Academic Activism: Critical Realism, Reflexivity and the Internal Conversation

by

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SUMMARY

The adjustment of universities to the neoliberal logic has resulted in a severe restriction of academic freedom to question, resist, and transform the logic of market forces. Against this backdrop of devalued human agency, this research explores the possibility of academic activism in current times. In that exploration, it acknowledges that that possibility has two dimensions: *structures* of possibility and *human* capacities of possibility. This draws specific attention to the nature of the relation between social structures and human agency that persists as a thorny problem for sociology and the social sciences more broadly. The project takes a realist (anti-positivist and naturalist) route to address that problem. It assumes the task of investigating the human capacities for social change, because they represent potential impediments to the expansion of neoliberalism. To explore those human capacities, this research draws on Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and its sociological operationalisation via Margaret Archer's Morphogenetic Approach (MA). The framework provided by critical realism and the MA ensures a realist approach to answering the question: *What kinds of reflexive capacities do academic activists possess and draw upon in their activist work?*

This project takes Archer's conceptualisation of reflexivity as the bridge between structure and agency. Reflexivity is revealed in the 'internal conversations' people have about themselves and their relations to wider worlds. This study employs theory-driven interviews to explore the internal conversations of seven scholar activists. As a result, the project offers insights into how scholars make sense of their activist practices and how they articulate their own self-transformation with broader struggles of social transformation in the neoliberal university.

Bhaskar's critical realism proves useful in presenting an understanding of neoliberalism as an

emergent form of capitalism that pervades all levels of the social being. This understanding, in turn, permits the re-conceptualisation of activism as an ongoing reflexive practice that is fuelled by powerful emotions and sustained by the real possibility of actualising alternative ways of being and acting in the world.

A key finding of this study is emergent forms of reflexivity informing the praxis of activism. Those emergent forms relate with the reflexive capacities to: (i) underlabour reflexivity; (ii) tap into the ground-state; (iii) practice selflessness; and (iv) adopt 'grounded' optimism. While further research is needed, this study suggests that these emergent reflexive capacities are linked to an increased understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. This awareness, in turn, offers a solid base for enhanced agency towards resisting and transforming the different forms of oppression historically emergent in the workings of capitalism.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Celina Valente

25/10/2021

ACRONYMS

CEPs	Cultural Emergent Properties
DCR	Dialectical Critical Realism
MA	Morphogenetic Approach
MPS	Mont Pelerin Society
PEPs	Personal Emergent Properties
PMR	Philosophy of metaReality
SEPs	Structural Emergent Properties
TINA	There Is No Alternative
TMSA	Transformational Model of Social Activity

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PROLOGUE

I was sitting towards the back of the lab and looking out the second level window at the trees, feeling a bit hot and distracted. Our teacher was discussing the topic of Thermodynamics. As the teacher briefly described the Laws of Conservation of Matter and Conservation of Energy, I experienced one of the most profound embodiments of deep understanding of my life. Looking down at the old lab benchtop, scarred from 50 years of graffiti and repainting, I UNDERSTOOD that the surface was timber.

It had been a tree. That tree had taken carbon from the atmosphere to incorporate into the trunk. That same carbon had come to the atmosphere from the breath of some other creature who had eaten a plant, fertilized by manure of another creature and broken down by microorganisms...

I felt a profoundly physical embodiment of deep understanding, of the shared and interconnected nature of existence. I felt and saw the infinite interconnections in an instant. Looking down at "My" hands, it was irrefutable that this collection of recycled atoms was not really "Me". Those molecules had been trees, space dust, dinosaur poo and immeasurable things before. They were merely borrowed by me and only for a short time! Many of them would no longer be with me by the end of the year! The interconnection and shared nature of the Stuff of Our Universe, of the Energy and Matter, escalated my strong sense of personal justice to a life of embodied activism.

I am by no means a radical activist. However, my daily actions are founded on a considered ethical basis and deliberately designed to honour my very personal sense of justice, equity and respect to the sphere of life and molecules we inhabit.

That experience of electrifying epiphany over 30 years ago is still fresh. Recalling it reproduces goose bumps every time. That experience of instantaneous, whole-bodied, reverential knowing, profoundly informed my decisions and actions from there. Pursuing harmonious, respectful, equitable actions has been the only conscionable choice.

(Steph)

For there is only one world, albeit there are very variant descriptions of it, the theories and principles of critical realist philosophy should also apply to our everyday lives. If they do not, then something is seriously wrong.

(Bhaskar, 2016, p. 4)

In October 2018, while I was on a field trip with my son's class, I sat with another mum with whom I had become quite close during the school year. Since I was part way through my PhD – and very much immersed in the world of the activists I interviewed for my project – the topic of activism came up. As I knew that she was a committed environmentalist, I asked her about the starting point of her activism. The story she told me is captured above. Steph wrote it down for me and generously allowed me to share it.

Steph's experience is testimony to the significance and, quite possibly, the uniqueness of the human experience. These kind of events of "instantaneous, whole-bodied, reverential knowing" about the interconnectedness of everything that exists are also reflected through the experiences of the academics interviewed for this project. This account from a 'non-academic' activist reminds us that the participants in this project are human beings first and foremost. Admittedly, as academics, they occupied positions of relative privilege, and they were also constrained by the structures they produced and reproduced. But, as human beings, they shared the same deep-real capacities and ontological limits with all persons.

