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## Activism, Academic Judgement, and the University

A Review of Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally (eds.), *The University and Social Justice: Struggles Across the Globe*, Pluto Press, 2020. 260 pp. £24.99 (PB). ISBN 978 0 7453 4068 5

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### *A New Cause for Student Activism?*

As many of the chapters in *The University and Social Justice: Struggles Across the Globe* attest to, the most successful forms of student activism against government higher education policies and/or university management decisions have occurred when both existing and prospective university students are united in a common cause. In recent years, students in all parts of the world have seen stark rises in university tuition fees, and these have prompted many in schools and colleges, as well as those already in university, to join demonstrations, campus occupations, and other forms of activism, in an effort to bring about a policy reversal. Each chapter of Choudry and Vally's collection pays due attention to student activism around university tuition fee increases, but the more extensive reflections on student fee strikes, demonstrations and occupations are to be found in relation to the student movements of Palestine (Meari and Duhou 2020, chapter 8); Quebec (Hampton 2020, chapter 5); and the UK (Woodcock 2020, chapter 2). Whilst the principal objective of student action in this regard has undoubtedly been to challenge the rationale that allows national government's to structure their economies by, among other things, creating extensive levels of student debt (Choudry and Vally 2020, p. 11), resistant action is also necessary to ensure that once at university students have the capacity to hold their institutions to account - for fee increases inevitably bring about a situation where "... a growing portion of students...combine education with work in order to be able to pay their fees, affecting their involvement in student activism" (Meari and Duhou 2020, p. 145).

Between 13 and 17 August 2020, certain events unfolded in the UK which intimate that there may soon be another cause capable of uniting students across the tertiary education sphere.

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The preference for algorithmic decision-making over the judgement of subject specialists and expert examiners in the university degree classification process has been a problem bubbling under the surface of higher education for some years. However, because potential links between issues of concern within universities (such as the much commented upon BAME attainment gap) and degree algorithm design have not been investigated, the processes according to which degree classifications are decided have not yet motivated students toward collective dissent.

### *A Levels, Degrees, Algorithms, and Academic Judgement*

As has often been observed, government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have brought into sharp focus pre-existing structural inequalities. This circumstance would certainly have been impressed upon students in the UK when they embarked upon a successful three days of protests/demonstrations after it was revealed to them that approximately forty per cent of estimated A level grades that had been submitted to the exam regulator, OFQUAL, by their teachers - in default of the standard examinations which students had been prevented from sitting due to the coronavirus school lockdowns - had been downgraded as a result of the application of OFQUAL's grading rules (algorithm). The OFQUAL rules gave significant weight to a school's performance in each subject over the three years preceding. Predictably, this particular grading rule resulted in students who attended poor or improving schools having their teacher estimated A level grades reduced in disproportionate numbers when compared with students who attended schools which were able to show strong or steady historical performances. Again not surprisingly, a significant number of schools which had benefited from the OFQUAL algorithm were either in the private sector or were highly selective state schools.

The student protests/demonstrations will no doubt go on record as some of the most successful in recent history, for they led to a reversal of the government decision to allow OFQUAL a decisive say in the final A level grades. On 17 August, the UK Education Secretary announced that all A level grades would be changed in line with the teachers' estimated grades - save where these produced a lower result than the OFQUAL algorithm.

Regrettably, during the period between the publication of the OFQUAL results on 13 August and the government reversal of policy on 17 August, many of those students whose reduced grades meant that they did not meet the threshold for entry to the university at which they held a provisional place found that they had lost the place to other students.

