

Polemics

Democracy as Protest: Towards a Free University Brighton Students' Union

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What has democracy got to do with protest, resistance and politics? In this paper I will argue that if we are committed to an emancipatory politics, democracy is not only important, but is crucial. In other words, in a proper sense, one cannot do emancipatory politics without democracy. To demonstrate why, I am going to first talk about my experience of working both within and without the Students' Union at University of Brighton; second show how the Students' Union actively inhibits what I will describe as our democratic agency; and third make the case that we - by which I am referring to the students of University of Brighton who are treated as children by the institution we are equal members of and by the Union that is meant to 'empower' us - 'we' should work towards the construction and assumption of a Free University Brighton Students' Union,¹ a Union which would be properly (or perhaps we should say 'improperly') democratic.

Rancière, Democracy and the Policing of the Student

What do I mean when I talk about 'democracy'? I am not using the word in a conventional manner; to refer to a collective decision making process, or a certain form of political regime. I am taking my lead from the thought of Jacques Rancière, a contemporary theorist whose work has covered philosophy, historiography, aesthetics, pedagogy, political theory and cultural analysis. I am going to first outline what Rancière understands as democracy and then think about this in relation to Brighton's Students' Union, and what alternatives we may wish to develop in response to its depoliticising tendencies.

To talk about Rancière's understanding of democracy we need to also understand some other concepts that Rancière makes use of, namely 'politics' and 'equality'. For Rancière politics, equality and democracy are intimately linked. Politics, Rancière argues, is that which disrupts the "order of the visible and the sayable".² It is the aesthetic distribution through which we experience our world, making certain subjectivities visible and others invisible, and further, assigning specific capacities to these subjectivities; giving them a proper, legitimate place in the social order. In other words, the names we are given and the capacities we are presumed to have police who we are, how we are meant to act and what we can say. They determine what is the proper thing to do, and what is the improper thing to do; they determine when I am acting legitimately, and when I am

1 The Free University Brighton is a grassroots organisation set up by activists wanting to make education available to those who have been priced out of accessing it, as well as mounting a challenge to the privatisation of higher education more generally. It is one of many similar initiatives around the world. For more information, see Harriet Swain, "Could the free university movement be the great new hope for education?," *The Guardian*, 28 January 2013, at <http://bit.ly/1tKqtn0>, accessed 22 October 2014, and www.freeuniversitybrighton.org.

2 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, transl. J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [1995]), 29.

acting illegitimately. For example, in the neoliberal university being a student is to be a consumer: we are treated as such from the moment we put down our choices on our UCAS forms to the moment when we complete our final assessment, and beyond as we desperately hold up our degrees as proof of our employability to our possible future employers. There are certain things a student is meant to do, and certain things a student is not meant to do: in a neoliberal university a student is meant to attend lectures and seminars delivered by staff or PhD students; write essays and take exams; join societies; go to nightclubs; fill in surveys; attend meetings so that we can be properly consulted; organise conferences or symposia; regularly inform the University of our activities if we are of a different nationality; take out Santander bank accounts; pay back the debts from our loans when we leave; and many other things, some deeply objectionable, some simply questionable, some relatively inoffensive. Conversely, there are many things, as people assigned the category 'student' in a neoliberal university, that we are not meant to do: we are not meant to decide how the University manages its finances; or contribute to curriculum development; or talk on behalf of the University; or expect to have a conversation with the Vice Chancellor; or to hang our art on University walls without first gaining the permission of the appropriate member of staff; or enter into forms of communal politics which are so often recognised as disruptive (which of course they are, although probably not in the way that is commonly understood); or enter into forms of politics with those who are not students - academic or support staff, 'associate' students in the private International College³ (those excluded from academic study whether due to debt, or nationality, or narrowly prescriptive understandings of what intelligence is, and how you assess for it).