Furthermore, Steph's narrative suggests that there are deeper levels of reality, and thus of possible knowledge, than mainstream Western philosophy might tend to accept. Tapping into those deeper levels is available to all of us. The fact, moreover, that experiencing "the shared and interconnected nature of existence" has such profound and long-lasting effects in people's sense of ethics is worthy of exploration. Critical realism, as a philosophy, is intended to "apply to our everyday lives". In all its richness and complexity, critical realism is a great explanatory and emancipatory asset for not just social scientists but all of us. It is my hope that this project stands as evidence of the underlabouring potential of critical realism to explore the nature of our 'human-ness' and, relatedly, to assist us in the realisation of our collective capacities to make our

social worlds human ones where, to echo Marx and Bhaskar, the flourishing of each depends upon the flourishing of all.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Critical realism sets out the goal of an eudaimonistic society as one in which the free flourishing of each is a condition for the free flourishing of all. (Bhaskar, 2016)

The greatest resource we have for building eudaimonia is people and their fundamental capacities. (Hartwig, 2015)

(…) we need a theory that can account for the selves who make choices as academic workers. (Clegg, 2005)

In its most general terms, this project is about the fundamental capacities of human beings to transform the world and, in the process, transform themselves. More particularly, it is about a certain *kind* of human agent, the higher education academic, and their socio-historically conditioned capacities to act for the realisation of a society founded on an ethic prioritising the free flourishing of all beings.

This project advances a critical realist humanism. In broad terms, humanism is conceived here as a philosophical outlook that stresses the capacity of human beings, by means of mindful thought and action, to transform both the world and themselves in the same movement. In this regard, humanism evaluates its success in terms of the enhancement and emancipation of human powers and potentialities (Harvey, 2014, p. 161). A critical realist humanism differentiates itself from other kinds of humanism in that it advances the position that no social organisation of human life can be considered emancipated unless it permits the thriving of all human and non-human beings (Benton, 2001). In that regard, a critical realist humanism is collectivist and non-anthropocentric. That is to say that it is diametrically and fundamentally opposed to the alienating, instrumental, and oppressive values underpinning the neoliberal logic. At the core of the critical realist non-

anthropocentric humanism lies the possibility of real change: the human capacity for reflexivity at the service of selfless, loving, compassionate actions towards the rest of the living beings that inhabit this world. This project contributes to that tradition by illuminating the causal mechanisms that actualise those human potentialities.

It does so by relying on critical realism to study one of the human abilities that, as Hartwig (2015) put it in the opening quotes, is a fundamental resource for building eudaimonia: human reflexivity. Critical realism understands that the 'default' mode of human being is not calculative exchange and self-interested competition but "trust, care, love and solidarity", where human agency is "relatively autonomous of social structures" (Hartwig, 2015, p. 232). The capacity for reflexivity reminds us that there is a *real* choice to be made between living our lives according to market-interested values or values of human flourishing, for example.

Drawing on the ground-breaking work of British sociologist Margaret Archer (2003) I show that reflexivity is the nexus between the objectivity of social structures and the subjectivity of agents (see Chapter 5). For Archer, reflexivity is revealed in the 'internal conversations' people have about themselves and their relations to wider worlds. I take Archer's research and insights and apply them to illuminate the reflexive processes of academic activists as they position themselves within and against the neoliberal university.

The significance of this thesis is double-edged. One has relevance to the field of sociology. In applying Archer's research, it contributes to the stock of sociological knowledge about the possibility of human agency vis-a-vis social structures. In this sense, it offers a deep and restorative engagement with the notion of agency, embodied by academic activists. The other has social relevance. It seeks to explain why and how academics might be activists for a 'eudaimonistic society': a social world that takes human flourishing as its highest good (Bhaskar, 2016, pp. 164-

165). This approach does not take universities in isolation from society but rather recognises the place (real or otherwise) assigned to universities in Western liberal democracies as institutions of free and critical inquiry. What might the possibility of academic activism tell us about the possibility of social activism more broadly in current times?

This introductory chapter begins contextually by discussing the 'neoliberal turn' (Tight, 2019) in universities and its implications for considering the reflexive capacities of academics. In bringing together what it is referred here to as 'structures of possibility' and 'human capacities of possibility' (G. Banfield, personal communication, October 10, 2020), space is made to provide a general outline and overview of the research. The focus here is on introducing what it means to understand and conceptualise academic activism through a critical realist lens. The third and fourth sections of the chapter turn to the task of detailing the objectives of the research and identifying its relevance and delimitations. In conclusion, the chapter provides an overview of the thesis structure and, in doing so, registers the commitment of the research to the critical realist goal of explanatory critique.

1.1 Background: reflexivity as resistance in the Neoliberal University

Substantially, this project is concerned with the possibility of academic activism in times of neoliberal capitalism. Historically, academics have had considerable autonomy to explore and question beyond the logic of the market forces. They have enjoyed, in this sense, 'academic freedom' (Banfield, Raduntz, & Maisuria, 2016; Blomley, 1994; R. Martin, 2009; Miller, 2019). However, this has come under threat in the last thirty or more years – as has university freedom – as a consequence of the neoliberal turn in higher education.

Drawing mainly, but not exclusively, from the work of David Harvey (2005, 2014), this study

understands neoliberalism as an historically specific political project advanced by capitalist elites in response to post-WWII crises of global capitalism. That project's aims were set not only to extend the logic of the markets to all the areas of social life but also to make market logic the 'common sense' of our era (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). In this way, neoliberal capitalism has become deep-rooted "in the ideological, political, social and cultural fields that are enmeshed in creating the conditions in which a mass common sense is manufactured" and therefore stepping outside of it is "close to impossible, as neoliberal relations are part of all modern life" (Maisuria, 2017b, p. 309).

