

# **Political Participation in the Corbyn Movement**

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I te taha o tōku pāpā  
Ko Rangitumau te maunga  
Ko Ruamahanga te awa  
Ko Kurahaupo te waka  
Ko Rangitane te iwi  
Ko Ngāti Hāmua te hapū  
Ko Te Ore Ore te marae

I te taha o tōku māmā  
I whanau mai tōku māmā i Ahuriri  
I maturuahau nō te iwi Airihi  
I tipu ake ia i roto i Ahuriri

Tokotoru ngā tamariki i tōku whānau  
Ko Rebecca mātou ko Tim  
Ko Will Golledge taku hoa rangatira  
Ko Jess Adams tōku ingoa<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is my pepeha, a customary way to introduce oneself in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). It describes my history in terms of the mountain, river, canoe, and people I come from, as well as key relationships to my family and my partner.

## Abstract

Within the resurgence of socialist activity that accompanied Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the British Labour Party between 2015 and 2019, one critical but sometimes overlooked aspect was the movement's emphasis on an expanded sense of political participation. This form of participation focused initially on an increased role for Labour Party members and forging a wide coalition with grassroots groups, but it also hinted at a future in which political participation extended not only to public ownership, but to policy-making at every level (Graeber, 2020). The aim of my research was to better understand how this expanded sense of political participation operated, how it responded to the wider status of political participation in the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how it challenged power.

I also sought to test the extent to which my militant research methodology could contribute to the movement. Militant research broadly prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge (Halvorsen, 2015). Within this militant research, which has been informed by the immanent philosophical tradition, I have organised with several political groups throughout Corbynism and post-Corbynism. This generated a militant research assemblage that brings together experiences, materials, and affective registers. I argue that some political participation within Corbynism and post-Corbynism can be understood as minor emergences. Within these emergences we occasionally glimpsed 'bone-deep' (Tuck, 2013) political participation. This stands in opposition to the 'nightmare' (Miessen, 2010) participation that dominates within our conjuncture.

Within bone-deep participation, a radical approach to difference and unity points to where some of the key 'wins' (Cox, 2019) have challenged power.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis and the research to which it refers is the product of my work, and that any ideas or quotations from the work of other people, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices of the discipline.

Below is a list of publications (published, forthcoming, or under review) from this thesis. One has gone to print, and it is included at the end of this document.

- Adams, J. 2022. *The nomadic subject in student organising*. Crossing Conceptual Boundaries. 12 (1). pp. 5 – 20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.15123/uel.8v1zx>
- Adams, J. 2022. *On Meeting Her Majesty the Queen: emergent and ambivalent strategy in militant research*. In 'At the Frontiers of Everyday Life: New Research Practices and Imaginaries in Radical Geography'. Gulen, H, Sungur, C, and Yesilyurt, A (eds). Publication by Springer forthcoming.
- Adams, J. 2022. *On WhatsApp, or what the ignorant schoolmaster taught me*. A 'note' under review for ephemera journal - a special issue on activist organising.
- Adams, J. 2023. 'A guide to militant research' - in development for Methods for Change publication (an Aspect funded project coordinated at the University of Manchester).

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## Definitions

Below are some of the figures of political action within this thesis, as well as some of the terms that have been developed or adapted, or that are being used in ways that may differ from 'plain English' readings.

Acid Corbynist: a figure of political action who, among other things, expresses a specific sense of collectively generated and culturally informed freedom. The Acid Corbynist was used to describe political action around the Corbyn movement (Gilbert, 2017b).

Bone-deep participation: nightmare participation's counter (see below). It is an embodied, material form of political participation informed by various emancipatory political trajectories and the immanent philosophical tradition. The term comes from Tuck (2013). It has three main features. First, in bone-deep participation, emancipation happens in counter-hegemonic activity that has concrete material goals. In our current conjuncture this means a rejection of liberalism, its bedfellows, and its successors. Second, the collective in bone-deep participation is where the individual and the group become a collective subject. Finally, pedagogy within bone-deep participation operates as a sense of dangerous (Giroux, 2010) pedagogy, in which consciousness-raising takes place, and learners are taught in a way that moves them to counter-hegemonic action. Across these components, a radical approach to difference — and unity — points to where some of the key insights are.

Collective joy: here understood as those moments where collective power increases through affect — where there is a “creative and productive interaction between singularities” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 201).

Comrade: a figure of political action who works on the principle of a “political relation of supported cover” (Dean, 2019a, p. 3). She forces us to take sides and she is committed to a politics of solidarity, which is where “all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all” (Sundberg, 2007). She partially contradicts the position of the ignorant schoolmaster (see below) because she prioritises truth over equality.

Corbynism: the period from 2015 — 2019 when the socialist MP Jeremy Corbyn was the leader of the British Labour Party. The membership of the party is said to have grown to 564,443 at its peak (Mason, 2019), and the ‘Corbyn movement’ temporarily and falteringly brought together the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary left. Corbynism and post-Corbynism (the years immediately following Corbynism) are the key lens through which this thesis examines our current conjuncture.

Dangerous pedagogy: a form of pedagogy that takes its cues from radical or popular education, where learners engage in collective consciousness-raising in a way that moves them to counter-hegemonic action. It develops democratic skills and it is ‘dangerous’ (Giroux, 2010) because it challenges hegemony.

Depoliticisation: the key goal of nightmare participation — see below. It refers to “the set of processes (including varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove

or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue” — as described in (Fawcett *et al.*, 2017), referencing (Hay, 2007).

Emancipation: in general, the activities or moments in which we get free from various forms of oppression and inequality generated by hegemony, including via bone-deep participation. It represents the fight for “[s]ocial justice and equality and political, economic and cultural self-determination” (Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer, 2022).

Emergence: a strategic process, often driven by the generation of new cultural expressions (Williams, 1992). It is a transversal method of creating molecular, minor becomings at scale and in a way that generates a collectively produced phenomenon that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

Emergent collective subject: a way to understand the relationship between the individual and the group within bone-deep participation. It is defined by a sense of transversality, where the group and the individual are partially merged and operate as a transindividuality (Balibar, 1993).

Ignorant schoolmaster: a figure of political action who operates pedagogically and who prioritises equality over truth (Biesta, 2017). This partially contradicts the position of the comrade (see previous). The figure comes initially from the work of Rancière (1991).

Militant: a figure of political action who is committed, and intense (Halvorsen, 2015).

Militant research: a methodological orientation in research. Within this thesis and building on several theorists (including the work of bergman and Montgomery, 2017; Bookchin et al, 2013; *Colectivo Situaciones*, 2003, 2005; Halvorsen, 2015; and Russell, 2015), militant research works transversally to increase collective power (including resources) from within a particular struggle and with emancipatory goals in mind.

Nightmare participation: bone-deep participation's counter (see previous). It is a broadly depoliticised (see above) and widely available form of political participation. The term comes from Miessen (2010). It is shaped particularly by liberalism and its successors, and it works to reinforce hegemony. In nightmare participation, individuals relate to the group solely for the purposes of a specific outcome or outcomes; pedagogy operates in a managerial way; and the form of freedom sought is oriented towards the market.

Nomad: an understanding of collective subjectivity developed by Braidotti. The nomad operates transversally and "s/he connects, circulates, moves on" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 35). Here, she 'holds' several other figures of political action.

Non-nomad: a figure of political action who drags the nomad back to the real (Tamboukou, 2021), thus grounding the nomad's flightiness in 'real' conditions.

Pedagogista: a figure of political action who troubles pedagogical assumptions (Vintimilla, 2018).

Political participation: the act of 'taking part' in any political activity — that is, any activity that engages with power (Arnstein, 1969).

Power: here explored via notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Within our current conjuncture, hegemonic power uses nightmare participation (see above), and is underpinned by liberalism, its bedfellows, and its successors. It aims to create or maintain inequality, and often to minimise difference. In contrast, the Corbyn movement represented (to very varying degrees) a counter-hegemonic rejection of liberalism, its bedfellows, and its successors — this means that the movement was informed by various emancipatory political trajectories, including anti-capitalism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and feminism. It sought counter-hegemonic power principally through state elections. This overarching strategy was ultimately unsuccessful but - more hopefully - the movement did also generate counter-hegemonic power through emergences (see above). This is a strategic and multi-scaler form of power. These counterhegemonic forms of emergent minoritarian power often incorporated bone-deep participation (see above), and it generated possibilities, which is arguably the 'best measure' of Corbynism (Grindin and Panitch, 2018). This sense of emergent power was also reflected in the choice of methodology within this PhD (see the definition of militant research above).

Radical diplomat: a figure of political action attuned to the ambivalence of strategising within our current moment. She promises a tight attention to the

conditions we are in and refuses to apologise for those same conditions. She also brings a sense of political strategy (Graziano, Graham and Kelly, 2008).

## **Abbreviations**

Constituency Labour Party (CLP)

First Past the Post (FPP)

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Red Square Movement (RSM)

The World Transformed (TWT)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

University College Union (UCU)

University of East London (UEL)

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## **Dedication**

For all the comrades fighting for emancipation.

## Introduction

While there are many ways to study political participation, studies often fail to discuss the experience of it and the extent to which it challenges power. In this thesis, I address these omissions by combining insights from the immanent philosophical tradition and from cultural studies with a specific methodology called militant research. I use these framings to study political participation within Corbynism and post-Corbynism. This refers to the groundswell of socialist organising that accompanied Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the UK's Labour Party between 2015 and 2019, and the ongoing legacy of that period.

The following brief discussion of some of the key themes in the literature on political participation focusses on work from and about the 'Global North'.<sup>2</sup> Here, the first major studies to use the phrase political participation emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and focused on voting and campaigning in elections in the US (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2021), (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1986). An interest in defining political participation has been a key theme since those early studies and many subsequent works have developed elaborate taxonomies of the various activities that could fall under its banner (van Deth, 2014). While many of these taxonomic approaches are rooted in positivist logics, there are some more critical exceptions — for example Arnstein's (1969) seminal work, *The Ladder of Participation*, which classified the various stages of participation in terms of the extent to which it challenges power.

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<sup>2</sup> The term is generally understood to refer to the rich countries with imperial and/or colonial histories who are today economically, politically and culturally dominant — vis a vis the 'Global South', which generally refers to poorer countries that have been colonised (Braff and Nelson, 2022).

Most studies proceed on the widespread assumption that democracy is strengthened by participation (Parvin and Saunders, 2018), and many take this further, working with the Aristotelian idea that enabling democratic political participation is critical for citizens to lead meaningful lives (van Deth, 2001).<sup>3</sup> However, attention is increasingly being paid to the idea that many widespread forms of contemporary political participation — encompassing both voting and also other forms of political participation ranging from protests to ‘consumer-citizenship’<sup>4</sup> — can *harm* democracy (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020). There are numerous potential reasons for this that scholars are exploring — for example, some argue that voters are irrational, rendering governments who are elected illegitimate (Achen and Bartels, 2016). For Blühdorn and Butzlaff the problem is much wider: they suggest that contemporary political cultures are polarised, illiberal and post-deliberative, and this means that “the expansion of citizen participation is, once again, widely regarded as a potential threat, both to democratic norms and to competent and effective policy making” (2020, p. 370). Some even wonder if we should see democracy as a way of ‘dealing’ with participation, rather than the other way around (Kelty, 2019).

As noted, one of the omissions within research into political participation is that judging the extent to which it contests power — or the way it upholds the status quo — is rarely mentioned in the literature or within mainstream practice (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017). Arnstein’s study is still a rare exception. Further, few studies take as their starting point the *experience* of participation. As Kelty argues, “[t]he immediate, emotional, affective experience of participation is

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<sup>3</sup> For a more nuanced take on this argument see (Mulgan, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Broadly, a sense of political participation where “socio-political activism [is] reduced to transactions in the marketplace” (Maxton-Lee, 2020, p. 453).

intense and meaningful in the moment, tattered and incomplete in retrospect. The experience of participation... is not accidental but essential to the power of participation — but it is also the aspect least likely to be preserved, strengthened, or taken seriously” (Kelty, 2019, p. 3). To re-use Kelty’s words, this thesis looks to preserve, strengthen, and take seriously my and others’ experiences of political participation with Corbynism in order to understand more about how power was being challenged.

This introduction first discusses the type of political participation on offer within Corbynism. I then set out the research questions I am seeking to answer, before outlining my methodology. I end by describing some of the various case studies I draw on (the projects and initiatives that I have been involved in) before providing an overview of the subsequent chapters.

## **0.1 Political participation in Corbynism**

In its widest application, participation is understood as an act of taking part, most frequently through participating in some sort of collective or group (Kelty, 2019).<sup>5</sup> More generally, however, participation is “a concept, a procedure, and an experience” and its various manifestations are best covered by some sense of choosing to participate, some sense of actually participating in decisions, and a sense that participation should eventually benefit the participant somehow (Kelty, 2019). When framed in this way, most individuals living in the Global North are offered participatory opportunities daily, sometimes hourly, and

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<sup>5</sup> The word comes from the Latin, *participāre*, which means to take part in (Collins English Dictionary, 2022).

particularly when we are on the internet, sometimes every second.<sup>6</sup> While participation is only one lens by which to examine our current conjuncture, its current prevalence— as a concept, a material practice, and a wider discourse— is significant.

I am particularly interested in what gets termed ‘political participation’, when it is understood as the act of ‘taking part’ in any political activity — that is, any activity that engages with power (Arnstein, 1969). It is stating the obvious to say that political participation is critical for generating political change — political systems rely on people ‘taking part’ by participating in collectives and institutions, through either formal or informal means. But, political participation has a complex relationship to emancipation. Kelty characterises the link well:

“The power of participation, at its best, is to reveal ethical intuitions, make sense of different collective forms of life, and produce an experience beyond that of individual opinion, interest, or responsibility. But in the twenty-first century, participation is more often a formatted procedure by which autonomous individuals attempt to reach calculated consensus, or one in which they experience an attenuated, temporary feeling of personal contribution that ends almost as soon as it begins” (2019, p. 1).

Kelty’s description of participation as a ‘formatted procedure’ reflects who and what is driving some of the predominant forms of political participation today. Liberal institutions, particularly but not exclusively liberal democratic institutions,

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<sup>6</sup> For example, when we participate on social media platforms.

have increasingly adopted and promoted participatory rhetoric and practices. As Baiocchi and Ganuza argue, “[a]cross the political spectrum and across policy domains it [participation] has become a privileged prescription for solving difficult problems and remedying the inherent flaws of democracy” (2017, p. 4). Further, these models are frequently imposed on poor countries in ‘development’ work through the work of multinational agencies and funders who impose participatory processes as conditions for accessing resources (Clever, 2001).

I call today’s dominant form of political participation, ‘nightmare participation’ (Miessen, 2010).<sup>7</sup> The term comes from the architect Miessen’s examination of liberal participation, which he discusses partly in relation to spatial practices but also in relation to wider democratic activities. It points, in essence, to political participation in name only — a form of participation that works as an illusion of meaningful engagement. As a postscript in Miessen’s book discusses, within “the nightmare of participation, political subjects become caught in the logic of an iconic participation, a representative participation that has been exaggerated to the point of hollowness” (Beaudry and El Baroni, 2010, p. 254). This is a depoliticised form of participation shaped by liberalism — when depoliticisation is understood as those processes around specific political issues that actually remove choice, collective agency, and opportunities to work together (Hay, 2007).

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<sup>7</sup> Outside of the title of the book, *The Nightmare of Participation*, Miessen (2010) only uses the word nightmare once himself, and it is not used in a way that applies to participation. He does include a quote at the beginning from Žižek that discusses how ‘disgusting’ it is when things that you dream about in secret are imposed upon you. It says, “We have a nice name for a realized dream: it is called a nightmare” – the quote comes from an interview published in Diez and Roth (2010, p. 60).

I believe that it is important to stick with the term participation, despite the prevalence of nightmare participation. We need to reclaim the word. In a response to Miessen's book, Till makes a case for both maintaining a critical lens on participation but also — as per Miessen — thinking about the ways it can enable more counter-hegemonic activity. He writes that “[p]articipation is not going to disappear as a term or a need, so it is best to allow it to develop on its own terms and be brought back into the centre of the debate” (2011, p. 3). Relatedly, I also believe that it is important to stick with the term ‘political participation’. van Deth has argued that studies of political participation have become a “study of everything”, which renders them somewhat meaningless (2001, p. 7). But given how prominent participatory rhetoric is, there is a need for us to identify how political participation can also be utilised for counter-hegemonic projects. Corbynism was an example of one of those projects.

The avowed socialist and backbench MP Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015 to the surprise of many, including himself. Under Corbyn's leadership, the Labour Party lost but performed better than expected in the 2017 election (BBC News, 2017), but in the 2019 election the party lost dramatically— winning only 203 seats to the Conservative's 365 (BBC News, 2019). Many of the policies Corbynism advanced were far from radical, but they did represent a broadly socialist platform that focused on renegotiating power away from the elite. Inspired by those policies, during Corbyn's time in power and to a certain extent afterwards, large numbers of people joined or re-joined the Labour Party and became active in its various spaces and in left-wing or socialist politics more generally. This resurgence of political participation took place, for example, in local Constituency Labour Party (CLP) branches, in the

socialist pressure group Momentum,<sup>8</sup> in unions, and in the expanded domain of political discourse, including new media outlets like Novara Media.<sup>9</sup>

In 2016, Corbyn described this short-lived but widespread resurgence in socialist politics in the UK as a ‘social movement’ (BBC News, 2016b).<sup>10</sup> This holds when social movements are understood not only as spaces where people are “fighting in the streets to resist or promote political change”, but also as spaces that have a “capacity to nurture innovative ideas”, and where movements are “engaged in generating and spreading counter-expertise and new forms of knowledge” (della Porta, 2020, p. 2). Within Corbynism, the extensive political canvassing in the two general elections was the closest the movement came *en masse* to ‘fighting in the streets’. However, the ‘innovative ideas’ within Corbynism partly revolved around the upsurge in political participation.

One of the key characteristics of Corbynism is that it was an experiment in thinking about, and sometimes ‘doing’, mass political participation. It was thus an opportunity to reconsider some basic assumptions about how the UK’s democracy could function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Berry and Guinan, 2019). It sits alongside many examples of largescale counter-hegemonic political participation in the UK,<sup>11</sup> including protests, community organising and trade

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<sup>8</sup> Momentum’s role within Corbynism is discussed more in chapter one, but it is a membership organisation launched not long after Corbyn’s election to be leader of the Labour party. It aimed “to organise support for Corbyn’s policies” by acting both as “a platform inside Labour and an organisation for building social movements outside” (Hannah, 2018, p. 228).

<sup>9</sup> A key Corbynite institution, Novara Media was established in 2014, a year before Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party (Chakelian, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Corbynism, Momentum also described Corbynism as a social movement (Wintour and editor, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Much of the discussion in this thesis focuses on the nation-state that is the UK, although I recognise the complexity of this political entity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. See, for example (Archer, 2012).

union activity.<sup>12</sup> In some instances, Corbynism took a pluralistic approach to working with and alongside these other forms of counter-hegemonic political participation. What was particularly unique about Corbynism's vision of political participation, however, is that it hinted at a future in which political participation extended not only to public ownership, but to policy-making at every level (Graeber, 2020).

For the purposes of the discussion here, there are several critical features of this social movement. First, Corbynism sought to win state power. Second, the policy agenda pursued by Corbynism, while not entirely 'radical', paid special attention to inequality and was thus considerably more innovative than the previous or the subsequent Labour Party agendas, particularly those under the leadership of Tony Blair and Keir Starmer. Third was the explicit strategy of bringing together the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary left, through sometimes innovative and sometimes conflicted means. Finally, the movement promised an increase in political participation, and thus democratisation, particularly in relation to plans to bring many assets into public ownership (The Labour Party, 2019), but also extending to the argument that citizens should be involved in all forms of policy-making (Graeber, 2020).

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<sup>12</sup> Some prominent examples of mass protests include the London riots in the summer of 2011; the Occupy movement in the UK later that year; Black Lives Matter mobilisations following George Floyd's murder in the US in 2020; ongoing various environmental protests, including by Extinction Rebellion; work by groups like Palestine Action. Examples of *mass* community organising are relatively scarce, but arguably organisations like Citizens UK are at the forefront (for a discussion of their work and the way it has 'professionalised' community organising, see (Balazard, 2011). In terms of trade union activity, there are countless examples, but a relevant and recent example is the widespread strikes amongst members of the University College Union. In February 2022, for example, thousands of university staff – myself included – took strike action over a long-running dispute over pay, conditions and pensions (Weale, 2022).

These features generated a form of political participation that was often different to nightmare participation. Following Tuck, I describe the more emancipatory and politicised type of political participation we glimpsed within Corbynism as ‘bone-deep participation’ (2013). For Tuck, this is the forms of participation where people are invited “to help define the scope of discussion, the rules of engagement, and the structure of relationships” (2013, p. 11). I argue that it is a project of *emancipatory collective pedagogy* and that despite the overall ‘failure’ of Corbynism, within my experiences of the movement, those glimpses of bone-deep participation challenged power in important ways. One of the key aspects of this is that experiences of bone-deep participation are potent — they create a desire for more (Tuck, 2013).

To briefly explain some key terms, Corbynism refers to the period from Corbyn’s election in September 2015 to the General Election in December 2019, when the Labour Party lost and the Corbyn project was widely understood to be over. The ‘Corbyn project’ is a phrase I often heard within the movement, and it speaks to the experimental and unexpected nature of what was happening. Corbynite is the term occasionally used to describe activities within Corbynism — for example, Corbynite canvassing or Corbynite political education. Post-Corbynism refers to the period from the 2019 election up until the time of writing, a period in which the wider movement have grappled with the vacuum Corbynism’s demise has left. The final aspect of this set of terms is that the movement was never ‘just’ about Corbyn, which Corbyn himself was always keen to stress — see, for example (Guardian News, 2019). For many who became involved, Corbyn became a figurehead for a set of progressive ideas (Carroll, Jones and Sinha, 2021).

## **0.2 Research focus and question/s**

My research aimed to investigate political participation within the social movement known as Corbynism. To do so, I have used a militant research methodology. My understanding of militant research draws on several theorists, discussed further shortly, but broadly the approach prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge (Halvorsen, 2015).

The research question I want to answer is: what can the use of a militant research methodology tell us about how political participation in Corbynism and post-Corbynism operated, and what we can learn about where it challenged power? Within this are several sub-questions:

- How did the expanded sense of political participation within the Corbyn and post-Corbyn movement operate, and how did it respond to the wider status of political participation in the UK?
- What role does the militant research itself play?
- Where are the wins, and what can we learn from them?

## **0.3 A militant research methodology**

### *0.3.1 Immanence and transversality*

This thesis examines political participation within Corbynism by combining insights from the immanent philosophical tradition and from cultural studies within a specific methodology called militant research. In relation to the

immanent philosophical tradition, the concepts I use have a lineage that goes back to Spinoza's work in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Spinoza's key contribution was to offer an alternative understanding of power — as something that exists between bodies — and an alternative conception of freedom, as being about being able “to act in the world creatively” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 76). Broadly aligned with these perspectives, militant research negotiates and challenges Western academic structures and epistemologies that have often been built on extractive, positivist research approaches and methods. It thus rejects an approach where the researcher's role is to be “meaning-giving” (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). It seeks alternative ways to generate knowledge, with a particular focus on processes and methods, and it entails a blurring of the boundaries between activism or organising and research, between researcher and researched, and between theory and practice (Pusey, 2018).

This reflects a transversal orientation. Transversality is a key conceptual tool within this thesis, and some of its various applications are discussed in chapter two. In general, however, it signals an approach that allows connections across and through a wide set of materials and framings, and across both individual and group levels. As Kelly argues, “[a] movement or mode of transversality explicitly sets out to de-territorialise the disciplines, fields and institutions it works across” (2005). This is not a project to simply avoid or ignore boundaries because they are inconvenient for our research practices. For example, in an introduction to an edited collected titled, *Disciplinary Stakes For Cultural Studies Today*, the authors describe how my discipline cultural studies works to undo disciplinary boundaries because of the way that they “serve to police particular, material power hierarchies, disciplinarity integral to the reproduction of

capitalism” (Jones, Laine and Sula, 2016). Or for decolonial theorists, academic borders are a critical component of the wider colonial project — and must be dismantled for precisely that reason (Choi, Selmeczi and Strausz, 2020).

### 0.3.2 *Militant research*

Definitions of militant research abound and reflect different interests, but the approach I have taken operates amongst the following set of insights. In the first instance, Holdren and Touza describe how in the work of the Argentinian group, *Colectivo Situaciones*, militant research tries “to create what Spinoza called joyful passions, which starts from and increases the power (potencia) of everyone involved” (2005, p. 600). And, a component of how that power is increased is by utilising the resources of the academic institutions that we labour within for counter-hegemonic ends (Bookchin *et al.*, 2013). This sense of increasing collective power is thus key to militant research (Russell, 2015) and it is also key to the methodology’s various precursors, including Participatory Action Research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), the *conricerca* or co-research programmes within the *Operaismo* and *Autonomia* movements in Italy in the 1960s (Carmichael, 2020), as well as feminist consciousness raising groups from the late 1960s (Malo del Molina, 2004), among other approaches.

The second definition is more straightforward. It comes from Halvorsen and it describes militant research as “a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward” (2015, p. 469). Halvorsen’s sense of ‘pushing forward’ relates to his argument that militant

research itself needs to operate ‘against’ any forms it might take — this could include the movement itself. For Halvorsen (2015), this is a transformative approach to negation and change: it suggests that any aspect of our work could be contested. Further, it is entirely legitimate for the ‘pushes forward’ to be modest — if those pushes increase collective power within the movement. The pushes can therefore include increasing resources, generating insights, or creating spaces for conversations that may not otherwise happen.

Further, Halvorsen’s sense of being ‘committed and intense’ points to one of the most critical aspects of this approach, which is also in the name. It is *militant*. This can take many forms, but it is fundamentally about intervening within the world.<sup>13</sup> For bergman and Montgomery, militancy “does not start from a pre-fabricated notion of justice. It is an attempt to intervene effectively in the here and now, based on a capacity to be attuned to relationships” (2017, p. 75). They argue that this means working from a perspective where relationships come before an ideological or moral position. As per a wider immanent orientation, they say that there is no rule book for militancy, that it is “a practice that is based in the specificity of situations” (bergman and Montgomery, 2017, p. 77). But consistent with the importance of making interventions, it is also about trying to ‘win’. This framing comes from Cox, who suggests the following:

“[a]cademia, for its part, routinely privileges “deep analysis” (in its radical forms, often deep and pessimistic analysis) to show at length (and using language designed to exclude) just how intractable a particular problem

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<sup>13</sup> As with most other political traditions, the attention to intervention is a premise that is fundamental to Marxism. In a manner consistent with this thesis’s orientation, and with the Corbyn project as whole, Marx argued that the point of philosophy is to change the world (Marx and Engels, 1998).

is, and by implication how clever those are who see it as so deep-seated that it can hardly be solved by human action. It does not reward — beyond the most trivial, technical / tactical — serious discussion of how popular movements from below can in fact *win* against these (economic, political, cultural structures).” (2019, p. 97) — my emphasis.

To bring these framings together: in this thesis, the aim of militant research is to work transversally to increase collective power in a way that pushes our emancipatory movements forward. As noted, the militant research I have done has taken place under the banner of Corbynism and post-Corbynism. My participation in this wider movement has been characterised by my interaction with several groups or institutions (notably, my interaction with the Labour Party itself is relatively limited).

While I describe some of these activities in more detail shortly, in brief, I worked on the 2019 election campaign and a few other activities in and around the British Labour Party; I did an internship (funded by my university, the University of East London (UEL)) that led to extensive organising with The World Transformed (TWT), an organisation dedicated to transformative socialist political education; I ran a small-scale project called Choose Your Own Adventure; I helped with the establishment of a mutual aid group in Homerton, London; I worked on a mostly student-run campaign called #SaveUEL at UEL; I worked to develop a national student organisers’ network called the Red Square Movement (RSM); and I worked on various other short term or one-off events, workshops and meetings, some with organisations outside of those listed here. Within these activities, I have played the role of coordinator, volunteer, paid researcher, facilitator, canvasser, campaigner, and more. Critically there was no

'plan' at the beginning of this research as to where things may go — but I was following the affective signals that were being generated and a Spinozist sense of power. I was interested in where the power to act was increasing.

### *0.3.3 A research assemblage*

While militant research is the overall methodology, I use the idea of a research assemblage to think through how the various materials within this thesis interact. The idea of a research assemblage comes from Fox and Alldred (2018) and builds on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) understanding of assemblages. It essentially posits a more horizontal and interconnected approach to research. The research assemblage itself is the milieu that, "comprises the bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry, including the events that are studied, the tools, models and precepts of research, and the researchers" (Alldred and Fox, 2014, p. 400). Within this, binaries of the components of research— like subject/object, methodology/content, and process/product — should be broken down. Some of the key aspects of the assemblage is the set of methods, theoretical sources, and practical activities I have engaged with.

The mix of different methods that have been used throughout this research includes both desk-based research (research, reading, notetaking, writing, presenting, and administrative tasks), as well as a whole swathe of organising tools, skills, and tactics that I detail further below. The organising methods have reflected the needs of the different groups I have worked with, and my evolving sense of militant research, as well as the theoretical material I have engaged

with. In brief, the theoretical material is drawn from a range of disciplines and approaches — predominately cultural studies, the immanent philosophical tradition, Marxism, feminism, and decoloniality, from the militant research tradition itself, from political science, from posthumanism, and from sociology. This wide-ranging interdisciplinary mix has often been shaped through developments or conversations I have had in the organising I have done.

To give some sense of the practical activities, throughout this militant research I have organised meetings on-line, off-line, and between the two. I have often worked with people one-on-one, learning from their expertise. I have tried (and often failed) to mobilise friends. I have attended endless meetings, had numerous conversations, introduced people, taken part in and sometimes devised workshops, written and shared petitions, written and delivered a few speeches, helped to publicise activities, participated in a limited number of actions, Tweeted, gone to lots of events, spent too much time on WhatsApp, took minutes (there was a lot of this), sent out electronic polls to find dates for meetings, went to quite a few reading groups, and experienced a great deal of collectivity and stress and laughter and frustration and joy. And as noted, all these different things intersect in what I understand to be a research assemblage and there has been a continual segue between these different components. Critically, I have used these experiences to develop what could be understood as two 'ideal types' of participation.

#### *0.3.4 Ideal types of participation*

As briefly noted, I understand the dominant forms of political participation within

our conjuncture to be examples of nightmare participation, and I suggest that within Corbynism there were moments in which we glimpsed the more emancipatory bone-deep participation. There is a critical methodological point to make about how these two types of participation operate within this thesis. Neither bone-deep nor nightmare participation are ‘real’<sup>14</sup> — within this research there have been no instances of ‘pure’ bone-deep nor nightmare participation. Much contemporary political participation in the UK sits transversally somewhere between the two. They are thus best understood as ‘ideal types’<sup>15</sup> — they point to a specific type of participation, and they help us to understand where the balance of power is within ‘real’ participatory practices. There are likely many other ideal types of political participation we could identify. And while in many respects this approach furthers the sometimes problematic taxonomic model described in the opening paragraphs, what is useful about nightmare and bone-deep participation is that they maintain a focus on the negotiations of power at the heart of political participation, as per Arnstein’s (1969) framing.

### *0.3.5 Subjectivities*

The final aspect of the methodological approach taken here is that Corbynism and post-Corbynism have presented opportunities to experiment with alternative subjectivities. This is deeply important because what we are fighting against is “also inside us, through the internalization of oppressive cultural norms which

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<sup>14</sup> This relates to the Deleuzian sense of the relationship between the real and the imagined (Biehl and Locke, 2010), which is briefly addressed in chapter two.

<sup>15</sup> The term ‘ideal types’ comes from the early 20th-century sociologist Max Weber. As a recent discussion of it described, it generally functions as a hypothesis about a specific phenomenon that enables comparisons (Midgley, O’Keeffe and Stapley, 2022).

define our worldview” (Reinsborough, 2004, p. 2). Subjectivity’s relationship to emancipation has been a key locus of discussion within political thinking (Flax, 1993). Within our current conjuncture (and on a basic level), there is a contestation between hegemonic liberal understandings of subjectivity that prioritise an Enlightenment-informed sense of individualism and autonomy, based on self-reflection, and the counter-hegemonic “forms of subjectivity that are simultaneously fluid, multicentered and effective in the “outer” worlds of political life and social relations” (Flax, 1993, p. 33).

To explore how that more counter-hegemonic sense of subjectivity has operated within this militant research, and to explore what that means in terms of understanding political participation within Corbynism, one of the key aspects of this thesis’s methodology is the identification of a series of figures who speak to different modes of political action. In their totality, they work to undo the liberal subject. This is a strategic move. Shukaitis describes how the Situationist International figurehead Debord suggested that the goal of strategy is to put yourself in “the place of the emerging collective subject.... [which is] a process of conceptualizing agency in a given situation” (2016, p. 29).

Thus, to summarise my methodology: this research proceeds from an immanent perspective and it works in a transversal way, under the banner of militant research. It uses a series of different research and organising methods, and a wide range of theoretical materials, all of which are held within the notion of a militant research assemblage. This thesis identifies two ‘ideal types’ of participation to enable an analysis of where and how power has been negotiated within political participatory experiences within Corbynism, and there

is a recurrent interest in the role of subjectivity within the research assemblage. Within this wider orientation, there are several case studies that need detailing. To note briefly for clarity — I use ‘case studies’ to describe the different groups I have engaged with but in the chapters, some of the analysis looks at one case study and other chapters look across several case studies. For example, chapter six looks at experiences across Corbynism on the digital network WhatsApp and is not tied to any one specific institution or group.

## **0.4 Case studies**

### *0.4.1 The World Transformed*

The first group that needs describing in more detail, and perhaps the most formative, is the political education organisation called The World Transformed, or TWT. TWT is based in the UK and, along with the political pressure group Momentum (briefly described earlier and more substantively discussed in chapter one), it is one of the key Corbynite institutions. It was formed in 2016 by a collection of political organisers who had been involved in Momentum and an organisation called Brick Lane Debates, who, as the name suggests, organised political debates on Brick Lane in London (Brick Lane Debates, 2022). It ran a political education festival alongside the Labour Party’s conference that year and has done so ever since (The World Transformed, 2022). Alongside the yearly festival, the organisation has more recently expanded its work to deliver year-round political education, including one-off events (book launches, panel discussions, fundraisers, etc.) as well as political courses. TWT’s politics are socialist and pluralist — themes at the 2021 festival in Brighton included

abolition,<sup>16</sup> the ‘future of the union’ (i.e. of the UK as a political entity) and municipal socialism (The World Transformed, 2021). Critically, TWT has always adopted an ‘in and against’<sup>17</sup> strategy in relation to the Labour Party, meaning that its politics and programming represent both the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary left.

I began my engagement with TWT as a volunteer at the festival in 2019, where I helped to schedule trained facilitators to attend different sessions. My participation at the festival evolved into work within a wider research project TWT was running, via the aforementioned internship that UEL paid for. This evolved into a new working group within the organisation. I am currently a co-lead of the research working group, I sit on the steering committee, and I have been involved in numerous other areas of work. For example, I have worked within the organisation’s training team and with the group of student organisers briefly mentioned earlier, with whom we developed a student organising school called Transform the University (discussed shortly). At the 2022 festival I co-led the welfare team, I helped to coordinate much of the training for volunteers, I spoke briefly at two sessions (on ‘feminising politics’ and on political education) and I worked in the festival’s evaluation team.

The research working group is the most comprehensive area of work I have been involved with at TWT and it is worth briefly detailing. The initial research

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<sup>16</sup> This term has become increasingly prominent on the US and UK left – while it can refer to a range of practices, the principal use of it that I have seen relates to the interest in abolishing “prisons, police, and punishment” (Abolitionist Futures, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> The phrase ‘in and against’ as well as the updated version, ‘in, against, and beyond’ (Holloway, 2016) and (Halvorsen, 2015), is discussed more in chapter one and throughout, but in the way that it is used here, it comes from the work of the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (Wheeler-Dresden and London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980).

(Ranford, 2022) was led by my comrade, Fiona Ranford, and was funded by the Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust.<sup>18</sup> This slowly merged into a core group who met regularly to discuss readings and to plan different activities within TWT. Alongside our evaluation of the yearly festival, the biggest achievement of the group to date has been an internal day of workshops that we organised on the theme of decoloniality. At its widest, the day sought to explore ways of thinking and working within political education that come from anti-colonial and anti-racist perspectives. Because of the timespan in which I have been involved with TWT, the work I have been involved in at TWT has been part of both Corbynism and post-Corbynism.

#### *0.4.2 The 2019 General Election*

Partly fuelled by meeting so many people at TWT, I became involved in canvassing in the General Election in late 2019, where I was out ‘door-knocking’ for the Labour Party under Corbyn’s leadership. The experience of canvassing created a real impetus to go on to engage with further aspects of Corbynism — it acted as an entry point (or gateway drug,<sup>19</sup> as discussed more in chapter two) to the organising that I have become involved in.

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<sup>18</sup> The trust is one of very few explicitly left-wing funders in the UK. They say that “[t]he general objectives of the Trust are to advance public education, learning and knowledge in all aspects of the philosophy of Marxism, the history of socialism, and the working class movement” (Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> The term ‘gateway drug’ has been used in part because of its relevance to ‘acid’, as discussed most comprehensively in chapter one. In particular, Milburn titled an article ‘Acid Corbynism is a gateway drug’ (Milburn, 2017).

### 0.4.3 #SaveUEL

Based on what I was learning through my involvement with TWT and through that experience of canvassing, I used some of my training budget at UEL to attend a short course on community organising in early 2020 (just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to require serious changes to our lives in the UK). That equipped me with the skills to coordinate a campaign at my university, the University of East London (UEL), called #SaveUEL. The campaign was run with a group of other students, most of whom were also working on their PhDs.

Our organising began in the summer of 2020, when several PhD students—myself included—were informed that our supervisors were at risk of redundancy. Through quite extensive campaign work focused on the redundancies (all run through numerous WhatsApp groups), including petitions, several events (an advertisement for one of those events is included in the appendix), student outreach, a social media profile on Twitter and Instagram, and work to engage politicians and other high-profile individuals who could support us, the group involved in #SaveUEL started to develop a better understanding of other issues on campus. We took action around those other issues, to some degree of success. The energy and impetus behind the work faded by the summer of 2021, but one tangential outcome of this work was that relationships were developed across the institution. Some of this resulted in an online conference that the university funded, called ‘Interrogating Decoloniality’ (ACI research committee, 2022). The outline of that conference is included in the appendix.

#### *0.4.4 The Red Square Movement*

Through #SaveUEL, I became involved in a new national network of student organisers that was forming called the Red Square Movement. It consisted of representatives from many of the major student campaigns across the country — students who had in 2020 gone on rent and fee strikes — as well as representatives from student groups like Pause or Pay, Liberate the University, and Young Labour.<sup>20</sup> Critically, the person I spoke to when I first became involved mentioned that the group were interested in developing an ‘organising school’ to train activists by developing skills and by sharing knowledge. At roughly the same time, TWT had recently been through a strategy process which identified ‘Generation Left’ as a key area of focus.

I joined RSM soon after the phone call and we began discussions to work on the proposed organising school with the support of TWT, and the National Union of Students (NUS). We delivered the school in April 2021 and it brought around 100 student activists together online for a weekend of reflection, training, and planning. I remained involved with RSM and at the 2021 TWT festival, a delegation of roughly 20 students attended the festival in an official capacity. At the festival, we organised a session called ‘Reimagining the Student Movement’ that asked attendees to discuss solutions or proposals around three core areas that had emerged in the strategising and collective work of the group. A photograph of Corbyn wearing the group’s signature red

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<sup>20</sup> The politics of these groups are described more in chapter five.

square is in the appendix.

#### *0.4.5 COVID-19*

Finally, while not a case study, COVID-19 has been a significant component of this militant research. On a practical level, as so many researchers experienced, I shifted all my 'in person' research online as the pandemic hit the UK and I changed my methodology quite significantly. Hooker has written about how militant research has been affected — about how the pandemic has hindered "the affective and physical encounter upon which this praxis relies" (Hooker, 2020). She notes that there are epistemological consequences for this because our access to the contexts we are studying has changed (Hooker, 2020). For me, this has included much more focus on the digital than I initially envisaged, and less emphasis on the experiences that come from bodies being in the same spaces. It is telling that some of the 'highlights' of my research have been the three in-person festivals run by TWT.

### **0.5 Overview of chapters**

To be able to answer my overall research question, it is critical to set out the wider conjuncture in which this research has taken place. Chapter one thus starts with a discussion of cultural studies and conjunctural analysis. I use several further tools from cultural studies: hegemony and counter-hegemony, articulation, and a requirement to "identify possible sites of political intervention" (Gilbert, 2019, p. 15). Setting aside questions of political participation for the most part, this chapter then looks at hegemony in the UK. I examine how many

of the key components can be traced to developments during the Enlightenment. These are principally the emergence of a liberal worldview shaped by a sense of negative freedom in which liberalism's bedfellows (including imperialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy) could flourish, and which set the scene for liberalism's successors (neoliberalism, and post-neoliberalism). I then address the relevance of three more recent periods — Thatcher and Blair's times in office, and our current moment of austerity politics. I detail how the Corbyn movement mounted a counter-hegemonic project, including through its socialist vision and via the hegemonic bloc it sought to create, and through specific understandings of both political participation and freedom.

Chapter two looks at this research's methodology in more detail. I begin with an examination of several branches of immanent philosophy. This starts with Spinoza and it includes a great deal of Deleuze and Guattari's work. In relation to Deleuze and Guattari, I focus on the concepts of a research assemblage, machines, and transversality. This chapter then briefly outlines a personal set of experiences I had while canvassing in the General Election in 2019 and I explore how they operated as a 'gateway drug' into militant research. I then discuss some of the core aspects of how militant research works and I argue that militant research requires a specific political strategy. This speaks to one of the figures of political action that this thesis identifies, namely the radical diplomat.

Chapter three examines nightmare participation, with a particular focus on how it intersects with democracy. I first discuss the relationship between participation

and democracy. I then discuss the relationship between participation and liberalism, its bedfellows, and successors, as well as the political subjects these aspects of hegemony create. I conclude by setting out how these various forces have intersected in recent years in Britain and how they have shaped 'nightmare participation'.

In chapter four, I turn more concretely to Corbynism to think through the emergences the movement generated, some of which allowed us to glimpse bone-deep participation. I first discuss the ideas of becoming, the minor, and emergence. I explore emergence in relation to its sense of scale, power, and strategy. I end with a discussion of how it intersects with bone-deep participation.

Chapter five looks at the relationship between the individual and the group within this militant research. This chapter begins by outlining the way that individual and group relations are negotiated within the ideal types of nightmare and bone-deep participation, before exploring how collective political subjects are experimented with, including within Corbynism. I then discuss Braidotti's framing of the nomadic subject as an example of one of those collective political subjects, and I do so via a specific trajectory of my militant research within Corbynism. This is my experience of organising with RSM. I argue that while the nomadic subject is promising, she would need to be tempered by at least two figures of political action — the non-nomad (Tamboukou, 2021) and the comrade — in order to make viable the collective subject of bone-deep participation.

Chapter six looks at how pedagogy operated in my militant research within Corbynism. I start this chapter with a discussion of what we are 'taught' within nightmare and bone-deep participation. This chapter then uses the insights of a collective subject known as the pedagogista (Vintimilla, 2018) to analyse the experience of organising on the digital platform, WhatsApp. I understand this discussion to be an expression of minor theory and I utilise a posthuman lens to suggest that we are 'becoming WhatsApp'. To make this argument, I look at three components of WhatsApp — the relationship between pervasiveness and intimacy; the role of complexity; and equality. I argue that despite its 'nightmarish' features, under certain circumstances WhatsApp can operate as an emancipatory form of pedagogy that both generates insights and leads to action.

Finally, chapter seven looks at emancipation — the third core feature of bone deep participation. It thus looks at the wins within this research and explores how they relate to Corbynism more broadly. This includes the key insight around the radical conception of difference and unity, the moments of convocation, the figures of political action, the understanding of collectives, and a series of insights into how the university has been negotiated.

In the conclusion I reflect on what this research means in our wider conjuncture, I discuss some of the considerations around the methodology of this research, and I point to future avenues of work.

## Chapter one: Our conjuncture

Speaking in June 2017, in a video titled, 'Corbyn is the absolute boy'<sup>21</sup>, Novara Media's Aaron Bastani said:

“So Labour isn't just the largest party on the centre left in Europe in terms of membership, it's also got the highest polling. Give JC some damn respect! That's phenomenal. He's broken all the rules and somehow, he's not just still standing, he's thriving! I think many commentators, many pundits, are now eating their words.” (*Corbyn is the absolute boy*, 2017)

The critical question is: why was Corbyn's rise to power considered to have 'broken so many rules'? This chapter starts to answer this, and my research question, by looking at the wider context in which this research has taken place. It opens with a discussion of the way cultural studies advances a project of conjunctural analysis and looks at some of the key features of this form of analysis. It then begins the process of conjunctural analysis to contextualise this research. I particularly look at how the Enlightenment was underpinned by a liberal sense of negative 'freedom' that generates significant inequality. I examine how those ideas have been developed in three more recent periods in British history. The first is the years of Thatcher's reign in the late 1970s and 1980s. The second is Blair's time in office from 1997 to 2007. The final component is the more recent period of austerity politics, beginning in 2010 and

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<sup>21</sup> The term 'absolute boy' was widely used on social media to refer to Corbyn in an affectionate way, predominately by young people. According to the Guardian newspaper, the term conveys "a sense of benevolent laddism" (Parkinson, 2017).

up to the time of writing, and which was delivered initially by a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. The second half of this chapter explores Corbynism in more detail and establishes some of the ways in which Corbynism sought to contest hegemony.

