

# Towards Democracy? Academic Activism as a Struggle to Re-create Collective Values

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## Abstract

The research is concerned with one of the signs of a globally evolving democracy: social movements. It is embedded in the paradigm of social constructivism and tackles a dynamically developing scientific discipline: higher education policy. The article examines the University's dynamics of change through protests of academic communities. The author analyzed selected academic movements in the context of their socio-political impact and deep-seated ideology. The University as a democratic community could be portrayed as an instrument allowing representation and active participation. Since 1960s the vision of The Academy as a representative democracy was mainly caused by students' protests and their criticism of the oppressive authority and dominance of senior scholars. Current global involvement of students is an interesting proof of inclination from the academic community to democratization and solidarity, challenging widespread academic capitalism and rapidly progressing commercialization of science (Nussbaum, 2016; Szkudlarek, 2007; Newfield, 2008). Such movements have flourished in many parts of the world; thousands of students and scholars have been demonstrating in the United States, Chile, the United Kingdom and other countries in the name of reforming education. The major research question is whether examined acts of student activism are efficient movements with the capacity to re-shape social order or self-delusion of its creators. Taking the long-term impact and scale of the movement into account, the author argues that they could be defined as dynamically emerging, long-lived local actions rather than radical steps towards democratization of higher education system and its policy as a whole. Even though the research exposed partial instability and illusion of examined protests, it also presented academic activism as a unique struggle to re-create collective values in democracy at a turning point.

## Keywords

academic activism, democratic University, student's protests, Chilean Winter

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## Introduction

Academic reflections on the transformation of the University have become a part of a relatively new, dynamically developing discipline: higher education policy. Emerging questions on the role and shape of academia and its members in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been posed by numerous intellectuals, public figures and international actors. Research on the given topics can be categorized into numerous groups, aiming to contribute to a better understanding of current changes from structural, institutional, comparative and micro-scale perspective. This research is concerned with one spectrum of a globally evolving democracy: modern social movements. It is embedded in social constructivism, which has been popularized in sociology since 1966, when "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge" was published. Its authors Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann defined it as a paradigm perceiving social reality as a form of consciousness (Berger and Luckman, 2010). The growing popularity of their theory resulted in the creation of a rich spectrum of various forms of constructivism in social sciences. The common element of all approaches is the assumption that the perception of reality is based on a subjective communicative experience of a person creating an individualized version of a social landscape. Continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of reality takes place and knowledge itself is not an objective representation of reality, but rather a tool to create it (Wendland, 2011). The process of experiencing reality, including participation in various forms of student activism, linked with a subjective perception of academic landscape, is – according to the author – a cultural act.

The article examines the University's dynamics of change through academic communities' protests. The major research question is whether examined acts of student activism are efficient, powerful movements with the capacity to re-shape social order – on local and (inter)national level – or yet another self-delusion of its creators. The first part is devoted to major changes and challenges of the higher education system worldwide, including rising commodification and unification. The dominance of profit-driven neoliberal policies, linked with a metaphor of the University as a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets, is shown in juxtaposition with the perception of the academic landscape as a democratic community of scholars. In the second part, the author analyzes selected cases of massive student protests in the context of their socio-political impact and deep-seated ideology. Exemplifications

of recent academic activism in Chile, the United States and the United Kingdom, which took place between 2001 and 2015, expose partial instability and illusion of examined protests. Nevertheless, argumentation provided in the last part of the article unveils academic activism as the unique struggle to re-create collective (mainly democratic, liberal and left-wing) values in democracy at a turning point.

### **Socio-political context of The Academy**

Academic postmodern changes could be seen as part of a larger transformation in relationships between society's key institutions, such as political and business institutions. The University is nowadays seen as a rapidly changeable institution, deeply immersed in the quest for an institutional identity. A business-oriented approach related to the omnipresence of the free market and the neoliberal paradigm results in both an institutional success, confusion and crisis of The Academy. Its role in society, purpose, structure, organization and financial aspects are at stake. (Readings, 2017: 17-41). Since the 1980s and the expansion of economic neoliberalism, the University's capacity for self-governance and adaptation is questioned (cf. De Boer et. al. 1998: 153).