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Already, then, the question of fair access to university has been raised by the A level debacle, and, as with rising tuition fees, this question of access undoubtedly is one over which school, college and university students can again unite. However, for the purposes of this review of *The University and Social Justice*, I want to draw inspiration from the A level student demonstrations to explore how student activism might be directed towards aspects of the university degree classification process. Admittedly with far less dramatic consequences than those visited on the 2020 cohort of UK A level students, UK universities have for all intents and purposes excluded the judgement of subject experts in determining student degree classifications. That this is so is evidenced by the most recent comprehensive investigation into the policies and guidance which provide the framework against which degree classification decisions are arrived at. The investigation, based on a survey of 120 institutions, was conducted by Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE, and their joint report was published in 2017. In the all too distant past, the judgement of expert examiners was decisive in cases where a student's performance was on the 'borderline' of two possible degree results. The UUK/GuildHE report confirms that this traditional space of academic judgement in the degree classification process is fast disappearing, and it is now "expected that the number of institutions using an automatic algorithm to decide on borderline cases will increase (UUK/GuildHE 2017, p. 39). The report makes clear that universities and their regulators consider academic judgement to be inimical to "fair" and "transparent" decisions (UUK/GuildHE 2007, p. 4).

According to the UUK/Guild HE report, 65 out of the 120 higher education institutions surveyed dealt with borderline cases by "automatically" applying the degree algorithm, or by simply not considering borderline cases (2017, p. 38). Even those institutions which submit borderline cases to the judgement of academics constrain the judgement of these academics by way of inflexible rules pertaining to when and how that judgement is exercised. For example, a common practice across the sector in borderline instances is to limit academic judgement to cases where a student is "within 1% or 2% of the next band" and only "on the basis of specific criteria such as requiring in excess of 50% of the final year marks to be in the upper band, or specific modules to be included in the final calculation" (Sinclair, Wright, Edwards and Keane, 2017).

It is unlikely that many university students are aware of the extent to which their degree results are dependent on algorithms which, like the OFQUAL algorithms, may include design factors which produce unfair results. Indeed, it is only because of the sheer scale and complexity of the Covid-19 emergency response that the UK exam regulator was unable to conceal the fact that A level assessments - even those arrived at after a conventional examination sitting - are liable to be adjusted by algorithm - especially in cases where the outcome of the exam sitting does not produce an obvious answer as to which grade the examination candidate has earned. And it goes without saying that any form of student activism is predicated on the students' cognisance of facts that could lead them to conclude that a potential harm has been done to them; and for too long the processes by which A level grades and degree classification decisions are arrived at have been shrouded in mystery.

In the concluding part of this review, I offer a suggestion about one area of the university degree classification process around which students might successfully act to bring about change. However, the suggestion will carry more weight once we gain from *The University and Social Justice* a better understanding of the conditions which must exist before students feels compelled to resist (temporarily at least) the role of the "compliant subject" (Vijayan 2020, p. 50) with which "...the structure and organisation of HE is designed to ensure compliance" (Vijayan 2020, p. 50), such that they are then able to engage as activists.

### *More About the Book*

Over thirteen chapters, *The University and Social Justice*: examines the conditions in higher education which have prompted students to engage in a variety of activist strategies in order to hold government and university management to account for the policies they propose to implement. As its subtitle indicates, the collection documents examples of student activism from a diversity of locations. However, despite the differing locations, readers will immediately note a remarkable degree of convergence among students over the specific evils in higher education in relation to which they perceive they have some power to change. In general terms, student activism is most often targeted "...against market rule in the education system" (Campos-Martinez and Olavarria 2020, p. 98), or, as Choudry and Vally put it, student activism has challenged the acceptance by universities "...of corporate culture as the appropriate form of management and leadership in higher education..." (2020, p. 9). All *visible* manifestations of this culture "...the most salient effects of

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[which] is the almost perfect socio-economic segregation of the country, which can be seen geographically as well as between the different educational institutions that constitute the system” (Campos-Martinez and Olavarria 2020, p. 101) have, to a greater or lesser degree, met some form of student opposition.

