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Student Rent-Strikes
Hope Through Unplanned Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

We explore a site of unplanned, informal critical pedagogy and how raising critical consciousness occurs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many students in England were required to pay rent for accommodation they could not occupy, or which offered reduced amenities. These undergraduates, who were largely first years, had yet to meet each other. Nonetheless, these students joined together to resist collectively, refusing to pay rent. Their action resulted in some partial victories. Through the lens of Freire's critical pedagogy, we examine students' lived experiences of participating in rent-strikes – using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Ideas of dialogue, praxis and learning with others through collective resistance, pervade the data. The research fleshes-out these stages which interweave to raise critical consciousness. This offers a site of critical hope, providing insights into possibilities for realising critical pedagogy across a wider demographic despite a relentless neoliberal agenda.

Introduction

This paper explores unplanned critical pedagogy, outside the formal classroom, and shows Freire's enduring relevance in a space far removed from that of his initial work. In the concrete context of rent strikes, critical pedagogy is collective, disruptive and inherently political.

> For Freire, pedagogy is not a method or an a priori technique to be imposed on all students but a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. (Giroux, 2010, p. 716)

We argue that the experiences of those taking-part in this social movement, coming-together in resistance, reveal learning and transformation and thus illustrate a tangible instance of the raising of critical consciousness. As well as bringing the theory of critical consciousness to life, we argue that the particular, atypical make-up of the (variably privileged) participants and the neoliberal context, make such transformation all the more remarkable and thus provocative. This research not only sheds light on aspects of critical pedagogy but also informs thinking around possibilities for realising wider, inclusive change despite the neoliberal context, offering critical hope. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, different universities in England took a variety of stances at various times, as national and local lockdowns came and went. Some universities moved to on-line teaching and maintained that stance, some offered a blended-learning approach, others moved between these approaches as guidelines changed. With this, often last-minute, changing university provision, students were often left unclear as to whether they should reside on campus or not. Moreover, students could find themselves locked-down, self-isolating, or unwell, in university accommodation, perhaps where they were yet to establish social connections. Whether they remained in student accommodation with severely restricted facilities, or wished to curtail, amend, or cancel their accommodation contracts, thousands of students found that housing and rent became central areas of concern. This led to collective rent-strikes in at least 55 (more than a third) of the universities in the UK (Simpson, 2021). The timing, scale and success of these rent-strikes varied considerably.

Our research took place against a neoliberal backdrop, for society at large (Harvey, 2007) and across the education system (Connell, 2013). Here, we consider that neoliberalism acts across scales, from the structural (Harvey, 2007), through to the individual level, where it penetrates our private lives, constructing self-governing neoliberal agents (Dean, 2007). Ong (2007) refers to this as '*Neoliberalism with a Big N*' and '*neoliberalism with a small n'* (p. 4). We sought to explore the lived-experiences of partaking in these rent-strikes and the student networks that built up around them. In this paper, we draw on concepts of critical pedagogy to probe how students learnt through this engagement.

We took an inductive and exploratory methodological approach to foreground the voices of the students. We conducted online, semi-structured interviews with eleven students, from across seven different universities. Students were invited to take part through Facebook and Instagram where they had rent-strike profiles. One was invited through a personal contact. Some use was made of snowball sampling, with students suggesting other people we could interview in the same university. All participants had taken part in a rent-strike except one, Dale (pseudonyms are being used), who was involved in planning for one which never occurred. The fact that we approached most through their public rent-strike profiles made it likely that most would be organisers and all

bar two – Ivy and Mala - were. We also note that most are studying humanities subjects. This does not necessarily indicate that those studying humanities are more likely to be activism organisers. Humanities students were frequently more affected by the issues around rent because they were invited to campuses but found all (or nearly all) of their sessions were online whereas students studying courses with large practical elements, such as STEM subjects were more likely to have face-to-face sessions. Edi's comment on strikers was typical: 'there's quite a few STEM people but from what I can tell the majority are humanities based'.

We used 'grounded theory methods as flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures' (Charmaz, 2003, p. 251). Our coding was inductive but we also used sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954), of dialogue, praxis and critical consciousness from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996, 2004) to inform our approach. We initially conducted independent free-writing and initial memoing on a range of interviews. Then we both read one interview and discussed coding approaches, which we subsequently tried applying to other interviews. Once we had agreed on our main emergent codes, we each coded and wrote further analytic memos on the interviews conducted by our co-author (Charmaz, 2006). Our analysis led to coherent groups of themes, and here we present those pertaining to aspects of critical pedagogy, explicitly using Freirean terminology of dialogue, praxis and raising critical consciousness, to structure our arguments. We have privileged the students' words to demonstrate consciousness raising processes.

The paper is situated at the nexus of critical pedagogy and learning in social movements. We argue that a Freirean lens is generative for exploring unplanned critical consciousness raising and there is a paucity of literature on unplanned learning operating at this particular nexus.

