Ratings and Rankings in Higher Education

A New-Materialist Exploration of How They Control Society

Jonas Thiel

CONCEPTS FOR CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY | DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES RE-THOUGHT

RATINGS AND RANKINGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This important work critically investigates the use of rating and ranking systems in higher education to show how they govern the academic population through the creation of competition and antagonism.

From social media to PISA and *Rotten Tomatoes*, ratings and rankings exist everywhere in our daily lives. Seemingly benign in practice, they can structure and govern important parts of society, including social interaction, public health and economic rankings. In this essential critique, author Jonas Thiel sets out the case against these practices, using the UK's higher education model to show how tools such as the National Student Survey (NSS) instead devides the academic population to make it governable and controllable. Instead of achieving its intended aim of improving teaching by forcing competition over student satisfaction, Thiel shows that systems like the NSS have a profound and often negative impact upon how people and institutions understand themselves. Drawing on the new materialist theory of Karen Barad, Foucault's governmentality and Laclau's understanding of antagonism, the book raises an urgent need to respond to these boundary-drawing practices, especially in light of rising inequality and ecological collapse, and poses the question: can we even imagine a world without 'Top 10' rankings and 'out of 5' scores?

Engaging with current debates around 'value', tuition fees and the role of higher education in society, this is fascinating reading for advanced students and academics in psychology, education, sociology and philosophy.

Jonas Thiel is a senior lecturer in education at Manchester Metropolitan University. His academic interests include competition and cooperation in education and beyond, arts education and democratic education.

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A New-Materialist Exploration of How They Control Society

Jonas Thiel

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CONTENTS

SERIES PREFACE FOR JONAS THIEL'S *RATINGS AND RANKINGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A NEW-MATERIALIST EXPLORATION OF HOW THEY CONTROL SOCIETY*

There is a methodological lesson that every modern discipline has embraced and avidly put to work, in education, management and social services and many other spheres of work. It is a lesson about failure, assessment failure, that at each stage of the process is reframed as a message that we need more of it, more assessment. The message is that because we are not doing so well at assessing the outcomes of our work, we need more assessment, and we need to probe the reasons why assessment is not delivering the goods, by assessing what has gone wrong. This book cuts into the claims made for assessment by carefully examining underlying assumptions and institutional contexts for 'ratings' and 'rankings' in one of the prime drivers of assessment today, higher education.

Just as psychology reduces 'learning' to measurable observable changes in behaviour, the 'outcomes' that are operationalised within the favourite theory of the researcher, education reduces the varieties of experience of learning to a quantifiable grid that can itself be assessed. Jonas Thiel shows how this self-serving and useless loop of assessment actually loses what is most valuable about our learning, how assessment turns what we learn into the evacuation of knowledge about what education should be concerned with. The pity is that we do it to ourselves, offering ourselves up to be rated and ranked at the very same moment that we engage in the rating and ranking of others.

We need some theory here, and so 'new materialist' theory provided by Karen Barad is put to work to help us step back from the

phenomenon, augmented by insights from Ernesto Laclau and Michel Foucault. These theoretical resources deepen our understanding of the way that one particular take of assessment that drives higher education, the 'National Student Survey', subjects all those who are involved to an administrative apparatus that promises empowerment and improvement of conditions of work, including the 'student experience', but delivers a mind-numbing and self-destructive lesson about alienation and obedience.

In different ways, the National Student Survey both exemplifies what is most vacuous about modern quantitative psychology and illustrates why we need a critical approach that goes well beyond the remit of psychology, not only psychology but also every discipline bewitched by assessment. We are able to see how the 'effectiveness' of educational approaches is systematically replaced with 'efficiency'; instead of focusing on what can be done with knowledge, knowledge is transformed into a circular self-confirming means of keeping the machine going and turned into means of societal control. We need to be able to break from the illusion that bad assessment can be made good by making it more 'efficient'. The theoretical frameworks introduced, explained and put to work in this book enable us to do that.

You can assess this book, of course, but you will learn first how to engage in a more authentic critical assessment of the arguments contained in it. You will then be able to operate inside the circuits of assessment, noticing how they work, able to think about them instead of having your thinking stripped out, instead of coming out knowing less than you went in with. You will still be inside the assessment apparatus, of course, but able to step outside it, to a liminal space that Barad, Laclau and Foucault have taken you to, 'outwith' it.

Ian Parker
University of Manchester

1

INTRODUCTION

Facebook, Uber, Airbnb, PISA, Moody's, TripAdvisor, Rotten Tomatoes – ratings and rankings have infiltrated society. Businesses fear low ratings and desire good ones. A state of national emergency is announced when a country's credit rating decreases. Countries are ranked regarding how many COVID deaths, hospitalisations, cases and vaccinations they have. People compare how many 'likes' they get for their Facebook statuses and 'selfies'. In short, ratings and rankings change how people, organisations and countries think and act in the world.

This book critically investigates ratings and rankings. It does so by focusing primarily on the UK National Student Survey (NSS) where students score their universities, similar to a customer satisfaction rating at H&M. These ratings then influence ranking positions in university league tables. Universities hope that with good ranking positions, they may attract more tuition fee-paying students. By forcing competition over student feedback scores, so the story goes, universities will improve their teaching and offer better 'value for money'. In this book, I, however, argue that this is untrue. Far from enhancing students' education, the NSS functions in rather insidious ways: it divides the academic population and makes it hence governable and controllable. To theorise this is the mission of this book.

Yet, before digging deeper into the NSS, I would like to spend a little time exploring ratings and rankings more generally. I start by inviting you to consider the following four scenarios.

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Example 1: My wife and I went on a trip to Rome. I remember that after visiting the ancient Roman Colosseum, we felt rather hungry and exhausted. Luckily, we found a cafe close by in one of the quaint side streets and decided, for once, not to consult our smartphones – we simply wanted to be 'spontaneous', relax and avoid becoming distracted by our phones. Excitedly, I ordered a 'wild mushroom pasta'. After 5 minutes, I was presented with overcooked pasta with an unpleasant-smelling sauce, notably without any mushrooms. This meal, quite frankly, was barely edible. Afterwards, I asked myself the question what other people wrote about the place online, and it turned out that it was not enlisted on any of the mainstream apps, such as TripAdvisor or Google. From here onwards, we always checked on TripAdvisor before being 'spontaneous'. As a result, we found a place in an excellent location and exactly at the price level we could afford; however, the restaurant was only rated at 3.1 stars. What did we do? We decided to walk further to another restaurant which scored 4.1. The food turned out to be mediocre. I'm not a snobby restaurant critic.

One may ask the question, 'After you've told me this story, what is the problem with ratings and rankings? They are great for finding the right places. They reward good cafes with good ratings and punish bad ones with bad reviews'. You may be right. But now consider my second scenario.

Example 2: Fictional character Haleema has a business in a wealthy southern European region. She feels lucky that she only ever received 5-star reviews from customers on TripAdvisor. However, her friend, Luke, who manages one of the expensive hotels in this town, had not been that lucky. One day, a wealthy guest booked *a range* of rooms in this hotel. (Admittedly, you must be exceptionally wealthy to book *anything* in this European region.) Upon arrival, this guest abruptly told the reception that one of the rooms was not needed any longer and that he did not expect to pay for this room. Luke politely replied that receiving refunds when cancelling at such short notice was impossible. Disgruntled, the customer went to his hotel room. Just a few minutes later, the reception received a phone call from the customer: 'I've seen a rat in my hotel room', the guest said, 'but I'm willing to let this pass if I do not have to pay for the cancelled room'. Luke did not agree to this as he reasoned that the rat never existed. The next day, the hotel in question received a 1-star rating on TripAdvisor. This rating was accompanied by a comment that the hotel was infested with rats which was clearly visible to everyone visiting TripAdvisor.

Example 3: A new trend that emerged in recent years are 'reciprocal ratings'. A perfect example of these ratings is used by the company Uber. Uber offers taxi rides. You press a button on your phone, the taxi arrives, you get driven to your destination and you pay automatically – no cash needed. After your ride, you are asked to 'Rate Your Driver'. You feel good about the drive and give your driver 5 out of 5 stars. A few minutes later, you realise that the driver has also rated you. To your horror, you realise that the driver has only given you 3 stars. Even worse, you realise that Uber ratings can be seen by all future Uber taxi drivers. Imagine the effect of this on you. You give your taxi driver 5 stars, your taxi driver gives you only 3 and, now, the next Uber driver may not actually choose you as a customer but another person who has a better overall score. It is no surprise that people have reported suffering from anxiety because of their Uber ratings (Hunt, 2016).

Example 4: These 'reciprocal ratings' are taken to the next level in Charlie Brooker's 'Nosedive'. Here, everyone rates everyone. Whether you buy a coffee, chat on the lift or swear in public, bystanders will be eager to reward you with 5 stars if they like you or punish you with 1 star if they don't, simply by swiping their fingers over their phones. Each rating contributes to an overall score for each person, and augmented-reality contact lenses allow this score to appear 'floating' next to your head. Low average scores will deny people entry to their workplaces, high-quality rental cars, attractive housing and flights. A very low score even results in incarceration. 'Nosedive' is a science-fiction dystopia; yet, there are warning signs that similar technology is being developed. For example, there are prototypical experimental designs for contact lenses that augment reality (Bolton, 2016). Moreover, a social scoring system has been trialled in China where, recently, a school denied access to a child from parents who were considered 'antisocial' based on their 'social citizen scores' (Bisset, 2018).

The NSS

After introducing ratings and rankings more generally, I now turn to the main enquiry of this book: the NSS. First implemented in 2005 (Ipsos MORI, 2018), some scholars have described the NSS as a 'national feedback survey' (e.g. Ashby et al., 2011:5), whilst others call it a type of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). My take is that the NSS is a simple customer satisfaction survey. It contains the following 27 questions which attempt to

gather final-year students' 'satisfaction' with their courses (Cheng and Marsh, 2010).

NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY 2017 – CORE QUESTIONNAIRE

Scale:

Definitely agree
Mostly agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Mostly disagree
Definitely disagree
Not applicable

Questions:

The teaching on my course

1 Staff are good at explaining things.
2 Staff have made the subject interesting.
3 The course is intellectually stimulating.
4 My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

Learning opportunities

5 My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.
6 My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics.
7 My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.

Assessment and feedback

8 The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
9 Marking and assessment have been fair.
10 Feedback on my work has been timely.
11 I have received helpful comments on my work.

Academic support

12 I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
13 I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.
14 Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.

Organisation and management

15 The course is well organised and running smoothly.
16 The timetable works efficiently for me.
17 Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

Learning resources

18 The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well.
19 The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.
20 I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.

Learning community

21 I feel part of a community of staff and students.
22 I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.

Student voice

23 I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.
24 Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.
25 It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.
26 The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.

Overall satisfaction

27 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.
(Ipsos MORI, 2017:online)

In 2018, the NSS was open for 16 weeks from January to April and all universities in the UK were supposed to participate (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). The UK government pays the multinational corporation Ipsos MORI to run the NSS. Ipsos MORI suggests that all responses in the survey 'remain strictly anonymous' (Ipsos MORI, 2018:online). There are similar student feedback questionnaires in other countries (e.g. Kane et al., 2008; Kuh, 2009).

To exemplify the NSS, imagine 21-year-old final-year undergraduate student Tracey. It is a cold January morning, and Tracey feels anxious as she knows that the final year counts. Tracey receives an email that tells her to complete the NSS and that she may even win a prize if she takes part. She sits down and, slightly grudgingly, begins the survey. The first question appears: 'The teaching on my course – Question 1: Staff are good at explaining things'. Tracey selects 'mostly agree'. The next question appears. 'Staff have made the subject interesting'. Tracey clicks 'mostly agree'. She begins to wonder, 'Do they mean "staff who are teaching face to face" or "staff on podcasts"?' She suddenly remembers a boring session on 'How to conduct an interview'. She still clicks 'mostly agree'. Tracey begins to ask how many more answers she needs to provide before she can continue writing her dissertation. After the 10th question, it becomes boring to fill in the NSS, and Tracey realises that she hardly reads the questions. She simply clicks 'mostly agree' because she needs to return to her dissertation writing.

This, of course, is a biased description as it captures *how I approached* these surveys as a student. Generally, I enjoyed my courses, so I answered all questions with 'mostly agree'. There may be students who deliberate and reflect on their answers, carefully weighing up their degrees' advantages and reflecting on whether it is fair or unfair to give certain experiences precedence over others. These reflections then culminate in 27 judgements that express an accurate and unbiased interpretation of three years of formative experience. Any confounding factors, such as recent relationship breakups, memorable parties with friends and disputes with landlords or credit-card companies, are

rationally excluded from influencing the answers given. Perhaps such diligent students exist. Perhaps, on the other hand, some students simply fill in the NSS after a long night and answer every single question with 'neither disagree nor agree'.

Why do universities allocate such importance to the NSS? The answer is that NSS ratings impact newspaper university rankings (Turnbull, 2018): high positions in these rankings may attract fee-paying students, whilst low positions may do the opposite. Newspaper rankings include 'The Times & Sunday Times Good University Guide, the Guardian University Guide and the Complete University Guide' (p. 7). These university rankings all have in common that the NSS data is given a higher weighting than any other metrics such as 'staff to student ratios' or 'expenditure per student'. In addition, the NSS also influences whether universities are offered gold, silver or bronze accreditations in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In short, both newspaper rankings and TEF accreditations create competition between universities over fee-paying students (cf. Jurkowitsch et al., 2006; Bates et al., 2017).

To attain better NSS rating scores, universities have implemented a range of tactics, such as offering prize draws for completing the NSS (e.g. University of Birmingham, 2021). Moreover, many universities have devised internal student feedback systems that assess student satisfaction more frequently and at the level of individual modules. Canning (2017:522) argues that universities raise this internal student feedback precisely because they want to 'pre-empt issues which may impact in their NSS scores'. That is, whilst the University of Bristol has been carrying out the 'annual internal University survey' for all non-final-year undergraduate students (University of Bristol, 2017:online), at University College London (UCL), 'second year undergraduate students complete the UCL Student Experience Survey, an Internal Survey with National Student Survey-style questions' (University College London, 2018:online). At Newcastle University (2018:online) students fill in 'module evaluations'. Similarly, the universities described in this book incorporated variations of Internal Surveys which were closely modelled on the NSS and allowed courses to be assessed twice a year for each cohort. For instance, one of these universities asked students to complete a questionnaire which repeated all 27 NSS questions for each module studied. In addition, both universities prescribed frequent *meetings with student representatives* to gather more personalised and detailed student feedback. In other words, whilst internal questionnaires explored the feedback for modules,

student representative meetings surveyed satisfaction more frequently and with individual lecturers. This did not only create pressure for courses but also for lecturers to maintain high student satisfaction. No lecturer wants to be identified as 'the weakest teacher'. For example, one of my research participants, Lisa, remarked the following:

> I was chatting to Rachel, and she was saying that another colleague was under really bad scrutiny because of students finding her seminars too challenging and too intellectual. Apparently, the colleague was told that if the negative feedback persists, they will have to think about her future employment.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

I conclude – and this will be discussed at length in the following chapters – pressures from the NSS filter downwards: competitions between universities create competitions between courses which, in return, create competitions between lecturers. At the centre of this competition is the attainment of positive student feedback.

I now briefly turn to the literature published on the NSS and Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). One of the issues I found when evaluating the literature base was that many articles take a rather instrumentalist perspective. More specifically, these articles often appear to show the reader how to enhance student feedback scores rather than critiquing the very notion of student feedback ratings and rankings. These articles, for example, explore how to improve student satisfaction ($N = 23$) in 'Assessment and Feedback' by avoiding 'sugar-coated' feedback (To, 2016) or how to improve student satisfaction by providing audio-recorded feedback instead of written feedback (Chew, 2014). Other literature appears to espouse what this book describes as 'neoliberal concepts', such as *competition* or *customer satisfaction*. This literature, for instance, explores how student loyalty could be predicted by student feedback (Fernandes et al., 2013), how Erasmus students' voice is often ignored despite being universities' 'customers' (Bogain, 2012) or how to rank and compare courses more effectively (Barefoot et al., 2016). Adding to this, two articles use distinctively 'new-managerialist' language (cf. Deem, 1998; Ball, 2003). For example, Horner (2010) advocates *spot checks* of assignment feedback to monitor the quality of feedback, and Appleton (2012) argues that alternative student feedback technologies may optimise *performance management*.

On the other hand, some articles critique the NSS and SETs. First, various scholars have argued that the NSS is neither *valid* nor *reliable:* questions may be interpreted differently by different students, and many factors can influence students' answers (Mendes et al., 2011; Bates et al., 2017). More specifically, Mendes et al. (2011) explore how students interpret the NSS question, 'feedback on my work has been prompt', and conclude that students may understand the word 'prompt' rather differently. Similarly, Bates et al. (2017) cast doubt on the question of whether the NSS can truly assess the 'holistic perspective of the student experience' (p. 2). In particular, one student complained about the ambiguity of NSS questions.

Second, SETs, including the NSS, may reinforce various biases. These may involve gender (Boring, 2017), ethnicity, sexual identity, age or disabilities (Heffernan, 2021). In addition, lecturers' physical appearance and perceived attractiveness may play a role in giving positive SETs (Campbell et al., 2005): if students perceive their lecturer to be 'good-looking', their student feedback also tends to be better (also see Riniolo et al., 2006). Further, 'academic ranks, and the use of humour' may also be positively correlated with better student feedback (Constand et al., 2018:166).

Third, SETs may negatively affect 'learning' in that they may produce grade inflation (e.g. Crumbley et al., 2010; Ewing, 2012; Spooren et al., 2013) and course quality deflation (Bok, 2009). More specifically, Crumbley et al. (2010:187) suggest that lecturers may give better grades in the hope of attaining better student feedback in return. In addition, lecturers may intentionally make courses easier – and therefore less academically rigorous – so that they become more 'enjoyable'. Shapiro (2002, cited in Crumbley et al., 2010:187) suggests that students may even threaten lecturers with lower SET scores in the hope that they 'accept late assignments, sloppy work, and all forms of excuses and laziness' (Shapiro, 2002, cited in Crumbley et al., 2010:187). 'Grade inflation' and 'course deflation' may be particularly problematic in high-stakes professional degrees. For example, Higginson (2016) suggests that, in nursing degrees, the NSS may compromise, rather than improve, standards. Instead of producing 'satisfied nursing students', the aim should be 'to educate competent nurses'. For example, a 'student nurse [may] be entirely happy with, for example, their course, their university building, personal tutor, [but] not be clinically competent' (p. 562). Therefore, 'the NSS tells us more about

a university's ability to perform well in satisfaction surveys than it does about the quality about what happens within them' (p. 562).

The fourth point of critique is that SETs are connected to wider trends such as the marketisation of universities (Molesworth et al., 2011; Tuck, 2017). For example, students may think that they deserve a degree because they paid for it. That is, the NSS makes it more likely that students see themselves as a customer who 'is always right' (Furedi, 2011:3). This leads to passivity along the lines of 'You'd better make this interesting and enjoyable and not too hard, otherwise I give you a really bad score'. Crucially, this recasting of students into customers makes universities 'compete against one another for resources and funding' (p. 3). For example, McGettigan (2013:55) argues that the NSS intends to put 'consumer pressures' on universities so that they improve teaching and offer 'value for money', whilst value could refer to 'both "cheap and cheerful" and "expensive but worth it"' (p. 55). Thus, universities aim to gain a favourable position in the 'higher education market' (Jurkowitsch et al., 2006; Bates et al., 2017). As a result, lecturers experience SETs as the 'tyranny of the evaluation form' (Spooren et al., 2013:600) because 'evaluations are used for performance reviews and promotion and tenure decisions' (p. 600) despite 'the inherent shortcomings of ratings' (Constand et al., 2018:166). In line with McGettigan (2013) and Giroux (2014), in Chapter 4, I will explore this issue of marketisation more in depth. That is, I will argue how the NSS is fundamentally *neoliberal* in that it artificially fosters competitive markets between universities with a range of detrimental effects on staff, courses and universities.

Structure of This Book

Based on this introduction, I present an overview of the book. In Chapter 2, I introduce Karen Barad's groundbreaking theory of agential realism which reads insights from quantum physics through those of the critical social sciences (Barad, 2007). Barad's central notion is 'intra-action'. 'Intra-action' describes the process that all phenomena in the universe (both within the natural and social world) only have a material form because they have relations with one another. It is these relations that create matter! For an initial example, I imagine myself, looking at an apple that sits on a table in front of me. Barad's argument quite literally is that the apple, I, the table and the room are not independent of one another. Rather, we are brought into existence

through our relations. Put differently, individual 'things' do not pre-exist their encounters (they do not 'inter-act') but rather ontologically emerge out of their encounter (i.e. they 'intra-act'). In Chapter 3, I then use the concept of intra-action to argue that the NSS enacts specific boundaries between entities (such as persons, modules, courses and universities) whilst simultaneously enabling these persons, modules, courses and universities to emerge in the first place. In addition, I suggest that intra-action is particularly powerful in theorising how macro policy, such as the NSS, can reconfigure what happens in everyday practice and vice versa. I finish with the following assertion: since Barad's notion of intra-action governs *all* phenomena in the universe – from the so-called natural to the social, from the microscopic to the planetary – it is important to postulate certain 'sub-categories' of intra-action.

Therefore, in Chapter 4, I bring Barad's work into conversation with Foucault's (2008, 2009) lecture series on 'governmentality'. I argue that the NSS utilises both 'neo-liberal governmentality' and 'disciplinary governmentality' (cf. Foucault, 1977). That is, the NSS makes the academic population governable through the artificial creation of competition amongst lecturers, courses and universities over student satisfaction. This competition is then systematised by 'disciplinary' panoptic ratings and rankings. Importantly, this creates boundaries between colleagues as they are tricked into competing over student feedback. It is crucial to remark that Foucault did not restrict his definition of governmentality to any particular social logic but rather saw it as an umbrella term for *any* technology capable of governing a given population. Hence, in Chapter 5, I postulate that, beyond neo-liberal governmentality, a further type of governmentality is operational within the NSS. I refer to this as 'antagonistic governmentality', drawing on Laclau's (2005) notion of antagonism. This governmentality can, for instance, be traced in that lecturers increasingly resent their students for their perceived power within student feedback systems instead of discerning the NSS as the actual culprit behind their unmet demands. Chapter 6 then attempts to integrate Barad's, Foucault's and Laclau's frameworks with one another.

Chapter 7 concludes that rating and ranking practices, such as the NSS, control society through the artificial creation of competitions and antagonisms. As a result, university lecturers become increasingly isolated from colleagues and students and therefore become incapable of developing what Foucault described as an 'immediate solidarity'

against those in positions of power. Importantly, the NSS is one example of how rating and ranking apparatuses (e.g. national credit rankings, school rankings) reconfigure the wider population in specific ways. Hence, I assert that there is an urgent need to investigate how to respond to these practices, especially in light of the global challenges of rising inequality and ecological collapse which may spell the end of our current 'civilisation' (cf. Motesharrei et al., 2014). This returns the book to Barad's (2007) work which, I argue, excels in re-theorising the notion of solidarity including the question of how alternative connectivities and boundaries between stakeholders may be enacted and sustained. I finish by drawing some connections to Srnicek and Williams's (2016) accelerationist philosophy.

It is worth saying that there are various pathways through this book. The most straightforward way is to read it from beginning to end. Alternatively, the book could be read differently: you could, for example, skip Chapters 2 and 3 – some readers might find it a little strenuous to start with a deep dive into the philosophy of Karen Barad (2007) – and read Chapters 4 (Foucault) and 5 (Laclau) first. Afterwards, return to Chapters 2 and 3 and then read Chapters 6 and 7. Either option hopefully works well, depending on your preferences.

Methodological Remarks

Before I move on, I would like to take a few moments to reflect on this book's utilisation of data. That is, as this book builds on ideas that I developed as part of my doctoral study, I will use data from this study to illustrate and exemplify points. This data stems from interviews with university lecturers predominantly employed in education departments. I also observed university lecturers' teaching sessions and had access to two research diaries (one of which was autobiographical). Please note that all names, places and entities were changed to guarantee anonymity.

Last, I wanted to generally mention that this book utilises, and builds on, material which I developed in my doctoral thesis (Thiel, 2019b) and two further publications (Thiel, 2018, 2019a).

2

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Karen Barad's Agential Realism

> Agential realism is an epistemological and ontological framework that cuts across many of the well-worn oppositions that circulate in traditional realism versus constructivism, agency versus structure, idealism versus materialism, and poststructuralism versus Marxism debates.
>
> (Barad, 2007:225)

This chapter introduces Karen Barad's groundbreaking theoretical framework of agential realism which I will then use to analyse the National Student Survey (NSS) in Chapters 3, 6 and 7. I deeply admire Barad's contribution. I remember that when I first engaged with their work, it radically challenged how I understood 'reality'. Helpfully, Barad succeeds at explaining quantum physics in accessible language. This is a considerable achievement, considering that one of the most famous scholars within quantum-mechanical research, Richard Feynman, once stated, 'I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics' (Atmanspacher, 2013:276).

Barad's career has been unusual. In an interview in 2012, they explain that whilst working as a theoretical quantum physicist, they were also reading texts by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. During this time, they realised that these texts complemented quantum physical theory. This then culminated in the publication of Barad's magnum opus 'Meeting the Universe Halfway' in 2007. Since then Barad has published on a range of topics, including Derrida (Barad, 2010),

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quantum phenomena in the natural world (Barad, 2011b), science studies philosophy (Barad, 2011a), 'touch' (Barad, 2012), the phenomenon of diffraction (Barad, 2014), queer theory (Barad, 2015) and the unity of matter, space and time (Barad, 2017).

At the core of Barad's framework is their notion of 'intra-action'. Intra-action profoundly challenges 'commonsensical' understandings of both natural and social phenomena. To give an initial flavour of Barad's radical proposition, I attempt to summarise intra-action in one sentence: intra-action means that material entities in the universe do not pre-exist but (ontologically) *emerge* from encounters with other material entities. This pertains to all 'matter', from humans to animals to inanimate objects, from atoms to planets, from human practices to receptor cells in stingrays. That is, all matter in the universe 'matters' – that is, attains its material form – precisely because of 'relations'. Crucially, Barad uses the word 'mattering' in the sense that something 'materialises' and something which is of 'significance'. Matter and meaning are inextricably entangled. For instance, two atoms may 'matter' (i.e. materialise) through their intra-action. Similarly, a conversation between two humans 'matters' these very humans into their current shape. Likewise, it 'matters' to some people that other people act politely (i.e. it has a materialising effect on their well-being). I apologise for personally addressing you (as the reader), but intra-action also suggests that whilst you are reading this text, both 'text' and 'you' materialise out of your intra-action.

In what follows, I first explore the foundations of Barad's agential realism: (a) Donna Haraway's (1997) diffraction, (b) Niels Bohr's (1963) 'philosophy-physics', (c) Michel Foucault's (1977) understanding of 'discursive practices' and (d) Judith Butler's (1993) 'performativity'. This then enables me to present Barad's agential realism in its entirety.

Diffraction

I begin by outlining Barad's (2007) understanding of *diffraction* (see Figure 2.1). Diffraction describes the phenomenon when *waves intersect one another*. Imagine two stones that plunge into a perfectly still pond and thus produce two concentric waves (i.e. ripples). As these waves intersect (i.e. diffract), a so-called diffraction pattern emerges. It is now important to understand that when waves diffract, there are areas where their amplitudes add to one another. This is referred to as 'constructive interference' (p. 77). 'Destructive

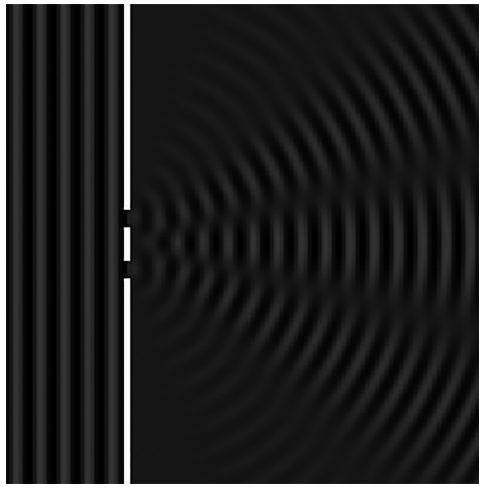

FIGURE 2.1 A diffractive pattern produced by two waves travelling through a two-hole grating

Source: Taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffraction#/media/File:Doubleslit.gif

interference' (p. 102), on the other hand, occurs when amplitudes subtract from one another, with the possibility of a complete cancelling out of the waves. Interestingly, diffraction not only occurs when water waves merge through one another but also can be observed when light waves or sound waves intersect. For instance, if light (imagine a projector) is shown through a plate with two tiny slits (such a plate is called a 'diffraction grating', and the experiment is called a 'two-slit experiment'), and then collected on a screen, the pattern on the screen is a typical diffraction pattern (i.e. with light and dark areas alternating). See Figures 2.2 and 2.3.

Surprisingly, diffraction even occurs when 'particles', such as electrons or atoms, are shot through a diffraction grating. Whilst common sense dictates that particles would produce a so-called scatter pattern (see Figure 2.4), under certain conditions particles, indeed, behave as if they were waves.

What is even more flabbergasting is that diffraction even occurs when atoms are shot at the grating one after the other.