As stated above, reasonable tuition fee levels are a key factor that enables students the time and resources to engage in any form of activism at all; hence many contributors highlight the role tuition fees, and consequent student debt, has “...played...in disciplining students and containing dissent...” (Choudry and Vally 2020, p. 11). Writing in the context of Mexico’s student population, Maldonado-Maldonado and Astorga insist that student activism “...require resources...that are not necessarily available to societies that are struggling” (2020, p. 168). However, once these minimal conditions of resistance are in place, student “...protestors appropriate some means of action from an already known repertoire” (Le Mazier 2020, p. 174). Le Mazier argues that “...strikes, demonstrations, occupations and general assemblies...” (2020, p. 174) are favoured because they do not rub up against other student commitments; rather, student activists can “...gather as many people as possible despite academic obligations...” (Le Mazier 2020, p. 174). Other contributors also highlight the advantages attendant upon the “...seizing of space during occupations” (Woodcock 2020, p. 37). For Gamedze and Naidoo, occupations allowed students “... the time, space and desire for collective discussion and critical education, where it was possible to have more productive engagement around issues ” (2020, p. 192). In a similar vein, Campos-Martinez and Olavarria allude to the “... self-education work inside the occupations...” (2020, p. 108), and Meari and Duhou observed that “[s]hutting down the university gates and occupying the university continuously until their goals were achieved constituted a new tactic that proved to be successful and strengthened the students’ confidence in their collective power” (2020, p. 150).

Aside from activism over fees, campus occupations and other strategies have allowed students to confront and, in many cases, counteract other manifestations of the corporate culture of the university, such as the expansion of the private university sector (Ozcan 2020, p. 62; Campos-Martinez and Olavarria 2010, p. 101); the increased dependence on donor funds (Abdulhadi and Shehadeh 2020, p. 121-2); the outsourcing of facilities, such as cafes, (Abdulhadi and Shehadeh 2020, p. 129-30; Gamedze and Naidoo 2020, p. 190 & p. 203); the “...commercialisation of student accommodation...” (Nafziger and Strong, 2020, p. 212) and the “... intensified...role of the university as a resource for international labour markets” (Raymundo and Mongaya 2020, p. 232).

However, other harmful conditions in the university have not garnered the same extent of student activism. In relation to what might be generically described as the “...hostile campus environment” (Abdulhadi and Shehadeh 2020, p. 132), the collection’s authors remind us that “... not all student politics are necessarily either progressive or democratic, however much they may claim those qualities” (Vijayan 2020, p. 55): that the institutionalised form of student activism which is orchestrated through student unions operates in such a way that “...through its alchemy, the (potentially) resistant-subject is morphed into the (potentially) oppressor-subject” (Vijayan 2020, p. 51), and, indeed, that institutionalised student movements often reproduce colonial tropes, even as they seek to challenge them (Hampton 2020, p. 79). More generally, some of the chapters show how “[i]ssues of pervasive, institutionalised racism – and the inability to effectively address, confront and eliminate it – continue to undermine the potential breath and reach of the student movement” (Hampton 2020, p. 85). The university environment is made hostile for some students as a result of a number of factors - most prominent of which are the colonial legacies of the university - in relation to which it has been the task of “...Black students...to raise critical questions about the politics of knowledge production” (Gamedze and Naidoo 2020, p. 203), and an increasingly “...securitised university environment” (Ozcan 2020, p. 67), which has resulted in the hyper-visibility of Muslim students.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Students in the UK have put in question the processes by which academic qualifications are determined, and these questions are by no means confined to the A level grades which were the subject of the August 2020 protests/demonstrations. Moreover, the grading controversies which sparked student dissent were *exposed, not produced*, by the UK Department of Education’s response to Covid-19 school closures and subsequent cancellation of A level examinations. Choudry and Vally’s collection reveals that the factors which give rise to levels of student dissatisfaction such that they feel compelled to coordinate resistance strategies are not significantly different for students studying in France (Le Mazier, chapter 10), or Nigeria (Nafziger and Strong, chapter 12), or the Philippines ((Raymundo and Mongaya, chapter 13) - to name just a few of the countries covered in the book. Thus, on the reasonable assumption that the A level grading issue has raised levels of

consciousness among university students about the extent to which algorithmic decision-making, *not the judgement of subject specialists*, influences degree classification decisions, one might expect to see increased levels of student activism addressed to university policy and guidance touching on the degree awarding process. One eminently achievable objective of any form of student activism would be to ensure that university examination board deliberations are held in public - with student names and other sensitive information suitably redacted - as is fitting for a decision making process that will alter the course of an individual's life.

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