To be political then, on Rancière's terms, is to resist this policing: it is to act in a way in which one is not meant to act, or is presumed to not be capable of acting. It is to go where you are not meant to go, speak to those you are not meant to speak to, about things you are not meant to have an opinion on. It is, in short, to assume an equality between yourself and every other member of University of Brighton. It is to assume the Vice Chancellor has no special capacity for governing this University, nor the deans of our Colleges, nor the heads of our Schools, nor our trade union representatives, nor our students' union representatives, nor any one individual. In this way, we are equal in our incapacity to govern. For Rancière:

Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it.⁴

Equality is something we assume everyone shares, and then through our actions we attempt to verify it in our everyday experience at the University. We do not strive towards equality, because then we have already assumed we are not equal and in this moment instantiated something of what it is to be unequal. The disruption of any entitlement

³ The University of Brighton's International College is a subsidiary of the international for-profit business Kaplan International Colleges, which now occupies numerous parts of University of Brighton. Kaplan charges up to £17,970 per year tuition fees, has a history of fraudulent practices, and has previously been under federal investigation in the United States. See Tamar Lewin, "Scrutiny Takes Toll on For-Profit College Company," *The New York Times*, 9 November 2010, at <http://nyti.ms/1DzzBfi>, accessed 22 October 2014.

⁴ Rancière, *Disagreement*, 33.

to govern, motivated out of an assumption of equality, is what Rancière understands as democracy. Indeed, democracy is the paradoxical assertion that the only legitimate entitlement to govern is not through birth, or through wealth, or through knowledge, but through the equal lack of capacity to govern; through one's illegitimacy. As Rancière says,

Democracy [...] is not a set of institutions or one kind of regime among others but a way for politics to be. Democracy is not the parliamentary system or the legitimate State. It is not a state of the social either, the reign of individualism or the masses. Democracy is, in general, politics' mode of subjectification if, by politics, we mean something other than the organization of bodies as a community and the management of places, powers and functions. Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualize in the broader concept of the police. It is the name of what comes and interrupts the smooth working of this order through a singular mechanism of subjectification.⁵

Democracy is thus concerned with aesthetics; with the power of our speech and our bodies to be deployed in improper ways, signifying new ways in which we can relate to the world and understand our place as a part of it. To quote Rancière again,

In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized. It is in this respect that we may speak of a poetics of politics.⁶

When I mentioned earlier what I called our democratic agency, what I was referring to is this poetics of politics: the extent to which we believe ourselves capable of 'inventing the scene' upon which we enter into political exchange within (and without) our University. It is this democratic agency which is stifled not just by the University but also by our Students' Union, and it is this democratic agency that I believe we would be demonstrating in the construction and assumption of a Free University Brighton Students' Union.

The Complicity of the Students' Union

I now want to outline how we can make use of Rancière's thought to help understand what's been going on at Brighton Students' Union. The Students' Union, I will argue, is powerfully committed to the policing of the subjectivity of the 'student'. At Brighton, the Students' Union functions as a crucial department within the University's institutional structure, being central to the branding of the University, to the 'student experience' the University has to demonstrate is better than elsewhere, to the 'benchmarks' and 'best practices' that the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education demands, and to the implementation of surveys which quantify our 'satisfaction' to hold up as cold, hard proof that University of Brighton is a 'satisfying' place to study. The Students' Union has unflinchingly taken up its role, demanded by the University, of putting "students at the

⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritics* 30 (2000) 2: 113-126, 116.

heart of the system”, to quote the Higher Education White Paper.⁷ At a certain point in the past one might have been forgiven for thinking that putting students at the heart of the system was a good thing to do. Indeed, on the face of it this seems important if we are to realise our democratic agency as students, as I’ve been calling it. But as Wendy Brown has made clear, neoliberalism has become highly skilled at evacuating political concepts of any politics they may once have had, filling this political void with the values of the market.⁸ Students are at the heart of the system to the extent that we are consumers making choices and offering feedback about the products we are consuming.

At Brighton I have been involved in one way or another with the Students’ Union during most of the time I’ve been here. Sometimes this has been as a critic and activist from the outside of the Union, at other times this has been from within the Union, as a representative. During that time my attempts to encourage the Union to take seriously its role as a political representative of the student body, one which will probably have starkly different objectives and values from those of the Senior Management Team, have mostly been a failure. Certainly we were most effective when, as activists in 2010, we occupied Pavilion Parade in response to the Browne Review, and forced the Union to oppose cuts and support staff strikes. These weren’t insignificant successes, in that the discursive power of a union which says it supports staff striking or opposes cuts can help to inspire people, to give people confidence, or to make it harder for people to be victimised. But in the larger picture, while the Union had to say it was against the cuts (or at least, could not say it was for them or indifferent to them), the Union was not beholden to do anything to actively campaign on issues of privatisation.

