

“They Say Cut Back - We Say Fight Back”

A Relational Realist Analysis of the UK Student Protests

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Abstract

This paper constitutes an extended response to Athanasia Chalari's claim that "the causal impact [of resistance] lies with the internal conversation about resistance" (Chalari, 2013, p.74). In the context of our engagements with critical realism and digital research into social movements, we review Chalari's main argument, before applying it to a concrete case: the student protests in London, 2010. Whilst our account is sympathetic to Chalari's focus on interiority, we critique the voluntarism that is implicit in her argument, arguing that it emerges because of an underlying neglect of the relational aspects of resistance. Instead, we offer a relational realist analysis that treats resistance as *process* within an ontologically stratified account of reality that is mindful of the contingency of political acts. Taking this route, we establish resistance as an emergent relation, generative of distinctive 'relational goods' in the context of collective action, which we locate at different levels of reality, as we move from an analysis of individual to collective reflexivity. In doing so we offer a sympathetic critique of Chalari, building on the thought provoking arguments contained within it, whilst also making a contribution to the theorisation of social movements and the 'relational turn' within realist social theory (Archer 2010, 2012).

Keywords: Critical Realism, Relational Sociology, Reflexivity, Resistance, Student Protest, Collective Action, Archer.

Introduction and Overview of Chalari's Argument

In an earlier edition of this journal, Athanasia Chalari examines the phenomena of resistance to develop an explanatory account of the interior cognitive processes that bring about intentional political acts. Viewing resistance through the lens of Margaret Archer's (2003) 'Internal Conversation' and her own work on 'mediation', Chalari examines the relationship between internal and external conversations, in which she argues that our expressed, externalised actions have their causal roots in inner experience. Building on her model of 'mediation' (see Chalari, 2009), which posits the process by which individuals seek to find a subjectively acceptable 'balance' between their inner and outer worlds, Chalari attempts to capture the process of resistance through a number of distinct stages of cognition. Chalari (2013, p.76) argues that analysis of the internal conversation can provide the tools necessary for disentangling the internal processes underlying externalised forms of (non-)action. Indeed, Chalari (2013, p.74) locates the internal conversation as the source of 'the causal impact of resistance', as decisions to act (or not) are constituted subjectively through the deliberative stages that each of us go through when we experience a particular phenomenon or what Chalari (2013, p. 68, 82) calls a 'common stimuli'. This argument is developed through the analysis of interviews conducted with a sample of Greek citizens on their response(s) to the austerity measures imposed on Greece by the European Union and International Monetary Fund (Chalari 2013, p.75). The outcome is an understanding of the micro-politics of resistance which foregrounds the subject and places their first-person experience centre stage. This point is summarised clearly by Chalari (2013, p. 82) towards the end of her argument:

...individuals perceive resistance in different ways because they deliberate internally upon actions, external conversations and stimuli associated with resistance in a unique way that we have called internal conversation about resistance, which is a distinctive process for each one of us and produces different outcomes for different agents.

We are sympathetic to this argument. In common with Archer (2003, p.133) we would accept that individual reflexivity should feature in our explanations because,

“without it we can have no explanatory purchase upon what exactly agents do. Deprived of such explanations, sociology has to settle for empirical generalisation about ‘what most of the people do most of the time’. Indeed, without a real explanatory handle, sociologists often settle for much less: ‘under circumstances x, a statistically significant number of agents do y’. These, of course, are not real explanations at all.”

Our complaint is not with the suggestion that interiority should factor into sociological explanations of resistance. Indeed, as Mouzelis (2000, p. 755) puts it, “the way in which subjects relate to virtual or actual social structures is not constant but variable”: unless this variability is incorporated into our analytical toolbox then it will either be subsumed under a theoretical ‘black box’ which imputes properties to agents which are assumed to govern their actions (e.g. ‘instrumental rationality’, ‘vested interests’ or ‘habitus’ as suggested by Archer, 2007) or entirely occluded, in a way which inculcates a dangerous propensity for a specific instance of what Sayer (2000) calls a ‘PoMo flip’: inverting a problematic theoretical position while retaining the underlying conceptual structure e.g. coming to stress ‘agency’ rather than structure because of the accumulation of empirical anomalies (Kuhn, 1996) resulting from a failure to recognise that “agential intentions are neither uniform, nor static, nor passive” (Archer, 2003, p.134). Without doing so it becomes impossible to unpack *how* and *why* it is the case that, as Chalari’s (2013, p.68) puts it, “different individuals may express dissimilar forms of active opposition when facing common stimuli”.

On this level, then, we agree with Chalari's argument and see it as an important contribution to our understanding of resistance. Where our problem begins is with how this causal power is conceptualised or, more precisely, with how its operation is construed in isolation from its immediate socio-cultural environment. In other words, how can a ‘common stimuli’ be encountered, in any given context, by ‘different individuals’ leading to ‘dissimilar forms of active opposition’? In response to this, we wish to argue that resistance is not only *subjectively* but also *relationally* mediated and that an adequate account of the former necessitates an adequate account of the latter.

The curious language of stimulus and response adopted in Chalari's paper obscures this environmental variability, in virtue of which subjects come to act in the way that they do given their subjective concerns. This paper instead offers a *relational* framing of this phenomenon, intended to shed more light on the deeply important theoretical question of how resistance is characterised at the micro-level.