Inspired by Donna Haraway's (1992) understanding of diffraction, it is now crucial that, for Barad (2007), diffraction is not only restricted to 'physics' but also can be observed in 'social' and

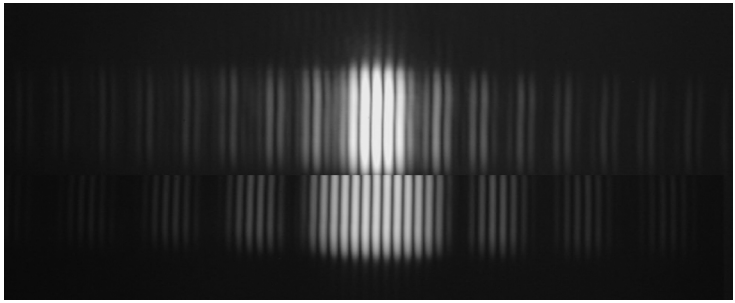

FIGURE 2.2 A screen which shows a diffraction pattern as the result of a diffraction of light waves

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SodiumD_two_double_slits.jpg

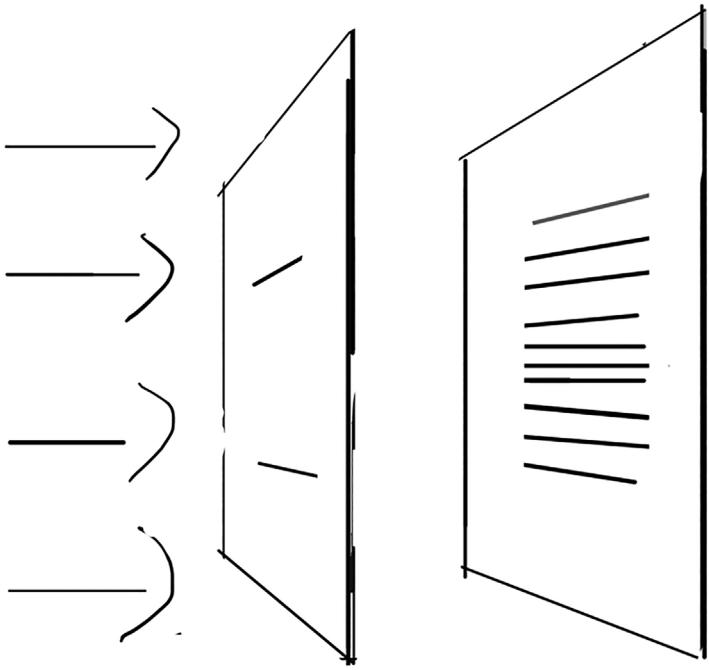

FIGURE 2.3 Diffraction pattern

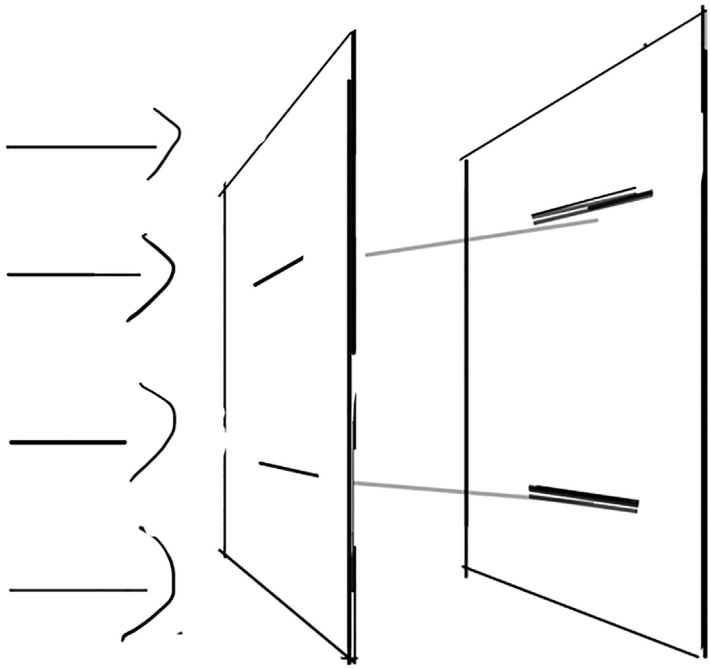

FIGURE 2.4 Scatter pattern

'cultural' practices. Therefore, Barad refuses to see diffraction as just another optical metaphor, such as that of reflexivity. Instead, diffraction is a general ontological feature of the universe. It is not restricted to the micro realm but rather is important for both macro and micro levels of scale.

In addition, Barad suggests that diffraction can be used as a *methodological tool*. That is, a diffractive methodology can both read 'insights through one another' and pay attention and respond to 'relations of difference and how they matter' (p. 71). Unsurprisingly, Barad's theoretical framework of 'agential realism' is itself diffractive scholarship in that they read the insights of Judith Butler's notion of 'performativity', Niels Bohr's 'philosophy physics', Michel Foucault's concepts of 'discursive practices' and 'power' and Donna Haraway's concept of 'diffraction' through one another. Likewise, in this book, I aspire to use a diffractive methodology that enables me to read theoretical frameworks and data through one another. For example,

in Chapter 6, I will diffractively read Barad's (2007) framework of 'agential realism' through Foucault's (2008, 2009) concept of 'governmentality' and Laclau's (2005) concept of 'antagonism'. Similarly, my Foucauldian analysis in Chapter 4 is diffractive as it argues that in the NSS, disciplinary and neoliberal governmentalities have merged into an amalgam. By the same token, Chapter 5 diffracts Laclau's concept of antagonism through Foucault's (2008) work on governmentality which produces a novel concept (a diffraction pattern) entitled 'antagonistic governmentality'.

In the next section, I now move on to discuss Niels Bohr's 'philosophy physics' which builds on notions such as diffraction patterns and two-slit gratings.

Niels Bohr's Quantum Physics

Quantum physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg once were friends – until they found themselves on enemy lines in the context of World War II (Barad, 2007). They also disagreed profoundly with each other on quantum physics. Their main argument was as follows. Why, they asked, was it not possible to simultaneously determine the *momentum* and the *position* of specific 'particles' called electrons? (Electrons are subatomic particles.) That is, if you measure the position of an electron, you cannot measure its precise momentum; if you try to measure an electron's momentum, you cannot accurately measure its position. On the one hand, Heisenberg suggested that this simultaneous determination of momentum and position was impossible because of some type of measurement interference. This is more commonly known as the 'uncertainty principle'. More specifically, Heisenberg assumed that both a particle's momentum and position existed simultaneously, but we simply cannot *know* both at the same time. Hence, his explanation was *epistemological*, i.e. to do with 'knowing'.

Barad (2007) suggests that Bohr, on the other hand, argued that this impossibility of simultaneously measuring an electron's momentum and its location was something much more profound, i.e. *ontological* (*to do with 'being'*). The measurement of 'momentum' and 'location' mutually exclude one another on a material level. In short, it simply could not 'be' that both momentum and location of the electron are measured simultaneously[1] because 'location' and 'momentum' were actually *brought into existence* through the specific experimental 'material arrangement' of the measuring device (Barad, 2007:139). That

is, one specific arrangement produces the phenomenon of 'momentum' (whilst excluding the phenomenon of position), whilst another arrangement produces the phenomenon of 'position' (whilst excluding the phenomenon of momentum). Put differently, in Bohr's view, *apparatus* and *object* cannot be meaningfully disentangled. It is this indissociability of measuring apparatus and object which Bohr refers to as 'phenomena'. *Phenomena* (*and not* 'independent objects') are 'the primary ontological unit' (p. 33). This ontological exclusivity will become crucial when discussing intra-action later.

Niels Bohr also had intellectual quarrels with *Albert Einstein*. Einstein and Bohr used a so-called two-slit Gedankenexperiment (German for 'thought experiment') to investigate the strange behaviour of light (Barad, 2007). (This connects to my discussion of diffraction in the previous section.) Hitherto, traditional physics separated phenomena into two categories: either things were waves or they were particles. Importantly, one can determine whether something is a wave or a particle. Building on my discussion of diffraction above, when light is shone through a two-slit grating, the resulting pattern usually is a 'diffraction pattern'. The pattern emerges because waves variously amplify or reduce each other's intensity (see Figure 2.5). When particles, on the other hand, are shot at these two slits, they typically create a scatter pattern (Figure 2.6). *Normally, diffraction patterns are typical for waves, and scatter patterns are typical for particles*. The issue is this though: under certain experimental conditions, light can behave as a wave

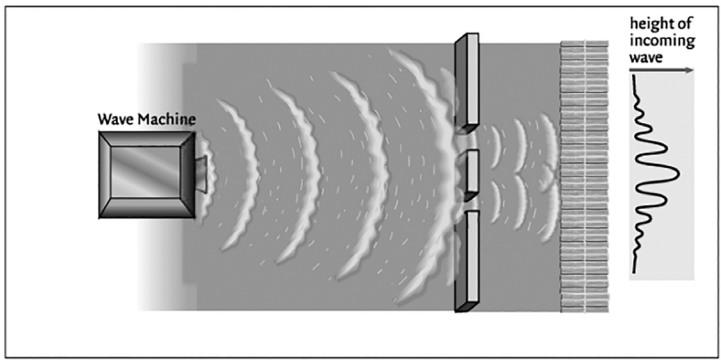

FIGURE 2.5 A diffraction pattern which is typical for wave behaviour

Source: Illustration by Nicolle Rager Fuller. Originally developed for Barad (2007)

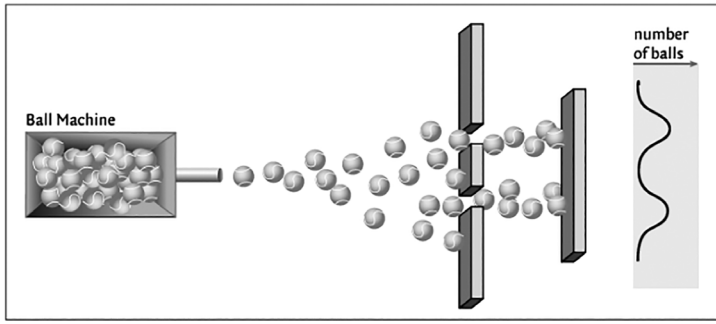

FIGURE 2.6 A scatter pattern which is typical for particle behaviour

Source: Illustration by Nicolle Rager Fuller. Originally developed for Barad (2007)

(and produce a diffraction pattern), whilst under others, it shows particle-like behaviour (to produce a scatter pattern). This contradictory behaviour is often referred to as the 'wave-particle duality paradox' (p. 83). To make matters worse, this strange behaviour is not restricted to 'light' but also sometimes occurs for particles. For example, when electrons, or even atoms (which are much bigger and heavier than electrons), are shot at a diffraction grating, they sometimes produce a scatter pattern and sometimes a wave pattern. What is more, particles even produce a diffraction pattern (suggesting wave behaviour) when they are individually shot at the grating (i.e. one after the other).

Based on this peculiar behaviour (of light, electrons and atoms), Einstein and Bohr built their Gedankenexperiment. Einstein, on the one hand, argued that electrons could exhibit wave-like behaviour and particle-like behaviour *at the same time*. (This is similar to Heisenberg's claims of the mutual existence of both momentum and position of electrons.) Conversely, Bohr argued that electrons could only ever *either* behave like waves *or* they could behave like particles. The two behaviours were mutually exclusive and could, hence, not be observed simultaneously. To exemplify Bohr's reasoning, I return to Figure 2.3. In this two-slit experiment, electrons are shot at the diffraction grating one after the other. As already mentioned, this results in a diffraction pattern, suggesting that electrons behave as waves. Bohr now argued, however, that if we were able to change the experimental apparatus only slightly – that is, so that we could measure which of the two slots each electron passed through – we would no longer observe a

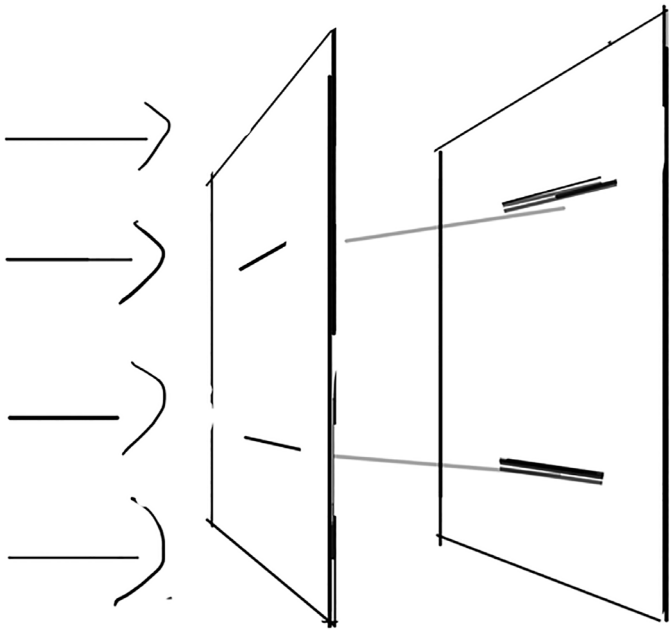

FIGURE 2.7 A scatter pattern emerges if one measures which slit electrons go through

diffraction pattern but rather a scatter pattern – that is, the electrons would behave as particles (see Figure 2.7). Bohr founded this hypothesis on his central assumption that the two experimental apparatuses lead to mutually exclusive phenomena. This is what Bohr referred to as the *complementarity principle*. That is, one apparatus produces the phenomenon of 'electrons as particles', whilst another produces the phenomenon of 'electrons as waves'. In other words, either phenomenon is associated with a certain mutually exclusive apparatus. Who was correct in his assumptions – was it Bohr or Einstein – will be revealed shortly.

Social Theory

I reiterate that one of the key innovations of agential realism is that it combines quantum physics with various critical social theories. That is, Barad (2007:26) reads 'feminist theory, critical race theory,

queer theory, postcolonial theory, (post-)Marxist theory, and post-structuralist theory' through quantum mechanical insights. Following a diffractive methodology, Barad delineates areas of constructive interferences whilst also attending to differences between those theories. The key critical socio-theoretical concepts utilised by Barad are Michel Foucault's *discursive practices* and Judith Butler's *performativity*.

Michel Foucault

I begin by tackling Barad's (2007) interpretation of Foucault' specific understanding of 'discourse' and 'power'. This understanding rejects both structuralism and phenomenology. That is, on the one hand, there are no 'external structures' like 'large-scale social systems' which fully determine the subject: the subject is not produced solely by an 'imposition of an external system of power, language, or culture' or a Marxist conceptualisation of 'ideology and false consciousness' (p. 62). On the other hand, Barad asserts that Foucault also rejected phenomenology, i.e. the idea that subjects solely produce 'reality' internally 'within their own minds'. Rather, Foucault was interested in how the historical context produced particular subjectivities over time. Similarly, *power* is not to be understood as an 'external force' that acts on 'a preexisting subject' but rather is 'an immanent set of force relations that constitutes (but does not fully determine) the subject' (p. 63).

In this context, 'discourse' and the physical human body are intricately linked. Importantly, discourse[2] is not figured as 'a synonym for language', that is, in the sense of 'linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations' (p. 146). Rather, discourses are the material conditions that restrain and enable what can be said and thought of in certain situations. In other words, discourses 'define what counts as meaningful statements' (p. 63). In my interpretation of Barad's theory, discursive practices do not only passively describe but also actively produce reality.

Judith Butler

The other pillar of Barad's agential realism is Judith Butler's concept of *performativity*. When teaching performativity in my classes, I always begin by asking the students whether there is a difference between 'gender' and 'sex'. With a few notable exceptions, students often assert that 'sex' is about biology and 'gender' is about how people understand themselves;

that is, gender is a social construct. A binary is clearly present here: 'sex' is about nature; 'gender' is about culture. Butler (1993) disrupts this sex-gender distinction significantly with their notion of performativity. Performativity suggests that human bodies do not have a pre-existing sex. It is rather through the *repeated* practice of performing gender that bodies become 'sexed' (Barad, 2007:191). In other words, performativity is a repetition (an iteration) of a doing which produces subjects. Performativity, however, must not be confused with performance (p. 62): 'gender is [not] performed' as in a 'theatrical performance conducted by a wilful subject who would choose its gender'. There is no already given subject that is then gendered. On the contrary, the subject 'emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves'— that is, the subject neither precedes nor follows 'the process of gendering' (Butler, 1997, cited in Barad, 2007:62). Here, Butler rejects the idea of seeing sex and gender as two separate things – that is, gender as 'a cultural inscription on the naturally sexed body' (p. 60). Gender does not describe 'the cultural interpretation of sex' but is instead 'the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established' (p. 61).

In the process of reconfiguring the binary between gender and sex, Butler (1990, cited in Barad, 2007:62) also radically rethinks the concept of gender *identity*. Identity, according to Butler, is not 'an essence but as a doing' (p. 62). Instead of, for example, seeing gender as a subject's fundamental trait, it is rather a 'kind of becoming or activity . . . an incessant and repeated action of some sort' (p. 62). This does, however, not mean that 'it's gender all the way down' so that 'culture replace[s] nature' or that the body in its materiality is denied (p. 62). It rather means returning to *matter*; this time not as an a priori substance but as a changeable entity. Matter in this respect is figured not as a 'site or surface' (p. 64). Rather matter is

> a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface.
>
> *(Butler, 1993, cited in Barad, 2007:64)*

The iterative nature of performativity – that is, the repetition of an act – is crucial for agential realism: according to Barad, matter can only gain perceived stability through iteration. I always imagine a torch being repeatedly moved in the dark which creates the illusion of a circle: what appears as a bounded entity (the circle) is in reality the product of an iterative movement.

Barad's Critique of Butler and Foucault

Beyond the overarching praise, Barad critiques that both Foucault and Butler did not sufficiently theorise 'matter'. To begin with, Barad (2007) argues that Foucault failed to adequately explain his notion of 'discursive practices': first, Foucault was unclear 'about the material nature of discursive practices', and second, he failed to 'theorize the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive practices' (p. 63). Even Foucault's conceptualisation of the apparatus (original: *dispositif*) – which includes 'the said as much as the unsaid', that is, 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' – does not mention the exact relation by which the 'said and the unsaid' are connected (Foucault, 1980, cited in Barad, 2007:63). That is, Foucault failed to show how (a) the materiality of the body (e.g. its anatomy) as well as (b) nonhuman 'material forces' contribute to '*the processes of materialization*' (Barad, 2007:65; emphasis in original).

Barad (2007) suggests that Butler, similarly, failed to adequately theorise the relationship between the material and the discursive. First, Butler only incorporated 'human bodies and social factors' into their analysis but failed to articulate 'the relationship between materiality and discursivity in their indissociability' (p. 34). Also, this revives a 'nature-culture dualism' where matter is figured as the final product of cultural and linguistic 'human activity'. As a solution, Barad (2007:66) suggests that the question is how both 'nonhuman' and 'human' bodies materialise, 'including the agential contributions of all material forces (both "social" and "natural")'.

Agential Realism

These two theoretical foundations (i.e. quantum physics and social theory) now allow me to describe agential realism's key notions.

Intra-Action

Barad's understanding of 'intra-action' is at the *core* of their framework of agential realism, and I will refine Barad's understanding of intra-action as I progress in my argument. For now, I suggest that intra-action can be best understood by returning to Bohr's and Einstein's two-slit

Gedankenexperiment. Einstein's suggestion was that an electron can both be a particle and a wave at the same time. Conversely, Bohr's hypothesis was that electrons 'behaved' either as waves or as particles and that both behaviours were mutually exclusive. (I will shortly reveal who was right.) The reason why I have put 'behave' into quotation marks is that, in Bohr's interpretation, a more accurate word would have been 'become'. That is, I should write *electrons either become waves or become particles*. To explain this, let us revisit Bohr's argument and the two-slit Gedankenexperiment more closely. Bohr's hypothesis was as follows: if the experimental apparatus detected which slit of the grating the electron passed through, the electrons would *become* particles. If the experiment did not detect which slit the electrons passed through, the electrons would *become* waves. That is, instead of independent and pre-existing electrons 'interacting' with the measuring device, *both electron and measuring device are actually part of one and the same phenomenon and come into existence through their intra-action*. Barad expresses this emergent nature of matter in that 'relata [e.g. the measuring apparatus and the electrons] do not preexist relations' but rather relations and relata emerge simultaneously. In other words, intra-action means that 'relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions' (p. 140). This makes it impossible for scientists to 'passively' measure a particle's properties because there is simply no such thing. Rather electrons are brought into existence through the specific configuration of the apparatus – again, either as waves or as particles.

Of course, intra-action is not restricted to electrons but, according to Barad, pertains to all matter in the universe as will become clear throughout this book.

The Agential Cut and Boundary Formation

So, all matter emerges out of intra-action. Yet, when I look around, the world clearly seems to be composed of 'things' which do not spontaneously emerge out of nowhere. For example, I can clearly see my mobile phone lying on the table in front of me. How is this possible? This is where Barad's notion of the 'agential cut' gives crucial insights. To illustrate the agential cut, I first return to Barad's description of the Heisenberg–Bohr debate on measuring an electron's momentum or position. I explained that Bohr rejected Heisenberg's idea that some measurement *interference* made it impossible to simultaneously measure

both position and momentum. Rather, Bohr suggested that the electron's momentum *or* position was *brought into existence* through the specific measuring apparatus. This relates to Bohr's understanding of 'phenomena': these, crucially, do not only entail *what we measure* but also *who and what is involved in doing the measuring*. To give another example, when I look at a coffee mug, this coffee mug is not the phenomenon – rather, the phenomenon is the 'assemblage' of both the coffee mug and me.

This understanding of the phenomenon allows me to elucidate Barad's 'agential cut' (p. 179). The agential cut cuts the phenomenon – as Bohr understood it – into the object (either position or momentum, or the coffee mug) and subject (i.e. the measuring apparatus, or me). However, the agential cut is a peculiar kind of cut. It is not a cut in the 'conventional sense', as in a string of rope being cut into half. Yes, the agential cut cuts things apart in that there is now a clear delineation between the measuring apparatus (subject) and the object (i.e. either momentum or position). However, at the same time, the agential cut cuts 'together' (p. 179) the measuring apparatus and the object. In short, the measuring apparatus and the object are fundamentally contingent on one another in that they both emerge out of intra-action, separated by the 'agential cut'. I and the coffee mug do not pre-exist our specific encounter.

The agential cut – and this is crucial – determines which part of the phenomenon becomes 'object' and which becomes 'subject'. Therefore, Bohr preferred the notion of 'agencies of observation' instead of 'subject' because this more effectively captures how the 'agencies of observation' (subject) and the 'object of observation' (object) materialise together. Likewise, without any specific arrangement of the apparatus, there is no agential cut, and thus, there also are no subject and no object. In short, Barad reconceptualises objectivity: they argue that 'objectivity' exists (it is all around us). However, this objectivity is not to be understood as an absolute exterior condition but as the product of intra-acting agencies that we, as humans, are part of.

Barad's understanding of the agential cut stands in contrast with what they term the Cartesian and 'Newtonian cut'. Instead of an *a priori* distinction between 'mind' and 'world' (Descartes) or between different individual entities *inter*-acting (Newton), the agential cut suggests that boundaries are not static. Rather, matter's boundaries – including those which delineate a shape of, for example, an 'apple' or a 'person' – are brought into existence through *intra-action*. It is

this agential cut which makes certain things 'matter', including which 'parts' of the phenomenon become the 'agencies of observation' and which parts materialise as the 'object of observation' (p. 154).

Barad (2007:154) clarifies the *constitutive* nature of the agential cut by utilising one of Bohr's examples: imagine a person in a completely dark room with a wooden 'stick'. This person has two options to use that stick. He could either feel the stick (its shape, texture, weight) using a *loose grip*; in this example, the stick would constitute the 'object of observation', whilst his hands and his body would be part of the 'agencies of observation' (i.e. the subject). Conversely, he could use the stick to investigate the room (as a prosthetic extension so to speak) by holding the stick with a *firm grip*. In this case, the stick becomes part of the 'agencies of observation', whilst the room would constitute the 'object of observation'. Importantly, the stick cannot be used in both ways simultaneously, that is, it cannot be used *to investigate* the room whilst *being investigated* at the same time. In other words, the two phenomena mutually exclude one another. Of course, the person can easily switch between the two practices as 'the line between subject and object is not fixed'; however,

> once a cut is made (i.e., a particular practice is being enacted), the identification is not arbitrary but in fact materially specified and determinate for a given practice.
>
> *(p. 155)*

How does Barad theorise boundaries between entities more generally? More specifically, how could their work help to understand that human beings have bodily boundaries which separate them from other human beings? This is where Barad (2007) builds on Butler's concept of performativity and identity formation: for matter to emerge more permanently, the intra-actions (and their associated agential cuts) need to become *iterative*. It is precisely this iterative intra-action (i.e. intra-action that repeats itself) which produces a 'bodily boundary' (p. 155). Barad, therefore, understands boundaries as repeated agential cuts. Thus, entities do not exist as static independent *beings*, but rather entities are repeated (i.e. iterative) "becomings" (that is, they are in a constant process of becoming and re-becoming). This principle of iterative intra-action is not only why human bodies have shape but rather iterative intra-actions underpin *all* phenomena in the universe. To give an example, both a chair and the floor on which this chair sits do not exist

in isolation. Rather, both iteratively materialise by intra-acting with one another. This also enables me to understand other phenomena, such as social processes or social identities, as iterative materialisation in their own right. Later, I will, for example, theorise the NSS as an iterative materialisation.

Complementarity and Exclusions

This mutual exclusivity of phenomena is what Bohr calls 'complementarity'. For example, electrons cannot simultaneously become 'waves' and 'particles' because each phenomenon requires a mutually exclusive experimental setup. One phenomenon excludes the production of another phenomenon. Barad's intra-action, therefore, does not only produce phenomena – including agential cuts which cut these phenomena into subjects and objects – but each intra-action also *excludes* certain phenomena from materialising. That is, intra-action 'enact[s] what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (p. 148).

To illustrate complementarity further, I consider 'optical illusions', such as the 'Rabbit-Duck Illusion'. Whenever I look at this illusion, either I see a rabbit or I see a duck – I cannot see both at the same time. I suggest that this is an example of how Barad's (2007) complementarity works. That is, one phenomenon excludes another. More specifically, one phenomenon comprises the subject (me) and the object (duck), whilst the other, mutually exclusive phenomenon comprises the subject (me) and the object (rabbit). Both phenomena cannot 'matter' simultaneously and, thus, exclude one another. Mattering, again, denotes both the physical matter (e.g. 'a table is made out of matter') and the semantic (e.g. 'it matters to me' or it is 'of significance'). Thus, 'agential cuts are at once ontic and semantic' because meaning is always of matter (p. 148).

Meaning and Matter

This allows for a neat transition to elaborate on Barad's understanding of the relationship between *matter* (ontic) and *meaning* (semantic). Barad (2007) does not see matter and meaning as separate. Rather, 'matter and meaning are mutually articulated' (p. 152). Hence, it is impossible to disentangle 'individual effects of material or discursive factors' (Barad, 2007:152): both always must be understood in their totality (i.e. as part of one and the same phenomenon). In this sense,

Barad understands 'meaning' not as 'a property of individual words or groups of words' (p. 149); in fact, they reject this as 'linguistic monism' (p. 133). Instead, Barad figures meaning as emerging out of intra-actions: it is the process of when one part of the world becomes 'intelligible to another part of the world' (p. 140). This understanding of meaning also impacts how 'measurement' in the natural sciences is understood: measurement, instead of denoting the measurement of an external independent reality, is when one part of the universe makes itself 'intelligible to another part' (p. 176). Yet again, Barad suggests that the universe is not composed of independent things that exist prior to intra-action; rather, it is within phenomena that things 'are agentially enacted' and assume distinctive boundaries and properties.

To illustrate this simultaneous materialisation of meaning and matter, I, once again, return to the Gedankenexperiment of Bohr and Einstein (see p. 20). Unfortunately, both physicists never lived long enough to find out who was right (Barad, 2007): their 'thought experiments' remained purely theoretical at their time simply because no technology existed to put these experiments into practice. The main issue that Bohr and Einstein faced was that a well-designed two-slit experiment must ensure that no *disturbance* – that is, no measurement interference – occurs. In other words, if the experiment were designed to ensure that the particle passing through the two slits had not been disturbed by the measurement, one would be able to get reliable results regarding whether particle-like and wave-like behaviours were simultaneously possible. This 'measuring without disturbance' is precisely what became a reality towards the end of the twentieth century where various real two-slit experiments, called 'micromaser experiments', were conducted. Crucially, micromaser experiments allow the determination of a particle's position (of an atom, in this case) without disturbing the particle (see Figure 2.8). This is achieved by shooting 'rubidium atoms' (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012:63) through a diffraction grating, and these are then collected on a screen. Before the atoms reach the diffraction grating, however, a laser beam first excites the atoms to a higher energy level. Another device (called a "micromaser") forces these atoms (with 100 per cent probability) to lose their excited state. When an atom loses its excited state, it *always* emits a *photon* (*a photon is a light particle*). This 'telltale photon' (Barad, 2007:307), which is now left behind in one of the two micromaser cavities, allows researchers to detect which of the two slits the atom

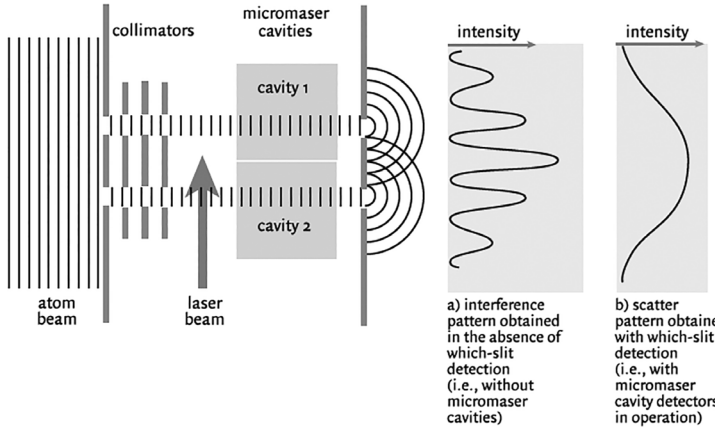

FIGURE 2.8 The micromaser experiment supports Bohr's hypothesis

Source: Illustration by Nicolle Rager Fuller. Originally developed for Barad (2007)

had travelled through, importantly without disturbing the atom in any way. In other words, the behaviour of the atom can under no circumstances be attributed to a disturbance (which was precisely Heisenberg's justification for his uncertainty principle).

The time has come to ask the question: What were the results of the micromaser experiment? *They confirmed Bohr's complementarity principle* and refuted Einstein's suggestions: if the apparatus determines *which slit* the atoms pass through, the screen shows a scatter pattern (see pattern b in Figure 2.8), suggesting particle behaviour (Barad, 2007). If, on the other hand, the apparatus does not determine which slit the atoms pass through (by excluding the micromaser cavities), a diffraction pattern emerges. Since the result cannot be attributed to measurement interaction between the apparatus and the atoms, the only remaining explanation is that the apparatus itself co-produced the phenomenon in question. Hence, the fact that we cannot simultaneously observe wave behaviour and particle behaviour of atoms is *not* because we cannot *measure* both at the same time. Instead, we simply cannot simultaneously *create* both phenomena because each phenomenon is associated with an exact experimental setup which then 'collaboratively' produces the phenomenon in question. Taken even further, this means that having the capacity to 'know' which slit an atom passed through (i.e. epistemology) has a real ontological impact on whether we attain a diffraction pattern or not. In short, the possibility of *knowing*

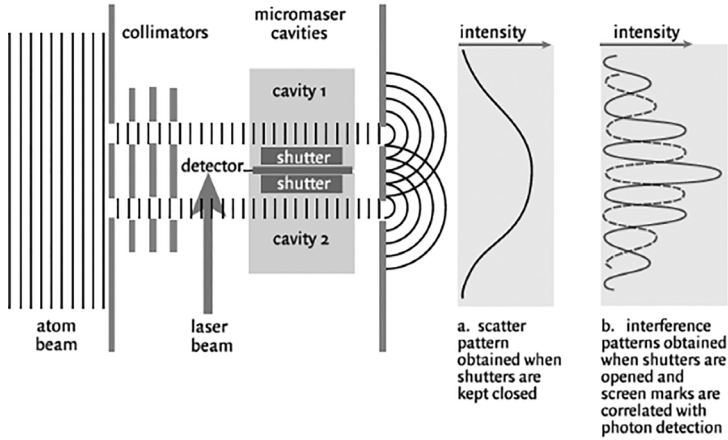

FIGURE 2.9 Quantum erasure experiment

Source: Illustration by Nicolle Rager Fuller. Originally developed for Barad (2007)

is entangled with *being*. According to Barad (2007), ontology and epistemology are not separate, and there is only onto-epistemology.