Crucially, the neoliberal project was founded on crafting a new kind of human being (G. Banfield, personal communication, December 1, 2020). Whyte (2019a) stressed the fact that early neoliberals pictured themselves as battling for much more than an economic programme. They were aiming to generate the moral values and subjective qualities required for a competitive market order. Quoting the influential work of Wilhelm Röpke, Whyte identified those qualities as "self-discipline, a sense of justice, honesty, fairness, chivalry, moderation, public spirit, respect for human dignity, firm ethical norms – all of these are things [according to Röpke] which people must possess before they go to market and compete with each other" (Whyte, 2019b, p. 36). In this way, neoliberalism is to be grasped not simply in terms of structural or even ideological forms, but in the subjective transformation of human beings to the extent they come to embody the logic of capital, that is, they become capital. The neoliberal project entailed a long and slow infiltration and capitalisation of social institutions (Harvey, 2005). This has been the case with universities and includes, as this research demonstrates, the making of the neoliberal academic (G. Banfield, personal communication, December 1, 2020).

Universities are only one of the many battlegrounds on which the simultaneous struggles to

impose and resist a neoliberal worldview have been waged. Although universities have "always existed in tension between the impulse to human freedom and resignation to the constraining powers of church, state and capital", the neoliberal turn, in its attempt to impose a logic of "indoctrination, regulation and accumulation" (Banfield et al., 2016, p. 4), has resulted in an escalation of that tension. As a result, higher education today is increasingly commodified, with its research, teaching and learning capacities shaped as products available for purchase and market consumption (Connell, 2013; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005; Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007). This process has been assigned different names: *neoliberal university* (Ball, 2015; Canaan, 2013; Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Giroux, 2014), *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), *enterprise university* (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

The mechanisms implemented to shape the cultural life of universities have been well researched and documented: the *audit technologies* (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 7), the ever increasing standards of productivity (Lynch, 2010), the soaring workloads, the increasing casualization of teaching (Brown, Goodman, & Yasukawa, 2010), the adoption of managerial practices imported from the corporate world (Marginson & Considine, 2000), are just a few examples of the changes that have happened in universities over the last decades. All these changes aim to restrict human agency:

> Students are reduced to test scores, future slots in the labor market, prison numbers, and possible cannon fodder in military conquests. Teachers are reduced to technicians and supervisors in the education assembly line – 'objects' rather than 'subjects' of history. This system is fundamentally about the negation of human agency, despite the good intentions of individuals at all levels. (Lipman, 2004, p. 179)

The opening of universities to the logic of the market has been accompanied by an implementation of strict forms of control and surveillance of academic labour, revealing that the neoliberal turn in universities exceeds mere economic motivations. It entails strategies directed

towards the production and reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities. For that reason, Sotiris (2012) suggests that the neoliberalisation of universities has to be conceptualised as a "complex process of adjustment to capitalist imperatives and not as simply the transformation of Universities into actual corporations" (p. 121).

So damaging have been the effects of that process that some authors have suggested that academic workers are turning into zombies due to their submissive behaviour in the face of the neoliberal attack on universities (Ryan, 2012). According to Bronwyn Davies and Eva Bendix Petersen (2005), neoliberalism hinders resistance in universities "by persuading each individual academic to treat the effects of neoliberalism as personal successes, responsibilities and failings rather than as a form of institutional practice in need of critique and transformation" (p. 77). The failure to plan and implement strategies for resistance is, thus, an unequivocal indication of the effects of the neoliberal turn in universities.

In a context delineated by the *structural* conditions imposed by the neoliberal project, Heath and Burdon (2013, p. 389) ask: "what is the source of the capacity to resist?". Finding answers to this question requires, as O'Mahoney, Vincent, and Harley (2018) put it, "a non-reductive, multi-level analysis" of oppressive structures and the emancipatory potential of agency capable of distinguishing between the ontological distinctive properties of both and sensitive to the relations stablished among them (pp. 576-577).

Underpinned by critical realism, this project probes into the *agential* dimension of the structure/agent problematic to illuminate the human capacities for social transformation.

1.2 Outline of the Research Topic: academic activism through a critical realist lens

This research is an engagement with the possibility of academic activism that is based on a realist view of the human being. It acknowledges two dimensions of possibility: structures of possibility and human capacities of possibility (G. Banfield, personal communication, October 10, 2020). This project assumes that deepening our understanding of the human capacities for reflexivity, for love, for solidarity, for creativity, and the human yearning for freedom and flourishing, becomes imperative under the rule of neoliberal capitalism. The crucial value of investigating the human dimensions of the social world resides in the fact that they represent possible impediments to the advance of neoliberal competence and individualism. In that regard, the ways in which activist scholars negotiate the structural changes affecting them, and the approaches to activism that they effectively practice, become a source of knowledge. Their experiences can give social theorists, academics, and activists, insights about the potentials for social change that exist within the scope of our human possibilities.

To take on the challenge of exploring those human powers, this project relies on a particular kind of realism. The kind of realism advocated here is the realism captured in the work of Roy Bhaskar (1998, 2008, 2009) who outlines a path between interpretivist and positivist understandings of the social world and advances a resolution of the enduring problem of structure and agency (objectivity and subjectivity).

The main feature of Bhaskarian critical realism is that it brings the question of ontology clearly into the picture. Bhaskar (1998, 2008) argues for a revindication of ontology which is necessary for a realist account of science to be possible. In this way, Bhaskarian critical realism maintains that science is a social and realist practice and, for its own intelligibility, needs to discern epistemology

from ontology: (fallible) knowledge of its objects from the objects themselves (G. Banfield, personal communication, March 23, 2020).

Moreover, critical realism argues that the world presents depth and structure. It makes an ontological distinction between different levels or domains of reality (Bhaskar, 2008). This distinction implies *emergence*, that is, a process in which the deepest domains of reality generate the necessary conditions for the more superficial levels to exist (Bhaskar, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2005). In this way, the social world is conceptualised as emergent from the natural world. The former has, nonetheless, *sui generis* properties and powers. Unlike the natural world, the social world consists of human beings and their reflexive and social-making capacities. In this regard, social sciences need to account for human reasons as the "irreducible and necessary form that causes assume in the social world" (Norrie, 2010, p. 10).