Situating the Exploration of Informal, Unplanned Critical Pedagogy in Social Movements

There is a body of research into 'curriculum activism' pertaining to social movements which aim to tackle social justice issues in formal education through addressing the curriculum, whether working to make it more inclusive, representative, or decolonised (Bhambra, Nisancioglu, & Gebrial, 2018; Glowach et al., 2022; Jester, 2018). Here then the focus is explicitly and firmly on the formal education system, at the school or higher education level.

Beyond formal education, there is a range of existing research on social movements themselves, taking different slants, many of which have their roots in political, as opposed to educational analysis. Indeed, Choudry (2015) contends that 'relatively little social movement studies literature focuses on learning and knowledge production' (p. 42). Graeber (2009), for example, in his ethnography on movements taking direct action, details the organisational arrangements, systems, processes and culture of a these particular spaces. Learning together features, alongside greater attention to the structure, process, and political implications.

Lang and Lang (2012) flesh out the details of one particular movement, Occupy Wall Street, collating contributions from activists across the movement, illustrating the varied role of media, arts and culture, or aspects of inclusion, alongside structures such as reading and research, planning and facilitating. Once again, aspects of social movement learning permeate through the recounted experiences of participating in the movement, as opposed to being to the fore.

Moreover, in both these substantive studies on the workings of social movements, although the social movement learning which occurs is indeeed outside the formal education system, rooted as it is in activism, much of the traces of learning portrayed is nonetheless deliberate, planned, and

curated, albeit in an informal, broadly non-hierarchical, dialogic and open manner. Embedding opportunities for sharing learning feature as a constructed part of the movement then, a tactic even, for expansion or impact. Thus while this learning through social movements is in an informal space, beyond the classroom, it remains largely planned.

Education has long been deployed intentionally as a tool for change across political social movements. Thus, wider research also acknowledges much of the learning taking place across such movements is internally planned, underpinned by deliberate, constructed educational activities, whilst recognising that unintentional, unplanned learning also occurs (see, for example, Hall, Clover, Crowther, & Scandrett, 2013).

Collective learning, cultivated through 'educator movements', such as teachers networks or unions, is recounted elsewhere (for example, see Maton, Dyke, & Stark, 2021). Here, with their specific focus on networks and movements of teachers, learning is indeed front and centre in the analysis. There is recognition that learning is embedded throughout such social movements and many insights into these processes, the role of knowledge, the production and sharing of knowledge and the deliberate creation of pedagogical spaces, are all explored. These are educator spaces, formed by, with and for educators and as such the embedded nature of learning, whilst imperative to probe and explore, is no surprise.

It is the unplanned nature of critical pedagogy across a movement of young people, not educators, which we argue provides the enriching, edifying aspect of our paper. We draw on Freire (1996) to detail how it is in this moment, that such unplanned learning together emerges, piece-by-piece, from the tentative early-stages of coming together in dialogue, to question and critique, through reflecting jointly on theory in action, linking the personal and the collective, to raising critical consciousness with others. Moreover, we argue that the realisation of such critical pedagogy against a neoliberal backdrop and within a movement which can be considered in some ways to have a novel, eclectic make-up, also affords hope.

In foregrounding the work of Paulo Freire, to explore the unplanned nature of critical pedagogy across a movement of young people here, we do not intend to deny the rich, diverse literature which has developed from his ideas. Nor do we claim that his work is uncontested or unproblematic. Freire's work has been variously critiqued for, amongst other things, having a too masculine, rational, or even colonial slant. Important variations of critical pedagogy have advanced to address such concerns. hooks (2014), taking a black, feminist approach to her transgressive pedagogy, eschews rationalistic simplicity. Her critical engaged pedagogy embraces the embodied, affective and emotional as fundamental to learning. Other theories of transformative learning, also emphasise the holistic, affective and embodied nature of the critical learning process, placing the corporeal, sensory experience at its heart (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Further authors tackle decolonising Freire's critical pedagogy, reinventing it through consideration of the role of empathy (Zembylas, 2018). We recognise that these enriched, enhanced versions of critical pedagogy all work to inform a more subtle, intricate and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of collective learning.

Rent Strikes and the Consciousness Raising Processes

Here we explore how it is that the raising of critical consciousness can occur in practice against a neoliberal backdrop, using the accounts of the lived-experiences of the student rent-strikes. We build up to a discussion of awareness raising, increased political awakening and more active engagement – 'conscientização'(Freire, 1996, p. 17) – to structure the analysis and

discussion. First there are issues of individual initial forays into considering, then becoming involved in action, followed by how it is that these students cohere to form nebulous collectives, in which they then learn and grow together. Here Freire's ideas of problem posing, dialogism, power-relations and the teacher/student and students/teachers are in evidence. Subsequently, praxis is explored as the students take part in - and crucially also reflect on and learn through - the collective strike action. Finally, we explicitly discuss the raising of critical consciousness, or 'conscientização'. These separations into subsections are somewhat artificial and are presented in this way so as to better elucidate Freirean concepts, as opposed to being indicative of an inherently linear or sequential structure. Indeed, as Macrine notes in summarising Darder's reading of 'conscientização', all this is 'an organic process' rather than 'an evolving linear phenomenon' (Macrine, 2020, p. 10). These intrinsically blurry and overlapping aspects of critical consciousness raising are considered alongside the navigation of disquieting tensions and limitations.