The intricate relationship between 'meaning', 'knowing' and 'being' becomes even more apparent in the next experiment – the quantum erasure experiment (see Figure 2.9) – which goes beyond what Bohr had predicted (Barad, 2007). The apparatus of this experiment is almost identical to the previous example. The only difference is that a *photodetector with shutters* has now replaced the wall between the two micromaser cavities. If these shutters are open, photons will be absorbed into the photodetector which, hereby, destroys the possibility of knowing whether the atom travelled through the top or bottom cavity and slit. In this case, it is not surprising that a diffraction pattern emerges on the screen. Conversely, if the shutters are closed, a scatter pattern emerges as it is now possible to measure whether the atoms travelled through the top or the bottom slit. The truly counter-intuitive finding, however, is this: if researchers shoot an atom through the micromaser cavities whilst having the shutters closed and wait until the atom has already made its mark on the screen and only then open the shutters, something astonishing happens: a diffraction pattern emerges. This is the case even though the atom had already made a mark on the screen!

When first reading this, I concluded: either the past has been changed in the present or the atom already 'knew' our decision to open the shutters in the future.[3] Both options appeared to me as profoundly confusing and untenable. However, Barad concludes

that these results only appear fundamentally counter-intuitive when viewed through a Newtonian understanding of the universe. This understanding postulates that the universe consists of 'objects' which move through 'time' and 'space' and interact with one another. In a Newtonian universe, once something has happened, it has happened. Whilst a Newtonian view of the universe assumes that time, space and matter exist independently from one another, a quantum-physical explanation sees these values as being inherently entangled with one another. Barad suggests that there is no time, space and matter; there is only 'spacetimemattering'. Not only can events be entangled across 'space' (e.g. one event on earth might be entangled with an event on the moon), but events in the 'past' can also be entangled with events in the 'future'. In short, past, present, future and space as well as matter and meaning need to be understood in their indissociability. The 'chronology of time' disappears (see de Freitas, 2017) which, crucially, also occurs in realms beyond the microscopic quantum physical. For example, Barad argues that lightning 'knows' already where it will have travelled before it begins its journey. Similarly, stingrays have eyes with specific receptor cells which activate *before* light actually arrives at these receptor cells (Barad, 2011b).

Cause and Effect

Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action – which produces 'spacetime-mattering' – also informs their understanding of 'causality'. I propose the following example: imagine a pool table where one ball (A) moves in a certain direction and knocks into another resting ball (B) which causes ball (B) to move. In a 'Newtonian' interpretation, ball A and ball B would be figured as independent objects which move through space and time. Upon making contact, ball A then has an effect on ball B. An 'agential realist' interpretation would figure this process differently. I suggest that it is only through their encounter – that is, their intra-action – that both balls (A) and (B) emerge in their movement. It is this process which also, simultaneously, enacts causality. 'Before' their encounter, both balls, of course, still 'existed' – however, not in relation to one another but only in relation to other entities, such as the pool table. At the precise moment when both balls make contact (i.e. intra-act), the following happens: ball B emerges not only as the subject but also as the *effect*, whereas ball A emerges not only as the object but also as the *cause*. What distinguishes this

from conventional Newtonian physics is again the emerging nature of intra-action: intra-action does not only (a) make subject and object 'come to matter' (p. 137) but (b) always concurrently enacts causality. In short, 'object' = 'cause' and 'subject' = 'effect'.

Alternatively, this can also be applied to Bohr's 'wooden stick in the dark room' example. When the stick is used as a navigational tool, the room emerges as the object (or cause) which 'marks' the stick and the person using the stick (the subject or effect). This causal structure changes when the surface of the stick is investigated. In this case, the stick becomes part of the object (the cause) which marks the skin of the person who is now the subject (the effect). In short, the agential cut shifts the delineating boundaries between subject and object.

The specific way how Barad frames (i) cause and effect, (ii) agencies and objects of observation and (iii) subjects and objects is summarised in Figure 2.10. This summary is not only important because it shows how Barad equates (a) 'agencies of observation' with 'effect' as well as 'subject' and (b) 'object of observation' with 'cause' and 'object' but also because it shows Barad's understanding of 'marks'. More specifically, Barad suggests that within intra-action, the object *always* marks (i.e. leaves marks) on the 'agencies of observation' (and not the other way around). I take this to mean that when, for example, someone speaks whilst another person listens, the speaker emerges as the object of observation (or the 'cause') which then *marks* the listener who emerges as the 'agencies of observation' (or

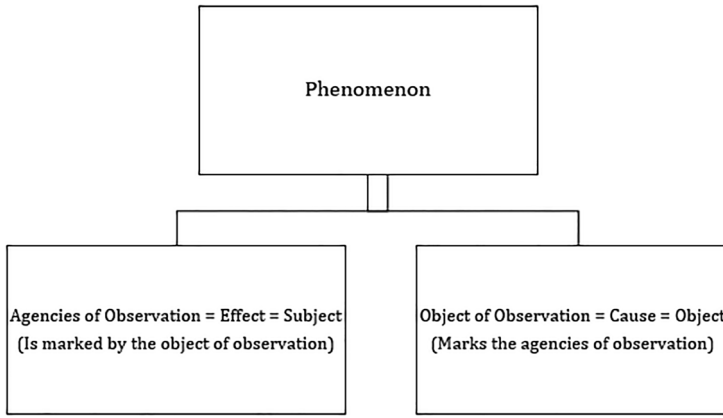

FIGURE 2.10 Simplification of phenomena

the effect). This will be important in my discussion of a confrontation with a student in Chapter 3.

Discourse = Apparatus = Phenomenon

As Barad's (2007) work progresses, they amalgamate Foucault's notion of 'discursive practices' with Bohr's understanding of the 'apparatus' and the 'phenomenon'. This conceptual shift is emblematic of Barad's *diffractive methodology* which attends to similarities and differences between concepts. More specifically, Bohr's notion of the apparatus went beyond what would usually be considered an experimental apparatus in physics. For example, in the 'two-slit experiment', the apparatus comprises not only (a) the experimental physical machinery (e.g. lasers, screens, gratings) but also (b) the concepts scientists use to make sense of this machinery. Bohr conceptualised these linguistic *concepts* as part of the 'actual physical arrangements' rather than non-material ephemeral constructs (p. 147). Thus, 'meaning-making' is a material practice. It is precisely this material nature of concepts, which is lacking in Foucault's notion of 'discursive practices'. Discursive practices are not '"supported" or "sustained" by material practices' (which is Foucault's understanding) or directed by 'nondiscursive (background) practices' but are material practices themselves (p. 147).

On the other hand, Barad critiques Bohr's understanding of apparatuses as too 'static', that is, lacking movement. In other words, Bohr's understanding of apparatuses lacks precisely what Foucault's notion of discursive practices offers: a sense of dynamism. On this basis, Barad suggests that apparatuses should similarly be understood as fluid and dynamic processes rather than static machinery and concepts.

This diffractive reading allows Barad to conflate the notions of 'discursive practices' and 'apparatuses': by combining Bohr's conceptualisation of apparatuses – comprising linguistic concepts as well as material configurations – with Foucault's dynamic notion of discursive practices, Barad asserts that 'apparatuses' *are* 'material-discursive *practices*':

> The basic idea is to understand that it is not merely the case that human concepts are embodied in apparatuses, but rather that apparatuses *are* discursive practices, where the latter are understood as specific material reconfigurings through which 'objects' and 'subjects' are produced.
>
> *(p. 148; emphasis in original)*

In short, 'apparatuses are not bounded objects or structures; they are open ended practices' (p. 170).

Connectivity, Enfolding and Topology

This leads me to discuss Barad's (2007) important assertion that 'apparatuses' (which, let us remember, equal 'discursive practices' which equal 'phenomena') can be (a) entangled with, (b) enfolded into or (c) contain other apparatuses. Barad begins by questioning the boundaries of apparatuses. Rather than apparatuses being some pre-constituted object perched

> on a shelf waiting to serve a particular purpose . . . any particular apparatus is always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses.
>
> *(p. 170)*

By intra-acting, apparatuses do not only change their relations to one another but also reconfigure their own 'internal' processes, which produces 'new phenomena, and so on' (p. 171). To illustrate this connectivity, Barad uses the example where the computer-chip company IBM wrote the letters *I B M* – with *individual atoms*. Barad suggests that an 'entangled set of practices' enable these Scanning Tunnelling Microscope [STM] images. These practices are

> STM microscopes and practices of microscopy, the history of microscopy, scientific and technological advances made possible by scanning tunnelling microscopes, the quantum theory of tunnelling, material sciences, IBM's corporate resources and research and development practices, scientific curiosity and imagination, scientific and cultural hopes for the manipulability of individual atoms, Feynman's dreams of nanotechnologies, cultural iconography, capitalist modes of producing desires . . . This is merely an abbreviated list that doesn't even scratch the surface when it comes to the kinds of genealogies that are needed to give an objective accounting of the micrograph.
>
> *(Barad, 2007:360–361)*

What becomes apparent is, again, that these entangled apparatuses are extremely diverse. Some of these apparatuses could traditionally be described as individual or social practices (e.g. Feynman's dreams

of nanotechnologies), whereas others resemble stereotypical apparatuses (e.g. STM microscopes). Therefore, just about anything could be considered an apparatus (from a 'thought' to an 'electric oven'). Similarly, I will argue that the NSS (itself an apparatus) comprises an entangled set of apparatuses (such as computer systems, being accustomed to league tables, a mindset of the student as consumer).

This brings me to the notion of enfolding. I suggest that micro apparatuses (e.g. conversations between people) may be enfolded into meso apparatuses (e.g. institutional practices) and macro apparatuses (e.g. gender, class and global capitalism). However, Barad understands 'enfolding' not in that one larger apparatus fully envelopes another smaller one (akin to a Russian doll) but as the 'agential enfolding of different scales through one another' (Barad, 2007:245). That is, geometrical issues of scale (e.g. that the United States encompasses New York) have to be complemented by issues of topology (i.e. of connectivity and boundary formation). For instance, a single mouse-click by a passenger on a 'flight from New York to London' (p. 223) can enact an instantaneous transaction to invest in regional development projects in China, thereby reconfiguring the living conditions of the local population. This results in an 'an ambiguity of scale which defies geometrical analysis' (p. 224). Similarly, I suggest that I – as the apparatus that is currently writing this book – am enfolded into other apparatuses. These may be visible (such as my office room, house, town or the UK) or hidden (such as my employment contract or laws which allow me to work and live in the UK). This immediately shows how apparatuses are also topological. For instance, my computer connects to the university network which comprises a range of local and distant servers. The laptop is also temporally connected to its own global and distributed production processes with Lenovo having factories in China, Brazil, Germany and Mexico (Shah, 2012). Last, I also comprise apparatuses (e.g. my fingers, brain, lungs). Topology again becomes clearly visible here in that I am in perpetual connection (intra-action) with apparatuses 'outside' my body (e.g. oxygen which intra-acts with my lungs).

Agency and Structure

This allows me to theorise Barad's (2007) understanding of the relationship between 'agency and structure'. I begin by communicating Barad's take on agency. Barad, crucially, does not understand agency

as a distinctly human affair, for example, as in the Enlightenment ideal for humans to make autonomous rational decisions which then somehow inform our actions 'in opposition to structures' (p. 230). Rather, Barad's take is firmly built upon their understanding of intra-action and, specifically, how intra-action may produce both 'human' and 'nonhuman' phenomena. Agency, therefore, needs to be understood as an 'enactment' – that is, as a 'matter of intra-acting' and not as 'something that someone or something has' (p. 178). For example, I propose that a volcanic eruption enacts tremendous agency which is embodied in its devastating effects on both humans and non-humans. Similarly, when my computer crashes whilst writing – as it happened a few times when writing this book – this enacts agency in that it affects how my writing unfolds. Relationality is, yet again, paramount here. Agency can only be enacted if there is 'something else' there. For example, a volcanic eruption can only enact its agency if there are apparatuses in its vicinity that can be affected, such as houses, people, trees and animals. For a crashing computer to have agency, there needs to be a frustrated writer who can be affected. For the NSS to have agency, there need to be vice chancellors who believe in the significance of the NSS results.

Barad's (2007:237) understanding of 'agency' is indissociably entangled with their take on 'structure'. (It is important to remember here that Barad conflates 'structure' with 'apparatus', i.e. 'structures are apparatuses'.) For example, I (as a university lecturer) intra-act as part of structures (e.g. my university). This intra-action does not only produce a specific version of myself (my professional self) but also 'iteratively (re)produces' the structure (i.e. the university). Importantly, for my university to maintain its specific identity, there must be an 'ongoing' and repeated way of how intra-actions happen (e.g. the process of grading and awarding marks is crucial for the institution to function properly). On the other hand, agency may be enacted when universities are '(re)configured through ongoing material-discursive intra-actions' (p. 240). In short, for universities to change (i.e. reconfigure), their processes need to change. For example, a strike may enact agency by disrupting the timely grading of assignments and thus reconfiguring the university in specific ways. Put differently, as all structures already comprise constant iterative intra-actions – again, imagine a university with its thousands of streamlined processes, such as student recruitment, teaching timetables, assignment deadlines – *change* can only happen if this iterative movement is somehow disrupted. For

instance, a person who moves a torch quickly in a dark room gives the mere appearance of a circle. I may now disrupt the shape of this circle by preventing the torch to be moved (e.g. by holding my hand in its path) or by changing the trajectory of the torch. Similarly, the iterative structure 'business as usual' in politics may be disrupted by environmental protesters or a new government. Routines in primary schools may be changed through intra-actions of a new passionate headteacher and inspired staff. Present global neoliberal capitalism (cf. Steger, 2010) could be understood as a global transnational structure that iteratively materialises (i.e. reproduces itself) through myriads of monetary exchanges. If everyone on Earth suddenly decided to stop consuming and/or producing, this would enact tremendous global agency.

I hence conclude that agency and structure, in Barad's take, are intimately entangled. Agency may reconfigure structures (e.g. imagine all employees in an organisation going on strike). Hence, the structure somewhat changes (i.e. materialises differently).

After this in-depth introduction to Barad's agential realism, in the following chapter, I will now deepen my Baradian enquiry by relating Barad's agential realism to rating and ranking practices in academia – or, to put this into Baradian terms, I will *diffractively* read my research on rating and ranking practices *through* Barad's agential realism.

Notes

1 It is important to acknowledge here that this ontological take on Bohr's philosophy physics is Barad's (2007) interpretation thereof. Barad laments that Bohr remained very tentative in his suggestions about ontology whilst explicitly only mentioning 'epistemological' (p. 31) issues. Yet, as Barad is eager to point out, Bohr's philosophy physics, if thought through, has indirect onto-epistemological implications.

2 Barad uses the notions of discourse and discursive practice interchangeably: 'Discourse is not what is said; it is that which contains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements' (Barad, 2007:146; italics mine).

3 More precisely, the pattern on the screen does not visually change its shape. That is because even if the shutters are open, the photon is not necessarily absorbed into the photodetector. This only happens with a 50 per cent chance. The other half of the time, the photon would still be in the micromaser, and hence, it would still be possible to know which slit the respective atom travelled through. It is only through correlating the atoms with their respective photons that we arrive at a diffraction pattern.

In other words, only by counting the marks made by the atoms whose respective photons had been absorbed into the micromaser cavity and by disregarding the marks which had been left by the atoms whose respective photons had not been absorbed into the cavity, we arrive at a diffraction pattern.

3

RATINGS AND RANKINGS AS APPARATUSES

This chapter analyses the National Student Survey (NSS) through Barad's (2007) agential realism. That is, I show how the NSS could be understood as an 'apparatus' (in Barad's understanding) which draws specific types of boundaries between stakeholders. Fundamental to my discussion is that Barad equates the notion of 'phenomena' and 'apparatuses', that is, a phenomenon is the equivalent of an apparatus. Moreover, I pay particular attention to how agential realism can theorise phenomena at various levels of scale. However, before I begin, I provide a succinct summary of agential realism.

A Brief Summary of Agential Realism[1]

As outlined earlier, Barad's (2007) notion of the *apparatus* is inspired by Niels Bohr's assertion that the experimental setup in quantum physical experiments influences the phenomenon that can be observed. Apparatuses, in this understanding, always comprise 'agencies', and these agencies, importantly, do not exist prior to their encounter. Rather, agencies emerge through what Barad calls *intra-action*. Barad deliberately uses 'intra-action' instead of the more common term of 'interaction': interaction suggests that certain individual agencies existed *before* their interaction, whilst 'intra-action' argues that agencies *emerge out of* intra-action. Moreover, intra-action does not only happen in quantum physics experiments and the microscopic realm but at all levels of scale. That is, Barad argues that quantum theory

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'*supersedes Newtonian physics*' (p. 324; emphasis added). This means that humans as 'determinately bounded and propertied human subjects do not exist prior to their "involvement" in naturalcultural practices' (p. 171). In short, agential realism suggests that all matter in the universe – and this includes those human matters described as 'social' – are the result of intra-action.

The most important features of intra-action are 'materialisations', 'agential cuts' and 'exclusions' (Barad, 2007). These features are fundamentally connected to one another: there are no materialisations without agential cuts and exclusions. First, matter can only materialise through agential cuts. Agential cuts 'split' the apparatus into 'objects of observation' (or *causes*) and the 'agencies of observation' (or *effects*). In other words, it is the agential cut that makes effects and causes 'matter' in the first place (again, I want to remind the reader: agencies do pre-exist their encounter; matter is relational). Barad uses the verb 'to matter' in an interesting way. When something matters, this 'something' both materialises (in the sense of taking shape) and is of significance (i.e. in the sense of 'this really matters to me'). This resonates with Barad's (2007) book title – that is, matter and meaning are entangled. This entanglement, importantly, does not mean simple intertwinement. Rather Barad understands entanglement as *quantum entanglement*, in the sense of lacking 'an independent, self-contained existence' (p. iv). What matters depends on the specific material arrangement of the apparatus (Barad, 2007). A small change to an apparatus produces a change to the agential cut which simultaneously produces a different phenomenon. For example, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, a certain experimental setting produces light as waves, whilst another produces light as particles.

This allows me to turn to the notion of 'exclusions'; Barad asserts intra-actions always exclude. That is, one specific intra-action produces one phenomenon, whilst another intra-action produces a different phenomenon. Both phenomena are mutually exclusive – or, in Bohr's words, 'complementary'. For example, as I will argue later, lecturers assume a certain identity based on their intra-actions with students. This also goes alongside the exclusion of other potential ways of 'becoming a lecturer' and 'becoming a student'. Similarly, a bench in the park that appears to somebody walking past as 'lemon yellow' cannot simultaneously appear as 'cobalt blue'. Likewise, I repeat: a certain experimental setting produces light as waves, whilst another produces light as particles. Both cannot occur simultaneously.

Last, I would like to draw attention to Barad's (2007) understanding of iterativity: intra-actions should not be understood as 'beings' but rather as 'becomings'. They develop their argument as follows. First, Barad combines Foucault's understanding of 'discursive practices' with Bohr's understanding of the 'apparatus'. This reconceptualises the understanding of apparatuses. Rather than apparatuses being static devices that are simply waiting around to be used for scientific tests, apparatuses should rather be understood as 'material-discursive practices'. This is where Barad (2007) weaves Butler's concept of performativity into their argument by proposing that performativity operates beyond the social realm. More specifically, Barad suggests that matter only attains a more permanent shape if intra-actions become *iterative*. These recurring intra-actions (i.e. iterative intra-actions) are precisely what produces a 'bodily boundary' (p. 155), or what I understand more as an illusion of a boundary, much like a torch in the dark being moved in a circle to give the impression of a circle. Boundaries are nothing but repeated agential cuts. For example, a coffee mug in front of me does not exist in a state of static independent *being*; rather it is in a process of iterative (i.e. repeated) *becoming*. Again, this iterative intra-action is not restricted to human bodies but rather can be observed more generally in the universe: both a rock and the ground below it iteratively materialise by intra-acting with one another. Similarly, the NSS is an iterative materialisation: it reproduces each year around February when students fill it in – and it also iteratively materialises in lecturers' and vice chancellors' minds when they worry about their NSS scores.

Micro Apparatuses

I now show how intra-action may operate at the micro level by using a specific story from my own practice. Here, I reprimanded a student for 'disrespectful behaviour' which made me subsequently worry that this student may now give me negative feedback. I will argue that this moment could be understood as a specific *phenomenon* or as an 'apparatus' (let's remember that for Barad, phenomena and apparatuses are synonyms). The following excerpt from my research diary depicts this confrontation:

> This confrontation with one of my students is still going through my mind. I remember he was talking loudly to his neighbour, showing her pictures on his mobile and attempting to tease

> her. . . . After a few unsuccessful attempts to pause and wait for the student to stop talking, I raised my voice [and] said, 'Either be QUIET or leave this seminar. This is really distracting'. I remember that I felt genuinely angry with the student and could feel that my heart was beating and that I perceived my body language as quite authoritarian, even macho like. The student apologised and was, indeed, a little quieter from [then] on. After the session I started worrying, however, whether he might now give me negative student feedback in the future and that, as a result, my contract as an associate lecturer would not be renewed.
>
> *(My research diary)*

I wrote later that

> I realised that in the following sessions I was trying to be particularly nice to the student.
>
> *(My research diary)*

I focus on the precise moment of my 'telling off' and ask myself, 'How would Barad make sense this moment?' First, Barad suggests that each phenomenon comprises two elements: 'objects of observation' and 'agencies of observation'. For example, in the two-slit experiment, the measuring apparatus emerged as the 'agencies of observation' and atoms as the 'objects of observation' through 'intra-action'. In analogy, I now suggest that the student and I also intra-acted. That is, the phenomenon (i.e. our confrontation) comprised the 'object of observation' (i.e. me) and the 'agencies of observation' (i.e. the student, p. 154). I reiterate that Barad suggests that 'determinately bounded and propertied human subjects do not exist prior to their "involvement" in naturalcultural practices' (p. 171). Hence, rather than pre-existing our encounter, what the student and I became in that moment was the result of our intra-action. What separated me from the student was a specific 'agential cut'. This cut functioned as a temporary *boundary* separating the student from myself.

Agential cuts are not conventional cuts though (e.g. like a string cut in half). Yes, agential cuts separate, but they also – importantly – *generate* in that they *produce matter* (in this case me and the student). Barad uses the phrase: agential cuts cut 'together and apart (p. 389). Hence, this specific 'agential cut' cut the student and me together (in that our short-lived identities were fundamentally contingent on

one another) and apart (in that we became separate bodies through our intra-action). Again, the counter-intuitive nature of intra-action transpires. Intra-action means that relations are *primary* to the relating 'elements' (what Barad calls 'relata'). The student and I emerged (mattered) through our relation, and we did so *ontologically* and not only experientially.

You may not have noticed this, but earlier I suggested that the student emerged as the 'agencies of observation' (p. 114) and I materialised as the 'object of observation'. Why? This is to do with the specific way how Barad (2007) frames the relationship between object and 'agencies of observation' (which I understand as another word for 'subject'). More specifically, as discussed in Chapter 2, Barad argues the following: objects of observation always *mark* the agencies of observation (and not the other way around). Put differently, I marked the student with my 'telling-off'. Hence, I emerged as the object and the student as the 'agencies of observation'. I also reiterate that 'intra-actions' (p. 140) *produce* causality. That is, cause and effect emerge out of intra-action. What is more, Barad conflates 'effect' with 'subject' and 'cause' with 'object'. The causality enacted in this intra-action was that it made me emerge as the cause (i.e. the object) whilst the student emerged as the effect (e.g. the student emerged as better behaved for the rest of the session). In Barad's words, the confrontation resulted in the 'iterative' (repeated) production of the student as increasingly compliant for the rest of the session (see Figure 2.10 on p. 33).

It is, however, now interesting to focus on what happened after the confrontation between myself and the student, that is, when I began to worry whether the student might retaliate by giving me negative feedback. I feared that this feedback, in return, might jeopardise my temporary employment situation. How can we understand worrying through Barad's (2007) agential realism? I suggest that 'worrying' is a perfect example of Barad's 'iterative becoming' (p. 181) because it involves repetition. For instance, McEvoy et al. (2010) frame worrying as *repetitive* negative thinking (also see de Freitas and Sinclair, 2018). Moreover, Barad's notion of *iterativity* is consistent with some neuroscientific research, more specifically with the idea of 'neural circuit' activations (Liberzon et al., 2015:117). In fact, neural circuits are a perfect example of how matter and meaning emerge simultaneously: brain cells *iteratively* activate and thereby simultaneously create human consciousness! That is, the experience of potential future student

feedback reconfigured the 'iterative intra-activity' (Barad, 2007:210) of my brain which simultaneously produced anxiety.

I, however, assert that psychological processes (such as worrying) cannot be understood independently, that is, as if they were sealed off from the 'outside' world. Rather, agential realism helps me to understand that 'worrying' is somehow *enfolded* into processes outside of my human body. In other words, my anxiety could be understood as a subpersonal phenomenon that, nevertheless, intra-acted with apparatuses outside of my body, thereby traversing 'bodily boundaries' (Barad, 2007:156). This becomes clear in the aforementioned example: the confrontation with the student affected me in that I began worrying (i.e. the feeling of worry 'mattered' psychologically). This, in return, prompted my teaching in the following sessions to assume a fake kind of niceness (behaviourally).

These intra-actions are 'cause and effect' relationships. Whilst a Newtonian conceptualisation would see causes and effects to happen between *independent entities* that interact, Barad understands causes and effects as emerging out of their intra-action. In fact, returning to Figure 2.10 on p. 33, Barad uses the notion of 'effect' synonymously with 'subject' and the notion of 'cause' synonymously with 'object' (p. 214). Applied to my example, the confrontation with the student enacted a causal structure. The confrontation, first, emerged as the cause which resulted in that I started worrying (the effect). Then, the process of 'worrying about negative student feedback', however, turned into the cause with the effect that I materialised as a 'nice', more compliant subject (i.e. 'agencies of observation' in Barad's terminology). This, in return, also reconfigured my relationship with the student. For instance, as one of the effects, the student materialised in a more powerful position.

This intra-action coincided with an *iterative* agential cut (i.e. a boundary) that emerged between me and the student. Importantly, this cut also *excluded* various other materialisations, such as my potential identity as a 'strict' lecturer. This identity simply did not 'matter' (in Barad's double sense of the word). Rather, it was excluded from mattering.

Examining another autobiographical example, 'positive' student feedback *also* affected me:

> After one of my taught English sessions, [a colleague] informed me that he had just had a meeting with student representatives and that they were 'really happy' with my teaching. . . . [As a

> result of this feedback,] I . . . asked myself the question, 'What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback?' I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to give me positive student feedback.
>
> *(My research diary)*

In Barad's words, the positive feedback 'mattered' (p. 167) – that is, it simultaneously materialised and was of significance – in that I tried to recreate the status quo. Importantly, this production of matter also excluded other things from mattering, such as being experimental with my practice.

I now move on to discuss an interview with Melissa, a teacher educator. I show how her story can also be understood as an entanglement of 'subpersonal apparatuses' and 'student/lecturer apparatuses'. In this interview, Melissa talked about feedback that she experienced as traumatic:

> The lowest moment, now I think of it, was in my first term when a student complained about me on behalf of the entire group. [Even though it turned out that] the rest of the group didn't share [this student's opinion] . . . it was very, very hard. I think you can feel very isolated at university per se, that kind of thing, you're left, there is more thinking time, but there's also more time to kind of become self-critical I think.
>
> *(Truncated excerpt. Interview with Melissa)*

I suggest that this encounter is another example of an apparatus where the complaining student 'mattered' as the object of observation (the cause) and Melissa mattered as the 'agency of observation' (the effect). Similar to my own experience, Melissa perceived this encounter as the trigger to 'become self-critical' (i.e. the experience 'mattered' in that it had a lasting effect). I suggest understanding this emerging 'self-criticality' as yet another example of subpersonal iterative intra-action. That is, through student feedback, a subpersonal phenomenon emerged. This phenomenon comprised an agential cut 'inside' a person (i.e. 'inside' Melissa) which split Melissa's self into one part (the cause) being critical of another (effect). This, in return, made Melissa feel isolated at her institution.

Anxiety as a 'Threat' from the Future

I now take a brief detour from Barad as I would like to bring their work into conservation with a fascinating article by Brian Massumi's (2010) philosophical exploration of 'threat' which I argue, in return, resonates with Barad's understanding of space, time and matter. I begin by suggesting that Melissa's 'feedback anxiety' can be theorised as a response to a perceived 'threat'. Threat, Massumi suggests, 'is from the future' (p. 53). The threat of an avian flu epidemic, for instance, may make front-page newspaper headlines even though the actual epidemic does not exist yet. This does not, however, mean that the 'threat is not real'. Rather, the threat is 'superlatively real' precisely because of its *non-existence* (p. 53).

To exemplify this, I draw on a diary entry from Lisa, a teacher educator. In this excerpt, she describes how her course leader suggested that 'if we don't get better NSS feedback, our department will close'. This threat, in return, had implications on one of her team meetings:

> We [Lisa and her colleagues] were all working frantically to analyse various sections of the results of the NSS. For example, my team was working on one section of the student feedback which tackled the question of academic rigour. My colleagues were particularly elated to find that this section was not even judged that badly by students. We then continued our discussions to try and understand student perceptions of the course and how we could improve it even further.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

I suggest that this is a perfect example of how a perceived threat from a future, which does not yet exist, invades the present. This non-existence, nevertheless, makes the threat 'superlatively real' (p. 53). Hence, everyone on Lisa's team was working 'frantically' to improve student feedback. Massumi further suggests that 'the future of threat is forever' (p. 53) by using the example of the Iraq War where George W Bush later justified the war by arguing that Iraq *could have had* the capability to make weapons of mass destruction. Massumi concludes that as 'in the past there was a future threat' (p. 53), it does not matter whether the threat turned out to be real or not. Rather, it was sufficient that the threat 'was *felt* to be real' at the time (p. 53; emphasis in original). Hence, 'what is not actually real can be felt into being'. Crucially, this threat is 'felt in the form of fear' (p. 54).