With the scaffolding provided by critical realism, this project addresses a gap in social theory that relates to understanding the individual capacities of agents to transform the world around them. That agentic capacity is approached in this study under the light of activism. Existing conceptualisations of activism are problematic at two different levels. At the epistemological level, widespread representations of activism promote "dramatic, physical, 'macho' forms of activism with short-term public impacts" (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 200). The Oxford English Dictionary (2018a), for instance, define activism as "the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change". Activism is, in this way, reduced only to actions that can be seen and somehow measured. Such a representation assumes that what needs to be changed belongs solely to the empirical world: to the world that immediately presents itself to us. Seeing activism as limited to what happens, for example in street demonstrations or in political bunkers, is an acceptance of only the surface appearance of things while ignoring the structured, emergent and

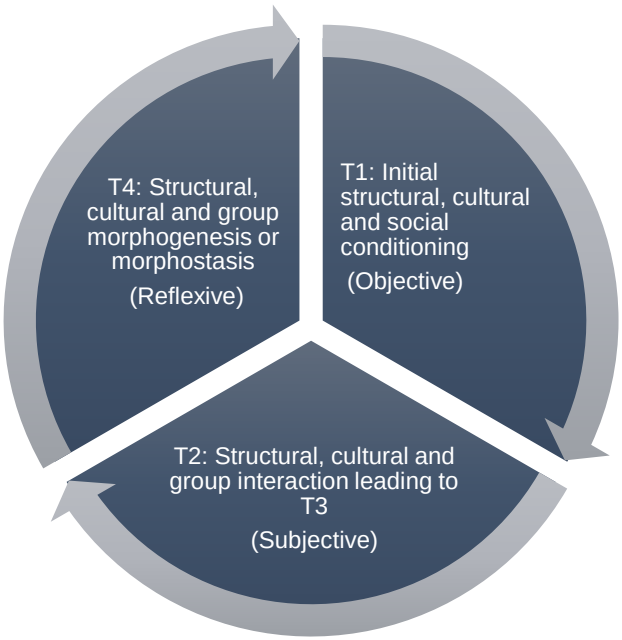
multidimensional features of the social worlds. Such a shallow understanding of activism overlooks the realist point that the causal mechanisms underpinning the inequalities, oppressions and alienations that activism stands against are structured and operate at different and deeper levels. The nature of alienation in capitalist societies implies, for example, that human beings are not only dispossessed of the means of production but they are also deprived of the connection with their own inner lives, with their fellow human beings, and with nature itself (Ollman & Bertell, 1976).

A review of the literature reveals that there is a lack of realist research about what activism is and how it is practised and embodied. The general trend in Western philosophy and science is to "reduce existing things into thoughts" (Alderson, 2016, p. 201)—ontology into epistemology (Bhaskar, 1998, 2008, 2016). Traditional approaches tend to conflate the misguided representations of activism described above with the real, embodied, practice of historically and socially situated activists (Flood, Martin, & Dreher, 2013; R. Martin, 2009; Young, 1999). In this way, they mistake the map for the road, perpetuating what Bhaskar refers to as the 'epistemic fallacy' (see Chapter 2): the confusion of what is known with what is. In following the seriousness with which the critical realist takes ontology, this research understands the transformative impulses of activism to be ontologically wide and deep. Transformation is not limited to social change. It also, and importantly, refers to the 'inner' capacities of reflexivity, or what Archer refers to as the "life of the mind" (Archer, 2003, p. 34), of academics.

The theoretical and methodological tools offered by Archer (1995, 2000; 2003, 2007a) are employed as the starting point to explore the internal conversations of activist scholars. Archer approaches the study of structure and agency as consisting in different and irreducible kinds of properties and powers (Archer, 2003, p. 2) that can only be separated analytically. On the one

side, social structures emerge from human agents but have powers that are different and non-dependent upon any individual agent. On the other side, human agents also have emergent causal powers that they can use to mediate the conditionings impinged upon them by social structures and to change or reproduce those structures. Archer captures the relation between structure and agency in a model she called the Morphogenetic Approach (MA) (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2003). The MA sees the interplay between structure, culture, and agency as a recurrent process that each person transits continually throughout life. Figure 1.1 visually illustrates the three stages in the mediatory process of social conditioning, namely: i. *Objective* (T1) social and cultural properties shape the situations which agents–involuntarily–face (T2); ii. Agents *subjectively* (T3) define their projects in accordance with their individual constellations of concerns; iii. Agents *reflexively* (T4) decide courses of action in relation to their objective circumstances.

Figure 1:1 The Morphogenetic Cycle.



As this figure indicates, by embracing a strong form of ontological realism, critical realism recognizes reflexivity and internal conversation as unobservable causes of social change. This way

of looking at the interactions between structure and agency opens the possibility to postulate the question: what human capacities are involved in the transformation of social structures? Among those human powers, there are those of thinking, deciding, creating, believing, empathising, caring, loving, etc. Archer encapsulates those powers under the overarching notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity is described as the human power "to deliberate internally upon what to do in situations that were not of our making" (Archer, 2003, p. 342). Despite the fact that reflexivity serves the crucial social function of mediating between bio-psychological structures and social structures, it remains relatively unexplored territory (Archer, 2003).