### **1.1 Cultural studies and conjunctural analysis**

A cultural studies orientation underlies this thesis's interest in understanding political participation within Corbynism. For Williams, one of the foundational thinkers of cultural studies, culture refers to both a sense of the "whole and distinctive way of life" as well as the specific "signifying practices" of the arts, and intellectual work (1981, p. 11). It is therefore interested in the intersection — or to use Williams' word, the convergence — of these different perspectives (1981). Recalling the arguments made in the introduction in relation to the relevance of studying the 'experience' of participation, cultural studies today is partly about "indexing important shifts in the way that social, political and economic processes are actively experienced, at a subjective and microsocial scale, as well as in the wider public sphere" (Gilbert, 2019, p. 13). However, one of the critical aspects of this orientation is that the theory cannot lead and (following Hall's stance) we need to always return to the context we are examining (Grossberg, 2014).<sup>22</sup> Conjunctural analysis does just this.

To suggest that we live in an era in which political participation is an important thing to study is to begin a form of conjunctural analysis. While an early version

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<sup>22</sup> To quote Grossberg, he suggests that "[w]e must use concepts but only and always in conversation with the demands of the material realities of the actual" (2014, p. 19).

of conjunctural analysis was Lenin's (2017) calls for concrete analysis of a historical period that looks specifically at the convergence of forces at play, in a more contemporary vein it is Hall's work that has systematically demonstrated how to deploy this form of thinking. Here, and consistent with Lenin, specificity to the moment is vital (Hall, 2017). Writing about Hall, Clarke argues that conjunctural analysis is not a theory but a way of orienting research. He says that it is "a way of focusing analytic attention on the multiplicity of forces, accumulated antagonisms, and possible lines of emergence from the conjuncture (rather than assuming a singular crisis and one line of development)" (2014, p. 115). In an idea that will be picked up in the next chapter, Grossberg (2019) suggests that ideally, conjunctural analysis could be developed collectively, and maybe even collaboratively.

Clarke (2014) has written about how Hall's understanding of conjunctural analysis was built on a particular understanding of time and power. In this understanding, a specific conjuncture, or period of time, will consist of either the creation of new configurations of power, or it will entail a stabilisation of contradictions and antagonisms. Summarising the overall approach to conjunctural analysis within cultural studies, Gilbert argues it "can be broadly defined as the analysis of convergent and divergent tendencies shaping the totality of power relations within a given social field during a particular period of time" (2019, p. 6).

Hall (2017) takes from Gramsci the importance of looking not only at the period's specific economic conditions, but also the ways in which those conditions are being upheld. Hall was thus consistently interested in questions

of hegemony and of counter-hegemony. Hegemony has various interpretations but what is core to the overall analysis here is that it is about the ways that the ruling classes expand their power by extending it into the realms of the political, the social and the cultural (Clarke, 2014). Hegemony is about how power operates without direct force — it is “domination through the construction of ideological consensus” (Grossberg, 2019, p. 50). It is also never static (Hall, 2011), and culture is critical within its formulation. In part because of its expansive scope, culture “means that it is continuously traversed by political forces, seeking to forge the connections that would tie political projects into the everyday or commonsense forms of popular thinking” (Clarke, 2014).

Hall developed a way of analysing hegemony through his concept of articulation. Critically, articulation works in two ways. The first is the way that hegemony expresses — how rule is created and reinforced through “ideological, discursive, symbolic practices” (Clarke, 2014, p. 120). The second is the way in which hegemony connects — how it manipulates cultural contexts to serve wider ideological projects via “the assembling of a (would-be) hegemonic bloc that involved compromises, alliance building, and the creation of a (temporary) set of mutual alignments and interests” (Clarke, 2014, p. 120). This latter understanding includes how hegemony accounts for specific, subordinate groups (Clarke, 2014). This is particularly interesting in relation to questions of participation, as it asks us to consider who can — or who wants to — participate politically today. It also suggests an attention to the ways in which participatory practices that on their surface seem inclusive, can and do mask substantive inequalities.

However, there is another way that the term hegemony gets used that needs briefly exploring. The second understanding is about the way a ‘ruling bloc’ engages in a political struggle solely to win leadership (Grossberg, 2019). For Grossberg a “hegemonic struggle, then, involves a struggle to reorganise the social and reconstruct and redistribute ‘the people’ around a singular but heterogeneous social bloc. It is often tied to a particular social-political project/vision” (2019, p. 51). There is a clear relationship between the second way in which articulation is understood and this second understanding of hegemonic struggle. For the sake of clarity, unless stated, my use of the terms hegemony and hegemonic in this thesis refers to the former description — namely, those expressions and connections of power by the ruling bloc. A further essential aspect of conjunctural analysis is that the aim is “always to map a social territory, in order to identify possible sites of political intervention”<sup>23</sup> (Gilbert, 2019, p. 15). As noted in the introduction in relation to the wider militant research methodology, the importance of identifying meaningful sites of intervention and contestation is critical and forms a key component of my methodology throughout this PhD — the next chapter will discuss this in more detail. The following begins the process of establishing the forces at play before and throughout Corbynism and in the post-Corbyn era.

## **1.2 Liberal roots**

Today, many of the foundations of hegemony in the UK can be traced to the form of liberalism that developed in the Enlightenment. This is underpinned by a ‘negative’ sense of freedom, in which the powerful shape the conditions under

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<sup>23</sup> This aligns with what some have called nonideal theory in philosophy, which proposes that concepts need to aid in the diagnosis and response to injustices (Khader, 2018).

which most of us live. Critically, this is not really a form of ‘freedom’ at all.<sup>24</sup>

While liberalism is a contested term, it refers to the emergence of a specific ideological and economic framework throughout the Enlightenment, through figures like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith. Freedman describes how seven concepts intersect at its core. These are “liberty, rationality, individuality, progress, sociability, the general interest, and limited and accountable power” (2015, p. 15). Liberalism has been credited with creating—in principle — a post-hierarchical social structure, where individuals can interact freely and on equal terms (McManus, 2020). But in reality, there is “no denying that liberalism has historically failed to address oppression in any systematic way” (Hay, 2013, p. 2).

Taken together, liberalism, its bedfellows (these include imperialism, capitalism, racism and patriarchy), and its successors (neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism) have played a *connecting* role within the wider hegemonic project, to recall Clarke’s (2014) framing described earlier — and these oppressions were frequently justified via the ‘intellectual’ developments within the Enlightenment (Andrews, 2021). There are many components of the various relationships within liberalism’s bedfellows and successors. The following predominately focusses on one trajectory within these relations, and looks at how the wider imperial project, underpinned by colonialism and racism, enabled the pursuit of material gains by the ruling elite, in a way that liberalism’s successors (neoliberalism and to a certain extent post-neoliberalism) have

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<sup>24</sup> To give one example, Howe (1977) discusses a specific understanding of liberalism closely related to the US’s Bill of Rights, that refers to “a commitment to “formal” freedoms—speech, assembly, press, etc.—so that in principle, as sometimes in practice, liberalism need have no necessary connection with, or dependence upon, any particular way of organizing the economy.” This has led to significant oppression, as many lack material resources.

furthered. As will be discussed in the second half of this chapter, this trajectory is particularly relevant to Corbynism.

Liberalism was premised on the imperial project and its ability to generate capital came (and continues to come) through the exploitation and oppression of numerous subjugated humans and non-humans. One of the critical aspects of hegemony in the UK is the fact that the country “has never been a nation but an empire” (Bhambra, 2017, p. 220). It is difficult to adequately convey the destruction caused by imperialism or the impact that it has had on modern Britain. For Andrews, genocide, slavery, and colonialism are the “foundation stones upon which the West was built” (2021, p. x111). But to give one indicative example: the material extraction from British colonies that began in earnest throughout this period has enabled many of the benefits available to British citizens — the welfare state in the UK was initially heavily funded by taxing colonial subjects in the Indian subcontinent, for example (Bhambra, 2022).

As this example demonstrates, despite the rhetoric of freedom and liberty, from inception liberalism has consistently operated as freedom and liberty *for some*. Thus, the form of freedom sought within liberalism (and its successors) is a ‘negative’ conception of freedom<sup>25</sup> (Carter, 2022). Within this negative conception, there are significant considerations in terms of what we are free from: it means making decisions about the freedoms we will limit, in order to guarantee the freedoms we want to protect (Love, 2020, p. 137). The issue of hierarchy is critical here — as the emergence of liberalism demonstrates, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Or liberty, the two words are often used interchangeably (Carter, 2022).

those at the top of the social order who get to decide the types of freedom they will have.

This is a key example of one of the ‘contradictions’ within hegemony in the UK as it emerged throughout the Enlightenment. For example, the UK was one of the main countries that profited from the slave trade (Draper, 2008) — and this was partly upheld by some of the key liberal figures. Losurdo (2014) has methodologically documented the links between the emergence of liberalism and chattel slavery, which by its demise had resulted in millions of enslaved people, and substantive wealth for a small group of elites. Through their exploitative practices, those elites suddenly found themselves with leisure time — and this “reinforced the proud self-consciousness of a class that became ever more intolerant of the abuses of power, the intrusions, the interference and the constraints of political power or religious authority” (Losurdo and Elliott, 2014, p. 38). As a result, “the planter and slave-owner developed a liberal spirit and a liberal mentality” (Losurdo and Elliott, 2014, p. 38).

This resulted in some challenges for the liberal figures who had to find ways to align their belief in liberty with their practices of enslavement, and other forms of oppression (Losurdo and Elliott, 2014). And what this resulted in was a significant contradiction, that Hall describes as being split along the following lines in the UK:

“... progress, but simultaneously the need to contain any ‘threat from below’; tolerance, reform, moderation and representative government for the English race, colonial governmentality, discipline, violence and

authority for recalcitrant 'other' native peoples abroad; emancipation and subjugation." (2011, p. 710)

This sense of needing to "contain any 'threat from below'" (Hall, 2011, p. 710) is reflected in the various ways in which scholars and political movements have theorised the intersecting oppressions generated by liberalism, its bedfellows and successors. For the decolonial theorist Mignolo, for example, these oppressions constitute a 'colonial power matrix' — using a term initially developed by Quijano (1993). This refers to the various forms of control that the imperial period established. Mignolo describes how the matrix has "four interrelated domains: control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity)" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 156). While this is but one of many ways to theorise these intersections, what is critical is the way that these oppressions are connected (in different configurations at different times) within hegemony.

One of the key goals of linking these forms of oppression relates to its relationship to difference. As Hirschmann writes: "[f]eminists and other critics point out that, despite liberalism's overt attention to diversity, liberal principles have historically been used to erase difference, in that only some interests, views, and life plans are seen as worthy by the state and hence protected by rights" (Hirschmann, 1999, p. 28). Continuing this argument, Hirschmann goes on to discuss the way that liberalism requires an "abstract universalism" that is built on "sameness" (Hirschmann, 1999, p. 29). This is a core component of the

liberal project — to support the set of oppressions that seek to homogenise and standardise our lives.

Liberalism also requires a specific subject. This understanding of subjectivity is one dominated by the individual, their identity, and the sense that individuals have an inherent nature or character. This can also be traced to the Enlightenment — and a foundational Western liberal thinker on subjectivity is Descartes. Writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and a key figure within the Enlightenment, Descartes' work was oriented around dualism, which “has become our traditional conception of the world, divided into two autonomous entities, a subject and an object, a mind and a body” (Fowler, 2004, p. 28). This means that from both a metaphysical and an epistemological perspective, Cartesian thought is part of rationalism, or “the sovereignty of reason” (Beiser, 2014, p. 3). Fundamentally, knowledge in this formulation derives from logic, from observation, and from analysis, and is perceived to help us arrive at an objective truth (Mansfield *et al.*, 2020).

Further, this understanding orients around the individual — this new perspective led to a different understanding of where the human sits within the world. This is as existing prior to the creation of knowledge (Mansfield *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the second component of the Cartesian subject was around the centrality of the rational individual, who uses that rationality to order the world (Mansfield *et al.*, 2020). However, this set of beliefs, particularly the emphasis on scientific rationality, has generated some disastrous outcomes. For example Andrews writes about how ‘racial science’<sup>26</sup> was integral to justifications for imperialism

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<sup>26</sup> For the sake of clarity, “[r]acial science arose as a discipline to explore the superiority of the White race” (Andrews, 2021, p. 7).

(2021, p. 10). More generally, following the establishment of these beliefs in the Enlightenment, subsequent centuries have seen them reworked and revised — but many of the core tenets have remained. We can see this by looking at the policies advanced by Thatcher, perhaps the key period in recent history for setting the conditions in which we live in the UK today.

### *1.2.1 There is no alternative*

The Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher's period in office between 1979 and 1990<sup>27</sup> introduced a specific model of neoliberalism. This built on Enlightenment-era liberal legacies through a negative sense of freedom that reinforced inequalities (affecting the working class, racialised people and other marginalised groups) and the argument it was the only possibly way to organise society. As noted earlier, neoliberalism can be seen as a 'successor' to liberalism. Some of the parts of liberalism that do the most damage to our collective wellbeing — the ideological prioritisation of individualism and the emphasis on self-interest, as well the rhetoric of freedom that works to mask substantive material and social oppression — are also some of the core features of neoliberalism. While the term neoliberalism is, like liberalism, also highly contested, it generally refers to the widespread adoption of free market logics across both economic and social realms since the late 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Today, neoliberalism can be understood as an ideological project premised on the idea that self-interest drives society, and that free markets can spontaneously

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<sup>27</sup> She had become the leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 (Gov.co.uk, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> The origins of neoliberalism are in fact much older, and can be traced back to the 1930s, when a group of intellectuals met in Paris, alarmed at the phenomenon of totalitarianism and of the rise in collectivist planning of economics – including the Keynesian policies of the UK (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010).

arrange themselves in a way that serves society as a whole (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010).

Thatcher used economic neoliberal policies as part of the ‘connecting’ articulation within hegemony. She was elected in the wake of the oil crisis in the 1970s, and the global financial uncertainty of that period provided justification for a slew of neoliberal policies that came to be known as the ‘New Right’ agenda (Andrews, 2021). This programme looked to “revive the individualistic values of the liberal ‘free market’ environment that had prevailed for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” — and, at the same time, to dismantle the welfare state (Williams, 2021, p. 1). Her time in power included moves to privatise many public services, “including British Airways, British Telecom, British Steel, and British Gas” (Edwards, 2017, p. 89), and it also entailed a move to make state provisions more attuned to individual choice (Jackson, 2012). Perhaps the most significant move Thatcher made was the ‘seismic’ changes brought about by the weakening of the power of trade unions in the 1980s under her reign (Clement, 2015). These changes had a devastating effect on the material conditions of many British people — this poor economic record holds even when judging Thatcher’s time in office on her own economic terms (Clement, 2015).

What is critical is the way that Thatcher stabilised this contradiction by seeking to change social conditions — as Saunders has written, her goal was not economic but social. She wanted to “eliminate socialism from British political culture” (Saunders, 2012, p. 40), which she did under the guise of the argument that neoliberalism had ‘no alternative’ (Thatcher, 1980). An important aspect of

this is that Thatcher was elected in part on an anti-immigration platform, and the racism within this position helped to articulate the hegemony she presided over (Andrews, 2021). As Andrews writes, “[t]he anti-immigration rhetoric of Thatcher was key to her appeal to being able to maintain a Conservative government for... eighteen years” (2021, p. 196).<sup>29</sup> She wanted, as has been widely remarked, to remove any working class solidarity across racial (or any other) lines — she was fond of saying that there was “no such thing as society” (Thatcher and Keay, 1987). Further, Thatcher’s racism did not stop at the border. Consistent with much British history, she continued to find new ways to take advantage of poorer countries with racialised populations.

Along with the US, the UK throughout this period was a key advocate for the expansion of global neoliberal economic policies, in ways that continued to benefit the imperial powers at the expense of poorer countries (Patnaik, 1994). This was particularly pronounced in relation to the structural adjustment programmes enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which resulted in significant hardship across the globe (Patnaik, 1994). Patnaik argues that the IMF “acted as the agency through which the interests of metropolitan finance capital could be served” (1994, p. 9). Hollingsworth (2013) used data from UNICEF<sup>30</sup> to speculate that up to five million people could have died in Africa and Latin America because of the structural adjustment programmes. The devastation of these policies is a core component of one of the key aspects of

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<sup>29</sup> Thatcher consistently pointed to the UK’s (imperial) past and future to justify her policies, which as Hall notes was contradictory (Hall, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF is now not an acronym that reflects the organisation’s name – the organisation changed it’s named from the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund in 1953, and is now called the United Nations Children’s Fund, while retaining the original acronym (UNICEF, 2021).

Thatcher's time in office, which is that she established a specific political blueprint.

Thatcher's leadership (alongside developments in the US) established a model in which neoliberalism came to function as a project pursued predominantly by governments and corporation which generates a form of reality that reinforces capitalism at every turn (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010, p. 2). This is core to its 'success' and building on Thatcher's legacy, it manifests today in five principles — privatisation, liberalisation of trade, a "monetarist focus on inflation-control and supply side dynamics", deregulation, and the marketisation of society (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010, p. 5). A critical aspect of neoliberalism for the arguments advanced here comes from Connell, who argues that neoliberalism, "also means the institutional arrangements to implement this project that have been installed, step by step, in every society under neoliberal control" (Connell, 2010, p. 23). This is critical to the way in which it operates within hegemony today.

Our ability to be 'free' under neoliberalism is severely constrained by capitalist forces. Birch and Mykhnenko (2010) argue that while neoliberalism promised individual freedom (in the same manner as liberalism), as the examples from Thatcher's reign demonstrate, it has also resulted in widespread hardship. Neoliberalism has not, of course, failed for the elite minority whose material interests are secure. Howe (1977) described the situation in the late 1970s via a socialist critique. He suggested that there is no evidence for neoliberalism's sense of free and equal exchange; there are large numbers of people who are excluded from social choice; and the idea of a truly free market is not sensible given the continued government interference in the economy. As he wrote:

“A powerful socialist criticism of liberalism has been that it has detached political thought and practice from the soil of shared, material life, cutting politics off from the interplay of interests, needs, and passions that constitutes the collective life of mankind” (Howe, 1977).

All of this has implications in relation to subjectivity. Following the description of the liberal subject described earlier (which, as a reminder was about the individual, rational and scientifically-motivated subject), this has been sharpened by neoliberal tendencies. As Thatcher repeatedly suggested,<sup>31</sup> the ideal neoliberal subject is constructed via free market discourse: they “will invest in themselves and their futures by acquiring the necessary levels of ‘human capital’ to succeed”, where “almost every act becomes an investable advantage in a competitive world” (Houghton, 2019, p. 621). As will be discussed in more detail shortly, one of the key ways by which neoliberalism stabilises the contradiction of negative freedom is that it established a specific type of modern anxiety where the neoliberal subject is both “atomised and activated” and also “anxious and vulnerable” (Burman, 2016, p. 9).

### *1.2.2 There really is no alternative*

While the Conservatives held power for another seven years following Thatcher’s reign, it was Tony Blair’s Labour Party which took power between 1997 and 2007 that concretised the neoliberal trajectory Thatcher had

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<sup>31</sup> As Dorey describes it, Thatcher’s speeches were full of references to “‘family values’, hard work, individual liberty, personal responsibility, sobriety and thrift” (2016, p. 105).

embarked upon. While Thatcher argued that there is no alternative, Blair's time in power articulated the idea that there really is no alternative. By continuing the hegemonic project began in the Enlightenment and strengthened by Thatcher, Blair's time in office also used neoliberalism to maintain negative freedom in a way that continued to reinforce deep inequalities, particularly in terms of the UK's role in the world.

In terms of his domestic agenda, Blair's government pursued a neoliberal agenda under the guise of what he called 'New Labour'. This broadly sought to develop a 'third way' between the neoliberalism of Thatcher's New Right, and 'traditional' social democracy, to use the title of the influential book by Anthony Giddens (1999). New Labour realised they could "simply burrow underneath the distinction between state and market. This meant New Labour adopting market strategies, submitting to competitive disciplines, espousing entrepreneurial values and constructing new entrepreneurial subjects" (Hall, 2011, p. 714). It represented, in practice, an almost wholesale acceptance of neoliberalism by the political party that was historically for the workers. This was reflected, for example, in the removal of 'Clause IV' from the party's constitution and an explicit distancing from the unions. The clause was intended to commit the party to a key tenant of socialism, namely the "common ownership of the means of production" (Jobson, 2018, p. 30). While the impact of Blair's policies on the material conditions of British citizens was less overt than Thatcher's, one of the key aspects of his time in power was a continuation of the process started by Thatcher, namely a considerable narrowing of the political horizon. As a purportedly left-wing government, his premiership instead reinforced the key

tenants of neoliberalism — self-interest, individualism, and the dominance of the ‘free’ market — to maintain hegemony through negative freedom.

The most substantive example of negative freedom during Blair’s time in office was the decision he made to invade Iraq in 2003, alongside American soldiers. The invasion went ahead despite considerable mass domestic protest of up to one million people, at the biggest march in UK history up until that point (BBC News, 2003). The eventual war saw somewhere between 90,000 and 600,000 Iraqi people killed (BBC News, 2016a). Sir John Chilcot, who authored the government’s substantive report into the decisions that led to the invasion, suggested that “[t]he UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted” (BBC News, 2016a). Critically, as Sivanandan argues, the US and the UK had colluded in a project underpinned by the “notion of a superior civilization” (2006, p. 2).

Ultimately, the invasion led to significant material gains for the UK, including greater control over resources in the region (Andrews, 2021). While Blair said that his motivation for the war was to “set the Iraqi people free and secure them from the “evil” of Saddam Hussein” (Mason, Asthana and Stewart, 2016) as Andrews describes it, this invasion “was the most blatant neo-colonial expression of hard power of the twenty-first century” (2021, p. 107). In relation to understanding this as part of a hegemonic project there is a clear ‘antagonism’ here. Underlying Blair’s claims to freedom are liberal logics — as a reminder, this is a form of freedom determined and shaped by those at the top of the hierarchy, and often resulting in material gains for that same group — which in Blair’s case was driven by a misplaced sense of saviourism (among

other things). As Hall wrote in relation to the decision, “.... liberalism became a ‘world mission’ harbouring an un-transcended gulf between us and ‘the others’, the civilized and the barbarians“ (2011, p. 710).

An example of the ‘connecting’ role within Blair’s hegemonic articulation was the changes he made to immigration rules that considerably weakened the possibilities for migration to the UK under compassionate grounds. Blair oversaw “a period of legislative activism on asylum with five major acts of parliament almost all aimed at preventing the arrival of asylum seekers and making the lives of those who do arrive increasingly difficult” (Davidson and Mulvey, 2019). Perhaps more substantively, while migration numbers grew considerably during his time in power, Blair shifted the terms of the conversation about migration to focus on economic considerations (Davidson and Mulvey, 2019). This collapsing of economic policy into (racist) social policy speaks to a means by which the contradiction of this position can be stabilised. It is a hallmark of the ways in which neoliberalism has worked as a connecting force to uphold a wider hegemonic project, underpinned by a liberal sense of negative freedom.

### *1.2.3 Austerity, and post-neoliberalism*

The last twelve years in the UK has seen significant domestic hardship due to the pursuit of ‘austerity’ politics, which have also worked to uphold a liberal sense of negative freedom. At present, the UK is one of the richest countries in

the world (World Bank, 2022).<sup>32</sup> At the same time, in the UK today 30% of children live in poverty (RCPCH, 2020), and scores of working class people are subject to economic policies that are “indifferent to the social and human costs” (Williams, 2019, p. 19). Our current period has been dominated by the politics of austerity that the Conservative government have pursued since their election (in coalition with the Liberal Democrats) in 2010. More recently, signs are emerging of what some have called post-neoliberalism. Both austerity and post-neoliberalism have been partly maintained through set of affective registers that enables hegemony to be maintained, and to stabilise the various contradictions and antagonisms within this period. These include substantive ongoing extraction from the Global South, Brexit, and the ‘hostile environment’.

The political project of austerity was introduced by the coalition under the guise of responding to the 2008 global financial crash. The agenda has represented a defunding of various public services, and it has significantly increased poverty and hardship (Williams, 2019).<sup>33</sup> Notably, until quite recently while most measures suggest that overall rates of poverty have not changed dramatically since the millennium, what is particularly significant is that ‘deep poverty’, now

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<sup>32</sup> According to the World Bank, the UK’s Gross Domestic Product is currently 30<sup>th</sup> of 270 countries in the world (World Bank, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> To quote a report at length: “Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010, while the number of homeless families have risen by more than 60 per cent. The numbers using food banks have spiralled, from around 41,000 in 2010 to over one million by 2016-17. Such developments appear to be linked to various significant reforms affecting the welfare system, and in particular controversial new policies launched since 2010, such as Universal Credit and the ‘Bedroom Tax’. Critics have claimed that such reforms were mistakenly instigated alongside spending cutbacks, which then resulted in unnecessary hardship and even deaths. Public spending savings generated by a prolonged pay freeze have also impacted on key workers such as teachers, nurses and police officers, while actual police numbers have fallen by 20,000 since 2010. An academic study published in late 2018 argued that austerity policies could be equated to ‘social murder’, as some of the most vulnerable and poorest members of society have been disproportionately affected by it. Some critics have argued that the post-2010 Conservative administrations pursued austerity in an extreme and harsh manner, influenced by lingering Thatcherite ideology, and with an economic mindset that has been indifferent to the social and human costs.” (Williams, 2019)

affecting seven percent of the UK population, has increased (Stroud, 2020). Or to give another example, between 2016 and 2018, life expectancy for men living in Blackpool, a poor city in the UK, differed from men living in Richmond-upon-Thames, a wealthy area, by 18.6 years (The Health Foundation, 2020). Despite the UK's wealth, the state's failures continue to have a disproportionate effect on the most marginalised. Fundamentally, large groups of people have been identified as groups whose lives are less valuable, once again reinforcing the liberal sense of freedom as being determined by those at the top.

One of the ways that this has manifest is via an emerging discussion around the possibility that we are now experiencing post-neoliberalism. This does not go 'beyond' neoliberalism, but instead works "as a device for questioning the mutation of previous forms of liberalism and neoliberalism and the challenges they pose in the present" (Davies and Gane, 2021, p. 10). Some of the shared characteristics of neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism include an emphasis on the individual, a distrust of the state, and decentralisation (Davies and Gane, 2021). Some of the departures have crystallised through the COVID-19 pandemic, where states used "exceptional monetary policies" that in the UK included extensive government borrowing, and a potential experiment described as "'monetary financing' of the state", both of which stand in contrast to neoliberal sensibilities (Davies and Gane, 2021, p. 26).

In many respects, the acceptance of both austerity and post-neoliberalism in recent years is because they are upheld by a set of affective registers that concretise the liberal intellectual project at the level of the individual. This continues the sense of the neoliberal 'project' that continually reinforces capital,

as pursued by Thatcher and Blair. As will be discussed more in chapter four, affect is a pre-personal intensity that creates changes in the body's capacity to act (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In 2013, Hall and Alan O'Shea wrote the following:

“Slowly but surely, neoliberal ideas have permeated society and are transforming what passes as common sense. The broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook... after forty years of a concerted neoliberal ideological assault, this new version of common sense is fast becoming the dominant one.” (2013)

Hall and O'Shea note that neoliberalism's structural features (individualisation, competition, and “the privatisation of public troubles”) has generated consistent “feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression” (2013, p. 12). Adding to this picture, theorists have argued that we live in an age characterised by anxiety (Plan C, 2021) or by exhaustion (Braidotti, 2019). For Berlant (2011), we live under circumstances of ‘cruel optimism’, where we come to desire things that are no longer attainable.

A good example of how these various registers interact is provided by Bhattacharyya, who has suggested that we live what they have termed a ‘post-hegemonic state’. They point to the lack of uproar over the post-neoliberal, explicit transfer of public money to elites throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK (Bhattacharyya, 2020b). As has been widely documented, the pandemic

saw roughly \$11 billion (half of the total spend) go on medical supplies procured by often historically controversial companies who had no history of providing medical supplies, but who did have political ties to the Conservative party (Bradley, Gebrekidan and McCann, 2020). This reflects a particularly substantive hollowing of the state in relation to the goods and services that the Conservative government procured, much of which came from “well-positioned firms and consultants, able to Hoover up contracts at short notice” (Davies and Gane, 2021, p. 15). Bhattacharyya (2020b) argued that what is particularly salient is how effective this strategy has been because it created a sense of both helplessness and also hopelessness.

A particularly powerful way that austerity and these post-neoliberal transfers of resources to the elite has gone almost unchallenged is through the way that hegemony has connected — has articulated — a link between the British working class’s own precarity, caused principally by austerity, and the identification of migrants, people living in the Global South, and racialised British people as the cause of that precarity. A critical example of this is Brexit, the UK’s exit from the European Union, a process given substantial weight following the 2016 referendum. As Khalili (2017) has noted, the campaign to leave the European Union was structured by xenophobia and racism from the beginning, particularly in relation to the EU’s policies for the free movement of people across borders. This fits with a longstanding pattern in the UK: as she notes, migrants get ‘blamed’ for accessing housing, education, and health services and for “weakening the working class” — but there is no attention paid to the ways in which “beginning with Margaret Thatcher’s scorched-earth neoliberalism, policies of privatization and austerity — during both feast and

famine — have led to a degradation of national life, a diminishing of social mobility and a growth in inequality in the UK” (Khalili, 2017, p. 260).

The Conservative government in recent years has introduced a ruthless set of policies around migration, under the guise of the ‘hostile environment’, driven by Theresa May (who was the Home Secretary from 2010 to 2016, before becoming Prime Minister for three years). As Andrews writes: “... May was part of one of the most racist British governments of recent times, creating a ‘hostile environment’ for illegal immigrant that included vans with ‘go home’ written on them driving around the capital, mass-deportation flights, and withdrawing support for search-and-rescue missions for predominately African migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe” (2021, p. 190). This is precisely the connecting work being done within hegemony. And these practices extend beyond the UK’s border, both in terms of migration but also in other ways.

The UK’s decisions have had severe consequences globally, including via the unabated processes of extraction from the former colonies and the Global South at large which began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hickel, Sullivan and Zoomkawala, 2021). Along with this extractivism, which has led to significant poverty and loss of life, the UK is playing a key role in generating the climate catastrophe we all face (Hickel *et al.*, 2022), a process that has and will continue to have a devastating effect for most people, but particularly the poor and marginalised across the world (Paul, 2021). And as noted throughout, many of these decisions, policies and practices have been strengthened by appeals to negative freedom.

Negative freedom is one way by which hegemony ‘expresses’, via (to recall the discussion from earlier) “ideological, discursive, symbolic practices” (Clarke, 2014, p. 120). As this chapter has discussed, key British examples of this form of ‘freedom’ include the decision made by the Blair government to invade Iraq, the austerity politics of the coalition and then Conservative government, and the recent policies around migration and ongoing extractivism from the Global South. As these cases demonstrate, negative freedom is not a form of freedom at all but is instead a discursive device used by hegemonic forces to maintain the oppressions of liberalism, its bedfellows, and successors. It is premised on the liberal and capitalist emphases on individualism, progress, the dominance of the ‘free’ market, and universalism – and it works in part via affective registers. Fundamentally, when claims to this form of ‘freedom’ are made, inequalities are created or reinforced. But as will be explored in more detail shortly, this form of freedom is not limited to right-wing politics. There were aspects of the Corbyn movement that similarly mobilised negative freedom within its various expressions – alongside more emancipatory tendencies.

### **1.3 The absolute boy**

Corbynism ‘broke so many rules’, to quote Bastani again (*Corbyn is the absolute boy*, 2017), because the movement as a whole was an energetic attempt to challenge hegemony in the UK. It was thus, as per conjunctural analysis, a ‘site of intervention’. There are several components of this that will be explored but in the first instance, Corbyn’s own political positions played a key role in determining the movement’s politics. He is widely regarded as one of the most left-leaning MP’s — this includes, for example, his longstanding anti-

imperialist stance (Lewis, 2019). Corbyn has been the MP for Islington North since 1983, although he had the parliamentary whip removed in October 2020 (UK Parliament, 2022a). His pre-parliamentary life included a grammar school education (Bloodworth, 2015), and time working for the National Union of Public Employees (Corbyn, 2015b). Once elected, he came to represent hope for socialist politics in the UK, a “thoroughly marginalised political tradition” (Nunns, 2016, p. 11).

As noted, the Labour Party performed well the election in 2017 but lost, and the defeat in 2019 was substantial. For many, the latter election was determined by the Conservative and Labour party’s respective positions on Brexit,<sup>34</sup> but this was not the line the mainstream media took. As Jones et al recount, the media eventually settled on a narrative that Labour lost the election because it was “... too left wing, its leader, Jeremy Corbyn viewed by voters as too radical, its hundreds of thousands of new members being too idealistic, demanding too much change, which resulted in an overly ambitious manifesto lacking credibility amongst conservative voters” (2021, p. 200). After the election the Labour Party once again capitulated to serve the wider hegemonic project, with the election of Keir Starmer, the UK’s previous Director of Public Prosecution, to the leader of the party in April 2020 (UK Parliament, 2022b). The next section discusses

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<sup>34</sup> As just discussed, the leave campaign particularly focused on a strategy of shifting the blame for many of the UK’s policies away from austerity and neoliberalism – including, for example, placing the blame at the feet of free movement policies (Khalili, 2017). Initially, in the 2019 General Election the Labour Party had campaigned on a premise of delivering the result of the 2016 referendum, in which the ‘leave’ campaign won. This policy later changed. This was in part due to the influence of key members of the Labour Party, including Keir Starmer who now leads the party (Stewart, 2019). The revised policy offered a second referendum to the public in the hope that it might overturn what many within the party perceived to be the ‘wrong’ outcome of the referendum, and this switch in policy appears to have been a key factor for swing voters in the election (Sturge, 2020). Many of those swing voters decided to support the Conservative party, whose election slogan, ‘Get Brexit done’, was a consistent refrain. The House of Commons website notes the following: “58 seats switched to the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election. Of these constituencies, 55 voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum” (Sturge, 2020).

some of the key components of Corbynism, but there is a critical point to make about Corbynism's status as a social movement first.

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis generally frames Corbynism as a social movement, in part taking a cue from Corbyn (BBC News, 2016b) and Momentum's (Wintour and editor, 2015) framings. While the field of social movement studies is considerable, and only limited amounts of it feature here, many in the field would not consider Corbynism a social movement. For example, Bassett Yerrel (2020) settles on the idea of a political rather than a social movement in his thesis on Corbynism. He does at points still utilise the term, principally because of the way that many within Corbynism (and particularly those within Momentum) took it up. Bassett Yerrel notes that many of those he spoke to for his research were particularly keen to stress the 'everyday' aspect of Corbynism. For them, this meant it constituted a social movement as constituting "extra-parliamentary political action (such as strikes or direct action) alongside the creation of voluntary organisations outside of both the Labour Party and the formal institutions of the state" (Bassett Yerrel, 2020, p. 27). This sense of the 'everyday-ness' of Corbynism, as a social movement, is critical in terms of understanding my own participation within Corbynism, and I have thus stuck with the term.

### *1.3.1 A socialist social movement*

The first major feature of Corbynism is that it was a socialist movement: its principal aim was to take state power and once in power, to introduce socialist policies. For Bassett Yerrell, "...the major agent of substantive change within

Corbynism was intended to be the state” (2020, p. 6). More specifically, the movement can be categorised under the banner of democratic socialism. As Berry describes it, at its most rudimentary level this is about three things: “basic economic rights; democratising ownership; and democratising power” (2021, p. 255). This was principally reflected in the party’s policy platforms, which came closer to the ‘transformative’ (Hannah, 2018, p. xiv) end of Labour Party policies than those manifestos put forth in recent elections. But, while the policies were far from ‘radical’, they did represent a challenge to hegemony and a substantive departure from previous Labour policymaking. Fisher sums the set of 2019 policies up by saying that they can be understood as “a modest case for socialism” (2020). Essentially the ‘transformation’ Corbyn offered was modest, but still significant in a British context.

The movement’s policies principally sought to dismantle some of the inequalities generated by thirty years of aggressive neoliberalism in the UK. For example, the party (The Labour Party, 2019) wanted to marginally increase taxes for the top income brackets, increase corporation tax, and close tax loopholes for multinationals. They wanted to increase social spending across the board, renationalise several public services, and create a ‘Green Industrial Revolution’ to combat the climate catastrophe through investing in thousands of ‘green’ jobs. They included significantly more funding for various social services, including education and the National Health Service, as well as attention grabbing policies like the introduction of free broadband across the country. For Pike and Diamond (2021), Corbynite policies ‘broke the mould’ both in terms of New Labour’s neoliberalism, and in terms of the previous leader

Ed Miliband's eventual acceptance of a watered-down form of austerity politics, and his problematic stance on immigration.

To look at one example in more detail, one of the key components of the party's 2019 manifesto was for a 'Green Industrial Revolution' (The Labour Party, 2019). In general, the hegemonic discourse on climate has, in a way consistent with neoliberalism, sought to position individual choices (around say, recycling, or driving less) as the key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (see, for example, Oreskes and Supran (2021)).<sup>35</sup> Instead, the Labour manifesto promised to lead the world's response to the climate catastrophe "with a plan to drive up living standards by transforming our economy into one low in carbon, rich in good jobs, radically fairer and more democratic" (The Labour Party, 2019, p. 11). The manifesto also suggested that 'social justice' would be prioritised, and that the party would "make sure that the costs of the green transition fall fairly and are mostly borne by the wealthy and those most responsible for the problem" (The Labour Party, 2019, p. 12). This response to the climate crisis — as one that needed to be tackled through substantive changes to our economic models and in a way that sought to right historic climate injustices — was thus a departure from the positions advanced by Labour leaders from Blair onwards.

At its broadest Corbynism can be understood to rely principally on a Marxist analysis, as per its wider democratic socialist framing, but to also have brought in perspectives from feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and other emancipatory political movements. As an example of a feminist policy focused

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<sup>35</sup> This is a framing in part enabled by the powerful hold the fossil fuel and oil industries have in relation to media outlets (Cahill, 2017).

on gender equality, the party promised to correct issues caused by earlier changes to pension plans (particularly the retirement age for women) that were highlighted by the campaign group, Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) (The Labour Party, 2019). It is of note, however, that the movement also became a particularly fraught space for debate around three key feminist issues: sex work, race, and trans rights (Dean and Maignashca, 2021). More broadly, the party's policy agenda was partly shaped by the influence of the grassroots<sup>36</sup> left. Graeber (2020) suggested many of the policies were further left than perhaps even the leadership may have been inclined to go, because they realised that they needed to mobilise the grassroots in order to create a political bloc. But, the struggle of aligning demands made by emancipatory movements within the confines of the British political system points to one of the key challenges within the movement's would-be hegemonic bloc.

### *1.3.2 A would-be hegemonic bloc*

As per the second understanding of the term hegemony, namely the assembling of a would-be hegemonic bloc (Grossberg, 2019), the alliance that Corbynism built was significant in a UK context, but ultimately failed to engage a wide coalition. Bassett and Gilbert express surprise that other politicians did not grasp the possibility to take up a similar mantle to Corbyn and also become a 'post-austerity leader', but they note that this can be explained by an "uncertainty about exactly who Labour's political coalition now was or should be, after decades of dramatic social change" (2021, p. 172). This is partly due to the

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<sup>36</sup> For the avoidance of doubt, at a basic level grassroots generally "refers to people who are poor and discriminated in social, economic, and political respects" (Mehrotra, 1997, p. 19).

political influences at play within Corbynism. My comrade Andrew sent a WhatsApp message that partly clarifies some of the key tendencies:

"... many of the individuals involved in the current institutions (if we can call them that) of the 'New New Left', TWT and Novara being key examples, were very close and connected to David Graeber and the turn to 'folk' politics, with things like Occupy, and also something like UK Uncut which was a more 'creative' way of enacting political action, creating a spectacle. Mark Fisher, Jeremy Gilbert and all the acid communism stuff is also all a big influence. These things combined with the spectacle of street mobilisation and occupations of the student movement, which then found that wave of energy enthused by the Corbyn moment, where the Labour Party became the cultural and structural frame and support for it all." (Jefferey, 2021)

To briefly clarify some of these influences, David Graeber was a prominent academic and anarchist activist (Amster, 2009). This reflect the salience of anarchism for the Corbyn movement, a position that was given credibility through the support lent to the movement by the US anarchist Noam Chomsky in 2017 (Asthana, 2017). Folk politics is a term that comes from the book *Inventing the Future*, by Srnicek and Williams (2015). They define it as “a collective and historically constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power”, often premised on lessons learnt in earlier generations, particularly from “state communism, exclusionary trade unions, and the collapse of social democratic parties” (2015, p. 10). UK Uncut’s creative protests most famously involved occupying a Vodafone store on Oxford Street, in London (UK Uncut, 2014). This hints at the creativity of the Corbyn movement. Fisher and Gilbert are two prominent left-wing academics,

who played a significant role in the movement's ethos and several of their works are mentioned at various points in this thesis. Finally, the student movement in 2010 was a reaction to the decision by the Conservative government to allow universities to increase student fees. At its height, 50,000 students marched through central London (Hollands and Rheingans, 2013). As Andrew notes, many of the leaders of this mobilisation became key to the Corbyn movement. See, for example, Smoke (2020) for a discussion of this.

Fundamentally, this specific set of influences were reflected in the core groups to make up the Corbyn coalition, which by and large was not driven by working-class people. Instead, it was those with histories of political engagement in either the Labour Party, or in the activist histories Jefferey (2021) describes. Perhaps the simplest summary for the discussion here is that it was made up of "the professionalized millennial precariat" (Forrester, 2021), or "the metropolitan left", namely the "London-based liberal intelligentsia... [and] large numbers of low-paid workers in cities such as London, Leeds and Manchester, especially in the public sector" (Gilbert, 2016). The other big group were people living in "smaller university towns as well as certain "traditional" working class populations in former industrial and mining areas where socialism was traditionally popular" (Gilbert, 2016). The identification of these two groups is generally supported by Waugh's analysis, who argues that the movement had a high level of participation from educated, younger people, alongside what he describes as "pre-Blair Labour Party activists", as well as union activists from the public sector (2018, p. 23).

However, there were several issues with this alliance. In the first instance, as

noted, the most significant omission was components of the working-class (Waugh, 2018), outside of the groups Gilbert identifies. This was a problem for a party whose political coalition had traditionally been built on “the plausible idea that blue collar workers and the progressive minded sections of the middle class could cooperate on the same broad political project” (Hayhurst, 2020, p. 142). Further, the combination of the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary left was arguably always going to be a fragile alliance. Bhattacharyya has written that “[t]here is a gap between the energetic and varied attempts to build Jerusalem here on earth and the often much more bad-tempered attempts to think about the future of the Labour Party. As so many others have said, the Corbyn moment brought these two largely separate projects together, briefly” (2020a, p. 42). Bhattacharyya (2020a) goes on to say that this ‘fractious’ project was possibly always impossible. Internal Labour Party dynamics are a component of why this was the case.

The Labour Party has always been torn in (at least) two directions. As Hannah describes, one on side there is a ‘transformative’ agenda which refers to broadly socialist measures that look to “challenge the existing power relations in society” (2018, p. xiv). On the other side is what he calls the ‘integrative’ tendency, which is “typified by those who want to weld the Labour Party to already existing state and social structures for the purposes of incorporating the interests of the labour movement into the establishment” (2018, p. xiv). This binary distinction simplifies a more complex picture, but it points to the key tension at play: throughout its history, the Labour Party has operated as a political home for a variety of positions that sit across the left political spectrum. This spectrum covers a significant range of views. As is consistent with a

critique of negative freedom, one of the most profound criticisms made by those on the left of the party is the way that the right of the party often seeks to limit what we believe to be possible (Blakeley, 2020). Despite the recurrent idea that the party is a 'broad church', in practice, as Blackburn (2018) describes it, there is no widespread commitment to pluralism within the party, and instead the various tendencies are "compelled to coexist uneasily by the pressures of realpolitik and the demands of the British electoral system." On the electoral system, the challenge is predominately driven by the fact that the UK has a 'first past the post' (FPP) system, which makes smaller parties less likely to ever succeed (Bogdanor, 1997).

In response to these dynamics, Corbynism drew on parts of autonomous Marxist thinking and praxis. The autonomous movement emerged in Italy out of the workerist movement, and principally via the *Autonomia* and *Operaismo* movements in the 1960s (as will be discussed in chapter two, the research activities within these movements were precursors to militant research).

Graeber and Shukaitis note that autonomous thinking puts class struggle at the forefront, in opposition to the more 'traditional' Marxists who "write history as if the real driving force in almost anything — imperialism, the factory system, the rise of feminism — was the working out of contradictions within capital itself" (2007, pp. 26–27). Fundamentally, this represents an orientation that looks not only to workers but to the working class as the key locus of change (Mandarini, 2020). Perhaps the foundational premise of autonomous Marxism can be found in Tronti's 1964 publication, *Lenin in England* (1964). The core position is that "rather than focus on where capital is weakest, one must turn to where the working class is strongest" (Mandarini, 2020, p. 547). Within Corbynism, this is

reflected precisely in where that coalition was built. As noted, this was a combination of precarious, politicised millennials, and those who lived in places with more politically radical histories.

There are of course some key differences between these two contexts that need clarifying. In the first instance, contemporary British workers do not face the same conditions as Italian workers in 1960s. In the years leading up to Corbynism and throughout the Corbyn and post-Corbyn period, British workers were far more fragmented (in terms of identities and working conditions) and more spatially dispersed. This is why the Labour Party became a sensible site to draw together the various struggles (Wheeler, 2019b). Writing from an autonomous perspective, Wheeler writes about how the party became the logical space to pull in “the multiple and different forms of class struggle into a force capable of combating multiple crises; a means to unite different forms of political autonomy into a coherent revolutionary voice, finding a common language for our antagonisms, despite the stratified (gendered/racialised and specialised differences) experiences of our class” (Wheeler, 2019a). And, with Corbynism, one of the key aspects of how this agenda operated with such a diverse set of interests at play was via a specific political strategy.

