

Janelle Reinelt

POWER WORKING THROUGH/ON BODIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

(*Note:* This statement started its life as part of the State of the Profession panel at the joint American Society for Theatre Research / Congress on Research in Dance conference in Seattle [November 2010]. I was asked to respond to the question of “how power has worked on/through/with bodies in the fields of dance and theatre studies, and in the academy at large.”¹ I decided to speak about the serious crisis facing higher education in light of the economic recession, and its particular challenges to the academy and our field, using my present context in the United Kingdom, where I have lived since 2006, as a case study.)

The time is the recent past: early November 2010 through early January 2011. While not a historian of the distant past, I have grappled during my entire career with the historiographic problems of the present. There is the problem of being too immersed in the situation to be able to describe and analyze it effectively. There is the further risk that before the ink dries (or the piece goes to press), events will have overtaken this account. Nevertheless, if nothing else I can document the unfolding events of a collision course between scholarly and creative aspirations and governmental policies intent on particularly uninspiring educational policies and fiscal retrenchments.

In the second week in November, three seemingly unconnected events provided a harbinger of the contested future for the arts and for the academy within the United Kingdom.

EVENT ONE

On Wednesday, 10 November, in central London more than fifty thousand students marched to Conservative Party headquarters in protest over the coalition government’s announcement of substantial fee increases (£6,000, with the

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possibility of rising to £9,000). These increases are intended to make up the shortfall of severe cuts to higher-education institutions, which will, specifically, cut arts, humanities, and social-sciences teaching budgets by about one-third while so-called STEM disciplines (math and science) are protected. The students were angry that the burden of paying for education was being shifted to them. These protests were organized by the National Union of Students (NUS) with a large group of Goldsmiths College students participating, and they were mostly peaceful, although a group of demonstrators broke into Conservative Party headquarters, breaking windows and causing some damage to property—and one person threw a fire extinguisher off the top of the building into the crowd below. So far, you might see power acting through the bodies of students attempting to use their own agency to stop or interrupt the power of the state, and recognize it as a familiar activity of political street demonstrations with a long historical pedigree. Excluding the antiwar march in the run-up to the Iraq War, this was the largest protest in London in many years; the Metropolitan Police had prepared for fifteen thousand, not fifty thousand. Indeed, in the aftermath, according to the *Guardian*, “the coalition government will be bracing itself for the type of violent unrest that has not been seen in the UK for decades.”²

Goldsmiths College, a part of the University of London, is usually identified as an arts college; thus these students were representing not any or all students, but specifically arts students affected directly by the cuts to their education, which they were protesting in addition to the fee increases. They were also upholding a tradition of arts students defying authority and engaging in protest through the broadest possible public gestures. Several photos in the daily newspapers specifically featured Goldsmiths students. Members of Goldsmiths lecturers’ union supported the protest and issued a statement, saying: “The real violence in this situation relates not to a smashed window but to the destructive impact of the cuts.”³

While many teachers supported their actions, not all of them did, and the institution issued a disclaimer saying, “It was deeply saddening to see a peaceful protest tarnished by utterly unacceptable behaviour.”⁴ Meanwhile, Prime Minister David Cameron reacted strongly to the attack and promised to seek out and punish students involved in the disruption. An 18-year-old, Edward Woollard, was arrested for throwing the fire extinguisher, and photos of thirteen other protesters caught on CCTV surveillance systems, four of them from Goldsmiths, were circulated widely as the police searched for them. Early in the week, the newspapers reported that the young man was to be charged with attempted homicide. As it turned out, he was charged with violent disorder and sentenced to thirty-two months in prison.⁵ There were sixty-one arrests in this initial demonstration, only one of whom was over thirty years of age.

This was power displayed through the bodies of officials acting out the power of the law and of the state to assert its supremacy. This series of events played out as “a repetition with a difference,” opening up familiar questions about the extent to which civil disobedience should be justified or condoned in the face of injustice. The highly charged and divided responses from university faculty, administrators, and some students remind us that these issues will need to be considered freshly in light of the current situation.