Through Massumi's work, the threat of 'negative student feedback', which may then result in 'potential redundancy', becomes something fundamental to the NSS. The NSS justifies pre-emptive action (e.g. a university's attempt to boost student feedback) with the sheer perception of threat. More specifically, regardless of whether or not there is the danger of negative student feedback,

> the felt reality of threat legitimates preemptive action, once and for all. Any action taken to preempt a threat from emerging into a clear and present danger is legitimated by the affective fact of fear, actual facts aside.
>
> *(Massumi, 2010:54)*

This is where Massumi's work links with Barad's. 'Threat', through an agential realist framework, becomes something that 'matters' from the 'future'. This 'mattering' expresses itself, for example, in that it changes how lecturers, departments and universities behave. Nevertheless, going beyond Massumi, Barad's work allows for the notion of threat to be reconceptualised as something that has an 'eerie' ontological (material) quality. To exemplify this, I return to the micromaser experiments which I outlined in Chapter 2. These suggest that if it is *possible to know which slit an atom travelled through*, this affects whether atoms become a wave or become a particle. Mindbogglingly, whether these atoms become a wave or a particle will happen 'after' these atoms have passed through the slits to make a mark on the screen. Similarly, the receptor cells in stingrays' eyes activate 'before' light arrives at these (Barad, 2011b).

I already mentioned that in a traditional Newtonian conception of space, this would (paradoxically) mean that the future actively changes the present (i.e. a future event affects a past one). Barad rejects this proposition by arguing that Newtonian physics – which suggests that time, space and matter are separate qualities – is an incomplete picture of the world. Rather, Barad proposes that through an agential realist viewpoint space, matter and time are inseparable and cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. Therefore, Barad prefers 'spacetimematter' as a better description of what is all around us rather than having space in one neat box and space and time in others. One 'present' event could, for example, be entangled with a 'past' or a 'future' event and 'what seems far off in space and time may be as close or closer than the pulse of here and now' (Barad, 2007:394). I hence

suggest that 'threats' are examples of events that *entangle* across the 'spacetimematter manifold' (p. 246). Here

> the past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming.
>
> *(Barad, 2007:182)*

My interpretation is that 'threats' invade the present from the future and exert power over the present. More specifically, the anticipation of negative NSS results – and these may never materialise – affect what unfolds in the 'present'.

Enfolding, Entanglement and Topology

This raises the question of how to think processes at various levels of scale together. Before I explore this question, I reiterate that the NSS has inspired universities to adopt a range of *intra-institutional student feedback systems*. As I explored above, these systems assess student satisfaction more frequently and at smaller levels of scale (e.g. at the level of individual courses and modules) intending to pre-empt negative student satisfaction in the NSS. I offer Lisa's example where her university implemented an *Internal Survey* which was modelled on the NSS:

> In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials

> with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

In short, in these Internal Surveys, universities could assess student satisfaction twice each year. Moreover, Lisa's university prescribed increasingly regular Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) which allowed for students to feedback on individual lecturers' performance. In contrast, at Dimitra's current Russell Group university – Dimitra was another lecturer whom I interviewed – there were no SRMs but only feedback systems that examined individual lecturers' perceived teaching quality. I cannot tell whether I find the practices at Dimitra's or at Lisa's university more problematic.

On this basis, I now theorise together the processes of 'worrying', 'encounters between students and lecturers', 'university internal student feedback systems' and the NSS. To do this, I use Barad's (2007) notion of 'enfolding' which suggest that apparatuses are often enfolded into other apparatuses. This enfolding must however not be understood only geometrically – for example, that one apparatus is nested in another – but as the 'agential enfolding of different scales through one another' (p. 245). The notion of 'agential enfolding' may help to explain how a change within one enfolded apparatus has the agency to reconfigure the workings of the apparatus into which it is enfolded. To exemplify this, I suggest, for instance, that my 'worrying' (as an apparatus in Barad's understanding) was agentially enfolded into my encounters with students (also an apparatus, albeit at a larger level of scale). These encounters were, in return, agentially enfolded into institutional feedback apparatuses which were enfolded into national feedback apparatuses (e.g. the NSS). What happened nationally contributed to what *mattered* in the other apparatuses and vice versa. Each phenomenon (worrying, micro-level encounters between students, meso institutional processes and the macro NSS) all need to be understood as distinct but interconnected apparatuses that are enfolded into one another.

This notion of enfolding is connected to Barad's understanding of *entanglement*. Entanglements happen both across time and across space, or more precisely across 'spacetime' (p. 240). That is, 'any particular apparatus is always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses' (p. 203). Barad hence raises the question: where does one specific apparatus start, and where does it stop? I return to the example in which the company IBM made so-called STM images, which

are microscopic logos made at the scale of atoms. One STM image, as an apparatus in its own right, for example, is entangled with a multitude of other apparatuses, such as ' STM microscopes and practices of microscopy, the history of microscopy, scientific and technological advances made possible by scanning tunnelling microscopes, the quantum theory of tunnelling, material sciences, IBM's corporate resources and research and development practices . . .' (Barad, 2007:360–361). Similarly, I argue that the NSS is entangled with a plethora of other apparatuses (e.g. IT systems that enable the provisions of feedback and students' own biographies including their experiences of past schooling).

Both enfoldings and entanglements are connected to what Barad calls topology. Topology refers to issues of connectivity and boundary formation, more specifically, where apparatuses connect to other apparatuses, on the one hand, and where they form boundaries, on the other. That is, universities (as apparatuses) may be *enfolded* into the NSS (as a larger national apparatus) but may also be *entangled* with other universities (again, also apparatuses). These universities may be spatially close to or far away from one another. That is, a university in Manchester may, in fact, be competing with other universities in the UK and China over fee-paying students (see Figure 3.1).

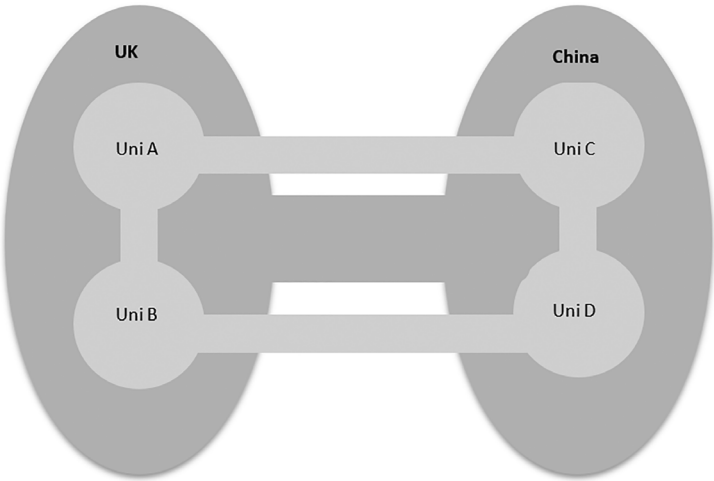

FIGURE 3.1 Competitive topologies

I suggest that these enfoldings and entanglements are precisely what give Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) such *power*. For example, in the following excerpt, Lisa writes about a conversation with a colleague after having received some negative student feedback in a student representative meeting:

> The meetings with student representatives [are] really useful because they allow for change. It is only through the combination of the meetings and [internal surveys] . . . that the meetings become much more devious. It almost feels a little bit that through having [internal surveys. . .] that whatever the students say in student rep meetings mutates into something much more powerful and absolute. I feel a little anxious now that my senior colleagues might make this into a bigger deal which will add to my already extensive workload.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Barad understands power not as something that *someone* has or enacts but rather as 'materialising potential', that is, the possibility that something materialises. Power, more importantly, is not restricted to social reality but rather is part of *all* of reality. That is, power may involve humans, but it does not have to. Instead, it could, for example, be enacted by a marine animal, such as the 'brittlestar' (p. 375) which intra-acts with its environment. This posthuman understanding of power enables me to postulate the following (Barad's key terminology in italics): (a) *intra-actions* between student feedback systems and Lisa attained the *power* to (b) promote a subpersonal *iterative materialisation* of anxiety within Lisa precisely because both *apparatuses* (i.e. (a) and (b)) were *agentially enfolded* into Internal Survey *apparatuses*.

These Internal Surveys attained even more power because of various other 'material-discursive practices' (Barad, 2007:146) such as rather tense team meetings as captured in Lisa's following diary excerpt:

> This all is a little worrying. Recently in one of my staff meetings, the course leader suggested that if the course was unable to gain better feedback in internal surveys that the course might be shut down.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

In addition, the following research diary entry is insightful:

> I am not teaching this one class any longer as the decision has been made to take this class of [sic] me due to negative student feedback from that class. I feel like I really failed on this instance even though I tried really hard to make things accessible and clear. But it is also my students' fault in that they simply don't understand things. But this won't help me much. If this happens in future seminars, I know that I will get into trouble with my line managers.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Macro Apparatuses

So far, I have stayed strictly within the institutional realm. That is, the apparatuses that I have described solely operated within the institution, or what is sometimes described as the meso level of scale. I now argue, however, that these apparatuses (i.e. 'worrying', 'student-lecturer encounters', 'Internal Surveys') are agentially enfolded into even larger national apparatuses, such as the NSS. These macro apparatuses are the origin of myriads of intra-actions at lower levels of scale. I want to elaborate on this a little further.

At this point, I repeat that the NSS creates an artificial market which produces competition for universities to attain better student feedback than other universities. This artificial market is created because the NSS heavily influences university rankings in newspapers. Vice chancellors may reason that good student feedback leads to better ranking positions and may therefore attract more fee-paying students into the university. Thus, universities begin to pay close attention to student feedback attained by *individual courses*. If courses fail to improve their student satisfaction scores, universities may increasingly focus on internal student feedback systems (Canning, 2017) to single out individual modules that attain particularly low feedback scores. In return, these Internal Surveys may exacerbate individual lecturers' anxiety and *agentially reconfigure* how they intra-act with students (e.g. Lisa). In short, the NSS *matters*: it has the power to make lecturers and university leaders 'materialise' as anxious. As implied earlier, I hypothesise that this anxiety is precisely what operates as a 'building block' of the NSS. Without anxiety, the NSS may lose its cutting edge.

Differential Gears and Solidarity

So, what agency do university lecturers have? To explore this question, I return to how Barad (2007) understands the relationship between structure and agency. I begin by looking at Barad's definition of 'structure'. First, it is important to highlight that Barad conflates the notions of 'structure' and 'apparatus' by arguing that 'structures are apparatuses' (Barad, 2007:237). Using the idea of 'enfolding' presented previously, I hence suggest that certain structures (e.g. Internal Surveys and the NSS) comprise other smaller intra-acting structures (e.g. lecturer-student confrontations and anxiety).

Moving to Barad's (2007) understanding of agency, Barad crucially does not understand agency as something that is restricted to humans. That is, Barad rejects that agency is solely about human ability but rather argues that agency can be extended to all processes and entities: humans may have agency, but so do brittlestars and tsunamis. Barad understands agency as 'the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices' (p. 178). The moment one of these practices changes agency is enacted. This change in practice then also reconfigures what is possible and impossible. That is, the NSS, as a practice, may change because of a student boycott or because of a malfunctioning computer system. Both, at least temporarily, change how the NSS operates, and hence, both enact agency. This change also opens up and closes down new avenues of possibility, that is, of possible relations for both human and non-human entities.

This gives me enough material to tackle Barad's understanding of the relationship between agency and structure. Barad theorises this relationship by suggesting that the component parts of structures are 'differential gears'. Structures, in this understanding, could be understood as 'differential gear assemblages' (p. 239). For example, the NSS (as one structure) comprises a range of universities (as its differential gears). Differential gears, importantly, are special types of gears because one broken cog *does not break the machine* (in contrast to a conventional gear). For instance, if one university lecturer refused to act upon student feedback, this would not significantly affect the functionality of Internal Surveys and the NSS (i.e. it would not 'break' the NSS). Put differently, the refusal of one lecturer would lack the agency to reconfigure the structure (i.e. Internal Surveys and the NSS). Rather, this differential gear (i.e. the lecturer) could easily be replaced by another differential gear (i.e. another lecturer). A different picture, however, emerges when considering a range of differential gears breaking (i.e. if myriads of lecturers or other stakeholders refused their participation).

That is, the NSS could only be significantly reconfigured by a range of its intra-acting agencies refusing to participate, foremost students. This is because if only lecturers refused to participate, this would still leave the perceived market pressures of the NSS intact. Students, on the other hand, possess the power to prevent the NSS from 'mattering' since universities are compelled to have a 50 per cent response rate in order to be included into the NSS rankings (Ipsos, 2017). That is, collective 'non-participation' of lecturers and students would be the precondition for the NSS to lose its materialising potential (i.e. its power). This almost happened with the 2016 student boycott (Grove, 2016).

I now suggest the following. Rather than perpetuating the ongoing boundary creation between lecturers and students, the central question must centre on how to create connectivity between students and lecturers, especially since students appear to share economic pressures similar to (or worse than) lecturers, necessitating the juggling of part-time jobs whilst facing an uncertain and increasingly precarious employment future (cf. Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). In other words, ways must be found to theorise the NSS in its entanglement with other concurrent policy apparatuses (such as assessment practices and the UK Research Excellence Framework) which promote increasing workload, competitisation (Brown, 2015; Steger, 2010) and *precariatisation* (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). It is perhaps the analogous working of these apparatuses that could explain the atomisation and isolation (Bourdieu, 1998) of lecturers and students, in particular, and of people, more generally. Moreover, the NSS could be understood as being *agentially enfolded* into larger-scale international apparatuses, such as international neoliberal policy practices, international university ranking industries (cf. Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015) as well as bottom-up streams of capital distribution (cf. Piketty, 2014) and resultant plutocratisation (Gates, 2000).

As I will argue in Chapter 5, it is now somewhat poignant that the NSS may turn out to be precisely the technology which prevents lecturers and students to develop this capacity for joint agency to undermine the functionality of the NSS. For example, I will argue that, as a result of the perceived pressures of student feedback systems, lecturers at Lisa's university increasingly developed a (somewhat covert) negative attitude towards students. This is what I will call an 'antagonism' in Chapter 5. Lisa, for example, notes the following:

> One of my colleagues continuously complains about students along the lines of 'they're never satisfied regardless of what you

> do' and 'they simply can't think for themselves'. Then one of these students knocked on the door and this very colleague suddenly turned into the friendliest person imaginable.

That is, since Barad suggests that materialisations, boundary creations and exclusions always emerge simultaneously as part of their intra-action, I postulate that the NSS functions as an apparatus which – in addition to the materialising effects above – draws iterative boundaries between students and lecturers, thereby preventing potential student-lecturer alliances.

Nevertheless, Barad's notion of a differential gear assemblage perhaps might not only provide a better understanding of how the (post) human subject is thoroughly implicated in – and an agentic part of – the (iterative) maintenance of (neoliberal) structures but might also provide us with an analytical tool so as to theorise potential ways of subverting and reshaping the naturalcultural becoming at university and beyond. In other words, the aim should centre on arriving at potential strategies to counteract the negative effects of (neoliberal) apparatuses, such as the NSS. That is, instead of students, lecturers, colleagues and senior colleagues being played against one another in a reciprocal process that enacts (iterative) boundaries, ways to create connectivity need to be explored. The nature of this renewed 'shared agency' (cf. Smith, 2015) may contain a re-evaluation or reassertion of notions of solidarity. That is, the traditional workers' song of 'Und erkenne deine Macht/Alle Räder stehen still wenn dein starker Arm es will' ('And recognise your power. All gears stand still if your strong arm commands it') might attain a reconfigured meaning when read diffractively with Barad's metaphor of the differential gear assemblage. How this solidarity could be promoted and how it could potentially transgress the confines of the university will, however, have to be explored elsewhere with recent developments in the context of accelerationism, perhaps indicating some ways how this may be achieved (see Srnicek and Williams, 2016). I will tentatively touch on this in chapters 5 and 7.

Before moving on to the next chapter, I would now like to briefly discuss how Barad's work has been taken up in the academic community and how a selection of relevant studies resonate with my take on Barad's work. In particular, I would like to focus on certain trends in Baradian studies which, I argue, fail to do justice to Barad's

agential realism because they underutilise the profound potential in Barad's work.

One of these trends is a certain favouring of the (seemingly) 'immediate' and 'local' over the 'large' and 'abstract'. This focus on immediacy resonates with Srnicek and Williams's (2013:online) critique of some of the left's valorisation of 'communal immediacy' and 'neo-primitivist localism'. This focus on the immediate and local, under exclusion of the 'larger' or 'longer', is, for example, captured in Taylor's (2013) account. Whilst rightly allocating agency to material objects and practices in the classroom as producing gendered practices (p. 691), Taylor's analysis remains firmly contained within the locality (i.e. within the confines of the classroom). Hereby, Taylor fails to acknowledge how these classroom objects may connect to other structures which are spatiotemporally larger and further away. In short, precisely the novelty of Barad's work – that is, one apparatus (e.g. a chair) may have ontological spatiotemporal connectivities to other apparatuses (e.g. trees and factory workers) and may be enfolded into other apparatuses (e.g. the classroom, the school, the country) – is 'excluded from mattering' (to use one of Barad's phrases). Instead, Taylor valorises the 'minutiae of bodily practices' (p. 689) and 'micro practices of matter' (p. 690).

This valorisation of immediacy dominates the Baradian literature base (e.g. Seear, 2013; Ford et al., 2017) and even extends to academic fields with strong temporal qualities. For instance, Alberti and Marshall's (2009) study is situated in *archaeology* but still only focuses on the material qualities of artefacts whilst failing to discuss their temporal connectivities (i.e. those topological relationships which may show stronger connectivity across time than across the immediate space that surrounds them).

Then there are those articles which do theorise macro and micro practices in their very entanglement, such as Rosiek (2018) in his discussion of racism or Nilsson Sjöberg (2017) in his of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, these contributions still fail to reference certain key features in Barad's work, such as their discussion of topology or the micromaser experiments.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. For example, Sherfinski and Chesanko (2016) explore the micro practices of homeschooling whilst also acknowledging their entanglement with environmental, economic, cultural, historical and political processes. I suggest that it is paramount that a 'posthuman ontology' or 'morethanhuman' ontology should not be restricted to the level of discrete and minute objects

and practices but that it shows how certain apparatuses are 'always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses' (Barad, 2007:203). This entanglement of apparatuses also comprises those apparatuses that are dispersed, both temporally and spatially.

This closes my agential realist discussion of the NSS. So far, this chapter sought to exemplify how Barad's (2007) framework of agential realism has the capacity to theorise the workings of the NSS and its effects on university lecturer practice. It was suggested that by participating in the NSS, lecturers materialised as being increasingly anxious which, in return, reworked the ways how they enacted their practice. It, furthermore, was argued that the NSS simultaneously enacted iterative boundaries between students and lecturers as part of their ongoing intra-action. The intra-actions specific to the NSS also excluded other potential 'matterings', such as more experimental approaches to teaching. Finally, the attempt was made to connect agential realism to a discussion of shared agency and solidarity. In short, if there are no inherent boundaries (and connectivities) in the universe, people (as part of the universe) can actively intervene to redraw some of these boundaries. Hence, whilst the NSS could most fittingly be described as a boundary-drawing, 'material-discursive apparatus of bodily production' (Barad, 2007:218), its disciplinary and competitising qualities may be resisted through the attempt to actively create connectivities between stakeholders.

Taking a break from Baradian theory, I will now explore how these struggles and connectivities can be further theorised in the next two chapters. My general argument will be that intra-action is an exceptionally wide notion and needs to be complemented by more specific theory. That is to say, if taken seriously, all matter in the universe is the result of intra-action: from my body (writing this book) to inanimate objects (such as a pen on my table), from atoms to galaxies, from non-human processes (such as a chemical reaction) to 'social' processes, such as rating practices, group dynamics and socio-economic disparities. Hence, in Chapters 4 and 5, I will complement Karen Barad's theory of agential realism with two concepts – Michel Foucault's governmentality and Ernesto Laclau's antagonism – to gain further insights into the NSS.

Note

1 This summary is based on one of my earlier articles (see Thiel, 2018).

4

THE NSS AS A DISCIPLINARY AND NEOLIBERAL HYBRID

In this chapter, I will explore the ideas of compliance and competition. More specifically, this chapter makes sense of the National Student Survey (NSS) using the framework of 'governmentality', a neologism which philosopher Michel Foucault first introduced in his 1978 lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2009). Governmentality can best be understood in its plural form, that is, as governmentalities or 'technologies of government' (Lemke, 2002:53). More specifically, 'sovereign power' (Foucault, 1977:48), 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977:187), 'liberalism' (Foucault, 2009:48) and 'neo-liberalism' (Foucault, 2008:117) may all operate as governmentalities, that is, 'different technologies of government' (Lemke, 2002:53). Building on this understanding of governmentality, I suggest that the NSS uses two specific governmentalities: (i) the 'disciplines' (Foucault, 1977) and (ii) '(neo)liberalism' (Foucault, 2008).

In what follows, I first use Foucault's notion of disciplinary power to analyse the NSS as a disciplinary technology. Next, I discuss Foucault's concept of neoliberal governmentality to make sense of the NSS. Last, I suggest that the NSS is best understood as a hybrid governmental technology that utilises both disciplinary and neoliberal governmentalities.

Disciplinary Governmentality

> Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?
>
> (Foucault, 1977:228)

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To begin with, the NSS could be understood as disciplinary 'governmentality', that is, a disciplinary 'technology of government'. It is important to note that Foucault only started to present discipline as a specific type of governmentality in his 1978 lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2009), whilst originally – that is, in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) – he simply used the term 'discipline'. Therefore, I first introduce Foucault's *original* understanding of 'discipline' (or 'disciplinary power') as introduced in his *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault's Disciplines

Foucault (1977) suggests that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, 'disciplinary power' progressively replaced an older type of power: 'sovereign power'. Sovereign power was expressed in how the absolutist states of the seventeenth century punished transgressions. For example, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) opens with a detailed description of a torturous public execution of someone who was accused of regicide (the attempted murder of the king). Foucault then moves on to describe the comparably calm daily routine of prisoners less than a century later. What happened? Foucault argues that this shift occurred not because rulers suddenly began to see torture as 'cruel' and 'inhumane' but rather because they realised that sovereign power (i.e. public executions) often had unintended consequences: instead of making the public compliant, executions frequently produced riots as people began to sympathise with the delinquent. Thus, during the rise of the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a more effective style of making people compliant emerged. This style could be observed in hospitals, army barracks, schools and prisons, and Foucault called this 'disciplinary power' or simply 'discipline'.

Three instruments can produce *discipline:* (a) hierarchical observation, (b) normalising judgement and (c) examinations. 'Hierarchical observation' describes the effect that observation has on humans (p. 170): if humans think that they might be watched, they are more likely to be compliant. Jeremy Bentham's prison design of the Panopticon, for example, uses this principle of 'eyes that must see without being seen' (p. 171). In the Panopticon, a watchtower is situated in the centre of a circular prison building, a position

from which prison guards have a clear view of the activities of the inmates. Crucially, 'venetian blinds' cover the windows of the watchtower and prevent the inmates from being able to see the activities of the prison guards (p. 201). Hence, the prisoners can never be sure whether they are currently being watched and therefore simply must assume that they are being *permanently* observed. This observational awareness is what Foucault calls *panopticism*, a gaze that puts the prisoners under perceived continuous surveillance and makes them comply with the behavioural expectations of the prison. As an effect, the prisoners are (1977:138) turned into what Foucault calls 'docile bodies', that is, humans that are both useful (in that they can complete certain prescribed activities) and docile (in that they do not step out of line).

Importantly, hierarchical observation within the Panopticon works pyramidically. For example, in the

> central tower, the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders: . . . and it will even be possible to observe the director himself [by an] inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon.
>
> *(Foucault, 1977:204)*

In short, prisoners are watched by prison guards and prison guards are watched by the prison director. Similarly, most institutions are panoptic with senior personnel observing 'lower-ranking' colleagues.

Moving on, *normalising judgement* disciplines people by placing 'them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else' (Gutting, 2006:84). Foucault uses the example of the eighteenth-century École Militaire to exemplify 'normalising judgement'. This military school was separated into classes known as 'the very good', 'the good', the 'médiocres', 'the "bad"' and 'the "shameful" class' (p. 181). Teachers could now *hierarchically* order these classes, by *comparing* and *differentiating* them from one another. This did not only have a *homogenising* effect but it also allowed teachers to *exclude* certain individuals by making them into something 'abnormal' by simply allocating these individuals to 'the "shameful" class of the École Militaire' (p. 183). Importantly, only 'merit and behaviour' (p. 182) were to influence allocation to these classes. This created fluidity through the constant

fear of punishments (i.e. to be relegated into a lower class) and the desire for rewards (i.e. to be promoted to the top class):

> [D]iscipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process.
>
> *(p. 181)*

Finally, Foucault suggests that the 'examination' combines both hierarchical observation and normalising judgement. First, examinations comprise the principle of *visibility* (i.e. a panoptic gaze). For example, in comparison to sovereign power which exercised its power through visibility of the monarch and the relative invisibility of his or her subjects, disciplinary power reversed this process. Here, the origin of the power becomes invisible, whereas people are expected to show 'compulsory visibility' (p. 187). For example, I invite you to imagine a CCTV camera that films you. You would be unable to know who exactly is observing you – or in fact whether someone is observing you at all. Hence, you must simply assume that you are being constantly observed with the power behind the camera being totally invisible. In addition to this panoptic quality, the examination also 'normalises' in that it 'individualises' subjects by *documenting* their specific characteristics. For example, in 'teaching establishments' it became necessary to 'define the aptitude of each individual, situate his level and his abilities' (p. 189). (Of course, this is a practice which persists to this day, for example in the shape of pupils' assessment levels at schools.) Foucault suggests that this documentation of specific characteristics of individuals was then used to turn an individual into a *case* that

> may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded.
>
> *(p. 191)*

In short, examinations are 'a normalizing gaze' (Foucault, 1977).

Docile bodies (i.e. compliant people) are created by combining the disciplines outlined above with a meticulous specification of the *time* and the *space* in which certain bodily *movements* should be undertaken. This necessitates 'an uninterrupted, constant [supervision of] the

processes of the activity rather than its result' (p. 137). For example, prisoners have very precise timetables which dictate what should happen when. Similarly, contemporary schools specify time, space and movements. For instance, primary schools have timetables and require pupils to sit on carpets, leave and enter rooms, line up, or transition between tables in specific ways.

The NSS as a Disciplinary Technology

This makes it possible to explore the NSS as a disciplinary technology. Before beginning, I will, once again, reiterate that the NSS has prompted a range of further *intra-institutional student feedback systems* which often allow for a more frequent assessment of student satisfaction at the level of individual component parts of courses, such as modules. These feedback systems exist with the rationale to pre-empt negative student satisfaction. I return to Lisa's example where her university implemented variations of these *internal feedback systems* which were closely modelled on the NSS. In these Internal Surveys, universities could assess courses at two points in the year in each cohort of students. In addition, Lisa's university also prescribed regular meetings with student representatives to gauge detailed personalised student satisfaction. In these Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), staff could gain student feedback more frequently and at an even smaller level of scale than in Internal Surveys in that SRMs could assess individual lecturers. On the other hand, at Dimitra's current university (a Russell Group university), there were no SRMs but only feedback systems that examined individual lecturers.

I now argue that the NSS, as a macro policy, utilises both 'hierarchical (panoptic) observations' and 'normalising judgements'. The NSS is *panoptic* because universities never know whether students' 'observations' – which they gather throughout their undergraduate degree – somehow will be included into the final-year NSS. There is also a perpetual possibility that an anonymous mass of people – such as parents, prospective students and other stakeholders – may consult university NSS *ratings* online. Hence, just as in the Panopticon, universities can never be sure whether people may search their 'performance' rating online. Therefore, universities must assume continuous surveillance, prompting them to put significant energy into attaining positive student ratings.

Similarly, *normalising judgement* operates in that students judge their courses on a scale from one to five. This, in return, influences newspaper ranking positions and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) accreditations. Foucault writes that *normalising judgement* 'compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, [and] excludes' (Foucault, 1977:183). National rankings do exactly that. They *compare* and *differentiate* university courses and universities by *measuring* 'in quantitative terms' (p. 183) student satisfaction which then leads to a hierarchy (i.e. a ranking). This hierarchy *homogenises* universities in that they make student satisfaction one of their priorities (Brown and Carasso, 2013). Furthermore, national rankings *exclude* those universities situated towards the lower end of the rankings (e.g. by diminishing student demand for these courses). Hence, a decrease in student satisfaction instantaneously puts additional scrutiny on courses, as captured in another of Lisa's diary entries:

> Today the vice-chancellor sent an email to all staff about that the 2016 NSS results have decreased by a few percentage points from 2015. Whilst praising those courses which managed to increase their scores, he also said that the courses that attained negative student feedback must make it their absolute priority to scrutinise their courses in order to attain better student feedback in the future.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Due to these external national pressures, universities have reconfigured *internally*. In other words, this reconfiguration has happened at the 'meso' or institutional level. As mentioned earlier, for example, many universities have implemented *Internal Surveys* so that any negative feedback can first be detected intra-institutionally before it materialises in the NSS (Canning, 2017). For instance, Lisa's university implemented biannual Internal Surveys which were closely modelled on the NSS. Lisa writes:

> In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he

> thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

In this specific Internal Survey, *normalising judgement* operates in that students rate individual modules which then places these modules 'on a ranked scale that compares them to' the other modules (Gutting, 2006:84). When one module failed to attain the 'minimal threshold' (p. 182) of an 80 per cent satisfaction rating, the module leader was situated 'in a network of writing' (Foucault, 1977:189): he had to produce an action plan on how to attain better student satisfaction in the future. As the module failed to attain an 80 per cent threshold, it was branded 'abnormal' (p. 183), akin to Foucault's description of 'the "shameful" class' in eighteenth-century military schools (p. 182). Interestingly, this action plan 'only exist[ed] to disappear' (p. 182): it outlined how to improve student satisfaction scores, thereby making itself superfluous.

Internal Surveys also perfectly show the 'pyramidal' functioning of disciplinary power. Just as the prison guards could be subjected to the panoptic gaze by the 'prison director' (p. 204), the module leaders in Lisa's example were subjected to their managers' gazes. These managers, in return, are exposed to the panoptic gaze of university senior management. When I interviewed Michael, a nurse educator, he remarked:

> Student voice is all they [senior management] ever think about [laughing]. As I said, we are fine, but one of my mates from [another faculty] told me that they are under tremendous scrutiny to get better satisfaction scores.

Through the power of Internal Surveys and the NSS, module leaders listen more to Student Representative Meetings. In these meetings, students can express satisfaction with individual lecturers. For instance, in an interview with Rose, a teacher educator, I enquired

whether she 'ever had any negative experience with student feedback'. She answered:

R: I remember that it must be quite bad for some of my colleagues because . . . somebody usually writes the minutes of these meetings.
I: Are they?
R: Yeah. So, each lecturer is given a score by students on how much they liked it. And sometimes . . . some colleagues don't get a good score . . . the students can look at [the minutes], but also, for example, [our course leader].

Similar to the NSS and Internal Surveys, these student representative meetings, again, utilise *normalising judgements* – that is, lecturers could c*ompare* their supposed teaching quality to that of their colleagues – and *panoptic observations* (the minutes are clearly visible).