Dialogue

Engaging through listening, debating, questioning

> It is through critical dialogue that students enter together into the process of problematization. And, by way of their critical exchanges, they experience important breakthroughs of knowledge that emerge from rethinking their historical and contemporary conditions. (Darder, 2020, p. 52)

Some of the simplest instances of the collective raising of critical consciousness have seeds in forms of on-going dialogue. In several instances, rent strike organisers and more experienced activists supported the less experienced, often more apprehensive, newly politicised potential campaigners, frequently simply through allowing the opportunity to pose questions, raise concerns and talk. These discussions were largely reassuring and informative, addressing specific concerns, perhaps highlighting the strength in numbers of collective action, that they are not alone in this, that the powerful (here the HEI in a pandemic) will be concerned with their image, and that there are legal safeguards and pitfalls to become informed about.

> It's really just, like, talking to these people and just saying that, like, you're not going to get kicked out; if they kick us out, they have to take us to court and imagine what universities will look like taking a bunch of students to court to try and make them homeless in a pandemic – like, that's never going to happen. (Caris)

Students contemplating joining the strikes had practical fears and concerns and sought reassurance and answers to their questions. Even as they began to find out more for themselves, they tried to share, discuss and explain. Here learning through dialogue is evident, as the fledgling strikers sought to encourage and inform those yet to join in.

> Lots of people were willing to talk about it, people were often sort of like 'oh it's a lot of effort'; 'oh I don't know'. There's sort of lots of worries people have about doing this sort of thing and obviously when I first started, I didn't really know that much about it, so I wasn't really able to explain everything. (Edi)

Some students recounted that it was a diminishing of apprehension and a sense of empowerment coming through the strength of collective action and mutual support, which allayed their fears and cemented their decision to take-part:

> It felt really, really kind of empowering to be able to take some kind of political action like this without kind of feeling like you're in it on your own and have no-one to fall back on … whereas now you know that you're backed up by the student union and the second years so it feels much more like a community ethic. (Mala)

Whilst students in other universities did not feel supported by their student unions, they all felt supported by fellow rent-strikers. For some, struggling to decide whether to join in, the lack of pressure to commit and the avoidance of judging those who wavered, or decided not to take part, were important. They felt that there was respect for individual circumstances, which may make active participation more challenging or higher risk for some, such as those with university bursaries and international students with visa concerns. They perceived an approach of trying to discuss, educate or even persuade, yet not to judge. Most of the groups of potential-strikers we researched embraced the idea of maintaining a larger more inclusive network, finding ways for those who felt unable to fully commit to nevertheless show their solidarity with the strikers, through signing petitions or open letters of support.

> There's risk involved, so sort of knowing how to negotiate, how to say to people, like, "This is why you should strike if you feel comfortable", but also everyone's economic position's different and if someone doesn't feel like they can, don't, like, hold that against them because you don't know why that may be, kinda thing. (Nicola)

> The community is quite supportive generally regardless of kind of whether you do or decide not to rent-strike … they also have an open letter … that loads of people have signed even if they haven't taken part in the rent-strike … I think generally no one's been kind of judging people who have or haven't because everyone has kind of individual reasons. Some people who are on bursaries don't want to risk their bursaries being cut, for example, international students don't want to risk being kicked out of the university, so everyone kind of has their reasons for not wanting to do it so I think everyone's quite respectful. (Mala)

This flexibility in dialogue, stems from recognising that students may be at different stages of awareness and thinking, at different points on their journey of engagement, as well as positioned differently. This resonates with Freire's emphasis on the need for varied dialogue:

> Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. (Freire, 1996, p. 47)

There was a range of pre-existing political awareness, knowledge, experience and expertise. When the frequent discussions took place, those more-knowledgeable members of the group shared their insights and understanding, largely in a discursive, supportive and open manner. However, sporadically some came to the fore, perhaps bolstered by greater confidence gained through their personal trajectory, momentarily dominating, arguably on occasion moving closer to coercion and further from informed debate:

> I think some of the loudest voices were [politically informed]. There was lots of discussions inside about sort of different sort of perspectives on things but not everyone was. It was a mix … There was a lot of talk of like dialectics and things

> like materialism I heard being thrown around, and sort of different theorists … There were bits they started explaining to me because I didn't really understand. (Edi)

As the open debates and discussions continued, other students heard about the issues and strikes, and some were drawn in. In this way the small handful of initial potential-strikers grew, and people became engaged through dialogue, and were brought on board through on-going discussion, explanation, and debate. Inevitably, with the backdrop of a pandemic and fluctuating possibilities for in-person meetings, much of the discussion took place on-line.

