

## Pow!

### Nina Power

Before the UK election in May 2010, Conservative think-tanks such as Policy Exchange were suggesting that universities should be forced to ‘sink or swim’ and that private takeover was a very real possibility for ‘failing’ (or even not-so-failing) universities. While the introduction of ‘top-up’ tuition fees in 1998 heralded a shift in the way institutions understood their relation to both the state and their students, the total market vision of universities held by the coalition government crosses a qualitative threshold in the long-standing drive to impose the ideology of ‘measurability’ on the education system, despite the absence of any economic or social benefit in doing so.

The tripling of tuition fees, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for 16–18 year-olds and the removal of state funding for teaching in the arts, humanities and social sciences have struck many not only as a searing indictment of the philistinism of a government whose members had themselves received a free university education, but also as an inadequate and unsustainable response to the economic crisis. How is reducing university places, making levels of debt so high that they become unattractive and impossible for those not from rich families, and cutting the funding of various subjects going to stimulate the economy? What else, exactly, are those sixteen-year-olds who will lose the EMA, and those potential university students put off by a lifetime of debt, going to do instead? The short-termist venality of government policy, the Liberal Democrat climbdown over fees, the misjudged rhetoric of ‘austerity Britain’, the new philanthropy, the ‘Big Society’ and newspeak claims that ‘we are all in this together’ have made it very clear to the British public that it is they who will have to pay, and pay hard, for a deficit they didn’t create, in the name of a ‘shock doctrine’ approach to the economy that they don’t want.

It is no surprise, in some ways, that education, with all its complex forms of constraint and emancipation, would be at the forefront of this ongoing struggle, though it is quite clear that the government (and the police) have so far massively miscalculated the public

response to their policies, assuming, perhaps, that after decades of ideological warfare, many, even among the middle classes, would find little to be upset about in the destruction of the university, with its supposed distance from the ‘real world’ and uselessness in an era characterized overwhelmingly by an obsession with profit, measurement and financial gain.

In many ways, the attack on universities and the EMA has been interpreted, correctly, as an attack on the young, and in particular on marginalized youth. We have in recent months been treated to the absurd spectacle of millionaire politicians telling already impoverished A-level and university students that they should be fixing the economy by mortgaging their future for the promise of jobs that are likely never to exist. Coupled with the institutional racism of a police force who have for a long time felt at liberty to harass and intimidate black and Asian youth in particular, the sense of divide between the rich and poor has become starker than ever. The battle over education, for so long understood as one of the main drivers of social mobility, has taken on a politicized character that had lain dormant in previous years.

### ‘Rage of the Girl Rioters’? Yes, please!

The increasingly large – and, latterly, ferociously policed – demonstrations of November and December were accompanied by a series of university, college and school occupations involving, in total, around fifty institutions across the country. Although these events took place in direct response to the attacks on education, they should be understood in the context of occupations that took place a year earlier in response to Israel’s attacks on Gaza, and to the brief occupation of Deptford Town Hall by Goldsmiths students on 3 November when the government first announced their intentions to raise fees and cut funding. Earlier actions in support of academic staff should also be remembered: last spring, staff went on strike at Kings College London and students occupied Sussex in protest at planned lay-offs. The international outcry that greeted the announcement of the closure of Philosophy at

Middlesex University in May last year, and the subsequent occupations of the main buildings and library at its Trent Park campus, coupled with management suspension of staff and students, similarly set the tone for the autumn occupations. Some have begun to call it Winter of Discontent 2.0, reflecting, on the one hand, the return of a more openly Thatcherite political climate (although it was of course Labour who commissioned the Browne Report) and, on the other, the role of new media in disseminating information and organizing the protests and occupations, the scale of which prompted many to compare current student activism to the events of 1968 (plus laptops).