While Archer's work on reflexivity draws primarily on the early development of critical realism, i.e. basic or original critical realism (Gorski, 2013; Norrie, 2010), this project, guided and supported by the demands of explanation emergent from the empirical data, brings in key ideas developed in the later phases of critical realism to shed light on some of the features of the participants' reflexivity. Early critical realism puts the emphasis on the centrality of *being* (ontology). Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR), in turn, conceptualises *being* as a totality in permanent motion, always *becoming* (Norrie, 2010). More importantly, it incorporates human beings as the "*only moving forces in geo-history*" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 69). The philosophy of metaReality (PMR), in turn, explores the potentialities of human agency. It outlines how reflexivity is enhanced by developing an increased awareness of more fundamental levels of reality in which all humans are interconnected and dependent upon each other and upon nature. According to the PMR, that awareness creates the possibility to overcome the current structures of alienation and oppression and allow humanity to thrive and flourish (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 203).

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

Supported by the critical realist framework outlined above, and drawing upon Margaret Archer's

notions of *morphogenesis* and *reflexivity* (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2003), this project sought to describe and explain how academic activists engage in internal conversations to make sense of their practice and how they articulate their own self-transformation with broader struggles of social transformation in the neoliberal university. The broad research question was:

What kinds of reflexive capacities do academic activists possess and draw upon in their activist work?

To operationalise this broad question, four interrelated sub-questions were employed:

1. What are the objective conditions that allow the emergence of activist dispositions in academics?
2. What is the subjective configuration of concerns that lead academics to adopt activism as a significant practice within their *modus vivendi*[1]?
3. Do academics consider the transformation of their own subjectivities a main concern in relation to activism?
4. What *subversive values*[2] do academic activists bring to their practice?

In order to adequately explore these questions, the study was guided by 5 objectives: (i) establishing the critical realist methodological framework; (ii) producing an ontological analysis of the objects of study; (iii) explaining the research design appropriate for this study; (iv) developing

1 *Modus vivendi* refers, in Archer's work, to a particular set of projects and practices adopted by an agent in order to successfully establish a way of living that mirrors her unique configuration of concerns. The establishment of a *modus vivendi* involves a reflexive process – the internal conversation – which acts as a nexus between the objectivity of social structures and the subjectivity of agents. See: Archer (2003, pp. 149-150).

2 Certain values, like kindness and compassion, are considered subversive of neoliberal common sense because they cannot be regulated or prescribed (Clegg & Rowland, 2010), therefore, like other properties and powers exclusive of human agents (love, care, reflexivity), they cannot be subsumed by the logic of the markets.

suitable methods to analyse and present the data; (v) outlining the contributions of this study and suggestions for future research.

1.4 Relevance and Delimits of the Study

It is against the background described above, where the market logic has conquered not only the institutional but also the personal spaces (Clegg, 2011), that the relevance of this project becomes clear. In exploring academic activism in the neoliberal university, a strong focus on agency is essential because macro-level changes are mediated through the capacity for creativity and resistance of individual actors (Clegg, 2005). In this regard, understanding the ontological mechanisms underpinning the social practice of activism is key, not only in the face of the adversity of the current neoliberal push, but also because it provides a better insight to the process of social change in general.

This study contributes to the fields of sociology and critical realism through advancing the knowledge of the interconnections of personal and social transformation. It is also expected that the project will be of interest for activists and leaders committed to social change in that it sheds light onto the ripple effect of small, routinised and reflexive activist practices. Additional audiences are students, educators and researchers in higher education, as well as people working in community development.

This project was limited to an in-depth exploration of a small number of cases within public Australian universities. Furthermore, the focus was exclusively on the inner reflexive capacities of those scholars. Issues of collective activism or political affiliations fell beyond the scope of this study.

1.5 Methodological Framework and Presentation

In outlining the project's methodological framing and its form of presentation, its critical realist underpinnings need to be emphasised. As such, both reflect an approach to research that treats content and process as structured, differentiated and emergent (See Chapter 2 and Appendix A). In critical realist terms, its methodological commitments are dialectical and anti-positivist (Bhaskar, 2016) which demand an organic, non-linear, engagement with the research problematic, explanatory theory and empirical data. For example, the reader won't find in this work 'watertight compartments' into which elements of the research process and its presentation (e.g. literature review, methods and techniques, findings, discussion and conclusion) are placed. While there is a clear articulation of a general problematic, as presented earlier in this chapter, it is to be expected that the problematic will unfold as the process of exploring it proceeds. By following a critical realist methodology, all the above elements were present in the research but not tackled in a sequential way. Instead, they were approached organically in a way which denied their presentation as elements of separate boxes. The presentation of the participant portraits in Chapter 4 is an example of this. The portraits are not the outcome of the straightforward application of analytical tools to empirical data but rather, the emergent outcome of a dialectical engagement of the two.

Furthermore, the reader will notice that no chapter is exclusively dedicated to the 'literature review'. Literature is introduced where specific content-driven explanation is required. The reader will also find that a discursive presentation style has been applied. This acknowledges the reality, contra positivism, that the researcher reflexively engages with research content and process.

Also, it must be emphasised that the organisation of the chapters reflects the "primacy of ontology" advocated by critical realism (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 79). In sharp contrast to positivism and

social constructivism that emphasise experience and epistemology, critical realism directs attention to identifying and explaining the workings of ontologically deep mechanisms beyond the appearance of things and knowledge of them (see Chapter 2). The search for explanation (rather than prediction) is central in a critical realist research project. This involves a process of *explanatory critique* that Andrew Collier (1999) describes as "an explanation of something which criticises it, not *in addition to*, but *by* explaining it" (p. 35). Explanatory critique identifies a misleading or false idea held about a certain aspect of reality, i.e. academic activism, and retroduces to the deep causal mechanisms generating that idea (Evenden, 2012). Once the mechanisms are exposed, a better and more deep-real understanding of the subject matter can be offered. The significance of this process is that it allows science to bridge the gap between explanation and informed action directed to transform false beliefs and, eventually, the social structures they help to uphold[3]. In that regard, explanatory critique is a form of *ethical naturalism* which implies that ethics are ontologically grounded in human nature. The ultimate task of social science, thus, entails an effort to identify false beliefs that impede the full realisation of human potentialities and to inform action directed to remove their causes. In Mervyn Hartwig's words, successful explanatory critique "achieves a transition not just from facts to values but also from (explanatory) theory to practice, form to content, demonstrating their dialectical unity and entailing that social science is intrinsically emancipatory" (Hartwig, 2007a, p. 94). In what follows, the organic, dialectic and iterative process of *explanatory critique* that informed this project (see Appendix B) is outlined.