> I think people who are interested … have been talking about it for a while but now, because people who maybe weren't previously now are, it's definitely, like, picked up pace. (Nicola)

> There was someone that I met in my own halls who was interested in doing a rent-strike but then that chat just grew from there so, like, it was five people then it got to 10 then it got to 15 … more and more students in halls kept getting added to that WhatsApp chat, from there we could kind of deduce, like, how to, like, make the strike work in a way that reached every student in the halls … We got to 350 I think was the peak … we were, like, strong in terms of organisers and in terms of people striking. (Tali)

> Through WhatsApp, big group chats because they have 250 people or so in them …Then through Instagram there was a big push, that was our main kind of social media, … essentially got to 350 very quick, maybe word of mouth as well. (Simon)

The students in a more organising role tried to be inclusive, through ensuring there were possibilities to raise questions and start a dialogue, or have your voice heard. To this end, they used social media and shared documents, to run polls, gather collective opinions and provide opportunities to input ideas.

> Used Instagram a bit for deciding what strikers would like for us to include in the demands so we just put out a couple of polls being, like, "Would you like to see this or this? Blah blah blah", and from that we could deduce, like, what popular appetite for demands was. (Tali)

> The people who run it are really good at maintaining inclusive stuff ... it's been really, really great because even though there are clear people who are head of organisation, there's always an awareness of, like, making sure everyone's okay with things, checking things, having, like, WhatsApp chats to, like, reassure people. (Nicola)

> All of the letters and statements that they put out are sort of on collaborative open Google docs so it's like a sort of network and … they have assigned people who you can message if you have any sort of concerns and queries. (Ivy)

Inevitably some more tentative students perceived tensions. In seeking advice, support, and discussion with other strikers and more central organisers, they felt listened to and supported in many ways, yet they simultaneously recognised that these others would prefer that they stay on-board:

> Obviously, some of the people who you speak to … their role in the rent-strike is in a sort of, like, welfare capacity; you get advice from them but, at the same time, you know that they don't want you to pull out so it's a bit of a … like, you know, you're talking to someone who sort of very ardently wants to stick with it. (Ivy)

> I've had quite a few, not, I wouldn't say heated discussions as such [laugh] but, you know, it's been, they're uncomfortable really, uncomfortable discussions. (Simon)

The ideal of a non-hierarchical, pressure-free collective, where mutual respect is fundamental, and parity is given to all voices in a dialogue - which permeates learning together through critical pedagogy - remained just out of reach. There was an ebb and flow, with pressure, bias and organisational hierarchy rearing their heads, even if on occasion unintentionally, unconsciously, or against the better judgement of those involved. Balancing rapid decision-making with consultation and the inclusion of all voices presented a challenge for these groups, which they navigated with varying effectiveness. Most ended up with organising committees similar to a form of representative democracy. For example, Jake said:

> So like originally we wanted to have a weekly Zoom call where people could come and like vote and be part of it. Like make it as democratic as we could be and make sure like they were involved in decision making. People don't turn up to Zoom calls though … We basically just asked for people to like put themselves forward to join the committee and we ended with like 10 people on there... (Jake)

Tali seemed to emphasise majoritarian voting as a democratic way of consulting all strikers:

> So, we wanted it to be a very democratic way of making decisions and we wanted to consult strikers as well … striker group-chat which had, like, 300 people in it but the campaign group-chat had about 20 people … in terms of decision-making … In terms of responding to the university … we would either make sure to consult all strikers by setting up a poll … we'd always make sure that there was over 50% of strikers wanting to do something before we carried on. (Tali)

Variations in how being 'democratic' was conceptualised were apparent. Anna referred to her 'democratic right to protest'. Dale wanted to be democratic by following demands. Voting was often seen as important and most groups of rent-strikers used online polls. In contrast, others used Google Docs that anyone could edit reflecting a more deliberative approach to democracy (Dryzek, 2002; Young, 2002). Simon reflected on his ambivalence about polling strikers when they had not engaged in discussions and may not have a good understanding of the issues. Polls allow the expression of existing preferences through narrowly defined choices whereas a Google Doc can lead to the exploration of multiple perspectives and is closer to Freire's inclusive, non-hierarchical, horizontal forms of dialogue:

> Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialogues is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue—loving, humble, and full of faith—did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world. (Freire, 1996, p. 72)

Dialogue, building trust and ever greater cohesion led to the expansion and strengthening of the rent strike groups. With such expansion, organisational expediency more frequently came into tension with collective inclusive action. The extent to which such tension reintroduced elements of hierarchy or domination is unclear, yet any shift in this direction, however small and fleeting, would impede a fully dialogic space.

> Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men [sic] who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. (Freire, 1996, p. 70)

We argue, the normalisation of hierarchical structures pervades neoliberalism, and the lack of similar exposure to alternative models - flatter, grassroots, or anarchic organisations - put decision-making and inclusion in greater tension than they otherwise might have been in less neoliberal societies.

Learning together sharing ideas, knowledge, expertise, and theoretical arguments

As local and national groups of rent-strikers grew, interacted, and coalesced, there were more opportunities to build on dialogue, to learn from each other's experiences, to share ideas, resources, information, and theoretical motivations. In this way what began with advice seeking evolved into tactical planning, political debate, and unplanned theoretical discussions.

> On WhatsApp … so like someone would ask a question about like how to cancel their direct debit and then like a whole conversation would start about Marxism or whatever. (Anna)

Equally, other people and organisations, often older experienced activist students, outside of these campaigners also offered guidance and support, making action seem viable by sharing previous successful strike experiences or providing organisational assistance.

