

(This is by no means a completed paper, but represented the fundamental essence of my research project by the end of my first summer of research)

Left-Wing Students, Ideological Identity and Political Activism

An initial theoretical study

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Introduction

Even notwithstanding the examples of 1968-70 and 2010-11, there is a common perception that student political activism in Britain has never achieved anything like the scale, success, or duration of that in other countries around the world (e.g. Altbach 2006: 341). The fact is, however, that student political activism goes on every day, often quietly, within small and large organisations; every day, students engage with the politics of the campus and with society at large, construing themselves as political actors as they do so. Providing researchers with a unique perspective on the development of political beliefs and identity, student politics is a rich resource for projects working from an interpretive methodology. But how do student activists perceive themselves – as students, as activists, as party members, as protesters? How do they construct and orientate these identities in their own self-image? Making use of Cohen's (1994) thought on 'self consciousness' and individually-constituted identities, this essay aims to provide a historical and theoretical foundation for future fieldwork which will investigate the interaction between individual and collective identities, individuals and institutions in student political activism.

Considering identity

It is important before progressing in the principal discussion of this paper without fleshing out the conceptual framework of 'identity' with which the discussion will deal. Here, 'identity' refers to a quality, or set of qualities which we consider ourselves to possess as part of our own 'self' (Heyes 2018), and which we can express externally through the employment of identity symbols with which

we can 'identify'. These symbols can refer to the individual identity of ourselves and others, as well as collectively to groups of individuals with whom we 'identify' with regard to certain qualities; as Meister (1990) terms it, we 'selectively invest' our ego into the symbols of our identity (1990: 25). On this, the key contention made by Cohen (1994), and the important point for the purposes of our discussion, is that these identity symbols, where they refer to social characteristics which cannot be objectively externally defined, are subjective in their substantive content and criteria: they do not possess a fixed set of predicates which can be objectively considered when discussing our individual or collective identities. The symbols are linguistic constructs, and the language in which they exist is not constant or binding as Mackenzie (1978: 42) suggests but subjectively redefined and reconstituted internally by each individual, 'reflexively' understood by ourselves (Giddens 1991: 53). It is impossible to force people to adjust their self-perceptions in order to conform to some externally-defined schema of qualification for identity symbols: the language of identity symbols is 'profoundly influenced by personal experience' while being 'made within terms which are characteristic of a given group' (Cohen 1994: 17). We may employ the same symbols to signal commonality of beliefs, 'but this says little about how we interpret and make meaningful to ourselves these symbols' (Cohen 1994: 19).

In the case of ideological or political identity symbols (that is, identifying oneself as left-wing, socialist, communist or so on), this non-essentialist viewpoint of identity (Pratt 2003) seems particularly relevant: even the base political beliefs which supposedly constitute the foundations of an ideology are regularly twisted and altered by reinterpretation and practice. For example, Mackenzie (1978) says of Marcuse: 'Marxist he must be called, since there is no Marxist pope or council to declare him heretical' (1978: 65). There is no higher authority which is capable of defining the exact meaning or content of ideological and political doctrines with any degree of legitimacy, since they are entirely socially constructed and are shaped through generations of individual experience and analysis. The same conceptualisation of self-identity as made up of subjectively-interpreted symbols is found in Rapport's (1993) study of an English village: Rapport found that participants subjectively defined and expressed the same identity symbols in vastly different ways, for example in creating '*Their* Englishness' (Rapport 1993: 57). To paraphrase Stromberg (1990), an identity is not an observable event, but an 'identity narrative' is: individuals are political agents who engage, individually or collectively, in constructing their own political or ideological identities (Loader et al. 2015). These identities may vary in their sophistication: previous research has suggested that only a fraction of the population had a complex, developed belief system in the shape of an ideology (Converse 1964), while a significantly larger proportion were able to place themselves somewhere on a political 'left-right' scale in some

way (Marsh 1977). Thus, the construction of ideological-political self-identity can be seen as a wholly individual process which is not subject to direct outside influence but is inherently influenced by personal experience, without necessarily being dependent upon a complex system of beliefs with which to back it up.