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EVENT TWO

Meanwhile, in the Midlands in Coventry, where the University of Warwick is located, I remained unaware of this protest because I was engaged in an intensive week's colloquium between my department and seven colleagues visiting from the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. Funded by the University of Warwick and JNU, our topic was "History, Memory, Event and the Politics of Performance." As it happens, we were examining collectively the years 1970–90 to ask about the efficacy of performance in relation to political events of importance in our differing contexts; to ask specifically how the political movements we espoused had fallen into decline during this period, how the religious right had come to power in India with what our colleagues call the "saffronization" of the nation and in the West as well, with Christian fundamentalism. We asked also how feminism had lost its hold on the hearts and minds of young women, how national identity failed to embrace its diverse racial and ethnic communities in the United States and United Kingdom, and failed to reconcile its regional, tribal, and religious communities in India. As we worked laboriously to find methods for sharing and putting before each other examples of performances that had played important parts in the struggles of those times, we also identified the junctures at which the differences between our situations and contexts were the greatest. Ironically, one of the flashpoints for us concerned the role of violence in protest and the performances that represented or intervened in this debate. We were so intensely engaged in our discussions with each other that we missed the news broadcasts that would have informed us about the student protests an hour away in London, and we never discussed them with our Indian colleagues.

Power in this context operated as the support given through institutional means to allow this dialogue to proceed; labor, here, was both intellectual and corporeal in the work of my colleagues and myself to structure and run the conference (late nights, long hours, sore shoulders, and strained eyesight—the typical physical cost of academic work). Meanwhile, the cohort of Masters Students in our MAIPR,⁶ who are finishing their program in December, were burning midnight oil to finish the first drafts of their thirty-thousand-word dissertations, due this same week, requiring faculty time to read and comment on them. This faculty labor is our engagement in the artisanal activity of pedagogy, training the next generation of scholars to do what we do by painstaking, handmade work. These efforts (close analytic reading, helping nonnative English speakers with their syntax and native speakers with their style) illustrate what many of us think of as our real work—the teaching and training of students through passing on knowledge and experience. This process can sometimes fail to disclose its dependence on the chain of power acting through institutional bodies, in close relation to the state. To state the obvious, budget decisions to cut severely the teaching budget severely will jeopardize both our teaching and research missions and will decrease the possibility or the frequency of these sorts of activity.

EVENT THREE

On Saturday of that November week, as the Warwick–JNU colloquium was ending and Edward Woollard was being charged for throwing the fire

extinguisher off the roof of the Conservative Party headquarters, a meeting was being held in Manchester about the effects of the budget cuts on the arts sector—especially on playwrights and programs to promote new writing. Organized by a group of academics and artists called the British Theatre Consortium and cosponsored by Northwest Playwrights, a not-for-profit organization supporting the writing community in the north of England, the one-day conference addressed the likely effects of large-scale cuts to Arts Council funding on a variety of projects in support of new writing.⁷ The panels mixed academics, frequently as chairs, with practicing writers such as David Edgar, Tanika Gupta, and David Eldridge, as well as some producers and directors. Conference organizer, playwright, and lecturer Julie Wilkinson noted the special impact on her region, calling it a “triple whammy”—cuts in Arts Council funds, cuts in Local Authority funds, and cuts in higher education arts courses. She said, “I think there’s an important point to be made about the way the dismantling of Arts funding structures could affect regional economies much more radically than they will affect London.”⁸ The draconian job cuts in civil service positions mandated in the new Conservative budget will affect cities with large administrative centers, such as Manchester and Birmingham, disproportionately and have already started to do so.



The main point I would make about these three events is that so far they are not “joined up.” While they represent a considerable amount of work by engaged bodies of people in search of power, or at least leverage, in shaping the future of the arts, and of arts scholarship within the academy, these agents are not yet acting in concert. It seems clear from the distance of a bird’s-eye view that these activities are connected and that the future will mean a protracted period of struggle for all of us if we are to retain the fruits of our labors—those aspects of intellectual and artistic life that we consider our work. However, the challenge is going to be to connect the disparate, relatively weak events I have described here into a force field that can make a difference to institutional practices, priorities, and state policy agendas.

In the weeks that followed in the run-up to Christmas, a number of other high-profile student protests were held in London and across the country. Large numbers of students continued to attend, and the various incidents of violent confrontations with the police were labeled by government officials as signs of the criminality of the students or activists involved. Students were divided about these issues, some feeling they would lose credibility if they did not remain nonviolent and orderly; others arguing that police mismanagement and brutality has provoked outbreaks of violence in most cases.

In the major protest in London on the day the vote was taken in the House of Commons (and passed), twenty protestors attacked the royal car carrying Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, Duchess of Cornwall. This was a chance occurrence—the royals had nothing directly to do with the protests but were caught in Regent Street in a throng of protesters and Christmas shoppers.