As Johan P. Olsen claims, we are now witnessing "policy making processes that take University dynamics beyond the frame of single universities and nation states" (Olsen, 2005: 2). It led to substantial rethinking, reshaping, as well as refunding of the University. Therefore, it is important to outline crucial dilemmas and challenges facing the University as well as distinct definitions of the Academy itself.

### **Defining (Post)modern University**

The University could be seen through different lenses and therefore several visions of its aim and structure occur. Some of the major and, to some extent, contradictory ones, include: The University as a democratic/meritocratic community of scholars and as a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets. Each of them serves as a simplified, stylized idea type based on distinctive features, such as constitutive rules and hierarchy.

The University seen as a meritocratic/democratic community of

scholars has normative and organizational principles of its own. The Academy's identity and self-understanding is based on a shared commitment to scholarship and learning, research and quest for the truth. Categories such as freedom of inquiry, rationality, intelligence, academic expertise, fidelity to factual content and logical coherence play the role of the universal criteria, independent of the specific economic, political or cultural context. The described vision portrays the University as an open, holistic institution committed to serve the whole society, not particular stakeholders (Olsen, 2005: 8-11).

The University as a democratic community could be portrayed as an instrument that allows representation and active participation to all scholars. The decision-making process is shaped mainly by various elections, voting and coalitions among organized groups. The democratization of The Academy is inseparable from the enhancement of democracy in society at large (De Boer et. al. 1999). "Internal" democracy and group governance are assessed as an improvement in comparison to strict formal hierarchy. It includes the reduction of the sovereignty of senior professors as well as distributing power to younger scholars, including newly accepted students.

Since the 1960s, the vision of the University as a representative democracy – a participatory, open and a more inclusive organization – was mainly caused by students' protests and their criticism of the oppressive authority and dominance of senior scholars. Historically speaking, many universities have shown little enthusiasm for using their participatory rights, even after the democratic reforms in the 1960s (March, Olsen, 1976). However, the current global involvement of students in a variety of protests – such as the Occupy movement on campuses in the United States and beyond (Buckleyjan, 2012) – raises the question of whether we are witnessing an inclination of the academic community to democratization and solidarity in the context of a new surge of student protests.

A completely different vision of the (post)modern University pictures the institution as an economic enterprise embedded in highly competitive markets (Marginson and Considine, 2000). As Polish sociologists Jan Sowa and Krystian Szadkowski claim, the entrepreneurial prism of examining the University has a long tradition (Sowa and Szadkowski, 2011). In this perspective, higher education is compared to a commodity which could be sold in a free market. The model of The Academy is deeply rooted in individualism and, as a result, based on competition. Scholars are therefore profit-ori-

ented and susceptible to changeable trends in markets. Knowledge is no longer viewed as a public good, but rather as one of the desirable goods. People are reduced to *homines oeconomici* and due to a profit-oriented approach, there is a disorientation related to the decreased meaning of education (Nussbaum, 2016).

Dominance of the productivity logic could be seen in national and European strategic plans and reforms. In 2000, the European Union set knowledge-based economy as the fundament of economic growth. As stated in the Lisbon Strategy, education should be the source of innovation and economic dominance (Grosse, 2008). The situation of the contemporary Academy is mainly assessed as alarming. According to Andrzej Mencwel, we are now witnessing the process of modernity fetishizing, leading to the over-bureaucratic formalization and reduction of critical thinking (Sierakowski, 2010). Public discourse related to higher education is dominated by economic concepts, such as service, innovation, capital, investment, efficiency, entrepreneurship and ranking. The abovementioned phenomenon is called the “colonization of the discourse” (Szkudlarek, 2007).

It is important to note that selected perspectives represent an abstract, simplified vision, which does not fully reflect “a shocking diversity” (Neave, 2003: 151) of universities as practices and the relations between academies, other key institutions and society as whole. However, they serve as a valuable introduction to understanding and defining the (post)modern University.

