

Campaigning for a Movement: Collective Identity and Student Solidarity in the 2010/11 UK Protests against Fees and Cuts (0037)

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Introduction

Student protest has existed for as long as there have been students, but the concept of a student *movement* is a relatively recent phenomenon. With students forming a critical mass in wider society, resultant protests have created significant, attention-stealing moments of agency – from Berkeley's Battle for People's Park in 1969, to London's 'Millbank' in 2010. Historically, students have participated in many movements beyond the campus, but the amorphous and transitory nature of the student population has limited their ability to build their *own* movements. Consequently, there is disagreement among scholars whether even peak periods of student protest activity represent the work of a unified, overarching student movement (Hanna, 2008; Hoefflerle, 2013).

Of course, student activists are well aware of these constraints, and have continually sought ways of creating long-lasting movements out of individual campaigns or events. Achieving this arguably requires both organisational power and a durable collective identity. In the case of the former, activists have historically struggled to maintain student unions' political focus, both at a local and national level (Brooks et al., 2015; Ellis, 1998). In the case of the latter, building strong, enduring ties of solidarity and trust out of initial mass-mobilisations not only requires rapprochement between a range of activist groups with differing ideologies and tactical preferences, but also promoting active participation to what often appears an apolitical and apathetic student population.

The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the challenges in building collective identity – and ergo, a student movement – out of mass-campaigns. Analysis focuses on the 2010/11 UK student protests, and the different experiences, identifications and solidarities which emerged from them. Initial mobilisations in autumn 2010 were unexpectedly widespread and radical: opposing Government plans to treble the cap on tuition fees to £9,000 per year, students responded with large-scale national demonstrations, co-ordinated mass walk-outs, and a network of around 50 campus occupation groups. Translating this energy and unity into a mass-movement, however, proved largely unsuccessful. The autumn protests created solidarities strong enough for a multi-repertoire campaign to emerge, but this belied underlying ideological and tactical differences among participants. These differences became more pronounced as distinct identities and solidarities formed around certain protest repertoires, particularly campus occupations.

The study

This paper focuses on the UK student protests against fees and cuts in autumn 2010, and activists' subsequent efforts to extend these campaigns into an overall movement against the marketization of higher education. Research for this case study took place between February and October 2012. First, a survey was conducted of students from a sample of 22 UK universities (N=2485). The sample was designed to give a broadly representative spread of regions and campus types, as well as degree subjects studied. In addition, interviews were conducted with 56 students (ranging from committed

activists to non-participants) from a subsample of six universities – University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, University of Leeds, University College London, University of Roehampton, and University of Warwick. With the exception of Roehampton, all recorded a high degree of protest activity during the case study period, including campus occupations in 2010 and 2011.

Findings

Research finds that a collective identity *can* be forged among the bulk of student protest participants, but this is more realisable at a campaign level rather than movement level. The survey found that 69.5 per cent of all participants shared a sense of pride and satisfaction in their involvement, but that this participation was divisible into distinct layers according to the costs and risks typically incurred: 11.8 per cent of participants qualified as high-cost/risk, along with 36.2 per cent for medium, and 50.8 per cent for low. Interview accounts support this insofar as students were united in their aim of pressurising Parliament into voting down the fees bill. Not only did this help reach out to a hitherto-passive student body, it also succeeded in co-ordinating an often-sectarian political left under a single campaign focus. Beneath this consensus, however, lay clear tactical disagreements, with high-cost/risk participants engaging in more provocative and controversial forms of direct action. This partly reflected a desire to produce media-friendly events that would keep the issue in the public eye, though this resulted in some students choosing to disassociate from the collective identity it created. Ultimately, however, findings show the basis of a productive campaign-level collective identity among the majority of protest participants.

For high-cost/risk activists, the campaign's purpose soon extended beyond simply realising its goals. Many underwent transformative political experiences through their participation in occupations and demonstrations, and following the fees vote, felt motivated to build a wider student movement against marketization in higher education. This motivation reflected the strong solidarity bonds that had formed the previous autumn, yet neither these bonds nor their deeper level of politicisation were experienced to the same degree by medium and low-cost/risk participants. The absence of a uniting campaign issue exposed not only conflicting views in activists' tactical preferences, but also increasingly divergent collective identity processes. In other words, as a foundation of movement-building these solidarity bonds were arguably activists' strength and curse: although continuing to drive protest organisation and mobilisation on campus and across the UK, politically and tactically they were becoming more and more removed from the ideas and values of the wider student population.

In sum, it is argued that student activism incorporates multiple layers of collective identity, layers which are capable of operating in concert for popular, goal-based campaigns, but might be too divergent and contradictory for building and sustaining wider student movements. This argument echoes Saunders's (2008) scepticism about the possibility of movement-level collective identities, whilst retaining the concept's usefulness for campaign-level analysis. Admittedly, these findings are very much informed by the unique properties of the campus field. The transitory nature of the student population already creates clear restrictions to maintaining institutional memory and activist expertise across cohorts. This arguably results in a tendency towards short and energetic campaign cycles rather than durable movements.