The ‘in and against’ strategy operates transversally and was a key strategic component of Corbynism. The phrase ‘in and against’ was coined by the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, a working group of the Conference of Socialist Economists in the UK. They published a book titled *In and Against the State: Discussion Notes for Socialists* in 1979. The authors were negotiating the failure of the Marxist-Leninist strategy of gaining state power, which was

demonstrably proving insufficient for overcoming capitalism (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group and Wheeler-Dresden, 2021). In a pragmatic move, they sought ways to operate within and against the state at the same time. Within Corbynism, as noted, this meant a temporary alignment of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left. Notably, for many from the grassroots left in the UK, seeing the Labour Party as a site of ‘radicality’ was a surprise. But one unifying factor within the ‘in and against’ strategy was the interest in increasing opportunities for political participation.

### *1.3.3 Corbynite participation*

Corbynism was a comprehensive effort to undo hegemony by increasing political participation (and thus democracy<sup>37</sup>) initially within the membership of the party, but with a goal to eventually generate participatory opportunities for all. Corbyn and his de facto deputy, John McDonnell, who at the time was the Shadow Chancellor, "... aimed to set the ball rolling in the direction of the democratization of all aspects of British society" (Graeber, 2020). For Dikerdem and Quick this represented — in theory— “a radical transfer of power and wealth from the elites to the people” (2019). They argued that “[t]his is about far more than fixing electoral democracy<sup>37</sup>, and requires a total rethink of the state, and a democratisation of the way that we make and deliver policy” (2019).

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<sup>37</sup> A more comprehensive discussion of the relationship between participation and democracy is in chapter three.

McDonnell took a particular interest in participatory policymaking. In the leadup to the election, his team organised a series of events across the country, inviting local Labour Party members to discuss issues that mattered to them — a good example is a session run with the Chingford and Woodford Green Labour Party (2019). The aim was to inform policy by understanding concerns and what people would like to see happen. This reflected a wider interest in ‘debate’, as Corbyn described in his 2015 speech after he was elected to be the leader of the party. He said that he wanted to foster a sense of “[r]eal debate, not necessarily message discipline all the time” (Corbyn, 2015a). One of the key spaces where political participation within the party has been greatly increased has been via the socialist pressure group Momentum.

Momentum is widely credited with propelling Corbyn to the leadership of the party, and their role in Corbynism is fundamental, particularly in relation to questions of democracy. As noted in the introduction (in a footnote), Momentum is a membership organisation that was launched not long after Corbyn’s election to be leader of the Labour party. It aimed “to organise support for Corbyn’s policies” by acting both as “a platform inside Labour and an organisation for building social movements outside” (Hannah, 2018, p. 228). Some of the demands made by the group have been to further democratise the Labour Party by more comprehensively engaging members. This built on work started by the previous Labour leader Ed Miliband in the early 2010’s (Pickard, 2018), and included projects like open candidate selection, and the development of policy (Smith, 2015). In elections, the group held left-leaning pressure within the party and membership, but perhaps more crucially, it acted as a more dynamic and responsive mobilising body than the Labour Party was

able to be. One of the key aspects of this was what became known as the 'ground game', or the mobilisation of thousands of activists, who knocked on doors up and down the country to capture data and to speak to voters on behalf of the Labour Party.

Momentum's key contribution has been to develop new programmes and new digital tools which prioritised forms of political participation that emphasised initiative and local self-organisation over top-down party instruction (Forrester, 2021). This stands in stark contrast to previous Labour approaches, when the party leadership were to the political right of the party, as described earlier. For example, one older activist told me that in the Labour campaign led by Blair in 1997, activists were told not to talk about policy on the doorstep, because it was 'Tony's job'. In Corbynism, active participation was encouraged.

However, this interest in participatory policymaking and debate was far from widespread within the party, particularly for those who held the 'integrative' views, and it did not reach huge numbers of the public. The sessions McDonnell organised were no more than pilots (due to the timescales involved), and as a result, their main function was to indicate the type of democratic policy-making that was possible. As Berry noted in the summer leading up to the 2019 general election, "[t]here's a kind of irony if the talk of democratizing the economy — which means participation — is being developed from the top down by quite a small circle of policy wonks and people around shadow chancellor John McDonnell's office" (2019).

Nonetheless, there was ambition to go much further, particularly if the Labour Party won either election. Recalling the discussion of the ‘in and against’ strategy described earlier, Milburn, writing in 2017, noted that “John McDonnell has talked recently about being within and against the State. By this he appears to mean he wants to use the power of the State to undo the State’s own power, facilitating different and more diffuse forms of democratic power” (Milburn, 2017). Or as one of McDonnell’s economics advisors James Meadway noted, McDonnell repeatedly said the phrase, ‘when we go into government, we all go into government’ (Meadway, 2019).<sup>38</sup> And, there is one key example of a space where wider groups of people were being engaged.

Throughout Corbynism, the most profound space in which non-members were encouraged to participate was through the community organising units. A group of community organisers were hired within the party not long after Corbyn’s election. As per their website, they defined community organising as an activity that “means listening to what people in their area are concerned about and helping local people lead a campaign to change it” (The Labour Party, 2022). There is a precedent for this work in the UK, namely the Labour government in the latter half of the 1960s. Harold Wilson’s government introduced numerous formal participatory measures like the Community Development Projects (Gilchrist, 2009). These projects were set up in poor parts of the UK, and involved research and community organising teams working with locals to better understand the structural causes of poverty, and to fight for change (Banks and Carpenter, 2017).

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<sup>38</sup> McDonnell himself wrote an article titled something very similar (McDonnell, 2018).

The community organising units explicitly took sides in local issues and tried to upskill local people to participate, politically. In early 2020, the MP Ian Lavery (2020) wrote an article titled ‘In Defence of Community Organising’. In it, he argued that it was critical to look ‘beyond’ elections, to rebuild trust and to make “real connections” — he goes on to note that “Labour has to show people, not just tell them, that it is on their side”. However, closing the community organising units was one of the first decisions that the new Starmer leadership made when elected in 2020. For the MP Zarah Sultana:

“... the new leadership seems to have opted for focus groups and “authentic values alignment”, as advised by PR firms. What does this signal? Labour members may fear that it’s not just the community organising unit that has been binned, but the hope to radically transform Britain as well.” (Sultana, 2021)

Examples like the community organising units, Momentum, and the wider features of Corbynism described here demonstrate the ambition within the project. Alongside its principal goal to win state power so that it could introduce socialist policies, it also sought to move not only Labour members but the entire country to more engaged and transformative types of political participation — in ways that would undo hegemony — and thus negative freedom.

#### *1.3.4 Corbynite freedom*

At its best, the form of freedom sought within Corbynism was an expansive understanding of freedom that prioritises a sense of equality, including material

equality. Compared to the form of freedom sought within hegemony in the UK today, this puts more focus on the most marginalised, and it reflects the Spinozist sense of having the freedom to act creatively (Gilbert, 2014). This is about our ability to live an expansive life. Spinoza felt that it was critical for us to live *actively*, which he felt was only possible through recognising our interdependence with “other human beings, animals and things...” (Albertsen, 2005, p. 80). The recognition of our interdependence, means, in essence, a sense of freedom in which hierarchies cannot be maintained, and where we need to actively work to ensure that everyone has access to the same resources and support. This is almost always the position of emancipatory political movements. For example, in relation to the civil rights movement in the US, the sense of mutual freedom is how the Combahee River Collective describe the need for our struggles for liberation to align with those most on the margins (The Combahee River Collective, 1983). Or as Fannie Lou Hamer, the civil rights campaigner in the US described it “nobody’s free until everybody’s free” (2010, p. 201).

This is a ‘positive’ version of freedom. Dixon cites Taylor to argue that positive freedom is about having the ability to determine the ‘shape’ of your own life (Taylor, 2017). This is about “freedom of thought, expression and association and ought to be committed to the doctrine that other things being equal individuals have the right to define and to pursue their own wants and satisfactions unhindered by authority or by the tyranny of orthodox opinion” (Dixon, 2010, p. 2). But this goes further. In an article by Clune,<sup>39</sup> he argues that within a socialist sense of freedom, having free time needs to be prioritised over

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<sup>39</sup> The article is a response to Martin Hägglund’s book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, from 2019.

our ability to be consumers. He suggests that “you should instead devote your finite lives to the kind of creative, interpersonal engagement that makes our world a better place” (2020). This could include, of course, the sorts of political participation Corbynism sought but it also relates to one of the key aspects of Corbyn’s political agenda.

Perhaps the strongest example of the interest in positive freedom in terms of Corbyn’s own political views were within the mix of his anti-racist (Maiguashca and Dean, 2020), anti-imperialist (Lewis, 2019) and anti-war (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2016) stances, and his more ‘friendly’ stance towards immigration — it has been argued that Corbyn is the most pro-migrant politician ever to lead the Labour Party (Bolton *et al.*, 2018). Reflecting these interests, the 2019 manifesto explicitly committed to, “[c]onduct an audit of the impact of Britain’s colonial legacy to understand our contribution to the dynamics of violence and insecurity across regions previously under British colonial rule” (The Labour Party, 2019, p. 96). The Labour Party also committed to implementing the recommendations from the Chilcot inquiry; to invest in its diplomatic forces; and to end the approach to security that they described as “bomb first, talk later” (2019, p. 95). These and other positions gained support amongst grassroots organisers. In Dean and Maiguashca’s empirical work, “interviewees involved in anti-racist politics were almost unanimous in their cautious optimism towards Corbynism’s amenability to various forms of anti-racist politics” (2020, p. 58).

However, these positions and policies were (once again) far from radical. There were still substantial areas in which Labour policies fell short — to take but one example, while the 2017 manifesto promised to halt indefinite stays in

immigration detention centres, it did not promise to shut down those same centres (Dale, 2017). These failings hints at more substantive issues in how freedom was framed and in some instances these policies reinforced negative freedom. For example, Andrews (2021) writes about the way that UK's version of the US's Green New Deal (which, as noted earlier, the party called the Green Industrial Revolution) was fundamentally a project that did not attempt to address global (and racial) inequality. He writes: "[i]n keeping with colonial logic, 'equality for all' really means improving the lives of those in the West, which remains the central concern in the latest version of Western empire" (2021, p. 167). But even despite their lack of radicality and their highly problematic implications for others globally, it was still this set of beliefs that posed one of the biggest challenges to hegemony in the UK.

These views, and the support they held amongst members, chipped away at the illusion of (negative) freedom, often built along racial lines, that the first half of this chapter described in some detail. And a significant amount of 'connecting' emerged within hegemony in response. In the media, this included the framing of those policies as a threat to national security (Lewis, 2019) and more broadly a relentless marginalisation of Corbyn himself, as well as the movement as a whole. On the latter, Corbynism was repeatedly described in the media as "the resuscitation of a 'looney left'", including via "the deployment of familiar signifiers of Cold War-era communism, such as the beret or the hammer and sickle" (Maignashca and Dean, 2020, p. 53). In relation to Corbyn himself, writing in 2016, a group of academics from the London School of Economics argued that "[o]n the basis of an extensive content analysis of a representative sample of the coverage of Jeremy Corbyn in eight British newspapers, we

argue and demonstrate that the watchdog has become an attackdog” (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). The movement’s desire to generate positive freedom inherently threatened hegemony, thus prompting a significant reaction.

The power that comes from the promise of positive freedom can be understood in part via the first figure of political action within this thesis: the Acid Corbynist. This is a figure around whom those active in the Corbyn and post-Corbyn era sometimes find affinity with. As Gilbert (2017a) has described it, Acid Corbynism is a political expression that can be understood as “an invitation to think about what a radically democratic politics might mean in the 21st century. It’s a suggestion that we question what kind of culture, and ultimately what kind of people, we want to produce”. Writing about the notion of ‘Acid Communism’ Fisher developed, and which preceded Acid Corbynism, Gilbert (2017b) writes about how Fisher “liked the idea of ‘Acid’ as an adjective, describing an attitude of improvisational creativity and belief in the possibility of seeing the world differently, in order to improve it, deliberately ‘expanding’ consciousness through resolutely materialist means”.

This is where Corbynism’s promise of democratisation through participation becomes particularly important. While far from the first movement to demand increased political participation, its prominence within our current hegemonic British context was significant — in part because it asked political participants not to focus on a neoliberal sense of growth oriented towards the market, but one that looked (as will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters) to the collective in place of the individual, to a radical version of pedagogy, and to the strategies we might need to generate collective emancipation. Further, and

in contrast to the way that liberalism and neoliberalism's affective registers work, one of the key characteristics of Corbynism was the emphasis on generating a sense of hope (Airas, 2019), a core component of the next chapter.

#### **1.4 Challenging hegemony**

This chapter generated a form of conjunctural analysis. It began by looking at how conjunctural analysis assesses the forces at play in a given period in time, with a specific interest in how, where and when a particular force is able to stabilise antagonisms and contradictions. The analysis happens by identifying hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tendencies and exploring how they play out through culture using the dual understanding of articulation described earlier via Hall (2017), and through a continual emphasis on identifying sites of contestation. With that wider framing in mind, I looked at the wider set of political and social forces that created the hegemonic conditions in which Corbynism emerged. I discussed Corbyn's characterisation as a socialist social movement, the specific would-be hegemonic bloc to make up the coalition, the way that political participation was understood, and the type of 'positive' freedom within the movement. The next chapter looks more specifically at my involvement within Corbynism and post-Corbynism, and particularly the use of a militant research methodology.

## Chapter two: A militant research assemblage

This chapter sets out how I generated a militant research assemblage in order to negotiate the conjuncture just described. I begin with a discussion of some of the key aspects of the immanent philosophical tradition that have enabled insights into the militant research I have done. This opens with a discussion of Spinoza's influence, before moving to the Deleuzoguattarian interest in assemblages, machines, transversality, and processes of de- and re-territorialisation. I then describe one component of this research assemblage, namely the experience of canvassing for the Labour Party in the General Election in 2019. This was a critical machine within the wider assemblage because it led to the adoption of the overall methodology.

I then explore militant research in more detail, starting with a discussion of the way that some research practices developed within Western universities have been built on colonial logics of extraction, 'venturing' (Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017), and capture (McKittrick, 2021). I argue that militant research takes forward the immanent ethos and stands in (partial) opposition to the forms of research that position the researcher as a "meaning-giving subject" (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). It does this by prioritising the political and by being militant. This chapter then establishes how the form of militant research I adopted needs to be understood as operating transversally, prefiguratively, bodily, (eventually) as a form of convocation (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2015), and finally as a form of political strategy in which the 'radical diplomat' (Graziano, Graham and Kelly, 2008) is present.

## 2.1 Immanent philosophy

Much of this thesis proceeds from ideas linked to the immanent philosophical tradition. The first of the immanent philosophers is Spinoza, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher. His approach set him at odds to his contemporary Descartes. In contrast to what became known as Cartesian philosophy (discussed briefly in the previous chapter), Spinoza saw the mind and the body as connected (Gilbert, 2014). While Spinoza's work can be read in many ways, what is clear is that "Spinoza's conceptions of power — which is always defined by the relation between a body and other bodies (Spinoza 2000) — and freedom — which is never simply the freedom to dispose of property, but always the freedom to act in the world creatively — were radically different from those that would go on to inform the liberal tradition" (Gilbert, 2014, p. 75). His work is profoundly rooted in an immanent world view. As Lambert describes his thought, it is all about "what is here" (Lambert, 2013, p. 7). Lambert argues that Spinoza teaches us about a certain form of joy — this tells us that "we might not be as free as we think we are, but we are carried by forces that link the whole material world together" (Lambert, 2013, p. 7). And to understand the negotiations of power within 'what is here', his understanding of joy is critical.

Spinoza's version of joy can be read as an affective register that is specifically about being able to *increase* the power to act, particularly when bodies interact (Lambert, 2010). For bergman and Montgomery, a Spinozan sense of joy is something that is "transformative, dangerous, painful and powerful but also somewhat elusive" (2017, p. 65). Particularly throughout Corbynism, one of the

key ways in which this sense of joy has been described is as ‘collective joy’.<sup>40</sup> To reference a comrade Sam’s description, this is where “we feel an elation, connection to others and to a sense of something greater” (Swann, 2018). It refers to the moments where collective power increases through affect — where there is a “creative and productive interaction between singularities” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 201).

In part due to his theorisation of affect, including joy, Spinoza’s work experienced something of a resurgence in the 1970’s when a growing number of theorists saw the way that his work could revitalise a Marxist sense of the relationship between organising and theory (Jose and Juniper, 2008). This was essentially “a materialist critique of philosophical idealism” (Jose and Juniper, 2008, p. 3), or a way of bringing theory into conversation with real world conditions in a more substantive way. This immanent ethos is core to this thesis and acts as a warning signal against theoretical work that is disengaged from material realities. Continuing this tradition, perhaps the most influential immanent philosophers in a more contemporary setting are Deleuze and Guattari.

Perspectives from Deleuze and Guattari and sometimes both (the latter is occasionally synthesised to a ‘Deleuzoguattarian’ framework, which I have also adopted here at times) are a critical component of the intellectual legacies I utilise. As with Spinoza, immanence also characterises their work — for example, Deleuze’s work has been considered the ultimate example of immanent philosophy in contemporary French philosophy (Smith, 2007). Their

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<sup>40</sup> If we work from Spinoza’s definition of joy, in this sense the addition of ‘collective’ is unnecessary.

work has individually and collectively had a profound influence across a range of disciplines from their original field of philosophy (Deleuze) and psychoanalysis (Guattari). They are interested in the relationship between creation and the new and in this there is a clear lineage with Spinoza. For example, Hallward argues that for Deleuze, “being is creativity” (2006, p. 1).

While there are numerous interpretations of their work, as it pertains to this thesis their approach sits somewhere between a line in Guattari’s book, *The Three Ecologies*, where he writes that the task at hand is that “[i]ndividuals must become both more united and increasingly different” (2014, p. 69), and Deleuze’s insistence on the fact that the imaginary and the real always coexist (Biehl and Locke, 2010). The negotiation of difference becomes an increasingly important theme as the analysis within this thesis develops, and as will be discussed, I am interested in those framings that see difference as productive.<sup>41</sup> On the latter, Guattari stressed that in relation to the subjective, these processes should resemble the working practices of an artist more than that of psychiatrists — he notes, for example that the best ‘cartographies of the psyche’ come from novelists (2014, p. 37). This touches on the centrality of affect in their work.

Affect has become a critical mode of analysis in contemporary academic work. In Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding it is, as Massumi notes, “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to

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<sup>41</sup> This is most comprehensively developed in chapter seven, when the various arguments related to this project of ‘difference and unity’ are brought together.

act” (1987, p. N).<sup>42</sup> More contemporaneously and to put it in perhaps more straightforward language, as Fedchun (2022) describes it, affect can be understood to be about emotions and feelings, but it is both more and less than these things. Further, affect is everywhere and “it is an almost unnameable sense of bodily or visceral impact that arises without direct physical contact” (Fedchun, 2022, p. 25). As subsequent discussions will tease out, it is key to understanding how political participation operates.

Deleuze and Guattari’s work is fundamentally about application, particularly in terms of identifying post-capitalist possibilities. But it goes further than this. Their collaboration was informed by their work outside of academia and publishing. This was particularly relevant in relation to their interest in more experimental organising, where “the concepts produced were immanent to their construction and participation in ‘left assemblages’” (Chatterton, Pusey and Russell, 2011, p. 579). This is one of the most salient aspects of Deleuze and Guattari’s work: it is critical to continue to use their work in a way that aligns with its radical origins. Chatterton, Pusey and Russell make a case for the maintenance of their original emphasis on radical application — the identification of post-capitalist possibilities. We need to, as they write, use the tools Deleuze and Guattari offer and “carry on using them indignantly, dangerously and with the original heretical intent in a way that reflects their original radical spirit of those who developed them” (2011, p. 582).

This wholeheartedly aligns with the positions taken here. I am interested, as discussed particularly in chapter seven, in where the wins are, and in where

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<sup>42</sup> To clarify – this means that affect in general either increase or decreases the capacity to act, while Spinoza’s sense of joy is about increasing the capacity to act.

both Corbynism's political participation and this militant research (as a constituent component of that wider milieu) have served some wider, emancipatory purpose. In fact, shortly before his death, Guattari argued for exactly the type of engagement with the real that militant research speaks to. He wrote that "social experimentation and action-research ought to be imbricated much more frequently with the objective analysis of social facts. In fact, in many domains, the research process is called on permanently to modify, to reconstruct, its object" (2015b, p. 132). And, one of the ways in which this 'modification' can occur is through the construction of research assemblages, an attention to machines, and the adoption of a transversal mode of thinking and working.

## **2.2 (Research) assemblage, machines, transversality**

Assemblages, machines, and transversality are related and are some of the key conceptual tools used throughout this thesis. To begin with assemblages, they are a tool to view almost any phenomenon in a non-linear and relational way — as multiplicity, rather than unity (Grossberg, 2014). Deleuze and Guattari give us some relatively clear instructions for how this should operate. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they say:

"This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out

continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.” (1987, p. 161)

In Deleuze and Guattari’s work, which was originally in French, the word assemblage wasn’t used. It was *agencement*, which Puar describes as being about “design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations” (Puar, 2005). In the ‘design’ of the assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that there are two axes. One should be based on the role the different components play, from the material to the expressive, and one relates to the stabilisation/destabilisation or territorialisation/deterritorialisation of assemblages. The former “acts to sharpen borders, homogenise components”, while the latter “acts to free up fixed relations” (Abrahams and Hiller, 2014, p. 17).

In terms of how these concepts intersect with conjunctural analysis, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation do not map neatly onto notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. As discussed more in the next chapter, it is feasible to have hegemonic deterritorialising trajectories, or conversely, to have counter-hegemonic reterritorialising forces. What is however key is to understand how power is being challenged. As Chatterton, Pusey and Russell note, “[l]ike all knowledge, if assemblage theory or political economy approaches fail to empower us from where we currently stand, they run the risk of reproducing relations of power/knowledge that keep us imprisoned in the present state of things” (2011, p. 578). Relatedly, assemblages are never static. They work as “contingent and shifting interrelations among “segments”—institutions, powers, practices, desires—that constantly, simultaneously construct, entrench, and disaggregate their own constraints and oppressions”

(Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 323). This endless changeability is critiqued for being too nebulous (Wachsmuth, Madden and Brenner, 2011), and in partial response to this, the approach taken here uses Fox and Alldred's discussion of a specific way of operationalising assemblage theory. This is the idea of a research assemblage, discussed briefly in the introduction.

A research assemblage takes a heightened interest in the materiality of research (Alldred and Fox, 2014). The various components of research (from the theoretical material to the researcher, to the desk at which one writes) are all part of the research assemblage. More crucially, they are understood relationally, meaning that the individual components are less important than the relations between them, and immanently, meaning that they operate on the same plane of existence (Alldred and Fox, 2014). There are specific ways to analyse a research assemblage, and Fox and Alldred make several suggestions. They argue that the analysis should incorporate both human and non-human elements, and that it should focus on processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Second, in terms of 'reporting' the research, they say that this should be: "reflexive, recursive and rhizomic, offering de-territorialisations and lines of flight to event assemblages and affects, and drawing research audiences into the research-assemblage, to contribute their own affects and capacities to its affective economy and micropolitics" (2014, p. 410). This is exactly the kind of analysis I am trying to build: something that circles back, that is tentative and perhaps even occasionally contradictory, and that works with the 'messiness' of the world as it stands rather than trying to standardise or control it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This is also why there are so many references to other discussions within this thesis – e.g., 'as per the discussion in chapter ...'

One of the ways in which assemblages change is through the role that machines play. Machines, for Deleuze and Guattari, are an assemblage of different parts, which in their unity *work* and *produce* (Goodchild, 1996). Essentially assemblages' assemblage, machines produce. Machines can be both oppressive or they can contest oppression (Ryder, 2018), and there are all types of machines:

“There are material machines and immaterial machines, technical machines and imaginary machines, desiring machines and abstract machines, machines inside machines inside still other machines, nested like fractals.” (Bogard, 2009, p. 17)

For Deleuze and Guattari, machines do not simply replace the human with the machine. The relationship is instead characterised by the ‘conjoining’ of the two in which the exchange, the movement, is prioritised over what they call the substitution (Raunig, 1995). Overall, however, Guattari’s (2014) fundamental argument is that machines could provide the solution to our failures of imagination.

Machines are closely connected to desire, and this is critical for understanding how the various threads within their work cohere. I understand the experiences of my comrades and I within Corbynism as an assemblage, made up of multiple desiring machines within that wider assemblage. The desire Deleuze and Guattari talk about is thus critical — each machine under discussion in this thesis reflects a desire to produce something. Fundamentally, they saw desire to work in a productive register (Deleuze *et al.*, 2012), and they saw it as ‘real’. As Deleuze writes: “If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is

productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality” (2012, p. 26). This in and of itself is ‘complete’ — it does not lack, and both desire and desire’s object work as connected machines (Deleuze *et al.*, 2012). And as many have noted, desire is critical for overcoming the interrelated forms of oppression we face. As Clune has written:

“The value of things in our capitalist society depends partially on what people want. We don’t need to descend into technical economic or psychological questions about the dynamics of desire to grasp this basic point. We need simply to recognize that part of the movement from capitalism to socialism will involve a transformation of desire.” (2020)

What is critical here is that I am (partially) *creating* these machinic, desiring becomings within the wider assemblage in which those machines operate. This PhD is thus partially about what I and my comrades desire, expressed through the process of assemblage. As Abrahams has written, “[a]ssemblage is concerned with assembling — processes of assembly; bringing heterogeneous elements into connection with others, separating elements and reconnecting them elsewhere and so on” (2014, p. 14). For example, Page (2019) has used assemblage theory to analyse the experience of canvassing in the 2015 election in the UK. In his research, the focus was on the way that the ‘party’ operated — thus a different site of focus, a different process of assembling. Instead here for the Acid Corbynist, “we must start from those desires, produced within contemporary society but whose fulfilment points far beyond the limits of a capitalist world” (Milburn, 2017).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Milburn is discussing this in relation to Acid Communism, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, but this does not change the ethos.

Assemblages are particularly useful for understanding political participation. Within the multiplicity of forces that make up any participatory encounter there are opportunities for emancipatory moments within even the most nightmare forms of participation, and vice versa. Pugh and Grove (2017) suggest that assemblages are a particularly useful framework for understanding these conflicting agendas within participatory practice. They call it participation's 'push' and 'pull' components. Consistent with the form of analysis within conjunctural analysis, they write that "we have found assemblage a useful way to think through both the indeterminate potentiality for participatory research to challenge existing power relations but also the determinate possibility for participation to reinforce and consolidate the status quo" (2017, p. 1137). In my assembling of some of the various forces within this militant research, using an assemblage framework helps to capture the 'messiness' within both the Corbyn movement within the wider sphere, and the ultimate lack of evidence for neat ideological frameworks. This is, at heart, a transversal orientation.

The term transversality initially comes from mathematics but in the immanent philosophical tradition drawn on here, it was originally a new way of thinking through individual and group subjectivities in a therapeutic setting. In this framing, the clinician and the patient's roles become interchangeable, and interactions cross both hierarchal and horizontal structures (Guattari, 2015a). This idea developed in Guattari's work while he was working at *La Borde*, a psychiatric clinic, and once Guattari met Deleuze, the concept increasingly took on a politicised character. In relation to Guattari's work with patients this is because, "political charge lies in transversality's potential to create its own

terms and affirm the singularity of everyone in the group” (Palmer and Panayotov, 2016).

As a concept, transversality has become widely used, likely because it is foundational to much of Deleuze and Guattari’s work; because it is one of their more graspable concepts; and because it can be applied to a wide variety of practices. Thus, as noted in the introduction, transversality today is an approach that segues across theory and practice, operating at the intersection of different forms of activity (Kelly, 2005). It is also the “unconscious source of action in the group... carrying the group’s desire” (Guattari, 2015a, p. 118). The role of the unconscious within transversality is salient.

The person who brought the unconscious to widespread attention was Freud, whose work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century established the highly influential field of psychoanalysis. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in literature and elsewhere, there was an increasing interest in the ‘split self’ — this refers, in essence to the interplay of rational and irrational (Mansfield *et al.*, 2020). The unconscious specifically refers to that which hovers in and around our everyday thoughts, namely “the existence of ideas on the border of consciousness” (Mansfield *et al.*, 2020, p. 27). It therefore follows that to participate as a subject with an unconscious is to be open to the less rational components of the participatory experience, and to understand that our behaviour is not fully shaped by objective decisions. The unconscious is thus one of the key components of this research assemblage of Corbynite political participation, particularly in terms of its relationship to desire. One specific machine within this

research helps to clarify how some of these theoretical threads have come together.

### 2.3 Canvassing as gateway drug

When I started this research, I thought I wanted to run participatory art workshops for groups of friends. I thought I was going to write my PhD about the link between that form of practice and populist politics. At my first ‘annual review’, one of the university’s procedures for checking our research is progressing as is deemed appropriate, my reviewers wondered if I should be taking those workshops to different place, particularly to marginalised communities. But as I wrote in my notes at the time, ‘This idea has been troubling me — it was raised in my annual review — that I should think about when I could take the workshops ‘on the road’...’. It was clear that I was grappling with discomfort arising from the power relations at play, although I knew I wanted to work with others in this research.<sup>45</sup> Not long after that annual review, and accompanied by much reading and some writing, as well as attending the 2019 TWT festival in Brighton, it was my experiences of canvassing in the 2019 General Election that acted as a flashpoint in my understanding of what political participation *could* feel like. It was an insight into a different form of political participation that felt like it was challenging power.

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<sup>45</sup> I did not want to do that in a way that the aesthetic would ultimately ‘trump’ the political. Participatory art is heavily theorised and there are many ways to interpret its relationship to the political – but I adhere to the belief that as a result of developments in the Enlightenment, as it is understood today it is ultimately driven by aesthetic rather than political reasons (Matarasso, 2019) – and thus less useful as an overarching focus for investigations within this thesis.

In the six weeks leading up to polling day, I participated in several aspects of the 'ground game'. I canvassed in 'marginals'<sup>46</sup> across London (Pimlico, North Kensington, Battersea, Harrow East), as well as in Milton Keynes and in Watford. Decisions about where to canvas were predominately made using a website developed by Momentum called mycampaignmap.com, which used algorithms to calculate which constituencies most needed support. I spent an evening phone-banking in Hackney and a week in Llandudno in north Wales, with the Aberconwy Labour office. I attended an informal training workshop run by comrades at TWT, read the materials that Momentum created, and participated in several online phone calls. I twice spoke to journalists, made new personal and professional contacts, bought unofficial Labour merchandise, and tried out my 'persuasive conversations' training with colleagues, friends, and strangers. Much of what was taking place within these various activities was consciousness-raising, and a surprising amount of this took place through the extensive, and often very funny, memes that were shared throughout the campaign,<sup>47</sup> some of which are included in the appendix.

I spent polling day in North Dudley. This was a long day, as two friends and I travelled up the previous evening and spent a few hours sleeping in a cold hotel. We were at the campaign office just after five am to go out leafletting. On the day of the election, many of the people I was in touch with became excited by what seemed to be a high voter turnout. There was hope that the advance work through the 'register to vote' campaigns and the canvassing, combined

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<sup>46</sup> For a constituency to be considered a 'marginal', it meant that the Labour Party felt that the gap between the existing candidate and the Labour one was tighter – and thus more winnable for Labour.

<sup>47</sup> This is still relatively understudied — see, for example, Dean's argument for political science to take digital content more seriously, including memes (J Dean, 2019b).

with the photos of large numbers of young people at the polls (which was trending on Twitter as '#youthquake') and the 'Get Out The Vote' operations, might have worked. As it transpired, turnout across the country was down two percentage points on the previous year (67%, down from 69% in 2017) but up slightly from the previous four elections throughout the 2000's (House of Commons Library, 2019). And as noted, the Labour Party lost the election rather dramatically.

Part of the motivation for canvassing came from the hopeful affective register that the Corbyn campaign generated. On a personal level that hope was profound and motivating, rendering the eventual defeat far more crushing. This was a widely felt experience: registers of hope and optimism characterised the campaign (Airas, 2019). This hope was made more significant by the form of participation that canvassing was, which was an experiment in collective solidarity, and for many a chance to actually 'do' something (Seaton, 2020). Seaton has written about the way that canvassing was a particular 'awakening' that unlocked something that could not be put back (Seaton, 2020). This was true for me and for many of those I was in touch with — after the election, there was a brief period of rest and reflection, and then activity did slowly pick up again. This continuation of activity for the newly politicised is particularly pertinent in terms of understanding the relationship between Corbynism and post-Corbynism. Writing in 2017 in the midst of Corbynism, Milburn (2017) suggested that it was important that Acid Corbynism worked as a gateway drug, for risk of disappearing.

For example, one of the first things I did after the election was to enrol in a

community organising course in early 2020<sup>48</sup> and this led to many of the activities described in the introduction. Following a wise suggestion by one of my supervisors to investigate militant research, I realised that these activities I was engaging with could be understood as and framed within a militant research methodology. Fundamentally, unlike the participatory art workshops I wanted to organise, these activities offered a way to be part of a bigger participatory experiment, and I wanted to use the tools and time that I had at my disposal, via the structure of doing a PhD, to contribute to what was becoming the post-Corbyn era. This aligns with the sometimes transversal nature of participation where “... strange behaviour in one place (the participatory arena) can lead to a questioning about what constitutes normal relations in other” (Kesby, 2007, p. 2820).

There was also of course a particular opportunity for this militant research to happen when it did. I was inspired by the idea that we might ‘all go into government’ and to a certain extent, I wanted to think about what I could offer. For Gilbert, one thing Corbynism taught us is that we need to “build our coalition in all directions — to the left, to the right, into the sphere of mainstream media and deeper into the lives of our communities — if we are to have any chance of overcoming the obstacles we face” (2020, p. 139). And often in social movement work, one of the core constituency groups is those in and around academic institutions. Holmes has argued that every social movement needs to balance “its aesthetics, its grammar, its science and its legalisms” — and this requires “artists, technicians, intellectuals, universities” (2009, p. 75). This same passage goes onto to note that there is an issue because all those different

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<sup>48</sup> This was made possible through my university’s training budget that came as part of my scholarship funding.

groups of experts operate as fortresses, and they need to defend themselves (Holmes, 2009). Militant research is one way by which we can break down some of these fortresses, to build the coalition 'in all directions'.

## **2.4 Militant research**

Militant research acknowledges that our institutional constraints are usually not forthcoming for explicitly political work, but it attempts to work collaboratively anyway, and to test the boundaries of what is possible. As described in the introduction, and drawing on the work of several others, for me the aim of militant research is to work transversally to increase collective power in a way that pushes our emancipatory movements forward. Consistent with the description of Deleuze and Guattari's work earlier, this has almost always manifest through researchers working immanently with different political groups. But the methodology has a long history, and perhaps the most important aspect of it is its epistemological position.

### *2.4.1 Negotiating extractive research*

In the first instance, one of the critical aspects of militant research is that it tries to negotiate Western academic structures and epistemologies that have often been built on extractive, positivist research approaches and methods, which themselves have roots in the Enlightenment. The feminist researchers Gunaratnam and Hamilton argue that within research there is often a sense that the researcher must foray into new worlds and note that the word method "at its European root is all about terrain, emplacement and venturing forth" (2017, p.

115). This has implications for how researchers view their roles — as having a right to study others, to make claims about their ways of life, and to operate as “meaning-giving subjects” (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). However, it is not only about venture and meaning-giving, but also capture and domination. For McKittrick, many dominant forms of knowledge and knowledge production express a “desire to capture, something or someone” (2021, p. 4).

In partial response to this are various critiques of liberal knowledge production, including from a decolonial perspective. As Grosfoguel (2013) writes, the Cartesian model becomes unravelled if we start to understand all knowledge as contextual, and we see knowledge as something that is produced dialogically. This relates to one of the premises of decolonisation, that “[e]pistemic changes do not depend on mere scientific discoveries (an idea that is at the very basis of the thinking of modernity) but on recognition of the diversity of truths (instead of the universal truth), their relationality and temporal and local contextuality” (Minoia, 2018). And this and other critiques of liberal knowledge production are represented in the various forms of more engaged research that sit alongside militant research. In these, the researcher’s role and the power they hold are core areas of consideration, alongside a reassessment of where the priority lies in terms of the relationship between research and political work.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is perhaps the most comprehensive and widely used methodology within the various more engaged and politicised approaches to research. This emerged most concretely in Colombia in the 1970s, in the work of the sociologist Fals-Borda. He defined it as an “experiential methodology [that] implies the acquisition of serious and reliable

knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes — the grassroots — and for their authentic organizations and movement” (1991, p. 3). To use Fals-Borda’s language, this is project aimed at increasing power to organise the grassroots. Militant research takes the (Spinozist) sense of ‘collective joy’ and translates it into a research methodology. And as noted in the introduction, the sense of increasing power also includes resources. Malo del Molina argues that militant research has a “materialist inspiration” (2005). A key feature of militant research is to repurpose the university’s resources for other ends (Bookchin *et al.*, 2013).

#### *2.4.2 Prioritising the political*

One of the aims of at least some historic manifestations of PAR is that political work is prioritised. This aligns with a Spinozist sense of power and of joy, and as per an immanent framing it accepts that we need to attend to what is here but also to seek to change those conditions. It means an attention to goals and processes rather than a set method (Malo del Molina, 2005), and it also explains why the participatory art workshops I was organising at the start of this research were not working. At the time, there was no clear political project, or sense by which they could increase power. As Halvorsen (2015) notes, militant research ultimately prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge.

Perhaps the most significant precursor within this space was the *Operaismo* and *Autonomia* movements, which were part of the autonomous Marxist political tradition touched on in the previous chapter. Militant research has a direct link to

the practice within *Operaismo* known as *conricerca*, or co-research. This was a form of research into the conditions faced by workers in Italy. It was undertaken by protagonists and workers in tandem and served a dual purpose in that it also worked as a politicising force (Carmichael, 2020). Carmichael summarises the intentions of the lead instigator of *conricerca*, Romano Alquati, by writing:

“The purpose of such inquiry was not only to address immediate concerns within the workplace; it also represented instead a form of activism which developed workers’ abilities to understand and challenge the mechanisms of control and alienation within workplaces, and either to promote less alienating and more democratic alternatives, or to extricate themselves entirely from them.” (2020, p. 387)

The ongoing legacy of this work is significant, and it points to the ‘committed’ aspect of the understanding of militant research developed here. For example, Roggero looks at *conricerca* in Italy in the present day and discusses the ways in which the process needs to be updated to reflect contemporary circumstances. For Roggero, co-research in our current condition should be to, “produce new glasses, through which to see what is not immediately visible and perceivable, as well as what it can be or what it could become”, which at this moment, means revealing that current forms of strike need, “to hurt the bosses and create new forms of life and production in common simultaneously” (2014, p. 521). This gets at the heart of what the ‘militancy’ in the formula speaks to.

### 2.4.3 Militancy

The word militant “means someone who is very strongly committed to, and very active in support of, some cause or other”, which in the UK, has generally been attributed to what Robertson calls the ‘far left’<sup>49</sup> (2015, p. 309). It is a committed — immanent — approach, as per Halvorsen's formula and demands a radical politics. As Deleuze and Guattari demonstrated in their work outside of academia, this is about continuing to use the ‘tools’ they created, “indignantly”, and “dangerously” (Chatterton, Pusey and Russell, 2011, p. 582). It is salient that the militant is a “figure that persistently returns as the marker — indeed, often the self-declared guarantor — of radical subjectivity across the spectrum of extra-parliamentary politics” (Thoburn, 2008, p. 98), particularly across anarchist, communist, and socialist politics (Thoburn, 2010). The militant is thus a key figure within this analysis. As noted in the introduction, this is about engaging in the ‘here and now’, and paying attention to the particular situations we find ourselves in (bergman and Montgomery, 2017).

The term militant research arguably gained greater recognition within the British and North American mainstream of academia around the time of the 2011 Occupy movement. A group of ten scholars based in and around the movement in New York wrote in 2013 that militant research for them was, “the place where academia and activism meet in the search for new ways of acting that lead to new ways of thinking” (Bookchin *et al.*, 2013, p. 4). Within a militant research framing, however, the objective goes further. As per the legacies of PAR,

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<sup>49</sup> This can be broadly accounted for by the group known as the ‘Militant Tendency’, who were a “splinter group of extreme left-wing Marxists who penetrated the Labour Party, especially powerfully in a few economically depressed areas such as Liverpool, so named after their weekly paper *Militant*” (Robertson, 2015, p. 309).

*conricerca*, and other key precedents,<sup>50</sup> Russell argues that the sole metric for measuring the success of militant research is the effect it has had on the social movement it is a part of. Thus, “the point of militant research is to contribute to processes of critical reflection and transformation of our movements” (Russell, 2015, p. 226). This framing positions militant research itself as the machine, and it also relies on a partially feminist sense of agency. For Colman, for example, “[t]he feminist practitioner is one who points towards how matter and things can be imagined; in new forms, or in ways that are different to the patriarchal structures of the world, through a focus on the agency that engenders other ways of being” (2018). Our task then is to think about what we can *produce*, using this particular methodology, as well as reflecting on our own roles and positions.

Within a wider militant research orientation, one of the key goals is to resist alienation, or the sense that we are “lacking the ability to affect change within the social forms we live under and through” (Graeber and Shukaitis, 2007, p. 32). This has a specific resonance within academic work. For Byron, Marx’s theory of alienation had four components. First, it begins at the point of production, which is not determined by the labourer, and second is that “[t]he worker does not get to exercise their intrinsic nature in work, but takes orders from the alien forces of the market and their capitalist exploiter” (2016, p. 386). While academics often do have more freedom to determine their work than many other professions, we still exist within structures that play a significant role

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<sup>50</sup> This mainly holds when considering the *historical* application of these methodologies, as many are now used in ways that depart significantly from their original intent. For example, a recent study from Queensland, Australia, used PAR to understand “how tourism businesses progress through the phases of cluster formation, enabling them to contribute to destination branding for their region” (Arcodia, Khoo-Lattimore and Perkins, 2021, p. 347).

in determining what sort of research is possible (Grove and Pugh, 2017). The third component is that we are alienated from our ‘species-being’ — we usually work solely to survive as individuals, not for the good of the collective — and the final aspect is that these various other components lead to a sense of alienation from one another (Byron, 2016). These factors are clearly expressed in academia, where individualistic rather than collective structures dominate (Gill, 2018).

In terms of how the combatting of alienation works within militant research and within Corbynism more widely, the term militant is about the sense of empowerment that comes from praxis. It is about acting in the world, as it stands, and with commitment. Sandoval interprets Foucault’s understanding of militancy as follows: “[d]o not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force” (2000, p. 165). As described in the previous section, this is precisely the role that this militant research has played for me, via the ‘connection of desire to reality’.

#### *2.4.4 Transversality*

Drawing on another key concept from the immanent tradition, there are several ways in which militant research operates transversally and it is arguably the transversality of militant research that sets it apart from other similar approaches. For example, for Pusey, engagement in activism constitutes being a ‘scholar activist’, but militant research aims to “collapse the separation of

theory/practice, theorist/activist and academic/non-academic” (2018, p. 365).

Bonefeld et al argue that from the perspective of militancy, the separation of theory and practices is highly problematic. When they are separated, “[t]heory’s capacity for supplying judgments on a social world derives from theory’s own reified logical and epistemological approach” (Bonefeld *et al.*, 1995, p. 2). What is key here, particularly when thinking about a militant research assemblage, is to think about the moments in which de- and re-territorialisations are taking place.

In part because of its transversal nature, the development of a militant research project is a more chaotic and less ordered process than some other research methodologies, and needs to respond as the ‘milieu’ changes (Russell, 2015).

Another aspect of the transversality of militant research is that it is about breaking down the relationship between the researcher and the ‘researched’ as much as possible. Within this research, this relates in part to the identification of the figures described earlier (the rationale for this is developed further in chapter five). As Kelly (2005) notes, transversality is deeply tied to notions of production, including of subjectivity.

Transversality is a core aspect of how the Argentine group *Colectivo Situaciones* have theorised militant research. Some of their insights have had a significant impact on this research. They were responding to and actively operating within the Argentinian struggles of the late 1990s and early 2000s. They have written that their approach is different to that taken by the political militant, “for whom politics always takes place in its own separate sphere” — instead, “the researcher-militant is a character made out of questions, not

saturated by ideological meanings and models of the world” (2003). Core to their approach is a sense of ‘not knowing’ (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). This recalls Coleman’s argument that we need to “act without guarantees, free from the conceit that we can prove our bases in advance” (2015, p. 277).

In terms of how this works in practice, and in terms of how it has worked within Corbynism, a key component of this is the use of the inherently transversal ‘in and against’ strategy in militant research. This was, as noted, fundamental for the groups who developed the autonomous approach. The *Autonomia* and *Operaismo* also developed a comprehensive programme of workers inquiries, which partially functioned as a form of radical political education in which workers came to better understand their labour conditions (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group and Wheeler-Dresden, 2021). This has been a key influence on militant research. For example, this approach influenced students at Pisa University and in 1968 they published what they called the Pisan thesis, where they framed their time as students not solely as an intellectual pursuit, but as labour power in development (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group and Wheeler-Dresden, 2021).

This wider strategy of operating ‘in and against’, including through labour and including through (this) student labour — as per the Pisan students — paved the way for the core ethos of militant research: it is about explicitly committing to using the labour time of academic work in service to a wider political movement. It operates ‘in’ the academy but partially ‘against’ the prevailing orientation of academic institutions which are now heavily marketised, and increasingly

financialised.<sup>51</sup> Halvorsen (2015) notes that the ‘beyond’ in the formula comes from the work of the autonomist Holloway (2016). Halvorsen’s critical intervention is to argue that the formula is not only useful in relation to the militant researcher’s relationship to the university. Instead, it can be used in relation to any form that militant research that operates within, against, alongside, or beyond. Reflecting the transversal form of thinking consistent throughout this PhD, it ‘dissolves’ the boundary between theory and practice through a “constant moving against-and-beyond the world(s) we create” (2015, p. 470). Another key aspect of this is the division of labour.