In summary, universities, courses and lecturers are exposed to *continuous* panoptic 'hierarchical observations' and 'normalising judgements'. These gazes are exercised from various directions but are eventually channelled in a hierarchical trajectory. For example, because of the pressures of normalising judgement (i.e. through positions in newspaper rankings), universities struggle with other universities over these positions. From here onwards, disciplinary power predominantly functions pyramidically all the way from the top of the institutional hierarchy to the bottom. That is, by instrumentalising student satisfaction ratings, vice chancellors and senior leadership use 'hierarchical observation'" and 'normalising judgement'" to discipline course leaders. These, in return, do the same to module leaders who do the same to individual lecturers. I argue that these combined rankings at various levels of scale in combination with hierarchical management structures discipline module leaders, courses, departments and universities. As a result, student satisfaction becomes the primary indicator of 'good teaching'. For example, I wrote in my diary:

> I feel like I'm continuously thinking about student satisfaction. This really is at the heart of what I do. I'm worried that I might attain negative student feedback, downhearted when I receive negative feedback and thrilled when I receive positive feedback. . . . I feel like I permanently dance to the hymn sheet of student voice.

The NSS as Neoliberal Governmentality

> Neoliberalism is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets.
>
> (Brown, 2015:28)

I now move on to suggest why and how the NSS could be considered 'neo-liberal'. It is important to mention that this chapter will only focus on Foucault's specific understanding of neo-liberalism and his idea of neo-liberal governmentality and not neoliberalism more generally. Albeit useful, it simply would go beyond the scope of this book to provide a comprehensive introduction to neoliberalism, including its associated phenomena of rising inequality, financial instability, corruption and unethical commercialisation (e.g. Brown, 2015), its origins in the Mont Pelerin Society or its various interpretations by different scholars (e.g. Harvey, 2005). I differentiate between the two concepts by using Foucault's spelling (i.e. neo-liberalism with a hyphen) in comparison to the more common spelling of neoliberalisms (without a hyphen).

Foucault's Neo-Liberalism

Foucault first mentions 'liberal governmentality' in his lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2009:370) and 'neo-liberal governmentality' in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 2008:91).

Liberal governmentality, as a concept, is first implied when Foucault elaborates on 'apparatuses of security' (Foucault, 2009). Importantly, *liberal governmentality* can be delineated from what I described as 'disciplinary governmentality'.[1] Foucault's disciplinary governmentality builds on his understanding of disciplinary power outlined above: it could, for example, be observed in how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the absolutist state tried to 'police' the price of 'grain' to its lowest possible price so that it could then be exported on the international market to attract as much gold into the country as possible. This 'price policing', however, had one significant side effect: frequent famines. These famines, in return, posed risks to the ruling elites, due to the dangers of civil unrest. Foucault argues that it was precisely this unrest – and the associated 'immediate solidarity' (p. 41) – which rulers were eager to prevent. Therefore, a group of economists – the 'physiocrats' – gained increasing popularity at the

time. The physiocrats suggested that famines and disobedience could be prevented by introducing a new economic strategy: 'laissez-faire' economics (p. 41). Laissez-faire meant that, instead of regulating grain prices to the lowest possible price, the price should be allowed to rise and then settle naturally at a 'just level' (p. 343), simply based on supply and demand. Moreover, 'free trade between countries' was to be encouraged (p. 345). Consequently, during grain shortages, a country could import, and during abundance, it could export grain. *The aim of this trade liberalisation, crucially, was not to prevent people from dying of hunger altogether.* Whilst famines (and ensuing riots) were to be avoided, the fact that certain individuals would starve was to be understood as an *indispensable element* of 'liberal governmentality':

> [famine] disappears. . . [but the] scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.
> *(p. 42)*

Put succinctly, in comparison to disciplinary power – which from now on I will refer to as disciplinary governmentality – liberal governmentality entered a certain amount of freedom (cf. 'political economy') into the art of governing by letting 'things happen' (p. 45).

I now turn to Foucault's interpretation of neo-liberalism. In his 1979 lecture series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008) suggests that neo-liberalism differed from liberalism in its understanding of 'markets'. On the one hand, liberalism and neoliberalism both glorified competitive markets. On the other hand, whilst liberalism argued that markets were natural (i.e. they naturally emerged whenever the state minimises interference), neo-liberalism saw markets as fundamentally 'unnatural' and therefore in constant need of construction and maintenance. It is for this reason that neoliberals rejected 'laissez-faire' economics. The state should not restrict itself to only playing the night watchman (i.e. protecting private property) but instead should play a more *active* role in *creating* and *maintaining* competitive markets.

I reiterate: neo-liberals argued that markets were 'nonnatural' and therefore needed to be continuously *produced* by the state (Brown, 2015:62). This understanding of markets as unnatural can be traced back to the German economic theory of ordo-liberalism (Foucault, 2008). That is, ordo-liberals broke with classical economic theory in that they had a 'radical anti-naturalistic conception of the market and of the principle of competition' (Lemke, 2001:193). That is,

ordo-liberals suggested that markets must continuously be maintained by the state and, therefore, rejected laissez-faire (Foucault, 2008). Whilst laissez-faire produced monopolisation,

> pure competition, which is the essence of the market, can only appear if it is produced, and if it is produced by an active governmentality.
>
> *(Foucault, 2008:121)*

Similarly, ordoliberals argued that *Homo œconomicus* (i.e. the self-interested, rational, autonomous, entrepreneurial self who tries to constantly pursue its own interest and is in competition with others) is not a primordial human destiny but rather needs to be actively constructed (Foucault, 2008:195). The Chicago school under Milton Friedman – who was one of the most prolific advocates of neoliberalism – took this one step further by rejecting any social policy intervention, such as 'assistance to the unemployed, health care cover, [and] housing policy' (p. 323). Instead, all social relations were now to be refigured as economic relations of *competition*:

> The society regulated by reference to the market that the neoliberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of *competition*. . . . This means that what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of *competition*. Not a super-market society, but an enterprise society. The homo œconomicus sought after is not the man [sic] of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production.
>
> *(Foucault, 2008:147; emphasis added)*

To succeed in a competition, humans are best advised to enhance their *human capital* (Brown, 2015). Human capital is to be understood as a mixture of 'inborn physical genetic predisposition[s]', on the one hand, and skills deriving from '"investments" . . . in nutrition, education, training and also love [and] affection', on the other hand (Lemke, 2001:199). To enhance human capital is to enhance one's 'capacity for self-control' which Foucault calls 'technologies of the self' (Lemke, 2002:52). Through self-control, individual subjects, 'families and associations', are recast as solely responsible for their

own fate which simultaneously shifts 'responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, and so forth' into issues of 'self-care' (p. 59).

The NSS as Neoliberal Governmentality

On this basis, I now suggest that, in addition to using 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977) to govern lecturers, the NSS also utilises *liberal and neoliberal governmentalities*. I start by returning to Foucault's description of how 'liberal governmentality' did not seek to fully prevent people from dying of hunger but rather always sought to maintain a certain amount of deaths as a deterrent. I now liken this to the modern threat of redundancy within the job market. A poignant example of this transpired when I interviewed Rachel, a teacher educator:

> R: Last year I had a bit of a bad year really . . . I felt quite stretched with everything . . . and . . . um . . . I also had a few student groups, I didn't . . . didn't quite get on with. So one day, I got invited into [my line manager's] office. I mean . . . I didn't really get on with my [line manager] anyway, but he told me that I needed to up my game if I wanted to continue my career at [Reddish University]. And I thought to myself, that's ridiculous you just don't like me . . . but obviously didn't say that out loud. Anyway . . . I was trying . . . hard to get better feedback afterwards. I mean, it worked, but that was very hard actually.
>
> *(Interview with Rachel; Teacher Educator at Reddish University)*

It is crucial that these redundancies – real or simply threatened – are not to be avoided for liberal governmentality to function properly. Rather, they are a fundamental part of it. That is, just as the physiocrats asserted that as long as the majority of the population have enough food on their plates, the deaths of a few individuals were not only expected but also *necessary*, lecturer redundancies are also necessary. These may function as important 'warnings' or 'threats' along the lines of 'look what happens when you fail to produce results'. Hence, the possibility of an 'immediate solidarity' (Foucault, 2009:41) is not only minimised (i.e. colleagues are less likely to step out of line) but the majority of the lecturers may also, indeed, work even harder to attain positive ratings (e.g., Rachel was 'trying . . .

hard to get better feedback'). Foucault's aforementioned quote could hence be amended to

> the [mass redundancy] disappears . . . [the redundancy] that causes the [precarity] of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.
>
> *(Foucault, 2009:64; changed to suit analysis)*

This logic is also important for intra-institutional and inter-institutional practices. For example, it could be hypothesised that university senior leadership may force the *department* with the poorest ratings to shut down; however, as long as the whole university attains better feedback, staff of other departments are less likely to mobilise. This unfortunate, lowest-ranking department simultaneously functions as a warning against staff taking solidary action as well as producing an urgency for other departments to work harder. Similarly, a university may fail to attract enough students as fee-paying 'customers' because of bad NSS feedback and hence may face closure (Evans, 2018); however, as long as all remaining UK universities perform better than this university – and it is in the nature of rankings that this *always* is the case – UK-wide academic discontent is prevented. Failing universities, hence, become a necessary feature of the NSS and associated rankings: the fear of becoming one of those bottom universities forces university senior leaders into performative action (cf. Ball, 2003) to raise student satisfaction ratings. In short, I argue that the UK higher education market prevents discontent and resulting solidarity.

Moving to neo-liberalism, I reiterate that liberalism and neo-liberalism are similar in their veneration of markets. However, they fundamentally differ in that liberalism sees markets as natural whilst neoliberalism sees markets as artificial and, thus, in constant need of creation. Therefore, I consider the NSS as a prototypical example of neo-liberalism (in Foucault's understanding): the NSS – and its resulting intra-institutional equivalents – pitches 'individuals, groups and institutions' (Lemke, 2001:197) against one another. This competition necessarily creates 'winners' and 'losers' (cf. Brown, 2015). Lisa, for example, admits:

> I really don't know but I can't help to feel smug when I get better feedback than others. I don't think I'm usually very competitive, but when it comes to student feedback I can't help to feel brilliant when students rate me as better than others.

Moreover, courses and departments are pitched against one another in that those courses with the worst student feedback are put under increasing pressure to improve their feedback (and become a 'winner') or otherwise face closure (and become a 'loser'). A reward may be as simple as the removal of the threat of closure. For instance, nurse educator Michael, expressing a certain relief, suggested:

> My boss said that our university won't shut our course down because of our amazing student feedback.

At the national level, the NSS pitches universities against one another who then try to attract as many 'customers' (i.e. students) as possible. This purposeful *creation of competition* is also reflected in policy. For example, the UK whitepaper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' praises competitive markets (Department for Business, 2016, DfB, p. 8) because

> competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.
>
> *(p. 8)*

Interestingly, the DfB's main reason to expand competitive higher education markets is to increase economic performance and not because of a desire for other qualities, such as personal fulfilment, equality or learning. That is, universities simply become another example of Milton Friedman's project for all spheres of life to be refigured in economic terms (cf. Foucault, 2008). The NSS is one of the technologies that 'incentivise' (i.e. force) universities to 'raise their game' and contribute to an overall higher 'GDP' (DfB, 2016:8).

As part of this perpetual competition, the NSS forces lecturers to become 'entrepreneurial' to survive; lecturers are invited to constantly enhance their *human capital* (in this case, their ability to achieve good student feedback) along the lines of 'do what you want but take care that your human capital is adapted' (Simons and Masschelein, 2008:55). To enhance human capital, one must, in return, enhance one's 'capacity for self-control' (Lemke, 2002:52). (Foucault described this capacity as 'technologies of the self'.) As a result, lecturers, departments and universities are 'responsibilised'. That is to say, student satisfaction is no longer understood as a complex interplay of various factors (e.g. student

effort, small class sizes, sufficient funds to survive) but, instead, becomes the *sole responsibility* of lecturers, departments and universities:

> What upsets me really, is that if you have a bad class, it's still your responsibility. . . . They [management] still hold you to account if you don't raise good student feedback . . . even if it's actually the students who are . . . the baddies really.
>
> *(Interview with Rachel; Teacher Educator at Reddish University)*

This "responsibilisation" also creates certain contradictions: counter to the neoliberal avowal of the entrepreneurial self (cf. Brown, 2015), a *risk-averse* self emerges. For instance, I reiterate that once I attained great feedback; I then asked myself:

> 'What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback?' . . . I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to give me positive student feedback.
>
> *(Author's research diary)*

In other words, fully responsibilised lecturers may reason that 'to maintain good student feedback', they must recreate precisely those conditions which initially created the positive feedback. This desire for positive feedback (and the fear of negative feedback) may hence produce subjects who *eschew*, and no longer embrace, risks. Sadly, regardless of how 'responsible' lecturers become, good student feedback is not guaranteed as

> a subject construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is.
>
> *(Brown, 2015:37)*

For example, Steve poignantly remarked that when one department was shut down,

> many colleagues were . . . successful and hardworking academics . . . with publications and everything but . . . um . . . not

> all of them managed to find a job afterwards or they simply decided to retire.
>
> *(Interview with Steve; teacher educator)*

Competition – Everywhere!

I summarise once again: what delineates neo-liberalism from liberalism is that governments must go beyond playing the 'night watchman' by ensuring that competitive markets develop and operate 'effectively'. In other words, neo-liberalism holds on to Adam Smith's (1776) idea of the 'invisible hand' (i.e. that the people's self-interest creates the optimal progress of humanity), but this self-interest is neither natural nor does competition always emerge automatically. Instead, it is the government's *responsibility to create the conditions* for the emergence of competitive markets. In short, markets under neo-liberalism are 'desirable' but no longer 'natural'.

Hence, it becomes possible that markets now transcend the *economic* sphere and become part of *all realms* of social life (Brown, 2015). 'New Public Management' – that is, the philosophy that the 'public sector' can become 'more efficient' if managed like the private sector (Steger, 2010) – is just one example of this remaking of the social in the image of the economic (Brown, 2015).

I now expand on neo-liberalism's most elemental property: competition. In particular, I ask: what happens in 'hypercompetitive' situations? I would like to begin by examining the contemporary reality TV series *Love Island* (ITV, 2018). For me, series, such as *Love Island*, are quintessentially neo-liberal because they incorporate two of neo-liberalism's indispensable elements: (i) desire and (ii) competition (both of which are artificially created). For instance, in one stretch of episodes, four women are partnered up with four men. Then, an additional man is introduced, and all partners have to decide whether they either stay with their old partner or choose a new one. The man who ended up 'partner-less' is cast out of the competition.

First, this artificially created *competition*, and its accompanying desperation to avoid losing, is characteristic of contemporary neo-liberalism in which all social interactions increasingly become framed as competitive interactions with necessary losers and winners (Brown, 2015). Second, I propose that all competition – and not only economic competition (cf. Brown, 2015) – is contingent on *desire*. If there was no desire (e.g. to earn more money, to get out of a desperate

situation, to defeat someone in a basketball game), there would be no competition. If people stopped desiring money, economic competition would decrease. This take on desire is also implied in Foucault's assertion in the context of the emergence of liberalism:

> Desire is an old notion that first appeared and was employed in spiritual direction (to which, possibly, we may be able to return), and it makes its second appearance within techniques of power and government. Every individual acts out of desire. One can do nothing against desire.
>
> *(Foucault, 2009:72)*

I would like to add: 'Yes, one can do nothing against desire, but one can certainly foster desire. Advertising is just one example'. 'Liberal governmentality', hence, is about how to govern by allowing desire to flourish. Third, I propose that competition usually involves the desire for something *sparse*. This is precisely what happens in *Love Island* where a desire for the love and affection of another person (often an exclusive trait) means that competition *must* arise. There are myriads of other reality TV programmes which artificially create competition by creating desire over something exclusive and where there can only be one winner, such as *The Apprentice*, *X-Factor* and *The Great British Bake Off*.

Hyper-competitions are even better exemplified by dramatised television series. For example, in an episode of the British science fiction series *Doctor Who*, the Doctor – a benevolent alien who frequently saves the universe from destruction – is trapped on a space station that broadcasts a plethora of seemingly deadly 'game shows'. For example, in *The Weakest Link*, a robot ('Anne-Droid') literally eliminates contestants who 'are the weakest link' through a disintegrating laser beam. Similarly, in *Big Brother* people are evicted not only from the Big Brother house but also 'from life'. Importantly, contestants *must* participate in these games to survive. Under neoliberalism, we similarly *must* participate or otherwise risk being discarded onto the streets (Brown, 2015).

Competition in its crassest form is, however, displayed in the film *Battle Royale* (*Battle Royale*, 2000). Similar to other productions, such as *Hunger Games* or *Squid Game*, in *Battle Royale*, teenagers are forced onto an island to play a sickening 'game'. Fitted with 'explosive collars', they are informed that they have three

days to kill all other participants. If they fail, their explosive collars are automatically activated. Explosions are also triggered if anyone decides to subvert the game. As expected, a brutal massacre ensues in which some teenagers enjoy the killing process, whilst others only kill because of the fear of being killed themselves. Some teenagers commit suicide out of desperation. Above all, this film shows what happens in an 'ultimate competition': that is, a competition *over life itself*.

Using *Battle Royale* as an analogy for everyday life under neoliberalism may appear an unfair exaggeration, yet there are striking similarities between the artificial and deadly game played in *Battle Royale* and the situation of individuals under neoliberalism. In *Battle Royale* there, again, *must* be winners and losers: the winner survives, whilst the losers die. Similarly, under neoliberalism, economic survival is increasingly connected to physical survival:

> where there are only [human] capitals and competition among them, not only will some win while others lose (*inequality and competition unto death* replaces equality and commitment to protect life), but some will be rescued and resuscitated, while others will be cast off or left to perish (owners of small farms and small businesses, those with underwater mortgages, indebted and unemployed college graduates).
>
> *(Brown, 2015:72; emphasis added)*

Whilst the competitive situation in *Battle Royale* is extreme, under neoliberalism people are perpetually confronted with what happens if they fail to adapt to the current economic climate and fail to find employment. In this context, I consider that when I walk home from work, I usually walk past many homeless people. I only realised recently that I would do almost anything not to end up in the same situation myself. This, yet again, resonates with Foucault's (2009:42) assertion that the 'scarcity-scourge disappears' but that individual instances of hunger must not disappear. Homelessness may, indeed, be part of neoliberal governmentality in that it instils fear in people (i.e. to become homeless) and thereby enhances compliance precisely because of this fear. If people see the alternative to a stressful, unfulfilling job, they will still prefer that job over being cast onto the street. Similarly, if a lecturer witnesses that other colleagues are made redundant because they failed to raise good student feedback, this lecturer

will work even harder to produce good student feedback. The event of resistance may be prevented by always making sure that those who are excluded are somehow clearly visible.

In conclusion, neo-liberalism infiltrates every sphere of human existence. Consequently, we fully become neo-liberal subjects, that is, self-investing, competitive, responsibilised and no longer entrepreneuring individuals (Brown, 2015). One aspect of this is that all members of a nation-state (and, as I will argue below, nation-states themselves) become competitors. For example, when I am at university, 'I become the service provider who sells a good student experience' (my research diary), whilst when I am shopping for perfume for my partner, I become the demanding and somewhat rude customer who may not even say thank you:

> Yesterday, I went Christmas shopping. I got so increasingly annoyed with the prices for everything and the general frenzy of buying Christmas presents for everyone (it's all so expensive) that I was thinking to myself, if I'm already paying so much for perfume, I at least want to be treated well (after all the customer is king, right?) as a compensation of feeling rather unhappy about the lack of money each month.
>
> *(My research diary)*

In short, and put slightly simplistically, it is not only that neoliberalism (i) makes most people poorer and/or less secure, (ii) commercialises everything, (iii) increasingly corrupts political decisions and (iv) destabilises society by excessive levels of financial risk-taking (Brown, 2015) but neoliberalism also colonises how we think about ourselves (as human capital), others (as competitors) and politics (as existing *for the benefit of* the economy).

Conclusion: The NSS as a Neoliberal-Disciplinary Amalgam

In this chapter, I used Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' to theorise the effects of the NSS. I first suggested that the NSS uses 'disciplinary governmentality' in that 'student feedback systems' use 'normalising judgement', 'hierarchical observation' and 'examinations'. Hence, university lecturers become increasingly compliant by prioritising the achievement of student satisfaction. Second, I considered Foucault's

work on liberal and neo-liberal 'governmentality'. Here, I suggested that the NSS governs the academic population by pitching lecturers, departments and universities against one another within artificial competitive markets. These markets avoid large-scale (academic) civil unrest by creating a competitive desire for positive student feedback whilst producing important collateral damage which functions as 'warnings' along the lines of 'look what happens if you don't produce good student feedback'.

The question now arises how these two different governmentalities could be thought together. Fittingly, Foucault's (2009:107) lecture series of 1978 already urges us not to think of sovereignty, discipline and liberal governmentality as separate historical epochs in which a 'society of sovereignty' is replaced by 'a society of discipline' which is then replaced by 'a society, say, of [liberal] government'. Rather these different governmentalities 'sovereignty, discipline, and (liberal) governmental management' comprise a 'triangle' (p. 143). Whilst discipline was operational in the emerging institutions of 'schools, workshops, [and] armies', it 'was never more valued than when the attempt was made to manage the population' (p. 143). Similarly, 'disciplinary techniques' are 'contemporaneous with' and 'bound up with' liberalism'. For example, Jeremy Bentham, towards the end of his life, proposes 'that the Panopticon should be the formula for the whole of [liberal] government' (Foucault, 2008:67). This government should 'give way to . . . [natural, i.e. liberal] mechanisms' and not interfere apart from supervising (p. 67). Only if this credo of non-interference proves to be ineffective, the government should actively intervene by subjecting individuals to 'discipline' or even 'domination' (cf. Lemke, 2002). In the context of the NSS, lecturers also may be free to do what they want, but only as long as they produce positive student feedback (i.e. the liberal idea of freedom is operational). Yet, if lecturers are unsuccessful in raising positive feedback, they may then be subjected to 'discipline' in the shape of 'disciplinary hearings' or 'disciplinary procedures'. If this disciplinary process also proves unsuccessful, then perhaps harsher 'sovereign' logics may be applied, such as redundancy, potentially leading to more radical forms of precarity, such as homelessness.

Perhaps, however, what happens in contemporary universities (and in society more generally) is something which Foucault could not have predicted in his own time: the proliferation of ranking practices facilitated through technology. This concluding section, thus,

suggests that in the NSS, disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentality have morphed into a new *amalgamated hybrid*. This 'neo-liberal-disciplinary governmentality' may, for example, operate through markets (by using student satisfaction as a metric) (cf. neo-liberalism). Yet, these markets operate within tightly controlled parameters (cf. discipline). More specifically, neo-liberal governmentality is at play in that universities, faculties, departments, courses and lecturers are pitched against one another in *competitive struggles* over positive student ratings and, indirectly, future student numbers (and, hence, income streams). Yet, 'disciplinary power' is present in that the government and management instrumentalise the panoptic gaze of students to normalisingly judge lecturers and departments by ranking them within league tables. Importantly, the intention is not to make these entities into 'better' people or institutions but to enhance their 'performance' and competitive standing (cf. neo-liberalism) within these very tables. If lecturers perform well in the tables, they are framed as winners (cf. Brown, 2015). Those who perform towards the bottom of the scale are framed as 'losers' (which is a typical effect of neo-liberalism). The 'losers' may be put under additional surveillance (cf. discipline) to enhance their competitive standing (cf. neo-liberalism). At all times, all university actors are under continuous pressure to enhance their 'human capital' to further improve their competitive standing (cf. neo-liberalism) within, however, highly systematised and clearly visible rankings which, of course, operate through normalising judgement (cf. discipline).

This returns the discussion to this book's introduction, namely, that ratings and rankings of services and products have proliferated in society more generally. Just in the last month, I received a dozen requests to rate services and products. A few moments ago, Amazon asked me again to rate the products I purchased. British Gas was interested in my experience of having a new electricity line fitted, including whether staff took off their shoes. 'Google Maps' is interested in my experience at the supermarket. Importantly, these individual ratings often accrue into an average rating. These average ratings, in return, guide people's choices and are difficult to resist. Again, a restaurant's 2-star rating on TripAdvisor – an online customer review website – would deter me from dining there. These rating and ranking practices sometimes have negative outcomes: I remember listening to a restaurant owner on the radio who complained that he was often less likely to urge 'rude' customers to leave the premises because of being scared

that these customers then leave a poor review for his restaurant on Trip Advisor.

I also reiterate that, interestingly, on some of these internet platforms, such as Airbnb, customers do not only rate the individual company or service provider, but the company also rates the customer. On my family's last holiday, Airbnb did not only ask us to rate the apartment we stayed at but also allowed the host to reciprocally provide a rating (including a comment) for us, based on how tidy we left the house and how satisfied the host was with us. In other words, hosts and guests rate one another reciprocally with potential consequences for both parties. Porges (2016), for example, suggests that hosts may be driven into 'burnout' by Airbnb reviews. Similarly, the taxi company Uber implemented processes in which both customers and taxi drivers rate each other on the experience of their shared car journey with anxiety-inducing effects on both parties (Hunt, 2016).

Charlie Brooker's 'Nosedive'

I now finish this chapter by returning the discussion to Charlie Brooker's dystopia Nosedive (2016) where reciprocal rating practices have infiltrated the entire social body in that not only commodity exchanges but also all human interactions are rated. In short, everyone rates everyone. Whether people buy coffees or swear in public, people reward with 5-star and punish with 1-star ratings, simply by swiping their phones. Each rating adds to an overall score for each person, and augmented-reality contact lenses allow this score to be visible at all times. Low average scores will deny people entry to their workplaces, attractive housing, high-quality rental cars and flights. A particularly low score even results in incarceration. 'Nosedive' is a science-fiction dystopia; yet, there are warning signs that similar technology is being developed. For example, there are prototypical experimental designs for augmented-reality contact lenses (Bolton, 2016), and a social scoring system is currently trialled in China where, in one instance, a school denied access to a child from parents who were deemed 'anti-social' based on their social citizen scores (Bisset, 2018).

'Nosedive' is a perfect example of my proposed amalgam of Foucault's disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentality. Beginning with disciplinary governmentality, 'hierarchical observation' is omnipresent in that everyone in 'Nosedive' wears augmented-reality contact lenses, making visible everyone else's scores *at all times*. Second, special

smartphones make it possible to continuously rate others. For instance, when protagonist Lacie loses her composure and starts swearing at an airport, people nearby instantly give her low ratings. In Foucault's (1977) words, she gets 'observed' (by bystanders) and 'normalisingly judged' (i.e. rated down). Put differently, Foucault's panoptical principle of 'eyes that cannot be seen' is universalised into all realms of social interactions: everyone 'judges' and 'is judged'. Importantly, alongside this universalisation, formal and informal hierarchies co-exist. For instance, people with higher scores possess more 'rating impact' than those with lower scores: at one point, Lacie is rated negatively by high-scoring 'Bets' simply for offering some free doughnuts as a gift and being perceived as 'trying a little bit too hard'. This low rating significantly affects Lacie's score (and her anxiety levels). Similarly, traditional hierarchies persist: in the aforementioned airport scene, a security police officer punishes Lacie for swearing by temporarily deducting one whole point off Lacie's score which, in return, prohibits Lacie from boarding the airplane.

Moving on, 'Nosedive' also exhibits elements of neo-liberal governmentality. For instance, Lacie enjoys a certain 'freedom' albeit in a drastically reinterpreted form: whilst in liberal societies, freedom was focused on the accumulation of wealth (Foucault, 2009), the freedom in 'Nosedive' is focused on the accumulation of positive ratings. In addition, these ratings 'competitise' society by producing 'winners' (e.g. those who are given cancer treatments or are able to attain attractive housing) and 'losers' (cf. Brown, 2015). This competitisation forces everyone into becoming *homo œconomicus* – that is, the self-investing entrepreneur – who attempts to invest into their own 'human capital' (i.e. their rating score) by calculating which action gives the biggest 'return on investment' (i.e. a higher score) (Brown, 2015:23). However, this neoliberal rationality of competition is merged with a disciplinary element where everyone is perpetually able to (panoptically) compare scores.

Other central aspects of neoliberalism, such as wealth inequality, also appear entangled with the social scoring system in 'Nosedive'. For instance, Naomi, a character with a very high score, is getting married on her fiancé's *private island*, whilst Lacie, with a lower score, is finding it difficult to afford decent housing. Similarly, a low score may deny people access to their office, which, of course, in return denies them the ability to earn money. Consequentially, the constant risk of downward mobility (both in terms of ratings and wealth) keeps

people in check (they are disciplined), just like in contemporary society where the fear of unemployment may prevent people from taking collective unionised action. In short, whilst certain neoliberal tendencies were not as prevalent at Foucault's time of writing in the late 1970s (such as downward mobility), these very tendencies may be an integral part of my suggested disciplinary-neoliberal hybrid. In analogy to pupils in eighteenth-century military schools, who became disciplined by the constant threat of being relegated to one of the 'lower classes', the prospect of being 'relegated' into unemployment contributes to peoples' docility.

The following chapter now builds on my Foucauldian analysis by discussing another logic that operates through the NSS: that of 'antagonism' (Laclau, 2005). Importantly, I present antagonism as another type of governmentality operating alongside the disciplinary and neoliberal governmentalities discussed so far.

Note

1 Foucault does not use the term 'disciplinary governmentality' in his lecture series. Nevertheless, the term is implied in the following quote: 'We are in the world of the regulation, the world of discipline. That is to say, the great proliferation of local and regional disciplines we have observed in workshops, schools and the army from the end of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, should be seen against the background of an attempt at a general disciplinarization, a general regulation of individuals and the territory of the realm in the form of a police based on an essentially urban model' (Foucault, 2009, pp. 340–341).

5

DIVIDE AND RULE

The NSS as an Antagonistic Governmentality

> It is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion.
>
> (Laclau, 2005:70)

The previous chapter argued that the National Student Survey (NSS) is a disciplinary and neoliberal governmental *hybrid*. In this chapter, I now suggest that the NSS additionally uses what I call 'antagonistic governmentality' drawing on Laclau's notion of 'antagonism'. Antagonism, in a nutshell, describes the following phenomenon: social groups often emerge when their members jointly oppose another group of people.

This chapter starts with Laclau's notions of 'antagonism' and 'populism'. It is important to mention at the outset that populism, for Laclau, is not restricted to phenomena of the political far-right (e.g. Nazism) but rather denotes a general political logic. Next, I explore 'student feedback systems' as technologies that promote antagonisms between students and lecturers. I end this chapter by asking questions about the political opportunities and dangers of antagonism.