There may be some mileage in comparisons to the protests of 1968, so long as they can avoid becoming a nostalgia-fest for those who have long since abandoned



political resistance. But any direct identification fails to recognize the changed nature and status of the student as a political and social being: the blurring of the line between student and worker is far more pronounced now, precisely because the expansion of higher education has created spaces for those whose families do not previously have experience of attending university. Most of my students at Roehampton (and I'm sure the pattern is similar in other post-92s) are just as much workers, parents and carers as they are students, which makes participation in the protests and occupations perhaps even more significant. As does the fact that none of the students who occupied and protested this winter will be directly affected by the fee increases, frustrating media attempts to push their usual stereotype of the lazy, self-interested student. Another set of characters had to be mobilized: the naive protester simply caught up in the heat of the events (reinforcing the reactionary division between the 'good' and the 'bad' protester), the image of a 'children's crusade' coupled with a critique of lecturers who 'should know better', and so on. It should be noted that unlike '68, where all the well-known

student leaders were male, the role of women as organizers, protesters and commentators in the recent protests was central, much to the horror of the *Daily Mail* in particular, whose 'Rage of the Girl Rioters' article (25 November) is already notorious.

While National Union of Students and University and College Union leadership were frequently 'spineless' – as NUS leader Aaron Porter described himself during a meeting at the UCL occupation – the students' self-organization and rapid outwitting of police tactics on several occasions should be recognized as part of a new wave of acephalic mobilizations, which, as protests build into the new year, cannot get much further without the support of trade unions, parents and other workers. This is a point made by Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite.

University lecturers, who are being increasingly told by management to inform on their politically active students, came in for some serious criticism from the media at various points, particularly those at Goldsmiths who signed a letter defending the student protests ('Full Marks for the Riot Say Lecturers' ran the *Evening Standard* headline on 12 November). The attack on Goldsmiths is not coincidental. It is seen as the symbolic home of everything that's 'wrong' with the university according to current government policy: arts-based, in London (there are simply 'too many'), renowned (but not in the right way) and far too accessible to students from non-traditional backgrounds. On a related note, the role of 'art practice' in recent protests is also interesting, particularly the re-détourning of already assimilated art forms – the way the flash mob turned in a matter of months from an empty social media happening to an advertising vehicle, to a form of popular protest in the shape of UK Uncut's tax avoidance campaigns.

There is no doubt that 2011 will see a continued and increasingly militant anger spreading from students and the young to public-sector workers and beyond. Parents of children and young adults are increasingly and justly antagonized by the punishment meted out on their kids, and further-education and university students involved in the protests have received a rapid education in how not to trust the state, the police or the media. Some of the most articulate summaries and slogans of the current situation have come not from the old revolutionary vanguard, or from the commentariat, but from the protesters and occupiers themselves – and how could it be otherwise?

# Occupations and their limits

## Escalate

Boundaries are permeable. We reach out beyond the police containment zone; our attempt to escape is our attempt to spread the movement into society at large. On the evening of 9 December, journalists are let out just before they hold us for two hours on Westminster Bridge. We are reminded of the futility of tweeting from our smartphones when all the professional reporters have gone home. But, instead of silence, we listen to our own chants.

In protest our biggest opposition is the boundary. We reject the boundaries of the lecture theatre, the separation of students from society, the institutions of privilege, the binding of subjects to disciplines, the lines on the timetables that tell us where to be and when. Boundaries are how we are controlled, and in occupying we aim to take control of and remove them. The metaphors abound, and our movement is attracted to them. It is not by mistake that we engage in modes of protest that leave themselves open to poetic interpretation.

Virtual boundaries manifest themselves in the physical world. Receiving the legal notice of a possession order against an occupation, we find ourselves presented with deeds and blueprints. The perimeters of the occupied rooms are outlined in coloured felt-tip. The documents tell us that the claimant is 'The University', which means its management. In legal terms, the management are the owners of the institution: in legal terms, they control it. Occupiers are depersonalized by definition, defined as 'Persons Unknown (including students)'. We are expected to recognize ourselves in that dismissive parenthesis. The symbolism of the boundaries marked on these documents at that moment becomes a spectre of physical violence: the threat of removal by bailiffs.