#### *2.4.5 Prefigurative divisions of labour*

The current division of labour is “the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour” (Do or Die, 2005, p. 2). Consistent with the overall interest transversal approaches, within a militant research framework it is vital to rethink the division of labour that comes from being described as an organiser or a student (or anything else).

Discussions of resources are (again) critical here (Graham, Graziano and Kelly, 2016). To a certain extent, militant research labour operates transversally via a prefigurative orientation. This broadly relates to the way that we try to develop practices that create the world we want to realise. For the Autonomous Geographers Collective, prefigurative militant research practices are about making sure that our everyday lives (and research) operate in line with the principals we believe in (The Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010). Tuck

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<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that the neoliberal university has less interest in the content of research – it is far more about securing grants – and then publications, good student experience scores, etc. A longer discussion of the financialisation of British universities is in chapter five.

(2008) talks about some of the work she has done with young people that operates in this prefigurative way, but she brings in a transversal framing. Alongside an attention to affect and the centrality of uncertainty, Tuck (writing with her young collaborators) talks about the importance of "constantly switching between inhabiting this current world and the world we want to inhabit" (2008, p. 60). That constant switching is a form of transversal practice.

For example, one of the most 'successful' projects I have participated in is the work we have done within the research working group at TWT. We are a small group (meetings vary between three to about eight people maximum), all with an interest in doing research for the organisation, and critically, from a range of backgrounds. The group meet regularly, if erratically, and examine a range of themes and issues.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps most importantly, we are working in a way that does break down the division of labour, as all of us, regardless of job or role experience, contribute in different ways. This group has offered a partial instantiation of what *Colectivo Situaciones* (2003) call 'serious work' in relation to the research collective. In this, we partially occupy a prefigurative and transversal 'beyond' at the intersection of academia and organising (and elsewhere). The body is another key aspect of militant research.

#### 2.4.6 Bodily considerations

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<sup>52</sup> As briefly discussed in the introduction, we have, for example, organised a day of workshops that among other things, utilised a classic decolonial text, Walter Rodney's *The Groundings with My Brothers* (2019) (in a session facilitated by a comrade, Kieron Turner). This pedagogical model is of increasing interest to many of us in the organisation. Taking forward a theme that is core to TWT, we are interested in different ways of building capacity through experimenting with alternate forms of pedagogy. This work has all been developed collectively, and through ongoing group reflection.

As noted earlier, Spinoza's version of joy is particularly about the interaction of bodies (Lambert, 2010). This is a key aspect of militant research, which broadly reflects a "critique of all disembodied theory" (Malo del Molina, 2005). It sees the body as central to militant research — both as a source of knowledge, and as a site of change. As Malo del Molina writes, "all new knowledge production affects and modifies the bodies and subjectivities of those who have participated in the process. The co-production of critical knowledge generates rebellious bodies" (2005). This broadly reflects a feminist perspective, and particularly a radical Black feminist insistence on the role that the body plays in producing knowledge (Cleary, 2016). Bordo argues that often the 'credit' for rethinking the body from the 1960s onwards is given to 'male poststructuralists' — instead, "[b]oth Black Power activists and women's liberationists, in the 1960s and 1970s, were centrally responsible for an awakening social consciousness of the body as an instrument of power and social control" (2015, p. 232). This tradition also emphasises the role that the body plays in subjectivity, and the importance of personal experiences (Lara *et al.*, 2017).

In relation to the latter, for example, one of the key insights from the gateway drug of canvassing was the specific bodily experience of getting out and onto the streets canvassing. This played an 'awakening', consciousness-raising role for many I met, as well as for me. A critical component of my experience of canvassing was the encounter on the doorstep. Page writes that, "[d]oor-stepping meant learning to *be* Labour, and the performance involved produced a line between the volunteers and society" (2019, p. 96). Fundamentally, in those flashes of exchange on the doorstep, the process where people would abruptly remove themselves — retreating behind the door, sometimes

slamming the door to emphasise the point — creates a stark distinction between you and them. This relocation of the site of the encounter to a very bodily interaction took an otherwise somewhat vague sense of political interest and agency to a much deeper level. Although those experiences were difficult, they felt like a more significant form of political participation than many other things I had done before. They operated as a moment of joy, in the Spinozist sense, and of emancipation.

To be clear, the pursuit of joy within militant research is not always 'positive'. And again, the body is critical within this, as well as within the research assemblage. On the latter, rather than understanding the researcher as a removed entity they become a part of the overall picture, where the crucial task is to, "(a)ttend not to individual bodies, subjects, experiences or sensations, but to assemblages of human and non-human, animate and inanimate, material and abstract, and the affective flows within these assemblages", and to "(e)xplore the movements of territorialisation and de-territorialisation, aggregation and disaggregation within the assemblages studied, and the consequent affect economies and micropolitics these movements reveal" (Aldred and Fox, 2014, p. 406). An example of one of these deterritorialisations were those experiences (shared by many) of having a door closed or slammed in your face repeatedly. We were experiencing what it felt like to be actively putting ourselves out in public as proponents of a specific political view. Those negative reactions we got were stressful — and the stress many of us felt throughout the campaign was significant. I wrote a draft chapter for this thesis in January 2020, a month after the election. It had the following section, which

reflected on the days following the election:

“A few days later I realised I needed to take a break. My boyfriend had gently suggested that it might be an idea to pause on checking WhatsApp so frequently and I burst into tears — at that moment, keeping up with the various takes and analyses already pouring in seemed to me the only way to get through the shock of having lost so comprehensively. I was exhausted. I was sick of taking trains, of not sleeping properly, and of feeling like there was nothing else happening in the world. This was far from unusual. Many other canvassers I spoke to were struggling with their mental health. We laughed and shrugged it off, but the stress and anxiety were very apparent. It became a bigger and bigger theme as time wore on — more and more conversations were about our lack of sleep, our stress levels, and our hopes and fears for what would happen on election day. By the end there was a grim acknowledgment of everyone’s collective exhaustion, and we focused less on getting to know one another, and more on quietly getting the job done. Ahmed expresses this well: “To express hope for another kind of world, one that is unimaginable at present, is a political action, and it remains so even in the face of exhaustion and despair” (2014, p. 186).”

While I was struggling with the psychological and bodily implications of the political work we were doing, I now understand that the experience of canvassing unlocked desire. It was a gateway drug, and it was a critical aspect of my own political journey, and that of many others. I remember reading a useful passage by Piven much later that helped me to understand the

experience. It reads: "... scholar activists should stop regarding themselves as martyrs. We are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like no other, because the comrades we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can" (2010, p. 810).

Fundamentally, this 'martyrdom' opened my eyes to a world of more committed and intense — to Halvorsen's (2015) word — form of political participation and of research. And this was realised specifically through the bodily experiences I had.

#### *2.4.7 Taxonomies*

Finally, my understanding of militant research has been greatly aided by theorists who have sought to go beyond describing approaches, and instead developed taxonomies of the various forms militant research can take. While I am cautious of an uncritical use of taxonomic approaches because of the link to the extractive forms of knowledge mentioned earlier, I see the value in using it as a tool to locate oneself in relation to a wider conversation, complete with tensions and power struggles. Different framings of militant research can be understood as machines — it is thus critical to attend to what they produce. Work by Khasnabish and Haiven (2015) has been particularly useful in this respect.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Note that they use the term 'Academic Activists', which locates them within the wider set of engaged research practices (the aforementioned term 'scholar activist' included). While there are differences, for the purposes of this discussion the typology they develop is still relevant for this discussion of militant research.

Their work has enabled me to conceptualise how my relationship to the wider Corbyn movement has evolved, and how it has slowly come closer to the form of militant research that does prioritise transversality. They identify three types of activist scholarship: an invocation, which refers to observational and reporting-oriented research; an avocation, where researchers “renounce the unjust autonomy and privilege of their academic status and seek to go to work within movements, putting their skills and whatever resources they may possess at the disposal of the movement itself”; and finally a convocation, where researchers seek to work with movements, while maintaining some autonomy that comes from their position as academic researchers, and specifically trying to use that autonomy to benefit the movement (2015, p. 25). I have realised, throughout this research, that I have moved through all these types in sequence (although my time spent in the first mode was limited). Due to my relative lack of experience as an organiser or activist, it is critical that I have spent a great deal of time working in the ‘avocation’ mode — including that experience of canvassing. But as my relationships have been strengthened and as my confidence has grown, it is the moments that where ‘convocation’ has happened that this research has added the most value. The implications of this are addressed in chapter seven.

Particularly in relation to the ‘convocation’ model, this has at times been a challenging methodology to describe and to deliver. In general, discussions about methodology are difficult, perhaps more so for doctoral students. As Dumitrica has reflected, the choice of methodology for PhD students “involves an assessment of our position and power within the academic setting, as well as a negotiation of the legitimacy of the method” — she argues that in this

process we determine our political commitments, and in this way, “this choice becomes an opportunity to investigate the ways in which power relations may come to shape both our understandings of ‘legitimate research’ and our performance of that legitimacy” (2010, p. 18). What I have discovered is that the open-endedness of militant research, while somewhat frustrating to our institutions, is a core aspect of how power is being partially challenged within this work. To again quote Malo del Molina, she suggests that militant research is “... always, an open trip, in which we know the origin and how it started, but we do not know where it will finish” (2005). And part of this sense of ‘not knowing’ where it will ‘finish’ relates to the role of strategy in this work.

#### *2.4.8 Methodology-as-strategy*

I venture that the generation of a militant research assemblage needs to be understood as an expression of political strategy. Strategy is vital for political work and thus for a militant research programme, given militant research’s prioritisation of political goals. Strategy is a concept that originates in military theory (brown, 2017) but has become widely applied to the development and analysis of social movements (Smithey, 2009) and increasingly, to militant research (see, for example Pugh and Grove, 2017 or The Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010). At its core, strategy is underpinned by a consideration of means and ends and “involves planning orientated toward achieving objectives, which is not to say that it is fully rational, but that it exhibits intention or purpose” (Smithey, 2009, p. 660). Arguably, collectively strategising is the most important thing we can do with the social movements we operate within (The Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010).

Strategy is not just about 'big picture' thinking. For Mohanty (2003), we need to value both the small everyday work we do, and the larger and more organised social movement work. This also captures the relationship between method and methodology, where the former refers to the specific small actions that make up a research project (all the everyday things described earlier) and the latter is the research strategy (militant research). This is critical in relation to the argument about the potential modesty of our ambitions. As noted in the introduction, simply using the research to create space for conversations that may not have happened otherwise — but that push the movement forward — is an entirely legitimate contribution. This partially links to the way that Shukaitis describes 'compositional strategy' — the creation of spaces of possibility (2016). He suggests that strategy in this framing is not about planning and rationality, but instead about context, process, and an ongoing evaluation of the wider environment.

This ties back into the sense of prefiguration discussed earlier, but here it is wider than labour relations. The sense of prefiguration partially links theory and practice via an understanding of strategy as both everyday and 'big picture'. Maeckelbergh reflects on the way that within her work (which can be read as militant research) theory and practice intersect. She writes:

“Prefiguration, the creation of alternatives in the here and now, enacts an interplay between theory and practice that was reflected in my own experience of distance and proximity. Theory can be developed from a

distance, but practices can only be developed through *doing*.” (2011, p. 3)

Within this prefigurative, methodology-as-strategy approach, transversality is critical. As with Maeckelbergh’s sense of the relationship between theory and practice, the most fundamental reason why militant research is transversal is because it embraces what Coleman (2015) calls the ‘gap’ between academic and political practice, because that is where critical insights can arise. Recalling the description of ‘convocation’ advanced earlier, Coleman argues that this means that we may take the political work we do “as a point of departure or starting point for critique” but we do not let “that commitment mark the point of conceptual or political closure” (2015, p. 277). She suggests that there needs to be a “less a closing of the gaps, than a persistent back-and-forth movement between critique and commitment” (2015, p. 263). It is precisely the negotiation of the ‘back and forth’ that constitutes the strategy of this work. And the figure of political action who best expresses this is the radical diplomat.

The radical diplomat is a strategist who was developed by Graziano, Graham, and Kelly (2008) and she is one of the figures of political action.<sup>54</sup> She speaks to a form of agency (recalling Debord’s argument about strategising subjects, as described in Shukaitis (2016)) that is attentive to our current moment. As they write:

“The radical diplomat might ask: if we are inhabitants of a field in which we are regularly implicated, subsumed and entangled in all that we had

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<sup>54</sup> A longer discussion of the role of the figures is in chapter five.

thought to oppose... how might we imagine a radical diplomacy that enables us to manipulate the conducts of the diplomatic to challenge our current circumstances?" (Graziano, Graham and Kelly, 2008, p. 104)

The radical diplomat is someone who moves away from "the endless repetition of a rally cry ('cooptation', 'instrumentalisation')", and instead looks "to understand those moments of uncertainty, of oscillation and ambivalence, as the beginning of an analysis of the 'historical conditions we are really in' and what an equally deep and enduring resistant practice might entail" (2008, p. 100). The decision to abandon those participatory art workshops in favour of canvassing within Corbynism is an example of the radical diplomat in action. She understood that something significant was happening and decided that it would generate more meaningful research and more political impact should this PhD research focus on it. This sense of immanent strategising is key to this research and the radical diplomat has guided those decision-making processes.

## **2.5 A bone-deep methodology**

This chapter outlined the way in which this research has constructed a militant research assemblage. I began with a discussion of the immanent philosophical tradition. A Spinozist sense of immanence is a consistent thread throughout this thesis, and it grounds the various components in "what is here" (Lambert, 2013). And, one of the ways to theorise the immanent is through the construction of a Deleuzoguattarian-informed research assemblage, which encourages a focus on processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. This approach also encourages the identification of a series of producing

machines and demands a particular attention to questions of affect and desire, and the importance of maintaining a transversal approach.

This chapter then discussed the way that on a personal level, one machine generated affect and desire, and the role that this played in choosing a methodology. This was my experience of canvassing in the UK's 2019 General Election, which acted as a 'gateway drug' to militant research. I outlined several aspects of militant research: the way it negotiates extractive research, the way it prioritises the political, the sense of militancy, the role of transversality, the prefigurative division of labour it hints at, its relationship to the body, and the taxonomy developed by Khasnabish and Haiven, particularly the idea of 'convocation'. I ended with a discussion of the ways in which militant research needs to be understood as a form of political strategy. While touched on at various points, this thesis has not yet discussed political participation in detail — it is specifically the critical relationship between democracy and participation that I address next.

### Chapter three: A democratic nightmare

A long time ago, I remember meeting a senior individual who ran a large social enterprise focused on increasing community participation. They expressed frustration at the fact that participants did not always return to the various initiatives they were developing. They understood political participation to be transformative — and wondered why, once the organisation had created space for people to participate, those people did not come back. At the time, I remember sympathising with them. I too was grappling with similar questions. I did not fully understand why participation, in and of itself, wasn't always all it was cracked up to be.

This person would not have used this language, but I now think they were describing nightmare participation, or a broadly depoliticised sense of participation in which liberal oppressions are upheld. Nightmare participation is everywhere within our conjuncture, and it interacts with several other powerful forces: liberalism, its bedfellows, and successors; democracy; and a set of potent affective registers. Further, and in alignment with the transversal form of thinking advanced here, and the argument made in the introduction that nightmare and bone-deep participation need to be understood as ideal types, in any 'real' participatory experience, there are likely aspects of both at any time. Before turning to the glimpses of bone-deep participation this militant research engaged with, it is critical to explore how nightmare participation functions within our current moment, and thus in this research assemblage.

This chapter begins by examining the ways in which democracy intersects with

participation. This includes the argument that participation can ‘revitalise’ democracy, competing definitions of what constitutes political participation, notions of participatory democracy, and arguments around the ‘democratic deficit’. I then establish the way that these framings of democracy and political participation intersects with liberalism, neoliberalism and to a certain extent post-neoliberalism. I argue that these ideological and economic frameworks have increasingly shaped the forms political participation has taken in the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century — how they have generated, in essence, a democratic nightmare.

### **3.1 De- and re-territorialising representative democracy**

Are participatory politics a ‘response’ to democracy, or is democracy a means to navigate participation? This is the question Kelty poses (Kelty, 2019) and it suggests some interesting avenues when considering the emphasis on forces within the assemblage. Recalling the basic definition of participation offered in the introduction — a sense of ‘taking part’ (Kelty, 2019) — it is on first reading clear how closely aligned participation is to notions of democracy, which is fundamentally about the promise of people ruling (Taylor, 2019). van Deth goes so far as to say that “participation is the *elixir of life* for democracy” (original emphasis) (2014, p. 350). But does one reterritorialise or deterritorialise the other?

In the widest sense of the term, participation — and democracy — have always been features of human life. However, as will be discussed further shortly, this does not mean that participation and democracy have been equally available to

all, nor is the relationship in any way consistent across different times and locations. I focus the discussion here on the relationship between the form of participatory politics Corbynism offered, which partially reterritorialises and partially deterritorialises the manifestation of representative democracy we have in the UK. There are several debates to tease out. The first relates to the two broad forms of participation that take place within representative democracies: those focused on reterritorialising representative democracies through conventional and policy-focused activities, while the second is the wider set of deterritorialising activities that content the status quo through what is sometimes called radical democracy, or improper politics. The machines that are social movements are one of the biggest drivers of the latter form of activity.

There are debates in the literature over the extent to which the term political participation should refer exclusively to the former, explicitly policy-focused activities (voting, referendums, participation in local government), or whether it should cover wider practices which have political resonances — those that work to deterritorialise those same structures (Hooghe, Hosch-Dayican and Van Deth, 2014). The approach taken in this thesis is to look at both. In this, it aligns with the argument made by Hosch-Dayican: “political participation today is more generally perceived as taking part in the expanded domain of politics rather than solely contributing to the policy-making processes. Activities in this new political sphere are accordingly prone to be marked by a less instrumental, but a more symbolic or expressive character” (2014, p. 343). On a basic level, Corbynism saw a temporary unification of these various forms of political participation via the unification of the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary

left. The movement was thus both deterritorialising and reterritorialising representative democracy in the UK at the same time.

Proponents of the type of participatory politics that are explicitly focused on policy agendas often believe in the idea that involving more people in politics will result in better decision-making, and thus, better democracies. For Landemore, this can be demonstrated via Condorcet's jury theorem, a probability principle that illustrates that group decision-making tends towards the 'right' option as the number of people in the group increases (Landemore, 2017). Perhaps the most concrete arguments for these types of participatory politics are the perceived neutrality of the democratic mechanisms they adopt, and the stabilising (reterritorialising) force that they are assumed to generate. As Junn (1999) has argued, the policy-focused forms of political participation are not simply about making better decisions. There is an idea that in participatory processes within democracies, "the democratic process is conceived as a neutral mechanism that aggregates revealed individual preferences" (1999, p. 1418). There is a sense that these processes help individuals develop as citizens and strengthens connections to communities. Looking specifically at participation in elections, Junn suggests that this provides 'system-level' stability (1999).

In contrast, proponents of the latter type of participatory politics argue that a tight focus on the mechanics of representative democracies (however innovative) cannot on its own represent the diversity of viewpoints or generate meaningful political change. As will be discussed, this is part of why large-scale distrust of the electoral system has happened. It is impossible to cover the wide

variety of movements that have fought for alternate expressions of democracy — and it is important to stress the variety — but a good example of some of the thinking that runs across these activities in more recent decades is the widely cited article by Graeber (2002) on the 'new social movements'. He said they were about “reinventing democracy” (2002). A notion of radical democracy is debatably the most widely accepted term for this vast range of activity — from community co-ops through to notions of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2003) but understood as “the theory and practice of democratic political contestation” (Finlayson, 2009, p. 13).

Arguably, it is in these counter-hegemonic spaces that ‘democracy’ often happens today — where the people have more promise of ruling. These wider participatory practices are part of what Devenney (2021) calls improper politics — for him, they represent where democracy is actually taking place, namely in spaces where people do not ‘behave’. Many instances of improper participatory politics — of people engaging in direct action and civil disobedience — would align with the characteristics for participation to be meaningful that Junn (1999) identifies. She argues that participatory processes cannot privilege a particular group or ideology, and they also need a fluid understanding of citizenship — where different “visions of citizenship must be recognized” (Junn, 1999, p. 1420).

However, it is critical to note that these different understandings of political participation do not neatly map onto a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic stance. There are in practice numerous instances of counter-hegemonic projects being taken forward through policy-focused activities (policies to reduce the working

week, for example) and there are numerous instances of hegemonic projects being taken forward through wider political activities (the forms of internal oppression that can be evidenced within progressive social movements — Hutchinson, for example, discusses the ways in which “patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism” have been accepted “by members of oppressed communities and progressive social movements” (1999, p. 188)).

### **3.2 The salve of participation**

With this complex picture in mind, it is salient that increasing political participation is often framed as a machine that can help to ‘solve’ the problem of democracy (Kelty, 2019). This relates to one of the most contested debates amongst those who study political participation, which is the extent to which political participation (of either type) is increasing or decreasing. There are consistent findings that political participation in recent decades has not dwindled. Instead, the argument goes, political participation has shifted away from the forms tied to representative democracy to a wider range of activities that have political resonance. In this respect, scholars have pointed to a stable level of political participation over time (Hay, 2007).<sup>55</sup> But to account for the decline in voting numbers (and thus the key engagement most people have with the policy sphere), mainstream political science is arguably preoccupied with what is often called the ‘democratic deficit’. Scholars focused on the democratic deficit consistently point to the notion that representative democracies are

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<sup>55</sup> In terms of the period that this covers Hay’s use of the term ‘contemporary’ – his book was published in 2007 and refers to studies from the 1970s onwards. He writes “[b]y and large, those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the mode of political participation” (Hay, 2007).

increasingly elitist, and far removed from most citizens' everyday lives, meaning citizens are "spectators of public life rather than participants in its making" (Jenkins, 2019).

And, in response to the democratic deficit and the decline in confidence in representative democratic structures, participation is often injected into those structures as a partial salve. The use of the term participation peaked in the 1960's (Google, 2021) — this was at the same time as confidence in representative democracy in advanced industrialised countries started to decline (Lindquist, Marshall and Wanna, 2015). As research by Barnes and Kaase (1979) from the late 1970s showed, the decline in confidence in the 1960s was accompanied by something interesting in relation to participation. They looked at empirical research to suggest that a 'participatory revolution' was occurring. They define unconventional participation as civil disobedience, and political violence that expresses unhappiness with existing political structures.

For example, the 1960s in Britain saw widespread counter-hegemonic participation in the UK by way of numerous social movements, including the feminist movement, anti-nuclear protests, anti-apartheid protests, art school occupations around May 1968, and the Bristol bus boycotts. In contrast, conventional activities include activities which relate to the electoral process, that Barnes and Kaase call "support for the rules of the game" (1979, p. p 444). Thus, while the sort of participatory politics that focused on policy (generally but not exclusively hegemonic political participation) was dwindling, the much wider form of political participation (generally but not exclusively counter-hegemonic)

soared. And, as these examples demonstrate, the most significant non-state actor working at the intersection of these forms of political participation are social movements. These movements (including Corbynism) are the biggest generator of improper politics and of radical democracy. As della Porta summarises, progressive social movements:

“... engage in democratic innovation. They experiment with new ideas in their internal life, prefiguring alternative forms of democratic politics, and they spread these ideas within institutions. They not only transform democratic states through struggles for policy change, but also express a fundamental critique of conventional politics, thus addressing meta-political issues and experimenting with participatory and deliberative ideas.” (2020, p. 13)

Further, they often intersect with policy-focused political participation in complex ways. Often, political participation that works to reterritorialise representative democracy is offered as a solution to the democratic deficit. It uses techniques and approaches from deterritorialising forms of participation. As della Porta notes, social movements like Corbynism have been some of the most prominent critics of what she calls a “democratic malaise”, as well as one of the largest drivers of innovations intended to overcome the democratic malaise (2020, p. 3). For example, an overlooked aspect of social movements is that they do not only involve the forms of practice that are explicitly about agitating for change, either within or outside of state structures. It is also, as della Porta argues, about the maintenance of the social movements and the forms of knowledge these movements generate.

At its most basic level, many forms of what is known as 'participatory democracy' can be understood as attempts to take ideas from social movements or other improper politics spaces into policy-focused arenas.

Participatory democracy refers to the practices where citizens become engaged in various ways within representative democratic systems, and where they are devolved varying degrees of power (Bevir, 2009). Participatory democratic activities are generally policy related and involve some degree of discursive activity. For Baiocchi and Ganuza these, 'democratic innovations' are based on "the conception of deliberation, draw on participation from ordinary people, and value inclusion for its own sake" (2017, p. 135). Some of the most substantive opportunities are things like citizens assemblies (which in some instances are given the power to legislate), and participatory budgeting. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation captures the intent of these latter innovations.

Her model, which is still relevant today, starts with what she calls 'non-participation', or manipulation and therapy. By therapy Arnstein is referring to the forms of placation the state and other institutions frequently offer to those who have undergone a difficult experience, or who are facing difficulties that are fundamentally social, but are 'treated' individually. In a contemporary setting, the explosion of treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness are in a similar vein and locate conditions like anxiety and depression within individuals. Arnstein's ladder then moves through to 'degrees of tokenism' (informing, consultation, placation), and ends with 'degrees of citizen power' (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). The form of political participation

Corbynism sought was at the higher end of the latter. And the specific way it sought to do this is key.

One of the critical ways in which Corbynism advanced a project of bringing counter-hegemonic democracy into hegemonic spaces was through the temporary alliance between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left that was discussed in chapter one. The latter brought numerous participatory techniques and tactics to bear on the movement. To give but one example, in chapter one I mentioned that Occupy was one of the precursors for Corbynism. In my militant research, the extensive focus on innovative and inclusive participatory processes within Occupy were visible in various ways into Corbynism. This ranges from efforts to use consensus-based decision making processes, through to the hand signals attendees at a meeting use that Occupy popularised (Shaw, 2012). But as it stands, and as Corbynism felt keenly, there are challenges in the exchanges that sit at the 'higher' end of the ladder — the end of the ladder Corbynism focused on.

For example, the introduction of participatory budgeting across different parts of the world has often intended to address the democratic deficit. But as Baiocchi and Ganuza note, within participatory budgeting processes, often “the focus is on citizen apathy rather than social justice or political transformation” — which leads to several problems, including the fact that participation becomes technical rather than emancipatory, and the outcomes aren't managed by the participants (2017, p. 150). These insights tie into one of the critical insights about participation and democracy, which is that in and of themselves, neither are necessarily emancipatory (Dean, 2009b). This is despite the fact that in

relation to democracy particularly, “[i]n some left political theory, democracy is an aspiration that occupies a place once held by communism“ (Dean, 2009b, p. 20). Part of the reason why these different projects have played out in the ways that they have is because of the increasing dominance of ideologically liberal, neoliberal and partially post-neoliberal frameworks, all of which articulate hegemony.

### **3.3 Nightmare participation**

In recent years in the UK, the status of political participation — the contours of the assemblage — reflect a complex mix of these different forces. If we recall the point from earlier about conjunctural analysis’s temporal arrangements being about the extent to which hegemonic forces are able “to shape new alignments or to overcome (or at least stabilize) existing antagonisms and contradictions” (Clarke, 2014, p. 115), it is neoliberalism that has substantively maintained hegemony throughout the last forty or so years, beginning with Thatcher’s reign. As the discussion in chapter one teased out, liberalism’s ongoing duplicity has sought to mask substantive oppressions. And, the duplicity embedded in the foundation of liberalism is reflected in much political participation today.

Today’s highly liberal form of participation can be understood as a machine, which, following Miessen (2010), I call nightmare participation. Drawing from fields far beyond political participation, Miessen is deeply critical of how many forms of participation on offer today fundamentally work to depoliticise. For clarity, depoliticisation refers to “the set of processes (including varied tactics,

strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue”, as described in Fawcett (2017, p. 5), and referencing Hay (2007). Miessen says that sometimes, “participation becomes a mode of buoyancy-production, a societal sedative, not in terms of the potential decisions that the populus can make, but in withdrawing the grounds from which they can actively critique the actions of the decision-maker and representative” (2010, p. 44). He goes on to say that participation today often creates what he calls Harmonistan. A description of a talk Miessen gave at an art gallery in 2012 describes what this is:

“Welcome to Harmonistan! Over the last decade, the term “participation” has become increasingly overused. When everyone has been turned into a participant, the often uncritical, innocent, and romantic use of the term has become frightening. Supported by a repeatedly nostalgic veneer of worthiness, phony solidarity, and political correctness, participation has become the default of politicians withdrawing from responsibility.”

(Kunstinstituut Melly, 2012)

Nightmare participation works to emphasise the status quo. As Edwards and Klees summarise, liberal participation does this by maintaining a sense that it can “accommodate the voices of individuals and communities”, but in a way that is aimed at ensuring the longevity of institutions, rather than benefitting those same individuals and communities (2015, p. 491). And, part of what is driving this form of participation is the dominance of what Deakin calls political ‘choice’. Here, the main goal is about “transforming the character of transactions between state and citizen so that they come to resemble more closely those that take place in the market” (Deakin, 1994, p. 48). For Brodie et al (2009), this

has been reflected in the UK through what some have called ‘voice and choice’, which they say operates at a community level — where community groups participate in a local user forum, for example. Essentially, through this approach we get to personalise or ‘co-produce’ the services we receive.

But despite all of this choice, there is also a global sense that those collective opportunities to ‘take part’, to participate, are ineffective (Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer, 2022). This is because of the increasing dominance of neoliberalism. As Baiocchi and Ganuza argue, “[p]articipation has spread precisely at the moment when an increasing number of decisions, because of their technical demands or their global scope, have become insulated from democratic decision making”, which they say is a result of what Brown (2015) calls the ‘neoliberal stealth revolution’ (2017, p. 5).

One of the key aspects of articulation within neoliberalism is the affective conditions described in chapter one — registers of insecurity, anxiety, stress, depression, cruel optimism, helplessness, and hopelessness, among others. These affective registers are visible in the way that much political participation operates today: they come together through the way that participation frequently works to depoliticise (Moini, 2017), and to create nightmare participation. Fundamentally, within our current conjuncture in the UK, when we are ‘given’ opportunities to participate politically — to vote, or perhaps to go one step further, and to take part in a local community forum where we get to exercise our ‘choice’ — little change comes about because of the dominance of neoliberalism. These experiences end up concretising the affective registers of anxiety and hopelessness.

For example, a key ‘choice’ we get to make is to vote in elections. As described earlier, this is an example of a reterritorialising form of participation in relation to representative democracy. Voting in elections is highly transactional (in a way that resembles the market) and the rise of neoliberalism has coincided — and arguably driven — the decline in voting (Cracknell and Pilling, 2021). For Lenin, elections were about getting to “decide once every few years which members of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament” (2019, p. 487). In the 2019 election in the UK, for example, only 67.3% of eligible voters chose to cast a ballot — down from 83.4% in 1950, the highest it has ever been (Cracknell and Pilling, 2021). Polling research (Marshall *et al.*, 2008) from 2008 painted a mixed picture of attitudes towards political participation in the UK. It identified a particular drop in voting numbers, but an otherwise polarising trend: “[o]n the one hand, the British are more assertive and active in asserting their preferences and desires as consumers and as citizens but are also often reluctant to articulate their views or to take part” (2008, p. 64). Fundamentally, there is a central antagonism that hegemony is working to stabilise here: our desire to participate is heavily shaped by our neoliberal subjectivities. This stops us from generating more collective, counter-hegemonic change, meaning that we can rarely achieve what we desire.

This is also part of what is being referred to in the notion of the ‘post-political’, which builds on the thinking around the democratic deficit to argue that in our contemporary conjuncture, “democratic institutions are formally retained but political power and decision making are relocated to arenas where corporate interests rule, largely insulated from democratic participation and accountability”

(Salmenniemi, 2019, p. 408). In many respects, this dynamic has deterritorialised representative democracy as we know it. As the example of voting demonstrates, we need to contest the framing of political participation which posits that in and of itself, it is an emancipatory force. A trajectory of liberalism has led to today's forms of political participation that are formatted, calculated, and temporary (Kelty, 2019). It is crucial we "recognize that neoliberal forms of participation may simply reproduce inequality (as do neoliberal reforms more generally)" (Edwards and Klees, 2015, p. 496).

Nightmare political participation has not meant that political participation in general is diminishing. To recall the arguments made earlier in this chapter about the changing nature of political participation, what is critical is that it is changing shape — towards, as noted, more market-driven ends. Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2020) advance a notion of the 'post-democratic turn'. In a manner consistent with the arguments made here, they note that a lot of the literature on political participation is focused on the ways in which more, and more effective, forms of participation could create a more 'authentic' democracy, but their work also "sheds light on the ambivalence of participation" (2020, p. 377).

They cite several different areas where this is happening. This includes the 'activation' of citizens, and it relates to the overall arguments made here in terms of the increasing prevalence of participatory frameworks. The second is what they call "the responsabilization of consumers" (2020, p. 369). This refers to the policy-focused forms of participation discussed earlier and the way that the public are expected "to provide public justification for their views, give full consideration to competing positions, establish a shared sense of responsibility

and ideally achieve rational agreement between all parties involved” (2020, p. 379). The final aspect is the way that ‘choice architects’ are being used to guide (to ‘nudge’) behaviour, as “a strategy to pre-empt societal opposition, to accommodate demands for co-determination in politics and society and to preserve a sense of self-determination even in contexts which leave citizens essentially no autonomy” (2020, p. 380).

A further aspect of this is the role of progress and universalism. Part of the justification for liberalism’s specific form of economic freedom, and individual autonomy, was the idea that this represented a form of progress — itself a machine. Within this framing, liberal participation offers ways for people to participate in a broader ‘progress’ towards a different future (Freeden, 2015). But as discussed throughout, liberalism and neoliberalism have continually failed to bring about the types of progress that is promised. This can partially account for the reasons so many ‘drop out’ of the predominant versions of political participation, namely voting. But this goes further because in the expansion of negative freedom, violent practices often accompany the expansion of nightmare participatory models. This means that they can be understood as examples of coloniality. As chapter one discussed, this is deeply tied to the liberal project (Freeden, 2015).

Finally, this is linked to the machine that is universalism. This is the result of the flattening of difference that chapter one discussed. Within this framing, the argument is that nightmare participation — and nightmare participation alone — should be everywhere (Freeden, 2015). The backing of policy-focused participatory politics now extends to the United Nations, who can be understood

as a continuation of colonial institutions (Blackie, 1994). They released a dictat in 2019 that stated that governments across the globe should be instigating different forms of participatory politics, beyond voting in elections (The United Nations, 2019). The UK is a key player in the expansion of nightmare participatory practices globally, which essentially reinscribe colonial logics through economic policy. The UK is one of the core imperial powers and it is one of the richest countries in the world (based on an ongoing extractive model, as noted in the introduction). This power is expressed through the fact that the UK has a seat on the UN security council, it a founding member of the World Bank (World Bank, 2021), and it is at the heart of the militarised NATO alliance — among many other global positions. Within those roles, the UK is part of the group of powerful countries pushing for nightmare participation using liberal models. It represents an outward commitment to a certain form of freedom that fundamentally oppresses.

### **3.4 Democracy and nightmare participation**

This chapter described in more detail the specific nature of nightmare participation. It started with a discussion of the relationship between de- and reterritorialising forms of participation, including those taking place within and outside of the explicitly policy-focused sphere. It outlined the ways in which participation — particularly the forms of participation that come from social movements and other emancipatory political trajectories — have been in various ways suggested as a partial salve to the challenges representative democracies face, often in relation to questions of the democratic deficit, or the post-political. It discussed some of the wider reasons for this situation, which

relates predominately to the increase in liberal, neoliberal and partially post-neoliberal influences. Those ideological forces shape what I have called, following Miessen, nightmare participation. They have determined many of the forms of political participation on offer in the UK, particularly through the affective register they generate.

So, is this all a 'democratic nightmare'? Perhaps not. Writing in 2019, Airas argued that an "affective background condition — characterised by negative feelings such as disenfranchisement, frustration and despair — has created the conditions of possibility for the Corbyn phenomenon to emerge" (Airas, 2019, p. 446). This post-political and possibly even post-democratic context thus set the scene for Corbynism, which offered something different.

## Chapter four: Bone-deep emergences

This chapter theorises the types of political participation within Corbynism that were described in chapter one, and that stand in partial contrast to the democratic nightmare just described. The core argument is that Corbynism generated a series of counter-hegemonic emergences, many of which included bone-deep participation.<sup>56</sup> I first set out the concepts of becoming and the minor. I explain how these framings intersect within a wider understanding of emergence. This operates strategically and across scales, in order to contest hegemonic power. Throughout, I discuss how TWT can be understood as an example of an emergence. I end with a longer discussion of bone-deep participation.

### 4.1 Becoming

In 2019 I went to my first TWT festival in Brighton and one of my tasks was to sort out a rota of trained facilitators to attend a series of ‘policy labs’ that had been organised by Annie Quick and Kerem Dikerdem.<sup>57</sup> The sessions covered a range of topics — one of the sessions I facilitated was about mental health, for example. All of the sessions had the same format. First, the topic was introduced by a group of people with expertise in the area. Then, there were small group discussions where people could brainstorm policy ideas they would like to see put into practice. At the end of the session, the groups fed back to the room about their ideas, and there was a ‘dot voting’ exercise where we

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<sup>56</sup> For clarity, they are not one and the same – there are many forms of emergence which do not contain bone-deep participation, and there are examples of bone-deep participation that are not emergences.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of the approach, see Quick and Dikerdem (2019).

could each choose which of the ideas we liked the most. Afterwards, someone wrote up the most popular ideas from all the sessions. At the end of the festival that write-up was presented to the then-Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and other senior figures as a 'People's Manifesto'.

I remember attend training for anyone who would be facilitating sessions; while I had facilitated workshops before it was the first time I had received substantive training within a political space. I remember so many things clicking into place. We learnt how to politely ask those who had contributed a lot to the session to take a 'step back' so others could speak, and how we might encourage quieter people to say something. We also learnt about how to manage difficult situations, and what to do if someone repeatedly or maliciously broke TWT's code of ethics (which asks, for example, people not to say things that are racist, sexist, classist, transphobic, homophobic, ageist, or ableist).<sup>58</sup> TWT in September 2019 was potentially the height of Corbynism – for example, the festival had its highest ever attendance that year. It was a few months before the General Election, and there was an immense amount of energy at the festival. Everyone involved in the policy labs kept saying that they were an experiment, but there was hope that if we did win the next election, these sorts of approaches would be pursued seriously by the incoming Labour government. The (democratic) skills we were learning within those experiments were key.

Along with many other moments throughout Corbynism, this is an example of becoming. Deleuze was particularly concerned with becoming, because it offers a way to be open to the new (Biehl and Locke, 2010). Becoming, for Deleuze, is

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<sup>58</sup> TWT's full current code of ethics is included in the appendix.

about “those individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 317). Becoming is thus inherently deterritorialising and for me personally, experiencing what it was like to participate in such a significant political project in a way that did ‘shake loose... from determinants and definitions’ was profound. What is key to becoming is that it is relatively open-ended — as Lawlor describes it, “the experience of becoming is *not* an experience directed toward or oriented by a final form” (2008, p. 174). That experience of participating in the policy lab had unexpected outcomes, not least helping to shape the direction of this research. A critical aspect of the reason why this experience can be described as a becoming is because it was ‘minor’ — itself an important component of how Deleuze and Guattari understand becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). As Lawlor notes, “[a]ll becomings in Deleuze and Guattari are defined by becoming-minor” (2008, p. 170).

## **4.2 The minor**

The minor operates in a transversal way. Katz’s (1996) conception of minor theory utilises the Deleuzoguattarian sense of minor and major literature. She argues that this operates as a political strategy, where the minor is about “subversion, escape, transformation. It is metamorphic--'a becoming'”, and this builds on the Deleuzoguattarian understanding (here relayed via Katz) that “to write a 'minor literature' is to use a major language in ways that subvert it from within” (1996, p. 489). Finally, minor theory is not about mastery, nor is it about ‘dismantling’ major theory, but instead it is about locating minor within the major.

Within the policy labs, the goal was to write a (minor) manifesto with ideas that a (major) Labour government could implement — as well as to trial a form of policy development that was more participatory. This ethos is taken forward in the notion of the minority, or minoritarian politics.

For Mould, the minority refers to “identities and experiences that have been cast “outside” of the majority by the powerful, either as unwanted and disposable, or as a resource to exploit (via co-option and appropriation)” (2021). He argues that minoritarian politics have an ethical orientation that looks at the creation of minor subjects, via an attention to institutionalised prejudices, as well as creating space for those prejudices to be resisted. Further, minoritarian movements are aligned to the molecular, namely that which is “vital, incessant, and unruly, operating below the threshold of perception and associated with becomings of innumerable kinds” (Merriman, 2019, p. 67).

This sense of the difference and ‘unruliness’ of minoritarian politics characterises some of the political participation within Corbynism that I engaged with in this militant research, including the policy labs. These labs included people from all different backgrounds, and, as described, considerable effort was made to create an inclusive and welcoming space. At the same time, and as is consistent with TWT’s socialist politics, the conversations had a particular focus on the most marginalised. The solutions that were developed ranged in terms of how counter-hegemonic they were — from reformist through to more radical suggestions — but they were all underpinned by an interest in minoritarian politics in terms of resisting Mould’s (2021) sense of institutionalised prejudices. In the session on mental health, for example, almost

all of the suggestions involved putting those who had experience of mental health issues at the centre of decision-making. This approach of seeking to prioritise the molecular, along with a sense of becoming, comes together in the concept of emergence.

### **4.3 Emergences**

Identifying emergences is one of the main tasks of conjunctural analysis (Clarke, 2014). It is partially underpinned by the idea that strategy is about creating the space for strategy to be created (Shukaitis, 2016), and as noted, it brings together becoming, and the minor. It has particular resonance in terms of culture. For Williams (1992), the emergent is about the identification of truly new cultural practices — new meanings, values, practices, relationships, and types of relationships. Williams locates this within a wider discussion of what he describes as ‘structures of feeling’, which is broadly about seeing culture as “processually structured” rather than static (Coleman, 2018, p. 606). More specifically, he says that it is “never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form” and he writes about a sense of ‘pre-emergence’ as being the critical thing to identify (Williams, 1992, p. 126). The latter refers to that which is “active and pressing but not yet fully articulated” (Williams, 1992, p. 126). The emphasis on finding ‘new forms or adaptation of form’ is key in terms of the process of identifying emergences.

Within this militant research, TWT is the best example of a becoming, minor emergence: it is metamorphic (to use Katz’s phrase) and it is unruly (to use Mould’s). As noted in the introduction, I have organised with TWT for three

years. As a brief reminder of its core function, TWT came about at the beginning of the Corbyn leadership and has run a yearly festival of art and politics alongside the Labour Party's conference. TWT's praxis feels, looks, moves, and sounds new, and speaks to the form of cultural emergence Williams points to. It continues to mobilise large groups around a project that is genuinely culturally informed, and it operates from a pluralist position: Labour Party stalwarts rub shoulders with anarchists and abolitionists at the festival (and sometimes on the dance floor).

Arguably, TWT's single biggest contribution has been to develop a pluralist space, and to consistently bridge the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left in a way that only Momentum has otherwise substantially sought to do in a contemporary context (Coldwell, 2016). This opening of relationships — of new 'types' of relationships, to recall Williams (1992) — is critical. It points to a pre-emergence in terms of the possibility (which is "not yet fully articulated" (Williams, 1992, p. 126)) that we could develop a more sizable coalition "in all directions" (Gilbert, 2020, p. 139). The programming of the festival is focused on generating a pluralist space, where different ideas can be brought into conversation with each other in a comradely way. In relation to the festival but also within the organisation's year-round work, there is significant effort devoted to facilitating conversations in a way that respects and recognises difference. For example, the organisation's Code of Ethics (referenced earlier and included in the appendix), explicitly asks people to respect one another's different positions. In my own experience of facilitating we are consistently sharing strategies to negotiate challenging behaviour. Part of the need for this ethos

comes from the way that the festival works strategically across scales to contest different forms of power — perhaps the key feature of emergence.

#### **4.4 Scale, power, strategy**

Emergence is a compelling and strategic way to operate at multiple scales. For brown, it is about “the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (2017, p. 3). This means that emergence is unassailably collective. In quantum physics, emergence is that which “refers to collective phenomena or behaviors in complex adaptive systems that are not present in their individual parts” (Pines, 2014). In relation to TWT, it is particularly the collective joy that is produced that speaks to the sense of emergence as generating something bigger than the sum of its parts. In our yearly evaluation of the festival, for example, people often tell us that at TWT they feel a genuine hope for the future in a way that they do not feel throughout the rest of the year. What is critical is people also tell us that they feel more inspired to engage in political activities. The hope and the energy that is generated at the festival thus translate into power (to recall the discussion of collective joy), which increases our capacity to act. This is precisely what emerges at a level beyond the individual interactions.

brown (2017) describes this sense of phenomena that emerge out of multiple interactions as ‘emergent strategy’. She argues that the critical aspect of emergent strategy is that it is about creating possibilities because “[a]uthentic, exciting unity takes time, and lots of experimenting” (2017, p. 156). brown says that in strategic processes there is often a “quick narrowing” of decision-making

towards the lowest common denominator because it is the only thing that people can agree on (2017, p. 156). Again, this reflects the ethos of TWT, where thousands of people are brought together to attend a wide range of concurrent sessions and events, but where there is no overarching defined path or journey for festival attendees. Instead, the organisation prioritises a more emergent ethos. This reflects the overall approach to emergent strategy that brown advocates:

“[i]t isn’t that we never need sharp, directed, focused and even single-issue moments — we absolutely do. It’s just that we live in a system that thrives when conditions are abundant and diverse, in a universe that holds contradictions and multitudes, and we often reject that chaotic fertile reality too soon, as if we can’t tolerate the scale of our own collective brilliance.” (2017, p. 156)

This approach to negotiating power (in multiple ways) has compelling links with a wider set of traditions. Recalling the discussion of the colonial power matrix in chapter one and its relationship to what I am here terming liberalism, its bedfellows, and successors, Grosfoguel draws on Césaire to describe the counter to these expressions of oppression. For Grosfoguel, the answer lies in a form of universality that is about increasing what, in a Deleuzoguattarian sense, could be described as molecular. Grosfoguel (2012a) quotes a letter written by Césaire (2006) that advocates for a ‘rich’ universalism. Grosfoguel expands this further:

“...to move beyond this system [the colonial power matrix] the struggle cannot be just anticapitalist but an anti-systemic decolonial liberation. Anti-systemic decolonization and liberation cannot be reduced to only one dimension of social life such as the economic system (capitalism) like it happened with the twentieth century Marxist left. It requires a broader transformation of the sexual, gender, spiritual, epistemic, economic, political, linguistic, aesthetic, pedagogical and racial hierarchies of the “modern/colonial western-centric Christian-centric capitalist/patriarchal world-system.”” (2011, p. 13)

This expansiveness is reflected in Deleuze and Guattari’s work also. The latter, for example, understood that a revolution is required that would attend both to global relations of power, and to the “molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence, and desire” (2014, p. 28). And it is also encapsulated in some of Marx’s later thinking. This is set out by Rosemount (1989) in his description of the interests Marx developed not long before his death, including in ethnography. Rosemount describes Marx’s, “new emphasis on the subjective factor in revolution... his unequivocal affirmation of revolutionary pluralism; his growing sense of the unprecedented depth and scope of the communist revolution as a total revolution, vastly exceeding the categories of economics and politics...” (1989, p. 212).