Ernesto Laclau's Antagonism and Populism

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005:ix) explores how 'antagonism' leads to the formation of 'collective identities'. To understand antagonism,

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one needs to understand Laclau's take on *discourse* which, importantly, is not restricted to writing or speech but may also include non-linguistic acts of signification, such as 'actions'. According to Laclau, discourses do not pre-exist but rather *create objectivity*. The guiding principles here are 'difference' and 'relations': 'something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else' (p. 68). I suggest, for example, that I can only understand people being 'polite' if I also experienced people being 'less polite'. Similarly, people in the film *Dead Poets Society* could only understand the significance of the disobedient act of 'standing up on chairs' because it was *different* from students following the social norm of obediently 'sitting down'.

Antagonism builds on this understanding of discourse. Antagonism describes the phenomenon when people construct their own group identity by opposing another entity. Antagonism is discursive (i.e. fundamentally concerned with 'relations') because 'opposing' is a form of 'relating' – between those who oppose and those who are opposed. Those who are opposed become 'Other', and this 'Other' 'prevents me from being totally myself' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:127). For example, when a landowner expels a 'peasant from his land' (p. 127), it is because the 'peasant cannot be a peasant' any longer (p. 127) that he develops an antagonism towards the landowner. In short, antagonism can be understood as follows: there is an antagonism (i.e. an antagonistic relation) if there is a perceived opposing force that prevents one person from becoming the person he or she wants to be. In other words, as long as 'there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself' (p. 127).

On this foundation, Laclau builds his understanding of populism. Laclau provides the following example here. A 'group of people' share a problem with 'housing' and demand a 'solution' from an unresponsive local government (Laclau, 2005:73). If a demand exists in *isolation* from the demands of other groups of people, Laclau calls this a 'democratic demand' (p. 73). If the local authority meets the demand for housing, this demand ceases to exist, and the local authority stops being an opposing force. What happens, however, if this democratic demand remains unmet for a longer period? Laclau suggests that this opens the possibility for the emergence of a 'popular demand'. For example, a popular demand may arise when the group that struggles with housing 'start[s] to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on' (p. 73). This may then establish an '*equivalential* relation . . . between' the demands of the different groups of people (emphasis in original). These popular demands

emerge, as in the previous example, through the people's antagonism towards a common enemy – in this case, their local authority.

Based on this local example, how can the emergence of a larger-scale populism be explained, such as the socialist revolution against the Tsarist regime in the twentieth century in Russia? Here, Tsarism – as the 'oppressive regime' – was separated by an antagonistic 'frontier from the demands of most sectors of society' (Laclau, 2005:130). For example, one group may have demanded 'political freedom' (but was denied this), whilst another demanded food (but went hungry). Even though these particular demands were 'different', they shared an 'antagonism', that is, their 'common opposition to the oppressive regime' (p. 131). This common rejection of the regime enabled connections, that is, 'equivalential links' between the groups, resulting in what Laclau calls an 'equivalential chain' (p. 77). Importantly, these 'equivalential links' were only possible because of one process: *one* specific demand suddenly became the symbol – that is, the signifier – for all other groups' demands. For example, the slogan 'Peace, Bread, Land' may have come to represent the demands of all groups (including the specific group that simply demanded political freedom and may, in fact, not be hungry). Laclau terms this specific demand which comes to represent all demands an 'empty signifier' (p. 105). That is, an empty signifier does not refer to any signified – that is, a specific idea – because an empty signifier means something different for each of the groups. It is this logic by which one signifier 'steps in' to represent the whole of society in relation to an antagonistic force (which denies society this wholeness) that Laclau calls *hegemony*.

Whilst there was a very clear antagonistic frontier between 'the People' and the Tsar family in Russia, resulting in an 'equivalential chain' between different sectors of society, in other populist configurations, the antagonistic frontier is not as clear-cut but rather 'blurred'. Here, one 'equivalential chain' can be disrupted by another equivalential chain (p. 131) (by a rival hegemonic project) *which tries to constitute a different antagonistic force as the root of unmet demands*. This situation makes it possible to develop Laclau's understanding of *floating signifiers*. Floating signifiers are 'signifiers whose meaning is "suspended"' in the sense that the meaning of the signifier is 'indeterminate between alternative equivalential frontiers' (p. 131). To exemplify this, I draw on Laclau's description of the 1950s US right-wing movement against the American New Deal. Here, the signifier of the 'small man' vis-à-vis the power of the elites became increasingly disconnected from the discourse of

the left (i.e. the American New Deal) and attached itself instead to a right-wing discourse against the New Deal (p. 131). In this discourse, the Western liberal left-wing elite was constructed as the antagonistic force against which a popular identity could be constructed. Importantly, people's democratic demands remained unchanged here (people were still struggling with the same issues): the only difference was that, now, the popular demand was constructed around a different 'equivalential chain' (p. 131), for example, 'common decent people' and Republican politicians against the liberal left-wing elite who represented the New Deal.

The question of which democratic demands will eventually attach themselves to which equivalential chain (and which empty signifier comes to represent this chain) depends on the 'hegemonic struggle' (p. 132) between two rival 'hegemonic projects' (p. 131). To exemplify this further, it could be suggested that in the contemporary United States – and other European countries for that matter – people are struggling over a variety of specific unmet 'democratic demands' (e.g. longer working hours, less income, less job security, omnipresent competition, crime). However, which equivalential chain (and associated popular demand) people attach their democratic demands to depends on who wins the hegemonic struggle. In 2016, Trump offered the antagonism of the 'liberal elitist left', 'immigrants' and outside competitors (Europe, China, etc.) and won the election. On the other hand, there was the rival hegemonic project offered by Bernie Sanders who suggested the antagonism of 'the billionaire Elite'.

The NSS as an Antagonistic Technology

I now move on to discuss how the NSS could be viewed through Laclau's notions of antagonism and populism. Before beginning my data analysis, however, I modify Laclau's framework slightly. First, I ask, 'How many people need to pursue a political idea so that this movement can be called populist? Are 5 or 500,000 supporters enough, or does it take 1,000,000 or even 2,000,000?' My answer is that populism is not restricted to large-scale examples; instead, I propose that antagonisms and populism can exist *at all levels of scale*. That is, against Laclau's assertion that popular identities can only emerge amongst larger population sizes, I suggest that populism can operate *irrespective of scale*, including the smallest groups. I furthermore propose that scale still matters but only in that it affects

the degree to which a signifier can become *empty*: the larger the amount of differing democratic demands, the 'emptier' the signifier needs to be. For example, in a hypothetical small company, one colleague may be struggling with childcare arrangements, whilst another is struggling with an excessive workload and wants better working conditions, and a third suffers from anxiety due to the perceived threat of losing their job. All three colleagues are confronted with an unresponsive power, that is, their boss, who refuses to meet these demands. As a result, the three colleagues may now stand up and confront their boss over these issues and demand 'better working conditions'. The signifier 'better working conditions' is already somewhat emptier than the original specific democratic demands. This is what I will call a micro populism. At a larger scale, on the other hand, there may be a country where one group of people are struggling with hunger and demand food, whilst others suffer under political persecution and demand freedom, and yet another group may be suffering under racial discrimination and demand equality. These groups may come together under a signifier, such as 'Freedom'. That is, even though freedom does not necessarily address, for instance, those issues of hunger and the specific demand for food, it still may come to represent these. This is what I will call a macro populism.

Micro Populisms

I would now like to begin my analysis by considering four excerpts from Lisa's research diary:

> This particular class does not seem to have anything in common and the students simply do not speak much to each other. The few conversation[s] which I managed to overhear were about certain students showing off their amazing holidays or talking about something that happened to them on their journey to university.
>
> *(October 2016)*

> After the session, a student came to see me and talked about the fact that she was concerned about her assignment.
>
> *(November 2016)*

> I am teaching this one class in which one group of students frequently complains about another group of students for being noisy and disrespectful. What I found interesting is that their

> friendship inside the group appeared to be strengthened through their animosity towards the other group. Honestly, I wasn't even aware of the fact that this group existed until they told me that they really did not like the other group. I also found it interesting that there was a strong emotional bond between the students, i.e. they passionately expressed their shared rejection of the rudeness of the other group. For example, after the [noisy] group had left the classroom, the other group stayed behind telling me that they found their behaviour so rude, especially towards me. I particularly remember one student who appeared flustered and angry whilst saying "I think it's disgusting. They were just so rude towards you.
>
> *(March 2017)*

> The group I was writing about earlier (i.e. the group that were complaining about the other group) were now increasingly doing social activities with one another. One student, for example, told me that they were all going on a night out together.
>
> *(March 2017)*

This sequence of journal entries is an example of my suggested 'micro populism in which a group identity may emerge based on their common rejection of another group. That is, when the students first met their group in October 2016 in their first year, there were only 'purely differential' (Laclau, 2005:69) student identities because each student defined his or her own identity in relation to everyone else. Whilst some initial identifications might have formed based on clothes, demeanour and so forth, student demands were expressed on a largely differential level. For instance, in November 2016, a student approached Lisa whilst only expressing an individual democratic demand, that is, 'assignment anxiety' (and not a group demand). In March 2017, however, it became apparent that friendship groups began to emerge. Importantly, some of these groups appeared to share an animosity towards a 'noisy and disrespectful' group, prompting students to approach Lisa with that 'they found a certain group's behaviour so rude'. Implied in this concern was a *demand* for politer student behaviour and the emergence of a tentative group identity. Although this specific group may have emerged because of other factors (I need to remain tentative because there is limited data available here), I hypothesise that the student group *partly* emerged on the basis of their shared antagonism of the other group. Importantly, there was a strong affective dimension in

the students' rejection (e.g. one student appeared 'flustered and angry'). This affective dimension created a 'strong emotional bond between the students' which managed to transverse the confines of the classroom; these students were now going 'on a night out together'.

In addition, it could be hypothesised that before their friendship group emerged, these individual students may well have been secretly frustrated with the behaviour of the other group of students. In other words, the members of the former group of students may have secretly demanded 'more respect' or a 'quieter work environment'. However, precisely because these students 'did not speak much to each other', their demands *remained isolated*. In other words, individual students' demands for respectful behaviour remained only 'democratic demands' (Laclau, 2005:125). (Let us remember that Laclau argues that democratic demands are always isolated demands.) When students, however, started to increasingly speak to one another, one student may have realised that another student also found the behaviour of certain 'noisy students' disrespectful. Hence, a 'micro populism' emerged. That is, akin to Laclau's example in which one group of people struggles with housing and realises that another group may struggle with water, the moment each 'well-behaved' student realised that the other 'well-behaved' students also found the 'disrespectful students' irritating, a shared group identity could emerge. Alongside this, a popular demand emerged:

> We had a student representative meeting the other day. One of the overarching negative feedback was that the class felt really annoyed by a small minority of students who they perceived to be really disrespectful.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

In short, the common rejection of the 'noisy group' by the rest of the group – that is, the 'silent majority' (Laclau, 2005:87) of the class – was the basis on which students could form their equivalential chain around the 'popular demand' for more respect.

Importantly, each student who belonged to that group needed to maintain his or her *democratic demands* and associated individual antagonisms to keep the *popular demand* alive. For example, one student was annoyed by the slang used by certain students:

> I overheard a conversation on one table where one posher sounding student made fun of the accent of another student on another

> table. The latter student said something along the lines of 'I thought that this was just much better' [closing quotation mark not in original] (whilst pronouncing the t with a glottal stop). The other student then was quietly mimicking [the pronunciation of the other student] whilst saying 'they are just so rough'.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Another student may simply find the excessive talking annoying:

> [Student A] complained to her fellow student, on the way out, that she finds this talking of [student x] really annoying and that she couldn't concentrate.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Yet another student may be worried about her assignment. Lisa remarked that one student approached her after a session:

> This student approached me today and said, 'I'm finding it very difficult to concentrate, and I'm getting really worried about the upcoming assignment'.
>
> *(Lisa's research journal)*

Each of these 'democratic demands' expressed itself in signifiers which are *emptier* than the specific antagonisms: the behaviour of the other students is now simply 'rude', whilst rude may signify 'slang' or 'excessive talking' or 'the reason why I cannot concentrate and might fail my assignment'. In other words, the popular demand structures itself around the empty signifier of 'more respect', which may mean 'soften your accent' or 'less talking'.

Interestingly, as Lisa's group progressed into their final year, the antagonistic frontier between various groups of students shifted. I suggest that it is here where the operation of Laclau's *floating signifiers* could be observed:

> The group representatives have now definitely complained against my teaching which they found too abstract and as I was told, 'too intellectual'. . . . I'm assuming that this has mainly to do with some anxiety regarding the upcoming assignments. . . . The most striking thing, apart from feeling a little bit hurt about not being accepted by a group was that there appeared a real sense of unity between the members

> of the group in their rejection of myself. . . . Interestingly, through word of my colleagues I was told that even groups who did not get on originally (in fact, in the first year there was a real witch hunt against another group inside this class) agreed that my teaching was too hard and that they were worried about the assignment.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

This illustrates how 'floating signifiers' may shift the group's antagonism from (i) the 'noisy students' towards (ii) Lisa. That is, in their first year, the 'chatty students' (who were in the minority) emerged as the antagonistic force which simultaneously made the popular camp (the rest of the class) emerge as a group. This antagonism (i.e. the antagonistic frontier) was now shifting in the students' final year towards Lisa vis-à-vis (Laclau, 2005:77) the students. Here, students felt that various specific demands were frustrated.

> Many students feel really tense at the moment. One of the students admitted that this largely had to do with the upcoming assignments. They really don't want to feel that overwhelmed.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

> One of my students was in tears today. She told me that she had to have a part time job which she needed to buy food. But this job kept her from studying. She said she wished that she wouldn't have to work.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

> Today, a range of students said that they wanted easier text[s] and complained about how hard the [last] academic text was. They said that they didn't understand a word.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Interestingly, some of these democratic demands were similar to those of year 1 (e.g. students still felt anxious about their assignments). Moreover, some new democratic demands emerged around finding the module too difficult. In short, students felt 'confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other' (Laclau, 2005:86). As will be made explicit, I argue that this 'unresponsive power' does not need to be the *actual* power that is responsible for the unfulfilled

demand but only needs to be perceived as such. For example, it could be suggested that it is unlikely that Lisa was the actual culprit of the students' unmet demands in that assignment practices, for instance, were clearly beyond Lisa's control. On the other hand, this exemplifies how antagonistic frontiers may shift by actively intervening in the construction of an antagonistic force.

Meso and Macro Populisms

The concept of 'floating signifiers' is illuminating when considering shifts in antagonisms – such as the shift from the antagonism against a specific group towards that against Lisa – because they help to explore how antagonisms may break away from the micro level and instead direct themselves against entities at meso and macro levels of scale. It is important to reiterate that whilst the antagonism may change (e.g. from the lecturer as the culprit towards the university or the government), the unmet democratic (i.e. unconnected and specific) demands must remain intact, *regardless* of who is posited as the enemy. These democratic demands may then simply attach themselves to an alternative 'equivalential chain' (Laclau, 2005:77). For example, in Lisa's excerpts, it could be assumed that students genuinely struggled with 'assignment anxiety', with 'difficult course texts' or with 'workload due to the necessity to juggle a part-time job'. These genuine struggles then produce democratic demands. However, the root (i.e. the antagonism) of these unmet specific 'democratic demands' needs to be *constructed*. That is, who is constructed as responsible – is it another group, the lecturer, the course, the university or the larger political landscape? – is contingent on which discourse wins the 'hegemonic struggle' (p. 132).

Accordingly, the 'popular demand' is also in need of construction. This is connected to the question of which 'democratic demand' manages to become a 'popular demand' in the shape of an 'empty signifier' that can signify all of the other students' democratic demands. Will the popular demand become, for example, 'Fair assignments', 'Less Work', 'Easier Texts' or 'More Support'? Put differently, antagonistic frontiers can be drawn differently with students seeing the root of their anxiety in varying postulated entities. It would be, for example, easy to picture a situation in which students understand (i.e. construct) that the origin of their assignment anxiety is to do with a structural issue with high-stakes assessments instead of the overly intellectual nature of Lisa's teaching. Similarly, students may attribute the fact that they are 'struggling to get their reading done' to the necessity to 'maintain a

part-time job' (and, as a result, would be able to identify with a popular demand for more 'state support') instead of figuring the lecturer (or the module) as the root of the problem. In other words, what is potentially 'floating' is the perceived antagonistic force (which fails to meet individual demands) and the corresponding signifier around which a popular demand emerges. To see how this may play out in a concrete scenario, I consider the following excerpt from my research diary:

> I really like this one year 3 group that I'm teaching. They are really struggling with some of the course content and complain and openly voice these concern[s]; however, they keep on trying and find aspects they find interesting. Moreover, I feel that students feel that I'm on their side. This may have to do with the fact that I understand their concerns. One student for example, complained about the bad situation at placement. The unit I was teaching on, however, helped the student to understand this situation at a deeper level as she told me later on. Another student also had a bad experience on placement and decided to only graduate with the degree and not with the teacher qualification. He repeatedly told me that my course 'blew his mind' and that he is determined to now study something else. In a nutshell, their concerns showed an understanding of the wider factors which constrain their ability to be successful. Another student said that she did not even know what neoliberalism meant before my course. I really feel quite connected to this group and will be sad when they leave.
>
> *(My research diary)*

It could be suggested that this connectivity that I felt to the students was perhaps built upon the postulation of wider structural issues as the antagonism. For example, initially, students often complained about 'issues with external class mentors or headteachers' or 'problems with the wider course'. However, the content of the unit helped to construct antagonisms beyond the university because of its specific critical exploration of wider issues, such as neoliberalism, power and performativity.

The fact that this unit was broadly well received may also have to do with the fact that, at the time (in Summer 2017) a certain larger-scale enthusiasm with left-wing politics was palpable:

> Today I spoke to one of my students as part of an undergraduate conference which I organised. I remember that our conversation shifted towards Jeremy Corbyn and Labour and said

> something along the lines of 'It's quite interesting what is happening with Labour at the moment'. The student instantly said that he thinks that literally everyone in the whole cohort, is supporting Jeremy Corbyn and that he had not heard of a single student who didn't like Corbyn.
>
> *(My research diary)*

A Historical Perspective on Higher Education Populisms

This discussion of 'micro and meso populisms' enables me to consider antagonistic and populist developments at even larger scales. I picked two historical examples. First, I consider the student movements in 1968 Germany as part of the wider student protests in Europe and the United States. Here, I suggest that antagonisms helped to construct the identity of a whole generation. The populist logic here is straightforward. Students rose against the 'Establishment', such as their parents, (most) professors, university leadership and the government more generally (Della Porta, 1999). This animosity towards the Establishment was captured in the slogan 'Unter den Talaren – Muff von 1000 Jahren' ('Under the gowns – the musty odour of a 1000 years') (Nath, 2007:online). This animosity was based on a generational conflict in which the younger generation accused their parents of remaining silent about collaboration and complicity in Nazi Germany (Gilcher-Holtey, 2001). I consider this an important historical epoch and feel deeply attached to the emancipatory undertone and anti-authoritarian stance of the 68 movements regardless of some later disappointments.

Turning to Laclau, I suggest that the 68 movement was deeply populist: students mutually rejected their parents' generation and built their group identity upon this rejection. My father always used to say that 'the 60s were brilliant because there was a clear enemy' (i.e. crypto-fascist parents in general). In his view, nowadays, it is much more difficult to delineate this enemy. In short, in Laclau's understanding of populism, the identity of the 68 movement depended on the postulation of a clear enemy in the shape of the parents' generation. This emergent antagonism between students vis-à-vis their parents' generation was variously expressed in student demonstrations and sometimes brutal government repressions, such as the fatal shooting of 'Benno Ohnesorg' by German police (Della Porta, 1999:72). Here, it was rare that members of the parents' generation crossed over to the popular 'student camp'. What was even

rarer was that lecturers drove student revolts with the notable exception of artist Joseph Beuys who, together with his students, occupied the vice chancellor's office in 1971 in what I describe as a 'meso populist' movement against university leadership (Riegel, 2013). In other examples, even long-standing voices on the intellectual left were rejected by certain student factions, poignantly expressed in student boycotts of Adorno's 1969 lectures (Adorno, 1969).

I suggest that the 2010 UK anti-tuition fee protests were another example of an emergent 'student populism'. London saw four larger-scale mobilisations of students against the planned increase of tuition fees from 3000 to 9000 pounds per annum by the newly formed Conservative–Liberal coalition government:

> U.K. coalition government of Conservatives (Tories) and Liberal Democrats introduced radical changes to the way universities would be funded – for example, funding for teaching in the humanities and social sciences was cut by 100 percent and the amount which students have to contribute was raised from £3,000 (US$4,800) to a maximum of £9,000 (US$14,400) per year. Besides this, the U.K. government also decided to scrap the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a weekly amount college students from low-income families received to stimulate them to continue studying.
>
> *(Cammaerts, 2013:531)*

Using Laclau's framework (2005), I suggest that students united behind an 'unmet demand' for affordable university education. More specifically, there is the 'whole student population', on the one hand, and certain 'student groups', on the other. One of these student groups (i.e. a more radical student faction) now managed to successfully form a demand which began to represent an 'incommensurable totality' (Laclau, 2005:70): the whole of the student population. In return, the 'whole student population' could itself be understood as being a component part of a larger 'assemblage' towards which it stands in a 'part-to-whole relation' (DeLanda, 2006:40). This larger assemblage could be described as UK 'society' itself. It could now be argued that whilst a 'part of the student population' managed to represent the 'whole student population', it did not manage to 'upscale' its reach towards the 'whole of society'. In short, student protests managed to win the hegemonic struggle at the level of the student population; however, they failed to win at the level of the whole UK population. I suggest

that one of the reasons for the failure of the 2010 protests was that the demand (against the rise of tuition fees) did not successfully connect to other democratic demands of other sectors of society (e.g. fairer working conditions and better housing). Another reason was that the British media played an indispensable part in this hegemonic struggle (also see Srnicek and Williams, 2016 on this issue): whilst there was sympathy from a few newspapers (e.g. *The Guardian* and *The Independent*), the dominant right-leaning newspapers (e.g. *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Express*, *Times*, *The Sun*) defamed the student protests with a particular focus on the vandalism of buildings.

Current UK Situation

Based on this exploration of two historical examples, how could the possibility for a populism in the current situation at universities be grasped? In other words, is there a possibility of a populist movement that encompasses both lecturers and students vis-à-vis a larger antagonistic force? As has been outlined earlier, populism – including a popular demand – is always contingent on 'democratic demands' (p. 73). What are the current unmet democratic demands of students and lecturers? Beginning with Lisa's university, I suggest that lecturers at her institution often struggled with large group sizes which led to exacerbating workloads due to an increase in marking and email writing:

> One of my colleagues was almost in tears because of the sheer amount of emails she keeps on receiving from students. She said, 'We have to answer them within a few days, but I just can't cope any more with this pace'.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

At my university, I similarly remarked:

> I really don't know how I'm going to get this done. I have to mark around 90 3000 words essays in 4 weeks.
>
> *(My research diary)*

Similarly, as discussed earlier, for students the democratic demand of 'more time for studying' is frustrated due to the necessity to juggle part-time jobs and an increasingly precarious employment future (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). At first sight, it appears that these frustrated lecturer and student

'democratic demands' could *easily* be transformed into shared 'popular demands' (Laclau, 2005). These popular demands would be based on 'equivalential links' (p. 77) between students and lecturers which may go alongside an identity construction around the 'empty signifier' (p. 105) of, for instance, 'hardworking exploited lecturers and ripped off students'. That is, whilst the sources of these unmet demands are differential – for example, students may demand 'better tuition', 'lower tuition fees' and 'less exam anxiety', whilst lecturers demand 'smaller workload' – in this hypothetical scenario, students and lecturers may find their equivalential moment in their common opposition of an antagonistic force (e.g. 'rich policymakers and university senior leadership'), which could then be constructed as the source of all unmet demands.

Considering this potential for a larger-scale 'student-lecturer populism', the question arises, 'Why is there currently no lasting populist lecturer-student movement?' In other words, 'Which forces work against a populist student-lecturer movement?' I suggest that two processes are responsible, both related to the NSS: (a) the absorption of democratic demands and (b) the shifting of the antagonistic frontier through the employment of floating signifiers. This returns the discussion to the operation of current student feedback systems, such as the NSS. First, intra-institutional student feedback systems are designed to (a) differentially 'absorb' (Laclau, 2005:89) students' unmet democratic demands and therefore avoid student dissatisfaction in the NSS. That is, akin to Laclau's example of 'agrarian migrants' whose democratic demands cease to exist when they are satisfied – that is, when they attain 'water, health, [and] schooling' (p. 73) – students who are unhappy with certain modules or tutors can have their democratic demands met through giving internal feedback:

> At my institution, we have [specific student] meetings. . . . Essentially, they are meetings where we meet with student representatives. A few days ago, I attended one of these meetings. Students, in this case, were not quite happy with how one unit [i.e. a module] was organised. We then publish a 'you said, we did' letter in which we 'close the feedback loop' and show how we attempted to address areas of dissatisfaction with the course.
>
> *(My Research diary)*

That is, this student feedback platform – which I previously discussed under the umbrella of Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) – exists

to *pre-empt* student dissatisfaction. More specifically, SRMs seek to increase the probability of positive student satisfaction in Internal Surveys and the NSS. In Laclau's (2005:89) words, I suggest that SRMs are designed to 'absorb' students' differential, democratic demands. SRMs reduce the fertility of the 'breeding ground' for larger-scale dissatisfaction. Thus, the emergence of a possible popular demand is made less likely simply because the initial democratic demand ceases to exist.

Second, student feedback systems could be figured as technologies that *produce antagonisms*. Combining this with Foucault's notion of governmentality, I, therefore, suggest a neologism: 'antagonistic governmentality'. That is, student feedback systems, such as the NSS, function as 'antagonistic governmentalities'. For example, SRMs produce antagonisms because they often increase the workload for lecturers who now must show how student dissatisfaction is going to be addressed. This additional workload, in return, may make it more likely that lecturers see students as threats (i.e. as an antagonistic force). Lisa, for example, lamented the feeling of being at the mercy of student feedback which reminds her of Roman Emperor Nero who used his thumb to 'indicate whether gladiators are supposed to live or die' (Lisa's research diary).

Modules that fail to produce positive student feedback prompt module leaders into disciplinary action as already discussed earlier:

> In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he [the module leader] thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Lisa spoke to one of these 'under-performing' lecturers a few days later, capturing a real sense of resentment.

> I met [lecturer x] today. He complained that he has so much on anyway and now also needs to attend these tutorials with [the module leader]. [Lecturer x then continued] 'and all of this just because of some spoilt students and a panicky [module leader]. It just isn't fair'.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Thus, I suggest that SRMs and Internal Surveys are actively implicated in the *engineering of lecturers' unmet demands*. For example, in the case of Lisa's colleague, the consequences of bad student feedback meant additional workload for him. This in return made him resent both students and the module leader. In Laclau's words, through problems with workload resulting from student feedback, lecturer x *developed* a demand for 'less workload' and 'high student satisfaction' (because a lack thereof may result in more scrutiny and additional workload). This *engineered* demand went alongside the creation of a similarly engineered antagonism in the shape of the 'all-powerful', 'never satisfied', 'needy' student. Crucially, what becomes invisible is the overarching structure (i.e. the specific student feedback systems) as the 'real' origin of the unmet demand. In short, there is a causal chain: student feedback systems create the possibility for students to voice their dissatisfaction; dissatisfaction needs to be acted upon because of hierarchical and market pressures; lecturers figure students as the antagonism; what gets excluded is the actual feedback technology which produced the antagonism in the first place.

In summary, the NSS produces an antagonistic relationship between lecturers and students. However, in comparison to hegemonic projects which actively seek to convince the population to see a minority as the antagonism (as is the case in Trumpism which attempts to situate, for example, immigrants as the source of unmet demands), the NSS functions in a more 'automated' manner, not unlike a 'computer algorithm'. That is, the NSS, once implemented, does not need much government 'input' or 'maintenance' (unlike the Trump campaign) because it *somewhat automatically produces lecturer antagonisms against students by creating a perpetual urgency to address student dissatisfaction*. Similarly, frequent 'student-testing-regimes' produce student antagonisms towards lecturers by creating the perpetual necessity to perform.

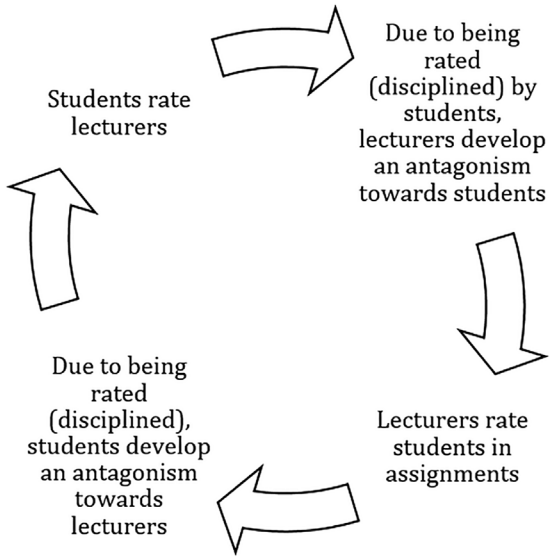

FIGURE 5.1 An antagonistic iterative cycle

Without testing, students may be happier, more eager to learn and, as a result, more satisfied. Thus, in both lecturers' and students' antagonisms, the hegemonic struggle is *immanent* in the mechanism of the feedback technique. Part of this automated and reciprocal process (as exemplified in Figure 5.1) is that the NSS shifts the antagonistic frontier from national policy towards universities which then make courses and frontline staff accountable. Hence, students increasingly see lecturers or individual courses as the origin of their unmet demands. This process is to be considered more thoroughly now, starting with macro policy.

Macro Level: The NSS

As mentioned earlier, a populism that entails an alliance between students and lecturers vis-à-vis the 'policymaking elite' is somehow prevented. How? I suggest that the origin of this process lies in national policymaking itself. More specifically, the NSS, which is underpinned by a range of policy documents that situate the reason for 'low standards in teaching provision' in a lack of competition between universities (e.g. Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016), shifts

the antagonistic frontier. It follows that instead of the government being identified as the source of inadequate education, universities are increasingly framed as the culprit. That is, the answer to 'low standards' in higher education is to create competition between universities through metrics, such as league tables and TEF accreditations. The NSS thus subtly shifts all potential 'national antagonisms' away from the government and towards universities that become 'responsibilized' (Brown, 2015:71). If students are satisfied, they will give good feedback and everyone is happy. If they are dissatisfied, however, they can hold their institution (and again not the government) accountable *because, after all, this is who they now pay £9000 per year to*. Lisa remarks:

> Today, I overheard a conversation of colleagues who work [in] the primary department. They seemed quite agitated. Apparently, one postgraduate student put his hand up in a lecture theatre and said that he found the lecture a waste of his time and money. The student apparently said, 'We are paying 9000 pounds a year and can expect something much better than this'.
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

In Laclau's words, universities can be held accountable by students for not meeting their 'democratic demand' to be satisfied (Hall, 2017). That is, by containing dissatisfaction strictly within a student vis-à-vis the university relationship, the NSS avoids any larger-scale dissatisfaction (against the government) by systematically pointing the metaphorical finger at universities (both in the sense of 'Great! You are doing well in the league tables' or 'Oh dear, you'd better try harder to climb those league tables'). Resulting from this complex interplay of the NSS and other factors (such as accompanying tuition fee rises), universities increasingly understand students as their customers whom they want to satisfy so that they give good feedback in 'customer satisfaction surveys' (i.e. the NSS).