This mutation from virtual to physical does not only go in one direction. The police line in front of Parliament or the Treasury becomes an integral part of a whole architecture worthy of destruction. The line becomes a boundary of the spectacle, and then itself becomes subsumed into the spectacle. We form our own line and so the process continues back and forth, between the spectacle of the boundary and the boundary of the spectacle.

The mass incarceration of protesters in Parliament Square is counterposed by the fences put up to stop people getting in. Boundaries become confused. Are they to pen us in or keep us out? In occupation, we rebel against a particular boundary, but in doing so we come to recognize the social functions of boundaries *as such*.

The space created within an occupation is based on mutual reliance, and the boundaries of the zones become semi-permeable, allowing in the trusted, ejecting authority. In a different way, police containment zones are based on such reliance, in which both police and protesters fulfil predetermined roles. But the protest of trust and permeability occurs twice: first by the police, and then by us. A thousand protesters break the police line on Whitehall. On the other side of the barrier, they reform, then come crashing back into the contained area. The only tactical advantage is an expression of solidarity.

For while it might seem that the police containment zone and the occupation are separated fundamentally – by the first being an act of unwanted incarceration and the latter an actively willed space of liberation – this divide is superficial. The spaces are different, but the boundaries remain the same. In essence, both rely on a dynamic of authority and protest. Our practice of disruption physically manifests the continuing assault of daily life upon free-thinking and the practice of resistance.

Those students who remained on the outside of the occupations, and those of us within who constantly fretted about every decision and movement, share a state of anxiety. While the first group concerned itself with the potential repercussions of illegitimacy, ours, the second group, was petrified that the legitimacy we had gained would slip away.

Such anxiety feels specific to every individual, but is communal. It is the binding collective emotion, the one on which our political movement is uneasily built. It stems not from an individual situation, but from a collective subjection to social authority. Alienation, apathy, depression, fear – these have always been the names of the mental state prior to politicization. Anxiety is the next phase, the one that propels people into new spaces of containment.

The Situationists were already noting in 1967 that the majority of students were destined to become low-level functionaries. For them this was a novelty. For us it is an overwhelming and indisputable fact. The atomization of the campus, the way in which our universities increasingly resemble the service industry – these are not accidents or metaphor, but active correlations between the world of work and the institutions which prepare us for it.

What were once seminars are now merely miscategorized lectures, ‘contact’ hours have diminished into minutes, and academics have been ‘incentivized’ to prioritize their research over their pastoral obligations. At the same time costs to students have been inexorably pushed up. Successive UK governments have gradually flattened the appetite among students for intellectual and political opposition. The crisis has removed for the state the need to immiserate us in slow motion.

Occupation has indeed re-entered the political vocabulary. But for us it is also a new political philology. The state introduces fees that will dissuade the poor from ‘accessing’ university resources. By seizing and then holding open doors to the fixed capital of which we are currently being dispossessed, occupation demonstrates that we intend to make those resources the possession of all.

Be under no illusions: it scares the management. If the university managers do not exercise control, they have no remaining function. They will scratch the itch of occupation: the courts are on their side, the police are on their side. They are desperate not so much for us to leave as for the status of the space to revert to the calm clockwork order of before.

We begin to realize that we are trapped between a series of closed doors while we can hear the privileged few on the other side, pocketing the keys and gluing the locks. But, as everyone saw on 9 December, trapped people get angry. Trapped people have to smash their way out. Anyone who isn’t smashing yet doesn’t realize just how trapped they are.

The state argues that fees are ‘fair’ on the basis that a university system financed by general taxation is not. When the state makes this argument, it does not mention (which is to say, it conceals) that low-income working people have always paid for HE, and that doing so has involved paying not just for teaching, but also for a decades-long programme of investment in higher-education infrastructure: in research libraries, lecture theatres, seminar rooms, sports halls, residences. In the publicly funded Higher Education Funding Council for England’s 2010–11 budget, £562

million was set aside for ‘Capital Investment’. The new fees will *in effect* exclude the poor from accessing this material wealth.

