

The University as a Political Space – The University as a Relational Space: Contemporary Transformative Student Politics in the UK and Germany

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Exploring *what kind of university* politically active students are currently experiencing, envisioning, and shaping, I argue that student activists are moving towards a university as a resonant space of possibility in which current crises and conflicts are negotiated and which stimulates nuanced discussion and transformation.

‘You can talk about it, it’s man-made, that’s why you can change it’, my conversation partner and student activist Pia summarises her stance towards (student) politics. Thus, Pia picks up on core findings of my ethnographic research on student activism: Politics is a relational act, it arises ‘*between-the-humans*’ (Arendt 2020, 11), and ‘every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices’ (Mouffe 2014) – there *are* alternatives.

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in Oxford and Cologne, a key focus of my work is on how students reflect on and understand their activism, and how the specific university context shapes their actions and visions.

Full paper

Student activism, on the one hand, is an expression of a certain *understanding* of the university, namely as a thoroughly political space, and on the other hand, an expression of a specific *relationship* of students to their (academic) environment, namely one characterised through belonging, self-efficacy, and hope.

My research reveals that student activists assume that the university, what happens within its walls and what is decided in its bodies truly *concerns them*. This includes the content of their studies, such as questions around curricula, circumstances of studying, such as examination regulations, as well as the set-up of the university, for instance as expressed through admission policy or accepted funding cooperation. It also comprises higher education and science policies which significantly decide upon the conditions under which students study. This also entails the degree to which student self-administration is possible in the first place and the potential for interference in university bodies.

Student activists also make the university actively *available to themselves*. They form communities and initiate campaigns; they occupy committees and thus have their say in almost every realm of university administration. Irritations, injustices, and innovations do not pass student activists by unnoticed. Rather, students make the reforms, conflicts, and debates concerning the university and higher education policy their own business and constantly *respond* to them. Thus, they reveal an understanding of themselves as political actors with agency and influence, even if this agency has clear limits. They disclose an enormous degree of self-efficacy, the belief that their actions indeed have an influence on the university and the conditions of studying. These students, through their political actions, conceptualise the university rather as a space of negotiation and critical reflection, a 'Lebensraum' (living space) than solely as space of professional learning

My research also shows that contemporary student activism reveals a remarkable variety of *political practices* which testify the strategic use of the temporal and spatial specificities of the university. Beyond participation in the university's committees and in the realm of student self-government, student activists engage in prefigurative political practice to exercise forms of communication and relating to each other which they wish to see characterising politics and institutions in the future. Students' political actions thereby reveal a *fine and strategic balance between cooperation and antagonism* and are fuelled by *hope*, in fact, at all stages of political processes. Student activists are animated by hope for progress, they start campaigns in the hope of change, they hope as a political act of not being satisfied with the status quo and are prepared to modify and maintain their hopes even in the face of setbacks. Their relationship to the university is one imbued with the hope that the future can indeed be different from the present.

The time of study thus turns out to be *a very specific phase of life*, the university *a very specific institutional space* to be politically active; in fact a time and space whose immediacy and manageability student activists repeatedly foregrounded. However, immediacy and manageability contrasts with a whole range of factors characterising current universities and study conditions that impede student activism, ultimately leading to the aforementioned majority of students who 'don't even recognise this political space' (e.g., time pressure and competition, alienation or schoolisation).

Thus, the very concrete political practices I observed lead into the much wider realm of higher education policy issues. Student activists disclose a wealth of information about the current state of democratic decision-making and student self-administration at university as well as the functions of university which various status groups at university, in politics, and society attribute to the university. The question arises as to who thinks that society can do without the university as space in which young people learn and participate in the fundamental principles of democratic decision-making, to reflect and develop, to practice political codetermination and self-organisation, to call and respond. What do students learn about politics at the university, about the basic principle that "politics is based on the fact of the plurality of people", i.e., on the fact that it has to organise and regulate the togetherness of the different, not of the equal' (Sontheimer in Arendt 2020, III); that 'politics arises in the *between-the-humans*' (ibid., 11)?

The student activists of my research show that there are alternatives. In this way, they show that a university geared towards dialogue and student codetermination is possible.

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