When applied to groups of individuals, these self-identity symbols are crucial in constructing such symbols on the collective level: individual identities can be brought together to constitute groups with more-or-less specific political-ideological identities. Since these identities are usually constructed upon the subjective self-identity symbols explored above, the collective identity is, in a sense, virtual: as Du Preez (1980) suggests, 'each one in the collective has some myth about what the collective is and how it appears to certain others' (1980: 13). These collective identities are bounded by a reasonable level of departure from each member's individual identity: a reasonable diversity of self-identities is possible, but they must exist 'without impugning the group's collective identity' (Cohen 1994: 12). As a result, collective political identities can be fragile: we cannot assume the existence of 'common understandings and meanings even among closely knit groups' (Cohen 1994: 17), and individuals must negotiate 'between individual and collective interest' (Rheingans and Hollands 2013: 556) in order to maintain a feasible collective identity. Ultimately, however, even in the tightest groups, 'the individual is...*prior* to community' (Stromberg 1986: 19): the root of collective identity lies in the individual and their own narrative of individual identity. In the case of political identity, it is clear that promoting collective identity (and solidarity thereof) is highly important for improving membership of political organisations and movements (Pinner 1969; Hirsch 1990), and groups aim to 'mobilise' individual identity symbols in collective form in order to recruit members to political collectives (Crossley 2008: 35).

Why, then, left-wing students as a subject of particular interest? The explanation for this can be considered in two parts. Students are politically of interest because of the unique relationship which the student body has with organised and informal politics: it seems that the institutional nature of a university education and the life-stage of undergraduate students combine to produce a high level of political interest and awareness. Crossley (2008) observed that undergraduate students were 4.22 times more likely to be politically active than sixth-formers (2008: 20); this may be due to a unique stage of 'studentship' (Klemenčič 2014: 399) which combines a high level of 'biographical availability' (McAdam 1986; Milkman 2017) – due to their less demanding schedules and fewer responsibilities than most working adults (Altbach 1989) – with what DeGroot (1998) terms 'youthful idealism, naïve utopianism, disrespect for authority [and] buoyant optimism' (1998: 4). The counterpoint to this observation is that student political activism usually has a relatively short generational span (most

undergraduate students will only be involved for a maximum of three years), and that such activism is frequently disrupted by life-events such as examinations, coursework deadlines and vacation periods (Altbach 1989). For the purposes of this paper, it is also of interest that students, being at a relatively early life-stage, are unlikely to have fully developed the same political or ideological identity or views that they will hold for the rest of their lives: they are still in the process of ideological development and identity formation (Merelman 1969). Yettram (1981: 165), by way of example, suggests that considerably more students would identify themselves as left-leaning politically than would be able to comprehensively justify or elucidate these beliefs in the form of a sophisticated ideology. In this, student political activism has a special quality which is different to political activism undertaken by other groups within society.

Left-wing politics, in addition, are of particular interest because of the historical tendency of the movement toward ideological conflict: the meaning of terms as central to the movement as ‘socialism’ and ‘socialist’ have been repeatedly and violently contested over time (Miliband 1979; see Cole 1949: 13-15), and it is clear that these diverging layers of collective identity are the downfall of many political projects, not least student ones (Hensby 2017: 27). This is rather neatly exemplified in what Crick (1986) terms the ‘select-a-sect’ nature of Trotskyist and other far-left political groups in Britain: the name of nearly every group could be formed from a list of twelve different words (‘Workers, Labour, Socialist, International, Revolutionary’, among others), with every group claiming to be the true interpretation of left-wing thought and condemning all others despite the very minor differences between them (Crick 1986: 19-20). This tendency toward ideological sectarianism may be considered in the light of Abrams’ (1994) concept of ‘political distinctiveness’: humans, Abrams suggests, have contrary needs for assimilation and distinctiveness of identity, and while joining a mass political party like Labour, with a mass collective identity, might fulfil a need for assimilation, it does not fulfil the need for political distinctiveness (Abrams 1994). As a result, Labour-leaning people are more likely to seek out obscure and niche ideological identities to fulfil that need. Part of this tendency toward ideological conflict may be rooted, at least in Britain, in the history of the Labour movement and Party: as Crick (1986) notes, individual membership of the Labour Party was impossible until 1918 – until then, membership was only possible through membership of an affiliated organisation such as a trade union or the Communist Party (1986: 9). This means that until 1918 and for some time thereafter, the Labour membership comprised members of a wide variety of discrete political and social organisations with widely different ideological perspectives. It is also clear from existing research that people choose the identity symbols which form their self-image by consideration of what carries, to them, normatively ‘good’ connotations: we choose to represent ourselves by symbols which represent