In an even wider context, it could be suggested that the NSS shifts the focus away from neoliberal austerity capitalism – characterised by funding cuts, precarious employment rights and so forth – as the culprit (i.e. the antagonism) of students' unmet demands. Instead, the cause for 'low post-graduation employment', 'students dropping out of university' and 'low student satisfaction' – all of which are measures that inform the university rankings and the TEF – is made the responsibility of universities. In this antagonistic logic, the government may succeed in establishing equivalential links with students by,

for example, arguing that universities have for too long shied away from 'high-quality competition' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016:8). Put succinctly, the government can now (together with students) hold universities to 'account' through the technologies of student satisfaction. In short, instead of the culprit being the government, the culprit *would* (theoretically) become the university. This would be the case if universities and their leaders were not trying to deflect the market pressures down the pyramidal hierarchy of the university which I will tackle in what follows.

Meso Level: Internal Surveys

As the NSS and its associated rankings induce competitive pressures between universities, and thus, the possibility of antagonisms between each university and its students, many universities have implemented Internal Surveys. Similar to the NSS, these Internal Surveys redraw antagonistic frontiers: whereas the NSS (and associated tuition fee rises) produce antagonistic frontiers between universities and students, I argue that Internal Surveys promote antagonistic frontiers between students and courses. That is, I propose that Internal Surveys, yet again, shift those unmet student demands (e.g. assignment anxiety, student precarity) away from seeing university leadership as the antagonism (akin to the government shifting the antagonism away from itself within the NSS) and towards the supposed 'underperformance' of individual modules and courses. That is, individual courses can now be identified to achieve lower student satisfaction ratings than other courses and can, therefore, be made into an antagonistic force.

The scenario in which university leadership shifts the responsibility towards modules could be described as the attempt to build an 'institutional populism' in which university leaders seek to establish equivalential links between *themselves and students*. This is why, at the university level, we find discourses embodied in banners (e.g. 'students are our customers') or 'you deserve excellent value for money'. London Metropolitan University, for example, writes the following in their university strategy:

> If you tell us you are dissatisfied, we will listen and we will respond to what you say. We will launch a module feedback scheme led and administered by students so that you can help improve the quality of our teaching.
>
> *(London Metropolitan University, 2015:online)*

Put bluntly, through institutional student feedback systems, universities seek to 'make friends' with students by demonising certain 'underperforming' modules which may be corrected through 'a module feedback scheme led and administered by students'. In addition, modules also draw on further microtechnologies, such as Student Representative Meetings (SRMs).

Micro Level

Through SRMs, students may now figure individual university lecturers as antagonisms. More specifically, SRMs shift the 'blame' away from module leadership (who, yet again, received the 'blame' from university leadership, who received the 'blame' from inter-university NSS market pressures) to single out individual lecturers as responsible for the negative student feedback. In analogy to the disciplinary characteristic of student feedback systems as explored in Chapter 4, it no longer is the fault of actors at the national, university, course or module level, but the fault is pinpointed downwards in a spiral towards individual lecturers. In short, I suggest that there is a continuous deferring of responsibility from the top towards the bottom.

Alternative Antagonisms beyond the University

This chapter sought to theorise the NSS as an antagonistic technology. That is, the NSS could be understood as an apparatus which seeks to avoid large-scale unrest (such as a national populism against the government) by deferring conflicts to the institutional level, which, in return, defers it to courses, which, yet again, defer it to individual frontline staff. Put simplistically, it could be suggested that, in conclusion, Laclau's antagonism works akin to the Roman saying 'Divide and Rule': by pitching various groups (e.g. lecturers and students) against one another, those actually in power are excluded from the limelight and are, therefore, safe from becoming antagonisms themselves (i.e. the target of discontent). Again, a large-scale populism is avoided by creating a multitude of miniature antagonisms. I overemphasise this point by claiming that the government is 'triple shielded' by the NSS: if students are unhappy, this unhappiness will first show up through SRMs internally. Individual leaders will then try everything to address the dissatisfaction because, after all, their careers may be in danger if they don't. If dissatisfaction is not addressed at this level, it will show up in the Internal Surveys where *module leaders* will

try hard to address dissatisfaction. If again unsuccessful, dissatisfaction will show up in the actual NSS questionnaire, which forces course leaders and university leadership into action.

This allows me to begin to connect Laclau's notion of antagonism to Foucault's work on governmentality by reiterating my neologism: 'antagonistic governmentality'. That is, I suggest that the NSS does not only govern the academic population (including students and lecturers) through disciplinary governmentality and neoliberal governmentality (i.e. competition) but also through what I call 'antagonistic governmentality'. That is to say, whereas my proposed 'disciplinary-neo-liberal governmentality' avoids academic large-scale civil unrest by pitching universities against one another in *competitive* struggles within league tables, 'antagonistic governmentality' pitches lecturers against students by creating *antagonistic* struggles. We could even extend this logic of antagonisms to various other interactions at varying levels of scale. For instance, 'inter-country antagonisms', such as wars, may be understood as antagonistic governmentality: it is through the 'demonization of' (Laclau, 2005:70) another country that one's own country develops its sense of cohesion, solidarity and identity.

6

GOVERNMENTAL APPARATUSES OF BODILY PRODUCTION

This chapter brings Foucault's governmentality (Chapter 4) and Laclau's antagonism (Chapter 5) into conversation with Barad's agential realism (Chapters 2 and 3). I delineate both similarities and differences between the respective frameworks, particularly focusing on some striking similarities between Barad's and Laclau's works. Importantly, relating this back to the methodological considerations in the context of Barad's agential realism, this could be understood as a *diffractive* reading which attends to some of the diffraction effects when Foucault's, Barad's and Laclau's frameworks are immersed through one another. Each framework, for example, could be understood as a metaphorical ripple on a pond. When reading all three theoretical frameworks through one another, it is as if these ripples (i.e. the resultant waves) merged through one another to create an 'interference pattern' (Barad, 2007:77). As mentioned earlier, an interference pattern has characteristic areas where waves amplify (positive interference) or cancel out (negative interference) one another. I will conclude this chapter by arguing that intra-action is the largest conceptual category capable of subsuming Foucault's notion of governmentality which, in turn, then comprises four governmentalities: sovereign governmentality, disciplinary governmentality (Foucault, 1977), neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) and, as discussed in Chapter 5, antagonistic governmentality (Laclau, 2005). The NSS could, therefore, be understood as an *antagonistic (Laclau), disciplinary and neo-liberal (Foucault) apparatus of bodily production (Barad)*. I argue

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that through the specific intra-action of these distinct governmentalities, lecturers (i) become increasingly resentful towards students whilst simultaneously (ii) being less likely to discern larger-scale issues, such as the NSS, as the source of their unmet demands (cf. antagonism); (iii) compete with other lecturers over student feedback (neo-liberalism); and, if this competition fails to raise positive student feedback, lecturers (iv) may be subjected to more fine-grained disciplinary practices.

Foucault and Barad

I begin by reading Foucault and Barad through one another. There are clear similarities between both scholars' frameworks, not least because Barad's work builds on some of Foucault's central concepts. That is, as mentioned earlier, agential realism extends Foucault's notion of discursive practices into the neologism of 'material-discursive practices', which Barad then conflates with their understanding of 'apparatuses'. Moreover, Barad refigures Foucault's (1982) notion of 'power', as denoting the capacity to change the conduct of other people, into an understanding of 'materialising potential'. Power, in this sense, is figured as something wider, that is, as the agency to make 'something' appear (e.g. a social action, a disciplined individual or an atom).

I have already discussed these issues and will therefore not repeat them here. Instead, this section will focus on the question of how Foucault's concept of governmentality may resonate with Barad's agential realism. That Barad did not include 'governmentality' into her 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* can probably be attributed to the fact that the associated lecture series was only available on audiotape at Barad's time of writing. However, there are resonances between both concepts, particularly in their respective foci on 'larger-scale structures of domination'. Both concepts are somehow concerned with how smaller-scale and larger-scale structures are entangled with one another: that is, they both interrogate how large structures impact (and are maintained by) smaller ones. I exemplify this by considering Barad's interpretation of Leela Fernandes's (Marxist *and* Foucauldian!) ethnographic study in a Calcuttan jute mill (Fernandes, 1997). I will then diffract this work through Foucault's understanding of governmentality.

Importantly, Barad (2007) argues that Fernandes succeeds in discussing how issues of power on the jute mill factory floor do not only have implications for what unfolds within the factory but also have

an impact on wider societal matters such as a perpetuation of certain capitalist structures of exploitation.

In what follows, I outline Fernandes's (1997, cited in Barad, 2007) depiction of events that unfolded after a weaving machine inside the jute mill factory had broken down.

After the machine stopped working, the weaver, who operated the weaving machine, became anxious because he feared for lost work and wages and hence called a mechanic to fix it. (The broken machine is one example of Barad's take on non-human agency: the machine enacted its agency by changing the material configuration of the work process.) The mechanic, however, arrived rather late which enraged the weaver, resulting in an argument between the weaver and the mechanic. Consequentially, 'the mechanic injured the weaver with his hammer, and in the ensuing fight the mechanic was also injured' (Fernandes, 1997:1). When the weaver (together with two further workers from his caste) confronted management, the 'general secretary of the leading trade union' got involved because he felt that his expertise had been undermined (ibid.). In front of a large crowd, one of the workers then pushed the assistant manager who fell 'against a machine' resulting in the four workers being banned from the factory (p. 1). This in return resulted in an ultimatum by the trade union to reinstate the workers within 24 hours. Meanwhile, the mechanic went into hiding because he 'was being hunted by the weaver's caste members' (p. 2). The next day, the union members managed to convince the weavers to strike for one hour. However, because other departments in the mill did not go on strike, this did not result in any real challenge to the jute mill's management.

Barad's (2007) take on this confrontation is that human and non-human agencies were involved. These agencies comprise capital (the lost wages), caste (the weaver and mechanic were from different castes), union politics (the weaver's caste had a strong union), gender (women were disadvantaged in the factory and did not even figure in this confrontation) and machines (the gears of the machine broke down which resulted in the lost wages for the weaver). Importantly, Barad suggests that it is through these conflicts between castes, genders and trade union affiliations that larger societal factors were kept intact. That is, '[c]aste, gender, and class materialize through, and are enfolded into one another' (Barad, 2007:242). That is, large-scale capitalist structures impacted the jute mill factory workers, but it is also the behaviour of the factory workers themselves which reinforced issues of class, gender, racism and caste politics. This, in return, fed back into the maintenance of a

particular national version of capitalism. In other words, subjects – that is, the workers – on the shop floor were not only at the receiving end of larger-scale capitalist structures but 'the spatiality of capitalism [was] itself produced through the politics of gender, community, and class and daily contests over the relations of power by those very subjects' (Barad, 2007:236). More specifically, it is through particular (material-discursive) practices (e.g. exclusionary practices towards women) that the (male) workers perpetuated class relations at a national level. By actively producing what it means to be male and female, the workers (inadvertently) reinforced 'the powers of management' and undermined 'attempts by the unions to successfully intervene in certain class-based-always already gendered-practices of management' (Fernandes, 1997, cited in Barad, 2007:236). Barad argues that capitalism is (re)produced both through the 'actions of managers who carve up the production process' and 'through the workers' own exclusionary practices'. Hence, 'the exclusionary practices of the workers need to be understood to be part of the technologies of capitalism' rather than separate to these (p. 237). Importantly, 'production is a process not merely of making commodities' (which is reminiscent of a Marxist approach) but also of making subjects, and remaking structures' (which is more of a Foucauldian take on the subject) (p. 238). These processes of production are not static but are 'continually reworked as a result of human, nonhuman, and cyborgian forms of agency' (p. 238).

This interpretation resonates with Foucault's work on governmentality (2008, 2009) in that local practices of competition for power could be understood as distinct mechanisms of government. For example, neoliberal governmentality avoids large-scale protests by fostering a rationality that pitches individuals against one another in competitive struggles. Put bluntly, I suggest that as long as various groups of people are competing with one another (e.g. in Fernandes's work this includes castes, trade unions and genders), they are less likely to rebel against larger structures. Hence, the maintenance of confrontations between these groups could be understood as one of Foucault's governmentalities (i.e. technologies of government). This liberal governing through 'freedom' – and neoliberal governing through 'competitisation' – is complemented by disciplinary forms of government. Disciplinary power is employed when the neoliberal strategies of freedom and competition fail. For example, Lecturer X (see p. 99) failed to raise positive student feedback which resulted in disciplinary mechanisms being employed. In this case, the awareness

of a panoptical gaze was heightened in that Lecturer X realised that he was under surveillance regarding whether he tried to improve student satisfaction. In addition, normalising judgement operated in that Lecturer X was made aware that he was lacking behind other colleagues. As a result, Lecturer X had to be shown how to 'control' his activity (Foucault, 1977:156) (e.g. the module leader showed Lecturer X how to teach a certain subject, what to say and what not to say). Lecturer X was made into a docile body: the action plan, which was devised, specified precisely when and where to meet – and when these meetings should stop.

In summary, Foucault's governmentality and Barad's agential realism share their focus on how subjectivity at the micro scale (i.e. competitive relations) may maintain the operation of larger structures. Yet, Barad's notion of intra-action transcends Foucault's work in one central aspect. Whilst Foucault's work remains firmly anchored in human practices, intra-action describes the process by which *everything* in the universe comes to matter (including entirely non-human aspects on other planets). Governmentality, hence, could be understood as one specific type of intra-action which makes it possible to control large populations. This is schematically visualised in Figure 6.1.

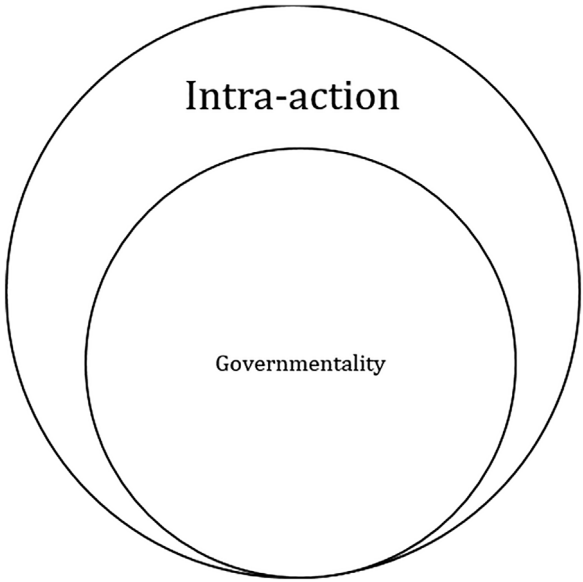

FIGURE 6.1 Governmentality as intra-action

Foucault and Laclau

This section turns to the diffractions which result from reading Laclau's and Foucault's works through one another. Importantly, Laclau (2005) built some of his concepts on Foucault's notion of the 'discursive formation' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:91), whilst Foucault's notion of governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009) remained underutilised. Foucault's governmentality and Laclau's antagonism resonate in important ways, however. First, as already implied in Chapter 5, antagonism could be figured under Foucault's (later) understanding of 'governmentality'. As mentioned in Chapter 4, governmentality refers to a range of different 'technologies of government', such as discipline, sovereignty and neo-liberalism. I suggest that antagonism could be understood as just another distinct type of governmentality, that is, an 'antagonistic governmentality'. This means that the NSS may simply make use of disparate technologies of government, such as disciplinary, neoliberal and antagonistic ones, which are all designed to govern the academic population. Importantly, this understanding would also introduce opportunities to theorise how some lecturers feel isolated in the context of their work environment. For example, Melissa suggested that she felt 'isolated per se' but that this feeling was exacerbated 'when things go wrong', such as a 'student complaining on behalf of the entire course'.

More specifically, the following (diffractive) argument could be developed: the NSS governs by pitching lecturers against students. That is, students are reframed as an antagonism, that is, as powerful 'customers' of the university who demand 'value for money' and a good 'student experience'. In addition to these antagonistic tendencies, liberal governmentality is at play in that lecturers are 'free' to devise innovative strategies to raise positive student feedback. Similarly, neoliberal governmentality is at play in that lecturers are more likely to compete with colleagues over that feedback. This competition may result in resentment of colleagues who attain better feedback but also creates an urgency to improve feedback.

If things go well, lecturers try to recreate this success. Conversely, if things go badly, lecturers feel pressured to raise better student feedback. This pressure could be disciplinary (Foucault, 1977). For example, Lisa's colleague who is a module leader disciplined Lecturer X (see p. 99) and implemented fine-grained mechanisms to ensure that Lecturer X would be turned into a docile body who knows exactly 'what' and 'how' to teach whilst being subjected to (i) a panoptic gaze and (ii) normalising judgement.

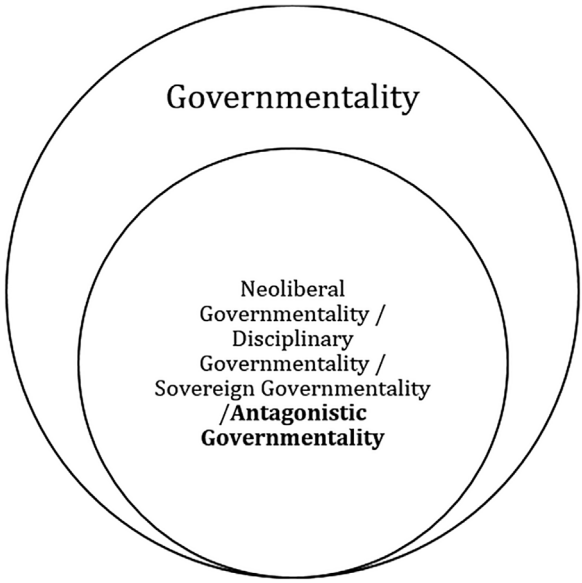

FIGURE 6.2 Antagonism as a governmentality

Similar to the suggestion that discipline and governmentality might have merged into an amalgamated assemblage (Chapter 4), perhaps antagonism (Chapter 5) needs to be understood along the same lines. That is, discipline (lecturers compare themselves to other lecturers), liberalism (lecturers are 'free' to win students' approval), neo-liberalism (lecturers are forced to compete) and antagonism (students are figured as the 'enemy') operate simultaneously in the NSS. It is the diffraction of these technologies which create the atomisation (i.e. isolation) of individual lecturers (see Figure 6.2).

Barad and Laclau

Although Laclau's post-Marxism and Barad's agential realism are often categorised in distinct theoretical fields – with Barad's framework being subsumed under what has come to be known as the new materialisms (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012) and Laclau's framework being described as post-Marxist (Sim, 2000) – a closer inspection of both theorists' works makes visible (almost uncanny) similarities. Therefore, this section will first attend to the difference to then progress to the similarities between both frameworks.

First, there are important differences between Laclau's and Barad's respective ontological assumptions, most prominently the fact that Barad seeks to theorise nature and culture together whilst Laclau's work draws a dividing line between these two realms. This becomes particularly transparent in Laclau's distinction between the notions of 'antagonism', 'real opposition' and 'contradiction'. I will explore these notions in what follows. Laclau begins his discussion by critiquing Lucio Colletti's (1975, cited in Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) ontological assumptions that there are only two mutually exclusive kinds of entities: 'real objects and concepts' (p. 126). In other words, there is a clear 'separation between thought and reality' (p. 126). Laclau then suggests adding a third concept: that of antagonism. Antagonism functions as an impossible object which operates thusly: 'I cannot be my ideal self, because you (i.e. the antagonism) hinder me to become that ideal self'. Importantly, Laclau (2005) differentiates 'real opposition' from antagonism. In real opposition, we have two already fully formed objects. Put concisely, 'there is nothing antagonistic in a crash between two vehicles: it is a material fact obeying positive physical laws' (p. 126). Similarly, Laclau cautions us that it would be problematic to equate class struggle with

> the physical act by which a policeman hits a worker militant, or the shouts of a group in Parliament which prevent a member of an opposing sector from speaking.
>
> *(p. 126)*

This is precisely where Barad's framework contradicts Laclau's assumptions. That is, Laclau's suggestions regarding the ontological status of real opposition, indeed, may hold true but only when thinking inside a *decidedly Newtonian ontology*, an ontology which – as reiterated throughout this book – has been challenged by Barad's concept of intra-action. For example, Newton's framework postulates independent, fully formed identities that interact with one another. Conversely, in Barad's framework, these identities emerge through intra-action because there are no already fully formed entities in the world to begin with! In fact, Laclau's notion of antagonism (which subsequently builds the backbone of his populist theorisations) describes a phenomenon that is much closer to Barad's intra-action than 'real opposition' ever could be. The only

difference, of course, is that Laclau's antagonism describes processes within the social world, whilst intra-action presents itself as a more generic blueprint to describe the materialisation of matter in the entire universe. This universe, in Barad's framework, comprises the social (whilst what is 'social' and what is 'natural' cannot be disentangled).

Discourse

This opens the opportunity to examine some of the parallels between Laclau's and Barad's frameworks. First, there are some profound similarities in Barad's and Laclau's understandings of *discourse*. Laclau (2005:68) suggests that 'discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such'. Importantly, his definition of discourse is not

> essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it.
>
> *(pp. 68–69)*

In fact, the similarities between Laclau's and Barad's understanding are so striking that the previous quote could also have been printed in Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. More specifically, at the heart of intra-action is that 'relata do not pre-exist relations' (Barad, 2007:140). In addition, Barad's conception of material-discursive practices resonates with Laclau's version of discourse in that both argue that 'discourse' is not restricted to language. Even more importantly – and this part is identical to Barad's work – 'elements' (which equate to Barad's intra-acting agencies) 'do not pre-exist' (Barad, 2007:ix; Laclau, 2005:68) 'the relational complex but are constituted through it' (Laclau, 2005:68)/'emerge as being part' of their intra-action (Barad, 2007:360). In addition, both Barad and Laclau hold on to a certain conception of 'objectivity'. Whilst Laclau suggests that '"relation" and "objectivity" are synonymous' (Laclau, 2005:68), Barad similarly figures objectivity in the Bohrian sense of an unambiguous specification of the material and conceptual apparatus. That is, Laclau asserts that 'discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such', whereas Barad sees material-discursive practices as

the practices which create objectivity. Even when it comes to Barad's famous assertion that intra-action is not about relations of pure exteriority (cf. DeLanda, 2006), but rather – due to the emergent character of intra-acting agencies – about 'exteriority within phenomena' (Barad, 2007:340), Laclau provides an almost identical explication of how group identities emerge, namely, through the articulation of a demand:

> This articulation, however, does not correspond to a stable and positive configuration which could be grasped as a unified whole: on the contrary, since it is in the nature of all demands to present claims to a certain established order, it is in a peculiar relation with that order*, being both inside and outside it*.
>
> *(Laclau, 2005:ix; emphasis added)*

Boundary. Another similarity between both scholars can be found when comparing *Barad's agential cut* and Laclau's *antagonistic frontier*. According to Laclau, antagonism is constitutive. By putting into question 'objectivity as such' (Laclau, 2005:85), Laclau outlines the differences between Saussure's structuralist claims and his notion of antagonism. Whilst Saussure's differences, for instance, 'still presuppose a continuous space without which they [i.e. differences] are, as such, constituted', in Laclau's (2005:85) notion of difference, there is no continuous space. Rather, antagonism describes 'a radical frontier' and 'a *broken* space' (p. 85; italics in original). The construction of a group identity, such as 'the people', fully (and not only partially) depends on the antagonistic frontier. Without the antagonistic frontier which separates the 'oppressor' from the 'oppressed', no group identity of the 'oppressed' would be possible. For example, in the context of this book, there is no possibility of the emergence of a resentful lecturer identity without the antagonism of students. Both elements are entirely contingent on one another. Moreover, there is no shared student-lecturer identity without the construction of 'oppressive policymakers'. The antagonistic frontier, in other words, creates objectivity as such. Frontier and group identity emerge simultaneously.

This antagonistic frontier is almost identical to Barad's general logic of intra-action and its accompanying *agential cut*. Intra-action suggests that there is no pre-existing matter in this world. That is, there are no independent particles or other entities, such as lecturers, electrons,

cells or stars. Rather all entities (whether small or large) emerge as part of their intra-action: all matter comes into existence through its intra-action. For example, in experimental settings, there is no such thing as a pre-existing 'light particle' or 'light wave'. Rather, whether light *becomes* a wave or a particle is contingent on the material conditions of the specific intra-actions.

In this sense, both Laclau's antagonistic frontier and Barad's intra-action describe the process by which reality is created as such. In Laclau's version, there is no group identity without an antagonistic force that prevents this group from having their differential demands met: the antagonistic frontier is constitutive of 'the people'. Barad's intra-action describes not only all social but *all* phenomena.

Foucault, Barad and Laclau

This section now provides an integrated reading of Barad's, Laclau's and Foucault's works. A visualisation of this framework is displayed in Figure 6.3.

As can be seen, intra-action is conceptually the largest of notions since it describes all matter in the universe, from the smallest elements towards the largest stars. Governmentality is nested within this as one specific type of intra-action – that is, as one specific material-discursive apparatus of bodily production (see Chapter 4). Governmentality, in itself, describes a technique of government, of which there are many. That is, as argued in Chapter 4, in addition to neo-liberal governmentality, discipline and sovereign power can also be reframed as governmentalities. As Chapter 5 argued, one further governmentality needs to be added: that of antagonistic governmentality.

Relating this to the NSS, it could hence be postulated that the NSS is a *material-discursive apparatus* that utilises various enfolded governmentalities (key notions are displayed in italics). This *matters* (i.e. it is simultaneously meaningful and has material effects) (Barad, 2007) in that it creates *boundaries* between lecturers and students and anxious lecturer *identities*. Foremost, these boundaries are *iterative* (Barad, 2007) – in that they have to be maintained through iterative worrying and other repeated intra-active practices – and *antagonistic* (Laclau, 2005). These boundaries moreover function as a *governmentality* (Foucault, 2009) in that they keep lecturers in an *antagonistic struggle* with students (Laclau, 2005) who *iteratively* and *intra-actively* (Barad, 2007) emerge as the *antagonistic force* (Laclau, 2005). Importantly, the NSS is not

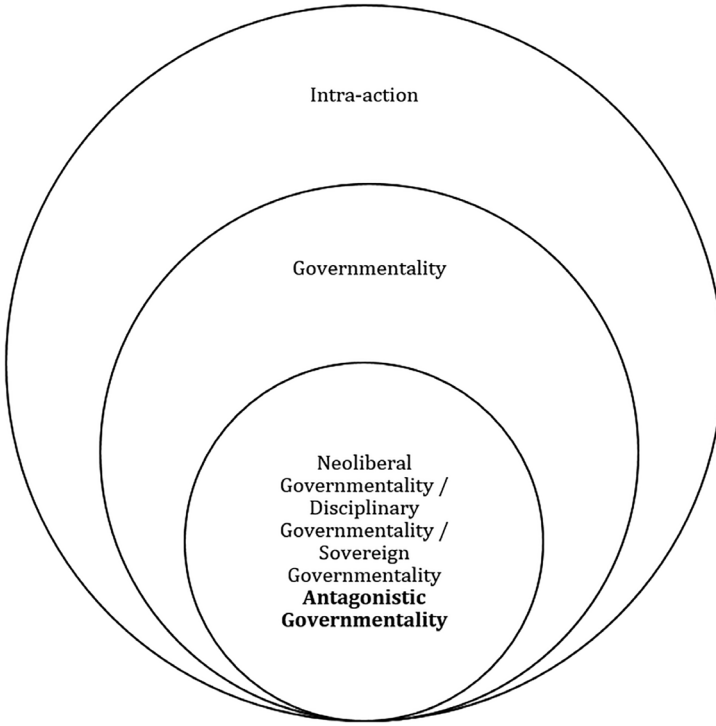

FIGURE 6.3 An integrated framework

the only technology that guides university lecturer practice or certain *antagonisms* between students and lecturers. *Entangled* with and *enfolded* into the NSS – as understood in Barad's sense of different scales being folded through one another – are further concurrent technologies, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Ofsted practices (in teacher education).

This ends my diffractive reading of Foucault's *governmentality*, Laclau's *antagonism* and Barad's *agential realism*.

7

CONCLUSION – SOLIDARITY, ACCELERATIONISM AND UTOPIA

> Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen.[1]
>
> (Adorno, 2018)

I will now conclude this book. This chapter, first, provides a summary. Next, the important issue of student voice is approached from a more general perspective. Subsequently, I will argue that any local version of student voice is severely limited due to larger-scale market and governmental pressures. Therefore, I will consider some wider implications of current global issues. I will argue that the NSS is entangled with these macro processes and that future research needs be attentive to these entanglements. Last, I will try to outline some limitations of this book and will resituate the enquiry in the context of my own biography.

Summary

This book sought to enquire into the effects of the National Student Survey (NSS) on lecturers, courses and universities. I started by reviewing the literature on the NSS and Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) more generally. This literature review concluded that the NSS may neither accurately measure student satisfaction nor be capable of meaningfully comparing universities or improving student outcomes. Rather the NSS may produce course deflation and

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maintain gender biases. This raised the question: what are the actual effects of the NSS on lecturer identity and higher education in the UK more generally?

I then proceeded by introducing Karen Barad's theoretical framework of agential realism. I attempted to stay close to Barad's text whilst providing my own interpretations whenever I found it necessary. Agential realism suggests that all matter in the universe is in a constant process of 'materialisation' through what Barad terms 'intra-action'. Put bluntly, all material entities in the universe do not exist outside of intra-actions; thus, people (such as lecturers) do not pre-exist their encounters with the world but rather are in a constant process of (ontologically) emerging *out of* these encounters. In other words, it is 'encounters' (i.e. intra-actions) between lecturers and students which make lecturers and students materialise in the first place. This materialisation – that is, the taking shape – coincides with what Barad calls the 'agential cut'. The agential cut makes the delineating boundaries between bodies (e.g. lecturers and students) intelligible. Barad suggests that for a more permanent boundary to emerge, agential cuts need to become 'iterative' (i.e. they need to assume some sense of repetition). This iterativity was, for example, captured in lecturers 'worrying' (i.e. anxiety as *repetitive* negative thinking) about student feedback.

