.. A key early moment in HE marketisation was captured by E P Thompson's *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (1970), written in response to and against Warwick University's business/industry orientation and surveillance of staff since its creation in 1965. Thatcher more fully realised this 'business-ification' (Hatcher, 2001) process; within three days of coming to power (1979), her government cut £100 million from the HE budget. Over the next four years 17% more was cut from government block grants to universities (Shattock in Slaughter and Leslie, 1997:41). Universities consequently had to more 'efficiently' use government grants received—the logic of marketization thereby expanded its hold more widely. Commodification was introduced in 1980 with the government's decision to charge international students' annual tuition fees of £1,000, thereby creating the idea that HE could be sold and bought.

These initial stabs at marketisation and commodification respectively could be considered indicative of the first stage of dis-articulated neoliberalisation of which Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) and Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) speak. Particular HE institutions like Warwick thus began to introduce business principles and concomitantly strategies of staff surveillance. They were then followed by an initially symbolic cut to government block grants to universities that then began to be substantially increased. At around the same time, tuition fees were introduced to a small fraction of students only, indicating that HE could be conceptualised as a product in the market.

Thereafter neoliberalisation processes and structures were more fully implemented and coordinated. The 1985 Jarrett Report, produced by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, introduced neoliberalising discourses by mooted the idea of ‘students as customers’, thereby contributing to the framing of HE with the market logic. This was followed in 1992 by the Conservative government eliminating the ‘binary divide’ previously separating universities from polytechnics.

Restructuring nearly all HE institutions as ‘universities’ was not impelled by democratic principles, conditions for all academics and students worsened. Student numbers doubled from 1990 to 1996 alone—while funding per student fell by 30% and staff numbers remained unchanged (CVCP, in Barr and Crawford, 1998). Not only were neoliberalising discourses reshaping how HE could be conceptualised and spoken about; the problems universities now faced were framed as problems of market rather than state funding and resources.

Unsurprisingly in this context of growing marketisation, Vice Chancellors of the top 20 universities (then receiving 2/3 of UK research grants and contract funding and attracting students with the highest A level marks) sought to fortify their privilege. They formed the ‘Russell Group’ (1994) in order to distinguish themselves from the rest so that they might pressurise government to maintain and expand their privileges, thereby re-stratifying the seemingly levelled playing field the government created two years earlier. Two other groups of universities followed suit. First ‘the 1994 group’ (formed that year) separated themselves from those they deemed to be at the bottom of the heap (and by implication from the Russell Group whose initial creation of a top tier impelled their creation). Shortly thereafter (and likely in response to this second group emerging), the ‘Million+’ group created a distinct market

niche that highlighted their ‘openness’ to the now growing working class presence in HE (Ainley and Weyers, 2008).

Clearly the logic of marketisation, which included the idea that universities—and especially groups of universities—could be brand themselves differently from one another in a competition for ostensibly distinct student market niches was became more embedded in the university system, building on and learning from earlier neoliberalising experiments.

Despite this tripartite differentiation of universities, the problem of rising student numbers and no increased government funding continued, leading the government to establish a bilateral (Conservative and Labour) committee (The National Committee Inquiry into Higher Education, 1996) to resolve these problems. The resultant Dearing Report (1997) suggested—and the government then implemented (with some modification) in 1998—the introduction of upfront student tuition fees of £1,000 per year across the board<sup>xiv</sup>. Thus the financialisation of the higher education sector that began with the initial introduction of fees to international students in 1980 was extended to all students. At the same time, commodification intensified<sup>xv</sup>; the then Education Secretary David Blunkett justified fee rises by suggesting that graduates would likely earn more than non-graduates and their work was conceptualised as increasing the likelihood of their own prosperity and that of the nation in an increasingly competitive global economy. University education was thereby reconceptualised primarily as a financial investment in one’s future (see Baty, 1997; Wilby, 2009), creating the kinds of customers first mooted in the Jarrett Report. Unsurprisingly, the process of shifting the funding burden from the state to the individual grew further thereafter: eight years later (2006) upfront tuition fees were ‘topped up’, trebled to

£3,000 (reaching £3,375 in autumn 2011, the last year before the near or complete termination of government contributions to tuition fee costs). University VCs viewed his ‘topping up’ by individual student fees as making up for the gradual lessening of government contributions to HE institutions and the rising costs of HE.