3 Explanatory critique is philosophically underpinned by dispositional realism (see Chapter 2), that is, the idea that alternative possibilities are real, but effort is needed to actualise them (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 99).

Chapter 2 begins the task of outlining the conceptual (underlabouring) tools that critical realism brought to the project. It does so by describing the three stages in the development of critical realism. Each stage advances fundamental notions for a better understanding of social realities. The re-signification of social reality as a structured, emergent, and open totality that exists in a constant process of *becoming*, provides the necessary scaffolding to explore the role played by the reflexive capacities of academic activists in progressive[4] social transformation. The chapter finishes with an exploration of the implications of a critical realist approach for the study of academic activism. These implications are put to work in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 3 addresses the research design and methods employed in this study. It deals with the implications of assuming a multidimensional and stratified ontology for the field work and the interpretation of the data collected. Those implications are discussed in terms of causality, abstraction modes, and research design. In particular, the latter is described as an intensive research design aimed to access the inner states of agents and illuminate the kinds of relations between the agent (academic activist) and the broader social and cultural structures (the neoliberal university). This is followed by a detailed account of methods used to elicit the data for this project. The methods employed to select the participants (strategic sampling), to collect the data (theory-driven interviews), and to present the data (Morphogenetic Portraits) are discussed here.

Any critical realist project aiming to explain and critique certain aspect of reality should start from the concrete, material aspects of that reality. A vital aspect of describing the reality under study

4 'Progressive' social change is taken here to be in close relation to the ethical naturalism underpinning critical realism. In this way, 'progressive' activism is understood as the kind of activism directed towards advancing a world where the free flourishing of each depends on the free flourishing of all.

involves reporting “the interpretation of the persons involved and their way of describing the current situation” (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jakobsen, 2002, p. 109). Chapter 4, therefore, introduces a portrait of each participant in this study. Those portraits were crafted through combining the MA and the portraiture technique (see Chapters 3 and 5) drawn from participant interviews. The purposes of the portraits are twofold. First, they illuminate the participant’s inner narrative of his or her embodied experience of activism. These are presented in the participant’s own words. Second, the reflexive process of the researcher is revealed in the portraits. The close examination of the internal conversations of academic activists reveals certain shared reflexive capacities. That commonality will allow to pose the retroductive question: What must the world be like for the reflexive capacities of academic activists to appear in the data in this way?

Chapters 5 and 6 outline a “new context of ideas” (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 110) from which to offer a comprehensive answer to that question (See Appendix A). Each of those chapters addresses an ontological analysis and critique of a different aspect of the object of this study: the structure/agency problematic and the actual context in which that problematic takes place for the purpose of the study, i.e. universities under neoliberal capitalism. Chapter 5 explains how, by embracing a commitment to ontology (Chapter 2), critical realism establishes an ontological distinction between structures and agents. In this way, for critical realism, structures and agents are different kinds of things and, therefore, both possess different kinds of powers. While structures always precede and restrict agency, agents retain the power to creatively transform social forms. That transformative power of human agents is exercised via the reflexive process that takes place in our internal conversations. For that reason, Archer (2003) refers to reflexivity as the bridge between structure and agency. It becomes clear, then, why investigating reflexivity becomes imperative to re-signify and deepen our understanding of academic activism.

Drawing on the tools provided by Chapter 5, Chapter 6 addresses the central issue of this project, as it emerged from the participants' experiences captured in Chapter 4: the possibility of academic activism in the neoliberal university. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, it explores the material (i.e. structural and discursive) contexts where academic activism is embedded. Neoliberalism is grasped materially as a political project aimed to expand the logic of markets to more and more areas of social life. The analysis then turns to the different ways in which the field of Higher Education has been transformed throughout the process of neoliberalisation and, more specifically, to the profound effects it has had in the re-signification of the role of academics in a democratic society. On the other hand, the transformative capacities of academic activism are illuminated. First, through a review of the literature, the common understandings of academic activism are exposed. When set against a realist view of academic activism, the point is made that these understandings are limited in important respects. Those elements are then analysed in terms of (i) reflexivity, as an ongoing practice that has the potential to activate causal mechanisms for social change; (ii) emotions, conceptualised as the irreducible link between reflexive thought and purposive action; and (iii) concrete utopianism, that is, the capacity to imagine and materialise alternative ways of being in the world.

Chapter 7 represents a distillation of the work done in the previous chapters (see Appendix A). It addresses a temporal, morphogenetic, analysis of the data through the lenses of the 'new context of ideas' outlined in chapters 5 and 6. In addressing the main research question, the chapter outlines and explains the structural contexts of emergent activist dispositions. This allows for a consideration of what the chapter refers to as 'the politics of reflexive activism'. Those emergent dispositions underpinning the politics of reflexive activism are identified as: the embodiment of particular values subversive to neoliberalism; the enactment of those values in projects

transcending self-interest and embracing human flourishing; and the practice of self-liberation from oppressive and erroneous structures. It is then demonstrated how participants' daily practices are underpinned by reflexive activism and concrete utopianism in an ongoing struggle to produce, in the present, better alternatives for the future. Lastly, the case is made that, emerging from the data, some reflexive capacities can be identified that are either missing from or not fully developed in Archer's categorisation of reflexive modes (see Chapter 5). Those capacities are discussed in terms of emergent 'enlightened reflexivity'.

Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the potential contributions that this study makes to the existing stock of knowledge in the fields of critical realism, sociology, and activism. It begins, for reasons of clarity, with a brief recap of the explanatory critique that was followed in the previous chapters. Then, it moves towards highlighting the findings and contributions offered by this study. First, it analyses the insights on the study of academic activism that assuming a critical realist perspective has offered. Secondly, it indicates the different ways in which the MA can be complemented and enhanced by interacting with the later developments of critical realism. Lastly, suggestions for future lines of research are made. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the research process.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL REALISM

> *A good part of the answer to the question 'why philosophy?' is that the alternative to philosophy is not 'no' philosophy, but 'bad' philosophy. The 'unphilosophical' person has an unconscious philosophy, which they apply in their practice – whether of science or politics or daily life. (Collier, 1994, p. 16)*

As Collier eloquently claims, we all have – and live by – a philosophy, whether we acknowledge it or not. The significant difference that critical realism brings is that instead of risking a 'bad' philosophy guiding our research, it encourages us to bring to the fore and, in so doing, deeply analyse and consciously choose the philosophy we want to stand for. Critical realism, contrary to mainstream Western philosophy, takes ontology seriously. It asks researchers to be explicit about the underpinning ontological assumptions of their study. Taking that lead, this chapter explores the central features of the three movements in the development of critical realism and argues that they provide the necessary conceptual scaffolding to explore human reflexivity.

The chapter begins by briefly positioning Bhaskarian critical realism in relation to other philosophical approaches that carry the descriptor *critical realism*. This serves not just to delineate Bhaskar's critical realism from other forms but also to highlight its particular strengths in advancing the practice of emancipatory social science. This is followed by an explanation of the three movements in the development of critical realism: early critical realism, dialectical critical realism and the philosophy of metaReality. Early critical realism is analysed in detail with the aim of exposing its key tenets about ontology and epistemology and, in this way, providing the necessary scaffolding to approach this helpful way of thinking about the world, namely, that it is multi-dimensional, structured and emergent. Next, a succinct explanation of the further

developments of critical realism is provided. The notions advanced in these later developments are of essential importance for illuminating the reflexive capacities of academic activists. Finally, the implications of a critical realist approach for the study of activism are advanced and the focus of the research is described in terms of the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 5.

2.1 Critical Realisms

In the simplest account, any philosophy which emphasizes the existence of a reality independent of our knowledge can be called 'realist' (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 3). Some types of realisms claim that the judgement of what is real is an empirical matter (Collier, 1994). In other words, they reduce what is real to what can be directly perceived through the senses. These forms of realism receive the name of 'empiricism' and, according to Collier (1994), represent a weak form of realism. One of the most common forms of empiricism is actualism, which is encountered again later in this chapter. The term actualism was used by Bhaskar to refer to those views that, while recognising the reality of things (a cloud, an atom, a person) or events (historical, cultural) independently of the human mind, deny the existence of underlying structures that produce or make possible those things or events (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 393; 2016, p. 201).

Bhaskarian critical realism, on the contrary, is committed to a strong form of realism (Collier, 1994). It makes the case that reality is greater than what our senses are capable of apprehending and argues for a realism consisting of elaborating "what the world must be like *prior* to any empirical investigation of it and *for* any scientific attitudes or activities to be possible" (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 4). In *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008), first published in 1975, Bhaskar demonstrates that, in addition to being *intransitive*, that is, independent from our knowledge, the things that exist in the world have certain properties and powers and no others as a result of their inner structures, which do not always manifest themselves empirically (*transfactuality*). He also asserts

that the world is *stratified*, that is, differentiated and layered. These three claims (intransitivity, transfactuality, and stratification) form the core of Bhaskar's *transcendental realism* (Psillos, 2007), which is explored in more depth in the following section.

In addition to its commitment to a strong form of realism, Bhaskar's philosophy stands out as a particular kind of critical realism. Hartwig (2007b) identified numerous philosophical developments under the name of critical realism. Dating back as far as the early nineteenth century in Germany, and moving across the globe to England, Austria, France, North America, Canada and Australia, the term 'critical realism' has a long and intricate history, along which it has carried different meanings (Hartwig, 2007b). Among all critical realist developments, Bhaskarian critical realism stands out as a "self-contained philosophy" (Losch, 2009, p. 96). The main feature that differentiates Bhaskarian critical realism from previous critical realisms, and from most of the contemporary positivist and post-positivist approaches to science, is that it brings the question of ontology clearly into the picture. Bhaskarian critical realism is serious about ontology in ways that other forms of realisms have not been. Indeed, in *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008), Bhaskar argued for a revindication of ontology which was necessary for a realist account of science to be possible. In this way, the Bhaskarian critical realism position is that science is a real social practice which, for its own intelligibility, needs to discern our imperfect representations of the objects from their reality, that is, epistemology from ontology (G. Banfield, personal communication, March 23, 2020). With this revindication of ontology, Bhaskar initiated the philosophy of critical realism, as it is known today. Discussing the first stage in the development of critical realism is the focus of the next section.

2.2 Early Critical Realism

It is worthy of note, at this point, that Bhaskar did not refer to his early philosophical

developments as critical realism. It was not until much later that he accepted the use of the term: "I had called my general philosophy of science 'transcendental realism' and my special philosophy of the human sciences 'critical naturalism'. Gradually people started to elide the two and refer to the hybrid as 'critical realism'" (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 190). This section expands on the basic features of 'transcendental realism' and 'critical naturalism'.