I then utilised another Baradian concept: that of 'enfolding'. It was argued that since lecturer anxiety and lecturer/student encounters are 'enfolded' into student feedback systems, these encounters develop a somewhat pernicious quality. For example, I discussed that at some point I was worried that a student whom I told off for disrespectful behaviour may take revenge and give me negative feedback in the future. As a result, I materialised as anxious and, hence, as particularly 'nice' towards the student in the following session. Macro-scale student feedback systems (e.g. the NSS) could therefore be understood as being 'enfolded through' (Barad, 2007:245) meso-scale institutional practices (e.g. Internal Surveys), my micro-scale encounters with the students and resultant subpersonal (psychological) processes of 'worrying'. It was argued that perhaps instead of having a relatively neat 'nested model' where subpersonal processes, interpersonal encounters, institutions and nation-states are situated within each other, Barad's work might be suitable in showing how 'topologies' (i.e. boundaries and connectivities) sometimes cut across scales. Nevertheless, I concluded that both issues of scale and issues of topology need to be taken into account because, put simply, it matters whether 5 or 500,000

students resist the NSS. The chapter concluded with my argument that agential realism is a powerful theoretical framework capable of theorising the NSS, but that this is not surprising because agential realism can theorise 'everything under the sun and beyond'. This is because agential realism is a general ontology of the universe capable of describing, for example, both power struggles on a factory floor and the behaviour of lightning (Barad, 2007, 2011b). This is not only one of agential realism's strengths but also one of its limitations when it comes to analysing social phenomena, such as the NSS. I, therefore, argued that it is necessary to complement agential realism with other analytical frameworks which can tease out and make visible some of the hidden naturalcultural logics at play within the NSS.

On this basis, I picked two theories which I found suitable to analyse the NSS: Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' and Laclau's understanding of 'antagonism'. More specifically, I suggested that the NSS functions as a governmentality (Foucault, 2009). First, 'disciplinary governmentality' was explored: I argued that the NSS governed academics through what Foucault (1977) referred to as the *disciplines*, that is, 'hierarchical observation' and 'normalising judgement'. For example, university lecturers, modules and universities were subjected to (i) 'hierarchical observations' by senior management – who instrumentalised students' panoptic gazes – and (ii) 'normalising judgement' in that lecturers, departments and universities were continuously ranked against one another. In addition, discipline operated by closely determining the space, time and actions of university lecturers, particularly if they failed to achieve positive student satisfaction. As a result, lecturers, departments and universities became not only 'docile' but also 'useful' (by aligning themselves with strategic policy decisions).

However, discipline as a mode of governing academics did not sufficiently explain other phenomena operational at universities, including occasional moments of lecturers' perceived 'freedom'. Hence, Foucault's later work on liberal and neo-liberal governmentality was used to make sense of these phenomena. The attempt was made to exemplify how the NSS could be understood as a *liberal* technology of government (by introducing a narrow conception of 'freedom' into the art of governing the academic population). In addition, the NSS creates artificial competition within quasi-markets; hence, I argued that a distinctly *neo-liberal* element permeates the NSS. I asserted that university lecturers, courses and universities become 'competitised'

and, thus, governable because, put bluntly, lecturers who are in perpetual competition with one another are less likely to challenge larger power structures as they are too focused on their competitors.

Based on this, I suggested that the NSS may perhaps constitute a novel combination (an amalgam) of disciplinary and neoliberal governmentalities. I then framed rating and ranking practices as neoliberal disciplinary hybrids in wider societal contexts. For this purpose, 'Nosedive' – an episode of Charlie Brooker's television series *Black Mirror* – was utilised. In 'Nosedive', rating and ranking practices have permeated virtually all realms of social life through the use of augmented-reality technology. Whilst this depiction may still seem like science fiction, these trends are already traceable in companies such as Airbnb or Uber as well as a novel Chinese project which uses a 'citizen score' to determine access to certain goods and services.

In Chapter 5, I then proposed that in the NSS another type of logic is present which I termed 'antagonistic governmentality'. This notion capitalises on Foucault's notion of governmentality (Foucault, 2009) and combines it with Ernesto Laclau's work on populism and antagonism (Laclau, 2005). I argued that antagonism describes the process of group formation which occurs when people jointly reject another entity. It is then precisely through this rejection that people form their group identity. I suggested that students may develop a group identity by rejecting their lecturer, and lecturers may develop a group identity by rejecting students. However, going beyond Laclau's specific meaning of antagonism, I proposed that the NSS could be considered an 'antagonistic technology', which generates antagonisms between lecturers and students not so much as a strategy that requires top-down managerial efforts but rather as an automatically functioning technology akin to a computer algorithm. For example, through the NSS, lecturers construct students as antagonisms due to the latter's artificially created power over the lives of the former. This, importantly, also creates a boundary (which Laclau calls an antagonistic frontier) separating lecturers from students. Connecting this to previous sections in the book, lecturers, departments and universities are not only disciplined and competitised but are also put into a position in which they see students as the 'enemy'. The most crucial 'side effect' of this figuring of students as the antagonistic force is, however, that the very technologies which created the antagonisms in the first place (such as the NSS) become increasingly 'unintelligible' as the root of the problem. That is, akin to the logic

of neoliberal governmentality which makes lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy competing with one another, antagonisms make lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy resenting students for their perceived power. In other words, antagonism 'governs' the (academic) population.

I argue that it is precisely through the simultaneous working of discipline, competition and antagonism that an 'antagonism without populism' emerges. That is, whilst antagonisms against students should really create *connections* amongst lecturers because they *jointly* reject students (e.g. as 'demanding customers'), this connection is sabotaged because lecturers are simultaneously in 'competition' with each other. I hypothesise that the NSS – as a disciplinary, neoliberal, antagonistic hybrid – systematically undermines attempts of solidarity between students and lecturers whilst simultaneously decreasing the likelihood that policymakers are constructed as the 'culprits' behind particular unmet demands. The NSS hence resonates with the Roman saying, 'Divide and Rule': lecturers are divided from other lecturers through competition, and lecturers are divided from students through antagonism.

Subsequently, a comparison – or using Barad's terminology 'a diffractive reading' – was attempted between the main theoretical frameworks of this book. First, Barad's and Foucault's works were read diffractively. Whilst Barad made extensive use of Foucault's notion of 'discursive practices' and, to a lesser degree, discipline, they did not utilise Foucault's lecture series on governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009). I, therefore, suggested that 'governmentality' may be conceptualised as one specific type of intra-action. Next, Foucault and Laclau were read diffractively. Whilst in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) draw on Foucault's work, this was limited to Foucault's earlier 'archaeological' phase in contrast to his later 'genealogical' phase (cf. Gutting, 2006). Thus, I reiterated that antagonism does not only comprise a distinct social principle but rather could be instrumentalised to govern a population. In short, the NSS may be an example of an 'antagonistic governmentality'. Last, the most striking similarities emerged between Laclau and Barad's works. In particular, both authors' definitions of discourse (Laclau, 2005) and material-discursive practices (Barad, 2007) displayed almost uncanny resemblances, including their agreement that people do not pre-exist their relations. In summary, I argued that Barad's *intra-action*

is the most general conceptual category; Foucault's notion of *governmentality* then becomes one mode of intra-acting at both macro and micro levels of scale (governmentality, according to Foucault, connects the practice of governing a whole population with the technologies of the self (i.e. self-control)). As a next step, four specific governmentalities could be identified: sovereign governmentality, disciplinary governmentality (Foucault, 1977), neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) and, as a novel contribution, antagonistic governmentality (Laclau, 2005). As a result of the NSS, lecturers (i) become increasingly resentful towards students, whilst larger-scale issues, such as the NSS, are less likely to appear as the real source of their unmet demands (antagonism); (ii) compete with other lecturers over student feedback (neo-liberalism); and, if this competition fails to raise student feedback, lecturers (iii) may be subjected to more fine-grained disciplinary practices. When viewed from these multiple angles, the NSS transpires as a policy that promotes the increasing atomisation of university lecturers. Put concisely, the NSS could be understood as a material-discursive apparatus that competitises, disciplines and creates boundaries *without* creating connectivities. This analysis now opens a range of further questions and lines of enquiry which will be discussed in what follows.

The Future of Student Feedback

There is a central issue that has not yet been adequately discussed in this book which, nevertheless, is of crucial importance. It concerns the danger *of positing students as seemingly all-powerful actors within the field of UK higher education*. Such a view would mistakenly neglect the multitude of further disciplinary and neoliberal assemblages within higher education, including those which figure students at the receiving end of disciplinary technologies, such as perpetual student assessment regimes (Raaper, 2016). Hence, rather than seeing student feedback apparatuses in isolation, I suggested that there is the need to seek an understanding of how these apparatuses interact with other (disciplinary/neoliberal/antagonistic) assemblages, including the effects of this interaction (intra-action) on all stakeholders at universities. For instance, I postulated a perpetual and reciprocal disciplining cycle in which students discipline university lecturers (through SETs) and lecturers discipline students (through conventional means of testing and examinations). This was another 'theme' that emerged from my data,

namely, that students spent a significant amount of time in their seminars straying off task by expressing how worried they were about their assignments. It is clear that conventional assessments have disciplinary qualities – after all, Foucault (1977) called the combination of 'normalising judgement' and 'hierarchical observation' the 'examination'. When students are judged on their academic performance, they are judged on a scale from 0 to 100 (normalising judgement), and this observation is top-down (hierarchical observation). This produces a situation in which lecturers rate students (in assignments), and students rate lecturers (in student feedback systems). Again, I argued that this reciprocal disciplining (and the resultant reciprocal antagonisms) mirrors what is found in Airbnb practices where both apartment host and guests rate one another. It also resonates with the saying 'Divide and Rule'. Perpetual, reciprocal assessments divide students and lecturers rather than bringing them together.

In addition, students are forced to compete with one another in the 'employment market' after graduation. In other words, students (similarly to lecturers) find themselves at the receiving end of perpetual competitisation as characteristic of Foucault's understanding of neo-liberal governmentality. Furthermore, many students are also subjected more harshly to other effects of neoliberalism (without a hyphen). For example, both lecturers and students face an increasingly uncertain employment future (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). Further complexity emerges when vocational degrees are added to the analysis. For example, Ofsted appraisals of universities in the context of UK initial teacher education (MacBeath, 2011) could be understood as a further disciplinary apparatus in which discipline filters down the university hierarchy with students at the receiving end. In short, these technologies are entangled and cannot fully be understood without acknowledging this entanglement.

I would now like to draw the following analogy. Pre-COVID, I frequently commuted to work on overcrowded trains. I suggest that the relationship between lecturers and students under technologies, such as the NSS, assessment practices and Ofsted regimes, is a little bit like the relationships between passengers on an overcrowded train. I frequently observe people getting frustrated with their lack of space. Instead of, however, blaming the train company for refusing to provide further compartments, people's frustration, at times, appears to be directed at their fellow passengers for 'deciding to travel at the same time'. Similarly, under the technologies discussed in this book,

lecturers, students and managers may begin to blame one another for their lack of creative space (and time) whilst forgetting the structural origins of their competitive and antagonistic behaviour.

This now raises the question of what non-disciplinary, non-antagonistic, non-governmental student feedback could look like. Is there the possibility of meaningful student feedback with the agency to change institutional practice without engaging in the governing of *any* stakeholder? After all, it could be maintained that it is not student feedback which is the problem but the managerialist, competitive and disciplinary fashion in which it is currently instigated and maintained at many universities across the world (Deem, 1998; Winter, 2009). Perhaps this would necessitate the provision of democratic platforms that are safe from threats of lecturer redundancy (or low student grades) and in which a much more direct voicing of student (dis)satisfaction is possible. These platforms may open spaces in which students and lecturers can engage in genuine debates on how to best structure higher education instead of disciplining one another within pyramidal and competitive power structures.

One such version of student feedback is presented by Fielding (2004), who, writing before the implementation of the NSS, argues for a more dialogic-orientated approach to student voice. In this dialogic approach, it is not so much about whether students actually get their 'voice' across – that is, it is not about whether students speak for themselves – but rather, student voice's liberating potential lies in the *act of speaking* (particularly to those in power). I suggest, however, that this dialogic approach could only succeed if it were implemented beyond the current NSS model. Again, this would require a re-evaluation of the power imbalances inherent in summative assessment practices where a (more powerful) person (i.e. a lecturer) judges the quality of the work of a (less powerful) one. In short, it could be suggested that abolishing student satisfaction surveys, such as the NSS, whilst maintaining top-down assessment practices may rightfully be considered unfair.[2]

The NSS as Part of Global Issues

This then raises questions regarding the opportunities of resisting or transforming the disciplinary-neoliberal-antagonistic effects of student appraisals and other technologies. Whilst some authors have suggested that it is still possible to reject certain developments at the institutional level in the shape of critiquing and resisting strategic

university decisions (Gonzales, 2015:303), the possibilities for agency may, indeed, be severely limited precisely because of larger-scale issues, such as market pressures between universities. This limitation poignantly transpired when I, in a recent team meeting, was asked what my stance on the NSS was:

> Recently, we had a meeting about the NSS scores for our course and I was asked to give my opinion, considering that my thesis was about the NSS. In retrospect, my answer really disappointed me. I mumbled something about that obviously the whole issue regarding the NSS is very complex, but that my answer would probably be twofold. I somewhat continued, 'On the one hand there's this dimension that the NSS does not tell us anything, it does not improve provision for students, may lead to grade inflation in that lecturers give better marks to receive better feedback and it might actually be bad for course quality because lecturers make it easy so students don't struggle. It's also actually quite pernicious in lots of ways: students may even give better student feedback to lecturers who they perceive to be good looking.' . . . I then went back and said, 'On a general level, the NSS is really problematic because it's part of a neoliberal agenda. Yet, this does not alter the fact that we as a department are under massive competitive pressures.' Afterwards, I asked myself, is this really the best I can do?
>
> *(My research diary)*

Despite my disappointment with my own 'advice' regarding the NSS, this spontaneous narrative may entail a certain 'truth' about the NSS. That is, although I felt rather unhappy about my response due to its lack of any positive counter-strategy at the institutional level and its unsatisfactory and compliant demand for 'playing the game', my answer perhaps touched on one important issue: that of large-scale competitive pressures. In short, any local response which seeks to resist market technologies, such as the NSS, may be severely limited because this localism keeps inter-university market pressures and wider effects of neoliberalism untouched (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). The following fictional scenario could be invented. University A decides that it will completely ignore the NSS by, for example, ceasing to allocate internal resources to the attainment of high student satisfaction. Consequently, no Internal Surveys would be administered

and no lecturers would be tasked with the job of analysing, evaluating and drawing conclusions from NSS scores for further strategic consideration. Lecturers would still meet with student representatives but engage in 'democratic' dialogue with students as suggested earlier (Fielding, 2004). (The possibility that this lack of satisfaction surveys may unexpectedly lead to an increase in student satisfaction scores will, for the sake of the argument, not be considered.) For now, it shall be assumed that as part of this democratic dialogue, it may also come to frictions between students and the course which, in return, result in a decline in NSS scores. From here, further events may unfold: the decline in NSS scores may lead to a decline in league tables, leading to fewer students choosing university A, leading to less funding through tuition fees.

This also shows how the raising of tuition fees and associated withdrawal of government funding are fundamentally connected to the NSS – in Baradian (2007) terms, it could be suggested they are 'entangled'. For example, if universities were not as dependent on students' tuition fees as is currently the case, this might also affect leadership decisions, such as relegating the primacy of student voice to a lower agenda item. Since universities, however, rely on tuition fees as one of their main funding sources, the pressures of recruiting students are profound. For example, Lisa remarks:

> At our university, the whole summer was spent on trying to recruit more students to our programs. It may have to do with the fact that we are a 'recruiting' university and not a 'choosing university'. However, the amount of resources allocated to securing places for further students was immense this summer. We continued to receive emails (weekly!) updating us on the current recruitment status. I am seriously wondering how these recruitment pressures clash with choosing excellent student teachers. Surely, when you are so reliant upon students' money, you may sometimes allow students to become teachers who may not be the best teachers for the children.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

Put concisely, I suggest that 'inter-university competition' decreases 'intra-university agency'.

Hence, I ask whether any meaningful change may only be achieved by larger-scale reconfigurations. If, for example, tuition fees were

abolished – that is, if universities were again solely funded by the government – this may also affect the status of the NSS. That is, the NSS may either (a) lose its impact on universities (it may lose its 'materialising power' (Barad, 2007) or disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977)) if money was paid to universities *regardless* of their student satisfaction ratings. On the other hand, in the opposite version, the government may (b) make university funding *contingent* on NSS scores. That is, in this 'hyper neoliberal' scenario (in Foucault's understanding of the term), the state may use student feedback to decide how much money would be allocated to universities which, in return, would exacerbate (and not ease) inter-university market pressures.

However, even the changes depicted in scenario (a) may still not go far enough since the NSS, of course, is part of broader international developments. For example, universities are not only part of a 'national ranking market' but may also be part of an 'international' one. Lisa writes:

> It is one of our university's distinct goals to attract more international students at the moment. We seem to be lacking behind other universities in this. International students also pay more money.
>
> *(Lisa's research diary)*

International rankings may attract increasing numbers of international students who pay higher tuition fees than domestic or EU students. This also appears relevant at a national level, captured in the Department for Business's (DfB's) assertion that 'graduates are central to [the UK's] prosperity and success as a knowledge economy, and higher education is a key export sector' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016:9). In other words, it is of national interest to attract money into the country in exchange for exporting 'accreditations'.

Further analogies can be drawn. Just as universities are somewhat powerless in an artificially produced competitive market (as is the case through the NSS), at a larger scale, countries may also be increasingly impotent in effecting any profound *internal* change. It could even be suggested that nation-states are increasingly reconfigured as 'large-scale companies' which seek to maximise profits by attracting capital from other countries. This relative impotence of individual countries in an international competitive market guided by internationally free-roaming capital was poignantly expressed in 2015 when Greece decided, based on a referendum, to refuse to pay bailout money to its

creditors (these comprised a mixture of German banks, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB)). This referendum was ignored, and the imposed austerity continued. Alongside this development, capital rapidly escaped Greece due to the fear of a banking collapse. In other words, in a world where capital can be moved freely with no effective democratic international oversight and regulation of these money flows (Piketty, 2014), countries may, in effect, be considered oversized companies which operate within a global market (just as universities are reconfigured as companies in a 'student satisfaction market').

I suggest that it is here where my new materialist discussion may add some further analytical insights. For example, returning to Barad (2007), whilst apparatuses may differ in size, the *relations* between their respective enfolded apparatus parts may be comparable. For instance, the logic of competition remains the same regardless of whether individuals compete with other individuals, universities compete with other universities or, in fact, countries compete with other countries. Hence, the example of Greece not only demonstrated that the interests of German banks appear to outweigh national democratic processes but also that – just as at a smaller scale, universities may be powerless against inter-university competition – nation-states may be somewhat powerless against 'inter-national' competition and associated capital streams.

It becomes increasingly clear that it is only one further analytical step to propose that not only people, courses and universities are the subjects of disciplinary-neoliberal-antagonistic governmentalities but also nation-states are. More specifically, the following Baradian (2007) analysis could be proposed: the apparatus 'Earth' contains a myriad (natural and social) enfolded apparatuses, such as oceans, landmasses and countries which intra-act in specific ways. First, as a result of neoliberal globalisation, countries (or *governmental* (!) organisations, such as the EU) are in 'competitive relations' with other countries. Interestingly, at this global level, these competitive relations may, again, be systematised by rankings (e.g. World Competitiveness Ranking 2018, 2018) and ratings (e.g. Moody's (Reuters, 2017)), just as at the national level, competition is systematised by the NSS and the TEF. As a result of this competitive pressure, countries reconfigure. This reconfiguration may be embodied in legislation which seeks to attract capital from other countries (e.g. 'tax breaks for investors', 'advertising campaigns to attract more international students') or in the implementation of further *internal governmentalities* (e.g. the NSS). That

is to say, because there are 'external' competitive pressures between countries, these countries respond by 'copying' those *external* competitive relations into their *internal* policymaking. This process could be first captured in a 'top-down' causal structure. Put crudely, because the UK is governed by (*external*) international competition, the UK government governs its component apparatuses to compete with one another on ranked scales *internally* – or in Barad's (2007:184) words, intra-actions produce relations of 'exteriority within'. For example, universities compete with other universities (in the NSS, REF, etc.), schools compete with other schools (e.g. in league tables (Richardson and Sellgren, 2018)) and hospitals with other hospitals (e.g. National Institute for Health Research, NIHR, 2018). These apparatuses, yet again, force their respective component apparatuses (e.g. university modules, school year groups, hospital departments) to compete with one another (e.g. in Internal Survey rankings, year group performance rankings, patient satisfaction rankings). In return, these apparatuses may promote competition between their respective apparatuses (e.g. lecturers informally compete in Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), teachers may compete with one another over the progress of their pupils and nurses may be competing over popularity with patients). Second, in a bottom-up fashion, it could be suggested that individuals become competitive so that their departments become competitive, so that their organisations become competitive, so that their countries become competitive. In short, neoliberal globalisation may be understood as a global, hierarchical assemblage of apparatuses which 'governs' people by creating competition at all levels of scale through normalising judgement and panoptical rankings. In addition, I suggest that competition and antagonism work alongside one another. For instance, a school class may develop its class identity based on a rejection (an antagonism) towards another class. A school may develop its own identity through its antagonism towards another school. A country may develop its own identity (in this case nationalism) based on its rejection of another country.

In addition, Barad's (2007) work is useful in showing how this current neoliberal globalised capitalism is not only to be understood in a neat nested fashion. Rather, it could be described as a 'topological animal' that constantly 'mutates through an open-ended dynamics of intra-activity' (p. 240). That is, there are distinct topological relationships which pierce through neat boundaries. For example, a lecturer in the UK may be competing with another in the United States,

whilst my university may compete with another university in India, thereby traversing 'bodily [state] boundaries' (Barad, 2007:155; word added to suit analysis).

This discussion now raises a distinctly modern question: can issues at the local level be addressed without also addressing issues at the global level? At the danger of sounding increasingly utopian, I ask whether the only way to counteract this tendency of global governmentality is to establish an 'international contract' which replaces global competition (as, e.g. enshrined in World Bank law) with global cooperation. This question, in return, is connected to even larger 'planetary' issues, which may, in fact, spell the end of our current 'civilisation', such as global environmental degradation and rising inequality (Motesharrei et al., 2014).

Whilst a more thorough exploration of these issues would clearly go beyond the scope of this book, I only schematically touch upon the crucial issue of 'rising wealth inequality' and then suggest how this connects to my arguments as presented in this book. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* problematises this global phenomenon of increasing *wealth inequality* (Piketty, 2014). Piketty asserts that capital, if left to itself and not redistributed, tends to accumulate without matching gains of productivity. For example, 'Liliane Bettencourt', before her death, owned 30 billion Euros, whereas 'her declared income was never more than five million a year' despite interest endowing her with an *annual sum of roughly 500 million Euros* (p. 525). This amount cannot be easily spent in a year. Therefore, ultra-wealthy people allow

> the remainder of the turn on one's capital to accumulate in a family trust or other ad hoc legal entity created for the sole purpose of managing a fortune of this magnitude, just as university endowments are managed.
>
> *(p. 525)*

This 'capital accumulation without labour' produces the issue that economic growth increasingly lags behind 'return on capital'. In other words, because capital is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small minority (i.e. the millionaires and billionaires of this world), the global return on this capital (e.g. the interest this capital produces if simply kept on a bank account) is increasingly larger than the economic global growth. The fact that 'capital reproduces itself

faster than output increases' (p. 571) is highly problematic not only because economic growth slows down but also because the rising inequality may be 'potentially threatening to democratic societies' (p. 571). As a remedy against this process, Piketty suggests a 'progressive annual tax on capital' (p. 572). Importantly, consistent with my previous argument, this capital tax 'is not within the reach of the nation-states' (p. 573) but only possible if instantiated on a global level or, if not possible, at least at a transnational (e.g. European) one. This wealth tax, in return,

> will make it possible to avoid an endless inegalitarian spiral while preserving competition and incentives for new instances of primitive accumulation.
>
> *(p. 572)*

I proposed that the inequality suggested by Piketty (2014) also enables governmental technologies, such as the NSS, to work more effectively. That is, precarity may function as a pre-condition for the governmentalities suggested in this book to work in the first place. Returning to the NSS, the following hypothetical scenario could be used as an explication. 'Lecturer A is rated poorly by students. This rating has a slightly negative emotional effect on her because she thought the course "was going really well". Because of the negative rating, her manager invites her in for a performance review. In this review, Lecturer A is given a warning that she should try to improve her teaching (i.e. raise better student feedback) in the future. As a result, Lecturer A tries hard to attain better student feedback: she becomes docile and competitive.' The same scenario shall now be considered with only one minor change: more secure employment rights (which are increasingly hollowed out under current neoliberal policies). In this scenario, Lecturer A still receives poor student feedback, still is invited for a meeting, still may even be given a warning; however, this warning lost its cutting edge simply because Lecturer A knows that she cannot be made redundant easily. In fact, on the premise of stronger employment rights, it is highly doubtful that superior managers may even be in a position where they could 'invite colleagues in and make threats'. On this basis, the following logic could be postulated: the more precarious the situation of a lecturer (or employee), the more power (used in Barad's sense of 'materialising potential') governmental technologies, such as the NSS, have. Put differently, threats lose their

cutting edge when there is no perceived realistic chance of putting these threats into action.

This also resonates with suggestions to strengthen the bargaining power of employees through a reduction of the workweek or a universal basic income (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). Srnicek and Williams argue that these two demands are paramount if humanity wants to avoid what neoliberal capitalism appears to be currently heading towards: a precarious future devoid of work and increasingly susceptible to fascist, racist and misogynistic tendencies. Whilst being broadly associated with what has come to be known under the umbrella of 'accelerationism' (see Mackay and Avanessian, 2014), Srnicek and William's (2016) vision of the future is a distinctly left-wing anti-neoliberal (but not anti-globalisation) project. Interestingly, this project demands 'full automation' (instead of rejecting it), arguing that automation cannot be stopped (artificial intelligence (AI) may, in fact, 'outperform humans in all tasks in 45 years' and may automate '*all* human jobs in 120 years' (Grace et al., 2017:729; emphasis added)). Crucially, this automation needs to, however, be accompanied by a reduction of the workweek – which would increase employee bargaining in that employers would no longer be able to threaten to 'employ somebody else' (as outlined earlier) – and a 'universal basic income'. Fundamental to Srnicek and Williams's (2016) accelerationist project is the creation of an ecology of institutions, seeking to develop 'utopian narratives' (p. 136) to 'wrench open a new horizon of possibility' (p. 139) which in return is able to critique present conditions. In the context of the NSS, further research could, hence, investigate utopian questions, such as, 'What would the future of higher education look like without the current disciplinary, neoliberal and antagonistic governmentalities embodied in various technologies, such as the NSS?' or, 'How do broader utopian ideas (such as a post-work society) reconfigure higher education (including the NSS)?"

Some Final Remarks

In conclusion, I suggest that, like much academic work, this book feels unfinished and, in many respects, limited in its enquiry regarding issues of student feedback and voice. Whilst it may provide a novel view on student voice through the utilisation of theory which had not been used in this context before (i.e. Foucault, Laclau, and Barad), it left a range of issues unaddressed. First, the data used for this book was clearly limited. Further research could mobilise a larger data set from a broader

mix of universities, containing a more substantial proportion of ancient and Russel Group universities. The pressures faced by these types of universities may be significantly different (e.g. more research pressures, fewer teaching pressures) which might be linked to their prestige and resultant status as 'choosing universities' (in comparison to post-1992 universities as 'recruiting universities'). Whilst this book eschewed the utilisation of quantitative methods, perhaps this larger data set would have enabled a mixed-methods approach to data evaluation.

In addition, some questions had to be omitted due to word-count restraints. For example, I could have utilised Lacanian theory, in particular, his notion of the 'four discourses'. It was argued that student feedback systems may create what could be called a hysteric-docility-utility – 'hysteric' (as one of Lacan's discourses) because lecturers may never be quite sure what students actually want from them in their feedback. Second, it would have been interesting to explore more deeply, various alternative conceptions of student voice (in fact, a whole chapter could have been dedicated to this instead of simply incorporating this into the conclusion).

Finally, various other theories presented themselves as good alternatives to the new materialist (and perhaps overly 'fashionable') theory used in this book. For example, actor-network theory may have been a useful addition to Barad's theory. In addition, Marxist/Vygotskian-inspired CHAT theory appeared to already address many 'New Materialist' issues, including those of language and matter. Further research could explore these connection points. Last, I could have explored some seminal theory, such as Marx's (2014 [1867]) *Capital* in the context of Barad's theory. That is, at one point, I found myself reading sections of *Das Kapital*, and the agency which was attributed to machines could have been copied verbatim out of Barad's (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few personal comments. First, of course, this book was deeply situated in my own – perhaps slightly naïve – investment in the hope for a better future. I believe that this hope, in return, is rooted in my own experiences growing up in neoliberal Western Europe and experiencing first-hand the pressures that are associated with this experience, such as the ruthless all-encompassing competition which was palpable at school, university and in part-time jobs. On the other hand, whilst studying, I witnessed various protest movements which sought to make a difference at the local level, including (successful) protests against the introduction of tuition fees in Germany. This experience of protest was accompanied

by my own attempts to survive on money which I solely made from playing music in pubs. Still, my position was privileged in that my late grandparents paid for renting a room in a flat-share whilst I only had to earn the money for food. In short, the hardships which I may have experienced shrink in comparison to those in worse-off situations.

This returns my discussion to neoliberalism. Whilst neoliberalism affects each person, institution or geographic locality differently, there still is an overriding commonality in that it makes the majority of people worse-off (cf. Brown, 2015). This decline of living standards may be expressed differentially in rising homelessness (or bleak and hazardous living conditions) for the most vulnerable members of society or may mean that more privileged people work for 'longer hours for less pay' and 'less security' (Brown, 2015:29). Neoliberalism seems to only benefit a select few, with recent statistics estimating that a plane-full of billionaires own as much wealth as the rest of the world population (Elliot, 2016). This inequality is neither good for the economy (Piketty, 2014), nor does it raise everyone's living standards. Hence, it is my deep desire that humanity manages to accelerate into a better future, which, in my view, entails a version where wealth inequality, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, environmental destruction and 'general nastiness' are less prevalent. In this sense, I desire something thoroughly modern and utopian: an extension of, what some may consider well-worn, notions of freedom, equality and global solidarity. I hope that this book represents a little contribution towards what has been recently described as the urgent necessity of building an international alternative to neoliberal capitalism or, even more poignantly, political developments that risk a return the dynamics permeating the first half of the twentieth century.

Notes

1 The quote 'Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen' is a quote from Adorno's (2018, p. 18) *Minima Moralia*. It translates to *Wrong Life Cannot Be Lived Rightly* (Adorno, 2005, p. 39).

2 Then yet again, there appears to be a more profound contradiction at play here which concerns the question of what would happen to universities' role of quality assuring degrees which may involve high stakes (e.g. medical degrees, nursing degrees).

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INDEX

Note: Page numbers in *italics* indicate a figure on the corresponding page. Page numbers followed by 'n' indicate a note.