The gradual 40-year marketisation, commodification and financialisation *deepened* since the Browne Review Report (October 2010), the Comprehensive Spending Review (November 2010) and the White Paper on Higher Education (June 2011). These documents framed changes they introduced, as ‘putting students \at the heart of higher education’, as the third of these reports was titled. Critics suggest that students are being located in a nearly heartless system in which the choices on offer cost more, provide less contact with lecturers and are increasingly widening class divides (Campaign for the Public University, 2011; Collini, 2011; 2012; McGettigan, 2011a).

Many factors contribute to this reconfiguration of students, lecturers and universities. Government is cutting to tuition fees by 80% (for so called ‘STEM subjects of Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine and a few others) to 100% (for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) and individual students’ fee contributions to between £6 and £9k year are concomitantly doubling or trebling (Browne Review Report, 2010: 47). University education is being redefined largely as ‘training for employment’ with most universities to be seen as serving ‘the purpose of training’ (Campaign for the Public University, 2011). Students are now construed as consumers, lecturers are being increasingly assessed on their efficacy in satisfying these consumers’ needs and HE institutions are made more accountable for ensuring that programmes better prepared students for employment after graduation. Russell Group universities are

the exception; they are charging the full £9k and offering mostly elite students the kind of ‘liberal’ education most students received at former polytechnics and universities before 1992.

Modelling universities ‘on the types of financial speculation that has helped get us in to this mess’ in the first place’ (Vernon, 2010: 3) allows the government to encourage corporate speculators to compete with public universities, a process enhanced by not subjecting these speculators to the kinds of pervasive regulations that the rest of the system endures (Collini, 2011; McGettigan, 2011a). As McGettigan (2011a) notes, ‘global higher education providers’ are primarily concerned with profit, not individual or social good. Indeed, the CEO of the first such private provider (BPP<sup>xvi</sup>), Carl Lygo, granted university status in 2010, claimed that he sought to cut university running costs by 25%--whilst spending an estimated 25% of the total budget on marketing (Shepherd, 2011; Hotson, 2011). But we need not look so far afield to see how profit propels the creation of such universities; at least one university is setting up its own for-profit university: Coventry University College (CUC), an offshoot of Coventry University, will open its doors in autumn 2012. CUC will charge no more than £4,800 per year, running professional programmes seven days a week, 42 weeks a year from 7am to 10pm weekdays and to 4pm weekends. Despite its association with Coventry University, students will have no ‘access to the university’s library, IT or sporting facilities’ (Vasagar, 2011).

Privatisation also will require many previously state funded universities to ‘replace entirely their annual grant income of £35 million (or more) with private fee income within three years’ (Campaign for the Public University, 2011). ‘[S]uch radical and rapid change’ of public universities is something that ‘[v]ery few private sector businesses could survive’

(Campaign for the Public University, 2011). Yet the government has no plans to support universities that might go bankrupt as they strive to implement these and other changes. Further, the annual cost of loans to students from 2015/2016 (when students being charged nearly double or treble current tuition fee rates will have entered all three years of university education) will be £12 billion, paid for in the short term by government and will add £5-£6 billion per year to government debt. This amount will add '£50 to £100 billion to the public sector net debt over the next twenty years' (McGettigan, 2012a). As government costs for providing these loans will be considerably greater than under the current system of government-subsidised tuition fees a question is raised about the impetus for HE privatisation in the first place. It now appears that the cut to government expenditure on HE was not simply to pay for rising government expenditure on an expanding HE system over the past 20 years. Rather, privatisation conveniently also reconfigure HE as an individual investment and, simultaneously, as a means of ensuring the continued educating of the already elite whilst preparing the rest for, at best, non-professional jobs after receiving training rather than education at university.

Additional casualties will be lecturers' pay and conditions and, concomitantly, students' loans and the education they receive<sup>xvii</sup>.

Academics, especially in most of the emergent private sector, will receive less pay and face more insecure and intensified working conditions than those currently in the public sector. The latter will further face still further scrutiny of their activities, having to spend even more time than at present providing evidence of compliance with regimes of accountability which cuts down on the time that they have to perform the activities these regimes supposedly measure (such as teaching and research. Audit of

course does more than this; it replaces ‘established informal, tacit understandings with explicit . . . centrally mandated targets, and [creates] . . . a climate of anxiety and fear [through introducing] permanent revolution in the quotidian practices of higher education institutions’ goals and management targets’ (Thorpe 2008, 107)<sup>xviii</sup>.