> I guess, like, sharing resources and things and also almost, like, creating an environment and just showing support. … even just saying to people, "No, this can work," in and of itself is probably quite a helpful thing to do. (Nicola)

> We had like second, third year students who just have a strong sense of social justice who just wanted to help out ... They were perhaps people who had activist experience previously … they've been fantastic, and like I say, a lot of the people that were organising weren't even paying rent. So … I've just got a lot of respect for these people. (Simon)

> I went to a protest … and then I met a couple of older students … they were really helpful in, like, the first month of, like, getting everything set-up, getting the comms out about the strike and stuff. (Tali)

> Like a lot of it was just winging it and hoping for the best, but the Young Greens did put on some online training courses … I did a few of those. (Jake)

Legal advice was a recurring source of support that was greatly appreciated and underpinned several early interactions between newly active rent-strike groups and some more experienced grassroots campaigners and activist groups. Some activists involved in the rent-strikes and other student groups - such as 'cops off campus' - received training in legal matters surrounding campaigning, to know their rights.

> Sort of like help each other with advice and like the legal aspects of rent striking and share like information. (Jake)

> We're getting trained as legal observers. (Anna)

Some groups of strikers educated themselves about university activities, investments, and influences. These strikers sought to better understand those they were up against, learning together, reading, sharing, presenting, and discussing articles.

> A lot of what we've been doing is sort of looking at the university, looking what they do, what they're involved in and reading up about it. So, there are lots of articles that we've been reading, we have been like learning … so sort of someone will find something or read something and then sort of present it. It's quite informal but sort of like yes, but we're always sort of looking for more things to sort of that might help us. (Edi)

> A big one was we found out a lot about the university's links … like the degree programmes are sponsored by them and all sorts and I'd never even heard of these companies before and then sort of found out that they're doing all these things. (Edi)

According to Freire (1996), this growing awareness and unveiling of the 'oppressor', through dialogue, is a necessary step for action and towards greater self-belief. 'It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves.' (Freire, 1996, p. 47). Moreover, he emphasises that problem posing education, which underpins raising critical consciousness, must enable ever more questioning, and thus 'regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality' (Freire, 1996, p. 64).

Students also learnt and shared ideas from the wider national movement. Learning is also evident as strike organisers reflect on how they would do things differently, for example:

> What we were trying to do was to have a list of demands that everyone could look at and sort of be like "yeah," "no," "that's a good idea", "I like that". So, we've looked at like what other universities were demanding and we'd basically just made like a shortlist of all the ones that we liked … There's things that I would do differently if I went back and did it again and like making the demands more specific to the people that like we're withholding money from. (Jake)

As these groups morphed and grew, the expanding collective included a range of people, some from other societies and already active campaign-groups, with existing experience of reflecting and acting to resist different forms of oppression. Thus, dialogue and sharing, learning together, evolved to incorporate wider concerns. As Freire notes, 'dialogue is the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world' (Freire, 1996, p. 69), and here these opportunities for wider collective learning and greater exposure to interrelated concerns, indeed facilitated such naming of the world. This reading of the world together, seeing things anew, is a necessary step towards reflection for action, to writing the world.

> The Marxist societies, like … they've been putting on sessions, like, weekly regardless throughout the whole pandemic which has been really great … it was just very useful to have them to be, like, 'Okay … this isn't an isolated incident; this is part of, like, a bigger thing.', like, that was really helpful for us. (Caris)

> It's like an anti-marketisation force and they were really, like, assistive with a lot of the rent-strikes … they were all, like, brought together, like, by pre-existing groups … it was just this idea of, like, this is the result of the way that this government and this country has completely screwed over higher education for, like, ever. (Caris)

> I think there's a lot of connections between, like, rent-striking and then also, like, the 'Kill the Bill' protests [against the increase in police powers in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill] and stuff … there is definitely, like, sharing of information and resources between those groups and I definitely wanna get involved with more stuff … I think it's almost informed my role in, like, representing disabled students more insofar as getting involved with this was partly because of, like, people being charged more when they shouldn't have been, so maybe that's a more immediate way it's been impacting other stuff I do. (Nicola)

In Caris's account, the making of connections is evident, with the realisation of rent-strikes being part of a wider concern with marketisation of HE as part of a political agenda. In this instance, Caris's learning was enabled by the more structured context and approach of the Marxist Society, a student society with a clear theoretical underpinning and agenda. For Caris, her more planned learning operated in parallel with the unplanned learning of the collective.

Moreover, Nicola's account reveals taking a step closer to reflection for action, as reading the world anew is starting to make her consider possibilities for acting differently.

A central element of what students seemed to learn was how closely a range of issues were related. At the university level, this led to them including other demands as part of their rent-strikes. Freire (1996) repeatedly makes clear that such reading the world anew and discovering the extent and interconnectedness of oppression, is only a part of the journey to raising critical consciousness. This discovery must spark action. Indeed, he is adamant that just as reflection alone is insufficient for transformation, unthinking action is also deficient. Both are necessary and it is precisely their interplay and entanglement, which he terms 'praxis.'