### **Novel Identity of Students and Scholars**

Many scholars claim that in the process of economic colonization of scientific discourse, citizenship is at stake. Activism could be replaced by the imperative of endless, thoughtless consumerism. It leads to the “commercialization of the identity” among the academic community, as Zbyszko Melosik states. Described (social) identity is immersed in business logic and aims mainly to gain competences in the job market. As a result, a model of a pragmatic, individual, flexible expert seeking economically useful knowledge is created (Melosik, 2009: 40). Marta Opilowska writes about redefining traditional roles: students become clients and the University starts to play the role of a service, providing a diploma as a valuable item in the job market (Opilowska, 2009: 109-110). However, it may be contradicted by intense activism of contemporary students

worldwide. The article provides an insight into the rationale behind extensive student protests in three countries: Chile, the United Kingdom and the United States. Many of them “embrace national issues through the lens of campus policies,” as Angus Johnston stated in 2015 (Wong, 2015).

### **United States: Against Social and Political Failures**

During the last two decades, we have been witnessing a surge in the critique of the American higher education policy. It has been criticized by numerous intellectuals and public figures for its transformation into a massive, universalized vocational program promoting efficient, profit-driven student-clients instead of critical, reflective, socially sensitive citizens (cf. Giddens, 2009). Being embedded into an economic-centered neoliberal mainstream policy, many leading American colleges, both private and public, have increased their tuition fees, resulting in a significant decrease of students from a poor background. The hegemonic position of America as a country with some of the world’s best universities is also reflected by an enormous corporation-like structure of the most prestigious institutions’ budgets and the influence they have on global education (cf. Hardt and Negri, 2012; Munch, 2014; Kehm, 2013).

The expansion of the higher education sector is mostly a result of economic demand, leading to further inequality within the academic landscape. The United States serve as an example of mainly corporation-driven changes in higher education policy which results in minimizing the scope of autonomy of particular universities as well as in the growth of elitarization through the above-mentioned process of raising tuition fees (Newfield, 2008).

Since the beginning of the new millennium, student activism in the United States has been focused on two crucial issues: the previously mentioned commodification of higher education system as well as social exclusion and discrimination within the American academic reality. By November 2009, student occupations had spread from California to Los Angeles, Davis, Fresno, Irvine and Berkeley, culminating in a walk-out on campuses across America on 4 March 2010 (Mason, 2013: 65). “There’s a renaissance of political activism going on, and it exists on every major campus” claimed Harold Levy (a former chancellor of New York City’s public schools) in an interview for Alia Wong in 2015 (Wong, 2015). In her recent article,

she wrote that at least 160 student protests took place in the U.S. over the course of the 2014 fall semester alone, according to Angus Johnston, a history professor at the City University of New York who specializes in student activism (Wong, 2015).

Student activism in United States reoccurred sporadically throughout history until the 2000s, when “the conscience of the [U]niversity” has been shaped, resulting in the rise of awareness about a spectrum of social and political failures, including racial inequality (with the emblematic Black Lives Matter movement against police violence initiated after the killing of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri which resulted in symbolic solidarity demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience across the country), immigrant rights, sexual assaults on campus, homophobia, wealth inequality, and the rapid increase of student debt (Ransby, 2015; Thomas, 2015; Schmidt 2014). Student campaigns in the early twenty-first century have revolved around a core set of demands and ideals: justice, access, equity, and peace.

### **The Chilean Winter: Persistence of Inequality and a Divergence between Expectations and Reality**

Chile has a strong tradition of left-leaning student party organizations. Similar to the American case, the Chilean civil society reactivated with mass student mobilizations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After the repressive 17-year military dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet, the country transitioned to democracy in 1990. From 1990 to 2011, Chile’s political and economic situation improved significantly, resulting in naming the state a democratic success story in Latin America (Donoso and Bülow 2017: 4–8; Palacios-Valladares, 2016: 152; Muñoz-Lamartine 2012: 25–30). Average income steadily increased, poverty rates plummeted, and democratic institutions consistently received positive reviews (Freedomhouse.org, 2015; Worldbank.org, 2016). At the same time, according to The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report from 2016, Chile remains the country with the highest level of income inequality in the world (Oecd.org, 2016).

