

## **Sand in the Academic Industrial Machine: Joyce Canaan's Sociological Practice<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*The sociologist Joyce Canaan's critical and sensitive analysis of the structural problems facing academics in Britain goes back decades. This article will examine the major themes and concerns in her thinking about the university system, spanning an academy turned to the uses of government and business, the effects of wide-ranging commercialisation and bureaucratic management on the experience of academic work, and the equivocal status of degrees in a harsh economic climate. It will also discuss Canaan's pedagogical work with students, where meaningful dialogue and collaboration are stressed, her activist, non-didactic and participatory work with people outside academic circles, among them socially marginalised groups, and the interrelation between these types of work. Canaan's ideas and activities are more urgent, it will be argued, because the managed and business-led system that she thematises has strengthened, and with this development the conditions needed for the kind of politically committed sociology that she practiced have become more insecure. The article ends with a discussion of the prospects for progressive action and change in current circumstances, a preoccupation of Canaan's from the start.*

**Keywords:** *critical sociology, the commercialised academy, Joyce Canaan, critical pedagogy, public sociology*

What kind of madness is it that some of us leave the university due to overwork and time-consuming, soul-destroying tasks (are we canaries in the coal mines?), whilst others inside face worsening and lengthening conditions and still others, seeking academic jobs, face poor pay and conditions with no guarantee that they will ever get on 'the ladder', even if the conditions on offer inside are hardly welcoming or easy? (Canaan 2014: 40)

## **On the Ground**

Take a university classroom and fill it with thirty to forty undergraduates dreaming of well-paid and long-lasting employment, and willing to borrow unprecedented sums in the hope of getting it; this in a climate of casualised and low-paid work where there is no way of knowing when or whether they can pay their debts. Now put before them someone who would find their odd mix of economic insecurity and aspiration to middle-class comfort very familiar, if rather more strange and questionable – a PhD student obliged to teach for free as a condition of their study grant, or a lecturer on a contract that is temporary or part-time, or both at once.<sup>2</sup> Or one whose real-terms salary has been shrinking for decades, and whose position, geared to performance targets and managerial thinking, is anything but safe.<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to see these people's utility for the business-driven, firmly branded organisation that will for some time form their habitat. Its more or less provisional and cheap workforce has a structural place in providing educative services at the lowest possible cost to its employers, its deeply indebted clientele in generating a predictable income that allows for planning, investment, employment and, when cynical money-making is taken to its logical conclusion, unemployment too.<sup>4</sup> All around them, parodying some bank building interior, leaflets, posters and catalogues bearing elaborate logos assure buyers and potential buyers that the intangible good on offer presents an attractive investment opportunity. That the boundary between work and non-work in Bourdieu's terms has long been definitively blurred for

white-collar professionals alongside so many others seems to matter little (2003: 35; 2004: 82, 84).<sup>5</sup>

The effects of such a situation, which is not untypical of university education in much of the UK, go well beyond economic matters alone. For example, if a few weeks after the start of teaching the numbers coming to class have halved, this is partly because it is hard for any educator to give much time and attention to more than about fifteen people at once, or simply remember their names, and students' own attention and engagement can decline into boredom, distraction or even cynicism as a result. As a corollary of labour and space shortages, it is also hard to teach with great energy and enthusiasm when tutors are faced with repeatedly conveying the same material to many and various groups, until an intake of hundreds has been catered to, while performing reliably and predictably throughout.<sup>6</sup> The situation is not helped by a proliferating body of managers whose careers are founded on treating colleagues as a means, and whose roles include exploiting ever-emergent micro-fashions to raise their employers' perceived profile and profitability. So again and again, on top of the work they already do and with little time to prepare, tutors are instructed to do tasks that many would choose to avoid, from teaching on newly-commissioned courses (or course components) aimed at entertaining momentarily fashionable tastes, and taking in subjects unrelated to tutors' expertise and interests, to being implicated in the running of policing mechanisms for monitoring students from different countries (Batty 2018; Weale and Batty 2019), or those whose academic interests are deemed not to be ideologically safe (Busby 2020). Among those caught up in this state of affairs, students and staff alike, it is hardly surprising if many feel little connection with what they do, to the point of asking themselves what they are doing here at all.

## **A Difficult Position**

The commercial and industrial transformation of the university was and is an assault on something that the sociologist Joyce Canaan (1950-2018) cared about deeply: her discipline's potential for helping bring about political emancipation and change. In opposition to this mass industry and its grimly instrumental character, Canaan chose to maintain an increasingly difficult position; she would, as she put it in many places, work 'within and against' it. In part, as an educator committed to the Freirean sense of critical-pedagogical work based on dialogue and collective participation among equals, this meant working with and for students in the service of political change: 'I believe that it *is* possible to act as sand in the machine, and that we can do so in part by working dialogically with students and colleagues to resist the alienation that the neo-liberal restructuring of HE is producing' (Canaan 2010b: 204, italics in original). More specifically:

Teachers who engaged in a dialogue that focused upon and took seriously students' thoughts, and considered them agents capable of expanding their limited understandings, could empower students to develop active thought, which they could then use to help themselves and other oppressed groups. (2005: 163)

An expression of this way of working appeared in the context of Canaan's social theory classes for undergraduates, where the usual lecture-then-seminar schema was reversed as a means of subverting its implicit hierarchy and relation of dependence between speaker and listeners (2006: 87). In seminars held before a lecture on Gramsci's ideas, for instance, students were asked to sketch out in written form their own theories about the social world, the self and their interrelation, partly to convey a sense of their own implication in Gramsci's argument that 'we are all philosophers who seek to understand the world'; but beyond this also to give some scope, in the lecture that followed, for freer and

more open comparison between students' own conceptualisations and established critical-sociological reflection on the subject (Canaan 2006: 85). Importantly, interaction here could develop in ways not generally suited to the broadcast model of the lecture form, integral to an education system designed for mass consumption. In reflecting on the politics of this tactic, Canaan writes that while 'in this mass education system' there is 'space neither in the timetable nor the buildings' to 'disrupt the idea that I am the active teacher and students are the passive learners', and while 'a Freirean pedagogy [...] is not possible in a system of module aims and learning outcomes where lecturers have less time and energy to devote to teaching given regimes of accountability', nevertheless 'I was seeking to create a pedagogy that was more humane, engaged and attuned to students' needs', to 'bring into my pedagogy more of what was excluded in an era of growing instrumentality in HE' (Canaan 2006: 85, 87, 85). Here then was an early attempt to work within but also against a mass academic industry, for the most part apolitical, efficient and impersonal, of which Canaan was unavoidably a part.