We would agree that "resistance is not exclusively an automatic or routine reaction or opposition to possible or related stimuli, but may be understood as possessing agential/subjective qualities" (Chalari 2013, p.82). The concern that we wish to address here is with how these 'agential/subjective qualities' are characterised and, in particular, the contentious claim that "the causal impact [of resistance] lies with the internal conversation about resistance" (Chalari 2013, p. 74). What Chalari's point appears to be is that structural and cultural factors do not operate 'hydraulically' (Archer 2007) in generating resistance on the part of individuals who encounter them. Rather, the explanation of *how* this happens remains at the level of invoking subjectivity to explain how individuals can be observed to be '(re-)acting' to 'stimuli' in the specific ways that they do. The result leaves us with a sense of interiority as impeding what would otherwise be constant conjunctions of *stimulus* and *response*. What is missing from this account is, firstly, a diachronic understanding of how subjects are shaped¹ through their past experience(s) of resistance, i.e. as a relational *process* through which agents inductively acquire beliefs about self and society which then condition their action-orientated deliberations. Second, it is essential to address the underlying question of *why* different 'stimuli' and 'responses' actually *matter* to these subjects (Sayer, 2012). Indeed, it is in theorising resistance at the level of meaning and subjectivity that one can draw attention to the multidirectional and generative effects of identity construction (Thomas and Davies, 2005).

In what follows, we seek to address these omissions by drawing on the account of relational reflexivity offered in Archer (2012). We unpack its implications for theorising resistance through an extended discussion of the 'Millbank Riot' in 2010 and, in doing so, address the objection raised by

Mouzelis (2008) that spatiality has tended to be occluded within Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach. We illustrate how an attentiveness to the situated interaction of embodied actors can help flesh out our understanding of the relational constitution of corporate agents, “whose own interaction is ultimately responsible for the reproduction or transformation of society - or a sector of it” (Archer, 2003, p.135).

The Mediation of Resistance

For Chalari, intentional political action emerges from an internal process of deliberation whereby the choice to resist (or not) is bound to a subjective understanding of an idea of resistance. How resistance is perceived through the filter of personal experiences and understanding is seen to shape the decision to resist. This allows Chalari to argue that individuals will inevitably perceive resistance in different ways: we each associate with resistance in a unique way as the ‘internal conversation about resistance’ produces different outcomes for different agents. For Chalari, the causal impact of resistance, then, is best expressed as an internal conversation, *externalised* as either;

1. Expressed resistance which may be witnessed, empirically, in the recognisable or unrecognisable actions of agents, e.g. joining a protest movement or refusing to partake in extensive consumerism, respectively;
2. As the non-expression of action based on rational grounds, e.g. the choice not to resist as an expressed action, as it is perceived that there will be no immediate or long-term result from this.

Both processes are considered examples of the intentional actions of agents, in which either the expressive or non-expressive form emerges due to the subjective experiences of the individual. To understand how this process occurs, Chalari develops the characteristics of internal conversation proposed by Archer (2007, p.2), such as, ‘clarification’, ‘anticipation and ‘talking through a practical activity’, to consider how expressive or non-expressive forms of resistance emerge in

response to ‘common stimuli’. Interviewing young (aged 25-40) Greek men and women on social change in Greek society, at the time of the Greek protests, Chalari analyses their transcripts, using these three characteristics to explain the deliberation process at work in choosing how to most appropriately resist. Indeed, these characteristics and a number of others, such as, ‘planning’, ‘making internal promises’ and ‘reaching concrete decisions’ mediate the process of resistance in Chalari’s view, bridging the gap between our experiences of social constraints and our (re-)actions to them as externalised behaviour. For instance, in the case of a decision not to resist (a non-expression of what is nonetheless active resistance), Chalari (2013, p. 79) provides this empirical example:

...because I have seen many things happen and nothing end up anywhere, I remain uninvolved. The forms of resistance I have seen up until now are not convincing for me.

In this case, this individual has decided that, on balance, they do not want to be involved in demonstrating against austerity measures. For Chalari, this process of deliberation can be understood through three moments, which follow a linear format:

1. An individual attempts to clarify, or think through, what is the most appropriate course of action in response to any given stimuli.
2. This clarification includes the element of anticipation, that is, in this case, the perceived success or failure of a particular political action, which then bears on whether the action is considered to be a rational choice.
3. The decision not to resist is considered the most appropriate activity for this individual who has reflected on their own experiences of (the fallibility of) protest actions.

This recognition of intentionally refraining from action is an important counterweight to approaches

within social theory which would deny these subjects the necessary autonomy needed to *choose* inactivity in this way (Archer 1988, 2000). Indeed, it is this choice to resist which, for Chalari, means that actors have all sorts of additional characteristics that mediate between social experience and expression in terms of action, of which she identifies the following:

1. An individual can *plan* how they will act to *clarify* their intention of an expressed action
2. The individual can *prepare* for this action.
3. This process of preparation can take the form of a *promise* to oneself.

Thus, as one of Chalari's participants confirms to her,

“...I will resist myself. So that I will not buy something that I can't afford no matter how much I want it”.