In occupations, the status of that wealth is contested. The process is quite simple. When we occupy a teaching space, we realize it is possible to participate in the composition of our syllabus without making a £9,000 per annum ‘personal investment’. When we occupy a research library, we realize we can determine who is kept out and who comes in. For the middle-class students who resist fees on principle (and, let’s face it, there are many), occupation is an education in the material reality of property relations. We learn how the spaces we occupy are policed under usual conditions: but we also begin to learn at what cost.

The state is orchestrating a large-scale withdrawal of social goods. This creates new and urgent possibilities for class struggle. If occupations have so far failed to include a larger portion of the student body, that failure has taught us how much work still needs to be done if students are to possess a political culture prepared for such struggle. They have also done some essential work towards that preparation. The new open spaces of the occupation offer new modes of understanding. Democracy is experienced by many in ways they had never imagined. Working groups cooperate for a greater good beyond the meaningless and arbitrary production of commodities or predetermined social goods of the welfare state.

Dumbfounded by the cogs of our society’s machinery, we break things to participate: the rules, the law, windows, property rights, norms, the officially determined uses of public spaces. Breaking away from our timetables, from our work/play divides, we come together not as producers or consumers, but as friends, in real places, with real tales to tell. The university became both a target and a home.

We create our own bounded space when we occupy, delimiting, provisionally, an autonomous space; but we create our own provisional boundaries only in order to explode their more permanent and more suffocating predecessors. Nothing can be locked up at night. We feel that we own a space in occupation, but in fact we understand occupation to be a *process* that we determine. We don’t want just another classroom, or another police containment zone: rather, we want people to join us and we want to join them. We risk the space becoming a fetish, and all too often it does. But when the occupation ends we continue our process on the streets and in the classrooms. We continue pointing to the boundaries we wish to surpass and destroy. All too often those boundaries follow us wherever we go.

# Smells like teen spirit

**Emily Clifton**

Before I learned about the planned rise in tuition fees in October 2010, my sole experience of political protest was as a nine-year-old accompanying my mother on a thoroughly peaceful anti-Iraq War march in 2003. I'm now sixteen, a student at a South-west London state secondary school. Following the election last spring, my friends and I had begun to talk about politics for the first time. There was a wide range of views. There was an equally wide range of opinions about the government's imminent plans involving tuition fees, only this time feelings were heightened as the issue was something that we could directly relate to our futures.

As the students of the future, we are the ones who will be saddled with massive debts. They will be a huge deterrent for many of us, as we ponder how best to continue our education. I don't accept that the Con-Dem alliance has any mandate to decide our futures, to reinstate an elitist education system, and to reinforce the class system that underlies it, particularly as the majority of them have benefited from an entirely free university education.

Inspired by news of planned demonstrations in London, a friend and I joined the 10 November protest march from Whitehall to Millbank, the Conservative Headquarters, in order to 'unite and fight' with thousands of other justifiably irate students from all over the UK. The enthusiasm and motivation of the crowd was phenomenal, with over 50,000 workers and students spanning all ages, united in their view that the contents of the Browne Report were unfair and unnecessary; the energy was particularly exhilarating and heartening outside Millbank, where the chants and banners found an immediate and compelling target.

Emboldened by our experience and motivated through the need to raise awareness among our peers and create an impact locally, we then decided to organize our own event in Kingston. We wanted to gain as much support as possible, particularly in secondary schools. Like so many similar groups all over the country, we set up a Facebook event page, giving information and explaining our motives. We planned to stage school walkouts, followed by a local march, to coincide with the National Day of Walkouts to

defend Education (on 24 November), organized by the Education Activist Network.