Canaan's work creating dedicated spaces for democratic participation and dialogue can be seen as a further development of her resistance to otherwise standardised, corporate and exploitative educational settings. The result, turning away from classrooms with fixed table-and-chair arrangements that tend not to facilitate exchange, was two purpose-built rooms with no tables or desks and no obvious front or back (Amsler and Canaan 2008: 8), each containing twenty-plus beanbags normally arranged in a circle and in various ways confounding expectations of an intellectual centre held above and in contrast to more marginal positions. Canaan explains: 'it was of utmost importance to use any and every space available in the university to introduce alternatives': 'I created, with student support, what students call "the beanbag room", where there are no lectures but largely discussions enhanced in part by students and teachers sitting

“at the same level” (Canaan 2014: 44).<sup>7</sup> With their anti-hierarchical elements, coupled with the means to project visual material almost anywhere and sliding whiteboards that could be pushed into corners for work done in small, isolated groups, these spaces opened up ‘physical possibilities for more dialogical and facilitative work amongst students and between students and lecturers’ (Amsler and Canaan 2008: 9). As such, the rooms would play a central role in all of Canaan’s teaching, and my own in my time as a colleague and co-tutor of hers.

Yet if in these rooms a more political and critical consciousness began to be produced, it was not in any essential sense because they were filled with beanbags, or because of their spatial configurations, or their technical possibilities. Rather, any Freirean *conscientização* produced in them was to do with the culture of collaboration and conversation welcomed and nurtured in such spaces, and with the tight-knit communities that quite often sprang from that culture, though such developments could not be predicted in advance, being inseparably linked with many factors far outside individual control. Canaan herself noted how the 2012 education cuts imposed by the Cameron administration on universities in England caused difficulties for her own work with students, bringing with them a shrinking number of staff and proportionally more students, alongside colleagues strained by performance targets and bureaucratisation, and students fatigued by having to work to pay for their education, and study at the same time.<sup>8</sup> If there were ‘serious limits to how much I/we could invest in these potentially transformative programmes’, this was because ‘staff who left were not replaced, adding to the workloads of those who remained’, because ‘regimes of accountability took up more and more of our time year on year’, and because of ‘students’ workloads as part or full-time workers paying for their university education’ (Canaan 2014: 45). ‘With regard to the beanbag room’, she added, ‘yes, it encouraged greater dialogue that did make a difference to students’ engagement as they said in module evaluations’;

‘but there were often over twenty students in the room at any time, which inhibited dialogue, and some students voted with their feet with regard to group work and deep engagement with ideas being encouraged’ (Canaan 2014: 45).

### **Abstract Tyrannies**

What is implied by Canaan here is that extrinsic factors that bear on classroom teaching and which may be anything but marginal to it, are nevertheless allowed no input in the tools used by managers to measure and regulate its effectiveness. From students’ freedom to study at all, linked with their working lives and incomes, leisure time and economic and cultural capital, through to academics’ working conditions and emotional well-being, all are conspicuously absent from what is assessed, whether it is satisfaction with programmes, students’ attainments, or the number of those dropping out of courses. Among the most popular managerial tools for surveying students’ opinions about curricula and their tutors are consumer-style questionnaires, featuring various pre-defined questions and rating scales of a Likert-inspired, agree/disagree kind, one example being the EvaSys software tool used by many universities across the sector. These questionnaires have long been notable for the reductions and simplifications written into their contents even before being further reduced to sets of numbers and graphs lacking any contextualising material. In an increasingly managed, market-oriented and anti-intellectual sector, the raw figures that result may be read as objective knowledge and acted on as such, often with baleful consequences for those on the wrong end of the grading and sorting to follow. While presented as a form of quality control, and while leading to judgements of quality about particular people and their particular pedagogical work, these measuring devices say little about what actually happens in the classroom, from the qualities of thought, collaboration and conversation brought to bear in it, or the internal and external conditions under which those qualities can flourish, through to the cooperative reflection and

learning emerging from their combination. They do however say much about an abstract and crudely figurative form of surveillance and policing, deployed throughout the sector as if anti-positivism had never existed, and about the industrial-capitalist mindset driving a whole apparatus for observing academic work. Canaan herself describes this type of mentality as ‘technical/instrumental rationality’, citing Daniel Schugurensky to the effect that managers, lecturers and students alike are encouraged to view academic activity only ‘in terms of performance indicators (program completion rates, levels of satisfaction of graduates and employers, etc.)’ that ‘should be accounted for and evaluated’ (Schugurensky 1999: 294, cited by Canaan 2002: para. 3.3).

There are many examples of such instrumental rationality and of the systems for observation that accompany it, a more recent and somewhat notorious one being the Teaching Excellence Framework.<sup>9</sup> In each case, insofar as they are based on observing and selecting a few measurable and comparable elements that can be related to their objects of attention and knowledge, while dismissing anything else as irrelevant, and insofar as they let the resulting caricatures stand in for something other than themselves and their creators, they are open to Foucault’s critique of scientific observation of the sort associated with natural history, where knowledge is founded on a privileging of sight: ‘Observation [...] is a perceptible knowledge’ that ‘leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof’ (2002: 144). Further: ‘The area of visibility in which observation is able to assume its powers is [...] what is left after [a set of] exclusions: a visibility freed from all other sensory burdens’: ‘This area [...] defines natural history’s condition of possibility, and the appearance of its screened objects: lines, surfaces, forms, reliefs’ (2002: 145). In 1922, György Lukács wrote of the industrial applications of such scientific methods: ‘industry and scientific experiment [create] an artificial, abstract milieu in order to be able to *observe* undisturbed



the untrammelled workings of the laws under examination, eliminating all irrational factors both of the subject and the object', and striving 'as far as possible to reduce the material substratum of [their] observation to the purely rational "product", to the "intelligible matter" of mathematics' (1971: 132, italics in original). What neither Lukács nor Foucault perhaps envisaged was how far the products of this attitude would be applied against academic work, against the very thing capable of critically illuminating the arbitrary workings of observing, classifying systems in the first place.