The unresolved problem in terms of the Chilean education system is that it – despite governmental promises – generates “a false promise of mobility” segregating students by socioeconomic status.

Significant differences between the quality of private and public-school systems engender an unequal system for human capital accumulation and upward mobility. Together with the income disparity and an elusive social cohesion, persistent “side effects” of the economic development make students demand a radical reform of the prevailing, highly segmented education system and request the end of the dominant role of the profit motive in the educational landscape (cf. Muñoz-Lamartine 2011; Sehnbruch and Donoso, 2011; *The Economist*, 2011).

The 2011–2013 Chilean protests, mainly described as the Chilean Winter or the Chilean Education Conflict, were a series of student-led protests on a national scale, demanding a new framework for education in the country. The Universidad de Chile’s Casa Central, the most emblematic university building, was occupied for nearly seven months. Students called for free, public, quality, transparent, democratic and non-sexist education, as well as new measures to penalize profiteering in higher education (Barrionuevo, 2011; Long, 2011; Charney, 2011; Franklin, 2011a; Sehnbruch and Donoso, 2011).

Protests were mainly organized in the form of massive marches, attended by tens or hundreds of thousands of people. Students also used occupations and cultural performances “to protest the rising private costs of education, the persistence of socio-economic inequities in access to quality education, the physical and academic deterioration of the public system, the lack of democracy in academic governance, and/or the increasing narrowing of the educational curriculum to market demands” (Palacios-Valladares, 2016: 151). The students invented entertaining and spectacular forms of protest in order to incite participation and attract public attention. Using pop-cultural and art tools, students converted discontent and a unifying collective identity into exceptionally massive protest waves. They also built bridges between their existing organizations, appealed to the Chilean public through the common ideal of equality and used their protests to draw attention to their cause. As a result, the Chilean Winter reached a significant level of approval from society: according to a conducted research, as many as 90 percent of Chileans supported the students’ demands (Cummings, 2015). It has been recognized as the largest social movement in Chile’s post-dictatorial history (Cummings, 2017; Palacios-Valladares, 2016).

Peter Cummings provides a structural, macro-political explanation for the emergence of mass student mobilizations in Chile: a generational shift. The growth of Chile’s economy in the post-authoritarian era and an increased access to education resulted in



rising expectations amongst the young generation. Nevertheless, school segregation, high tuition rates and the persistence of inequality created a gap between expectations and capabilities. This phenomenon led to dissatisfaction and restlessness amongst the post-Pinochet generation. An unprecedented spread of protests was possible due to a common generational identity. “La generación sin miedo” (the fearless generation) was the first generation of students born after the dictatorship, which did not share the fear regarding protest action of the previous generation (Cummings, 2015).

Despite the size and unprecedented social support for the student-led Chilean Winter, the results of the actions are ambiguous. The first clear government response to the protests was a proposal to create a new education fund and a cabinet shuffle (replacing Minister of Education Joaquín Lavín). Further propositions, as well as the ones mentioned above, were widely criticized due to inappropriateness to the students’ demands. Other government proposals were also rejected. It is hard to prove the size of the impact of the protests on national politics and the significant rise of disapproval towards Piñera’s cabinet in 2011-2013 (Sehnbruch and Donoso, 2011; Franklin 2011b; Hulse 2011). Nevertheless, the Chilean Winter raised the question of the future of national higher education policy and reshaped local ties among members of the academia. Moreover, the Chilean case serves as explicit proof that generational life experiences influence political action, and it can lead to the formation of new collective identities.

### **United Kingdom: Ambivalent Relationship with Consumerist Discourses**

In the highly marketized British system, the construction of students as consumers in policy pronouncements is dominant (Sabri, 2012), underlining the expectation that students will perceive a degree as a private investment and be prepared to concentrate significant debt in order to receive a diploma. The language of consumerism has been particularly prevalent since the fee reforms of 2012.