The field known as posthumanism also shares some of this perspective on difference and unity. It is a complex and deeply theoretical field, but, at its broadest, posthumanism challenges many of the epistemological foundations of

the Enlightenment. Often in conversation with feminist new materialism<sup>59</sup> which, among other things, sees matter as agential (Aldred and Fox, 2018), posthumanism in brief builds on the various efforts that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “to challenge the possibility of grounding theoretical knowledge, moral life or political practice on an a-historical concept of “man”, “subject”, “individual conscience”, “human nature” or “human essence”” (Iftode, 2020, p. 6). Critically, posthumanism aligns with this understanding of emergence. As Tomasula has written in relation to narrative: “... rather than plot, the engine of posthuman narrative is emergence: the process by which lower-level conditions and interactions give rise to higher order behaviors, patterns, formations, meanings” (2009, p. 13). Perhaps the most relevant aspect of posthumanism in relation to the form of difference argued for here is the sense of ‘affirmative ethics’ Braidotti develops.

Recalling the aspect of militancy from chapter two as being partly about the identification of ‘new ways of thinking’ (Bookchin *et al.*, 2013), particularly from a transversal standpoint, there is an alignment with posthumanism because of the way that it both breaks down existing ways of thinking, and mixes both practical and applied knowledges (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 28). Here, the ‘engaged

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<sup>59</sup> Feminist new materialism is a large and complex field, but because of its close relationship to posthumanism it is worth detailing here briefly. Iris Van Der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn’s summary of the evolution of new materialist thought is a useful overview of some of the key developments in this area. They define new materialism: “for a cultural theory that does not privilege culture but focuses on what Donna Haraway calls ‘naturecultures’” (Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012b, p. 93). Naturecultures, for Haraway, are a more apt way to understand our interaction – our imbrication— with nature, not as a removed and separate entity, but as co-constituting one another (Haraway, 2003). As noted, a further critical insight or position that the feminist new materialists take is to see matter as agential. New materialism emerged at a time when the dominant trends across the humanities were linguistically oriented, through the dominance of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory. It looks to (re)assess the importance and agency of matter, while still maintaining an attention to language. For Fox and Aldred, drawing on Taylor & Ivinson, “[m]atter is not inert, nor simply the background for human activity, but ‘is conceptualised as agentic’, with multiple non-human as well as human sources of agency with capacities to affect” (Aldred and Fox, 2014, p. 400).

intellectual' rejects universalism and takes an "ethical-political commitment to provide adequate and reasoned cartographies of power" (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 21), in a clear alignment with militant research. As is consistent with the traditions just described, affirmative ethics is about producing knowledge differently, and it transversally, "rejects oppositions of all types, and addresses the material foundation of all subjects, including humans, as heterogeneous assemblages of humans and non-humans, connected to natural environment, historical events, social codes, in a creative manner, which is embedded and embodied" (Braidotti, 2021). What is also critical about this sense of affirmative ethics is precisely its immanence and its subsequent call to action. As Braidotti has said, "we're part of the problem, we need to be part of the solution" (2021).

Framing the way that power was being challenged within Corbynism as partially posthuman is perhaps the boldest move made in this research but, as Papadopoulos (2018) notes, there is value in trying to think about social movements in a posthuman way. He writes about an understanding of what he calls insurgent posthumanism. This looks particularly at the role of non-humanist struggle within social movements, thus moving away from the traditional interest in the state, and in political power (2018, p. 204). In an argument partially consistent with della Porta, he notes that many of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s began to experiment with the ways in which they lived their lives, rather than focus too much on the state, and this has continued up to the present day where "[s]ocial movements start to become more than social, movements of matter and the social simultaneously, movements that change power by creating alternative forms of life that cannot be neglected by instituted politics" (2018, p. 205). This is precisely the sense of

the molecular and it is in part what Corbynism sought to do, including via this research.

Thus, while there are significant differences in the focus and scope, what is compelling across these traditions is a similar approach to challenging power in a way that is multi-scalar and multi-fronted. This comes together in the sense of emergence argued for here in relation to parts of Corbynism. For example, to locate this within a different example to TWT, during canvassing there were thousands of Labour Party activists out meeting voters, each with their own agendas and experiences and journeys. Critically, this was imbued with a specific sense of pluralism (to use Rosemount's term). And in addition to the huge increase in the number of people canvassing, there was a different ethos to previous years. As described in chapter one, Labour activists within the Blair years were asked not to talk about policy. Within my experience, we were energetically debating policy and strategy — we were participating, politically, in a minor emergence. Unlike the attempts at rationality, progress, and a universalism that flattens (all of which are conditions that derive from a liberal orientation as described in chapter one and three), these emergences, as minor becomings, represent an “emergentist materialism that implies multiple, entangled processes at different structural levels within a single historical material reality (which includes the symbolic/ideological as part of that material reality)” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 20). And in many of these examples, we were also experiencing bone-deep participation.

#### **4.5 Glimpses of the bone-deep**

As discussed in the previous chapter, social movements like Corbynism are key arenas in which less 'nightmarish' and more deterritorialising forms of political participation are being experimented with. The discussion of Corbynism's various forms of political participation in chapter one clarified some of the spaces where this was happening — including within Momentum's structures and the community organising units — and the discussion in chapter two set out a key aspect of my own experience, namely canvassing. To recall della Porta's (2020) words from the previous chapter, these experiments are prefigurative and they thus deterritorialise (representative) politics as it stands. At the same time, they are transversal: they exist, immanently, within the world, and they are only partial contestations of hegemony. Critically, these experiments could also be understood as emergences. Within each of these examples, minoritarian politics were being enacted through becomings that created something that was greater than the sum of its parts. What is key is that within these wider processes of emergence within Corbynism, we often experienced bone-deep participation.

The term bone-deep comes from the decolonial theorist Tuck (2013). In this research, I have extended Tuck's framing to better understand the more emancipatory form of political participation Corbynism hinted at, which stands in contrast to the form of nightmare participation described in the previous chapter. As a reminder, I use it as an 'ideal type' to better understand the negotiations of power within the forms of political participation we experienced in Corbynism. And as is consistent with militant research, it is informed by the immanent philosophical tradition — bone-deep participation's embodied nature means we feel it in our bones, not our nightmares.

More pragmatically, bone-deep participation is the activities we engage in, collectively, to reject hegemony and the various structures that uphold it. In the UK at present, this is liberalism, its bedfellows, and its successors. It thus speaks to counter-hegemonic activity that has material goals, and a focus on the most marginalised. Bone-deep participation was only glimpsed within these wider processes of emergence within Corbynism because of the prevalence and strength of nightmare participation in the UK. Nonetheless, as the following chapters will tease out, unlike the way that nightmare participation works to stifle democracy — to depoliticise it — bone-deep participation gives us a window into a *re-politicised* form of democracy.

The subsequent chapters will focus on the three main features of bone-deep participation, but it is useful to briefly outline them to frame the subsequent discussion. The first feature of both nightmare and bone-deep participation is the relationship between the individual and the group. The next chapter discusses how, within nightmare participation, this is expressed as a form of liberal ‘contributory autonomy’ (Kelty, 2019), in which a group of individuals ‘serve’ a wider collective project. Within bone-deep participation, in contrast, the individual and the group become an emergent collective subject, thus partially suspending the distinction between the two. Pedagogy within nightmare participation operates as a form of managerialism, in which decision-making is ‘technical’ (Moini, 2017) and depoliticising. In contrast, in bone-deep participation, pedagogy operates as a sense of dangerous (Giroux, 2010) pedagogy, in which consciousness-raising takes place, and learners are taught in a way that moves them to counter-hegemonic action. Finally, in contrast to

nightmare participation's pursuit of negative freedom, bone-deep participation works towards the positive form of freedom Corbynism sought. It reflects the Spinozist sense of having the freedom to act creatively (Gilbert, 2014), and, consistent with the way that emergence contests power, it also sees difference as productive.

#### **4.6 Challenging power**

As the discussion in this chapter has begun to tease out, emergences challenge our current hegemony in compelling ways. Unlike the attempts at rationality, progress, and universalism within our current conditions, emergence seeks to build a different sort of power. This is attuned to the molecular, the minor, the transversal and to moments of becoming. Emergences are strategic, and often driven by the generation of new cultural expressions. Critically, they create a collectively produced phenomenon that is bigger than the sum of its parts. Corbynism generated many of these sorts of emergences, some of which have continued in the post-Corbyn era, including TWT. And within many of the emergences within Corbynism, we glimpsed bone-deep participation.

## Chapter five: Emergent collective subjects

“I wish I knew how / It would feel to be free / I wish I could break / All the chains holding me / I wish I could say / All the things that I should say / Say 'em loud say 'em clear / For the whole round world to hear” (Simone, 1967)

These lyrics come from a Nina Simone song called ‘What it feels like to be free’. We played it several times throughout the online Red Square Movement’s organising school I helped to coordinate. My comrade Sara made the playlist (the full playlist is included in the appendix). Every time I hear the song, I get goosebumps — it really makes you feel something. The experience of seeing comrades and people I did not know swaying on camera and sometimes singing the lyrics was powerful, and it generated collective joy.

This chapter looks at the relationship between the individual and the group, and how that relationship was expressed within Corbynism and post-Corbynism. I first discuss how nightmare participation relies on a sense of contributory autonomy (Kelty, 2019), while bone-deep participation looks to the generation of emergent, collective subjects. The latter is characterised by the establishment of transversal collectives, who seek to build across difference. This involves a partial downplaying of identity, and the need to take sides. I discuss these characteristics through an examination of the relevance of one collective subject — Braidotti’s nomad — in relation to my experience of organising with the RSM national student group.<sup>60</sup> Throughout, I consider how these dynamics relate to

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<sup>60</sup> A more substantive description of my engagement with RSM is in the introduction to this thesis.

Corbynism and post-Corbynism as a whole. I end with a brief discussion of the function of the nomadic 'figures of political action' within this thesis.

## **5.1 Nightmare relations**

The relationship between the individual and the group operates differently in nightmare and in bone-deep participation. At its broadest, nightmare participation works to depoliticise the relations between the individual and the group by upholding the liberal emphasis on the individual. Recalling Junn's argument from chapter three, part of this relies on the understanding that the process of participation can operate "as a neutral mechanism that aggregates revealed individual preferences" (1999, p. 1418). When we participate in nightmare political participation, it is usually as isolated individuals whose subjectivity is realised by joining a wider process or collective. It is through the experience of participation that we activate a model where we are, "an individual whose autonomy and freedom exist for the purpose of contributing to a polity, a society, a community, a collective, a market" (Kelty, 2019, p. 17).

Kelty calls it contributory autonomy — where the figure of the participant is not a lonely individual who has been "forsaken by the state", nor an individual who is "oversocialised" and needs the state to recognise them (2019, p. 17). Instead, participation operates on the basis that we as individuals 'serve' a collective, and we are important for that reason (Kelty, 2019). This is one of the most critical aspects of Miessen's critique of contemporary participation. As he notes:

“Both historically and in terms of political agency, participation is often read through romantic notions of negotiation, inclusion, and democratic decision-making. However, it is precisely this often-unquestioned mode of inclusion... that does not produce significant results, as criticality is challenged by the concept of the majority.” (2010, p. 13)

There are several aspects of the ‘connecting’ work happening within this aspect of hegemony. The first component is around who is and who is not ‘at the table’. As Beaumont and Nicholls note, neoliberal participation creates what they call a ‘silenced margin’ (2008, p. 87), and for Moini, neoliberal participation will both “increase consensus over its norms and values and, at the same time, silence dissenters” (2017, p. 132). Nightmare participation purports to be for everyone, but it rarely is. Those who are not bought in to its mechanisms are simply left out.

Further, contributory autonomy relies on the idea that we can be clearly differentiated from one another (Kelty, 2019). One way that this often happens is through the highly sophisticated and effective machine that is liberal identity politics, where (so the argument goes) specific identity markers suggest there are critical, perhaps intractable, differences between people. For Grosfoguel, for example, the whole project of liberal identity politics works “from an identitarian and culturalist reductionism that ends up essentializing and naturalizing cultural identities” (2012b, p. 84). This is deeply linked to the view of highly individualised subjectivity generated throughout the Enlightenment, as chapter one discussed.

To give an example of how these various features of nightmare participation interact we can look at the most widespread example in the UK of nightmare participation: voting in elections. As was discussed in chapter three, voting is deeply shaped by our liberal and neoliberal subjectivities. This is an expression of contributory autonomy (individuals get a vote, and this process is understood to benefit citizens at large). In this process, we are understood to be specific individuals with complex, different and measurable identities. As such, there is extensive analysis of which policies might appeal to us and there is consequently extensive targeting of segmented groups of voters.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the vast numbers of people who do not vote<sup>62</sup> are simply omitted from the process — they are silenced, to use Moini's term, and they contribute to the so-called democratic deficit.

As chapters one and three discussed in some detail, in the UK and under neoliberalism this system (particularly in recent years) has articulated what is often called the post-political, resulting in a series of governments with no ability or inclination to generate substantive changes that would improve the material conditions of citizens in the UK. This is not to discredit the electoral system in the UK entirely, but it is to highlight the ways it functions today — as per Miessen (2010) — as an *illusion* of participation, from which we need to 'wake up'.

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of a recent UK example, see Bakir's (2020) discussion of Cambridge Analytica's psychographic profiling and targeting, particularly during the Brexit referendum campaign.

<sup>62</sup> As per the discussion in chapter three, if 67.3% of eligible voters cast their ballot in the General Election in 2019, that means that almost a third of eligible voters chose not to (Cracknell and Pilling, 2021).

## 5.2 Bone-deep emergent collective subjects

Bone-deep participation takes a different approach. Here, the group operates as an *emergent collective subject*. This differs from the relations within nightmare participation that are built on an aggregation of individuals. For Haarstad, an analysis of collective subjectivity "can be understood as the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interests of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in contemporary capitalism" (2007, p. 57). This is precisely how the individual and group relationship is different within bone-deep participation: it is the idea that through collective agency we can create change, via an acknowledgement that social dynamics play an 'outsize role' in these processes (Táíwò, 2021). The first key aspect of bone-deep collective subjects is that they are emergent.

In tandem with the wider conjuncture the collective subjects of bone-deep participation are, as Lazzarato (2004) suggests (and riffing on Gramsci), caught between the old and the new. These new subjectivities — or more accurately these experiments with new subjectivities — revolve in part around economic questions, which Lazzarato argues are particularly focused on questions of precarity.<sup>63</sup> For Haarstad (2007), what is key is that class has been eliminated as an orientating identifier in collective subjectivities within global politics. This reflects a partially autonomous orientation.

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<sup>63</sup> Note that Lazzarato was writing in 2004, a few years before the financial crash in 2008. If anything, precarity has only become worse since this time – see, for example Mangan (2019).

Shukaitis argues that the defining contribution of the autonomous tradition has been "the desire not to preclude in advance the emergence of new social subjects, even and especially from unexpected positions or social locations. It is an approach to the political, a search for new forms of radicality, that does not want to shut down in advance its possible territories" (2016, p. 2). This is a key aspect of autonomy: it creates a distinction between the subject of classical Marxism, namely the worker (and the collective subject, namely the working class) and new forms of subjectivity that arise within social movements. This reflects a longstanding interest in subjectivity within autonomous thought and praxis. In relation to the *Operaismo* tradition, for example, "the *operaisti* centered questions of *subjectivity*, or rather — as Alquati called it — *counter-subjectivity*. This was a subjectivity that wasn't only against capital, but also against the capital within us" (Roggero, 2020).

Thus, one of the most important aspects of the collective subjects of bone-deep participation is that they are a component of wider emergent processes. To recap from the discussion in the previous chapter, emergence here is seen as a strategic process, often driven by the generation of new cultural expressions. It involves generating molecular, minor becomings at scale and in a way that creates a collectively produced phenomenon that is bigger than the sum of its parts. And this aligns with the emergence of new ways of understanding subjectivity. Haarstad (2007) for example, suggests that the task at hand is primarily about creating space for the 'imagery' of new collective subjects to emerge. Within Corbynism, there were significant opportunities for the imagery of new collective subjects to emerge.

As noted, the Corbyn movement mobilised thousands of people, and activity took place across the country. Within this were numerous experiments with new subjectivities. Others have written about the emergence of subjects within Corbynism for whom the relationship between age and asset ownership became decisive (Milburn, 2021); the notion of a collective subject based on a populist sense of ‘the people’ (Prentoulis, 2022); and the sense of a (desired) subject generated by a ‘culture war’ that failed to build a pluralist and, again, populist coalition (Pitts *et al.*, 2022). As the subsequent discussion will tease out, I venture that Braidotti’s nomadic subject is another lens by which to view my experience organising with RSM — one of the experiments within post-Corbynism. But there is a critical point to make about the way that the sorts of collective subjects described here function.

The same critique of the ‘silenced margin’ (Beaumont and Nicholls, 2008, p. 87) levelled at nightmare participation could be applied to the collective subjects explored here also. For example, Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer (2022) bring in an analysis based on the relative privilege of those comrades who can fight for emancipatory change. They suggest that due to that privilege, and because the benefits that have been generated by emancipatory politics have benefitted those groups more, emancipatory movements have “nurtured, unintendedly, new feelings of marginalisation and disempowerment — which neoliberal policies of welfare retrenchment then further aggravated” (2022, p. 5). But this goes further, and it ties into some of the arguments established in chapter one about our conjuncture, and the intellectual and political legacies that shape it.

Contemporary freedom in rich countries is built on imperialism (Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer, 2022). Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer argue that in the social movements that they study, they “are united in understanding emancipation as the struggle for inclusion, greater equality and more democracy — demands which are often addressed to the state and established political institutions which are perceived as securing the established structures of oppression” (2022, p. 7). They argue that this ‘take’ on emancipation goes back to the Enlightenment, but they note that what is troubling is the idea that as emancipation is gained, or granted, other forms of oppression are often generated. Thus, they cite thinkers like Foucault, Adorno and Butler, who they assert argue that “chances are high that... what presents itself as emancipation today is likely to usher in new forms of social control and domination tomorrow” (2022, p. 11). This is a particularly challenging feature of bone-deep participation — and the implications of it will be explored in the subsequent discussion, which examines one specific, emergent collective subject via an examination of the experience of organising with RSM.

### **5.3 The Red Square Movement**

In early 2021 I had a phone call with a key member of the emerging RSM about the work we were doing within the #SaveUEL campaign discussed in the introduction. The talked about how a new group of student organisers were coming together and exploring forming a national network around a shared political horizon. The group consisted of representatives from many of the major student campaigns across the country from the previous tumultuous year of student politics. This included students who had recently gone on rent and fee

strikes.<sup>64</sup> It also had representatives from student groups including Pause or Pay (2020), who campaign around art schools specifically; Liberate the University, who campaign for universities to be ‘demarketised, democratised, and decolonised’ (Liberate the University, 2021); and Young Labour, who operate within the Labour Party<sup>65</sup> (Young Labour, 2021).

Those who are involved in the group work from emancipatory political positions (including anti-imperialist, decolonial, anti-racist, abolitionist, feminist, queer, communist, socialist and/or anarchist positions, among others), but we were united by our shared experience as precarious students in the UK. Recalling Lazzarato’s sense that many collective subjectivities are today built on a sense of precarity (or a structural position of precarity), this is particularly relevant here. While individual circumstances vary widely, for undergraduates and master’s students this precarity relates not only to the challenging years of financial precarity while a student, but also to the prospect of enormous post-university debt (which has all sorts of repercussions, for example in terms of the future housing security, see Callender, Desjardins and Gayardon (2021)). For PhD students this includes (among many other things) the precarity of the prospect of employment (OECD, 2021).

The person I spoke to mentioned that the group were interested in developing political education activities by arranging an ‘organising school’ for student

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<sup>64</sup> Many students gained substantive rebates because of these strikes – for example, at the University of Manchester students received a 30% rent rebates on their first semester (Lott-Lavigna, 2020). As an article explained, the strikes were organised in “response to a lack of welfare support during self-isolation periods, a lack of face-to-face teaching, and disruption to normal university life” – further, students “feel mislead [sic] about the requirement to rent accommodation on campus when teaching has primarily moved online” (Lott-Lavigna, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> At present, the elected representatives of Young Labour, who broadly represent the socialist tradition, have a difficult relationship to the party. They are unable, for example, to Tweet from the official @YoungLabourUK Twitter account. See (@YoungLabourUK, 2022).

activists. I joined the group soon after the phone call — this principally meant joining a WhatsApp group and attending meetings. We then began discussions to work on the proposed school, which was eventually delivered as a partnership between RSM, TWT and the National Union of Students (NUS)<sup>66</sup> in April 2021. Roughly 20 of us worked together to deliver the project, and my role was primarily to coordinate across the various branches of activity. In the end, the school brought together around 100 activists for a weekend of reflection, training, and planning. To give a sense of the school, examples of the advertising for the weekend and a WhatsApp message I sent to everyone involved on the morning of the first day are included in the appendix.

Partnerships between different organisations were at the heart of the school and it is the relationship between TWT and RSM that I can best speak to.

TWT's strategy at the time was partly influenced by the work of Milburn. In the same vein as his work mentioned earlier in this chapter, which looks at the salience of age and asset ownership in defining political subjects in the UK, Milburn has more specifically identified a critical demographic group that he calls 'Generation Left'. It refers to the generation of young people whose material prospects are less promising than older generations (Milburn, 2019). Milburn notes that "[i]n the UK Millennials are likely to be the first generation for hundreds of years who will earn less than the two generations who came before" (2019, p. 8). His argument is that this group are increasingly being politicised through their experiences of precarity within capitalism. There has been interest at TWT is ensuring that there are ways to engage this wider

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<sup>66</sup> The National Union of Students was founded in 1922 and has been, as the name suggests, the UK's national student union (NUS, 2022). In May 2022, the Conservative Party cut government funding to the NUS (Jackson, 2022).

demographic in politics. As one of the 'brokers' of this arrangement between RSM and TWT, I could see how it would be mutually beneficial: RSM benefitted from the organisational capacity to run a large online educational event, and TWT has an interest in engaging younger people.

The partnership proved fruitful, and the two organisations continued to work together for a while. A delegation of roughly 20 students attended the 2021 TWT political education festival in September in Brighton in an official capacity. We organised a session at that festival called 'Reimagining the Student Movement', which asked attendees to discuss solutions or proposals around three core areas that had emerged in the strategising and collective work of the group, including at the organising school. The first of these looked at how universities could be repurposed for communities, the second related to the demand for free education, and the final aspect was about how we could build a radical student movement. As my time as a student is coming to an end, I have become less involved with RSM and, while there is still some activity, the group are much quieter now than at the height of our work.

One of the critical aspects of this discussion of the collective subject of RSM is that, as elsewhere in this thesis, an artificial separation of the theoretical and the everyday does not hold. We need to "drag theory back, to bring theory back to life" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10). The process of learning more about subjectivity within this research has altered my sense of my own subjectivity. As I have discussed these ideas with comrades, their sense of their subjectivity has changed, as has mine of theirs. This aligns with a sense of how subjectivity be analysed, where a "more substantial conceptualization of cultural experience is

in order, one in which the collective and the individual are intertwined and run together and in which power and meaning are not placed in theoretical opposition but are shown to be intimately linked in an intersubjective matrix" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007, p. 14). This orientation speaks, in part, to a nomadic subjectivity.

#### **5.4 The nomadic subject**

Braidotti's theorisation of the nomadic subject is a compelling way to analyse the emergent collective subject within the RSM organising school, and by extension Corbynism and post-Corbynism. As with Shukaitis, Deleuze and Guattari, and many others referenced throughout this thesis, Braidotti (1994) is interested in the new and the emergent and she asks where creativity in theory and politics can be found. While a straightforward reading of the nomad (which comes initially from Deleuze and Guattari's work) is that of a traveller, actual movement or travel is not necessary for the nomadic subject. Instead it is about rebelling against conventions, and thus operates as "a creative sort of becoming; a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 5). This includes the idea that nomadic subjects can operate as a myth or a political fiction — albeit one still heavily motivated by ethical and pragmatic concerns. Recalling Haarstad's argument that we should be creating spaces for subjective 'imagery' to emerge, Braidotti argues that "[p]olitical fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems" (2011, p. 26).

Braidotti's (2019b) work responds directly to the liberal subject: she argues that the nomadic subject does not intersect with liberal individuality, but instead works as what she calls a haecceity. As was outlined in chapter three, nightmare participation tends to operate as a form of universalising praxis. In contrast, Braidotti argues that 'the universal' is a fallacy — she suggests that “the decline of the universal in the age of modernity, marks the opportunity for the definition of a nomadic standpoint that is based on differences while not being merely relativistic” (1994, p. 98). This builds on Guattari's understanding of subjectivity, which was a key influence on Braidotti's conception of the nomadic subject. For him: “[v]ectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a 'terminal' for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc.” (2014, p. 36). This sense of ourselves as a 'terminal' points to the restlessness and rejection of fixity that Braidotti outlines. In particular, she refers to the Deleuzoguattarian notion of micro-fascisms and their warning that hegemony can be replicated at any scale. In response to this, the nomad is a figure who rejects fixity (Braidotti, 1994).

Thus, one of the key aspects of the nomad is that she is restless, and this is reflected in RSM. A core aspect of how RSM has operated is via our collective involvement with a series of different groups, who are in and around student politics. For me, the relevant groups are #SaveUEL, the University of East London's branch of the University College Union (UCU)<sup>67</sup> and TWT. In many

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<sup>67</sup> UCU is the national union that represents predominately academic staff in further and higher education. More specifically, the union “represents over 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK” (UCU, 2022).

respects, the school came about in the way that it did because those of us involved are active in many different spaces. As Braidotti argues:

“... the nomadic subject functions as a relay team: s/he connects, circulates, moves on; s/he does not form identifications but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections.” (1994, p. 35)

For example, my experience of the organising school was hugely determined by the way that I was positioned within the various groups in and around RSM's orbit (this dynamic was replicated by most others in the group too). Within #SaveUEL, I was a new campaigner, but I was buoyed by the connections we had made, what we had learnt, and to a certain extent what we had achieved in our campaigning. In relation to RSM, I was a novice (particularly when it comes to direct action — I have almost no experience of this, while others in the group are much more experienced). To a certain extent, I was keen to demonstrate my worth by showing that I did have skills to offer. Within TWT, I was slowly understanding what useful roles I could play as I became more involved in the organisation. Within UCU I was listening, learning, and developing an awareness of the tools at our disposal from more experienced comrades. Within all of these positions, it is precisely the sense of “transgressive identity” that meant I could “make connections at all” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 35).

Further, the specific, nomadic form of RSM (different groups who have formed a temporary coalition) greatly shaped the type of politics we have enacted: the sense of ‘connecting’ and of ‘coalitions’ (to use Braidotti’s terms) expresses a particular horizon for political work. Again going back to Braidotti, she argues that “inner, psychic or unconscious structures are very hard to change by sheer volition” — she suggests, via Irigaray, that what is needed within nomadism is something that “allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices” (1994, p. 31). It is the process of unlocking desire that is critical for the creation of new subjectivities, and for the creation of a particular political mode of work that can be restless and attuned to contradictions.

For example, the organising school acted as a platform for a wide variety of counter-hegemonic approaches and views to be shared, debated, and sometimes taken forward. Our goal was not to develop a single plan for the wider student movement to adopt, but to open a space for a variety of issues and approaches to be discussed. This was partly determined by the limited temporal horizon inherent to student politics<sup>68</sup> — but again, this also speaks to a nomadic orientation, particularly in terms of the sense of ‘moving on’ (Braidotti, 1994). We knew that the RSM group would not be around forever and there was thus a sense of constantly making what you can of the resources you have. In this transitory movement, the nomad rejects the liberal subject’s fixity (Braidotti, 2019b), but there are also challenges within this approach.

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<sup>68</sup> While somewhat inevitable, this has been a key source of frustration for the groups I have worked with – essentially, the fact that very few students stay at any one institution for longer than three years. Anecdotally, some of the most effective student organisers are those who have stayed at one institution for at least an undergraduate and master’s degree – sometimes taking time out of their studies to hold student officer roles.

These challenges are evident when looking at one of the biggest projects the RSM group embarked on, which was to try to generate a longer-term strategy for our work. Over the course of many one-to-one conversations, Zoom meetings, one large in-person gathering at the student union of the London School of Economics, and discussions in other spaces, we explored and workshopped the options available to us. A key aspect of those conversations was that we found it difficult to determine how we could operate in a way that both built on the resources we had (a core group of dedicated organisers with a range of views as to how the organisation should operate, and a wide set of connections across the student movement), while also developing something that could meaningfully intervene against the universities whose practices we wanted to contest. There was a tension between two models but this did not necessarily split us into two camps. I remember making arguments for both positions at different times.

The first model was to continue the way that the group were initially brought together. This was as a platform or umbrella or even media organisation, which in its diversity comes close to resembling an emergent, nomadic collective subject. When the group was founded, this *form* of organisation had unlocked a nomadic sense of desire, particularly in terms of being able to hold contradiction. The second model was those who wanted to see us shift to a form more akin to a campaigning organisation, with a clearly articulated set of demands. In the end, we became something in the middle — we sought to bring people together around a loose set of positions. However, that model proved challenging to implement, in part because of its demands to generate both a

community that is properly cared for, and a campaign, at the same time. And while there were many reasons for the group to become less active, our inability to reconcile these positions was a key component.

Part of this also relates to a key aspect of the desire that operates in much counter-hegemonic political work, and that those new collective subjects help to unlock. Throughout the organising school, for example, one of the issues we faced was the substantial issue of burnout. The same motivation that keeps us engaged and connected to one another quickly gets exploited into overwork. We have discussed it since, and there was a collective sense that perhaps we should have been less ambitious in our programming. This is a key challenge of working in this nomadic, transversal way. While everyone is ‘connecting, circulating, moving’, there need to be mechanisms to ensure that collective care can happen, given the wider hegemonic forces at play.<sup>69</sup>

In partial response to the collectively generated conditions that were causing harm, a small group was established who were specifically responsible for thinking about care and welfare. This was underpinned by an acknowledgement of the ways in which a culture of White supremacy shapes our organising cultures<sup>70</sup> — a key lens by which the group understands hegemony to operate. We organised several events focused on care and one of the most useful was an internal workshop devoted specifically to understanding how racial dynamics impact our organising — organised by Connor Moylett and Nehaal Bajwa. This responded to issues we were facing within the group and like much of our work, the wider conversations were complex and sometimes messy. While the

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<sup>69</sup> Some of the affective registers of neoliberalism were described in chapter one.

<sup>70</sup> See for example, (Jones and Okun, 2018) for a discussion of how this works.

workshop generated many meaningful insights for those who attended, it inevitably was unable to entirely tackle the issues we faced.

These challenges and some of the responses to them reflect tensions across Corbynism and post-Corbynism as a whole. As with the RSM group, Corbynism saw a temporary and partly nomadic alignment that has — as subsequent years have demonstrated — been slowly (and sometimes quickly) eroded. There is thus a distinct parallel in terms of the sense of the connecting, circulating, and *moving on*. Corbynism did engage a huge swathe of the left in the UK, and there was a palpable unity for a time. At the same time, the bonds that were built were often new, and fragile. And within the movement were a wide range of views and actors, many of whom disagreed with one another. The most salient aspect of this picture is the role of the right of the Labour Party, whose sense of connection to Corbynism was fraught (and in some instances non-existent<sup>71</sup>). As noted earlier the Labour Party has struggled to “reconcile the differences between its constituent tendencies” (Bassett and Gilbert, 2021, p. 175). At the core of this is the challenge, as with RSM, of maintaining contradiction within a nomadic position. This is key to the ethos of how collective subjects work, and it points to some challenging aspects of this form of analysis.

Part of the reason for delving into this one specific trajectory of experience in some depth is to avoid making universalistic claims. As chapter three discussed, a particular form of universalism is key to nightmare participation. Kleinman has written that it is important to focus on personal experiences

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<sup>71</sup> As it turns out, in the election in 2017, right-wing Labour Party staff engineered a sabotage of certain constituency seats (Stone, 2020).

because it means that we gain “an appreciation of the variety of human conditions... we affirm that our subjectivities and the moral processes in which we engage are forever in flux... and open to transformation” (2007, p. 55). At the same time, this discussion is about a *collective* subject — I have generated this argument from the militant research, which has involved engaging with a lot of people, to varying degrees of intensity. It is therefore critical to discuss in more detail the way in which the ‘collective’ insights have been generated and understood.

In this militant research, the sense of collectivity can be understood as moments of singularisation. Some of the most profound collective experiences have been articulated via culture, when understood as per Williams’s second understanding, that is, the ‘signifying practices’ of the arts, and intellectual work (1981, p. 11). These are inherently collective acts and these moments (like playing the Simone song, or laughing at a political meme, or dancing with comrades at a party, or on Zoom) — are instantiations of singularisation. The term comes from Guattari, who (in line with Reinsborough) felt that mass culture “produces individuals: standardized individuals, linked to one another in accordance with hierarchical systems, value systems, systems of submission” (2008, p. 22). He saw singularisation as a potential counter to these forces (Kaiser, 2017). The term refers in part to the ways in which subjects are created. Rather than trying to classify differences, singularisation asks us to “consider the transversal emergence of entities as the result of a relation of forces” (Kaiser, 2017, p. 156), including the affective. This is key in terms of understanding one mode by which difference can be negotiated within a collective subject, because it moves away from classification. This same

emphasis on singularisation points to the specific form of the collective subjects that have emerged.

#### 5.4.1 *Transversal collectives*

As noted, one of the key aspects of RSM was the form it took — namely, the way in which the group operated *as a transversal collective*. This is key to emergent collective subjects, and references Guattari's understanding of transversality in relation to individual and group relations<sup>72</sup> (developed in his work at *La Borde*), which was described in chapter two. This is more specifically expressed as a sense of 'transindividuality', that refers essentially to the mutuality of the individual and the collective (Balibar, 1993). It also relates to the autonomous Marxist Holloway's (2005) conception of subjectivity. This stands in contrast to what he calls a capitalist logic, which is one of command and hierarchy. It is mirrored in the state in terms of the way that it excludes people from power, as well as the way in which it divides people. Instead, and alluding to a sense of transversal subjectivity, Holloway argues that within the political projects he is interested in he sees "[s]ubjectivity not as an individual subjectivity, but as a social subjectivity" (2005).

As an emergent subject, this sense of transindividuality is also key to the nomad. Recalling the project to develop a counter-hegemonic bloc described in chapter one, Braidotti suggests that one of the critical tasks is to assemble 'a people'. She writes that "to activate solidarity and resistance, it is better to avoid

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<sup>72</sup> To recap briefly on some of the overarching ideas raised in the previous chapters, transversality in Guattari's early work operates as a method for thinking across individual and group subjectivity, of manifesting desire, and of understanding where power lies (Guattari, 2015a).

hasty recompositions of one 'humanity' bonded in fear and vulnerability. I prefer to work affirmatively and defend grounded locations, complexity and a praxis-oriented, differential vision of what binds us together" (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 37). In many respects, this understanding of transversal collectives recognises our mutual interdependence. As Balibar reads Spinoza, individuals, in "their construction as well as their activity always involves a previous connexion with other individuals" (1993, p. 9). There is not space to fully detail the ways in which our interdependence has been theorised, but as is consistent with the posthuman influences in parts of this thesis, the understanding here reflects both social and scientific aspects. As Thomas wrote in 1974 reflecting on developments in biology: "[t]he whole dear notion of one's own Self — marvellous, old free-willed, free-enterprising, autonomous, independent, isolated island of a Self — is a myth" (1978, p. 142).

As is consistent with many political groups, RSM did at times have moments of singularisation in which a sense of transindividuality was detectable — as a 'social subjectivity', that is built in part on our mutual interdependence. The group's rationale was underpinned by a sense that that by working together, across difference, we could (emergently) achieve something far more substantive than if we were to operate separately. But it went further, and there were moments in which the group's care for one another played a critical sustaining role. This enabled us to operate as a transindividual entity, by generating more capacity for activism and organising. I remember, for example, how energising the event we delivered at TWT was. There was a strong sense of the strength of the collective, and we discussed how important it was to have worked as a group to deliver the session. This is precisely the emergent

component. By operating collectively, we generated something bigger than the sum of our parts, not least a motivating sense of camaraderie. And this fits with the understanding of Corbynism as generating many such emergences, as was described in the previous chapter. But as this chapter has alluded to at various points, within this moment and in our wider work, perhaps the biggest challenge of this sense of a transindividual subject is around the negotiation of difference.

#### *5.4.2 Collectivity in difference*

The question that underpins a transversal collective is how we build collectivity in difference (Braidotti, 2019b). Or as Braidotti wrote, the task “is how to restore a sense of intersubjectivity that would allow for the recognition of differences to create a new kind of bonding, in an inclusive (i.e., nonexclusionary) manner” (1994, p. 36). One of the ways in which this can play out is by developing what Mohanty (2020) calls ‘dissident communities’. This aligns with the sense of minoritarian politics argued for in the previous discussion of emergence — Mohanty argues that we need to look for alternative information and alternative sites of knowledge, and we need to do the work of ‘materialist imagination’, where we deliberately create communities based on diversity. She argues that we need people from all kinds of different spaces talking about how different histories and politics intersect.

This reflects RSM’s ethos, including via the sense of difference or pluralism in the politics of the groups and individuals involved. As described earlier there were various political traditions represented, but there are also many organising approaches — from those who hold positions within their student unions, to

people like me who have operated more autonomously (and the people who do both roles at once), among other configurations. There were numerous pockets of power, we were not all aligned in our ideological views of how the world should be, nor did we always align in how to get there. In part because of that, specific ways of approaching those differences were required.

Dissident communities demand a transversal politics — this derives in part from standpoint epistemology, which comes from feminist theory. As Lykke documents, feminist transversal politics partially relates to “the method of establishing transversal conversations”, which was developed initially by Italian feminist peace activists in the 1990s and has been taken forward by various groups in different ways over the years (Lykke, 2020, p. 198). Lykke uses the work of Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis and summarises the approach as being about a conversation where participants both note their own stakes in the conversation, while “seriously trying to imagine what it takes to inhabit the situated perspective of their interlocutors, but without pretending that different positionings can be collapsed and power differentials erased” (2020, p. 198). This is a process of rooting (understanding one’s own position) and shifting (understanding another’s) (2020, p. 197).

What is critical to this type of transversal politics within an emergent framework is a sense of “the encompassment of difference by equality” (Yuval-Davis, 1999, p. 95) which itself means a comradely, solidaristic position. For Dean, being a comrade means having a “political relation of supported cover” (2019a, p. 3). More pragmatically, Dean suggests it is a way to address others: the term functions as “a mode of address, figure of belonging, and carrier of

expectations” (2019). In essence, comradeship is a form of political action that generates a collective fighting for change — and solidarity is a key aspect of comradeship (J Dean, 2019a). Comrades needs to include and be attuned to the minoritarian, the most marginalised, the most ‘cast aside’ (Mould, 2021). Most importantly, a politics of solidarity highlights the sense of personal interest at stake. The desire to generate collective change is in part is due to the personal benefit we hope to gain. Within solidaristic work "all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all" (Sundberg, 2007, p. 148).

This comes together in the sense of transversal politics. For Yuval-Davies, “[t]his means the recognition, on the one hand, that differences are important... but on the other hand, that notions of difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality” (1999, p. 95). Fundamentally, by not ‘pretending’ that difference can be erased suggests a specifically *transversal* sense of solidarity in which difference and equality are both acknowledged. Within RSM there were efforts made to negotiate across differences to build something more substantive, like the antiracism workshop. The strength of the nomad here is that she can relate (however fleetingly) to a much wider range of other positions. She can create moments of singularisation by working with and through diversity to create something new.

This sense of transversal collectives is reflected in dynamics within Corbynism more widely, where there was a temporary but meaningful alignment across the would-be hegemonic bloc. It was also reflected in practices like the policy labs at TWT, as discussed in the previous chapter. In that work, there were serious (albeit fledgling) attempts to develop a minoritarian politics. While the eventual

disintegration of the coalition points to its fragility, it still illuminates the possibility of a comprehensive attempt at ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’ — and an autonomous sense of creating space for the emergence of new collective subjects. But what is key to this negotiation of difference via singularisation in transversal politics is the importance of taking sides.

### *5.4.3 Taking sides*

Emergent, nomadic subjects operate as comrades,<sup>73</sup> which means they take sides. Unlike a nightmarish sense of inclusion, within the emergent collective subjects of bone-deep participation you are either on the side of those fighting for change (and thus a comrade), or you are not. This is what Braidotti is getting at when she talks about defending ‘grounded locations’ (2019b, p. 37).

Fundamentally, a key component of being a comrade is the sense of demarcation. While nightmare participation gives the illusion of choice, bone-deep participation demands you choose a side. This is critical. As Dean has written:

“We need to accept the reality of division, know whose side we are on, and fight to strengthen that side. We don’t need to convince everyone. Rather, we need to convince enough people to carry out the struggle and win.” (2019)

This sense of demarcation was core to the ethos of Corbynism also. As chapter one described in some detail, in the context of post-neoliberal conditions within

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<sup>73</sup> As noted earlier, the nomadic subject can contain other figures within her.

the UK, the movement was broadly counter-hegemonic and offered “a modest case for socialism” (Fisher, 2020). This ethos was reflected in the party’s rhetoric — when Corbyn was elected leader in 2015, for example, he said that “[o]ur Labour Party will always put people’s interests before profit” (Corbyn, 2015a). More extensively, the widely used slogan, ‘for the many not the few’ clearly demarcates these lines (The Labour Party, 2019). It establishes a position (‘for the’); as well as a side for whom we were fighting for (‘the many’); and the hegemonic bloc we are up against (‘the few’). Perhaps the best illustration of the way that Corbynism sought to create this kind of nomadic, collective subject who have taken sides (‘the many’) was through the explicit resourcing of community organisers, as outlined in chapter one.

Building on that discussion, one of the key aspects of those community organising units is the collective subject it created. The units looked beyond Labour Party membership and the standard electoral-focused form of political engagement that membership entails. Community organising is a way of generating new, emergent collective subjects through the establishment of a group of comrades. Critically, the desire that this mode of political work unlocked was successful. While electoral results are only a small element of this, they are a measurable outcome of shifting sentiments. As Lavery noted, “[i]n Yorkshire, the swing away from Labour in seats where community organisers operated was 3% compared to a regional swing of over 10%” (2020). This demonstrates how transformative the units could become, particularly if given more resource, including more time. As discussed in chapter two, the threat posed by this type of action was significant, and it resulted in the units eventually being shut down. As a reminder, the goal held by the ‘integrative’

component of the Labour Party is fundamentally to manage labour relations — to incorporate them into capitalism, rather than to transform those same relations (Hannah, 2018).

These dynamics also played out within RSM. In the first instance, our sense of comradeship comes from the shared political horizon discussed earlier. The range of counter-hegemonic views within the group have meant that we have been broadly against the financialisation of universities and all that entails: our ‘enemy’ is the wider hegemonic bloc responsible for this financialisation. While financialisation is a widely used term with multiple definitions, it can be broadly understood as “the intensive and extensive accumulation of interest bearing capital to such an extent that there are qualitative and quantitative transformations in both economic and social reproduction” (Bayliss, Fine and Robertson, 2017, p. 358). The way that this has played out within universities has led to some disastrous consequences.

Within higher education in the UK, as Horgan (2020) describes, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a rejection of the model of higher education in which the public essentially funded three- and four-year degrees. Key to the changes were the 2010 reforms introduced by the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat coalition government. For Horgan, this represents more of a ‘drift’ than an ‘extreme break’ to marketisation and neoliberalism, but it nonetheless results in some dramatic changes for universities. One of the key aspects of this was the government’s decision to significantly increase student fees — this resulted in “a deterioration of working conditions, overcrowded lecture halls, cuts to student support, and the prioritisation of a building spree to attract more and more

students”, much of which was done by the opening up of universities to private investors and companies, and in many cases has resulted in universities operating with significant debt (2020).

Thus, our ‘enemy’ includes the previous Labour government who arguably are responsible for laying the groundwork for many of these changes within higher education (Askew and Birtwistle, 1999), the university managers who implement these changes, the Conservative government under whom these changes are being accelerated, as well as property developers, financiers, banks and more. It is critical that the RSM group has taken sides — and that we defend our ‘grounded locations’ (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 37). The camaraderie that comes from having a shared enemy (however much that is a vague or moving target) is substantive and helps to negate the nomad’s tendency towards flightiness. But within a transversal political framework, the search for unity through the identification of a common ground and an enemy means partially downplaying our personal identities.