‘positive and attractive’ features of our identity (Mach 1993: 7). Given obvious normative stigma attached to many of the symbols of left-wing political and ideological identity by the chequered history of the movement, it seems logical that a process of pragmatic consideration of the history and context of these symbols will be undertaken by most left-wing students seriously considering their political and ideological identity.

A typology of student activism

Before embarking on a more detailed consideration of ideological identity in left-wing student political activism and organisation, it is important to establish some conceptual distinctions between types of student activism and organisation. By and large, this paper will work from the typology developed by Altbach (1967), which establishes the distinction between an ‘organisation’ and a ‘movement’. Here, the distinction is between the formal and institutionalised character of an ‘organisation’ and the informal and non-institutionalised nature of a ‘movement’ (Weinberg and Walker 1969; Luescher-Mamasela 2015: 37; Luescher 2018): organisations, for example, are more likely to have a formal membership, whereas movements are not. This typology, however, is obviously not completely ideal in nature, and there is considerable blurring of the distinction between the two types of student political activism – a process which has been assisted by the increasing tendency of student ‘organisations’ to engage in the kind of ‘unorthodox’ activism (Marsh 1977) which has been traditionally linked with less formal student ‘movements’, such as protest, direct action and, increasingly, social media campaigning (Loader et al. 2015; Mason 2013). Nevertheless, the typology is still broadly helpful for the purposes of this paper, in order to distinguish broadly between formal institutionalised activism such as student organisations and unions, and informal activism such as broad protest movements.

Student activism prior to 1968

Although activism of both of the kinds mentioned above has taken place at British universities since the higher education system first began to form (Boren 2001), it does not seem that a national infrastructure of student political associations affiliated with national parties developed until after the Second World War (Barberis et al. 1999). Prior to the late 1960s, the most prominent example of student protest in Britain was the campaigns connected with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) (Boren 2001: 101). These campaigns, in contrast to those which would later oppose U.S. policy in Vietnam (among others), were generally divorced from a partisan label and operated within the

same liberal culture as the universities in which they took place (Stedman Jones 1969: 43), rather than the overt 'counterculture' which would be seen in later protest.

One major platform for institutionalised student activism, such as was possible prior the late 1960s, was the National Union of Students (NUS). Originally founded strictly in order to represent students on issues regarding welfare and conditions at educational institutions, the NUS had frequently been the target of criticism by frustrated students who sought to see the platform used to voice the views of students on other issues in society (Widgery 1969). Although the Union had expanded its policy mandate into general education policy after the Second World War, and further into issues such as immigration policy and Apartheid by the 1960s, such policy was generally directed principally by the National Executive rather than by the student membership at large (Widgery 1969). Prior to 1968, the officers and Executive of the Union typically kept themselves aloof from partisan politics, and the general perception of the NUS by students was that the Union was in no way radical, and indeed was even conservative, in nature (Burkett 2014: 541); Widgery, writing in 1969, contends that the NUS had 'bored a generation of students to political death' through this refusal to engage with wider politics (1969: 119).

One particularly important event of the 1950s which would go on to affect left-wing student activism and ideology for decades to come was the British New Left movement. Spurred on by a number of events – from outside, the 'double shock' of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising of 1956-7 and, from inside, the 'victory of the Labour New Right' in 1957 and the growth of party bureaucracy (Chun 1993: 1-4) – the academic New Left resulted in a serious reconsideration of the exact meaning of 'socialism' and a rejuvenation of left-wing intellectual thought in Britain. Comprising a combination of CPGB members disenchanted by the Soviet Union's actions and the party's doctrinaire qualities (Miliband 1979), and Labour members who were disenchanted with the abandonment by the party of the policy of public ownership and traditional socialist doctrines (Crouch 1970), the movement challenged the interlinked and overlapping ideologies of liberalism, social democracy and Moscow-oriented communism (Levitt 1981: 53), and voiced the disillusionment of many left-wing activists with the 'Parliamentary Left' and 'establishment liberalism' (Crouch 1970: 17).