In this case, this individual has reached a concrete decision to resist extensive consumerism through a personal promise. For Chalari, the internal conversation about resistance examines how this course of action arises, as the individual deliberates over austerity, and prepares to implement some personal measures. What the externalisation of this internal process reveals is how an individual's resistance relates to their subjective understanding(s) of the problem.

It is this emphasis on the subjective processes involved in resistance that leads Chalari to cite the internal conversation as the site where dissimilar forms of active opposition to 'common stimuli' emerge. Individuals perceive resistance in different ways because of these characteristics, witnessed empirically in the descriptions of action or non-action by agents, which lead to alternative forms of decision-making based on individual experience(s). One individual may conceive of austerity measures in one way, because of their subjective understandings, in comparison to another. This difference is then explained, sociologically, through the deliberative stages of the internal conversation. In the next section of this paper we will apply this explanation of resistance to one

example of resistance within the context of the 2010 British student protests in the UK. The purpose of this will be to get a sense of how Chalari's perspective might be applied to a particular event or situation, which we can then be used to open up a space for a critique of her ideas.

Student Protests and the 'Millbank Riot'

The 2010 British student protests were a series of demonstrations that took place between November and December 2010. Following a review into higher education funding in England produced by Lord Browne, which had recommended wide-ranging changes to the system of university funding, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced a budget reduction in education and an increase in the cap on tuition fees which universities could charge students (Holmwood 2011, McGettigan 2013). In response, major demonstrations were held, in London, over a two month period, of which the first, occurring on November 10, ended with the occupation and vandalism of 30 Millbank, Westminster; the campaigning headquarters of the Conservative Party. Some 50,000 protesters attended the protest, which was jointly organised by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the University College Union (UCU), and many other political groups were represented, including the Labour Party, the Green Party, Socialist Workers Party, and other left-leaning youth organisations, such as the Revolutionary Communist Group.

In general, the protest was peaceful. The official route, known as "Fund Our Future: Stop Education Cuts", was pre-approved with the Metropolitan Police, as demonstrators were sanctioned to march from Whitehall past Downing Street and then past the Houses of Parliament to meet outside Tate Britain for a rally. Firsthand accounts of the atmosphere of the march characterised it as 'energetic' with most protestors chanting a variety of slogans, the most popular of which were, 'No ifs, no buts, no education cuts!' and 'Nick Clegg, shame on you, shame on you for turning blue!'. .

Towards the afternoon, as demonstrators passed the Houses of Parliament and moved towards the rally location, thousands of protestors surrounded 30 Millbank. Initially, protestors and

police clashed at the entrance to the building, eventually overwhelming the limited police presence, allowing approximately two hundred activists to move in and occupy the building. Outside, protestors continued to skirmish with the authorities, chanting and cheering, in the forecourt of Millbank Tower. Near the entrance, the atmosphere was, at times, combative, as police used truncheons to maintain order. In response, protestors shouted “Fuck the Police”, along with “Fucking Filth”, as riot-control officers use physical force to create distance between the building and the crowd (Video 1, 2010, 2:50). Separate footage suggests that these police tactics follow the occupation and vandalism of the reception area of 30 Millbank, as protestors smash windows and seize the entrance. A group of protestors can also be seen shouting “Tory Scum” (Video 2, 2010, 0:29). Back inside, staff were promptly evacuated from the building, as a contingent of approximately one-hundred protestors moved through the reception area towards the roof of the building; an action which would be later celebrated as a collective achievement against the Conservatives (McIntrye, 2010).

What happened on the roof of Millbank Tower was widely reported in the mainstream British press. Edward Woollard, an 18-year old student from Hampshire, was found guilty of violent disorder after throwing a fire extinguisher from the roof of Millbank Tower in the direction of the protesters and police below (BBC News, 2011). Though footage reveals that this action was met with widespread disapproval from the crowd, who chanted “stop throwing shit” (Video 3, 2010) at the occupation above, Woollard’s actions were, nevertheless, reported to be illustrative of the ‘thuggish’ and ‘disgraceful’ nature of the occupation and protest (Hurst, 2010). Various commentaries pondered over why the violent disturbances erupted and, in a search for ‘whodunit’, journalists debated over whether the riots were caused by a splinter group of anarchists or a temporary state of anomie (Martin, 2010; Penny, 2010).

In either case, the purpose of this paper is to consider how Chalari might theorise these expressions of resistance apropos to the internal conversation. Taking quotes from protestors on the

day, we can consider how Chalari might begin to unpack their deliberations,

“I’m here because I believe in a fairer education system for all and I just don't think that the new plans will give everyone the fair access to university that they want” (Video 4, 2010).

So this individual *planned* to attend to this protest by way of *clarification* of the implication of government reforms for fair access to university. Utilising the internal conversation about resistance, it could be argued that her expressed action, of joining the protest, emerges from her subjective conception of what a fair education system should look like. The government cuts and increase in tuition fees is rendered problematic, as a stimuli, which then this individual interprets, through her internal conversation about resistance. This process allows the individual to clarify that an externalised action, expressible, in this case, as protest, is the *most appropriate activity*, given the *anticipation* that such action can lead to change. Similarly, another protestor comments,

“I mean with the Iraq war everyone came out on the streets but nothing changed so I hope that they will listen to our voice and that things will change” (Video 4, 2010).