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This incident was highly publicized and led Prime Minister David Cameron to label the attackers a “mob” and promise “the full force of the law” would be used against them. He also insisted that this was not an isolated incident: “It is no good saying this was a very small minority. It was not. There were quite a number of people who clearly were there wanting to pursue violence and to destroy property.”⁹ More than two hundred arrests have now been made, most of them based on CCTV footage, of protestors from demonstrations on 24 November and 9 December.

However, the day the royals got roughed up was also the day on which a number of students were hospitalized as a result of police actions, causing student leaders to launch accusations of police brutality. In addition, Mark Bergfeld of the Education Activist Network, one of the growing number of new student groups, told the press, “I saw that people were being kettled until 1 A.M. on Westminster bridge. They were held there without toilet facilities, without water or food for 10 hours. We don’t live in that kind of regime.”¹⁰ Kettling is a police procedure used to contain protesters and immobilize them—a bit like corralling cattle. In the freezing temperatures of the coldest December London had seen since 1910, young people—college students were joined by high-school students in these protests—were helpless to get out of the kettle, sometimes for many hours. (The students have, however, increasingly learned how to break into smaller groups and disperse, thus avoiding the kettle; in future demonstrations, it is not clear what tactics the police and the protestors will assume.)

There are other familiar performances on view in relationship to this recent set of events. The leader of the NUS has backed off of his militancy, causing a number of other student group leaders to call for his resignation. On the other hand, unions are backing the students, and some hope exists for coalitional politics under a “big tent.” On 6 January, Netroots Nation, an Internet organizing group also active in the United States, held a one-day conference in London that brought together students, antiracists, feminists, greens, and most important, significant union numbers. Backed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), this event shows that the possibility for new antigovernment collective action is alive and well. Additional protests were scheduled for the end of January 2011 (after this essay has gone to press).¹¹ Time will tell whether joined-up thinking in the arts and education communities, but also in the other major sectors of British society, will perform with a difference an appropriate resistance for today’s crisis.

This is the state of the profession, as I see it now.

ENDNOTES

1. From the invitation to speak that I received from conference cochairs Anthea Kraut and Nadine George.

2. Paul Lewis, Matthew Taylor, Adam Gabbatt, and Rachel Williams, “Police Caught Out by Peaceful Student Protest That Turned Violent,” *Guardian*, 10 November 2010, online at www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/10/student-protests-violence (accessed 18 January 2011).

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3. Quoted in Haroon Siddique, "No 10 Hits Out at Lecturers Who Praised Student Protests at Tory HQ," *Guardian*, 12 November 2010, online at www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/nov/12/no-10-lecturers-praised-student-protests-at-tory-hq (accessed 18 January 2011).

4. Ibid.

5. Maev Kennedy, "Student Protester Admits Throwing Fire Extinguisher," *Guardian*, 24 November 2010, online at www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/24/tuition-fees-higher-education (accessed 16 February 2011).

6. Masters in International Performance Research, an Erasmus Mundus masters program, funded by the European Union, led by Warwick, with the University of Amsterdam, University of Helsinki, and University of Belgrade. Students study in two of the four locations and receive double degrees.

7. The British Theatre Consortium consists of myself, David Edgar, Dan Rebellato, Steve Waters, and Julie Wilkinson. Four of the five of us are professional playwrights, and four of us have academic positions as well. The BTC has run a number of conferences over the past few years (in London, Warwick, Birmingham, and Manchester) and has secured funding from Arts Council England for a report into the status of new theatre writing in Britain. The report, "Writ Large," can be read online at <http://britishtheatreconference.co.uk/writ-large/> (accessed 27 January 2011) or downloaded via www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/publications/writ_large.pdf.

8. Julie Wilkinson, introductory conference remarks, 'Next Act: The Past and Future of New Theatre Writing', Manchester, 13 November 2010. Unpublished ms courtesy of Julie Wilkinson.

9. James Meikle and Vikram Dodd, "Royal Car Attack: Cameron Calls for 'Full Force of Law'," *Guardian*, 10 December 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/dec/10/royal-car-attack-cameron-charles (accessed 18 January 2011).

10. Ibid.

11. Update as of 1 March: Student demonstrations continued in January and February; Aaron Porter, head of the NUS, resigned under pressure from students angry that he was not militant enough in his leadership of the protests, and a large demonstration is planned together with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) under the banner 'Funding Our Future' for 26 March 2011.