The problems associated with such 'quality control' systems, from their internal workings to their commercial applications, and from their ideological expediency to the power relations involved in identifying and defining the categories underpinning them, have led Michael Power, Louise Morley, Bronwyn Davies, Eva Bendix Petersen and many others to grant quality assurance in the sector little significance other than as a central device of political control. In her article 'Teaching Social Theory in Trying Times', Canaan also takes the measurement and regulation of educational processes as a specific theme, pointing to concerted and politically motivated efforts to conceive of 'the process of education as a standardised and measurable product rather than as a social process (2002: para. 3.3). Morley outlines the broad issue as follows:

quality assurance is at the very epicentre of the debate about the future of higher education in Britain. [...] Quality procedures translate particular rationalities and moralities into new forms of governance and professional behaviour. As such, quality is a political technology functioning as a regime and relay of power. Political technologies, with their norms and common-sense assumptions, disguise how power works. (2003: vii-viii)

While Karl Spracklen notes how ‘In this new regime of auditing and bureaucracy, the reality of what academics actually do is not important, instead we are audited on what the systems and the managers can understand’, and also how ‘the work of an academic [...] is impossible to reduce to a simple calculus’ (2016: 50), the problem is that in a sector increasingly founded on instrumentalism and commercialism it is perfectly ordinary for academic work of all kinds, from teaching to research, from grant applications to outreach, to be torn from the broader context that forms it and gives it coherence, then arranged on a single, abstract scale, usually composed of numerical values, where otherwise complex and diverse work can be hierarchically ordered and where, gross, if readily understood, simplification is precisely the point. If the motive for this reduction is that unmanaged action cannot be countenanced and must be replaced by a more bounded and regulated sort that can be manipulated and controlled, then this should be set against its human consequences. We shall say more about these consequences shortly, but Canaan wrote of the emotional effect of auditing mechanisms, citing Charles Thorpe’s article on the subject: ‘Audit institutionalizes permanent anxiety’ to the extent that ‘very few academic practices and procedures have any real legitimacy or feeling of solidity, permanence, or stability’ (Canaan 2010a: 59; citing Thorpe 2008: 107). In addition, she was not afraid to admit her own implication in the consequences of such a process: ‘work-pressures for productivity inhibited my intellectual engagement [...] I could not engage as fully as I hoped with the pedagogic and curricular challenges of teaching social theory’: ‘Whilst I consciously tried to deal with work pressures, they prevented me sleeping’ (Canaan 2006: 80-81).<sup>10</sup>

We have seen that if simplistic representations can be thought up for what can be complex and highly contingent working practices, this is partly due to the exclusion of underlying causes, which is what permits the classification and ordering of for instance the teaching and learning process, and what lends the

fixed, apparently definitive forms that result (number charts, comparative tables, teaching and research ratings, etc.) their objectivity and coherence. But it is also due to what it means to be an academic under the sway of a professional body of managers whose existence and actions are bound to commercial enterprise and instrumental bureaucracy. Canaan was sharply aware that increasingly demoralised and impoverished academics and the scale and expense of bureaucratic management have a reciprocal relation. In an interview published in 2014, she speaks of the ‘exhaustion and depletion that academics are experiencing’, and of ‘the growing work intensification and insecurity’ resulting from proliferating ‘regimes of accountability or audit’ (Canaan 2014: 55, 39), part of what she labels ‘new managerialism’ (Canaan 2010b: 205). Elsewhere she writes of what it means to be subjected to the scrutiny that comes with these regimes, and of the dominion over academics that they presuppose,<sup>11</sup> continuing that ‘As lecturers’ pay and conditions worsen, management levels and salaries grow, further adding to universities’ running costs’ (Canaan 2013: 30). That managers are generally not obliged to do academic work compounds labour shortages, and distances and protects them from the consequences of their actions. But in a competitive system run on business lines where managers’ success is measured by number and where academics are only important as a means or an impediment to the associated targets, what may otherwise be seen as acts of coercion and cruelty can, among a larger body of managers performing the same basic function, equally be a matter of inspiration or the basis for praise or attention, driving reputations and bearing on career advancement: ‘We are all just collectively working on their CVs’ was how one lecturer I spoke to put it. While they are doing what they have to do as managers, and while they are a symptom and essentially the product of a much wider difficulty – a university system bent to state and business purposes – ‘spiralists’ is the term used by Michael Burawoy to describe those making up this new professional class, and the attitudes and role now expected of them:

‘The university has been increasingly hijacked by a class of “spiralists” – circulating administrators and their management consultants, concerned more with finance than education and research, who thereby threaten the very functions they are hired to protect’ (2016: 389). Tony Coady echoes this view and points to some of those functions in writing that their fixation on the bottom line above all other considerations has made university managers lose sight of the importance of ‘people for whom learning, ideas, clarity, criticism and exploration of significant, difficult thinking really matter’, and by extension to what Davies and Petersen, who cite this passage, refer to as ‘the purpose of universities as critical incubators of intellectual life’ (2005: 78; citing Coady 2000: 10-11).