> This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism[1], but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis. (Freire, 1996, p. 47)

Praxis

> Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection, and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire, 1996, p. 68)

Many of the interviewees' comments reflect Freire's (1996) 'praxis' of theory and practice. Permeating the accounts are instances of learning through the messy interplay of action and reflection, of praxis, which Freire argues is essential for transformation. Praxis is a key way in

[1] Some students and we, as authors, have used the term 'activism' throughout this article to refer to engagement with the rent-strikes but this was often as praxis rather than unreflective action in the way that Freire uses the term 'activism'

which critical pedagogy can be distinguished (Johnson & Morris, 2010) from more narrow (often neoliberal) understandings of critical thinking.

Some commented on how the experience of taking part in this collective action had given meaning to the otherwise intangible, dry nature of their studies, bringing abstract ideas to life, as well as shifting their position from being more of a commentator at a distance to a participant and potential change maker.

> Even when you study politics, it can still feel very theoretical so to actually go through it… I feel like I learn more in engaging in actions than I do in reading about politics because it's actually how it is in real, like, lived experience, which is probably more powerful in a way… When I kind of try and get involved with stuff it's because I actively want to change something as opposed to just, like, analysing it. (Nicola)

For others, the reflections started from a deeply personal and indeed often individualised place, from the lived experience of perceived injustice, perhaps for the first time. This in turn can prompt a personal awakening, with such once-disparate individuals starting to educate themselves, and crucially coming together, and cohering to learn collectively from each other. In this way, through shared reflection on collective action, connections are made with wider struggles and bridges built between personal and public domains (Giroux, 2011). They come to see 'private troubles' as 'public issues' (Wright Mills, 2000). Such connections spiral outwards incrementally, from injustice around their rent, then to larger issues, such as the marketisation of HE. Caris, Dale, Jake, and Simon all used the term 'marketisation' unprompted, for example:

> There was no reason I was sent back to halls. It was just a bit ridiculous, so we all came together and then, like, slowly, this process of, like, people's personal experiences kind of led them to … like, educating themselves on what was actually going on and now I feel like this movement has turned into one, like, against the whole, like, marketisation of higher education. (Caris)

Praxis is inherent within this extract. Behind 'educating themselves' there is thinking and reflecting, while implicit within 'movement' is collective action. For Edi, once again praxis is evident through the language used when reflecting on the rent-strike experience, recounting a period of intense action, 'boot-camp,' and of associated learning, 'training in campaigning'.

> I'd definitely like to do more. It's sort of been a, I guess sort of like a bootcamp sort of thing, a little training into sort of what campaigning is like. You know I've already started to get involved with [a big local campaign against the senior management] and sort of going to more other protests and things. (Edi)

Notions of praxis were also apparent as the students drew differently from their formal studies, to inform their actions, or reflected on their academic learning in a new light as a result of their actions. Tali had been learning about the history of local housing action groups which made her actions feel part of a long tradition of resistance in the area. Anna was studying Theology but hoped to change to Law, largely because of engaging in the rent-strikes then being trained as a legal observer.

Jake talked consistently about how participation increased his confidence. He also felt it helped his academic attainment:

> We had an essay … it was basically 'are students more likely to be involved in activism than non-students?' and I think I got a first in that one. And then I also did a presentation [for a different module], and we could basically do that on anything because it's a really broad subject, so I did that on whether the rent-strikes … like were they caused by neoliberalism and the marketisation of higher education – and I got a first in that one as well. So yeah like the way I've seen it is it has just been like a practical application of my course and it has definitely helped because I've got good marks in essays where I've written about that. (Jake)

Student narratives rarely referred to lecturers. However, in cases such as Jake's, lecturers gave students the space to make connections for themselves. Despite formal university educators being broadly absent, students valued the role of educators and sought out various educational relationships. Those who we interviewed were almost all involved in organising which might suggest that they were more teacher-adjacent but they also talked about how they learnt from others implying a more student-adjacent role. We suggest that the plurality of formal and informal educators around each student is significant and that they complement each other. Moreover, we note the blurring of boundaries between who is a teacher and who is a student, as members of the rent-strike community move between foregrounding one role or the other, across moments, places, and spaces. When he contemplates a 'banking' model of formal learning, Freire (1996) refers to the educator in the singular and the students in the plural. Then, as he moves to describe practice which is closer to a critical pedagogy approach, he begins to blur these concepts:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 1996, p. 61)

Beyond formal university learning, across the informal rent-strike community, no formal teacher was present. Yet those students who began in a leading, more teacher-adjacent role, nonetheless navigated changing positions as they moved back-and-forth between more learning-focussed to more leading-focussed roles. Jake articulates how some students have moved from one activist group to another, applying their newly acquired skills, passing them on:

> You could look at the youth [climate] strikes as sort of … giving a lot of the activists the skills that they needed to do the rent-strikes. Because a lot of those activists … have gone to university now and they've basically used those skills to organise a rent-strike. (Jake)

This then creates a cycle of increased confidence and aptitude in campaigning and taking part in collective action:

> It was a lot of fun. And it was really empowering actually to see like … at least for a moment like people really were going to try and like do something about it … it was nice to see like other people getting involved and like taking action. (Jake)

> You have a sense of solidarity from the knowledge that others are doing it. (Ivy)

This cascading of learning together, spreads a sense of greater competence and solidarity, which supports further collective action. Thus, the blurring of the teacher-student roles and notions of praxis are inherently entwined.