However, as with the subsequent student protest movement itself, the New Left was hampered by ideological divisions (Fraser et al. 1988: 249). The sheer number and breath of organisations which were involved in the theoretical direction of the movement – not least the CPGB, International Students (IS), the IMG, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), the SWP, NALSO and the RCP, to name but a few – meant that factionalism was rife and splits on points of theory were frequent, and activists were

keen to denounce other left-wing thinkers with whom they disagreed as ‘non-socialist’ (Yettram 1981: 145). By way of demonstration, Chun (1993) identifies three broad and discrete political traditions within the New Left: traditional radical ‘dissident communism’; Oxbridge middle-class ‘independent socialism’, and classical internationalism continental ‘theoretical Marxism’, as well as other elements including green, feminist, countercultural aesthetic and other traditions (Chun 1993: xiii). This ideological heterogeneity almost certainly contributed to the collapse of the movement in the early 1960s, as the political group became a loose combination of different interests (Chun 1993; Young 1977). As much of the ideological and intellectual heritage of the New Left was carried on by the protesters of 1968 and later, it is important to note the clear division in ideology and beliefs above between those who identified themselves politically as a collective (Young 1977).

Similarly, the ideological fractures within left-wing ideological discourse of the period was also reflected in the official Labour Party student organisations. Generally, prior to the Second World War, the party’s youth section had been seen as a ‘nuisance’ by the party leadership (Crick 1986: 13), and the Labour League of Youth was stricken by bitter ideological conflict between members who favoured a ‘popular front’ against fascism, and those who held that cooperation with Liberal and even Conservative politicians was unacceptable (Crick 1986: 13). From the 1950s until 1967, the Labour Party’s student wing was the National Association of Labour Student Organisations (NALSO), which generally managed a membership of between 7,000 and 10,000 (Halsey and Marks 1969: 39). Although more middle-class than the party’s youth wing, Young Socialists, which had a general reputation for extremism (Halsey and Marks 1969; Lamb 2002), NALSO had its leadership taken over by far-left figures in 1958 and lost its role as a key recruiting ground for Labour Party staff (Halsey and Marks 1969: 45).

The 1968-70 student protests

It seems reasonable to suggest that, in comparison to other countries such as West Germany, France and the United States, Britain experienced very little in the way of widespread student activism during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Altbach 2006); nevertheless, the fact remains that the 1968-70 period was even in Britain the most significant high-point of student activism during the twentieth century. While ‘there was never any serious doubt...that revolution was not an immediate prospect in Britain’ among protesters (Fraser et al. 1988: 244), and Britain never saw revolutionary theory of the kind produced by Marcuse or Habermas, figurehead leaders such as Rudi Dutschke in Berlin or Hans-Jürgen Krahl in Frankfurt (Leslie 1999), or protests on the scale of those in Washington or Berkeley, left-wing

British students nevertheless engaged with the university as a site of protest as part of the ‘long march through the institutions of power’ in order to achieve social change (Kazin 2018).

Although the two most significant protest events of the period took place in London – at the LSE, where students successfully forced university authorities to reinstate the presidents of the Students’ Union and the Graduate Students’ Union through occupations and boycotts of university buildings (Ellis 1998: 59), and the Grosvenor Square protests against the U.S. conduct of the Vietnam War, organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) – protests were not limited to London, nor to the issues with which protests in the capital were concerned. Protests in the north-east of England alone included those by Durham students against food price rises in 1967, at Newcastle for mixed halls of residence and paid sabbaticals for SU officers, and widespread protests against rugby matches featuring touring teams from South African universities (Ellis 1998). Many protests aimed at disrupting speakers giving addresses at universities, especially those by Conservative MPs (Crouch 1970): Enoch Powell’s speech at Rutherford College in Newcastle in 1969 was disrupted by members of the university’s Socialist and Left-Wing Societies (Ellis 1998: 58), and notable protests were also held at Essex, Hornsby, Hull and Birmingham (Chun 1993: 93).