### **Symbolic Violence and Its Effects<sup>12</sup>**

It should be clear that being managed and controlled in this manner can have serious consequences for the health of academics, ones that should not be overlooked or downplayed. Mark Fisher drew links between ‘the rising incidence of mental distress and new patterns of assessing workers’ performance’, and specifically referred to the ‘perpetual anxiety’ produced in academics by the ‘battery of bureaucratic procedures’ that they are obliged to perform, many of which have funding consequences for their employers, and which bear down on all that they do from their curricula and teaching to their marking and research (2009: 37-38, 52, 42, 41). In terms of their emotional responses, it may be that academics are so affected because the intellectual interests that brought them to their fields are held to be of intrinsic fascination and in themselves have nothing to do with commercial concerns or bureaucratic aims and methods. The latter can then appear as an imposition on ideals and emotions that, if they are not to become incoherent in their own terms, must remain irreducible to extrinsic aims and criteria. It is in this light that we can understand Morley’s disturbing interviews with academics who, in the face of

constant auditing and surveillance and the ensuing ‘Work intensification based on uninspiring activities’, related feelings of ‘panic’, ‘fear’, ‘guilt’, ‘shame’, ‘pain’, ‘anger’, ‘exhaustion’ and ‘demotivation’, and regularly identified ‘increased illness’ as the concomitant of what can only be seen as a wide-ranging Taylorisation of academic work (2003: 85, 82, 84, 86). Morley notes that many of her informants, working in different fields for universities of different types, described their experience in terms reminiscent of violence: ‘Terms such as “abusive”, “violation”; “bullying” were frequently invoked to describe the sense of invasion’ (2003: 83). Echoing Michael Power in his book *The Audit Explosion*, she continues that the anxiety and insecurity associated with such bureaucratic, symbolic violence can destroy professional commitment and loyalty, the basis on which academic work rests, to the extent of undermining performance (Morley 2003: 85; citing Power 1994: 33). Davies and Petersen make a similar point when they write that for academics: ‘The focus on end-products may put them at risk of losing the capacity to fulfil (or even to feel) the desire to carry out significant, creative or critical intellectual work’ (2005: 78). The issue of the loss of self-realisation in an apparently endless parade of mechanical tasks, especially in relation to the experience of industrial work, is the terrain of many writers and thinkers. There is, for example, Lukács’s statement, written in the early 1920s about individuals turned to the discipline and regimentation of factory work, that ‘In every aspect of daily life in which the individual worker imagines himself to be the subject of his own life he finds this to be an illusion that is destroyed by the immediacy of his existence’ (Lukács 1971: 165). Clearly, such statements may now be extended far beyond manual work of this kind; they can be readily applied to various kinds of mainly intellectual production, not least academic work, if Davies and Petersen (for example) are at all accurate.

Insofar as the imperatives of management are at cross-purposes with those of academics taken individually or collectively, with as we have seen hardly positive consequences, we should not be surprised if one result is mutual distrust. As Morley has it, ‘When there is a mismatch between the tasks that workers have to perform and the management systems that they have to accommodate, distrust can proliferate’ (2003: 70). Canaan spoke directly to this complex of problems: ‘as the web of judging and judgemental practices multiplies horizontally and vertically’ and managers are ‘invited to invest in new, more extreme forms’ of ‘hyper-panopticism’, all taking ‘a view of the processes and people being evaluated’, it is hard not to see that ‘there has been an erosion of trust’ and moreover that ‘The picture I am painting is, to say the least, rather bleak’ (2010a: 63). Managers may themselves recoil from this consequence of the bureaucratic processes that surround academic work, where the view taken of those held up for inspection is that they are fundamentally to be distrusted. Morley quotes one head of quality assurance in a new university who, reflecting on a quality control visit from inspectors for a state-funded body, wonders about the mechanisms put in place to monitor academics and their activities: ‘It was all about “We distrust academics so these are the things that we are doing to make sure that our distrust is not justified”’: ‘I’d love to see more trust coming back’ (2003: 169). Yet any such rapprochement may prove difficult, especially if we accept Niklas Luhmann’s view that, taken as tools for classifying and homogenising information, instrumental bureaucratic systems of the sort that saturate the university environment need not be based on trust in order to function (1998: 6; 1979: 48-60). Rather, all that is required for their functioning and thus the prospect of them spinning out of control under their own logic, with unlooked-for long-term consequences, is for them to be there.

### **‘Subversion’ Allowed**

If there is a strong impression that an institution such as this seems inadequate to the task of doing pedagogical work of a political and critical sort, Canaan was fully aware of it, and it should be no surprise that she increasingly moved to continue this task outside of the university altogether: ‘I am uncertain as to how much can be accomplished inside the university’: ‘it feels as if I can do more outside’ (2014: 45).<sup>13</sup> Such scepticism about what can be accomplished from within the current confines of the university system did not lead her to think that critique and agency were utterly compromised there; it did, however, mean that the system as it currently exists leaves little room for anything except very modest and minor steps towards political and social improvement. Gurnam Singh, in a debate with Canaan on political aspects of her work, remarked that ‘The current situation of our higher education system is pretty challenging for all of us and maybe more so for critical pedagogues’, before asking ‘what progressive strategies do you think could develop?’ (Canaan and Singh 2013: 151). Part of her response was to highlight the continued use of ‘lecturers in their own classrooms doing things that they think of as critical pedagogy’, so as ‘to help to develop the next generation of students to be critical thinkers’ (Canaan and Singh 2013: 151). But while for Canaan this is a necessary first step, it is insufficient to leave it there, for two main reasons. First, the system as it stands and develops, she says, ‘functions and flourishes by allowing little bits of subversion to operate at the particular chalk-face’ (Canaan and Singh 2013: 151). Here the suggestion is that, as with other commercial organisations, in business-driven and market-led universities work which may be seen as subversive can easily be made safe, not just permissible but tradeable, indeed needed, as one marketing option among many. A linked issue is that in a system where individuals are pushed to compete with one another for funding and attention, anything seen as ideologically dangerous can also be exploited by academics searching for a particular niche for themselves. It is not just that

successful careers can be made out of what Duncan Fuller describes as ‘the latest [...] exploitative academic trend, fashion and potential source of production’ (Fuller and Askins 2007: 587), but that such exploitation takes in concerns and themes which may once have had a subversive side, as Paul Chatterton, Stuart Hodkinson and Jenny Pickerill sardonically suggest in writing of human geographers who ‘have returned to issues of political relevance with an outpouring of special collections, disciplinary networks and conference panels debating how to make geography more “public”, “activist”, “moral”, “radical”, and “participatory”’ (Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill 2010: 246). In a higher education system heavily reliant on fees from students and funds from sponsorship, and consequently dependent on marketing and fashion, on economic competition between universities regionally and nationally, and on academics competing with each other thematically, whatever is seen as ‘subversive’ or otherwise beyond the pale is open to appropriation and assimilation, with the result that political concerns are continually transformed into commercial ones.