According to Brooks, Byford and Sela, students’ unions in the United Kingdom „have an ambivalent relationship with consumerist discourses: on the one hand, they often reject the premise that the student is best conceptualized as a consumer; yet, on the other, they frequently accept aspects of consumerism as a means of, for example, trying to protect their independence and autonomy”

(Brooks et. al., 2016: 1211). Nevertheless, widespread protests had been organized before the new law was introduced. The United Kingdom student protests were mainly student-led, both violent and non-violent protests in opposition to the plan of spending cuts to further education and an increase of the cap on tuition fees by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The National Union of Students (NUS) was critical towards the increased cap on tuition fees, seeing it as a risk to prevent potential students from poorer backgrounds from attending higher education. David Barclay, the president of the Oxford University Student Union, claimed that “a generation of politicians learn that though they might forget their promises, students won’t.” (Harrison, 2010).

Between 2009 and 2010, tens of thousands of students in the United Kingdom mobilized against increased tuition fees and cuts in education funding (e.g. Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), introduced in 2004 by the Labour Party). On 24 September 2009 (“Day X”), The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) called for a mass walk-out and demonstration, together with students at the University of California Santa Cruz occupying their own common rooms. In the course of the next months, various occupations took place at campuses throughout the UK, including Manchester and Cambridge. Across the country, protesters occupied university buildings in at least 13 academies (Gabbatt and Haynes, 2010; Camber 2010). Further protests were organized in Cardiff, Cambridge, Colchester, Newcastle, Bath, Leeds, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Belfast, Brighton, York, Manchester, Plymouth, Scunthorpe and Bristol (Coughlan 2010).

The next major demonstration against the government’s proposed reforms occurred on 10 November 2010, jointly organized by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the University and College Union (UCU). It involved between 30,000 and 52,000 demonstrators marching through central London. This demonstration was officially known as “Fund Our Future: Stop Education Cuts” (Gabbatt and Haynes, 2010; Harper, 2010).

Another central London protest (the so-called “Day X3” demonstration) took place on December 9, the day that the proposed reforms were passed into law, with protesters clashing with the police. Demonstrating students have created “The Nomadic Hive Manifesto”, the parody of a well-known text by Marx and Engels (Criticallegalthinking.com, 2010; Mason, 2013; Harper, 2010).

Despite its relative longevity and scope, the student protest in the United Kingdom had a very limited influence on the government policy-making in respect to tuition fees. At the heart of its failure in preventing the government's reforms was an insufficient support among British society for the new fees policy and consumerist agenda. Moreover, the demonstrations (as well as the methods used by the police) were highly controversial and widely criticized in the country. Therefore, in comparison to the Chilean Winter, the obstruction of policy by students' unions was far less successful because other social actors in the United Kingdom had a strong commitment to neo-liberal norms.

### **Re-creation of Common Values**

Various types of protests, in particular occupations, are prone to create strong movement communities with intense affective and cognitive bonds due to continued face-to-face interactions within a confined and high-risk context (Della Porta and Piazza, 2008; Castells, 2012). Bonds are strengthened by a joined confrontation with a common concern and can be widely spread through networks, disseminating forms and ideas of protests. Analyzed horizontal political practices have also brought feelings of empowerment and political engagement (Palacios-Valladares, 2016). As Palacios-Valladares argued, such communities are „socially and culturally constructed in everyday practices and interactions, and filled with ideational and emotional meaning (...). This contributes to the creation of protest communities built on strong ties of love, solidarity, and morality. These ties bridge ideology, class, or other sociological characteristics, allowing activists to create and negotiate their own alternative anti-hegemonic identity, culture, and forms of self-government” (Palacios-Valladares, 2016: 160).

On the other hand, protests contain an immanent risk of isolating activists from society as a whole, due to external and internal conflicts, unbearable exhaustion, an ideology often opposing the mass values and lifestyles as well as a tendency to construct small, closed communities within affinity groups. The examined movements have created a counter-culture, and – as the Chilean and American examples proved – they strongly resonated with a wide audience. As Mason claimed, „these movements are not trying to take power, but to form a counter-power within capitalism (...) that rejects the conformist, stereotyped mass culture that the elite and the mainstream media are signed up to, but it is not yet prepared to

offer an alternative" (Mason, 2013: 50). The case of Chile could be defined as an inspiring protest mobilization which has managed to create a particularly effective collective identity thanks to the idea of evoking sentiments related to fearlessness, political action and democracy.