As lecturers’ pay and conditions worsen, management levels and salaries grow, further adding to universities’ costs. In 2011, the salaries of Vice Chancellors of 13 of the most elite institutions reached more than £330,000 on average per annum-. This occurred as teaching and capital project budgets were cut across the board (Shepherd 2012).

Further, 85,000 university places were taken out of the system of government-allocated student places for the 2012-2013, academic year. Twenty thousand of these places—nearly 25%--were opened for competition to universities charging tuition fees of an average of £7,500 or less per student per year. Sixth form colleges, historically educating 16 to 18 year olds and, during the past 15 to 20 years also providing the first year of university education at a lower cost than public universities charged, gained more than 10,000 of these 20,000 places (Lee, 2012). Sixty-five thousand places—more than 75%--were allocated to students with A level results of two As and a B or higher. These latter students will likely attend universities charging £9,000—that is, Russell Group universities. Thus a race to the top (of more than three times as many places to institutions charging maximum fees) accompanies the race to the bottom, polarising the entire system further<sup>xix</sup>.

Thus, university education is no longer viewed as an intrinsic good, enabling individual’s self-cultivation, or as a social good, as the Robbins Report proposed 60 years ago<sup>xx</sup>, but as serving singularly to enable

individuals to gain the skills and training necessary to perform graduate jobs and earn graduate salaries (especially in Russell Group universities). Thus shifting higher education costs from society to the individual re-orientates education from a public to a private good; from a gift of one generation to the next and therefore to society, to ‘an individual’s personal investment—even a speculation on his or her personal future’ (Rustin, 2010, Finlayson, 2010).

University restructuring is also occurring at the micro level of university workers and students as well. Lecturers and support workers are being further disciplined, work-intensified and insecure. Disciplining and work-intensification are expanding as regimes of accountability grow for both groups, diminished in number, who must now spend more time demonstrating compliance with these regimes. Consequently lecturers have less time to prepare for teaching and/or doing research without working further into evenings and on weekends. Growing insecurity is due to universities having cut 25 % of all programmes since 2005 and currently making additional cuts to academic and support staff through voluntary and mandatory redundancies supposedly enhancing their survival in the increasingly competitive world that privatisation is introducing. Given that some universities are unlikely to survive this competition and that government has already said it will not support universities facing bankruptcy, pressures on all staff grow. They therefore spend more time performing their growing tasks and facing greater insecurity.

Students (except for those at elite institutions) are increasingly encouraged to see themselves as customers who pay more for the same, or, as is increasingly the case worse, education, given fewer lecturers, higher student/lecturer ratios and lecturer work-intensification. As fees



have risen over the past 14 years since their introduction, in 1998, students have found it necessary to engage in at least part-time employment, with over 50% of full-time students engaged in paid work in 2006 (BBC, 2006). Students thereby have less time and energy to study, which contributes to their instrumentality as learners. Further, most students were already trained in instrumentality given that prior to HE their education focused on grades achieved on national tests. Whilst staff and student conditions worsened, top management pay at least rose, with a growing minority receiving nearly corporate sized salaries.

Therefore, what was once ‘one of the world’s most successful higher education systems’ (Collini, 2011; Hotson, 2011) is now being reorganised as ‘a rigged market . . . that will confer and confirm privilege among the privileged, riches upon the [already] rich, and ensure the complete control of demand and supply’ (Inglis 2011). The process of more fully conceptualising and realising universities as profit-making businesses will likely lead to some universities closing (predominantly those supporting less privileged white and minority students) and a growing polarity between elite and other institutions.

HE has reached the stage of deep neoliberalisation. Reforms and structures are framed much more fully than ever before with the logic of marketisation, commodification and financialisation that benefits the few at the expense of the many (Ball, 2003, 2012, Canaan, 2008, 2010, 2011; Shore and Wright. 2000; Strathern, 2000). What kinds of responses to these processes are emerging and how might they be developed further?