Second, and beyond the matter of how in its commercialised and competitive guise the academy can readily tolerate ‘little bits of subversion’, including those that thematise its corporate structure and ethos and foster an oppositional culture, Canaan says ‘I agree with Marx that understanding should serve to help us get beyond critique to transformation’ (Canaan and Singh 2013: 153) – and this would include the various factors creating and maintaining universities’ current enfeeblement as a force for political change. Among these are the inward-looking nature of academic discourse and the way critical and theoretical writing tends to be isolated and disconnected from action or agency, going some way to explaining Canaan’s view that ‘at the current juncture, the university must be connected to the world outside’ (2013: 151). Thinking of Burawoy’s writings on public sociology, and particularly of his basic thesis that



the discipline's first public is its students (Burawoy 2005: 7), Canaan states that 'sociology is already and must be more fully linked to the world outside', adding: 'We must have public intellectuals and we must encourage sociology students to bring the analytical and critical skills they learn at university to the world outside and to see space outside the university as potentially informing university knowledge' (Canaan and Singh 2013: 151). Beyond the circle of the university, examples of public spaces for engaged critical work of this kind, or 'arenas of action' as Dave Hill has put it, include grass-roots movements, community and workers' organisations, and activist and charitable action to improve housing and welfare programmes, at a local or national level (Hill 2019: 99).<sup>14</sup> Drawing especially on Vygotsky and also on Freire, Hill notes that such work, as well as being self-critical, should be non-hierarchical, democratic, participative and collegiate (Hill 2019: 107, 101, 105), suggesting that those hoping to critically contribute in the mode pointed to by Canaan will learn from others and take more effective action as a result.

### **Sociology and Its Publics**

The public sociology programmes that Canaan designed with Matt Badcock, bringing together critical theory and the sociology of education (especially the work of Burawoy and Freire), an element of activist, egalitarian engagement with marginalised groups and, if students wished, coursework in media suited to projects involving interested parties outside academic circles, should be seen in this light.<sup>15</sup> These programmes, which took place in the beanbag rooms already discussed, did not shrink from addressing the dilemma of a politically committed sociology being hosted by an institution transparently compromised by a corporate ethos. The syllabus raised questions about how and why formal education is tied to purely business demands, about how far this link is associated with teaching structures and methods founded on hierarchies and distinctions of role and place, and about how these may be countered by a more

collective, cooperative, democratic culture.

More specifically, drawing on Bob Jessop's general argument that 'as capital searches for new sources of valorization, commodity relations can be extended into spheres not [previously] subject to the logic of accumulation' (Jessop 2002: 29),<sup>16</sup> and Thorpe's more specific account of how 'universities are expected to play a direct role in capital accumulation' (Thorpe 2008: 111, 104), the concept of the hidden curriculum was invoked and – with educational establishments at all levels being de facto organisations dedicated to increasing socialisation into and for commercial environments – not just as an old concern of sociologists but as very much a current preoccupation. In the sessions, such considerations tended to foster debates about how and why the type of person slowly emerging from prolonged contact with the education system's structure and forms is meant to embody the characteristics expected of a good employee: precise, efficient, goal-directed, deferential towards some authority, disciplined and hard-working. Also covered was the fact that this apparently happens even with disciplines like sociology that can make these concerns their subject of study, and regardless of the methodology that the tutors involved choose to employ. Such a process is precisely why Lukács, writing of reification and the 'second nature' it produces and is produced by, makes it clear that 'workers who live under capital have to conquer the delusion that [for example] the economic or juridical forms of bourgeois society constitute the "eternal", the "rational" and the "natural" environment': 'They must cease to feel the excessive respect they have had for their accustomed social environment' (1971: 334). But he also warns that 'The struggle against the effects of reified consciousness is itself full of stubborn battles' and 'If reification is overcome at one point the danger immediately arises that the state of consciousness that led to that victory might itself atrophy into a new form of reification' (1971: 334). It is worth pointing out that Lukács's ideas here, first published in 1922, are an important theoretical

precedent for Fisher's notion of capitalist realism (which Canaan takes up in various places) where for many what lies beyond capitalism is simply unimaginable (2009: 2). Yet remarkably little has been written about this link. This is curious not only because Lukács's sense of reified consciousness and capitalist realism in Fisher's terms overlap, but also because dereified consciousness has implications for the view that capitalism's outside is unimaginable, while capitalist realism may go some way to explaining why dereification is uncertain, provisional, and easily frozen into new forms of mental rigidity.

Plainly, to study such topics as students was to be very much implicated in them and, judging by their free-form, individual responses – communicated in coursework, in lecturers' and students' conversations with each other, and on the blank sheets of paper that Canaan had handed out for the purpose – those going through the public sociology courses often said as much themselves, in what amounted to a simultaneous self-recognition of their own slow, methodical objectification and a piece of *conscientização*, most immediately of the fate of what Thorpe (2008) calls 'the humanistic university' under successive governments' attempts to impose on it the demands of business instrumentality. Of one of the most sustained comments over time ('my eyes were opened by this module'), Canaan remarked:

maybe in the course of a module [...] when students see things more fully there's an understanding, an excitement, a possibility that, "It doesn't have to be this way". [...] Maybe that's the most we can ask for [in] an undergraduate degree [and] it would be hubristic to assume we can take it far beyond. (2013: 153, emphasis in original)

Students were also clearly aware that the open, honest opinions that they expressed about these matters could only occur in a setting that values the

sharing of personal experiences and views, and in a cultural context in which they are treated as equals and participants, constituting an antidote to the usual practice, albeit only a partial, localised and minor one, as Canaan freely grants: ‘these effects were a small part of one programme in one university’ (2014: 45).