Anticipation is much clearer in this example, as the individual states that she *hopes* that the protest action will lead to change, giving an insight into how this individual interprets the stimuli apropos to her conception of protest action as the *most appropriate activity* to bring about change in this case. Thus, both individuals *plan* their expressed action in line with their clarification of the stimuli, which is broadly in line with the reflective commentary of another demonstrator,

“We've been building up to this for so long there is such a good feeling on campus now. There are so many people who want to be involved in this fight” (Video 4, 2010).

The implication, here, is that the internal conversation of resistance sees an individual *plan* their expressed action - ‘protest-as-marching’ - based on an *anticipation* of (or hope for) its success. Beyond this, the individual can then *prepare* for this action which helps them to *make a concrete*

decision to resist. As this demonstrator shows, building oneself 'up' is part of the mental process of readying oneself for political action.

Certainly, one can raise legitimate questions about how first-person reports of political participation should be treated, particularly when the action concerned is as contested as the 'Millbank Riot' remains (Stott, Gorrington and Rosie, 2010). Our point is not to cite these brief statements as data about reasons for participation on the day but as illustrative cases with which to think through the underlying theoretical concerns of this paper. Nonetheless, we would strongly resist any slide from recognising that not all *reasons are causes* (or that retrospective accounts of reasons can be unreliable) to a generalised scepticism that reasons *can* be causes (Archer 2000, 2003; Elder-Vass 2010). Furthermore, the so-called 'Attitude/Behaviour gap' which points to the disjuncture between professed attitudes and actual behaviour is an explanatory conundrum which we believe can be solved by taking subjectivity seriously, rather than constituting a critique of such a theoretical move (Malpass et al., 2007, p.246).

One of the main advantages of Chalari's approach to resistance is that it emphasises the subjective choice to resist and entails that expressed actions are contingent on an individual's prior experiences. As such, it would follow, logically, that those who vandalised and occupied 30 Millbank might respond differently to the government's plans, possibly conceiving of them differently, due to their subjective experiences. As one demonstrator makes plain (Video 5, 2010, 3:40),

"Votes for women didn't happen until people started throwing themselves under horses and protesting violently and I think that violent protest although its not -- although its not entirely palatable, it is a legitimate, proper and, you know, and it is a way to protest".

Thus, an individual could *anticipate* that violent protest would be the most efficacious activity given the circumstances, leading them to *plan* and *prepare* for such an action accordingly. In this case, the act of bringing a hammer to the protest would be an example of an individual's *preparation* to cause criminal damage; an act which is actualised, for Chalari, as such internal arrangements concretise

external expressions.²

This is where we formulate our intersection into this discussion, recognising that whilst Chalari correctly emphasises subjectivity, her approach to resistance also risks lapsing into voluntarism. This concern stems from Chalari's approach to the external conversation about resistance, which we believe overlooks the relational dimension to social (and political) life,

“In all cases we refer to certain stimuli that activate some sort of internal conversation about resistance and may be followed by a further process”. (Chalari, 2013, p.80)

Where Chalari makes a powerful case for the relevance of interiority, her approach fails to observe the diachronic aspects of action-orientated deliberations. Protests take place *over time* and, thus, to develop an adequate sociological rendition of resistance, we believe that much more needs to be said about those 'further processes' through which agents come to shape themselves. For this reason, we begin with the idea that the *event* - the demonstration, the occupation and the vandalism of 30 Millbank - was itself contingent upon broader social relations within which the action-orientated deliberations of protestors were framed. What we intend to show is that the spatio-temporal enablements and constraints, entailed by marching down a particular route, at a particular time,³ frame the conditions within which intentional acts can take place. In other words, it is within the constellation of *relations* between subjects, situated spatio-temporally, in the empirical context of the demonstration and, yet, also extending beyond this, as biographically relevant details, that an adequate grasp of the connection(s) between individual reflexivity and intentional action remain.

Space, Contingency and Networks

To elaborate upon these points in a more substantive manner, we will now consider a first person account of the protest. The purpose of this is to highlight the contingent nature of the internal conversation of resistance through the narrative of someone who took part in the occupation of 30

Millbank. In providing an analysis of his blogpost,⁴ we begin to substantiate our account of resistance as *relational*, generative of its own ‘relational goods’ with a symbolic extension (from the networks within which the subject is *actually* embedded and whose reciprocal interaction generates the good) to a wider reference group which consolidates, in various ways to varying degrees, within the *event* as a spatio-temporal site of collective action. This is offered as a generative mechanism through which corporate agents, in Archer’s (1995) sense, are *affectively* consolidated at the macro level.

I was always optimistic. Reading the newspapers’ estimates of 20,000 students registered for the march the evening before, I thought to myself; I haven’t “registered”, no-one I know has “registered”... this was going to be huge. If you told me on that evening that I would end up on the roof of the governing party’s headquarters, however, I would have laughed. The sun was shining on the morning of November 10th, and our blood was boiling. If the government thought they could slash our education and destroy our futures without a response, they would soon have another thought coming. (McIntyre, 2010)

The decision to resist which so preoccupied Chalari can, in this light, be seen as one made with reference to networks of relations, some *real* and others *symbolically* assumed, characterised by greater or lesser degrees of solidarity as ‘relational goods’.