#### *5.4.4 Downplaying identity*

It is critical that transversal collectives deprioritise personal identity, but this can be particularly challenging. As noted earlier, identity is key to the contributory autonomy of nightmare participation — but in our work, it acts as a barrier to the formation of a transversal collective. In part this is because it does not enable singularisation, which requires a move away from classification. This is key to the nomad. As Braidotti has said:

“I think we have to start from eliminating identities. We will never arrive anywhere if we identity as a starting point [sic]. In fact the whole process of becoming is a process of abandoning identity and entering in the construction of subjectivity, subjectivity being per definition transversal, collective.” (2018)

This tension is particularly difficult. As Dean explains via the work of Silva and Lane, identity is continually reinforced as the primary sense of legitimacy in the world — in particular, there is a difficult sense that identities are more valuable when they are marginalised. In this context sacrificing our identity “feels like a demand to sacrifice one’s own best thing, yet again, and for nothing” (2016). It is a salient example of another means by which hegemony is articulated. As is consistent with liberal identity politics more generally, this works by pitting our personal (and supposedly stable) identities *against* counter-hegemonic work. Further, and to complicate matters, the renouncing of identity within the nomad’s continuous movement means we partially replicate the negative freedom of hegemony. While Braidotti argues that nomadism is “vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularisation of the self” (1994, p. 16) this sense of being *able* to sideline identify and being *able* to continually relocate (even intellectually) is problematic. This is because, as Tamboukou (2021) reminds us, there is a certain abstraction happening at the level of a figure like the nomad, which sidesteps real world conditions.

Tamboukou’s critique oscillates around the nomadic subject’s contemporaneous relationship to real lives. She asks if we can continue to use the nomadic subject given how many displaced people have been forced into

nomadism in recent years. She instead argues that philosophy must “respond to or walk alongside new forms of subjectivity that emerge from their entanglement in the world, not the other way around” (2021, p. 15). This is precisely why the nomad is discussed in relation to the real-world experience of organising with RSM. Tamboukou proposes the figure of the ‘non-nomad’, who is not a negation of the nomad, “but rather points to its shadows and margins” (2021, p. 20). Critically, in this framing the non-nomad is demythologised, but a sense of political imaginary remains (Tamboukou, 2021).

Within RSM, in our immanent present, many students do not have the material resources, and often the inclination, to side-line identity and to ‘connect, circulate, move’. For example, we had a relative absence of organisers from groups working directly around issues that stem from racialised and colonial structures — Palestinian solidarity, migration, the hostile environment, and abolition stand out, but there are others. Importantly, many in the group are working on or around these issues to varying degrees. But while almost everyone has a sense of nomadic allegiance to these causes, the group were brought together through different logics, namely the commonality of being precarious students, with a shared enemy — one that was less based on identity. But this means that RSM’s work has not always aligned with the needs of the most (racially) marginalised students — including the international students relying on foodbanks, students who have experienced racial trauma, students who are forced migrants or who otherwise have a precarious immigration status. For a short time, we were a somewhat prominent left student group in the UK, and consistent with Blühdorn et al’s (2022) analysis, it is feasible that our organising partially dominated the space of student politics.

Our experience of partially side-lining identity arguably resulted in an inability to achieve a fully-fledged minoritarian praxis.

This was also reflected in the challenges within Corbynism's would-be hegemonic bloc. As discussed in chapter one, this bloc reflected the Labour Party's ongoing uncertainty about what its political coalition should be (Bassett and Gilbert, 2021); it was always a 'fractious' alliance (Bhattacharyya, 2020a); and it excluded many — particularly but not exclusively the working class<sup>74</sup> (Waugh, 2018). Corbynism did pay particular attention to some (although not all) of the UK's 'minoritarian' causes to varying degrees of success, including via the increased prominence of fights for racial and gender equality that were discussed in chapter one. For example, Corbyn spoke specifically about the increase in "black, Asian and ethnic minority members joining our party", and about how members of the party were increasingly united by a sense of solidarity that was about "not walking by on the other side of the street when people are in trouble" (2015a).

However, in the spaces I was in, one of the biggest challenges was the movement's fundamental omission of a wider internationalist agenda — as per some of the tensions outlined in chapter one, for example around the Green Industrial Revolution. This points to the same dynamic Blühdorn et al (2022) discuss. There is a significant tension at the heart of the British left's demand for workers' rights in the UK, and the impact of these demands internationally. This is a longstanding issue, "where socialists orient to electoral politics alone,

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<sup>74</sup> While I was canvassing, for example, I remember someone I was with complaining that there were not enough working-class people door-knocking. They went on to say that roughly half of the people they had met were PhD students. I cannot remember, but I suspect I did not tell them I was one of those students too.

internationalism seems to melt away” (Dale, 2017). It points more generally to the type of ‘freedom’ we have within the UK, and on whose lives it has been built. And while this is where the nomad falls short, it is also where the non-nomad and the solidaristic comrade are critical for highlighting these blindspots. This points to the salience of the figures of political action that are developed throughout this thesis.

#### *5.4.5 Figures of political action*

As noted in the introduction, this research identifies several figures, who each speak to different forms of political action within a nomadic collective subject. They are, as one comrade described them, a ‘polyphony’ of figures. So far, our figures include the militant, the comrade, the non-nomad, the Acid Corbynist and the radical diplomat. Soon we’ll meet the ignorant schoolmaster and the pedagogista. In the final chapter of this thesis, all the figures will be brought together to identify and examine where the moments of emancipation within this research have been, and to understand what this tells us about political participation within Corbynism. Further, my comrades and I could contain all the figures expressed: these figures can be ‘held’, transversally, within the nomadic subject.<sup>75</sup>

As Haraway has asked, “[c]ould there be a family of figures who would populate our imagination of these post-colonial, postmodern worlds that would not be quite as imperializing in terms of a single figuration of identity?” (1990, p. 8).

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<sup>75</sup> As mentioned earlier, the nomad (to repeat the quote) — is “a creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, of experience and of knowledge” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 5).

These figures partially advance the ‘cartographic’ project advanced within critical posthumanism. For Braidotti, “a cartography is a theoretically-based and politically-informed account of the present that aims at tracking the production of knowledge and subjectivity (Braidotti, 1994, 2011a, 2011b) and to expose power both as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)” (2019a, p. 33). The aim here is thus to identify a cartography of figures of political action who speak to the Corbyn moment (particularly my and my comrades experience of it) and who point to where power is being gained and lost, as Braidotti suggests, and who help us to recognise our blind spots and our omissions.

## **5.5 Collective futures?**

What was the relationship between the individual and the group within Corbynism? What does this tell us about how the collective operates within bone-deep participation? Ultimately, can we overturn the “oppressive cultural norms which define our worldview” (Reinsborough, 2004, p. 2)? This militant research with RSM points to some of the options at our disposal. This chapter sought to describe the centrality of emergent collective subjects to bone-deep participation. I then explored how one of these emergent collective subjects — namely a nomadic subject position — has operated via a discussion of my experience working with RSM. I argue that the broad conception of the nomad (‘connecting, circulating, moving on’) aligns with the nature of RSM. However, it is important to be attuned to the specificity of our real-world positions within this nomadic movement and this is where the non-nomad and the solidaristic comrade help. Part of the salience of these figures is in enabling learning, which is addressed more concretely in the next chapter.

## Chapter six: Dangerous pedagogy

This chapter examines how pedagogy functioned within Corbynism. I focus particularly on the digital platform<sup>76</sup> WhatsApp, which has played a central role in Corbynism and post-Corbynism. The platform is becoming “a major global communications channel” (Caetano *et al.*, 2018, p. 1)<sup>77</sup> and within the networks I am part of it is popular amongst people engaged in relatively low-risk political organising. It is an instant messenger platform most people use on their phones, although you can use it on a web browser alongside the phone version too. It is owned by the corporation Meta<sup>78</sup> and your data is used by the company, although the company claims the messages themselves are encrypted (WhatsApp, 2022).

This chapter starts by describing how pedagogy operates within nightmare and bone-deep participation. I then draw on posthuman thinking to suggest that WhatsApp is a hybrid human machine: my comrades and I are ‘becoming WhatsApp’.<sup>79</sup> I briefly clarify how, as a hybrid human machine, WhatsApp works pedagogically. This relies in part on the insights of the pedagogista (Vintimilla, 2018), another figure of political action within this thesis. With this framing in mind, I analyse what WhatsApp is ‘teaching’ us, and what we are teaching WhatsApp. I end with the argument that WhatsApp generates a problematic but also compelling space of counter-hegemonic activity.

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<sup>76</sup> For clarity, I generally use the word platform to refer to the infrastructure of WhatsApp, and the word network to refer to the set of relations that emerge from the platform. This distinction comes from Montero and Finger (2021).

<sup>77</sup> In February 2020, the company claimed that two billion people were using it (Meta, 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Previously Facebook.

<sup>79</sup> As elsewhere in this thesis, my focus is predominately on the WhatsApp groups that am in or was in, as part of the wider Corbyn and post-Corbyn movement.

## 6.1 Nightmare pedagogy

Pedagogy functions differently within nightmare and bone-deep participation. Within nightmare participation, pedagogy works as an expression of managerialism that offers the same sense of ‘choice’ described in chapter three. Pollitt describes managerialism as “an ideology which positions better management as transformative” (2014, p. 3). It reflects the belief that bringing more managers and management into both the public and private sector is the most effective way to improve service delivery and to generate profit (Shepherd, 2018). Shepherd (2018) identifies five components. These are that management is both “important and a good thing”; that management should operate as a “discrete operation” primarily focused on organisational strategy; that management is both “rational and value neutral” and should be driven by processes involving defining problems, gathering data, developing solutions, and evaluation; that it is “generic and universally applicable” and there are a set of “generic management skills” that can be widely applied; and that “managers should be granted the right to manage” (2018, pp. 1672–1674). This is a highly technical approach that is consistent with nightmare participation’s broader depoliticising function. As Moini writes, participatory projects often work in a way where “the stakes are thematized and exclusively represented in technical terms, neglecting their political meaning” (2017, p. 136).

Within this, the sense of ‘choice’ is essentially a reframing of the options available to citizens — but fundamentally reflects a drive towards the market (Deakin, 1994). It teaches citizens how to act by offering choices that are

consistent with market logics and needs. This recalls the arguments made by Blühdorn and Butzlaff that were set out in chapter three around the prevalence of what they call ‘managed behaviour’, which they say is “guided by choice architects aiming to correct erroneous beliefs of citizens about their true best interests” (2020, p. 137). It also relates to their sense of “the responsabilization of consumers” where citizens are expected to rationally examine competing options within the market and whose “consumer power, supposedly, puts them in a position to address particular problems” (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020, p. 382). This discourages participants from asking more substantive questions. It thus fundamentally works to depoliticise and to articulate and reterritorialise hegemony.

However, pedagogy in nightmare participation does not happen principally *between* citizens. Instead, as Clarke describes it, often “ordinary people are involved in a sort of *inverse pedagogic practice* in which their role is to teach the state (and its agencies) what it cannot know by itself, or at least has trouble discovering through other means” (2017, p. 28). Clarke notes that people are being socialised as the agent of government. Hegemony is being upheld through the creation of hegemonic subjects — by creating processes by which we increasingly embody, and stand up for, the oppressive systems that dominate us, and that generate negative freedom. As with Clarke, Moini notes that in roughly the last twenty years of participatory practice there has been “a sort of social pedagogy and patronisingly political approach” in operation (2017, p. 131).

For example, one of the most comprehensive examples of this form of pedagogy in the UK in recent years has been the drive towards localism. A brief discussion of these trends highlights some of the challenges around pedagogy within nightmare participation. Localism represents a political programme that argues for devolving power and resources to local levels — cities, towns, parishes — in a way that prioritises ‘choice’ (Hastings and Matthews, 2015). But, in the UK in recent years, the form of localism on offer has been increasingly described as ‘austerity localism’ — see, for example, (Ahrens, Ferry and Khalifa, 2019). This version of localism is affected by severe budget cuts, which have generally constrained the ability of local government to be able to integrate the participatory processes they were being asked to deliver (Ahrens, Ferry and Khalifa, 2019). Further, localism operates pedagogically in a duplicitous way. As Hastings and Matthews note, it seems “to empower the powerful by providing a beneficial context for the strategic deployment of agency... It places a clear responsibility on citizens to identify their own needs and then to act on these” (2015, p. 555). This reflects, as with the description of the liberal individual in chapter one, a similar emphasis on the rational individual.

## **6.2 Bone-deep dangerous pedagogy**

The form of pedagogy generated within bone-deep participation stands in contrast to managerialism: it is deterritorialising and it is ‘dangerous’ (Giroux, 2010). The Brazilian educator and theorist Freire looms large within radical education theory and practice. Freire (2017) described the mainstream approach to education as a ‘banking’ model of education, in which learners are

taught by rote what to learn (partially recalling nightmare participation's managerial pedagogy). He advocated, instead, for a more engaged and critical pedagogy in which learners were empowered to reflect on their own lives and histories in a politicised way. The idea is that these reflections will be broadly deterritorialising, and that through them people will realise the nature of their oppressions and will go out and try to create counter-hegemonic change. In this, he was aware that critical pedagogy could be dangerous (Giroux, 2010) — it could act as a form of consciousness-raising, to recall the discussions in chapter four, that spurs people into action.

Freire was also interested in the way that life was “conditioned, not determined” (Giroux, 2010), and part of how this ‘conditioning’ works relates to the centrality of political action, as a pedagogical space in which learning takes place. As Giroux writes:

“For Freire, pedagogy is not a method or an *a priori* technique to be imposed on all students but a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy.” (2010, p. 716)

This emphasis on practice — on the development of democratic skills — is key to radical pedagogy. And within this practice, dangerous pedagogy requires relationships to be generated *between* learners — unlike the citizen/state relationship required by nightmare participation's pedagogy. The mutuality of the connection between the student and the teacher is a key component of this.

While this is a complex relationship that will be explored in more detail shortly, what is critical is that the ‘teacher’ adopts a sense of humility in relation to their own shortcomings, and that both parties engage in an ongoing dialogue in which different ideas can be explored (Freire, 2017).

In many respects, Corbynite political education sought to emulate Freire’s ethos. This needs to be situated within the history of political education in the UK and particularly the political education driven by the Labour Party. Barnett (2018) discusses the role of socialist educational initiatives in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noting that via “boxing and cycling clubs, gyms, pubs, libraries, musical groups, and schools”, the initiatives sought to improve the lives of working class people. What was critical about these spaces was the sustaining role they played, as well as their role building confidence and capacity. However, after World War II, as “the Labour Party developed into a party of real administrative clout... this infrastructural work was deemed no longer strategically worthwhile” (Barnett, 2018).

Corbynism saw an upsurge in political education — the community organising units described in chapter one and briefly analysed in the previous chapter are an excellent example of one of the more compelling spaces of political education within the movement. In 2018, Blackburn provided an analysis of political education and the Labour movement in the UK. He suggested that what was key was for Labour members to be “encouraged to organise and formulate their own political demands, enhance their political understanding and self-confidence, and be equipped to make use of democratised policy-making structures” (2018). Aligning with Freire, he argued that there needed to be ways

for people to make the connections between their experiences and frustrations and the way that changing social conditions could help to alleviate oppression (Blackburn, 2018). What is critical for Blackburn is that emancipatory pedagogy is not just about giving 'voice' to the oppressed, but also the means and tools to actually create change.

This reflects an interest in developing democratic skills, as per a wider radical education orientation. Waugh writes about 'what Freire would say to Jeremy Corbyn', and suggests that "whereas people at the bottom of Brazilian society in the 1960s were disempowered by illiteracy, people at the bottom of UK society now are disempowered by a deprivation of democratic 'skills'" (2018, p. 23).

This is also reflected in the idea that within social movements, education should not become marginalised from the "day-to-day politics, as a playground for those who enjoy such things but irrelevant to most members" (Cox, 2019, p. 100). Corbynism did seek, in sometimes fragile ways, opportunities for more people to gain those democratic skills.

However, the forms of political education available throughout the period were inconsistent, and sometimes haphazard. Because the movement appeared relatively quickly there was a rush to create political education spaces and programmes: numerous people I met early on in this research, for example, told me that what the wider movement 'needed' was extensive and freely available political education. However, as noted in chapter three, much of the political strategy within the movement could be understood as 'in, against and beyond', and thus slightly ambivalent. The Labour Party did provide a coherent structure for some aspects of how new people could be brought into the movement,

particularly in tandem with Momentum’s organising tools described in chapter one, and the activities of various other groups, like trade unions. But more widely, opportunities for political education were not always available, and activities were often not as effective as they could have been. The latter was for a myriad of reasons including funding shortcomings and difficulties reaching audiences (Ranford, 2022). With this complex picture in mind, it makes sense that WhatsApp became a key locus of transversal political education because it was a critical space within which people came together to make things happen - to recall the centrality of praxis within radical education.

### **6.3 Becoming WhatsApp**

In my own experiences within Corbynism and post-Corbynism (the General Election and work with RSM, but also work with TWT, and the various other projects mentioned in the introduction) a huge amount of the actual *organising* has taken place on WhatsApp. In the organising school, the form of nomadic subjectivity and the moments of singularisation described in the previous chapter have been generated and strengthened through WhatsApp. Much of the consciousness-raising within the General Election took place on the platform — including (as noted in chapter two) via the memes that were being shared. This means that the pedagogy that happens in those organising spaces has been partially shaped by the way WhatsApp works, and the role it is playing in our lives.

Studies of WhatsApp are increasingly demonstrating how central it has become. Research from Mexico City, for example, argues that the use of WhatsApp

amongst the population is so widespread that the network needs to be understood as a ‘technology of life’ (Cruz and Harindranath, 2020).<sup>80</sup> The various forms of social distancing generated by the COVID-19 pandemic have made our reliance on platforms like WhatsApp even more salient. As Davies and Gane (2021) argue, it is not possible to discuss the pandemic without also discussing platforms, including the way they sustain and reconfigure our lives. They reference work by Plantin et al (2018) to note that the platforms now operate as ‘social infrastructure’, despite the fact that the technology companies are run by corporations. This speaks to the transversal nature of WhatsApp — the idea that “[e]ven as we continue to participate in digital networks, we should keep in mind that participation is full of contradictions, and those contradictions define our contemporary existence” (Mejias, 2013, p. 160).

These contradictions are key to the ways in which WhatsApp today intersects with democracy — to recall the discussion in chapter three about the complex interplay between democracy and political participation. Mejias’s (2013) book, *Off the network: disrupting the digital world*, was published before WhatsApp had become as prominent as it is today. He is writing about digital networks in general, but he suggests that the form of the network is late capitalism’s foremost operating logic. He maps out the two core arguments, with one side seeing participation via online networks as a key tool to strengthen the public, while the other perspective is to see networks as “merely a tool of surveillance and regulation, making us more vulnerable to state control, further transforming

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<sup>80</sup> They use the phrase technology of life “to highlight the ways in which life is expanded, experienced, and has become increasingly dependent on certain technologies” (Cruz and Harindranath, 2020).

us into a mass” (2013, p. 68). The way that the latter works aligns with nightmare participation.

Digital participation is perhaps the foremost way that nightmare participation articulates a wider process of depoliticisation today. This depoliticisation is hugely driven by the saturation of digital platforms, and their affective registers, which broadly align with the affective registers of neoliberalism. Platforms like WhatsApp provide instant gratification that fades almost immediately, and this makes them addictive. As the ‘technology venture capitalist’ (Forbes, 2021) Chamath Palihapitiya, who worked at Facebook in the early years of its creation has said, the “short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have create are destroying how society works... [these platforms are] eroding the core foundations of how people behave” (*On Money as an Instrument of Change*, 2017). In relation to political organising specifically, many platforms simply offer ways to share information, rather than organise (Mejias, 2013). And this means that often, they do not only fail to move us to counter-hegemonic action, but they further solidify neoliberal subjectivities. As Forrester (2021) argues, the ‘social industry’ does not transform our worst behaviours — but instead concretises them.

Further, because digital networks are increasing our ability to participate we often overlook their corporate ownership (Mejias, 2013). As Rustin writes, “powerful commercial entities— including internet corporations such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and Amazon, the giant industrial monopolies of the twenty-first century— control and manage these infrastructures to their own profit-seeking advantage” (2019, p. 60). Critically, there is a lack of oversight

about what is happening on these platforms from governments, and because of this some argue the platforms have become 'dystopian' (Rustin, 2019, p. 60). For example, the far right have been quick to utilise digital technology's potential for stoking nationalism (Jiménez-Martínez and Mihelj, 2021) and in relation to WhatsApp specifically, at present the platform can share some user information, for example the length of time you spend on the platform (Newman, 2021). This data is, of course, being sold and utilised for profit, as per the wider neoliberal 'choice' agenda. Further, cases are emerging of WhatsApp selectively abandoning their claims to accessibility (for example by temporarily suspending the accounts of Palestinian journalists (Al Jazeera and News agencies, 2021)) and to privacy (it is becoming clearer that under certain circumstances, the content of messages is also not protected (Pfefferkorn, 2021)).

Consistent with nightmare participation more broadly, this reinforces hegemony. Mejiias uses Dean's sense of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009a), where participation is about having "the *ability* to communicate, to express one's opinion, in particular about the—mostly commercial—choices that give individuals their identity" (my emphasis) (2013, p. 21). Recalling the centrality of political 'choice' within the nightmarish options available to us, the risk is not that we will be removed from the platforms, but that we will be unable to resist participating (Mejiias, 2013). This is particularly profound in relation to WhatsApp, given how pervasive it is — it has become what Mejiias calls an episteme. He writes:

“The network episteme reinforces a narrative where participation is productive, while nonparticipation is destructive. Within the network, everything. Outside the network, nothing. All forms of participation are allowed, as long as they submit to the organizing logic of the network. Participation itself then becomes the only means of expressing difference.” (2013, p. 27)

At the same time, within this episteme, and as will be discussed more shortly, political participation on WhatsApp can also work towards more emancipatory ends. This reflects a complex relationship to scientific rationality and technology more broadly. Drawing on Haraway, Braidotti (1994) notes that our political challenge is to articulate how science is *both* dominating and liberating. And this aligns with other framings within this thesis: the autonomous argument that what drives change is workers rather than capital, and the idea that political participation is always potentially transversal.

This aligns with how WhatsApp works. As Mejias suggests, networks create “decentralized and ungovernable multitudes” — in contrast to “the state, the digital network is experienced as personal, heterogeneous, fluid, and not bound to a territory” (2013, p. 70). And, within the ‘ungovernable multitude’ WhatsApp creates — which aligns with a sense of emergent strategy — pedagogy is taking place. As Ünlüsoy, Leander, and de Haan note, “[s]ocial networks have the potential to be provocative spaces in which learners are challenged to approve or dismiss the visible information, or to evaluate and react (individually or in groups), which makes such networks important for stimulating thinking or discussion” (2022, p. 84). This means WhatsApp is a machine. This works both

literally, in terms of the technological, machinic processes that make the platform operate on our phones and computers, but also in terms of the sense of machines that Deleuze and Guattari set out, in terms of the way that WhatsApp *produces*. As Savat (2009) argues, Deleuze saw machines as social before they were technical. We thus need to think about what, exactly, they are socially producing. A posthuman lens is useful here.

One of the core arguments made within posthumanism is that there are numerous ways in which our selves are increasingly blurred in relation to the technologies we have so readily adopted (Braidotti, 2019b). This is particularly salient in terms of the fact that so many participatory opportunities today are digitally mediated, and we need to be cognisant of the implications of this. This aspect of posthumanism means it complements the arguments about conjunctural analysis developed in chapter one in particular ways. Our imbrication with technology is partially grounded in the specificity of our time — it relies on technological developments in recent years. Braidotti (2019b) has in fact described our moment as a ‘posthuman convergence’ to illustrate the ‘nowness’ of the critique.

The idea that humans and machines are merging is significant. As Hickey-Moody and Page write: “[b]odies and things are not as separate as we were once taught” and instead, they are “porous” (2016, p. 2). This porosity needs to be examined because it includes the way that WhatsApp is a response to our behaviour, and the way that WhatsApp changes our behaviour. Writing from a new materialist perspective, Roseik, Snyder and Pratt say that what is at stake in our pedagogical analysis “is not just how the object of our inquiries are

understood differently in our enquiries, but also how are we ourselves becoming different through inquiry and how our relationships with the other agents in our inquiries are transformed" (2019, p. 6). In addition, posthuman works to undo anthropomorphism, and pays specific attention to matter and non-human life (Braidotti, 2019b). Thus, one of the most crucial aspects of this analysis in terms of what WhatsApp is producing — what it is teaching us — from both a posthuman and a new materialist perspective, is about the agency of the machines themselves. For Sidebottom (2021), this means an attention to the material ‘agents’ in our classrooms that are often overlooked. When Dolphijn and Tuin interviewed the new materialist Barad, she argued that “[m]atter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire.... Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns, and remembers” (2012a, p. 59). In the ‘classroom’ that is this militant research, WhatsApp is a clear material agent that is frequently overlooked in terms of its pedagogical capacity. There is a sense of becoming, and emergence here — we do not entirely know what is happening in these processes or what, exactly, the agency of the machines we engage with is producing. We need to proceed with caution: the networks we participate in shape us in ways that we are sometimes unaware of (Mejias, 2013).

Thus, WhatsApp works both as a form of digital matter that has its own vibrancy, and its own ‘desires’ (Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012a), while at the same time, the relationship between the human and the machine that is WhatsApp is increasingly blurry. As noted, to build out the analysis of what exactly is happening in these complex relations, a pedagogical framing has been used. In this, I am partially summoning the figure — the mode of political action — that is the pedagogista. She “traditionally troubles and problematizes engrained

assumptions and ways of understanding education” (Sidebottom, 2021), and thinks about other possibilities for pedagogy (Vintimilla, 2018). And, part of the pedagogista’s contribution is to seriously consider the autonomous argument in terms of who is driving change — we also need to consider the idea that we are also ‘teaching’ WhatsApp something.

#### **6.4 Minor theory**

In part because of our agency in terms of what we might ‘teach’ WhatsApp, this discussion can be understood as an expression of minor theory. Following the introduction of this mode of work in chapter four, minor theory helps us to understand how capitalism and hegemony are upheld, and the options we have for dismantling them (Katz, 1996). Minor theory looks to ‘read’ the major (here WhatsApp) through the minor (here this militant research). This approach is particularly apt in relation to WhatsApp, where the forms of knowledge production that focus on analysing big data often (but not always) do little to break down WhatsApp’s behemoth status, or to find the cracks within it.<sup>81</sup> It also fits with the understanding of militant research offered by *Colectivo Situaciones*. They suggest that to do militant research in ways that subvert or do not align to academic rules means to create “a positive connection with subaltern, dispersed, and hidden knowledges, and the production of a body of practical knowledges of counter power” (2003).

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<sup>81</sup> For example, one study describes the decision to use a more expansive analysis of WhatsApp beyond data analytics, and argues that they needed “different frameworks, modes of engagement and methodologies that are attentive to local political-cultural milieus” in order to better respond to “different and interesting modalities of technological use” (Cruz and Harindranath, 2020).

This chapter examines the everyday research practices I have engaged in but with a specific interest in the way that these have worked pedagogically. As Giroux relays, thinking about pedagogy needs to “begin at those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations” (2000, p. 355). This also links to some of the initial pedagogical propositions within cultural studies. Turner explains that one of the things that cultural studies has emphasised is that the ‘informal knowledge’ we have is valuable (Turner, 2013). Participating in Corbynism and post-Corbynism has meant a significant amount of time spent in ‘mundane acts of everyday relations’ on WhatsApp, to use Giroux’s framing. To give some sense of these mundane relations, it is useful to briefly detail some of my own experience — my own ‘informal knowledge’, gained via WhatsApp.

My participation on WhatsApp has varied in intensity, but rarely in consistency. For example, there are many groups in which I am simply a ‘lurker’ (Andrews, Nonnecke and Preece, 2004), and read the debates back and forth. Particularly in the groups I helped to set up, I am more active, depending on what we are working on or organising. Conversely, as noted in chapter two, there have been (admittedly short) moments when I have needed to take a break from WhatsApp. As Jones et al recount, one of their researchers kept a journal of their use of WhatsApp, particularly throughout the 2019 election. This “recounts spoiled special occasions and intimate family time, sleep deprivation due to late night WhatsApp conversations” (2021, p. 209), all of which is familiar. For example, perhaps the most sensible decision I have made in recent years was to enforce a rule of putting my phone away in the evening — rather than sitting

scrolling through and responding to messages until late at night. Nonetheless, I generally have WhatsApp open all day on my computer, and I try to keep ‘on top’ of messages.

One particular WhatsApp group I am in is of note. Towards the beginning of the election period in late 2019, some friends and I sent out an invite to anyone we were in touch with whom we thought might want to go out canvassing. One Monday night, fifteen people were at my house discussing the election and their personal reasons for wanting to engage with it. I outlined various ways Labour and Momentum were suggesting people could get involved, and we made plans (via WhatsApp) to join canvassing sessions and initially to create and share memes. I joined several other WhatsApp groups, but it was the original one that proved to be the most fruitful. It changed name a few times before we settled on ‘Broadband communism’ — a reference to Labour’s manifesto pledge to introduce free broadband across the country (The Labour Party, 2019). Most of the people in that group (me included) had not been out canvassing before. But that sense of collectivity was motivating and many within that group spent significant hours out on the streets that December.

I relay these examples because they point to some of the ‘data’ this chapter draws on — alongside the academic materials. Backer and Cairns write that they want to start “[t]hinking about organizing pedagogically — centering the material conditions of activism, or the ritual practices involved in trying to change relations of production” (2017). WhatsApp is both a ritual practice and a material condition of organising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To assess how, exactly, WhatsApp is operating pedagogically, there are several features of the way that

it works that need to be discussed. The first is the way that it is pervasive and intimate.

### **6.5 Lesson I: pervasiveness, intimacy**

The first insight, for the pedagogista, is that WhatsApp is everywhere, and part of the reason for this is that it is intimate. As noted, WhatsApp for many is a “technology of life” — it has become how we organise work, the informal economy, and relationships, among other things (Cruz and Harindranath, 2020). It is “perceived as a highly versatile, all-encompassing space of encounter, meaning-making, and coordination where entrance barriers are low and exit costs are high” (Boczkowski, Matassi and Mitchelstein, 2019, p. 2195). Part of the reason WhatsApp is so pervasive is because it is free (Montag *et al.*, 2015), at least in terms of the fact that we do not get charged fees to use it. This ties into the findings that WhatsApp could be addictive (Montag *et al.*, 2015). For example, the network shapes a certain type of responsiveness, due to a function where you can see whether people have ‘seen’ your message.<sup>82</sup> This encourages you to respond as soon as you receive a message, to avoid being seen as impolite.

But there are demographic differences here. As Matassi found, young people were more likely “to configure the application to exert some control over the flow of content” — this was also the group who most saw WhatsApp as a ‘given’

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<sup>82</sup> In direct messages (between you and one other person), once your message is sent, there is a single grey tick in the corner of the message. Once the message is ‘delivered’ (once it is accessible on the receiver’s phone), two grey ticks replace the single tick. And once the message is ‘read’ – once the receiver has opened the thread with the message in it, two blue ticks replace the grey ticks. In group messages, you can select a message and see who has ‘read’ it.

component of their lives (2019). This fits with this militant research — getting added to WhatsApp groups happens all the time, and it is so rare that someone will not be able to access the platform that even the most considerate organisers I have worked with usually assume most people have it. What is interesting about the demographic differences is that younger people are by default more likely to be ‘digital natives’<sup>83</sup>, or the group who are the *most* posthuman in their imbrication with technology. Fundamentally, WhatsApp — at present — feels inescapable, but it is also somewhat promising that the *most* posthuman users of WhatsApp are more comfortable in shaping it in ways that work for them.

Part of the reason we want to respond quickly — part of the way that our desire is being directed — is because we experience a relatively close connection to people on WhatsApp, since it is structured as a ‘private’ space. Marc Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Meta, has suggested that people want to connect privately in the digital equivalent of a ‘living room’ (Zuckerberg, 2021). As WhatsApp argue on their blog:

“Our mission is to connect the world privately. As more of our conversations move from face-to-face to digital, we acknowledge there is a certain magic in just sitting down with someone in-person, sharing your thoughts in confidence, knowing you are both connecting in private and in that moment. The freedom to be honest and vulnerable, knowing that

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<sup>83</sup> While this is a contested term, its broadest application is the idea that younger people have not known a world in which their use of digital technology, and particularly the internet, is not freely available. For a discussion of this and some of the challenges to this view, see (Selwyn, 2009)

conversation isn't being recorded and stored somewhere forever.”

(*WhatsApp Blog*, no date)

This is a highly political shift (Williams *et al.*, 2022). Williams et al suggest that the sense of a digital living room is an ‘intimate’ space that “constructs a familiar and trusted space for knowledge exchange away from the surveillance of governments”, which relies on three assumptions (2022, p. 322). These are around the perception of safety; the idea that “digital private spaces are inclusive and apolitical”; and that governments will not intervene “to craft their own vision of “democracy”” (2022, p. 322). They describe this as a process that tries to ‘domesticate’ WhatsApp — while also putting democracy into the domestic sphere (2022, p. 322).

This is partly achieved through a reinforcement of the ‘invisibility’ (Mejias, 2013) of anyone not on your list of contacts. You can either message people directly or you can set up groups on WhatsApp, and while there is a ‘broadcast’ function, this still only applies to individuals or groups.<sup>84</sup> This privacy equates to exclusion, which expresses a certain unconscious desire. As Mejias writes, “... while the digital network increases the means of participation in society — as celebrated in much of the current literature — it also increases socioeconomic inequality in ways that we have not yet fully begun to understand” (2013, p. 3). In many cases, and as a study of far right WhatsApp groups in India demonstrated, one of the ways in which inequality has been furthered through WhatsApp is through the ways in which ‘interest groups’ have solidified

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<sup>84</sup> In a broadcast group, only the administrators of the group can send the messages – everyone else can only read them. If they are not a broadcast group, anyone in the group can message. In this militant research, in general, when we have set up small groups for specific things (for example, organising an event or workshop or similar), the group will be used for the duration of that project, then will go completely quiet.

worldviews while at the same time decreasing “democratic modes of diversity and dissent” (Williams *et al.*, 2022, p. 323). As noted earlier in this chapter, one of the core features of pedagogy within bone-deep participation — in comparison to nightmare participation — is that it generates connections *between* participants based on dialogue and humility, rather than between participants and the state. And as the previous chapter argued, the sense of demarcation<sup>85</sup> is critical for a politics of solidaristic comradeship. But when it becomes difficult to express dissent, those group dynamics are a critical ‘lesson’ WhatsApp teaches us.

Adding to this picture, research has found differences in the way that it is used by political and non-political groups (Caetano *et al.*, 2018). Of particular relevance here are the findings that in political groups, “users are in fact engaging in an exchange of postings, which can be thought of as a dialogue between the various players between the leaders and her audience as well as between members of the group catalyzed by a given theme” (Caetano *et al.*, 2018, p. 8). And in these dialogues there are usually a lot of users who actively follow that dialogue, but do not themselves post many messages (Caetano *et al.*, 2018). They call this group ‘interested users’, the leaders in the political WhatsApp group ‘hosts’, and the interlockers as ‘guests’ (Caetano *et al.*, 2018). However, being an interested user — that ‘lurking’ — is partially a process of self-censorship. As Mejias writes, “[a]lthough much has been said on how decentralized networks spell the end of censorship, we are only just beginning to understand how participation in networks fosters certain kinds of self-

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<sup>85</sup> For clarity, the demarcation between the group of comrades fighting for change and everyone else.

“censorship” (2013, p. 48). And a dynamic in which a few leaders play an outsized role in shaping the group’s content while others self-censor is problematic.

If WhatsApp functions as a pervasive and private (and in my experience comradely) space, while at the same time operating as a space in which dissent is difficult and self-censorship is rife, there are questions of desire and the unconscious to explore. Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper,<sup>86</sup> Davies summarises his take on the consequences of these dynamics:

“As any frequent user of WhatsApp or a closed Facebook group will recognise, the moral anxiety associated with groups is rather different. If the worry in an open network is of being judged by some outside observer, be it one’s boss or an extended family member, in a closed group it is of saying something that goes against the codes that anchor the group’s identity. Groups can rapidly become dominated by a certain tone or worldview that is uncomfortable to challenge and nigh-impossible to dislodge. WhatsApp is a machine for generating feelings of faux pas, as comments linger in a group’s feed, waiting for a response. This means that while groups can generate high levels of solidarity, which can in principle be put to powerful political effect, it also becomes harder to express disagreement within the group.” (Davies, 2020)

Davies goes on to argue that one of the benefits of the privacy of WhatsApp is that it “means intimacy with those we care about and an ability to speak freely; on the negative side, it injects an ethos of secrecy and suspicion into the public

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<sup>86</sup> While there are several studies of WhatsApp, I have been unable to find many accounts of the platform that describe how it *feels* to use it – hence why I have drawn on an article from a newspaper.

sphere” (2020). However, while I am sympathetic to Davies’ argument, by applying a ‘minor’ reading, we can take aspects of it further.

In relation to the sense of pervasiveness and intimacy, WhatsApp is a particularly transversal pedagogical space. In our current conjuncture, it is precisely the intimacy it generates and the ‘high levels of solidarity’ (Davies, 2020) that are so important. When I think about my own experience, for most of my militant research, I have been an interested user. I have been able to passively follow the back and forth between comrades but always with the knowledge that I could, if I wanted, participate. Here a (high) degree of self-censorship was arguably critical for my own journey. When I started this PhD, I did not have the skills or the knowledge to organise some of the things I now work on. I needed educating by the collective, and in my time organising in Corbynism and post-Corbynism much of this has happened via WhatsApp: I have moved from an interested user, to a guest, to a host. There is thus a Spinozist sense of joy in operation — being in these WhatsApp groups has increased my capacity to act.

Finally, while social movements have always developed independent methods for communicating with one another, few of those methods have been widely available. The barriers to entry, and to finding out more about the groups I began to engage with, were low — and that made it possible to join and to get involved without a great deal of experience. This is part of why WhatsApp is so pervasive and so important. This is critical within our moment — as discussed at various points, Corbynism saw new people (some of whom had moved away from activism and organising) getting involved and becoming active. Because of

this, part of the task of a movement like Corbynism is to ‘meet people where they are’.<sup>87</sup> As Nielsen notes, “[i]f organizers rely too heavily on tools and techniques that some but not others are comfortable with over time, this will influence who are recruited into the movement” (2013, p. 176). This does not mean that WhatsApp is an ideal pedagogical tool. My argument is simpler: in our current conjuncture, given the forces at play, it has been a fundamental politicising and organising platform because of its pervasiveness and intimacy, and we need to recognise its value in that regard. One of the key aspects of its value is how complexity functions.

## **6.6 Lesson II: complexity**

The second insight, for the pedagogista, is that in comparison to many other widely used platforms, WhatsApp has much less hierarchy built into its structure. This articulates complexity, and a more radical sense of equality. Key here is the design of the platform. As people message, their words simply appear in chronological order. A good contrast is with Twitter, where algorithms determine what we see and where there is a huge discrepancy between the most prominent users, and the lurkers. In some of the political groups I am in on WhatsApp, it often feels chaotic and inspiring and overwhelming — some days there are literally hundreds of messages. But, it does not always bode well. As noted earlier it can be difficult to disagree, and further, when disagreement does happen, those larger groups can become the venue for political debates that descend into personal attacks.

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<sup>87</sup> This is a phrase I have heard a lot within this militant research, particularly in relation to community organising – it has a long history within social work. See, for example, (Harkey *et al.*, 2017) for a discussion of its use across a range of settings.

Nonetheless, this is a transversal space — the seemingly endless flow of information is how WhatsApp is teaching us to engage with complexity. Broadly speaking, complexity relates to the way that systems with multiple parts interact, and the interest in complexity in the Western world can be traced to developments in the natural and social sciences in the post-war 1920s (Chandler, 2014).<sup>88</sup> Complexity is now a widely studied phenomenon, across management studies, various sciences, and elsewhere. Further, complexity operates within neoliberalism as a transversal force that both demands and constrains agency, often through reinforcing a sense of perplexity. This is where the link to emergence becomes clearer. For Volchenkov, an examination of complex phenomena can be “perplexing because of emergent properties of a complex system which arise at a higher level of organization, above the level of its individual components” (2017, p. 1).

Broadly speaking, in response to complexity, some choose simple narratives — for others (including me and many of my comrades), a sense of perplexity defines how we negotiate those manifold interactions. This is because complexity and perplexity are an incredible counter to the push towards the liberal universalism that crushes the diversity of life, and it creates the conditions for emergences. As Gilbert has written:

"Without imposing a template, we would want to develop humans who would find it easy to collaborate with others in a creative way in as many

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<sup>88</sup> Chandler argues that liberal confidence in progress had been shaken by the first world war and by the Bolshevik revolution, but it was a series of scientific discoveries, including Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' in quantum mechanics, that cemented the growth of narratives of complexity (Chandler, 2014).

contexts as possible, without paranoia and fear. Someone who's comfortable with their own complexity and the complexity of the society they live in." (2018)

At the same time, capital thrives on difference, and complexity and perplexity can be understood to displace accountability and political action. This is because complexity is deeply tied to the neoliberal project, and the “appeal to complexity displaces accountability” (Dean, 2013, p. 147). Dean’s analysis is built around the salience of drive within neoliberalism. She argues that there is an alignment between financialism and critical theory, via notions of reflexivity and complexity. Fundamentally, she suggests that complexity works to convince us that the perplexity we experience is insurmountable. Dean talks about the endless loop of discourse around markets and its parallels in academia, which “recedes in levels of increasing meta-ness, commenting on discourses and practices and alternatives and limits until the need to act loses its force and urgency” (2013, p. 151). But, as Dean argues, there is also a counterforce within academia, pulling us in the opposite direction — we are told both to react, *and* to reflect.

WhatsApp reflects this complexity. For example, the days after the 2019 General Election felt particularly frantic, but numerous other events have also been the cause for lots of messages. As well as discussions, there are often calls for support, some of which get answered, many of which do not. It often feels more like a stream of consciousness rather than a hierarchy or categorisation of information. While it does sometimes happen, for the most part there is rarely anyone who properly takes charge and anyone in most group

chats can (theoretically) chip in. WhatsApp, in the way the Dean describes, similarly creates a demanding and paralysing sense of perplexity. This is baked into the structure of the internet. While the basic connections the internet makes are quite simple, complexity comes “out of the aggregation of lots of simple social operations” (Mejias, 2013, p. 49). And this creates a certain form of pedagogy:

“When navigating online networks, a decentralised and multi-directional structure enables users to seek, explore discover media in a non-linear and sometimes unexpected way. ... Learning thus becomes unexpected and unpredictable — emergent.” (de Haan, Leander and Ünlüsoy, 2022, p. 84)

Through WhatsApp, I have been educated in a way that is overwhelming, but also consistent with the complexity of the world we live in and the necessity of maintaining a sense of perplexity. This relates to participation more generally. As Kely argues, participatory experiences react to perplexity differently. He writes that sometimes “perplexity is resolved through violence, subjugation, colonialism, or versions of liberal universalism; in some cases it is allowed to stand firm, as a testament to tolerance, to pluralism perhaps, to politics maybe” (2019, p. 22). It is the nightmare forms of participation that does the former, and it is bone-deep participation that does the latter.

Finally, as noted, complexity is closely related to emergent strategy — a manifold of ‘simple’ interactions, that make up a larger force (brown, 2017). With this complexity in mind, WhatsApp is getting closer to a rhizomatic form of learning, a further concept from Deleuze and Guattari. For Cormier, rhizomatic education sees knowledge as a negotiation that is contextual and collaborative,

and has “mutable goals and constantly negotiated premises” (2008, p. 2). Here, the curriculum is “constructed and negotiated in real time by the contributions of those engaged in the learning process” (2008, p. 5). This, “distributed negotiation of knowledge” (2008, p. 6) is precisely what it feels like to learn on WhatsApp. The process is never straightforward — instead, we pick up bits and pieces of information from different sources, paying some more attention than others, and eventually merging it into partial understandings. All of this is critical because it is part of an emergent becoming. As Cruz and Harindranath note in relation to the group function on WhatsApp, these “are not merely reinforcing existing forms of socialisation but also facilitating new ones” (2020). Perhaps the most profound aspect of the socialisation that is taking place relates to the fact that a platform owned by Meta is used so extensively as a counter-hegemonic tool — this is the way in which WhatsApp learns from us. And what is key to this is the prioritisation (of sorts) of equality.

### **6.7 Lesson III: equality**

Within this complex, emergent form of pedagogy and particularly in relation to the negotiation of difference, there are critical questions around how equality and truth intersect. The final key insight that the pedagogista has learnt in relation to the forms of pedagogy we negotiate on WhatsApp revolves around Rancière's understanding of the 'ignorant schoolmaster'. Biesta (2017) analyses this figure in relation to Freire's understanding of emancipatory pedagogy. In essence, the form of pedagogy Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster offers contrasts with that of the widely utilised understanding of emancipatory pedagogy, developed most comprehensively by Freire. Fundamentally, this

latter understanding of emancipation has its downsides — while it "is aimed at liberation of the one to be emancipated, it actually installs dependency at the very heart of the act of emancipation", because it is the teacher who must develop the means by which the student can realise their own oppression (Biesta, 2017, p. 55).

Biesta contrasts this approach with the work of Rancière, and particularly his understanding of the 'ignorant schoolmaster' — a figure based on the actually-existing French teacher Joseph Jacotot, who famously taught his Flemish students, who did not speak French, to understand the French book *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. To do this, he used a translation of the book that was bilingual, in French and Flemish. Jacotot was critical of the role of *explanation* in teaching — the process whereby the teacher is assumed to have knowledge of something, that they can then pass on or explain to the student. Through Jacotot, Rancière advocates for a position of radical equality between student and teacher (Biesta, 2017). Rancière argues that the teacher's role becomes about "the distinction between intelligence and will, in that what Jacotot did was not to replace the intelligence of his students with his own intelligence, but rather to summon his students to use their own intelligence" — in essence, he created scenarios where the student's will to learn, and thus to become emancipated, was heightened (2017, p. 62). For Biesta, what this comes down to is the relationship between truth and equality — Freire's desire to side-line the teacher is done in the name of truth, while for Rancière, this truth does not exist — but equality between teacher and student does.