If Canaan here sounds modest, even chastened, about the impact of her work, this does not mean that no wider changes could ever come out of it, only that she understands how individual actions – her own included – do not have an impact and cannot be understood only on their agents’ terms. To suppose otherwise for her would be to follow the dominant discourse about executives and entrepreneurs, talented, unique and special individuals working alone and unaided, in full control of their actions and even their consequences.<sup>17</sup> We might note that a variant of this discourse is when such individuals have to be distanced from their actions or the resulting effects (for instance when these are deemed discreditable) to ensure that their sovereignty still appears intact. As Siegfried Kracauer puts it, writing in 1929 about business practices: ‘The indispensable precondition for private economy is the autonomous entrepreneur, so the defence of his sovereignty is the central issue’ (1998: 96). In describing her visit to Caracas University Canaan points to another model, in which agency and change are not achieved through heroic individual action, nor are they for the benefit of any one person. Instead they are to do with collaboration, ‘with and for’ other people.<sup>18</sup> Canaan describes how ‘One of the sociologists spent three hours talking with me. He said that the university isn’t just located in the university, but goes to communities [and works] with community members’. She continues: ‘To do a BA in Sociology you cannot enter this free university unless you have a project usually agreed upon by your community’, concluding ‘So the project is not for you as an individual yourself, but for you to work with your community, to help them improve themselves. So immediately it’s a social rather an individual experience’ (2013: 158).

In a limited way, these principles were explored and sometimes enacted by the public sociology programmes, inasmuch as they could work against the commercial and institutional restrictions of their setting – and we can add to those already discussed the timetabled circumstances of classes, precluding uninterrupted conversation, the time and attention needed by students to study other subjects, and the problem (already touched on with regard to academics) that it may be students who more than anyone else capitalise on collaborations with their publics.<sup>19</sup> As Canaan notes:

Some students worked with progressive grassroots groups I had known and worked with as an activist over the years, such as asylum support groups, anti-academies campaigns and working with the NUS during the 2010-2011 academic year to encourage student activism. Others worked on projects they set up independently (with a church group or a women's group they established). (2014: 44-45)

As at Caracas, here students' engagement with various publics was informed by a collaborative, non-prescriptive ethos of dialogue derived from Freire (1993), and by working methods of the democratic and participatory type pioneered by the Columbian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda from the 1950s onwards (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991).<sup>20</sup> Despite some success, not least with those projects for mobilising opinion over the Cameron government's proposed education cuts (indicated by the telling dates mentioned by Canaan above), there were serious difficulties: 'our students had, in their prior educational experiences, been taught by teachers who had to ensure high pass rates on national exams and the national curriculum offered little space for them to subvert dominant ideas and encourage students' critical thinking',<sup>21</sup> and again while 'hardly surprising given that this was just one module in a relatively traditional degree programme [...] the Public Sociology routeway was hard to recruit students to, and [some] students voted with their feet with regard to engagement' (2014: 45).

## **The Threat of Economic Failure**

Students struggling with a highly expensive university system doing its best to emulate the worlds of luxurious shopping and dining have long been consoled with the proposition that the exclusive, standardised service offered to its patrons is also a good investment. That this has always been a somewhat tenuous claim was something that Canaan expressed in many publications, but also in her public sociology teaching materials. In the notes accompanying one seminar, entitled ‘Public Sociology in and from the Neoliberal University? Exploring Differing Views on Its Challenges and Possibilities’, she quotes Thorpe’s arguments about ‘the diminishing “cash value” of a university degree’, and about a ‘crisis of opportunity’ for graduates looking for ‘creative, self-directed work that is meaningful’, this being one of ‘a range of expectations which capitalism cannot broadly fulfil’ (2008: 117, 118). Then she directly and intentionally asks: ‘What does this mean and what is your reaction to this point given that you are the potential graduates Thorpe is talking about?’ (Canaan 2012: 4). The question had all the more force since it was asked towards the end of 2012, shortly after the Cameron administration greatly increased fees,<sup>22</sup> and with the effects of the 2008 crisis very much in evidence. Thorpe’s (and Canaan’s) point was partly that it should not be assumed that degrees are studied only for utilitarian gain, as recently suggested by a student at the Royal College of Art: ‘As a practising artist, the piece of paper at the end is not why I’m here. I came here to develop and grow’ (Fazackerly 2021b). The basic point can also be demonstrated statistically: for instance in a *Times Higher Education* article one vice chancellor, referring to the findings of a Universities UK opinion poll, states that ‘only one in three students and recent graduates say they decided to go to university to get a higher salary than they otherwise would have’ and that ‘the value of a degree is not all about earning money’ (Morgan 2020a).

When such statements are compared with those of government ministers – for example, ‘I want to see our universities competing on the quality of what they offer, value for money and strong positive outcomes for their students so that every degree is worth the investment’ (Ball 2019)<sup>23</sup> – it becomes clear how far the latter are the product of quite a particular sort of mindset and, in a blending of ‘I think’ and ‘you should’, an exhortation to others to share in it. Notably, some large companies’ application forms now allow no reference at all to educational attainments – undergraduate degrees included – and use different criteria for selection instead (Burns 2015; Havergal 2015; Rodionova 2017), while a recent Department of Education press release baldly states that ‘Thirty-four per cent of graduates end up in non-graduate jobs’ (Morgan 2020b). Whether as a basis for distinguishing between candidates for a job, or on the basis that the links between initial outlay and monetary reward have become too tenuous, that some elements of business and government have in different ways cast doubt on the value of degrees comes close to denying their worth altogether, at least as mere vehicles for financial gain. Immediately, then, the economy itself, with its sizeable, structural body of would-be white-collar professionals (Makortoff 2020; Weale 2019), is one of the current system’s greatest vulnerabilities.

### **Grains of Sand**

The problems that affected Canaan’s efforts to influence political action and change say a great deal less about one academic’s committed and activist sociological work than they do about the circumstances in which all such work now finds itself. If, at least outside of sociology classes, students cannot and do not think about the sorts of topics covered by Canaan – including the social and moral considerations behind the work of US sociologists like Jane Addams and Oliver Cox, the activism of French students and workers central to the events of 1968, the 2010 student protests in England, or the related police actions that left

the philosophy student Alfie Meadows needing brain surgery (Meadows 2019) – and instead search for opportunities for voluntary or casualised work, and become acquainted with the support structures for making coursework more manageable, then this suggests something of the deep problems facing public and critical sociology of the kind that she practiced. It may even be that her work gives a glimpse of the limits to any progressive and activist sociological project operating from inside an academic industrial machine for long maintained for and by vested commercial interests.