Me and Finlay, my younger brother, who could be losing his EMA under the education cuts, drove into central London around an hour and a half before the demonstration was due to begin. (McIntyre, 2010)

Indeed, it is the relation, between brothers, but also between friends, which provides the conditions of possibility for resistance, as *biographically relevant* aspects of these real and/or symbolically assumed relations mediate the reciprocal interactions necessary for ‘relational goods’. What is important is that these relations are also spatio-temporally constrained and enabled, entailing that our location in any particular space, at any particular time, can also frame our relations, which then

effects our action-orientated deliberations:

We heard loud music coming from the centre of the crowd, but as we located the moving bicycle it was emanating from, it became clear that this music was leading a crowd of its own. Finlay looked pleased; “Those are my friends from school!” he told me. We joined the music crew, which was weaving its way forward through the crowd. We were approaching the Treasury on our right; “That’s our first target,” I told my brother. The people with the music system must have had the same thought. All of a sudden, the bicycle burst out of the crowd, rushing through the pair of armed police guarding the private road of the Treasury. A group of 200 followed, including me in my wheelchair, and Finlay pushing at full speed. A dubstep tune came on, and the chanting began; “Fuck Cameron! Fuck Cameron! Fuck Cameron! Fuck Cameron!” Not the Treasury’s proudest day. (McIntyre, 2010)

This is a helpful illustration of how events external to a person or protestor can effect their relations with others, framing their actions within the spatio-temporal context of what other people are doing. In this case, the *presence* of friends, who were situated with a crowd that were following another presence, music, is enough to effect the dynamic of the relations that this protestor became part of. Indeed, the *fluidity* of resistance is clear from the protestor’s description of the event, as the presence of music and friends provides the condition for relations to be (re-)constructed. Relations, expressed here as, “We joined the music crew”, but which helped frame an example of resistance, as an intentional act, in which the context of following people (with a music system), down a particular route, towards the British Treasury, all matter in understanding ‘the decision’ to storm through its guarded private road. Of course, what is also important is the *affective* dimension to such relations, and how our emotions, moods and feelings all shape the (re)production of our relations in the context of the *event*, conditioning what resistance ‘looks like’ at any given moment. In this case, the presence of friends, music and, due to the contingency of the direction of the protest route, even *seeing* the British Treasury, framed the relations within which this protestor deliberated on his actions. Thus, if one is to analysis a political act, of being pushed quickly through the police sentry shouting “Fuck Cameron!”, then one must see resistance not as unitary, as a moment of

individual deliberation to an external stimuli, but as an emergent relation between people and their objective realities.

We turned right, onto Millbank. I met up with Kareem, who had postponed a studio session to join the action. “Where are we headed now?” he asked me. I wasn’t quite sure. And then I remembered. “The Tory Party HQ!”

The energy was rising. We were walking, jogging, running. We were ready. And then we saw it. To the right, a huge courtyard was packed with thousands of students, with thousands more still pouring in. In front of us, a huge glass building towered; it was the Conservative Party’s Headquarters, and it was under attack. The crowd was so tightly packed that even with the wheelchair, it was a huge effort to force our way through. Around half way we gave up. The crowd was swaying. “They’re smashing the windows...” Me and Finlay looked at each other. We knew that we had to make it to the front. Kareem started pushing the wheelchair again, and Finlay cleared a path in front of us. Two rows from the front of the crowd, I saw a close friend, Jonte. He grabbed my arm. “This is so tight, we are going to break the police line any moment now.” Me and Finlay went for one last push, and forced our way to the front. Five riot police stood in front of me, and they looked terrified. Their under-staffing is something that I now see as seriously suspicious. Perhaps the Metropolitan Police are keen to avoid the cuts the rest of us will suffer. “You want to go through?” one policeman asked me. “I want everyone to go through,” I replied. Red smoke billowed from flares, and shattered glass hung from what remained of the windows. The noise from the crowd was deafening. I could see that some students were already inside the headquarters.

It wasn’t long before the next surge came. A Mexican wave of bodies. I fell out of my wheelchair and pushed through two cops. Finlay stood behind me, the wheelchair still in his hands. The crowd continued to push. Below my hands, I could feel the smashed glass. The police were batoning the crowd, desperately trying to defend the Conservatives’ HQ. I tried to pull my way through, but my left leg was still trapped under two policemen. The crowd continued to surge. A demonstrator already inside the building grabbed my arms and pulled me through. I cannot describe the sense of achievement I felt at that moment. Scores of demonstrators followed. Finlay came running in with the wheelchair a couple of minutes later. Victorious chants rang in the air; “Tory scum! Tory scum!” “When they say cut back, we say fight back!”

But then, the chants changed... “To the stairs! To the stairs!” Two policemen

blocking a tiny door were soon brushed aside, and around fifty of us forced our way through before they had a chance to re-seal the entrance.

It was an epic mission to the top. Nine floors; eighteen flights of stairs. Two friends carried my wheelchair, and I walked. We couldn't give up now.

When we finally made it to the roof, a feeling of calm descended. I looked over the edge; thousands of students, three massive bonfires and masses of passion still occupied the courtyard. The Tory's HQ was on it's last legs. And we were on the roof".