### **3. Critical Pedagogy: re-conceptualising higher education as a process of continuous reflexive resistance to and action against what is**

The above analysis paints a very bleak picture of English HE at present and into the future. But it is incomplete. Section two suggested that there has been a 40 -year process has led to the current moment of deep neoliberalisation. But if, as section one showed, neoliberalisation is construed as a process that started with discrete and disconnected experiments against the prior Keynesian model of economic growth that deepened, so, I suggest below can we consider critical pedagogy as an experiment that could be seen as countering this neoliberalising.

### **A. There is at present a need to define critical pedagogy**

Amsler (2012) reminds us of the importance of defining critical pedagogy in an era where business and corporate interests and government are appropriating ‘popular education methods’ [to produce] ... consumerised longing for autonomy [at the same time that] . . . discourses of participation have become ubiquitous in mainstream politics’ (Amsler 2012:61).<sup>xxi</sup> Those on the left have long known that capitalism can and does co-opt progressive ideas and practices<sup>xxii</sup>. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the present climate where neoliberalisation so powerfully colonises peoples’ dreams and desires as part of its pervasive penetration of their daily lives, that key critical pedagogy signifiers are being linked to marketising, commoditising and financialising signifieds. All the more reason, then, that left critical pedagogues specify what they mean by critical pedagogy

Further, left critical pedagogues often presume, without clarifying what they mean by the concepts and practices they utilise. Amsler (2012:68; see also Ball, 2012) further reminds us that critical pedagogues ‘draw on diverse and contradictory philosophical traditions, occupy different generational, class, gender and racial positions’ (and, I would add, have

different histories and degrees of political activism). Thus clarifying the insights that guide one's engagement with critical pedagogy can help others clarify their practices and theories in order to develop a fuller appreciation of how critical pedagogy can contribute to the process of contesting the neoliberalisation of HE. Given the multiple definitions and usages of critical pedagogy in and outside this literature, below I present the understanding of critical pedagogy I have been developing with the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education Group (now the Critical Pedagogy Collective (which also includes Sarah Amsler, Stephen Cowden, Sara Motta and Gurnam Singh))<sup>xxiii</sup>. I seek to show how this understanding of critical pedagogy can help forge left alternatives to the neoliberalisation of HE.

### **B. Critical pedagogy assumes that education is an inherently political practice produced within and against wider politicising structures and processes**

The Critical Pedagogy Collective defines critical pedagogy as 'overtly political and critical of the status quo' and, concomitantly, as 'committed to progressive social and political change' (Crowther 2010:16). Our position stems from and builds on Freire's acknowledgement that whilst education claims to 'serve everyone', it actually 'function[s] in the interests of the dominant class' (Freire, 1987:103). Indeed,

There neither is, nor ever has been, an educational practice . . . [that is] neutral in the sense of being committed only to preponderantly abstract, intangible ideas. To try to convince people that there is such a thing as this . . . is indisputably a political practice (Freire, 2003:77).

As part 2 of this paper argued, higher education has been one of many arenas of public life organised with the neoliberalising logic that seeks to

transform all social relations into market relations. However, as Freire, like other revolutionary theorists and practitioners North and South whose work informs his own (including Fanon, Gramsci, Guevara and Marx), recognises that dominant class control can never be complete:

Education, as a specifically human experience, is a form of intervention in the world . . . [that] implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking. The dialectical nature of the educational process does not allow it to be only one or the other of these things (Freire, 2001:90-91).

For Freire all social processes entail intervention in the world in which dominant efforts to impose their vision of the world on others are incomplete because their dominance rests on obscuring and/or ignoring the interests and views of others. Thus, hegemony can only ever be partial. In the context of the full frontal attack on the public university through neoliberalising processes today, critical pedagogues aiming to resist these processes and structures can work with students so that together they can speak truth to, and against, the power now pervading HE.

### **C. In critical pedagogy the teacher seeks to work with and against students' current interrelated words and worldviews**

Freirean critical pedagogy presumes that students enter education with already elaborated 'discourse[s] upon the world, their world [with which they were] remaking that world' (Freire 2003:38). Students are conceptualised as having 'knowledges [that] are explicit, suggested or hidden in [the ways that they decode the world] . . . which in its turn always precedes the decoding of the word' (Freire, 2001:76). For Freire students' words embody their prior understandings of the world; their

words ‘have two dimensions, reflection and action’ (1996:68). Students’ words thus embed their reflections on prior actions.