What is clear is that the fundamental questions that Canaan asks about the direction that university education has taken are very much still to be addressed. Since, as she reminds us in various places (for example Canaan 2010a: 167-168; Canaan 2013: 18; Canaan, Hill and Maisuria 2013: 179-181), what has happened to higher education is part of a much wider attack on public services that has been continuing for decades, the problem is not whether individual sociologists dissatisfied with the current state of the system and looking for alternatives can, in Bourdieu's words, 'throw their grain of sand into the well-oiled machinery of resigned complicities' (2003: 65). Rather the difficulty, which is as old as sociology itself, is how their own actions may become integrated with a larger political and cultural movement for change. Here we may think of Bourdieu's call for a 'new internationalism' taking in – and students are certainly implied in this list – 'artists, writers, scholars', 'scientists' (that is, those 'most committed to autonomous research'), alongside 'unions, grassroots organizations and issue-oriented activist groups', as well as 'publishers, gallery directors [and] critics' (2003: 24, 75, 77, 75-76; also 1998: 60-69).<sup>24</sup> From Lukács's writing on reification to Fisher's idea of capitalist realism, there are many reasons why the possibilities for a counter-hegemonic programme of this kind may seem remote. But these possibilities are no less present and, as Canaan well knew, they need to be explored.<sup>25</sup> This is especially



so in times of crisis when the usual order becomes unsettled and the habitual actions that sustain it are revealed as what they are, and when various, normally excluded alternatives come out into the open – in short when ‘the extreme situations of times of crisis give some people the opportunity to reveal potentialities unknown to themselves and to others’ (Bourdieu 1992: 295n). Indeed where our current pandemic crisis will ultimately take us, not least culturally and politically, remains to be seen.<sup>26</sup> And sociologists ‘each in their own place and their own fashion, and to however small an extent’ (Bourdieu 2003: 65), can certainly have some role to play in the realisation of otherwise suppressed ‘potentialities’. This is not least because of the degree and variety of exploitation and manipulation surrounding them, and confronting them, part of the full range of what has been called ‘ordinary suffering’ (Bourdieu 1999: 4, 5), but also because they are, as Canaan’s work amply and clearly demonstrates, well equipped to think about and act upon those problems.

## Notes

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1. I would like to thank Katerina Gachevska, Dave Hill and Spyros Themelis for their helpful responses to a draft of this article, and especially Dionysis Kapsaskis and David Morgan for offering such detailed ones.
2. On casualised and poorly paid academic work, see for example Adams (2020), Anon. (2016a), Batty (2020), Chakraborty and Weale (2016) and Megoran and Mason (2020).
3. In relation to falling incomes in the sector, Eyles (2019), in research commissioned by the employers’ body Universities and Colleges Employers’ Association, has found that from 2009 to 2019, wages for lecturers decreased by between 9% and 17%, depending on the measure of inflation used. The *Guardian* journalist Patrick Collinson (2019) has compared lecturers’ wages in 1969 and 2019, noting that ‘real pay for academics has barely edged ahead in 50 years’. Fazackerley (2021a), McKie (2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c) and Sheridan (2021) write of over a dozen universities that currently have plans for making academics redundant.
4. The latest lay-offs in the sector have led to serious disputes over their financial justification (Fazackerley 2021a; McKie 2021c; Sheridan 2021).
5. Now some politicians also suggest as much. For instance the Shadow Secretary of Health Jonathan Ashworth remarks: ‘We’ve built an economy characterised by zero-hours contracts, temporary work’ (cited in Elgot 2021). This particular type of economy, he adds, was only recently built, implying that there were and are alternatives.

6. Amsler and Canaan note that ‘Average staff-student ratios have risen from 1:15 to 1:28 in twenty years’ (Amsler and Canaan 2008: 3). For a detailed analysis of the shrinking number of educational staff versus increasing numbers of students, see Court (2012). For evidence of the long-term decline of public subsidy for all aspects of university operations, see Richardson (2010).
7. The design of the rooms was inspired by Mike Neary’s influential ‘Student as Producer’ work, where a central concern is the matter of how politically engaged educators can erode teacher-student distinctions (Neary 2009; Neary and Winn 2009). This idea goes back to Walter Benjamin’s writings, especially his 1934 essay ‘The Author as Producer’, where eroding the distinction between author and reader is the goal (Benjamin 2005: 780).
8. Of the many effects of these cuts, the most pressing, especially for undergraduates in England, was the very steep rise in fees, from what in Autumn 2011 had been £3,375 to £9,000 annually in most universities, which has since increased. Price levels are lower, by contrast, in Northern Ireland, and for the majority of undergraduates in Scotland access to university education is cost-free; in Wales, since the 2018 reforms, there is no longer much difference in prices. In a number of European countries, it will be remembered, higher education including postgraduate study is offered for free as a public service.
9. Among a large critical literature, see Anon (2016b), Ashwin (2017), Grove (2017a), Grove (2017b) and McKie (2019).
10. The issue of working conditions is returned to by Canaan again and again. For example: ‘work intensification prevented me from reading more fully and revising my lecture’ (Canaan 2005: 167); ‘as lecturers are increasingly work-intensified and under-resourced’, it becomes more difficult to find the time and energy to rework teaching practices and support students’ learning’ (Canaan 2010b: 227). Or in a piece co-authored with Sarah Amsler, entitled ‘Whither Critical Pedagogy in the Neo-Liberal University Today?’, the authors state: ‘we are tired’, among other things due to ‘the sheer volume and intensity of work’, ‘student numbers’ and ‘the limits of our efforts within the university to encourage and enable students’ to move ‘to social and political engagement’ (Amsler and Canaan 2008: 9-10).
11. For instance in an article published in 2010 Canaan described the experience of having to complete a form for evaluating teaching, where tutors were judged according to whether they attained recently invented targets for percentages of students going from one year to the next of their courses, reaching 90% over three years, with those failing to attain the targets having to account for this in another form, so replacing one time-consuming process with another. If such exercises are arduous, it is because it is hard for tutors to account for factors over which they have no direct control, and very hard to be made to feel responsible for them. Canaan concluded that here ‘regimes of accountability [...] offered managers more opportunities to judge those subjected to these regimes, exercising a power that disciplined subordinates more fully than previously’ (Canaan 2010a: 67).
12. The term ‘symbolic violence’ was coined by Bourdieu, being ‘the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination) when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator’ (Bourdieu 2000: 170, emphasis in original). Its detail and application are discussed by Bourdieu and Passeron in the chapter ‘Foundations of a Theory of Symbolic Violence’, part of their book *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1990: 1-68). In the chapter ‘Symbolic Violence and Political Struggles’ from his book *Pascalian*

*Meditations*, Bourdieu notes how ‘It is quite illusory to think that symbolic violence can be overcome solely with the weapons of consciousness and will’ (2000: 180).