This insert is quoted at length to capture the contingency of the event. It is clear from the narrative that decisions to resist are not only caught up in 'the heat of the moment', but that intentional action is itself conditioned by the relational network within which actors find themselves embedded. Thus, "we achieve autonomy within social relations but never autonomy from them" (Crossley, 2011, p. 19) as we move towards an interesting forum for *relational reflexivity*, embodied within action situations, in which an individual's reflexivity and decisions to act, such as occupying the roof top of Millbank Tower, is contingent upon their relations with other people and their reflexive deliberations. In this case, the affective component of these relations is (contingently) important in the context of the event. So, in this case, "When they say cut back, we say fight back!" is characteristic of the affective aspect of the relation, between people, as they were chanting, within a fixed and evidently crowded space. Of course, such concrete conditions cannot be appreciated without a clear conceptualisation of the contingent nature of the protest route, for this must foreshadow any notion of intentional vandalism or violence, as this narrative points out. Rather, in this case, the occupation of Millbank Tower and its rooftop can be seen as an *unintended consequence of intentional actions*, as highlighted in the beginning of the narrative,

"If you told me on that evening that I would end up on the roof of the governing party's headquarters, however, I would have laughed". (McIntyre, 2010)

In emphasising the contingencies which frame intentional action, we open up the situation to a

sociological critique which places intentional action within its proper, that is, historicised and relational, context. What arises is a relational account that shows how unintended consequences can develop, over time, as resistant intentional actions emerge within particular conditions, re-framing our original intentions, to give a serious account of the fluid nature of political activism. Where it can be said that there are collective moments, these should be understood in terms of relational networks, precisely because such a notion does not absorb the individual into any collective mass. Rather, individual actions are framed, relationally, in the spatio-temporal context of the event.

Relationality, Reflexivity and Theorising Resistance

On this view, social relations can never be reduced to *interpersonal* relations. Instead relations are understood as having “irreducible properties arising from the reciprocal orientation of those involved” and it is this reciprocity which (re)generates, qua emergent, the relational bond. As such, relations “cannot be reduced to the subjects even though it can only ‘come alive’ through these subjects”:

As in the paradigm case of friendship, it belongs to neither of the friends but is shared and valued by both. Each orientates themselves to the maintenance of this emergent ‘relational good’ (for example, by patching up a quarrel or keeping friendship in good repair); this reciprocal orientation becoming the source of collective intentionality in larger groups. Relational goods are generated from relationships linking those involved and are wholly reliant on the endurance of their bonding. Hence, no one can take away part of the orchestra or the football game as their personal possession and by taking themselves off they destroy the generative mechanism producing these very goods (Archer 2010, p.202-203).

This account of the genesis of ‘relational goods’ entails an attentiveness to their specificity. For instance, as Donati (2011, p.137-138) notes, “some authors think that trust has the same reality constitution when it is observed in the couple (married or living together) and in the informal extended network (of friendship, care, affection, etc.)” but for relational sociology this is not so

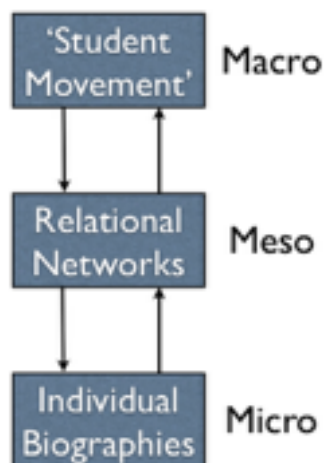
because “the different nature of these relations entails different realities of trust”. This specificity is necessary to understand how ‘relational goods’ can, to use Archer’s terminology, entail morphogenetic or morphostatic consequences within a given situation (Archer 2010, p.204). The evaluative orientation of subjects towards ‘relational goods’ (and their counterpart ‘relational evils’) renders possible what Donati calls ‘relational reflexivity’, which “consists in the subjects orientating themselves to the reality emerging from their interactions by taking into consideration how this reality is able (has its own powers) to feed back onto the subjects (agents/actors), since it exceeds their individual as well as their aggregate contribution to it by virtue of their personal powers” (Donati 2010 p.xvi). This is what we suggest is missing in Chalari’s (2013) account and, without it, we are left trying to explain resistance in terms of dissimilar reactions to common stimuli. At the outset of the paper we made clear our agreement with Chalari’s project of retrieving subjectivity as an explanatory variable in explaining resistance. Our argument is that it is insufficient to simply invoke the reflexivity⁵ of individuals engaged in resistance because “their relations with others also need retrieving as variable but powerful influences upon the equally variable outcomes that now constitute the lifelong socialization process” and that “otherwise, the entire concept risks drifting into an unacceptable monadism”(Archer 2012, p.97).