However, as Paul Mason argued, „the revolution remains trapped at the phase of ideology, culture, political debate. The real changes in the world desired by those who protest are still only achievable by those with hierarchical power" (Mason, 2013: 294). In the future, all academic movements will have to face and seek a solution for major shortcomings of occupations (and not only): „the reproduction of rigid mechanism of social control, isolation, and disorder and conflict" (Palacios-Valladares, 2016: 161). The ongoing challenge for social movements is countervailing brevity, exclusion, activists' exhaustion and disillusionment, while strengthening solidarity and society's support of postulates.

### **Global cause?**

In recent years, American, Chilean and British students have challenged neoliberal views of education as a private investment rather than a public good and social right. The reappearance of students as political actors is related to a range of distributional conflicts being a result of the implementation of the neoliberal agenda in the field of higher education (cf. Cummings, 2015). It is important to note that significant spatial variations in the way neo-liberalism is defined and constructed can be observed. It is „a politically-grounded movement and should thus be conceived, not as an end state, but as a continually realised process" (Peck and Tickell, 2006: 26).

Today's undergraduates are more and more often perceived as measured inputs and outputs of a commercialized global higher education, a vital asset for the financial system (cf. Mason, 2013). In 2006, Citigroup generated \$220 million of clear profit from its student loan book (Dos Santos, 2009). As Paul Mason stated: „The crisis of neoliberalism, compounded by the total failure to emerge of any alternative within official politics, simply leaves unanswered the next generation's question: how does capitalism secure my future?" (Mason, 2013: 46). The emerging student movements in the past and nowadays reflect the general pressure for renewal. As a result, student action provided an important impact on a new (post)

modern Academy's governance structure.

The United States, the United Kingdom and Chile serve only as single examples of worldwide-spread student activism. Some students' protests which have emerged in the last decade, caused by legal and organizational changes in The Academy, lead not only to grassroots actions and protests, but also to the creation of meaningful and recognizable organizations. Sukarieh and Tannock noted that, since 2009, student protests have been organized in fifty countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States and Chile. All protests shared a common set of postulates, including the opposition to increases in tuition fees and student loan debt, cuts to public funding and further privatization of higher education. Such concerns are directly related to the dominance of a neo-liberal agenda and a shift of welfare costs from the state to individuals and the private sector. Interestingly, they argued that student protests should not be understood as a radical rejection of the contemporary model of higher education, but rather its ultimate realization (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The study shows that "capitalistic" changes in higher education could not only lead to the degradation of some core, traditional university-based values, but also contribute to a vital social change through students' constructive activism. Nevertheless, the systematic, structural, world-scale shift in Academia has not been halted due to the surge of student protests worldwide.

Persistence of inequality in Chile and its underfunded public education, the fact that education systems replicate societal inequalities in all the analyzed countries and that there is a continuous rise in tuition fees in the UK and the United States proves that the change is yet ahead of the academic (and wider) community. However, massive interactions among empowered, active students suffering from frustration about the unequal, exclusive, commodity-based nature of Academies could inspire further democratic political actions.

The Academy can be the leader of social change, not by direct reproduction of existing discourse, but by giving the voice to students, enabling their mobility, scientific exchange and social activism, such as protests or participation and creation of students' networks, organizations and clubs. As Tadeusz Ślawek claims,

“the [U]niversity must (...) respect free market rules but cannot let economy become the only regulation of academic and social life” (Sławek, 2002: 26).

The described massive protests reflect the vision of the society as a process of discontinuity, the contingency and ambivalence of social orders. Continuous economic and socio-political crises suspend equilibria and direct attention to previously unnoticed vulnerabilities. It also resulted in a higher degree of politicization, understood as the process of making citizens (especially students and recent graduates) concerned actors more involved in politics.

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