Through our Facebook campaign (which included accept and decline options) we received confirmation of nearly 600 people intending to participate in the walkouts. We met with our head teacher to discuss organization and safety; we wanted to make sure that staff knew that this was not an action against the school itself. We were allowed to join the protest with parental permission; students in some other schools around the borough had been threatened with expulsion or other punishment for attending. Other teachers in our school had varying opinions about what was planned. One teacher specified she would be 'very disappointed' with any student who attended, while others seemed really excited and impressed by what we were doing and said they would have loved to come along themselves.

We contacted the president of the Student Union at our local university in Kingston, and arranged for our protest to join up with the university rally planned for 24 November. Through our Facebook campaign, the Kingston Youth Member of Parliament and Youth Council also became involved and promised to attend the rally.

On the day, my friends and I were filled with trepidation and excitement at the prospect of what was to come. Having been warned of disappointment (we know that often people promise passionately but then apathy takes over) we set off for school with bated breath. When the appointed walkout time arrived, we were astounded and relieved at the number of our fellow school students who had obtained letters of parental permission – about 300, far above our expectations.

We had planned for the walkout from school to begin at 10.30 a.m. and were apprehensive as – armed with our banners, placards and posters – we marched through central Kingston. Encouragement and approving looks from supportive onlookers gave us a sense of hope for our cause. When we arrived at Guildhall, we were met with a great amount of unanticipated support. By this stage around a thousand people had gathered from at least eight different secondary schools around

the borough. Standing in the crowd chanting ‘No ifs, no buts, no education cuts’, we felt an incredible sense of pride and unity. Hundreds of students marched through the streets, stopping the traffic and clearing the pedestrianized areas of shoppers. The atmosphere was exhilarating and overwhelmingly positive. People had brought along musical instruments, and the inevitable police presence felt very good-natured. Onlookers joined us as we proceeded to the university, where various speakers had been arranged to address the march. They voiced the increasingly militant feelings of the crowd, and the protest gained an additional sense of clarity and unity.

Watching our protest from inside the Guildhall were various members of the council, including the leader. He sent a representative out to us, who invited my friends and me inside to an impromptu meeting, while others protested outside. We discussed the council’s stance on the policies (Liberal Democrats, they supported free university tuition, opposing the coalition government on this point). We were invited to address a full council meeting two weeks later. We duly attended armed with a petition containing 650 signatures. Two of us argued our case, after which a debate followed. A motion, to lobby Kingston’s two local MPs and encourage them not to vote for the proposed increase in tuition fees, was carried by a significant majority.

This was an unexpected achievement, which we saw as important acknowledgement of our generation’s very real sense of fear about our future. We were encouraged by the fact that our councillors seem prepared to engage with us in a democratic process. The council noted at the meeting that their policy was to ‘lobby for the abolition of student fees’ over the next four years, as they believe a university education should be free. The leader of the council applauded the fact



that his daughter (a pupil at our school) had attended the march.

My friend Liane Aviram and I have attended various university meetings and lectures, including at the LSE and Kingston University, where we have offered a teenage perspective on the protests and our feelings and motivation about them. We attended the 9 December protest and got caught in the police kettle that afternoon. We were genuinely shocked at the lengths taken to prevent protesters from walking the streets of their own towns – the vast majority of them peacefully. So far as we could tell, almost all of the violence was begun by the police; it was their provocative and aggressive tactics that sparked the relatively isolated clashes that later occurred. We found ourselves shoved forwards and backwards and pushed about without any justification. I had never imagined anything like this before: police bullying sixteen-year-old children in their school uniforms, just because we were peacefully protesting. Being caged in for hours was eventually rather frightening – the continual circling of helicopters overhead lent a sinister atmosphere to the proceedings and the noise made it difficult to communicate. We were eventually freed in the early evening, exhausted by the experience.

We are determined to carry on fighting, regardless of the government’s determination to implement most of Browne’s disastrous recommendations. And if the protestors who demonstrated all across the country on 9 December are at all representative of wider student feelings and priorities, then the coalition government should remember that we will all be voters at the next election.