13. Many similar statements expressing discomfort with the mainstream institutions can be found elsewhere in Canaan’s work, for example in the 2008 article co-authored with Amsler: ‘We have [...] begun to explore how the creation of institutions which are places for emancipatory education might be more fully realised if we work not just within and against the university, but also *beyond* it’ (Amsler and Canaan 2008: 9-10, italics in original). A prominent example of such an institution is the Lincoln Social Science Centre, in which Amsler is centrally involved and which Canaan frequently referred to: see for example the discussion in the 2014 interview (2014: 49-50).

14. There are many other public areas for action in this sense. Writing of various places for social justice educators to exercise public pedagogy or ‘educational activity and learning that occurs outside of formal educational institutions’, Mike Cole lists some others, such as cultural bodies, popular culture, commercial spaces, print and social media, videos, podcasts and various types of writing from blogs and articles to books (Cole 2021: 1, 2). Importantly, these areas are not the same when it comes to the interaction of educators and publics, reflecting the distinction between public sociology’s traditional and organic variants in Burawoy’s terms. The traditional public sociologist, relating a social problem (in, say, a newspaper) ‘might not actually participate’ in the debates that their writing may open up ‘within and between publics’; with organic public sociology (aired for instance online), ‘the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public’ (Burawoy 2005: 7).

15. In a chapter called ‘Sociology and the Public(s): Using Public Sociology to Rework Student Engagement beyond University’, Badcock writes of the advantages of new media, mixed media, campaign literature and community events in encouraging public participation, especially when compared with more conventional forms of coursework (2009: 26-27).

16. As Schugurensky notes, ‘Since its medieval origins, and in spite of considerable tensions with the church and the state, the university has enjoyed a large degree of autonomy’ (1999: 295), the point being that the loss of this autonomy is comparatively recent in historical terms.

17. It is also possible to see the broad issue from a viewpoint far beyond individual actions and beliefs, as Luhmann does in focusing on uncontrollable consequences to the extent of having no interest in conscious actions whatsoever, only in the radically impersonal systems that they perpetuate: ‘Are consequences part of an action or not? And if not, what could interest us about an action besides its consequences?’ (1995: xxxviii).

18. The term comes from Peter Reason whose participatory work ‘with and for people and not on people’ (Reason 1988) has many Latin American precedents. Canaan describes her own ‘academic activism’ as ‘long-term’ and ‘collaborative’, something that ‘cannot be done by one person singularly and seemingly heroically battling against the odds to help encourage the creation of the next generation of activists’ (2010b: 206).

19. The issue of researchers exploiting their publics on various levels, while claiming to be committed to popular participation and dialogue, is a major theme of Chatterton, Pickerill and Hodkinson’s article ‘Beyond Scholar Activism’ (2010: for example 247, 248, 252).

20. Olivieri’s (2017) research work interviewing academics at different universities in Caracas provides further insight into how students working with disadvantaged communities there have used Freire’s ideas, while Puiggrós (2019) considers Freire’s uses in and for similar work across Latin

America generally. In thinking about working methods for public sociology projects, Burawoy specifically refers to critical pedagogy and participatory action research as apt for use (Burawoy 2005: 23; Burawoy 2008: 13).

21. While Canaan is referring here to school learning, it can be asked how far the point made also applies to various aspects of university education.

22. In Autumn 2012, as already noted, generally fees for undergraduates in England increased from £3,375 to £9,000 a year, since then rising again. In an article published in the *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* in 2013, Canaan gives a historical account of changes in state policy towards education where public subsidy for the universities was progressively withdrawn. What had for decades been offered for free or at a low cost as part of a set of state services ended in 1980 when fees of £1,000 were introduced first for international students and then for all students from 1998 onwards. Fees went up to £3,000 in 2006, reaching £3,375 in Autumn 2011 (Canaan 2013: 24-32).

23. The words are those of the then universities minister, Sam Gyimah; they date from November 2018 and as Charlie Ball who cites them notes are set in the wake of ‘the launch of the “Absolute Returns” report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, looking at earnings data of graduates to the age of 29’ (Ball 2019).

24. While this work did not coalesce into a larger movement, obviously Canaan had worked internationally and across the divide of academy and public many times. Examples include her collaboration with the Banner Theatre Company, known for its cultural activism, her involvement with the Birmingham Radical Education discussion group, and her contact with Latin American scholars such as Edenis Guilarte and Alejandrina Reyes, who have interests in community work (Canaan and Singh 2013: 159, 158; Canaan 2014: 50).

25. In part, I am thinking here of the title and content of Canaan’s 2011 piece ‘Is This “Just the Beginning”? Exploring the Possibilities of the 2010 English Student Movement’.

26. The Covid-19 lockdowns have brought about major and perhaps lasting changes, especially in the field of business as some now working remotely rethink what is most important in their lives, which could have implications for the ethos of being firmly planted in offices and at least some of what comes with this. Bourdieu is directly relevant here: ‘when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed’, previous habits of thought and action ‘may waste away or weaken through lack of use’ or ‘heightened consciousness’, falling out of step with their associated field and with ‘the “collective expectations” which are constitutive of its normality’ (2000: 160), and so opening the way for a shift in the field itself. The education system has also been very much implicated in this time of ‘crisis or sudden change’ (2000: 161), and it will be telling to see how far changed attitudes to what went before here might present difficulties for any quick, straightforward return to the previous order.

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