The teacher uses what Freire calls the problem posing model in which students are presumed to be subjects already ‘capable of knowing’ (2001:112). This assumption of students as knowers guides teaching, negating the conventional assumption that the teacher is the all-knowing sage on the stage of the classroom to whom students passively listen. As Freire (1996:78) asks:

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own . . . How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite?

As Au (2007) notes, for Freire teaching and learning is a two-way process. Students and teachers are ‘co-investigators in dialogue’ (Freire, 1996:62) who together explore the problems or issues of concern to students. Students are encouraged to consider their prior naming of the world as ‘a problem’ that ‘requires of them a new naming’ (Freire, 1996:69) that can negate dominant naming or meanings. As students come to name the world more fully in their own terms, they can see themselves as actors in and transformers of the world who have an agency that can be differently realised in future. Students come to recognise, that is, that their speech fuses ‘action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world’ (Freire, 1996:106). Praxis here operates at a phenomenological level; it entails a transformation of one’s perceptions of and practices in the world.

Both teach and learn in and through their dialogue; ‘whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of

learning’ (Freire, 2001:31). Student learning thus entails teaching the teacher about students’ words and worldviews so that the teacher who listens can reflect back limits to students’ understandings. Teachers themselves can only teach because as students their learning required them to develop ‘ways, paths, methods of teaching’ themselves (Freire, 2001:31).<sup>xxiv</sup> Thus, ‘to teach is part of the very fabric of learning (Freire, 2001:30-31)—just as, I would add, learning is part of the very fabric of teaching. These are interrelated and mutually informing processes. Thus students and teachers’ words and worldviews reflect their prior internalisation of those of the dominant. The teacher works with students to facilitate the latter’s realisation of this internalising process (and through that process, I would add, teachers learn about their own internalising of the dominant logic that their dialogue can help them undo).

The vision of learning and teaching that critical pedagogy proposes goes against the increasing narrowness of current construction of learning and teaching in which ‘human interests are abandoned whenever they threaten the values of the market’ (2001:93). Critical pedagogy places human interests in the foreground, which is one reason why at least some left HE lecturers utilise its tenets to guide their teaching practices.

#### **D. Critical pedagogy seeks to transcend participants’ present thinking and doing**

The possibility of remaking the educational process by working with students to utilise their agency so that it can more fully enable them to realise themselves presumes that people are ‘beings in the process of *becoming*’ (Freire 1996:65, emphasis in original). To be, that is, is

conceptualised as moving ‘out of and beyond ourselves’ (2001:25), towards something “apart from oneself, outside itself, which surrounds it” (Vieria Pinto in Freire, 1996:51). At the core of this ontological position is ‘the attitude of permanent openness’ (Freire, 2001:119). The openness of being is due, Freire posits, to the fact that humans are simultaneously ‘being’ and ‘making with’ others in a world conditioned by one’s antecedents<sup>xxv</sup>, as the second epigraph indicates. If being entails being *with* others in a process of collectively thinking and acting, remaking the world in part in and through remaking one’s dreams about how the world could be:

Imagination and conjecture about a different world . . . is as necessary to the praxis of historical “subjects” (agents) in the process of transforming reality as it necessarily belongs to human toil that the worker or artisan have in his or her head a design, a “conjecture” of what he or she is about to make (Freire, 2003:39).

Imagining the world being possibly other than it currently is thus an integral part of thinking about and acting in the world. Dreaming otherwise guides this process and is itself transformed by prior reflection and action.

Dreaming otherwise is part of what Freire considers to be the human capacity to hope. This hope, this dreaming capacity, is itself impelled by openness:

[i]t is this sense of incompleteness that itself engenders hope. Hope is rooted in men’s [sic] incompleteness in which they move out in constant search—a search that can be carried out only in communion with others (Freire, 1996:72).

Freire uses the word ‘communion’ here and elsewhere purposefully, evoking the profound sense of sharing and participation that lies at the root of this word<sup>xxvi</sup>. This capacity for greater completeness does not operate abstractly; it requires grounding in practice:

[h]ope as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice . As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness (2003:9).

The human need for hope is therefore only realisable by action in and on the world—practice that actively aims to change current historical conditions.