Although the protests of this period were organised by a wide variety of political groups (Thomas 2002), it is clear that an important role was played by students identifying with left-wing political identities: the VSC was led by Trotskyists and prominent International Marxist Group (IMG) leaders Tariq Ali and Pat Jordan (Ellis 1998), and protests outside the capital seem to have been heavily influenced by affiliated Socialist societies (Crouch 1970; Ellis 1998). For example, during the period the Labour Club at Durham University became the most popular and active society, as was the case at other universities (Ellis 1998). Blackstone and Hadley (1971) specifically note that the momentum for the LSE protests originated in the university’s Socialist Society, and passed through the students’ union onto the student body at large (1971: 2), as was the case at Hull (Caute 1988: 305). While those protesters taking part in demonstrations throughout the late 1960s came from all across the political spectrum, especially in protests concerning international issues – notably, protests against the university establishment at Birmingham even received the endorsement of the university’s Federation of Conservative Students affiliate (Caute 1988: 323) – it is important to recognise the crucial role played in the leadership of protests by student members of left-wing political organisations.

This broad assertion, however, conceals the streak of ideological infighting within supposedly politically similar students during the period. In 1967, in response to what was seen as a shift towards extremist left entryism through organisations like the IMG (Crick 1986: 56), the Labour Party

rescinded the bilateral agreement through which NALSO was affiliated as the party's official student wing. Consequently, until 1971, through the height of the protest movement, Labour went without an affiliated student organisation on university campuses (Barberis et al. 1999). In response, many of the most extremist members of NALSO left Labour entirely and defected to the Socialist Labour League (Halsey and Marks 1969: 55). As a result, it seems as though the official Labour Party played a relatively minor role in the protests of 1968-70, being primarily concerned with the takeover of organisations like Young Socialists, the youth wing of the party, by entryist organisations (Crick 1986). As a result of the disaffiliation of NALSO and the expulsion of perceived extremist Marxist and Trotskyist student members, those remaining elements of student membership within Labour seems to have maintained a firmly moderate, democratic-socialist political identity during this period.

The NUS, similarly, seems to have avoided any real involvement with the protests of the period at large: as radical students became more and more vocal in public debate, the criticism of the NUS for attempting to remain aloof from the protest movement became steadily louder. Alongside the perception among radical students that the Union's leadership were right-wing reactionaries who used the prevailing political climate to dismiss left-wing students as 'communists' and used the organisation's bureaucracy to prevent such students gaining positions of influence (Widgery 1969), the NUS's inaction regarding the protests at the LSE and around the country, even following the election of Jack Straw as president in 1969, led many of the most radical left-wing students, primarily identifying as Trotskyists and radical socialists, to break away as the Radical Students Alliance (RSA) and the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation (Ellis 1998). The fact that the NUS had urged its members to boycott the Grosvenor Square protests did little to quieten the complaints (Caute 1988), and several individual institutions including the Universities of both Keele and Hull passed prominent votes of no confidence in the NUS during this period (Ellis 1998). In this, the general student unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s seems to have been reflected in the machinations of established and institutionalised student political groups, with a clear division developing between the more moderate 'establishment' groups such as the Labour Party and the NUS, and radical groups such as the IMG, the RSA and the RSSF.