It would be wrong to say that the state the Union finds itself in is because of the individuals that make up the Students’ Union, whether staff members or student representatives. Since 2011 when the policy to support striking staff was formally adopted it came under most strain in the academic year 2013-14, with the oversight of a sabbatical team that is probably the most ‘progressive’ in my time at Brighton. Equally, while Postgraduate Students’ Rep during 2013-14 I mainly attempted to persuade the Students’ Union to forge closer ties with the University’s trade unions, not least because many of the members of the Students’ Union I represented - postgraduates - are also staff members at the University. During this time I made no progress at all. This seemingly modest proposal demonstrates the strict unspoken rules of impropriety that govern what a ‘student’ is meant to do and how they are meant to act. We are not meant to disrupt the dominant idea of what it means to be a student by pointing out that many people’s lived experience of being a student is a messy mix of being a staff member, or being a parent, or being a distance learner, or being many other things which don’t have a place in what it means to be a student in a neoliberal university. Or more accurately, we can notice these things, but we can do nothing about them. We reduce these differences to nothing more than a variety of interest groups which we need to respond to (thereby shoring up the norm

7 Vince Cable & David Willets, “Students at the Heart of the System,” Gov.uk, 28 June 2011, at <http://bit.ly/1rq9yOV>, accessed 22 October 2014.

8 Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39-40.

of the neoliberal student), rather than allowing their lived experience to disrupt what it means to be a student in the first place.

Rather than focusing on the failure of individuals, we need to look elsewhere to explain the Students' Union's craven complicity in the neoliberal agenda. My colleague and friend Gari Gómez Alfaro, at a Critical Studies Research Group work-in-progress seminar earlier this year, described this process as a "divorce between the shell (namely the student union) and the inner movement of student activism".⁹ We need to understand how this divorce takes place. I think we need to consider how the Students' Union officers themselves are policed: by training courses run by the National Union of Students; by a never ending slurry of meetings the majority of which, by their own admission, they have no reason to be there for; by the advice and support of entrenched senior managers within the Union; by the demands of the University to promote the National Student Survey which quantifies our disagreements, tensions and awareness of fundamental contradictions, so that we don't have to worry about them, as if the University and the Union were removing a tiresome weight from our shoulders; and finally to the adoration of the annual election as the only true, proper expression of our political passions. All of these are forms of the "subsumption of dissent", to again refer to Gómez Alfaro's argument.

So if there is a divorce between the shell of the Union and the core of student activists, what is to be done? As my personal experience should show, working from within the Union to influence it is a fruitless task; working from without the Union is little better. For now I think we should forget about the Union - not because it isn't important (it is), but bizarrely, by trying to influence it we both undermine our ability to meaningfully influence it, and we stultify ourselves in the process: we fall victim to the subsumption of dissent. So I say again: we should, at this precise conjunction, ignore our Union, and hopefully those are the last words that I'll say about it.

Towards a Free University Brighton Students' Union

Now I would like to return to Rancière. I think we need to start taking democracy seriously and embrace our democratic agency which has for too long been subsumed into the poverty of representative consultancy. I think we need to start acting as equals in our University: we need to instigate a politics of poetics, and in this way give the lie to the entitlement to govern that our University is premised on. I think one way we can do this is by the construction and assumption of a Free University Brighton Students' Union. This would, at its heart, be nothing more than students at the University coming together as equals to partake in making decisions about how their degrees, departments, faculties etc. are run; to talk on behalf of the University, as the University; to act without asking permission; to open the University's doors to any and all; to collectively refuse to submit to the monitoring of the United Kingdom Borders Agency; in short, to disregard policies and procedures that belittle students, that stultify students, and that infantilise students. We shouldn't be naive: the University is unlikely to listen to us as equals, precisely because that would involve the recognition of us as equals, and further, would require a fundamental reimagining of what the University itself is. In this way when we state that we are equal members of the University, we do not do so in the hope that the University

⁹ See <http://bit.ly/1s09TPe> for more information. On the notion of the "shell" and "inner movement" see <http://micropolitiques.collectifs.net/>.

will listen to students more, or include us more; we do so in the knowledge that if the University is to recognise our shared equality then what the University is forever changes because we properly become what is the University. If the University refuses to regard us as equals, if it violates our assumed equality (rather than maintains an assumed inequality that we are eternally attempting to overcome) it is on these grounds that protest becomes a powerful and necessary part of democratic practice.

There is much more that a Free University Brighton Students' Union could be and could do, but I want to finish by simply saying that whatever it might be and whatever we call it, it will only begin when we presume ourselves equal, an equality which only gets its meaning when we act democratically and ignore the neoliberal student that both the University and our Students' Union assumes us to be.