This quote from Archer (2012) was actually used in a different context, as part of a project which she had earlier described as “casting the theory of the making and breaking of modes of reflexivity in relational terms” (Archer 2010, p.206).⁶ We use it here because precisely the same point applies to conceptualising resistance as does with the emergence of a distinct mode of reflexivity. Unless we take account of the causal significance of relations then a diachronic account predicated upon the capacity for reflexivity risks sliding into monadism. Unless it is accompanied by an ensuing concept of personal change, such that the present exercise of reflexivity is seen to be conditioned by its past exercise and ensuing consequences for both self and circumstances, it also risks collapsing into the voluntarism of which King (2010) inaccurately⁷ accuses Archer (2000, 2003) but which could much more fairly be directed at Chalari (2013). However, if this is to be

avoided then we need to have a much greater degree of purchase upon *resistance* as a socio-cultural phenomenon, which enables us to conceptualise both its empirical patterning, and the underlying mechanisms generative of this patterning, without losing the subjective frame of reference which Chalari has introduced. Archer's work on *modes of reflexivity*, the social conditions tending to generate them and their attendant orientations towards social structure and norms, provides a potentially potent set of conceptual tools for explaining why some resist and others do not when presented with 'common stimuli' (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012). So too does the concept of the *relation* found in Donati (2010, 2011) and applied to the emergence of practices of reflexivity in Archer (2012), particularly with a view to understanding the social goods emergent from relations⁸ and the role which the evaluative orientations of actors towards them play in fostering projects of transformation or reproduction vis-a-vis the broader environment within which these relations are embedded. Furthermore, the concept of *relational reflexivity* will be integral to any attempt to understand 'resistance' as constituted through collective action which seeks to preserve the evaluative frame of reference of individuals as an explanatory variable.

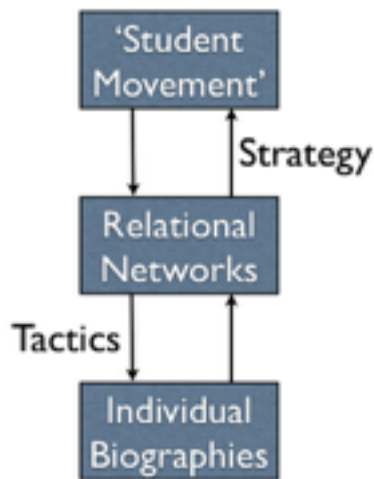
In this paper we have used the example of the 2010 student protests in London, as well as the ensuing 'Millbank Riot', as an explanatory aid in fleshing out our sympathetic critique of Chalari but also in an initial attempt to think through what a sociological analysis of 'resistance' that takes relational reflexivity seriously would entail. We have also used this as a basis to argue that both Chalari and the morphogenetic approach (Mouzelis, 1995) have tended to occlude the *spatiality* which is so integral to understanding the unfolding of those events. Our contention is that such a frame of reference helps trace the connections between individual resistance (individual reflexivity) and collective resistance (relational reflexivity) by foregrounding the venue through which *imagined solidarity*⁹ gives rise to *real solidarity* and can, in turn, be reinforced by it: the former constituted by knowing that others share one's evaluative orientation towards political event(s) and the latter emergent from the interaction of the demonstration. In doing so, we begin to open up the process through which individuals (on their own, with friends, as part of organised

groups etc) come through their collective participation in organised events.¹⁰ This constitutes one modality through which the ‘double morphogenesis’ of agency manifests itself empirically,¹¹ as “the self-same process by which people bring about social transformation is simultaneously responsible for systematically transforming agency” (Archer 1995, p.253). In such cases what Archer (1995) described at the macro level as the ‘grouping and regrouping’ of agency, constituted through their ‘elaboration *as* people’ can be analysed, at the micro and meso levels, in terms of the events through which converging individuals *begin* to coalesce into corporate agents, with the properties and powers of the latter emergent from the configuration of the latter, as inflected through the spatiality



of the event. In other words, we can understand something such as the ‘student movement’ (macro) in terms of the relational networks emergent from political events (meso) which are themselves constituted through the participation of individuals (micro). This is represented schematically below, which illustrates the ‘top down’ as well as ‘bottom up’ causation (Elder-Vass, 2012). While the ‘student movement’ is reliant on the individuals participating within it, it also *conditions* the circumstances within which such

participation unfolds: some forms of action are encouraged and others discouraged (e.g. the contentious issue of ‘direct action’ on the student demonstrations) while some ideas are promoted and others marginalised (e.g. the notion of ‘intergenerational injustice’ as a frame through which to understand the political situation facing the ‘movement’). These conditioning influences encompass



both *tactics* and *strategy*. The former has implications for the individuals who constitute and reconstitute the ‘student movement’ through their participation. The latter has implications for the ‘student movement’ itself, as particular networks at the meso level directly or indirectly¹² promote certain directions for the movement as a whole. The approach we are advocating allows for a plural ontology at the *meso* level while nonetheless affirming the existence of a ‘student movement’ as, following Archer

(1995), a corporate agent at the *macro* level. Obviously though the abstraction ‘network’ invites concretisation through empirical work. For instance in our particular case study, we would suggest that relevant ‘networks’, each with their own analytical history of emergence, include the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, the Education Activist Network, the Socialist Workers Party, the National Union of Students, various strands of the anarchist movement, student contingents of the various political parties and what Mason (2010) described as the ‘bainlieue-style youth from Croydon, Peckham, the council estates of Islington’. Furthermore, there are countless ‘nameless and faceless’ networks of individuals, some acquainted through participation in the ‘student movement’ but most presumably not, whose individual participation (micro) is integral to the dynamics of conflict and consensus at the network level (meso) the results of which shape the nature of the ‘student movement’ as a collective agent. Such is presupposed, we would argue, in attempts by more established activist elements to seek the ‘radicalisation’ of the movement (much as any empirically identifiable radicalisation within a movement cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the *internal constitution* of the movement itself or the events through which it is shaped and reshaped).