1968-2010

As substantial as many of the radical organisations which were at the centre of the 1968-70 protests, and as large as their membership may have been during that period, Britain saw the same process as the rest of Europe: those coalition groups which had been held together by their common involvement

in the broad campaigns of 1968-70 fragmented into 'orthodox' political groups with greater ideological hegemony (von Dirke 1997: 34). In terms of institutionalised student politics, one of the key shifts during this period was the replacement of the defunct NALSO, which had been disaffiliated from the party in 1967, with the new National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS). Initially, at least, this new organisation was far more acceptable to the party leadership than its predecessor, and in comparison to the youth wing of the party, the Young Socialists (which had been taken over by the Trotskyist Militant tendency in 1970), the NOLS was considered to identify itself far more with the moderate democratic socialist ideology of the party at large (Crick 1986; Lamb 2002). As a result, a great deal of the funding which had been allocated to the Young Socialists was handed to NOLS by the party's NEC; the perception of the NOLS as a moderate democratic socialist organisation persisted over time, despite the appointment of open Trotskyist Andrew Bevan as the party's first full-time youth officer, and a battle for control of NOLS between the 'Clause 4' moderate group and the Militant tendency during the 1970s (Crick 1986; Lamb 2002). This conflict grew so bitter that at the NOLS conference in 1976, moderate students who would later form the Clause 4 group travelled from all over the country in what was known as 'Operation Icepick' (after the weapon used to kill Leon Trotsky in 1940) in order to prevent Militant supporters from gaining power in the organisation (Crick 1986), and members of the different groups came to physical blows at the conference in 1984 (Lamb 2002: 290).

Despite the ongoing conflict within the Labour Party's student membership during the 1970s and 1980s, this was still a departure from the way in which ideological dissent was treated previously: rather than expelling members and disaffiliating NOLS when it became too troublesome, the organisation and its members largely remained within the party. Although many Trotskyist members of organisations like the VSC, appalled by the Labour Party's 'complicity' in the American policy in Vietnam, remained outside the party (Edmonds 1994; Cauter 1988), few of even the most radical members of the Militant tendency seem to have left NOLS over ideological differences, plausibly as a consequence of Militant entryist policy (Crick 1986). It is worth noting as an aside that, during this period, Militant also fought constantly against not just the 'soft left' of the Labour Party but other Trotskyist groups, most notably its former allies the IMG (Crick 1986: 91). Because of this, it was possible for Crick (1984) to estimate that Militant controlled 30 of the 130 university Labour Clubs around the country at the time. However, the ability of Militant to field candidates for every available position and gain control of affiliate organisations waned by the late 1980s (Crick 1986), and the 1990s seemed to see the ideological divisions within NOLS largely fade away in parallel with those of Young Socialists and subsequently Young Labour (Lamb 2002). The transition from NOLS to Labour

Students in the first part of the decade seems to have had little effect on the control or ideology of the organisation (Lamb 2002; Barberis et al. 1999), which by then had come to generally identify with a New Labour political platform.

This shift in the dynamics of the Labour Party student apparatus coincided with the increase of the politicisation of the NUS which had begun, nominally, at the time of the 1968-70 protests. From that point onward, left-wing students remained an important force within the Union, and candidates from left-wing factions (principally NOLS and the Broad Left coalition consisting of NOLS, CPGB and other parties) holding the presidency for much of the subsequent period (Yettram 1981). For most of the 1970s the NUS continued to agitate for left-wing aims on a broad footing: in the wake of the LSE protests, the NUS membership rejected a 1971 agreement with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) which promised to increase student representation at universities while placing constraints on the mandates and activities of student leaders (Day 2012: 36); an attempt to restrict the activities of the NUS to strictly education and welfare concerns in the wake of the collapse of NUS Travel Services in 1976 was rejected (Day 2012: 41), and the controversial practice of ‘no-platforming’ speakers considered racist was approved by the NUS conference in 1974 (Smith 2018: 206).

2010/11 and the ‘Occupy’ protests

In the beginning, at least, the ‘Occupy’ protests in Britain were dominated by students (Brooks 2017: 1) – indeed, the first stages of the unrest had their roots in the outrage of students at the decision of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government to raise the cap on tuition fees to £9,000 per year, in line with the 2010 Browne Review (Rheingans and Hollands 2013: 546). The first major event of the protests, indeed, was the NUS/UCU-organised demonstration of 10th November 2010, which attracted 50,000 demonstrators, mostly students and schoolchildren (Day 2012: 43), but was overshadowed by the group of several hundred protesters who occupied and ransacked Conservative Party Headquarters at Millbank Tower (Myers 2017). Following the initial London protests, the movement broke out onto a wider footing, with students at universities such as Newcastle occupying official buildings (Rheingans and Hollands 2013) and the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts arranging mass action against the general austerity policy around the country (Myers 2017). Ultimately, however, despite the enormous attention that the protests of 2010/11 received in the media, and the depth of popular outrage among students against austerity and the coalition government which was shown, the protests achieved little: the tuition fee rise went ahead after a vote in parliament, and the greatest extent of the student demonstrations had subsided by the end of 2011 (Myers 2017), although