The student body is far from homogenous. The rent-strikes, it appears, have attracted a wider demographic into direct collective action, drawing in some students who might not normally be involved in such activities, who perhaps have never previously felt subject to a personal injustice:

> I think there's a lot of people who normally would not do any sort of direct-action and would feel incredibly uncomfortable opposing authority in any way, have become involved … I think it's engaged a much larger kind of demographic of students … I think that's just because everyone's been put in this situation together and is directly affected by you know, exploitation and a lot of people before would have not necessarily encountered that because … like they were living quite privileged lives, so I think a lot of people who before hadn't ever had problems, have suddenly realised the political action is necessary in some situations. (Anna)

However, the more privileged were not always organisers. Jake identified as 'a straight white guy' but noted the committee was 'extremely diverse'. Elsewhere, Tali commented:

> A lot of the work fell on the most marginalised students so, like, the students of colour, the LGBT students and stuff, but just because that's the way that it works with stuff like this. (Tali)

For some campaigners, those previously less attuned to matters of social injustice, this connecting of the private to the public, the personal to the political, this bridging the gap between firsthand-experience and wider oppression, these making of connections, these sudden realisations, can be seen as an illustration of the first awakenings of critical consciousness. We argue that the bringing together of those with vastly differing other experiences of oppression, is noteworthy and that the rent-strikes may inform thinking around engaging different demographics in action.

Raising Critical Consciousness

> The term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. (Freire, 1996, p. 17)

To some extent, conscientização is thus the natural evolution of embracing praxis, although as neither reaches a completion, they both continue in parallel as two ways of articulating the on-going and intertwined re-reading and re-writing of the world. Such raising of critical consciousness, whilst deeply personally affecting, is also shared with others.

Rent-strikes are inherently collective, based around a substantial number of people withholding rent, of solidarity in numbers. Through their involvement, students developed their appreciation of the role of collective action as well as coming to recognise how their issues around rent were closely connected to broader issues. Rent-strike demands were wider than simply housing related issues, such as rent-rebates, lease contract breaks, or maintenance standards. In broader demands, there are kernels of an appreciation of the need for showing wider solidarity, of making connections, of seeing links with other struggles against oppression, as exemplified by Simon:

> We had a few demands ... including no job losses for staff, like maintenance and cleaning staff, because obviously we didn't want us to be paying less rent and then they say, okay, we'll cut the jobs then … we also had no, had like a reinstatement of the no-detriment policy for COVID-19 … a full review of the maintenance in halls because they were just some shocking stories, like mushrooms growing up out of people's carpets, rats everywhere … we had like a 30% discount for terms two and three, which did happen, and … a key one that I find personally is to allow people to leave their contracts … and they haven't even entertained the idea once, which is, I just frankly find it disgusting that they have so much money … So, they weren't short of money, they were just short of the willpower which, you know, frankly shows a lot. (Simon)

In articulating his sense of disgust that the HEI is uninterested in - or even ideologically opposed to - making some specific concessions, Simon shows a burgeoning realisation of the priorities of the HEI, as he reflects on its place in the marketization of higher education. Other strikers echo this growing awareness of the position of HEIs within a neoliberal context. These pivotal political awakenings spiralled outwards, throwing into question other previously held assumptions, or uncritically-considered situations, fuelling new ways of 'reading the world' (Freire, 1996). Interviewees discussed how their understanding of power and authority had developed through being involved in rent-strikes. Ivy began to question the truthfulness of authority figures:

> It's demonstrated that just because people are in positions of authority doesn't mean that they're willing to engage with you on, like, a meaningful or completely truthful level. (Ivy)

Jake reflected on how much what he had learnt was intangible, but much also seemed to focus on learning more about how power operates:

> A lot of the most valuable things … that you'd learnt … you probably wouldn't be able to express … because it's more like an understanding of power and like how the world works … Understanding like where power lies at least at our university and how they respond … when that's challenged, and I guess like the way university really works, compared to the way they say it works, and sort of like the effects that marketisation has had on universities … I've learnt there's a massive problem with sexual violence. (Jake)

Mala considered issues of power imbalance, the differing priorities of the more powerful and crucially expressed her growing appreciation of the possibilities to resist and 'fight back':

> It makes you just a lot more aware of kind of the way these institutions work … have so much power and just kind of being made aware of to what degree they prioritise student wellbeing over just, like, profits … What's it actually taught me is just kind of learning that you can actually, like, fight back; you don't have to just take it, whereas I think, previously … the concept of actually forming a movement to try and counter what they did would never really have kind of been in my head. So, I think what things like rent-strike has really shown me is … you can actually try and change things. (Mala)

As Freire argues, it is only through such a profound appreciation of the world they are in, that people can see that things can change and be otherwise: 'A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation' (Freire 1996, p. 66). Recognizing that change is possible is integral to the raising of critical consciousness.