We have argued that the *event* represents a crucial modality through which (macro) ‘grouping and regrouping’ unfolds: it is in this sense that we are advocating that the ‘Millbank Riot’

be seen as a crucial movement for the ‘student movement’, not least of all because of the relative marginalisation of the National Union of Students which ensued amidst broader debates about the role of organised groups within the movement and their alleged propensity to claim ‘ownership’. However our broader aim has been, through a critique of the paper by Chalari, which we found extremely thought-provoking but ultimately flawed, to think through what a relational realist approach to social movements would look like. In doing so, our tentative suggestions are orientated towards the thorny issues within social movement research, which are ably summarised by Crossley,

We would all agree that social movements are ‘collective’ ventures, for example, but what makes a venture count as collective? Is it a matter of numbers? If so, how many? Is it a matter of a type of interconnection between people, an organization or network? If so, how is that interconnection itself defined? Does ‘wearing the badge’ and ‘buying the T-shirt’ make one part of a movement or must one attend monthly meetings and engage in protest? And if the latter, what counts as protest? Would wearing the aforementioned badge count as a protest or must one stand in a group of three or more people waving a placard? There can be no decisive answers to these questions. (Crossley 2002, p.2)

In closing, our paper has sought to address this challenge through an approach which considers the interconnections between the macro, meso and micro: seeing ‘social movements’ as corporate agents in Archer’s (1995) sense, constituted through entangled networks of variable consensuality or conflictuality but *ultimately* composed of individuals with their own biographies of participation. Thus we retain Archer’s (1995) frame of analysis within which a social movement, qua corporate agent, can be considered within a broader macro social context whilst also looking ‘downwards’ to the conditional circumstances within which individual participation unfolds. We maintain that this gives us a frame through which to examine how some forms of action are encouraged and others discouraged, as well as how some ideas are promoted and others marginalised, in the context of the networks of relations, where what is *real* and *symbolically* assumed is characterised by greater or

lesser degrees of solidarity as ‘relational goods’. Above all, we have laboured to give a serious account of the fluid nature of political activism that takes account of the causal significance of relations predicated upon the capacity for individual and collective reflexivity. Anything less risks sliding into monadism.

¹ Experience is invoked to explain the deployment of the subject’s causal powers in acts of resistance but there is little sense offered of how the subjects *themselves* change.

² An image under copyright but published in a national newspaper shows a youth with a hammer, celebrating, as they smash the glass of Millbank Tower (Gill, 2010).

³ Itself the consequence of prior negotiation between police and event organisers. It is crucial to note that the constraining and enabling influences enacted by the protest route are both an issue being negotiated, under the descriptions utilised by the actors party to the negotiations, while also inevitably outstripping the knowledge and forward planning of said actors. What makes the case of the organisation prior to a protest march so interesting is the extent to which such spatio-temporal constraints and enablements are prime concerns albeit in different ways and for different reasons of all parties to the negotiation.

⁴ The post is from journalist and political activist Jody McIntyre’s blog ‘Life on Wheels’ (McIntyre, 2010). To understand the content of the post, it is worth noting that McIntyre is a wheelchair user who is diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

⁵ We also have disagreements with how Chalari has conceptualised reflexivity. Though, as noted at the outset, her account draws on a much more expansive theoretical work (Chalari 2009) which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁶ See Archer (2000, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2012) for a comprehensive account of the theory of reflexivity, which has been elaborated through three empirical studies. The broader point here is one which could be detached in principle from Archer’s account of reflexivity though, in practice, such a move would seem puzzling assuming that the underlying premise of our argument (the need for both ‘real and efficacious subjectivity’ and an account of relations in order to offer an adequate account of resistance) is accepted by the reader.

⁷ In the case of Archer’s work, there is no transition from a “structural orientation in the 1980s to a preoccupation with reflexive individual agency” (King 2010, p.256) but rather the exploration of reflexivity to overcome what she saw as the inadequate notion of ‘structural conditioning’ within realist social theory (Archer 2007, Archer 2012, p. 294).

⁸ Which are occluded in interactionist or non-relational sociologies. Archer’s (2010) account of how Critical Realism has long lacked the theory of social integration which can be found within Italian Relational Realism points to the explanatory implications entailed by the broader meta-theoretical neglect of emergent relational goods.

⁹ By which we mean something akin to the distinction Elder-Vass (2010) draws between the proximal and imagined norm circle i.e. those in our local environment who ‘endorse and enforce’ a given norm and the broader group beyond this environment who we *imagine* to share this orientation.

¹⁰ We would not wish to downplay the extent to which a demonstration, *qua political event*, is conditioned by the prior action of a multitude of organisations and the interaction between them. This point could be seen dramatically in the internet debate between high profile figures provoked by the student protests. See for example Penny (2010) and Callinicos (2010).

¹¹ One which we firmly believe is *particularly* important for the formation of social movements, though a comprehensive justification of this claim is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² Indirectly in the sense that specific networks can, through their actions and or presence, shape strategy without seeking to influence it. For instance, the role that the ‘bainlieue-style youth’ played in pushing the tactics of the ‘student movement’ beyond what some of its more organised and/or centrist elements would have accepted, at least ideationally.

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