This framing is taken further in Sternfeld’s (2010) work. She builds on Rancière to describe ‘the impossible’, when she reflects on a genealogy of political pedagogy in which, “critical educational approaches have been concerned with working in a collective perspective to challenge the hegemonic canon” — where, “knowledge is considered a weapon and education a form of organization and self-empowerment”. But, she says that these perspectives are being challenged as there is now almost no way of operating outside of hegemony. In this, Sternfeld captures the core ambivalent dynamic at the heart of the ‘in, against, and beyond’ strategy, in that we need to be working across these various orientations, with a view to the idea that there are no options entirely outside of the dynamics of hegemony. Sternfeld suggests that what we need to do is to create the conditions “that would demand learners take a political stand, but without anticipating what that stand should be and thus effecting closure” (2010). And when brought together with the previous two lessons, this has a compelling relevance to how WhatsApp functioned within Corbynism.

### **6.8 WhatsApp, a minor reading, and Corbynism**

Much of the activity described as Corbynism took place on digital platforms, and this makes it critical to think about digital learning — as noted throughout, this is a complex picture. Reflecting on the extent to which Corbyn was a ‘digital movement’ Forrester suggests that “Corbynism was no shortcut to power, but its digitally propelled rise made it seem like it might be” (2021). She goes on to say that “[t]he social industry organizes everyday infrastructures, but it doesn’t often do so in ways that break people away from their worst habits, desires, and

beliefs. Instead, it shores them up” (2021). Throughout Corbynism, there was a relative lack of ‘real world’ organising (people getting together, face to face, and making things happen) outside of what was happening digitally. Today, much of the energy behind Corbynism has faded, and arguably a key reason for this is the lack of face-to-face organising: too much time creating memes, not enough time plotting actions. However, the engagement I had on WhatsApp was a first step. While its ability to create truly dangerous pedagogy (a core component of which is to move people to counter-hegemonic action) might be lacking, it was a window into more substantive organising for me and for many others. Adopting a minor reading lends a more hopeful note.

Within this militant research, WhatsApp has at times operated in a similar way to the ignorant schoolmaster. It lets the various inconclusive threads immerse the student, perplex her, and eventually generate a desire to understand and to participate. This aligns with the approach taken by *Colectivo Situaciones*, who say that their approach “works neither from its own set of knowledges about the world nor from how things ought to be” (2003). They bring in questions of pedagogy, arguing that the task is to continue to hold onto a sense of ‘not knowing’, which they say, “is an authentic *anti-pedagogy* — like what Joseph Jacotot wanted” (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). WhatsApp’s pervasiveness, intimacy, complexity, and equality all served to generate a sense of comrades engaging in collective pedagogy, where the *collective* takes the role of the ignorant schoolmaster. These components allowed us to occasionally glimpse bone-deep participation via WhatsApp, for example that group of friends in ‘Broadband Communism’. WhatsApp functions as an ignorant schoolmaster — but as a hybrid machine that is both the technology, and the collectives that use

it, at the same time. In my encounter with the platform and my eventual move to become a 'host', this speaks to the way that the contours of the platform have transformed me. I argue that happened through the pedagogical prioritisation of equality over truth, and a transversal, emergent ethos.

## **6.9 A (partially) dangerous pedagogy**

This chapter examined how WhatsApp has operated as a specific form of pedagogy throughout the research for this PhD. Within Corbynism, pedagogy was critical, but not always fully developed as a comprehensive programme. Taking my cue from minor theory, I examined how this militant research developed through the platform WhatsApp. I argued that WhatsApp needs to be understood as a core component of political participation in our conjuncture, and specifically a type of pedagogical articulation. I used a posthuman framing to suggest that my comrades and I are, in many instances, 'becoming WhatsApp', by looking at three of WhatsApp's 'lessons'. The first lesson is the way that WhatsApp is pervasive and intimate, the second lesson is the role of complexity, and the final lesson is the relationship between equality and truth. I argued that despite WhatsApp's problematic status in a social movement like Corbynism, which sought to engage a wide group of people, some of whom had no previous experience in organising or activism, it was not only critical to use the platform, but it also generated a specific form of pedagogy between comrades that we can use to our advantage.

This attempt to understand the form of pedagogy WhatsApp offers helps us understand how pedagogy has functioned within Corbynism. But the key role of

dangerous pedagogy is to move people to action. Hall writes: "... what happens when an academic and theoretical enterprise tries to engage in pedagogies which enlist the active engagement of individuals and groups, tries to make a difference in the institutional world in which it is located?" (1992, p. 284). The next chapter partially answers this question.

## Chapter seven: The wins

In this final chapter, a key question emerges: where are the wins within this militant research assemblage? Where are the moments of emancipation, in which hegemony has been challenged? Critically — what can this tell us about emancipation within Corbynism as a whole? This chapter begins by revisiting the concept of emergence and I discuss how it relates to my own experience of ‘waking up’ within Corbynism. I explore how that connects within the wider framing of bone-deep participation, focussing on the sense of difference *and* unity that underpins it. I then discuss several wins, or glimpses of bone-deep participation, again arguing that a radical approach to negotiating difference is present within them. I suggest that this is the insight that we can most apply to thinking about what comes next, and to other settings.

### 7.1 Delusions and wins

I felt excited while canvassing in 2019. It felt like something seismic could happen. Reading over my notes again now, three years later, they seem vaguely delusional. Even though few people on the doorstep responded positively to our pleas to vote for Corbyn, the feeling amongst the Labour members I was out canvassing with was optimistic. I wrote that the response on the door was approximately a third ‘Labour or able-to-be-talked around’, a third ‘undecided, and hard to convince’ and a third ‘other (mainly Tory)’. I also wrote that ‘Of the ‘against’ people, anti-Corbyn sentiment was huge’. The extent to which I and many others I was out canvassing with thought that we could somehow turn that tide through our collective efforts — no matter how

impressive — was a feat of our imagination that made the immediate sense of defeat on the evening of the election profound.

Nonetheless, on that evening and in the days following, a quote was shared consistently on social media that captured the fundamental thing I learnt — the fundamental becoming — in the experience of canvassing and of Corbynism at large. It was from Tony Benn, the socialist Labour MP who held the seats of either Bristol South East or Chesterfield for much of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (UK Parliament, 2022c). The quote reads, “[t]here is no final victory, as there is no final defeat. There is just the same battle. To be fought, over and over again. So toughen up, bloody toughen up.”<sup>89</sup> Once the election was over, like many others I realised that my tiny two-month foray into canvassing needed to be the beginning of much more. We realised that we needed to ‘channel the energy from an ultimately unsuccessful mobilising effort which was met with deep resistance, to deep community organising’ (again quoting that first chapter). As noted in the introduction, a critical aspect of bone-deep participation is that it creates a desire for more (Tuck, 2013).

In relation to this research, and my interest in political participation, I ‘woke up’ to the nightmare of participation and I understood that there are counter-hegemonic alternatives that I could help to partially advance through this research. As Beaudry and El Baroni write, “[t]he nightmare of participation can only end when we wake up to a strange world where we have accepted an order that is not predicated on the same measurement of things” (2010, p. 256).

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<sup>89</sup> It is not clear where the original quote came from but as an example of it being shared, see, for example (Sinclair Lack, 2019).

Corbynism was an opening, an emergence, into a different world. It did seek to “shake loose from determinants and definitions” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 317). And at scale, amongst the thousands of comrades who had similar experiences, it is precisely the sense of emergent *strategy* brown addresses — and this is perhaps the best measure of Corbynism, namely the “extent to which it problematises how to implement reform measures in such ways as to advance, rather than close off, future socialist possibilities” (Grindin and Panitch, 2018).

But despite these openings, there is a lot to be concerned about today. The cost-of-living crisis<sup>90</sup> is becoming overwhelming, the climate crisis even more so. Corbyn still has the parliamentary whip removed by the Labour Party. The wider left in the UK lacks unity, and while the sharp rise in trade union activity in recent months is promising,<sup>91</sup> there is arguably no large-scale hegemonic (to use the second sense of the term) bloc in formation. Within the Labour party, there are now far fewer supporters of Corbyn, and more members who support a Blairite agenda (Walker, 2021). This is because the Labour Party have not only shifted to the right but have also pursued a relentless strategy to purge Corbynite tendencies, extending to the decision to remove the whip from Corbyn himself. In this, the Labour leadership are taking from the Blair-era

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<sup>90</sup> This represents a significant fall in purchasing power within the UK, or “the fall in ‘real’ disposable incomes (that is, adjusted for inflation and after taxes and benefits) that the UK has experienced since late 2021. It is being caused predominantly by high inflation outstripping wage and benefit increases and has been further exacerbated by recent tax increases” (Hourston, 2022).

<sup>91</sup> In early December 2022, the BBC listed the following sectors as going on strike in December: Border Force officers, ambulance staff, nurses, rail workers, Royal Mail workers, teachers, university staff, baggage handlers, driving examiners, and bus drivers, with civil servants and junior doctors also balloting or looking at strike dates. (BBC News, 2022). Among other trade union leaders, Mick Lynch, the General Secretary of the RMT (who represent rail workers) has suggested that unions should be looking at a general strike (Elgot and Pidd, 2022).

model, which saw the extensive marginalisation of socialists. As Blair himself directly advised Starmer in November 2021, “[t]he leadership should continue to push the far left back to the margins” (*From Red Walls to Red Bridges: Rebuilding Labour’s Voter Coalition*, 2021, p. 5). Broadly, since that waking up, like many I have sensed a disintegration of the movement, a lack of clarity as to where to focus energies, and the occasional whisper of doubt about whether the change we seek is even possible.

This can feel frightening. As Bhattacharyya writes: “... perhaps we do not know how to make things happen — and the uncertainty and nerviness caused by this half-articulated realisation haunts political possibility in our time” (2020a, p. 46). Some of this reflects the occasional ambivalence of emancipatory politics (Blühdorn, Butzlaff and Haderer, 2022) but it also reflects the ambitious scale of the Corbyn project, and the difficulty of achieving the complex ‘in and against’ political strategy. As was discussed in chapter one, the leadership of the party sought to increase participation everywhere — in the party, to generate policy, through public ownership, and through developing stronger relationship with the grassroots. And to reference Berry again, there was an ‘irony’ in the way that this was playing out — in part through people discussing participatory practices in McDonnell’s office, rather than in the streets (Berry, 2019). At the same time, the ultimate goal was to win state power (Bassett Yerrel, 2020), a task that proved insurmountable.

There is a wealth of analysis on the reasons for the defeat: arguments have addressed the critical role played by Brexit (Prosser, 2021); the role of disinformation in the campaign (Vaccari, Chadwick and Kaiser, 2022); and

popularity of the respective leaders of the two main parties (Tonge, Wilks-Heeg and Thompson, 2020). As I argued in the introduction, the project was ambitious — it sought to (eventually) transform the way that the entire country participated politically by using positive freedom to counter negative freedom. It is somewhat obvious to say that the defeat reflected how deeply engrained the neoliberal sensibility is, how powerful the hegemonic forces we are up against, and the profound challenge of overcoming either through an ‘in and against’ strategy (while also recognising it is likely the only strategy that could work). But as this thesis proceeds from a militant research standpoint and concentrates on political participation within Corbynism rather than electoral politics (while appreciating that that the two are deeply intertwined), I am more interested in understanding how collective power was increased through the wins than in analysing the defeat. Thus, my focus in this chapter is on what those experiences of socialist political participation enabled, as Panitch and Grindin (2018) note in relation to the Corbyn project more widely.

Fundamentally, Corbynism has left a legacy. Writing in late 2022, the collectives with which I and many others are engaged are still emerging and will continue to emerge, and there are still glimpses of bone-deep participation. We are finding our way and are developing new alliances and new modes of political work that respond to our conjuncture — and it is uncertain as to where much of it may lead. Some of that relates to the opportunity we had to grasp power, but even in our failure and loss, that experience, that partial glimpse of bone-deep participation, was illuminating. There is much we can learn from an analysis of what took place, and particularly where the wins were. The first win relates to the key insight around bone-deep participation itself.

## 7.2 Difference and unity

The biggest win in this research has been to develop an understanding of bone-deep participation, and to think through how, when and where it has manifest within the Corbyn and post-Corbyn movement. This relates to the ideas discussed in chapter two around the sense of ‘methodology as strategy’ — a key component of this research. As noted in chapter four, nightmare participation seeks negative freedom, while bone-deep participation seeks positive freedom. Given that the aim of militant research is to increase collective power (and thus positive freedom), this has meant paying attention to the moments where power has increased via political participatory practices. My engagement with the various experiments in political participation within Corbynism and post-Corbynism aligns with the way that Shukaitis and Graeber (2007) argue that within the militant research process, the subject and the object of the research are collectively constructed. This sense of collective construction relies on the recognition that political work produces knowledge — “it reflects theorisations of social movements as knowledge producers, rather than merely as objects of knowledge for social movement scholars” (Chesters, 2012, p. 9).

It also, on a more basic level, reflects the way that militant research is not only responsive to its context, but as discussed in the introduction, deeply (immanently) inseparable from it. As per a convocation framework, this means better understanding bone-deep participation’s features (emergent collective subjects, dangerous pedagogy, emancipatory goals), but it also means

understanding what underlies these components. And perhaps the most substantive insight from looking across all those moments of bone-deep participation is understanding the role of difference and of unity. Across this militant research assemblage, the most substantive wins emerged where difference was embraced, and unity was sought.

Critically, unlike the universalising (and flattening) model of liberalism, bone-deep participation is imbued with a radical sense of difference in which it is understood as generative. This ties into the sense of strategic emergence argued for throughout and it has critical insights for us more widely: bone-deep participation partially answers the question Braidotti (2019b) poses, which is how we build collectivity in difference. This operates under a set of conditions that are broadly brought together by her sense of the importance of respecting “differences while not being merely relativistic” (1994, p. 98). There is a significant danger of succumbing to a version of difference that aligns too neatly to the capitalist project (Dean, 2013). But Guattari’s framing is useful, when he suggests that is our task is to become both more united and more different (Guattari, 2014). The ‘unity’ comes from our emancipatory goals — anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, and more. This has arguably been a surprising ethos to recognise within Corbynism, given that the Labour Party has struggled to ever align its different tendencies (Bassett and Gilbert, 2021). Nonetheless, this framing of difference as generative and as (transversally) uniting builds on many of the discussions of difference within this thesis so far, in addition to the discussion of difference within emergence in chapter four.

These framings include the feminist transversal politics described by Yuval-Davis. This is about “the encompassment of difference by equality” which suggests a specifically transversal sense of solidarity (Yuval-Davis, 1999). It is also reflected in the idea of singularisation, which moves us away from classification (Kaiser, 2017). The transindividual collective subject is key as chapter five discussed, as is the form of dangerous pedagogy discussed in chapter six, which offers a way to build coalition within difference (Backer and Cairns, 2017). This approach to difference is also reflected in the decolonial thinking that argues for a sense of a universality that argues for “anti-systemic decolonial liberation” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 13). It also aligns with the way that the autonomous tradition actively seeks new, and different sites of popular struggle (Shukaitis, 2016). Further, this understanding of difference has meant paying attention to minor forms of knowledge, which is about creating a multitude of possibilities without attempting to master any of them (Katz, 1996). Here these (partially) ‘minor’ forms of knowledge have included the bodily, the subjective, the affective, and to a certain extent, the decolonial.<sup>92</sup> The subsequent discussion will address several wins — several moments of bone-deep participation in which difference and unity are transversally held — and the next win is the process of convocation.

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<sup>92</sup> It has been widely remarked upon that the recent ‘move’ towards decoloniality in many higher education institutions in the Global North has been deeply problematic. While there are of course many areas of excellent work, one of the biggest criticisms is that much of this work has only become so widely known following the ‘discovery’ of decoloniality by White academics in the Global North, many of whom ignore the long histories of outstanding decolonial scholarship from the Global South. See, for example, (Moosavi, 2020) for a discussion of some of these issues. I would put some of the work presented within this PhD into that category – partly for reasons of space but also because of the focus of this work, I have not been able to adequately cover many of the decolonial theorists who have also engaged with these framings of difference. Perhaps the ultimate example is the famous Zapatista call for *Un Mundo Donde Quepan Muchos Mundos* or ‘A World Where Many Worlds Fit’ (Gahman, 2017, p. 106).

### 7.3 Convocation

The wins discussed here have generally operated as moments of convocation.<sup>93</sup> As a reminder, this is the approach to militant research that tries to “call or summon something into being collectively”, and that particularly works with the “unjust, unearned, but potentially fruitful autonomy and resources that accompany academic-based research” (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2015, p. 25). Khasnabish and Haiven suggest that convocation is most useful when the movements we are engaged with are either fragmented or reconsolidating, which fits squarely with our fragmented post-Corbyn landscape. These moments of convocation are small, but as machines, they help to provide the solutions to our failures of imagination (Guattari, 2014).

This sense of convocation maps onto the understanding of the wins advanced here, which is that they can be understood as minor, emergent becomings. This research *feels* like brown’s characterisation of ‘chaotic fertile reality’ (2017, p. 156) in lived, everyday research practices. This is because while I have been at the centre of this research, unexpected and sometimes exciting things have happened within this wider research assemblage — within the wider context of a collective ‘brilliance’ (to use brown’s (2017) word) that is the various groups I have worked with. To take but one example, as described in the introduction, the work I did to broker the relationship between RSM and TWT resulted in relationships being formed or strengthened within those two networks. These, in turn, have generated all sorts of outcomes — including opportunities to

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<sup>93</sup> I read the text by Khasnabish and Haiven quite late in this research – and am particularly grateful to Jacob Stringer for recommending it — but as I noted in the overview of militant research in chapter two, it was a text that helped me locate the practices and thinking I had already been pursuing.

introduce people, to several instances where the student group's more thoughtful approach to community care and welfare have resulted in direct changes to practices in other spaces, including at TWT.

Thus, this research has operated as a small convoking force, or machine, within the wider Corbyn and post-Corbyn assemblage. This broad framing corresponds with the way that Grossberg thinks about what it means to be an intellectual within a wider context. He argues that the intellectual, is, fundamentally, an “assembler of contexts” and “since the project of constructing a context is always a collective one, always unfinished, incomplete and fragile, one is called upon to be humble, because the project is always greater than the individual, and to be reflective, because no individual can completely escape the context of concern” (Grossberg, 2018, p. 185). What is critical about these forms of convocation is that they speak to how I — and my comrades — can contribute to the creation of wider emergences. As noted, this is the strength of the type of politics Corbynism hinted at, where that compelling sense of difference and unity was detectable. The next win is the identification of the figures of political action.

#### **7.4 A polyphony of figures**

The polyphony of figures this thesis identifies are an example of how this sense of difference and unity operated within my and my comrades experience of organising within Corbynism — but they also have wider strategic resonances. As Shukaitis (2016) notes, this sense of strategy is key to the way that Debord saw the ‘emerging collective subject’. The approach also responds to the

Deleuzian sense of subjectivity as a continual process — in this view “subjectivities and bodies are merely locations for ongoing actualizations” (Mejias, 2013, p. 89). As discussed in chapter five in some detail, these figures sit within the nomadic subject and work to undo the subject of nightmare participation, thus pointing to moments of becoming. This is an experimental and broadly theoretical move but given how political discussions of subjectivity are, a sense of ‘fluid’ subjectivity is both an ethical (Flax, 1993), and pragmatic position.

These figures build on the approach within militant research to locate oneself as concretely within the moment as is possible. For example, *Colectivo Situaciones* defend their right to be ‘anti-ideological’ and argue that when our analysis falls back onto existing paradigms (they list autonomist, horizontalist, situationist or multiple), it operates destructively. In this process, “[a] real, contradictory, rich and always conflicted experience is laced on the one-dimensional pedestal of the redeeming ideal” (Graeber and Shukaitis, 2007, p. 84). And this brings in the most profound aspect of the decision to bring together a polyphony of figures under the banner of the nomadic subject.

This is the way that it responds to ‘the real’. Braidotti writes that she ‘pleads’, “for an immanent — and yet fluid — re-grounding of ourselves in the messy contradictions of the present” (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 38). As chapter five discussed, this is partially enabled through the figure of the non-nomad. Thus to ‘ground’ the subsequent discussion, I want to go back to the quote from Howe included in chapter two, where he offers a critique of liberalism. He suggests that under liberalism, politics is cut off from “the soil of shared, material life”

(Howe, 1977). This is, I would argue, a partially immanent perspective and it points to the criticality, within this analysis, of once again looking at our shared material conditions. It is fundamental, as per the arguments made throughout this thesis, to keep on dragging theory back to life (Ahmed, 2017). And this means pointing to the multiple modes of political action within one of the possible collective subjects of Corbynism and post-Corbynism.

The messy contradictions of this research and of our present are expressed in the various figures of political action identified thus far, who work alongside the understanding of a nomadic subjectivity within the specific moment in which I have operated. This is the sense of difference argued for here in action. As noted, the nomadic subject is interested in being the one who “connects, circulates, moves on” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 35), while Tamboukou’s non-nomad drags the nomad back to the real (Tamboukou, 2021). We have also met the comrade, who reminds us we need to take sides, and the militant, who is committed. We met the pedagogista, who encourages us to think about pedagogical possibilities. We met the Acid Corbynist, who, among other things, expresses a specific sense of culturally-informed emancipation. We have met the radical diplomat, who promises a tight attention to the conditions we are in and refuses to apologise for those same conditions (she also brings a sense of political strategy). We briefly met the ignorant schoolmaster, who encourages us to prioritise equality over truth. How do all these figures intersect?

In the first instance these figures have increased collective power, the key aim of militant research. And this operates in part through desire. As the subsequent discussion will work through, within my experience of doing this research and

on a transindividual level, it was sometimes the summoning of these figures who provided the rationale, or the confidence, or the convoked framing, for a set of decisions that have led to these various moments of bone-deep participation. In many respects, the figures have ‘taught’ lessons about the types of bone-deep participation we seek — where we can make decisions about the options available to us, in a way that is particularly attuned to the moment in which we operate. With all of this in mind, the following discusses different ‘real world’ moments to tease out the complexity of the conjuncture — but, critically, to reflect on where the moments of emancipation are. This approach may be of use to others thinking about how to operationalise the type of collective subjects argued for here, particularly (but not exclusively) the nomad. The next ‘win’ within the research assemblage relates to how the collectives operate.

## **7.5 Always-to-come comrades**

As discussed at various points, one of the biggest challenges of this understanding of the emergent collective subject is thinking about who is *not* included. This includes the discussion in chapter one about those who are left out of our emancipatory projects, despite their centrality to our goals; the discussion in chapter five about the way that the logics of the RSM network operated (which itself recalls the way that many groups within Corbynism operated); as well as the role of ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ discussed in chapter six. This is also a fundamental aspect of the posthuman critique of humanism (Iftode, 2020) that was discussed in chapter four. Most critically, it relates to the argument that while the comrade is a promising figure of political action for the

future of the left — as Atkinson notes, Dean’s “work suggests that the political horizon of the Left must be built on collective struggle, and one way to make this return to the collective is through the figure of the comrade” (2021, p. 51) — she nonetheless requires a demarcation between those who are comrades and those who are not. This comes with problems.

Part of this is to do with the way that groups are brought together. Ruddick frames the key challenge here as follows: “[h]ow do we fashion a new political imaginary from fragmentary, diffuse and often antagonistic subjects, who may be united in principle against the exigencies of capitalism but diverge in practice, in terms of the sites, strategies and specific natures of their own oppression?” (2010, p. 21). This is incredibly important — in part because we need to grapple with these questions in relation to *both* our movement and in relation to how it negotiates everyone not (yet) in our movement. I venture that the pedagogista is here pushing for us to think differently about what we are learning.

In many respects this the most critical aspect of the analysis advanced here, and it has strong links to the challenges of the Corbyn movement. As Bassett and Gilbert describe it, the various positions held within the frame of the Labour Party:

“... are not merely questions of individuals occupying different points along a continuum of opinion, from centre to centre left, to radical left. Rather, they involve fundamental epistemological and analytical disagreements over the core questions of what has happened to Britain since the 1970s, what forms of knowledge about that issue might be

considered legitimate, and what forms of political intervention may be possible.” (2021, p. 172).

What is critical for the politics advanced here is that we need to summon the comrade — we need to take sides — but we do this with a long-term view in mind that eventually, the forms of bone-deep political participation we seek should be available to everyone.<sup>94</sup> This is an example of some of the figures working together. It is the lesson of the ignorant schoolmaster, who uses the radical diplomat and the non-nomad to remind the comrade of their Acid Corbynist goal. And what it means is that our collectives, of comrades, are ‘always-to-come’.<sup>95</sup> Essentially, this is a way of being in, against and beyond the collective itself: as Halvorsen (2015) suggests, militant research can operate ‘in and against’ everything it comes up against.

This includes the forms of research that prioritise a nightmarish sense of contributory autonomy — where participants in a research project rarely get a chance to work in a collective way, but are instead brought together as individuals, for the purpose of the project. But more challengingly, it also means that we should plan for our collectives to eventually be dismantled. Shukaitis describes the project of the Situationist International, in the way that they felt that the collective subject needed to both “anticipate and desire its own negation as a precondition for the emergence of effective strategizing” (2016, p. 43). Many of the collectives I’ve been involved in have (perhaps somewhat unconsciously) sought a collective that would also ‘desire its own negation’. It also relates to the discussion in chapter two about the prefigurative labour of

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<sup>94</sup> This could be taken further through a posthuman lens – not only all humans, but all non-humans too.

<sup>95</sup> This framing is suggestive of Derrida’s sense of ‘democracy to come’ (Derrida, 2005).

militant research. Coleman suggests that we should look to create the transversal conditions under which the subjectivities of militant researchers at ‘both ends’, namely our organiser and our academic selves (2015, p. 274) could eventually be refused entirely. This is precisely what the TWT research group has experimented with, as per the discussion in chapter two.

As another example of how this attention to ‘always-to-come comrades’ has operated in practice, one of the most promising avenues to come out of this militant research has been an increasing engagement with work that focusses on care and welfare. I have been drawn to the spaces where comrades are looking critically at our practices and thinking about what we can do to make the ways in which we work more accessible to more people — how we can create the conditions in which more people have a sense of belonging.<sup>96</sup> This work asks, fundamentally, how we can create the conditions for more radical sense of difference within the unity of our collectives. To a certain extent, this has been driven by the ‘convocation’ within this thesis — particularly the more ‘theoretical’ (but heavily praxis-informed) work I was engaging with from decolonial, abolitionist, and anti-racist traditions — as well as some perceptive comrades who have steered me towards this work. I have learnt more about how we can use the current forms of counter-hegemonic political participation, as comrades, to better serve those on the margins of our movements or to push

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<sup>96</sup> This has included joining the RSM's welfare group, and I would particularly point to the knowledge and leadership within that group in terms of these practices. I have also been involved in this work at TWT, and at both the 2021 and 2022 festivals, I co-lead the welfare team with a comrade called Andrew. To give a sense of what that work entails, Andrew primarily led on recruiting and onboarding a team of volunteers, and I worked on our training for volunteers (which in 2022 included de-escalation training, arrestee support, preventing burnout, community care, accessibility, ‘calling in’, and more). I also did a significant amount of work on some of our policies and processes, including revising our safeguarding policy to bring it more in line with abolitionist approaches. This principally means putting the wishes and views of the person in question at the heart of the approach, and wherever possible, avoiding contacting authorities.

for the extension of these practices to those who are not (yet) comrades. In essence, I have become increasingly interested in the ways in which we can create spaces that are 'in, against, and beyond' our current collectives. And as discussed in chapter one, this is precisely what Corbynism sought to do also.

This aspect of our relationship to difference (where our collectives are 'always-to-come comrades') will forever be an ideal, something to work for. This is partly why I focus so heavily on the idea of emancipation rather than liberation, as I am interested in the *moments* of emancipation, where we hint at more utopian futures. Nonetheless, this is perhaps the insight with the most relevance more widely, as it most clearly makes the link between the findings presented here around difference, and our overarching aim to increase collective power. Most likely, it is only by paying attention to the processes of engaging more 'comrades-to-come', with all the difficult negotiations of difference and unity that requires, that we could build a counterhegemonic bloc that could win. This insight also feeds into the discussions that follow, where the next set of wins relates more concretely to academia.

## **7.6 Finding courage**

As well as the prefigurative aspect of our labour just briefly discussed, there are also more immediate questions of the specific conditions of our labour within the academy. Grossberg (2018) has in recent years written about the way that academics need to take a more upfront approach to the way that the landscape we operate in is changing. He argues that there needs to be more self-reflexivity about how the labour conditions we face affect our practices. It is impossible to

ignore how the ongoing financialisation of universities in the UK has generated an increasingly competitive and individualised academic context, which has implications for the type of research that can happen. As briefly mentioned in chapter two, the damage being wrought by the individualistic nature of contemporary academia is widely documented. Gill, writing in 2018, noted that when discussing these issues with academics, there was a “dominance of an individualistic register—a tendency to account for ordinary experiences in the academy through discourses of excoriating self-blame, privatized guilt, intense anxiety, and shame” (2018, p. 207). There is now a body of academic literature that looks at the way that the metrics introduced into academia have altered what is possible within the academy (Grove and Pugh, 2017).

For example, as described in the introduction, it is telling that parts of the academic community have, by and large, failed to engage seriously with political participation within Corbynism. The militant research literature I was engaging with in the earlier part of this research filled a gap in relation to the fact that I was finding little academic work directly about this thesis’s core theme — which I had assumed would be being discussed within political science, sociology, and elsewhere. Corbynism did mount a challenge to hegemony and for academics invested in the political status quo, this proved a threat that needed to be handled. In some cases this was by studiously ignoring it — in other instances, particularly within political science, through “an underlying generally dismissive attitude towards the political dynamics that [Corbyn’s] candidacy and subsequent leadership represented and have set in motion” (Allen, 2020, p. 70).

Part of the reason for this is that much research today seeks the same type of freedom as nightmare participation: it is highly market oriented, and it is consistently exported — and imposed — around the globe. As Smith writes, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (2012, p. 1). In response, we need to think carefully about the lines we need to walk between the knowledge we gain from the movements we are part of, and the parts of that knowledge we choose to share within academia.<sup>97</sup> As Pusey notes, “the ‘academic-recuperation-machine’” (2018, p. 368) is always ready to take knowledge for its own gain. With this context in mind, it is useful to recall the central orientation within militant research, which is not to the university, but to the social movement or struggle that it is operating within (Russell, 2015). For Chatterton, Pusey and Russell, within militant research we need to be finding ways of “struggling where we are, building collective counter-power, finding strategic points of intervention in order to create space ‘inside’ within which we can move against and beyond the existent” (2011, p. 580).

This points to the confidence that I gained from engaging with Corbynism — as well as the sense of difference and unity argued for throughout. While small in relation to the scale of Corbynism, the act of generating more difference within the movement — to ‘build the coalition’ out so that it included (one) more PhD student — is significant. Zocchi writes about the specific conditions of PhD research: “[o]n the one hand, we are given the liberty to explore, dare and critique. On the other, we must constantly negotiate this liberty with loyalty and commitment to the hierarchical structure we belong to” (2021, p. 2). To a

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<sup>97</sup> Ideally this is done in collaboration with the movements in which we operate – where that is possible. One of the final stages of this thesis, for example, has consisted in sending a copy to key people within each of the groups I have worked with, to ensure that they are happy with how the work we have done together is being presented.

certain, tentative extent, this is the militant in action. It took a degree of courage to use this methodology and to study Corbynism in this way. And there are (cautious) parallels we can draw between our working conditions in academia and wider labour conditions.

As Khasnabish and Haiven suggest, militant researchers need to avoid defaulting to “shamefaced hand-wringing over the relative luxury and privilege enjoyed by academic researchers when they interact with social movements and other actors” — instead, we need to “also recognize our special competencies and opportunities as survivors within a hostile ecosystem, a virtuosity of survival that can inform the sorts of research we do, not primarily in order to generate data, but to catalyze radical social change” (2015, p. 22). The experiences of grappling with the university gave me an insight into the bodily experience of fear in relation to a powerful institution — the same affective register, I think, that my comrades battling other (often more threatening) institutions experience. This sense of affective, transversal solidarity is profound and speaks, again, to the orientation of the comrade, and to a moment of emancipation. As Mohanty (2020) argues, solidarity is not a given, nor is it a commodity, or a product, but an achievement that must be earned through our collective labour. Thus, to state the (somewhat) obvious: gaining the confidence to do militant research via practices of solidarity is an example of bone-deep participation. It was the pedagogical experience of engaging with a wider collective (both inside and outside of the university), with wider emancipatory goals, that enabled this research. And part of what that confidence enabled are several material wins.

## 7.7 Biting the university

A second win that relates principally to the academic institutions I have engaged with relates to a key aspect of militant research, which is the interest in utilising the resources of academia for counter-hegemonic ends (Bookchin *et al.*, 2013). In some respects, this builds on a decolonial form of emancipation. Academic institutions are rooted in settler colonial pasts, and likely futures (Tuck, 2018), so one of the key aspects of an engaged decoloniality within the university is the practice of anti-capitalism (Kerrigan and Nehring, 2020) — this is about the prioritisation of life over the “production and reproduction of goods” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 161). This practice needs happen beyond the pages of our academic work. Maldonado-Torres (2021) argues that decoloniality is a verb — which itself develops the argument made by Tuck and Yang (2012) that decolonisation is not a metaphor for wider projects of racial or social justice but instead is an explicit commitment to repatriation.

Through the training budget I could access through my PhD funding and some other sources, I have been able to channel money towards counter-hegemonic groups and organisations.<sup>98</sup> While these instances have not been particularly duplicitous in relation to the university’s processes, they stand in contrast to the ways the university envisages us using their resources: I was ‘training’ myself how to better support grassroots organising. Almost all those transfers of funds

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<sup>98</sup> This has included money to pay a grassroots organisation to host me for a day of training, paying a direct-action organisation to host a workshop (as a donation), paying politically aligned artists working in and around various political issues to attend a short workshop, paying three speakers to join a day of ‘decoloniality’ workshops with TWT, where payment to speakers is not usually possible, paying TWT to host me as an intern (as discussed in chapter one) and using university resources to pay for transcription services. I did also attend some more formal training (as per the intention of the budget) – but increasingly was able to identify training providers whose values better aligned to this research, for example the Centre for Progressive Change, in the UK, a course run by Advaya, an international activist support network, and others.

can be understood within a wider counter-hegemonic agenda — although almost all fall short of Tuck and Yang’s criteria for repatriation. What is particularly critical here is that as my knowledge and confidence grew, I was able to channel these funds towards groups with increasingly minimal reciprocity requirements from the groups themselves. This is a good example, as Tuck suggests, of “research activities that bite the university that feeds us” (2018, p. 150). I was able to become more militant, to recall the figure — and in relation to the argument about the sense of difference and unity, is a clear example of how ‘difference’ can be supported materially.

The second aspect of this is the ‘resource’ that is my time. The most profound example here in relation to the university is the #SaveUEL work, which directly contested the university’s operations and leadership. The contribution I was able to make to coordinate some of this activity (and in some instances significant portions of this activity) was directly enabled by the funding and space I had for this research. As noted in the introduction, we fought against the targeted dismissals of hundreds of academic staff, but we also sought to bring together different groups on campus, including some of the most politically marginalised groups. This work was a clear example of the form of bone-deep participation informed by the sense of difference and unity argued for here, and the links that were made increased our collective capacity.

I recall, for example, an online event we organised that had a wide array of speakers from outside of the university, including the Labour MP for Poplar and Limehouse Apsana Begum. The event also had breakout room discussions where we discussed what a university could look like (PGR Action Group, 2021). At the start, we played music and had made a slideshow of screengrabs

from Twitter of different people expressing support for staff who it was anticipated would lose their jobs under the planned restructuring. At that event and at other points, many told us that the experience of being part of the work we were doing was the most ‘connected’ they had felt to the institution in a long time. There was a sense of collectivity, and of our collective power increasing. However, this work was far from straightforward. Because of the conditions under which we were brought together, our shared horizon was relatively limited. While we collectively opposed the staff redundancies and had a general (unifying) sense of outrage about many of the things we were learning about, at times we struggled to prioritise opposing those cuts alongside the other injustices on campus we were finding out about (much of which cannot be relayed here). Collins notes that “[b]reathing life into ideas requires working across differences and building communities in which dialogue is possible” (2013, p. 37). It was precisely that difficulty of working across difference that was so challenging. This also points to the ethos of ‘always-to-come’ comrades.

As this research has partially documented, there are ways to negotiate a sometimes unfavourable academic environment, and to rethink the way that the university itself could work as a machine that can reorganise everyday practices (Russell, 2015). Perhaps the most useful figure here was the ignorant schoolmaster, who reminded us of our fundamental equality in the face of an institution who sought to put hierarchies in place at every turn. There are risks to this counter-hegemonic work — there is “a price to pay in entering onto the field of battle” (Grossberg, 2018, p. 187). The price we paid, or were worried we might pay, meant that we needed to draw, heavily and consistently, on the radical diplomat to be mindful of the ways in which we were compromised.

Those two modes of political action, while not entirely aligned, sustained our work, and thus helped to increase collective capacity — as well as generating small moments of emancipation.

## **7.8 Ethics, and ethics**

The final aspect of the negotiation of the university relates to ethics. Much research in contemporary universities, particularly in the UK, operate in a highly managerial way. The various university-driven ethical processes are the best example of this (Carey, 2019). Fundamentally, the challenge has been to align my own sense of ethics (which broadly fits with Braidotti's (2021) sense of affirmative ethics described in chapter four, namely, where we do see ourselves as part of both the problem and the solution) with the university's ethical processes. There is a risk in terms of what might happen should any aspect of my approach prove incompatible with the university's. For example, there is a significant question about the extent to which a university's ethical review process, which draws mainly on the dominant positivist frameworks of the social and natural sciences, can be applied to the sort of counter-hegemonic work we do, which operates from a very different set of epistemological positions. More generally, while parts of the university's ethical processes have been useful in this militant research, some components have created barriers for ways in which we might meaningfully respond to "complex and non-binary issues" — to quote from Carey's (2019, p. 150) discussion of social science research into social work.

There are many examples that highlight this clash of epistemologies — the foremost being the way that research participants are understood, which at its

broadest is historically not as collaborators (and even less as comrades) within a research project. For example, I had to make a special case for the people I have worked with to be named (with permission).<sup>99</sup> Beyond this, it is difficult to convey some of the specific challenges, but in many respects the details are not necessary — what is critical is that this engagement with the ethical processes of my university has taught me something quite different to its intention. This summons the pedagoga: I have, through this negotiation of the machine that is my university, understood more about the extent to which institutions work to protect themselves. My response to these challenges highlights the radical diplomat in operation. She accepts the complexity of the situation, and rather than get frustrated, she looks for the moments in which we can “manipulate the conducts of the diplomatic to challenge our current circumstances” (Graziano, Graham and Kelly, 2008, p. 108). It also recalls the comrade, who deliberately chooses the side of the political work. In situations like this, the ‘in, against and beyond’ strategy is challenging — but it is also those challenging moments that best hint at what convocation can do.

This points to a compelling aspect of this research, which again ties into the overall argument about difference and unity. Here, I am interested in the relationships we have to other militant researchers. Unfortunately, many militant researchers operate broadly autonomously from one another. There is a need for groups of these scholars to come together to decide “on research priorities with social movements and other activist scholars in order to address the wider

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<sup>99</sup> This particularly challenges the norm within the social sciences, where anonymity is the default. For example, Jones et al’s account of the 2019 election has the following line: “[a]nonymity in writing up is of course a prerequisite, with identifying features disguised as far as possible...” (Carroll, Jones and Sinha, 2021, p. 211). This is, I would argue, not appropriate for some of the people I have worked with, whose time and energy should be acknowledged (where they agree to it). The ethics committee thankfully (eventually) agreed.

strategic issues of this engagement for achieving radical change” (The Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010). For Piven, these colleagues are crucial — “[i]f nothing else, we can cultivate the scholar comrades who share our activist commitments and can come to our defense if the occasion arises” (2010, p. 810). In relation to that experience of negotiating the ethics committee, for example, several comrades provided guidance and moral support. In our conversations we have learnt from one another — and have grown in confidence in terms of having the certainty to know when and how to push forward in response to institutional challenges, and when to stay silent.

## **7.9 Emancipation**

This chapter discussed some of the wins within this militant research assemblage. The first example is the identification of the features of bone-deep participation, and particularly an ethos of difference and unity that underpins it. The second is the way that convocation has operated. The third is the figures of political action who are key to this analysis: they were here briefly brought together, and their influence was felt throughout the subsequent examples. The fourth example is the sense of ‘always-to-come comrades’. The fifth example is the courage that emerged in the negotiation of academia, the sixth was the way resources of the institution were distributed, and the final aspect was the negotiation of ethics. All of these components relate to bone-deep participation and were underpinned by a sense of radical difference and unity.

## Conclusion

“And at / The end of the day / We’ll remember the days / We were close to the edge / And we’ll wonder how we made it through / And at / The end of the day / We’ll remember the way / We stayed so close till the end / We’ll remember it was me and you / Cause we are gonna be forever you and me / You will always keep me flying high in the sky of love” (Nincs, 2009)

I have such a vivid memory of a comrade playing this song at the end of a long Saturday morning Zoom meeting, to ‘see us out’. We had spent a few hours running through the various parts of the TWT21 festival in Brighton, discussing what we thought worked, and what did not. The debrief took place long enough after the festival that people showed up, but still close enough that everyone’s collective tiredness was palpable. Nonetheless, the energy in the meeting was impressive. Everyone was proud of what had been achieved. I was happy the COVID-19 planning had rolled out smoothly and I had ideas for how we could improve our welfare provision for attendees and volunteers. At the end of the meeting my comrade put on the song above, which is by the band the Lighthouse Family. What normally happens at that point is that people say goodbye quite quickly, either using their microphones or through the chat, and then leave the meeting. That didn’t happen on this occasion. The choice of song was perfect — everyone started swaying and dancing about, and the song played out before we all said goodbye. It was a tiny moment in a much longer few months of organising for the festival, but it was charged. The sense of collective joy was profound.

Dancing on Zoom is an example of a 'site of intervention' within this thesis's wider interest in understanding political participation within Corbynism and post-Corbynism. I have argued that understanding how political participation functions within our current conjuncture is a critical avenue by which to explore how we contest hegemony. In the introduction, I noted that there are few studies that seek to understand the experience of political participation with a view to understanding how it engages with power. The social movement known as Corbynism offered a compelling context in which a militant research methodology could help to investigate these questions.

This thesis combines insights from cultural studies, the immanent philosophical tradition, several political trajectories, and more, to generate what I have described as a militant research assemblage. My understanding of militant research draws on several theorists but broadly the approach prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge (Halvorsen, 2015). The specific struggle was Corbynism and post-Corbynism and I have been participating in this movement 'live' to understand what that type of political participation feels like, looks like, and sounds like, how power is being negotiated, and how all of this relates to the role that research can or should play. In this conclusion, I recap on the arguments I have made by revisiting the overall research questions, and I particularly look at some of the methodological challenges I faced. As a reminder, my research sought to answer the question: what can the use of a militant research methodology tell us about how political participation in Corbynism and post-Corbynism operated, and what we can learn about where it challenged power? There were several sub-questions within this, which the following discussion will answer in turn.

## 8.1 Political participation in our conjuncture

The first sub-question is: how did the expanded sense of political participation within the Corbyn and post-Corbyn movement operate, and how did it respond to the wider status of political participation in the UK?

### *8.1.1 Hegemony and counter-hegemony*

To answer this, it was critical to establish a framework for understanding our moment. Part of this was answered in chapter one, where I used the notion of conjunctural analysis. I opened the chapter with a discussion of the way that cultural studies understands culture as “whole and distinctive way of life” (Williams, 1981, p. 11) before describing the key aspects of conjunctural analysis: a focus on hegemony and counter-hegemony, on processes of articulation, and on identifying sites for intervention. I then moved to a discussion of our conjuncture in the UK. I understand this as being characterised by an interplay between liberalism, its bedfellows (imperialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy), and its successors (neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism). I discussed how a set of liberal ideas that emerged in the Enlightenment that focused on the individual have had significant impact on the types of oppressions we experience in the UK, beginning with Thatcher’s time in power and through to our current moment.

Chapter one then explored how the social movement known as Corbynism sought to contest hegemony. The chapter included a discussion of the broadly

counter-hegemonic socialist policies Corbynism advanced (while accepting that they were far from 'radical'), the 'would-be hegemonic bloc' that made up the Corbyn coalition, and the type of 'positive' freedom the movement sought. I discussed how some of the more creative aspects of the movement were encapsulated by the figure known as the Acid Corbynist. This chapter included a brief outline of Corbynism's counter-hegemonic political participation. Broadly, there were several key sites of political participation, including within the party; within the wider alliance between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left; as well as the moves made to think about what it would mean to democratise public ownership, and policy-making more widely. What is key to this framing of the specific type of counter-hegemonic work Corbynism advanced was the idea of emergences.

In chapter four and drawing on the militant research I have done within Corbynism, I argued that the movement generated numerous minor, emergent becomings. These operated transversally, and thus 'in, against and beyond' (Halvorsen, 2015) the various structures we sought to challenge. I see emergence as a strategic process (brown, 2017), often driven by the generation of new cultural expressions (Williams, 1992). Emergence is a transversal, deterritorialising process that involves generating minor becomings at scale and in a way that creates a collectively produced phenomenon that is bigger than the sum of its parts. Within Corbynism, project like TWT are excellent examples of emergence — the festival and the wider project represents a significant cultural endeavour, in which numerous people, groups, and movements are brought together in a pluralist space, and in which wider phenomenon arise. Further, I argued that part of what characterised these spaces of emergence,

from my own experience and that of my comrades, was the idea that we occasionally glimpsed bone-deep participation. This stands in contrast to the nightmare participation that dominates.