This capacity for hope with which lecturers and students can work together to transcend their current understandings, states of being and actions thus offers a strategy for negating the kind of fatalism suggested by Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism. Indeed, Freire’s last book spoke of neoliberalism’s ‘cynical fatalism and its inflexible negation of the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia’ (2001:22). Such a strong sense of stasis, immobility, can potentially be countered by the kind of personal and collective moment of dreaming differently that critical pedagogy provides (Cowden 2010).

### **E. Critical pedagogy offers a model for revolutionary praxis**

Freire’s entire oeuvre viewed critical pedagogy in the classroom as the basis for both phenomenological praxis enabling people to change their perceptions of and actions in the world (discussed in 3C above) as well as for wider and deeper revolutionary change. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), for example, Freire presents as two parallel moments the process by which teacher and students transform their understanding of the world



through their dialogical work together and the process by which revolutionary leaders<sup>xxvii</sup> and the oppressed work together to change the world (pp. 109-110). Here Freire speaks of:

[t]he educational dialogical quality of revolution . . . [being] one of the most effective instruments for keeping the revolution from becoming institutionalized and stratified (1996:118).

In *Pedagogy of Freedom* (2001) Freire connects learning and teaching more immediately with revolutionary action that aims to overcome current injustices. Further, and importantly, in this later work Freire more explicitly views learning (and teaching) as being a simultaneously positive and negative practice that links to and is part of a more far-reaching revolutionary praxis:

For what and for whom do I study? And against what and against whom? . . . [T]o the extent that the future is not inexorably sealed and already decided, there is another task that awaits us. Namely the task of the inherent openness of the future . . . It is necessary . . . that we know that our comprehension of the future is not static but dynamic . . . It is not by resignation but by the capacity for indignation in the face of injustice that we are affirmed (2001:73-74).

In this excerpt Freire conceptualises studying (or learning) as being for one purpose (revolution) and group (the working class) and against another purpose (the status quo) and group (the elite). Further, given the Freirean supposition that humans are inherently open beings, the future is not construed as predetermined but as requiring an appreciation of the past so that it can be remade differently so as to lessen present injustices. Freire thus speaks of the need for people to reflect upon the past in order to understand ‘more clearly what and who they are so that they can more

wisely build the future' (1996:65). Only by these reflections on learning, on the world as it is and could be, on those who dominate and those who are consequently oppressed, can learning and teaching, students and teacher, together work towards building a better world. Revolutionary praxis is thus conceptualised as being at the core of the student teacher relationship, as Au (2007) notes, Freirean critical pedagogy has the ultimate aim of enabling:

students and teachers to . . . look at reality, critically reflect upon that reality, and take transformative action to change that reality based upon the original critical reflection, thereby deepening their consciousness and changing the world for the better.

The Critical Pedagogy Collective to which I belong has spoken about needing to work with others to deepen consciousness and improve the conditions of the many in the world today. Our aim is to work with others in and outside the university, pooling our knowledge and experience:

to work towards collectively creating, publicising and realising more socially just alternatives to the neoliberal status quo (Amsler et al, 2010:11).

But we have not called this revolutionary praxis because it is not revolutionary. We face the dilemma of teaching students who increasingly have gone through an education system with predetermined curricula and national testing regimes that stifles their learning and encourage examination success (see, for example, Allen and Ainley, 2012). In the context of students coming to HE with such 'preparation', government HE policies compound this problem by encouraging students to consider themselves customers seeking a service from lecturers. Further, Freirean critical pedagogy requires considerable time and space

to prepare and realise and those in the Critical Pedagogy Collective like so many others, find it more and more difficult to obtain this time and space. What we do, however, in this challenging context, is to utilise critical pedagogy insights to guide our constrained dialogues with students. We wonder if it is enough for us to work with students to help them and ourselves question further the world as it is and seek to think, act and dream differently. Freire seems to suggest that this is at least partly essential today given the ‘cynical fatalism’ that negates ‘the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia’ (2001:22). Colleagues and I in the Critical Pedagogy Collective thus work with students to open up for discussion ‘the increasing wealth of the few and the rapid increase of poverty and misery for the vast majority of humanity’ (Freire, 2001:114).