In seeing possibilities for change and in critiquing the wider world anew, a swathe of other issues came to the fore for these students. Struggles previously considered disparate, were now perceived to have parallels, different forms of oppression could be recognized as different manifestations of a larger struggle.

Involvement in rent-strikes led to conversations with students also involved in different forms of campaigning. Students broadened their thinking, reflecting on, debating and rethinking other issues, such as campaigning for fossil-fuel divestment, the wider climate-strikes, and protests in support of Palestinian rights.

> Since getting involved in this, I've also had conversations with people who've been involved … in, like, [environmental campaign] camps and stuff like that which was something that I had very little awareness of … now I'm talking to a lot of people who are, you know, going to actual camps to do stuff or, yeah, organising stuff like this. (Ivy)

While many of the students more involved in organising, already had some experience of participating in collective action, marches, or political campaigns, they nonetheless articulated how it is that the rent-strike shaped their on-going conscientisation. Often, this had to do with students making greater links between issues. The students now recognised issues as coherent, interwoven, parts of a larger whole.

> It is part of the broader marketisation of education, the crisis of capitalism, so on and so forth. (Dale)

> It was just the fact that, like, this struggle is kind of tied into all of the struggles that are going on in the UK … it's really made me view everything, like, more cohesively. (Caris)

This first-hand experience of praxis did indeed raise a wider critical consciousness for most participants, evidenced by their desire to seek out opportunities to take further political action.

> It's kind of made me more interested in getting involved in student politics … more interested to get involved in things like this. (Mala)

Taking part in the rent strikes inspired the majority of our participants to continue their 'conscientização'. In Simon's words it 'awakened the activist in me'. Students reported that they would stand for various positions, for example, in the Student Union, the Marxist Society, and as campaigns officer for a political party. Students further recounted their intent to join a range of other campaigns.

Whether more vocal or reticent in these wider political discussions, each rent-striker here nonetheless articulated a journey where their dialogue and reflections and actions with others, their praxis then, had indeed made them aware of links with wider oppressions, raising their critical

consciousness. These journeys resonate with Darder's description of what underpins the awakening of critical awareness:

> Conscientização represents the development of the awakening of critical awareness (Freire, 1983). The struggle for change begins, then, at the moment when human beings become both critically aware and intolerant of the oppressive conditions in which they find themselves and push toward new ways of knowing and being in the world. (Darder, 2020, p. 45)

A Site of Critical Hope?

> I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential concrete imperative (Freire, 2004, p. 8)

Set against a neoliberal backdrop, these student rent-strikes provide a tangible illustration of how individuals come together in praxis to 'read the world' anew (Freire & Macedo, 2005), to deepen their understanding of how power operates and how struggles against oppression are interconnected. As new understandings are formed and reflected on together in dialogue and in action – in 'writing' the world anew - transformation occurs, for individuals and for the rent-striking community, spiralling outwards from there. This collective struggle for greater social justice, and recognition of the rent-strikes as part of wider oppressions, this laying bare of the raising of critical consciousness, provides hope. Moreover, there were varying measures of success from this action – partial rent-rebates, changes in some rent contracts, modifications to no-detriment policies and aspects of student support. Such victories, albeit with some only partial or reversible, likewise fuel hope. Hope here is thus multifaceted, embracing critical awareness, tangible experiences, and actions. With this hope rooted firmly in critical consciousness raising, through praxis with others, we argue – echoing Ojala (2017) – that such hope can function in transformative ways.

'Freire offered no recipes for those in need of instant theoretical and political fixes,' (Giroux, 2010, p. 719), and we too eschew seeking, or offering, a formula for moving forward. Yet as Giroux continues: 'Although Freire was a theoretician of radical contextualism, he also acknowledged the importance of understanding the particular and the local in relation to larger, global and cross-national forces.' (Giroux, 2010, p. 719).

That this coming together in resistance could still happen in neoliberal 'dark times' is encouraging. The particulars, revealed through our use of a Freirean lens to explore unplanned learning in social movements, may provide insight into how to ignite further collective learning. The students – particularly those previously less exposed to the very real hardships and injustices propagated within a neoliberal context – came together initially through living a shared injustice. Initially self-interest and social justice coincided. This then grew through dialogue and praxis into transformation, personal and collective. To widen the reach of movements of resistance to embrace a less traditional body of people, exposing shared hardship may hold a key, however minor such hardship may be, in comparison to greater injustices and however fleeting in nature. Uncovering and revealing small injustices, which may be felt by those less clearly oppressed, even perhaps elite, could provide an opening for a common understanding; a seed where self-interest and social justice align, which can germinate and create greater understanding, spiralling ever outwards, raising critical consciousness as it expands. Such experiences can 'stimulate the collectives of students to development of their capabilities of self-organizing and claiming' (Accioly, 2020, p. 135) and must be embraced.

We suggest that a wider collective, brought together through similar coincidences where more neoliberal self-interest coincides with issues of wider oppression, is crucial to raising critical consciousness in a neoliberal context, creating the possibility of a more aware public, less enamoured with the neoliberal agenda.

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