further 'Occupy' demonstrations continued for some time, and anti-austerity protest events are still taking place to date.

Although many of the most vocal mouthpieces of the protest movement of 2010/11 were represented as politically left-wing (especially given their frequently extreme anti-Conservative rhetoric [Myers 2017]), the idea that predominantly left-wing students formed the core of the movement is debatable – the political beliefs and identities of individual participants ranged 'from the Tories to revolutionary communists' (Myers 2017: 119) – and Labour Students kept largely aloof from the protests, failing to attract senior party leadership to the protests (Myers 2017: 102) despite the fact that the two presidents of the NUS whose terms overlapped with the protests – Wes Streeting and Aaron Porter – were Labour members (although only Streeting was elected under the Labour Students banner). The role of the NUS was similarly distant from the more radical side of the protests: despite the fact that the Union was critical in organising the first London protest in November 2010, as well as helping to promote the 'Vote for Students' pledge to which 1526 prospective parliamentary candidates subscribed prior to the 2010 General Election (Day 2012: 43), the role of the Union was hardly that of a national representative body for the sector of the population most profoundly affected by the proposed legislation. Hampered by the executive's reticence to commit to a substantive finance policy (Day 2012), the NUS was largely abandoned as a vehicle for activism by tuition fee demonstrators (Myers 2017) and seen by many as a vocal but hollow organisation which failed to formulate aims clearly or organise or inspire its members coherently to achieve them (Kumar 2011). Similarly, the most widely-reported incident of the movement, the occupation of Conservative Campaign Headquarters at Millbank Tower, was undertaken by more radical protesters who broke away from the NUS-backed protest (Mason 2013; Myers 2017).

As noted previously, the role of political solidarity and collective identity in providing impetus for activist movements and organisations is critically important. The political solidarity and collective identity shared by the protesters of 2010/11, however, seems to have been minimal, even in comparison to the 1968-70 protests: both Mason (2013) and Myers (2017) record a 'distaste' for ideology held by many of the protesters, and those discussions of ideology which did take place were largely limited to the background (Myers 2017). Although collective participants of individual protest events did seem to develop a sense of collective action and solidarity (Rheingans and Hollands 2013), this was not shared across the wider movement, and there was no overarching ideological quality shown within participants in the protests beyond opposition to the tuition fee rises and, in most cases, the coalition government's austerity policies.

Of course, an important aspect of the 2010/11 protest movement was that it took place in a very different environment to that of the last major student protest events seen in Britain – that is to say, the world was a very different one to that of 1968-70. Although a clear trend toward marketisation and massification in higher education had been seen by the time of the earlier protests, these processes had not truly taken hold in Britain by the 1970s (Marsh 1977; Thomas 2002). By 2010, however, the two waves of mass university openings in the early 1990s and the early 2000s had fundamentally altered the prospects and experiences of university graduates as an ‘incipient elite’ (Altbach 1967: 74; Wakeford and Wakeford 1974). The path from university to ‘positions of leadership and influence’ had been seriously disrupted (Burkett 2018a: 2), and the prospect of ‘the graduate with no future’ (Mason 2013: 66) had become very real for the first time. The massive growth and social change in higher education meant that, for the first time, the assured place of the graduate in the socioeconomic and political elite was no longer assured (Brooks 2017; Burkett 2018a). The rise of social media in the mid-2000s also fundamentally affected the environment in which the protests of 2010/11 took place: the advent of what Mason (2013) terms the ‘networked individual’ made organisation of political activism easier than ever before, even between those who have never met in person (Milkman 2017; Myers 2017).

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