In the introduction, I argued that the ‘ideal types’ of nightmare and bone-deep participation maintain a focus on the negotiations of power at the heart of political participation. I have argued throughout that nightmare participation is the form of political participation that our current hegemony articulates, and bone-deep participation is a counter-hegemonic alternative. There are three key aspects of how both nightmare and bone-deep participation function: the understanding of emancipation, the relationship they establish between the individual and the group, and the role of pedagogy.

### *8.1.2 Emancipation*

As described in chapter one and chapter three, nightmare participation seeks a negative version of freedom, in which the oppressions of liberalism, its bedfellows and successors are upheld. This form of negative freedom is premised on the liberal and capitalist emphases on individualism, progress, and universalism and it works in part via the affective registers they generate. In chapter three, I particularly looked at de- and re-territorialising forms of political participation in relation to representative democracy. I argued that in some respects, we live in what could be understood as a ‘democratic nightmare’, because nightmare participation aims to depoliticise. It does this despite — or in some cases because of — the numerous instances where ideas about political participation from social movements and other emancipatory political

trajectories have been inserted into representative democracy, as a partial salve.

In contrast within bone-deep participation, emancipation refers to the *moments* in which we get free from various forms of oppression and inequality. This thesis has discussed many of these moments, including the dancing on Zoom described at the beginning of this chapter. Within this militant research, emancipation ultimately represents a rejection of our current hegemony and the various structures that uphold it, and it requires concrete material goals. It operates transversally. It aims at the ‘positive’ form of freedom Corbynism sought (as described in chapter one), it reflects the Spinozist sense of having the freedom “to act in the world creatively” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 76) and sees difference as productive. Further, unlike the way that nightmare participation actively represses democracy, bone-deep participation reinvigorates it. This form of positive freedom — this form of emancipation — provided the hope that motivated the Corbyn movement. As chapter two discussed in some detail, this was encapsulated in the experience of canvassing in the General Election in 2019. This was motivating, and it spurred a switch of methodology to focus on Corbynism more concretely.

### 8.1.3 *Collectives*

In chapter five, I discussed how within nightmare participation, the relationship between the individual and the group is characterised by a sense of contributory autonomy (Kelty, 2019). As Kelty describes it, this is where individual autonomy is prioritised for the purpose of the collective: “it follows a logic of putting

individual autonomy into the service of a greater collective; your vote counts, your voice is important, you are not (bowling) alone” (2019, p. 14). Thus, contributory autonomy maintains the focus on the individual, and a sense of inherent identities. The key example that chapter five discussed is voting — where we are told we have a regular opportunity to shape the political sphere, but very little ever changes.

In contrast, the collective in bone-deep participation is where the individual and the group operate as an emergent collective subject. This indicates a sense of transversality, where the group and the individual are partially merged, in a way that creates a ‘transindividual’ entity (Balibar, 1993). This recognises that we are inherently dependent on others, and it partially deprioritises individual autonomy. It also demands a politics of solidarity, where “all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all” (Sundberg, 2007, p. 148), and of comradeship, which refers to a “political relation of supported cover” (Dean, 2019a, p. 3). Further, in relation to bone-deep collective subjects, political participation is about both deepening participation for those already engaged (as comrades), and it is about extending participation to those not already engaged. The goal is to improve our collective material conditions and to enable everyone to have lives that are creative, and interpersonal, and whose actions “make our world a better place”, to quote Clune (2020).

In chapter five I took forward an analysis of my work with a group of national student organisers called RSM, a specific collective that I engaged with within post-Corbynism. I argued that within this militant research, we glimpsed an emergent collective subject whom we can understand via Braidotti’s framing of the nomadic subject. I discussed the implications of the nomadic subject’s

requirement of a transversal collective, the way she seeks collectivity in difference, the way she takes sides, and the necessary downplaying of identity. I then related this back to Corbynism as a whole, suggesting that the nomadic subject needs to be tempered by other modes of political action. In particular, she needs the non-nomad to ground her in the real, as well as the solidaristic comrade.

The nomad has significant parallels within Corbynism, particularly in terms of the shared sense of movement, and of 'moving on'. It is reflected in the way that the movement demarcated comrades from everyone else, including the role (analysed more concretely in chapter seven) of 'always-to-come comrades'. These dynamics were reflected within the Labour Party's community organising units also. They spoke to the significance of the threat that they posed, particularly in terms of the fact that they were eventually shut down. However, part of the challenge of this process of demarcation was the omission of a truly internationalist agenda from the movement. As I argued, this again points to the type of freedom hegemony generates, and the lives upon which it has been built. So, while this is where the nomad (again) falls short, it is also where the non-nomad and the solidaristic comrade are critical.

#### *8.1.4 Pedagogy*

In chapter six, I discussed how within nightmare participation, pedagogy works in a highly managerial way. Managerialism is a comprehensive set of practices, but it includes the idea that more managers and more management are the most effective way to improve public services and critically, to generate profit (Klikauer, 2015). Within participatory practices, managerialism operates as a

form of pedagogy where participation becomes a ‘technical’ exercise, in which a version of ‘choice’ (Deakin, 1994) is available, but where that choice is determined by the market.

Chapter six also discussed the way in which, in bone-deep participation, pedagogy refers to a sense of dangerous (Giroux, 2010) pedagogy. In this, consciousness-raising takes place, and learners are taught in a way that moves them to counter-hegemonic action. This builds on the history of radical education — for Freire (2017), this is about politicising learners by enabling reflection on their own lives and histories. It is also about developing democratic skills (Giroux, 2010).

In chapter seven I looked in more detail at the way that pedagogy operated within this militant research by examining it through one specific lens, namely the social media platform WhatsApp. I introduced the figure of the pedagogista, who encourages us to question pedagogical assumption. Using a posthuman framing, I discussed the ways in which my comrades and I are ‘becoming WhatsApp’. Within this I looked at several lessons that WhatsApp teaches us, including its pervasiveness and intimacy, its complexity, and the specific form of equality it generates. The latter principally drew on the insights of the ignorant schoolmaster. In relation to Corbynism as a whole, I argued that WhatsApp has operated as a partially dangerous form of pedagogy. Because of the pervasiveness and intimacy of the platform, the use of WhatsApp within Corbynism came to reflect the complexity of the moment in which we live, but also — and critically — it operated (via the platform’s prioritisation of equality) as an ignorant schoolmaster.

## 8.2 The role of militant research

The next question is: what role does the militant research itself play?

This was initially addressed in chapter two, when I discussed how this research responded to the conjuncture. I outlined some of the key aspects of the immanent philosophical tradition — detailing the influence of Spinoza’s thought, before moving into the significant influence of Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking. I particularly argued that notions of a (research) assemblage, machines, and transversality are critical tools for understanding what I characterise as a militant research assemblage. I discussed the outsize role that the General Election in 2019 played as a form of consciousness-raising, before moving to a discussion of different aspects of militant research. This includes the way it negotiates extractive research, the way it prioritises the political, and the sense of militancy – the latter led into a discussion of the figure of political action called the militant. I also discussed the way that militant research works transversally, the way it requires a prefigurative division of labour, the role of the body, and a useful taxonomy of militant research practices. I then moved to a discussion of the centrality of political strategy within militant research and introduced the radical diplomat. Across this research, the use of a militant research methodology came with several benefits and challenges that are worth detailing.

### 8.2.1 *A conjunctural open trip*

Throughout this thesis, I have used militant research in tandem with a series of other theoretical tools, as is consistent with militant research more generally. In particular, the overarching ethos builds on the similarities that exist between militant research and conjunctural analysis. I read both approaches, particularly when combined with a research assemblage, to be less interested in providing a taxonomic overview of a certain time period, and more interested in identifying interventions and different 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The latter means that the research field or topic changes as the process evolves, and it rejects the idea that our research design should be entirely set from the beginning. In this, it asks the question (borrowed from St. Pierre): "... why do we think we should know what to do before we begin to inquire?" (2021, p. 6). In part because of this approach, my research focus and questions have evolved.

The key challenge here is that while some unexpected and useful avenues have opened, there are omissions in this research that I anticipate a more 'systematic' approach to research (namely, research that does not change course in terms of what its overall ethos or questions are) would have had more chance of including. To briefly list some things that may have helped answer the research questions differently and possibly in a more sophisticated way are more analysis of the history of radical democracy in the UK; further investigation of the 'bloc' that made up Corbynism; the salience of care and healing within the movement; and more analysis of the specific ways in which imperialism continues to be upheld, among other things. Further, I suspect that a select number of formal interviews (perhaps conducted later in the research) would have improved some of the arguments.

But, omissions in research are partly unavoidable — and critically, the more chaotic, ‘open trip’ (Malo del Molina, 2005) I embarked on is more attuned to both militant research and minor theory, and to the immanent world as it stands. It also partly relates to the ultimate ‘failure’ of conjunctural analysis. For Grossberg, this always-partial reading works against the way that the academy usually works — as he says this means that in some ways, “... by traditional academic standards, it will always be a failure. But then, a conjunctural analysis is not a goal but a practice, a process, a critical analytic” (2019, p. 42). Accepting that militant research and conjunctural analysis are processes, or practices, is key, but related to this is one critical learning that I would like to take forward in future research. I now have a much deeper understanding of militant research, even when understood as an ‘open trip’ and in future, I would like to involve more people in the research design.

This was not possible at the beginning – I had not come across militant research, and I did not appreciate that there was academic work that explicitly looked to operate in service to a wider movement. Further, the fact that I did not begin my engagement with different groups with a militant research methodology in mind probably created more genuine and meaningful relationships. I did not fully plan out these engagements, and instead simply immersed myself in different areas, helping where I could, while hoping that something useful would come of it. This is the avocation model Khasnabish and Haiven (2015) put forward, where we use our time to organise and volunteer with social movements. This phase played a formative role in the development of this thesis, and for me personally. But now that those relationships are more substantial, I think I am better placed to seek input into the research design.

Critically, and while being mindful of the time and capacity comrades can devote to work outside of their immediate considerations, finding meaningful opportunities for others to propose ideas should create the conditions for more wins.

Related to this is another realisation — another lesson from the pedagogista — is that I never want to do a substantive piece of work alone again. There is an irony in the way that this thesis relies so heavily on a sense of collectivity throughout, but that I needed to do this inherently solitary writing to understand and to communicate the value of the collective. Again, I hope to pursue (and continue) further collective projects once this thesis is finished. Key to this will be more collective strategising — not only within the groups with whom I am active, but also with other militant researchers I have met.

### 8.2.2 *Immanent tools*

There are several tools from the immanent philosophical tradition that are worth exploring in terms of how they operated methodologically. First, minor knowledge and minor politics has been critical. In the first instance, the minor is closely tied to the idea of transversality, which I have used throughout in different ways. This includes the way that transversality helps us to think across fields, methods, and sources of knowledge (or data); to think across individual and group relationships; and to think across modes of action. This emphasis on non-binary thinking has been a consistent reminder of the always-transversal nature of political participation that was discussed in chapter three. Another aspect of how the minor works is that this thesis has — as noted — several

threads that are picked up in different ways and at different times (particularly the collective, pedagogy and emancipation, although there are many more). I would not wish for any of these threads to be seen as 'mastered'. This entirely fits with the way that Katz says that "[w]orking in a minor theoretical mode is to recognize that those subjectivities, spatialities, temporalities are embodied, situated, and fluid; their productions of knowledge inseparable from--if not completely absorbed in--the mess of everyday life" (2017, p. 598). This fits with the ethos of cultural studies, which looks to understand wider contexts through everyday culture — and where "[t]he question is never what the *right* theory is, but what theories will help us better constitute and understand this particular context" (my emphasis) (Grossberg, 2019, p. 48).

However, one of the key challenges with this minor approach is negotiating my own role. There are political questions here. As noted repeatedly, and as Guattari (2014) suggests, we must become increasingly united and increasingly different. Part of this means being deeply attuned to our *own* differences, so that we have more to say about what unites us. And this relies on a 'minor' reading. Katz critiques the focus within major theory on the "broad brushstrokes" approach it takes, which fails to account for how the social relations they index work, or how they feel (2017, p. 598). Instead, by "[i]ndexing the ways these problems are encountered and lived, refused and reimagined in different forms, places and scales might enable the construction of assemblages that work the relays among these forms of exploitation, violence, oppression, and offer new means to respond to them" (Katz, 1996, p. 598). This is precisely the move I have sought to make within this research — to better understand some of the ways that different knowledges have operated

relationally and contingently within the research of my PhD. But navigating my own role here is difficult.

Kleinman argues that when we focus on personal experiences we get an insight into difference, and to the consistency of transformation (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007). At the same time, it is difficult to know when this work is unhelpfully inward-looking.<sup>100</sup> I take my cue here from Hall, who highlights this tension: "[a]utobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically" (1992, p. 277). As discussed briefly in the introduction, acknowledging and working with this tension is the kind of analysis I have sought to build, including via the inclusion of my own experiences, and that of my comrades. I propose a (transversal) acceptance of these tensions — between autobiography, authenticity, and authority — without a goal to 'resolve' them.

Assemblages are another key tool and I want to dwell briefly again on the role that the research assemblage has played, particularly in relation to conjunctural analysis and to militant research. What is central to this is the way that Deleuze and Guattari saw the use of their work. Assemblages should contest power relations (Chatterton, Pusey and Russell, 2011). Can I point to power relations changing because of the use of a research assemblage as a tool within this PhD? I venture that the set of emancipatory moments discussed in the previous chapter (the most important chapter, because it most concretely points to the

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<sup>100</sup> As the decades of scholarship on auto-ethnography, and other fields, have grappled with. See, for example, (Delamont, 2009) for a discussion of some of the tensions within auto-ethnography specifically.

wins) required a more nuanced take on relationality than would have been made possible through some other ways of thinking. It is only by thinking *across* the experiences I have had within this militant research, in tandem with the various theoretical materials, that some of the key insights were generated.

In particular, the project to think across the entirety of the assemblage has driven the increasing attention to the radical sense of difference and unity that underpins many of the arguments. This is a challenge to hegemony — particularly (but not exclusively) when it is reflected in praxis, as the discussion of the work I have increasingly been drawn to around care and welfare set out. There is an ontological component here: assemblages by their nature suggest a project of difference and unity and it is perhaps that framing that informed the insights around difference and unity. At the same time, the insights were also framing the decision to use assemblages as a conceptual tool. Again, this points to a transversal relationship between the theory and the practice, and the convocation model of militant research.

### 8.2.3 *(Militant) method as strategy*

The final aspect of this discussion of methodology relates to thinking about the role of this thesis itself. As is widely but informally discussed, almost no-one reads anyone's thesis, outside of examiners and supervisors. While I have been preoccupied throughout with thinking about how to make my work relevant to the movement I work within — how I can find the moments of bone-deep participation in militant research — very few of my comrades will read this work. What is however critical is that my engagement with these different groups (my

participation) has altered things, hopefully mostly for better, undoubtedly sometimes for worse. I am increasingly interested in the idea that militant research in the context of a PhD, and perhaps more widely, can be far less about the actual written thesis that is produced, and far more about the process of producing that research, or the specific deployment of *methods*. When I reflect on all the research I have done, it is in many of those small, intimate, affective moments where things really happened.

This relates to the arguments made in chapter three around the way that methodology needs to be understood as strategy, but as this thesis is being concluded I want to stress how central that argument is to my understanding of the role that this research has played within Corbynism and post-Corbynism. I believe that Chatterton, Pusey, and Russell are right when they say that “progressions in radical thought don’t emerge from the heavens akin to some transcendental truth about our existence, nor are they found hidden deep like a biological truth about our being; they are actively constructed through the actual practice of bodies coming up against the limit of what is considered possible” (2011, p. 579) — but I want to take their insight further. Essentially, I am interested in the idea that for some of us doing militant research, it is the *methodology* and particularly the *methods* of our research that could have *more* relevance to our movement than the ‘findings’ of our research. This is encapsulated in what has been described as ‘impact-in-process’ (Marzi and Pain, 2022) and it is a partially prefigurative reading. I want to pursue this line of thinking in future work.

### 8.3 The wins

The final question is: where are the wins, and what can we learn from them?

This was most concretely addresses in chapter seven. There were many wins within this militant research — all of which can be understood as examples of convocation, including the key insights around bone-deep and nightmare participation, and around difference and unity. The idea of convocation offered a way to think through the praxis/academia milieu and the strategic polyphony of figures, who offered ways out of some of the contradictions we face. I discussed the idea of the ‘always-to-come comrades’, which is important in terms of thinking about who, exactly, we are engaging with and why. Finally, I outlined the way in which I found the courage to pursue this research, and different means by which the university was challenged. Within much of the literature on Corbynism, I have — as noted — seen little about political participation, and there has been little in the political participation literature that looked specifically at the experience of it,<sup>101</sup> or of the extent to which it challenges power. Thus, working on this project has partially (and in a small way) corrected those omissions.

The most substantive insight is that while the Corbyn movement is over, it was a window into what a form of political participation could look like that (often very falteringly) prioritised difference — as well as an assessment of the role that research could play in advancing this agenda. This is a project of minoritarian politics in which struggles for emancipation align with the most

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<sup>101</sup> In the final days of writing this thesis I have seen a call for papers that looks at the experience of participation within cultural institutions, and it draws on Kelly’s (2019) framings.

marginalised and through which joy (collective power) increases. The experiences I document within this research speak to this: this militant research did not only witness or engage in bone-deep participation underpinned by this sense of radical difference, but also at times enabled it.

This is a key area for future work. Understanding that a radical sense of difference and unity is a 'win' is one thing — but further investigating how to replicate it in different settings is critical. There is a glimmer of possibility that this approach could successfully articulate a counter-hegemonic project that could overcome our hegemony underpinned by liberalism, its bedfellows, and successors.

#### **8.4 Bone-shaking participation**

So, then: what can the use of a militant research methodology tell us about how political participation in Corbynism and post-Corbynism operated, and what we can learn about where it challenged power? I would point to the work of Jones, Carroll and Sinha who ask the following question: “[h]ow can one understand the losses of political parties without experiencing them from within, in all their bone-shaking, debilitating and world wearying horror?” (2021, p. 209). It is partly this ‘bone-shaking’ participation in Corbynism and post-Corbynism that this thesis grapples with. I believe that by finding ways to create bone-deep participation we can challenge hegemony. And to realise that through research (here militant research) I take from brown. She says that is critical that we “fight for the future, get into the game, get dirty, get experimental” (2017, p. 18). This is precisely what I am interested in — these years of experimenting and

emergently strategising and 'getting dirty' have taught us a little more about how we might get free, in a way that I and my comrades have felt in our bones, not our nightmares.

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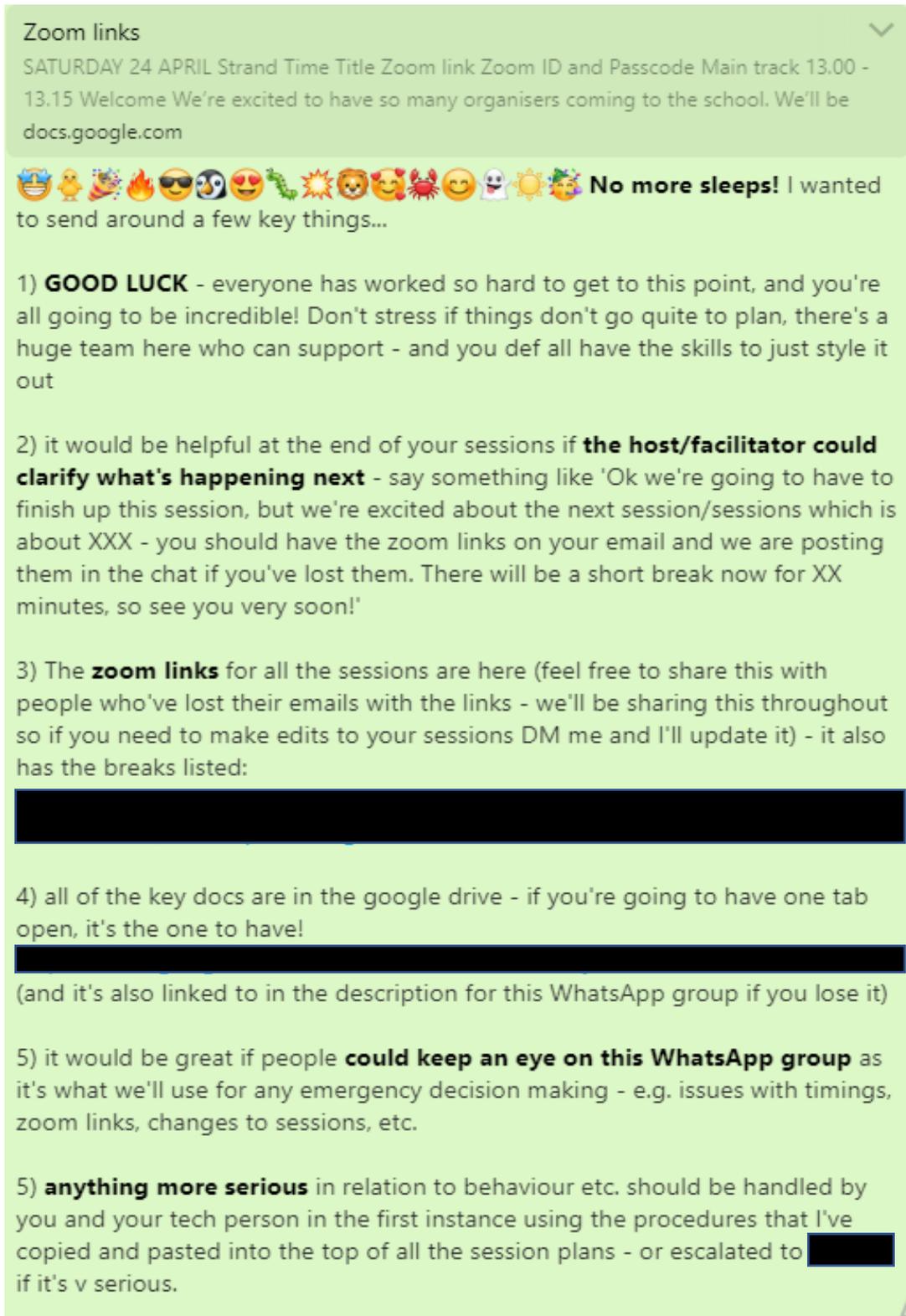
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## Appendix

[Redacted due to third party copyright]



1. A screengrab of the WhatsApp message I sent on the morning of the Transforming the University organising school.

[Redacted due to third party copyright]

## **Statement on collaboration**

As consistent with a militant research methodology, some of this work has been developed in partial collaboration with several different groups. The nature of these collaborations is described in detail in the introduction, under the section titled 'Case studies'. I have written permission from all the groups and individuals that are named within this thesis as being a group with whom I worked directly.

## **The nomadic subject in student organising**

Jessica Adams

### *Abstract*

There is significant interest in the way that collective subjectivities emerge, and in how they negotiate power to create change. Through a discussion of work that I have done with the Red Square Movement (a national student network organising for a radically different educational system in the UK) I argue that the posthuman theorist Braidotti's conception of the nomadic subject is a compelling conceptual lens by which to read this activity. Drawing on my experiences, I suggest that the nomad is greatly strengthened when she works transversally, and thus alongside both the comrade and the non-nomad. This research has taken place as part of my doctorate and uses a militant research methodology.

*"Were I to write an autobiography, it would be the self-portrait of a collectivity..."*  
(Braidotti, 1994)

For those interested in political change, subjectivity – and specifically a sense of collective subjectivity — is critical for enabling an understanding of how to overturn the “oppressive cultural norms which define our worldview” (Reinsborough, 2004, p. 30). Thus, recent decades have seen a reconfiguration of understandings of subjectivity towards more collectively informed models. These collective subjectivities are emergent and they are, as Lazzarato (2004) suggests (and riffing on Gramsci), caught between the old and the new. For Haarstad (2007), an analysis of collective subjectivity "can be understood as the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interests of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in contemporary capitalism" (p. 57). This reminds us of what is at stake – collective agency and the ability to make change, particularly change which orients towards anti-capitalist futures. These new subjectivities, or more accurately these experiments with new subjectivities, revolve in part around economic questions, which Lazzarato (2004) argues are particularly focused on questions of precarity. In alignment with Harstaad's (2007) suggestion that the task at hand is primarily about creating space for the ‘imagery’ of new collective subjects to emerge, part of the way that this interpersonal, or more precisely

transpersonal, sense of subjectivity is being developed by scholars is through the creation or identification of figures or figurations (Sandoval, 2000). The nomad is one of these figures.

I argue that the posthuman theorist Braidotti's (1994) nomadic subject is a compelling conceptual lens by which to examine work I have done with a national group of student organisers called the Red Square Movement (RSM). RSM is a good case study for a nomadic form of collective subjectivity for several reasons. This includes the nomadic subject's restlessness and the way that she demands the assembling of 'dissident communities'. It also includes the nomad's approach to negotiating difference and particularly identity, and through her understanding of power, discussed here in relation to my role as a militant researcher. However, to generate substantive change, the nomad needs to be understood as a specifically transversal subject. Based on my experience, the comrade and the non-nomad are equally as important subjective figure, who are required to support the nomad's ambitions.

To briefly contextualise, this work has taken place within the context of my doctoral research where I am using a militant research methodology. This is an approach where the researcher actively uses their labour time, as part of their research, to help further political projects. As Halvorsen (2015) writes, it is "a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward" (p. 466). Thus, I have been active in numerous political and/or educational spaces throughout my research. This includes the focus here, on the work with RSM, but also work with the political education organisation The World Transformed (TWT) and a campaign called #SaveUEL that focussed on halting the University of East London's plans to make redundant potentially hundreds of staff, among other things.

In thinking through this specific experience, or set of experiences, the artificial separation of the theoretical and the everyday does not hold. Ahmed (2017) writes about the way that these interact: "[t]heory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life... We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life" (p. 10). Further, the process of learning more about subjectivity has altered my sense of my own subjectivity. As I have discussed these ideas with comrades, their sense of their subjectivity has changed — as has mine of theirs. This aligns with the following sense of how subjectivity be analysed, where a "more substantial conceptualization of cultural experience is in order, one in which the collective and the

individual are intertwined and run together and in which power and meaning are not placed in theoretical opposition but are shown to be intimately linked in an intersubjective matrix" (Biehl et al., 2007, p. 14)

### *The Red Square Movement*

In early 2021 I had a phone call from a key member of the emerging Red Square Movement about the work we were doing within the #SaveUEL campaign. They talked about how a group of student organisers were coming together and exploring forming a new national network around a shared political horizon. The group consisted of representatives from many of the major student campaigns across the country from the previous tumultuous year of student politics. This included students who had recently gone on rent and fee strikes. It also had representatives from student groups like Pause or Pay who campaign around art schools specifically (Pause or Pay, 2020), Liberate the University, who campaign for universities to be 'demarketised, democratised, and decolonised' (Liberate the University, 2021), and Young Labour, who operate within the Labour Party (Your National Committee, 2022)

As far as I know, those who are involved in the group broadly work from emancipatory political positions – those which are anti-imperialist, decolonial, anti-racist, abolitionist, feminist, queer, anti-capitalist (communist, socialist and/or anarchist), among others. The person I spoke to mentioned that the group were interested in developing some political education activity by arranging an 'organising school' for student activists. I joined the group soon after the phone call and began discussions to work on the proposed school, which was eventually delivered as a partnership between RSM, TWT and the National Union of Students in April 2021. Roughly 30 of us worked together to deliver the project, and my role was primarily to coordinate across the various branches of activity. In the end, the school brought together around 100 student activists for a weekend of reflection, training, and planning.

Partnerships between different organisations were at the heart of the school and it is the relationship between TWT and RSM that I can best speak to. TWT's strategy is partly influenced by the work of Milburn - he identifies a critical demographic group that he calls 'generation left'. It broadly refers to the generation of young people whose material prospects are significantly less promising than older generations (Milburn, 2019). His argument is that this group is increasingly being politicised through the experiences of precarity within

capitalism, especially in relation to the generations who came before. As one of the ‘brokers’ of the arrangement between RSM and TWT, I could see how it would be mutually beneficial. RSM benefitted from the organisational capacity to run a large online event, and TWT has an interest in engaging younger people. The partnership proved fruitful - since the school the two organisations have continued to work together. A delegation of roughly 20 students attended the 2021 TWT political education festival in September in Brighton in an official capacity. We organised a session at that festival called ‘Reimagining the Student Movement’, which asked attendees to discuss solutions or proposals around three core areas that had emerged in the strategising and collective work of the group, including at the organising school.

I want to clarify that the aim here is not to offer a concrete analysis of RSM’s work, nor to represent or convey all the work RSM has done (which goes far beyond the things I have been directly involved in). Instead, I want to ‘drag theory back to life’, and to relay some highly personal reflections on the way that the nomadic subject position operated within my work with the group. The school and the wider work I have done with RSM helps to clarify some of the specific ways in which my political subjectivity has evolved through collective processes of politicisation and political action that this PhD research is partially documenting. It also offers clues as to how we might replicate these processes – how we might, to recall Reinsborough (2004, p. 1), ‘decolonise the revolutionary imagination’.

To briefly set out how this process of change has operated within this collective subjectivity there are two core theoretical components. The first is the role of Foucault's (1985) concept of the care of the self, which my increasingly politicised subjectivity has partly been driven by. It relates to how an individual sees themselves as a subject. It is both a relational and an active process – there is no standalone 'self' which needs to be found, and instead the process of caring for oneself is how subjectivity is realised. Via these ongoing processes of caring for oneself, Foucault essentially argues that we can challenge some of the ways in which disciplinary structures subjectivise us and we can also create new, different subjectivities in the process – albeit always temporary and always evolving (Peters & Besley, 2013). The research in this PhD has involved a great deal of caring for myself using many different forms of reflection — for example, through engaging with theoretical materials, through conversations with others, through attending events, and through action. Though the most profound acts of 'care of the self' have happened when moving transversally between the logics of the organising I do, and

the logics of the academic milieu I am in (when something I have read surprisingly ‘fits’ with my experience organising, and vice versa, for example).

The second is the various relationships and networks that have been central to those processes of caring for the self, offering spaces for collective learning and growth via singularisation. Much of the knowledge I have developed has come through, as noted, the various groups and collectives I have worked with, for example through people sharing articles or book recommendations, or conversations to flesh out ideas. I am deeply indebted to those with whom I have worked —most of whom give their time voluntarily to the projects we have worked on. The sense of collectivity varies across spaces and organisations, but when moments of synergy surface, they are profound, moving, and motivating experiences. Critically, some of the most profound experiences have been articulated via culture, an inherently collective act. These cultural experiences work in a way that other experiences do not. Laughing at a political meme, dancing with comrades at a party (or on Zoom) — these experiences are instantiations of Guattari's singularisation and in these processes, Guattari saw a role for "desire, a taste for living, a will to construct the world in which we find ourselves, and the establishment of devices to change types of society and types of values that are not ours" (Guattari & Rolnik, 2008, p. 23).

### *RSM's nomadic subjects*

Braidotti's creation of the nomadic subject is widely understood to have offered a compelling new way to understand subjectivity (see, for example, Kliem, 2014). Braidotti is interested in the new and the emergent and she asks where creativity in theory and politics can be found (Braidotti, 1994). While a straightforward reading of the nomad (which comes initially from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work) is that of a traveller, actual movement or travel is not critical for Braidotti's nomadic subject, although it does appear regularly. Instead Braidotti (2011) argues that being a nomad is about rebelling against conventions, and thus operating as "a creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, of experience and of knowledge" (p. 6). Nomadic subjects operate as a myth or a political fiction – albeit one still heavily motivated by ethical and pragmatic concerns. Braidotti (1994) argues that "[p]olitical fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems" (p. 4). Critically, Braidotti's understanding

of subjectivity is deeply transversal (Salari, 2018) – the nomad can then be also read as a transversal subject.

There are several ways in which my experience with RSM aligns with a nomadic subjectivity. In the first instance, the nomad is restless, and this aligns with the restlessness of RSM. Guattari's (2014) understanding of subjectivity is a hugely significant influence on Braidotti's nomadic subject. For him: "[v]ectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a 'terminal' for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc." (p. 36). One of the principal ways in which my work with RSM has operated is through our collective involvement with a series of different groups in and around student politics (the relevant groups for me are #SaveUEL, the University College Union (UCU) and TWT). In many respects, the 'organising school' came about in the way that it did because those of us involved are active in many different spaces. As Braidotti (1994) argues:

... the nomadic subject functions as a relay team: s/he connects, circulates, moves on; s/he does not form identifications but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections. (p.n.?)

The description speaks to the form of politics we have enacted – as a composition of different groups who have formed a coalition for a period of time. While more sustainable structures are coming out of this work, they will not be around forever and there is thus a sense of constantly making what you can of the resources you have. In this transitory movement, the nomad rejects the liberal subject's fixity: the nomadic subject instead works as what Braidotti (2019) calls a 'haecceity'. But while the nomadic subject partially dismantles the liberal subject through her rejection of fixity and her mythological status, the positioning of the nomad as a figure or as a myth is problematic in other ways.

This springs from the way in which the mythological status of the nomad relates to 'the real'. Tamboukou (2021) has mounted a critique that oscillates around the nomadic subject's contemporaneous relationship to real lives. She asks if we can "still use the nomadic subject in the era of the recent huge refugee waves that have uprooted millions of people across the globe

and have forced them to take up nomadic paths as the only feasible way of going on living?” (p. 4). Tamboukou (2021) proposes the figure of the ‘non-nomad’, who is not a negation of the nomad, “but rather points to its shadows and margins” (p. 20). Critically, in this framing the non-nomad is demythologised – but a sense of political imaginary remains (Tamboukou, 2021). This point is echoed by Hanafin (2010, p 131), who notes that while Braidotti argues that the nomad was based on the subjects emerging in politics ‘from below’, he argues that there is very little in her work that actually makes these connections.

In relation to the organising school – to relate the nomad back to ‘the real’ - my personal experience was hugely determined by the way that I was positioned within the various groups in and around RSM’s orbit. Within #SaveUEL, I was a new campaigner, but I was buoyed by the connections we had made, what we had learnt, and to a certain extent what we had achieved in our campaigning. In relation to RSM, I was a novice (particularly when it comes to direct action - I have almost no experience of this, while others in the group are much more experienced). To a certain extent, I was keen to demonstrate my worth by showing that I did have skills to offer. Within TWT, I was slowly understanding what useful roles I could play as I became more involved in the organisation. Finally, within UCU I was listening and learning, and growing an awareness about the tools at our disposal from more experienced comrades.

Essentially, it was the interaction of my positioning within these three spaces that enabled me to operate as a nomadic subject in the development of the school – to use Braidotti’s (1994, p. 35) words, creating ‘bonding’, ‘coalitions’, ‘interconnections’, working in a way that “connects, circulates, moves on” . But this somewhat celebratory approach to movement and circulation needs to be tempered. The other aspect of my positionality – the economic aspect – is that I have funding for my PhD. And while this comparatively comfortable position does not entirely negate the nomad’s value (arguably a project like an organising school would struggle to function without several nomadic subjects operating within it), the challenge the non-nomad brings does sound a note of caution. Relating the nomad to the real brings an attention to the specificity of our positions (however fleeting or temporary), which make our nomadism more or less feasible.

*Dissident communities: assembling 'a people'*

The second aspect of the nomad's character that fits with my experience within RSM is that within this restless nomadic movement, we need to avoid moving alone. Braidotti (2019) suggests that one of the critical tasks is to assemble 'a people'. She writes that "to activate solidarity and resistance, it is better to avoid hasty recompositions of one 'humanity' bonded in fear and vulnerability. I prefer to work affirmatively and defend grounded locations, complexity and a praxis-oriented, differential vision of what binds us together" (p. 42). In terms of how this works in practice, one of the most significant tensions here is between homogenisation and difference. On the one hand, we live in a world that wants to homogenise our experiences, so we need to hold on to what defines us from one another. At the same time, capital thrives on difference, which means that we need to find ways to act collectively and in solidarity both to resist this, but also to suggest other ways of being. We need to find ways to create subjectivities which are diverse and hybrid, but also directed and organised. To recall Guattari's (2014) framing, we need to be more united and more different at the same time.

Thus, for Braidotti (2019), the question is how we build collectivity in difference. Or, as she wrote in 1994, the task "is how to restore a sense of intersubjectivity that would allow for the recognition of differences to create a new kind of bonding, in an inclusive (i.e. nonexclusionary) manner" (p 36). One of the ways in which this can play out is by developing what Mohanty (2020) calls 'dissident communities'. Mohanty (2020) argues that we need to look for alternative information and alternative sites of knowledge, and we need to do the work of 'materialist imagination', where we deliberately create communities based on diversity. She argues that we need people from all kinds of different spaces talking about how different histories and politics intersect.

Fundamentally, there is a sense of difference or pluralism in the politics of the groups and individuals involved in RSM. There are various political traditions and organising approaches represented – from those who hold positions within their student unions, to people like me who have operated more autonomously (and the people who do both roles at once), among other configurations. Thus, there are numerous pockets of power and we are not all aligned in our ideological views of how the world should be. The strength of the nomad here is that she can relate (however fleetingly) to a much wider range of other positions – she can work with and through this diversity to create something new. But this negotiation of difference comes with

challenges. The tensions here can be articulated through the way that the nomadic subject intersects with the form of collective subjectivity offered by global social movements. While both collective subjects square up to the challenges of the highly distributed forms of power we face today, as Harstaad (2007) writes, one of the critical challenges is that this same sense of multiplicity and distributed power is also where the weaknesses of movement across scales within global social movement subjectivities lie. This is because the scaling up and down is framed as an antagonistic process (Haarstad, 2007).

The nomad partially counters this challenge via a ‘principled’ movement between scales, to use Sandoval’s (2000) framing. Or as Braidotti (1994) argues, we should “respect the complexity, not drown in it” (p. 15). On a pragmatic level, one of the ways that we can respect complexity and the scaling up and down of power in the creation of dissident, nomadic communities is that we can operate on the principle that we need to start from a place of common ground. This is what Braidotti is getting at when she talks about defending ‘grounded locations’. This is where we reject a politics of working either purely for our own self-interest, or solely on behalf of others. Instead within a solidaristic framework, “all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all” (Sundberg, 2007, p. 148). Recalling Lazzarato’s (2004) sense that many collective subjectivities are today built on a sense of precarity (or a structural position of precarity), this is particularly relevant here. In relation to RSM, the most obvious common ground is our shared experience as precarious students in the UK right now. While individual circumstances vary widely, for undergraduates and master’s students this precarity relates to the prospect of enormous post-university debt, which has all sorts of repercussions, for example in terms of the future housing security (see Gayardon et al., 2021), and for PhD students this relates (among other things) to the precarity of the prospect of employment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021). The shared political horizon discussed earlier is another key space of common ground.

However, the most concrete aspect of finding common ground comes from the lessons of the comrade, who, alongside taking action, also takes sides (Dean, 2019). It is fundamental that the RSM group has taken sides. We are broadly against the financialization of universities and all that it entails – our ‘enemy’ is the university managers who implement these changes, but also the current Conservative government under which these changes are being implemented. The camaraderie that comes from having a shared enemy (however much that is a vague or moving target) is substantive and helps to negate the nomad’s tendency towards flightiness.

### *Negotiating identity*

However, this celebration of difference (including but not limited to identity) and unity (precarity, a shared political horizon, a common enemy, among other things) means a partial downplaying of identity. That tension is particularly difficult. As Dean (2016) explains via the work of Jennifer Silva and Carrie Lane, identity is continually reinforced as the primary sense of legitimacy in the world – in particular, there is a difficult sense that identities are more valuable when they are marginalised. As Dean writes, in this context, “[s]olidarity feels like a demand to sacrifice one’s own best thing, yet again, and for nothing” (p.n.). Braidotti (1994) argues that nomadism is “vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularisation of the self” (p. 16) but this sense of being *able* to sideline identity is embedded in a colonial outlook, as is the sense of being *able* to continually relocate (even intellectually).

To a certain extent, this colonial logic was replicated through the work we have done within the group. For example, RSM has had a relative absence of organisers from groups working directly around issues that stem from colonial structures – Palestinian solidarity, migration and the hostile environment, and abolition stand out, but there are others. Importantly, many in the group are working on these issues to varying degrees. But while almost everyone has a sense of nomadic allegiance to these causes, the group was brought together through different logics – the commonality of being precarious students. This means, however that at present, RSM’s work does not align with the needs of the most (racially) marginalised students – including the international students relying on foodbanks, students who have experienced racial trauma, students who are forced migrants or who otherwise have a precarious immigration status. There is a possibility that the failure to fully centre these students means that we may have re-articulated colonial logics. There is a concern that we have nomadically claimed these causes because of the social value it brings to ourselves and to the organisation, once again replicating colonialism’s extractive model.

The challenges here are highlighted in Tamboukou’s (2021) work, when she proposes the figure of the ‘non-nomad’, who is not a negation of the nomad, “but rather points to its shadows and margins” (p. 20). Critically, in this framing the non-nomad is demythologised, although a sense of political imaginary still remains (Tamboukou, 2021). The demythologisation of the nomad – the dragging of theory back to the real – of this specific challenge within our organising, points to the need to find other ways to work, and other ways to negotiate the

colonial legacies we uphold. This is deeply challenging work and some of us are at the beginnings of these journeys. However, what is promising is that these difficult processes are also part of what it means to unlock some of the desire that is critical for new subjectivities. Again going back to Braidotti (1994), she argues that “inner, psychic or unconscious structures are very hard to change by sheer volition” – she goes on to note, via Irigaray, that what is needed within nomadism is something that “allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices” (p. 31). This negotiation of internal contradictions, unconscious desires, and political choices is critical to the sense of emerging subjectivity I think we have generated in the work within the Red Square Movement – which the comrade and the non-nomad help to move forward.

*(Self-)reflecting on power*

One of the identity markers I held within the school is that of a militant researcher, and it is useful to explore the way that this played out in terms of questions of power. Militant researchers who work in universities occupy an extraordinarily privileged position – we are funded, however precariously, to do the organising others give their time to for free. I am deeply conscious of the fact that I coordinated the school – while as much as possible was done as collaboratively as was feasible, I still designed the agendas for meetings, coordinated across teams and organisations, and pulled the overall schedule together. Getting to play that role is an expression of power, and part of the way that this was enabled was because my schedule as a PhD student is reasonably flexible. It is also impossible to escape the fact that gaining a doctorate is partly motivated by the sense of prestige it brings. Thus, one of the most important things I have been aware of is the ethical challenges this combination of nomadism and prestige presents.

Throughout the school, one of the issues we faced was the very substantial problem of overwork and burnout. The same motivation that keeps us engaged and connected to one another through camaraderie quickly gets exploited into overwork. We have discussed it since, and there is a sense that perhaps we should have been less ambitious in our programming. Some of that responsibility sits with me. I worry that the rather bold scale of the school (two days of programming, which we pulled together in about six weeks) was partly enabled by my subject position *as a nomadic, militant researcher*. The nomadic subjectivity I was able to inhabit has the very real threat of leaving a trail of destruction, rather than of care and creation.

However, if we take the arguments about identifying a common enemy seriously, we need to be aware of the wider structural conditions that make burnout so common amongst organisers. While I am attuned to Dean's (2019) argument that as comrades we need to "confront our own continuing yet unwanted attachments to hierarchy, prestige, inadequacy" (p. 16) – as well as the arguments made within militant research literature that we need a type of subjectivity that is "capable of submitting itself to a radical criticism" (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003) – the 'enemy' is the capitalism and the financialization of universities, which leads to conditions of stress and burnout. And it is thus important that this is precisely what RSM is fighting against.

### *Nomadic futures?*

How then do we overturn the "oppressive cultural norms which define our worldview"? (Reinsborough, 2004, p 2). My experience of working with RSM points very tentatively to some of the options at our disposal. The discussion sought to more fully articulate how a nomadic subject position operates through two critical processes within subjective change. The first is the Foucauldian sense of care of the self, which has been most profound when it sits at the intersection of academia and organising. The second is the salience of the various relationships and networks who have offered spaces for collective learning and growth via singularisation, which is precisely the relationships we have benefitted from within RSM.

I argue that the broad conception of the nomad ('connecting, circulating, moving on') aligns with the nature of RSM and the various political positions we encapsulate, as well as the way that this manifests in practice, for example through the partnership model that the organising school entailed. However, it is important to be attuned to the specificity of our real-world positions within this nomadic movement - my personal experiences within RSM are greatly implicated by my positionality, including as a funded PhD student. This is where the non-nomad helps to clarify one of the nomad's blind spots – essentially, the spaces in which nomadism is feasible, or desirable.

A nomadic subjectivity also requires the assembling of 'a people', understood here as a dissident community, and this has taken place through the identification of a grounded location, or common ground. In the experience of organising with RSM, this relates to the precarity of student life in the UK in the early 2020s and a shared political horizon. However, the inclusion of the comrade to walk alongside the nomad is important here too - she encourages a focus on

having a shared enemy, and on taking sides. Our collective enemies help to unite the group, which in turn relates to the way that the nomad negotiates identity.

The celebration of the dissolution of identity within the nomad's framing is problematic and upholds colonial framings, and I think that we have to a certain extent replicated this in our work. While there are few easy answers here, the negotiation of these contradictions and challenges is greatly aided by the comrade and the non-nomad. These intersections in turn play a critical role in the generation of desire, which itself is fundamental for the generation of the new subjectivities we need to decolonise the revolutionary imagination. Finally, returning to identity - throughout the school, one of my identity markers was that of a militant researcher. A discussion of the operations of power within this, from the perspective of radical self-criticism, reveal failings in relation to my (and our) ability to create spaces of care. At the same time, these failings do not undercut the wider project, which is to dismantle the very systems that create the conditions for the lack of care so many students, and others, experiences.

Tamboukou (2021, b) suggests that in more concretely relating the nomad to the real there is a need to "make cartographies of mobility assemblages, wherein nomadism is a component of entangled relations and not a category or a figuration of a subject position" (p. 5). I would argue that the nomad's transversal nature means she is able to align – to be a comrade – with other subject positions. Thus, nomadism does for me function as a subject position, but as only one of many positions that also include the comrade, and the non-nomad, in a transversal haecceity.

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