Interestingly, alternatives to neoliberalising processes and structures are now emerging *outside* the public university at present. Whilst it is not the brief of this paper to address these alternatives, I mention them to indicate that at least some academics are taking seriously their commitment to learning and teaching with students to facilitate a more affirming educational experience that can itself contribute to thinkers, actors and dreamers of and for a better world than the one we currently inhabit. I am part of one such alternative and intend to explore our efforts more fully in future publications.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper suggests that an understanding of the English university today is enhanced by viewing it with the lens that neoliberalisation offers. Within English HE, neoliberalisation has, by autumn 2012, reached the point where some new students now paying nearly or completely full tuition fee costs claim that universities must satisfy their needs as fee-

paying customers. Also from autumn 2012, lecturers must act as an arm of the UK Border Agency, monitoring student attendance ostensibly to ensure that no potential terrorists lurk amongst the ranks of foreign students (Ingham, 2012). These factors come on top of a declining staff group facing ever increasing work intensification, monitoring and insecurity, and some institutions charging the full £9000 have under-recruited first year students whilst the government claims that it will not provide a safety net for any such institutions (Vasagar, 2012<sup>xxviii</sup>).

What can critical pedagogy offer English HE in this climate of a deeply neoliberalised public university system that, year on year, compounds the challenges that lecturers face in seeking to work, think and act differently with students, one another, and potentially outside others? The analysis above of Freirean-based critical pedagogy takes some steps in developing alternative strategies for overcoming, at least in the classroom, prior limits to lecturer and student engagement with one another and the world more fully and deeply. It suggests that the process of seeking to nurture this more engaging pedagogy embodies the negation of the fatalism that pervades university structures and practices as well as the bodies, minds and souls of lecturers and students today. By doing so, students and lecturers can begin to speak and act *with* one another as they bring more of themselves, their understandings, to their dialogue, re-thinking and re-making the world in a process of praxis—at least in a phenomenological sense.

The growing presence of critical pedagogy in and against the neoliberalising English public university is hardly surprising, given the revitalising hope that its practice offers to and engenders in the lecturer student relationship. It is one indication, amongst others (such as newly emergent campaigning groups and a growing number of conferences on

the public university and alternatives), that the present is not a time of mere quiescence in English HE. And yet, as colleagues and I in and outside the Critical Pedagogy Collective are well aware, those who take the commitment to critical pedagogy seriously find themselves exhausted, depleted, stressed and depressed at the seemingly Sisyphean challenges we face. Given these challenges, perhaps it might be more possible and likely that those committed to critical pedagogy can more fully utilise its tenets to develop alternatives outside the public university.

I have argued that strategies that critical pedagogy offers powerful strategies to the process of building alternatives to the neoliberalising university. I have been guided in part by the insight of Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) and Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) that neoliberalisation can be countered in ways similar to its own countering of the post-war Keynesian welfare state—through building initially disconnected and not clearly articulated alternatives. I have thus sought to clarify what I mean by critical pedagogy so that a more coherent and powerful praxis against neoliberalisation can be developed in and outside the public university.

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### **Author details**

**Joyce E. Canaan** is a Professor of Sociology at Birmingham City University. She has published widely on critical pedagogy, the neoliberal university and learning and teaching in the university today.

### **Correspondence details:**

Joyce Canaan, Professor of Sociology, Birmingham City University, City North Campus, Perry Barr, Birmingham, B42 2SU.  
[jecanaan@gmail.com](mailto:jecanaan@gmail.com).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Earlier drafts of this paper were given to the: ESRC seminar series, Global citizenship as a graduate attribute, (14 October 2011), Middlesex University Conference on Critical Education, (2012) and 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of AMSE-AMCE-WAER, Reims, France (June 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> The former 20 institutions in this elite group has now been expanded to 24, leaving the second tier of universities with 15 members (Grove, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> University and College Union.

<sup>iv</sup> These include the Campaign for the Public University (<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>) and the Campaign for the Social Sciences, (<http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/documents><http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/documents>)

<sup>v</sup> Similar conditions are being imposed on administrative staff whose conditions are not discussed herein.

<sup>vi</sup> <sup>vi</sup> 27% of all degree programmes in the UK have been cut from 2006 to the present; of these, 31% occurred in England (Press Association 2012). At present (autumn 2012) Welsh universities are being nearly halved from 11 to 6.

<sup>vii</sup> Space limitations prevent me from discussing important contributions made by campaigning groups of academics such as Campaign for the Public University (<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>) and the Campaign for the Social Sciences, (<http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/documents><http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/documents>).

Contributors to both groups, especially the former, have produced significant documents, some of which I use herein.

<sup>viii</sup> Thanks to Ayman Salem for his thoughtful reading of this section.

<sup>ix</sup> Thanks to Spyros Themelis for calling my attention to this process.

<sup>x</sup> Harvey calls these the 'signal features' (2005:160) of neoliberalisation.

<sup>xi</sup> See, for example, reelnews <http://reelnews.co.uk/>

<sup>xii</sup> Thanks to Ayman Salem for articulating this point. (personal communication 2012).

<sup>xiii</sup> The analysis below is partial, highlighting some key neoliberalising processes in English HE, a process that continues as I write. Further, whilst Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) and Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009) developed a model at national and supra-national levels, I am applying it solely to English HE.

<sup>xiv</sup> Whilst Dearing also recommended that the government should retain the gradually reducing maintenance grant given to support students' living costs, the government decided to replace it with means-tested loans for students from poorer backgrounds alone.

<sup>xv</sup> HE *also* became subject to regimes of accountability from the mid-1980s with the establishment of the then Research Assessment Exercise (1986), the Quality Assurance Agency (1997) and the Teaching Quality Agency.

<sup>xv</sup> BPP was an offshoot of the Apollo Group that ran Phoenix University in the US and was fined \$9.8 million (£6 million) in 2004 for giving bonuses to recruitment agents to boost recruitment numbers (Fearn, 2009).

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<sup>xvi</sup> BPP was an offshoot of the Apollo Group that ran Phoenix University in the US and was fined \$9.8 million (£6 million) in 2004 for giving bonuses to recruitment agents to boost recruitment numbers (Fearn, 2009).

<sup>xvii</sup> The exception will be institutions charging more than £7,500 (estimated as the real annual tuition cost at present, thereby receiving more income per student than they currently do).

<sup>xviii</sup> I have discussed this process in detail in prior papers (Canaan 2008, 2010).

<sup>xix</sup> The race to the top is also indicated by the privately financed New College of the Humanities, led by internationally renowned academics with A C Grayling as its first master. This university will charge double the September 2012 top capped tuition fee (£18,000) with lecturers paid 25% more than at public universities. If successful, other similar institutions could follow. But because the government will not offer such institutions student loans, their further development might be limited (Collini, 2011).

<sup>xix</sup> Robbins argued that universities should: ‘entail ’instruction in skills; . . . ’produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women . . . ’ [be centrally concerned with] the search for truth . . . [and] transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship ‘(Robbins Report 1963, Ch. 2, points 25-28).

<sup>xix</sup> For example, an unemployed friend of mine on the Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) scheme recently was encouraged by their local JSA advisor to apply for a trainee community organiser post for a government funded social enterprise. The job pack cited Freire’s work (but not *Pedagogy of the Oppressed!*) and that of Saul Alinsky as guiding the post and wider programme to which it belonged.

<sup>xix</sup> As *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007) shows, in recent years this has been a re-appropriation of the critique of capitalism created by radical activism of the late 1960s.

<sup>xix</sup> The Critical Pedagogy Group has held day workshops and produced podcasts to date; we have recently submitted *Acts of knowing: Critical pedagogy in against and beyond the university* (Cowden, Singh, Amsler, Canaan and Motta) to Continuum Press for publication in 2013.

<sup>xix</sup> I would add that teachers also learn about limits to their own words and worldviews as they listen to and reflect on students’ words and worldviews. A larger critique of the lack of greater reflexivity in the Freirean teacher student relationship is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>xix</sup> Freire partly acknowledges his debt to Marx’s idea that ‘men make history but under circumstances not of their own choosing’ when he says:

‘Even before I had read Marx I had made his words my own . . . I rejoice in knowing that I am a “conditioned” being, capable of going beyond my own’ conditioning’’ (2001:115-116).

<sup>xix</sup> I am guided here by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Hoad, 1993).

<sup>xix</sup> I am uncomfortable with the construct of revolutionary leaders working alongside the oppressed, just as I am uncomfortable with the construct of a teacher focusing on student learning without also considering their own. Further discussion of this issue cannot be addressed in this paper.

<sup>xix</sup> Whilst the University of Southampton has announced a drop in anticipated first year students, I have heard of similar drops of student numbers at other universities in and outside the Russell Group.



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