Bhaskar's main goal was to create a philosophical system to *underlabour* all sciences. He borrowed the metaphor of 'underlabouring' from the British philosopher John Locke who, in the eighteenth century, claimed that the role of philosophy was to 'clear the ground a little' to help clear the path for the practice of science. In that sense, the goal of critical realism is to remove "the philosophical rubbish that lies in the way of scientific knowledge, specially but not only in the domain of social science (…)" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 2). The ultimate purpose in that process of conceptual ground-clearing is to allow science to work, uncluttered, towards its intended aim: human flourishing and wellbeing. Aspiring to seriousness and coherence, Bhaskar was committed to producing a philosophy that 'we can act on' (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 2). However, for serious and coherent action, it is necessary for scientists to establish the nature of the (natural or social) objects of inquiry.

Bhaskar dedicated most of his intellectual work to fulfilling the task of developing a philosophy that could be acted upon. He first turned his attention to natural science and developed *transcendental realism*. This represented a middle way between the two dominant and divergent approaches to Western science: Humean empirical realism and Kantian transcendental idealism. In the former, scientific knowledge is understood to be derived solely from sensory experience. Only what is experienced can be said to be real. According to Hume, the task of science consisted of inferring *causal laws* from *empirical regularities*, i.e. the repetition of atomistic sensory experiences. One of the pitfalls of this position is that such empirical regularities very rarely occur

outside the laboratory's closed environment, therefore being almost impossible to find in the social world which, by definition, is an open system. Hume's empiricism was very influential in the historical development of scientific thought, passing down the "problems of a closed system conception of reality to future accounts of the scientific method" (Morgan, 2007a, p. 170), i.e. positivism.

In contrast, the problem of scientific knowledge was approached in transcendental idealism via the Kantian *transcendental* question "how is empirical knowledge possible?" (Collier, 1994, p. 20). Kant's answer was an *idealist* one. He claimed that the world must have a certain structure for it to be knowable, i.e.: it is organised in time and space, it possesses things and events, and causal laws govern them (Collier, 1994, p. 21). For Kant, "a universal reason or knowledge a priori imposes the structure of time, space and causation on experience rather than the other way round" (Morgan, 2007b, p. 247). He did not argue against the existence of an external world; rather, it could not be known. Crucially, Kant's transcendental idealism tended to reinforce the Humean position that all that is scientifically knowable is that which can be observed or directly experienced (G. Banfield, personal communication, September 9, 2020).

For Bhaskar, both approaches were partial and inadequate. The objects of scientific inquiry are not, as in empiricism, simply observable phenomena; nor are they, as in idealism, exclusively mind-models created to explain observable events (Bhaskar, 2008). Bhaskar's *transcendental realism* acknowledges both a mind-independent *reality* and a *transcendental* movement of thought from the observed to the unobserved. The main tenet of transcendental realism is a clear distinction between the world as it is (ontology), and the possibility of knowledge about it (epistemology)(Bhaskar, 1998, 2008, 2016). In this way, critical realism avoids the epistemic fallacy or the tendency to collapse being into thought, ontology into epistemology

In *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar, 1998), Bhaskar extended his transcendental realism to underlabour the social sciences that, as he saw, were riven with debilitating antimonies (Hartwig, 2007a, p. 92). This was the second move of 1M critical realism (see Section 2.3) – originally known as *transcendental realist critical naturalism* (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 137) but which subsequently has come to be understood as simply 'critical naturalism'. According to Bhaskar, critical naturalism offered an alternative to the main traditions in social sciences: hyper-naturalistic positivism with its law-finding aspirations for social sciences, and anti-naturalist hermeneutics with its tendency to reduce explanation to interpretation and meaning-making (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 2013; Sayer, 2000).

The 'naturalism' of *critical naturalism* serves to indicate the ontological grounding of both the natural and the social worlds in natural necessity. It is a naturalism "which stresses the crucial role that being (ontology) plays in our understanding of how knowledge (epistemology) is possible" (Norrie, 2010, p. 7). Furthermore, consistent with the structured and differentiated depth realism advanced in his transcendental realism, Bhaskar's naturalism can be described as (i) *ontological,* articulating the dependence of the social on the natural; (ii) *scientific*, unifying the social and natural sciences in a common method and (ii) *axiological*, enabling the explanation of human emancipation in terms of human beings as natural kinds (Banfield, 2016, p. 3).

On the other hand, the 'critical' of *critical naturalism* indicates a crucial difference between the social and the natural worlds. Unlike the natural world, the social world consists of human beings and their reflexive and social-making capacities. In this regard, social sciences must address the hermeneutic premise that human actions are meaning-dependent. This does not mean, however, that the purpose of social sciences is limited to the interpretation of meaning. On the contrary, as Norrie (2010) clarifies:

> (…) intentional human agency is inconceivable without society, and society is a necessary, structuring conditioning for its possibility. At the same time, however, society and social structures exist only by virtue of the intentional human agency that reproduces and transforms them. In this context, human mind and intentional agency are emergent properties of a certain kind of physiological matter to which they are irreducible. (p. 10)

For critical naturalism, then, social sciences "can be 'sciences' in exactly the same sense as natural ones, but in ways that are as different (and specific) as their objects" (Archer et al., 2013, p. xvii). That is to say that natural and social sciences are unified in the *form* and *reasoning* that scientific knowledge takes (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 18), i.e. a transcendental movement of thought from manifest phenomena to the underlying structures that generate them. Now, because "all science follows its object" (Hartwig, 2007a, p. 92), the difference between natural and social sciences lies in the fact that social sciences need to account for human reasons as the "irreducible and necessary form that causes assume in the social world" (Norrie, 2010, p. 10). Bhaskar developed this idea of social causation as dependent on intentional agency in a model called the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) which is addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

So far, a description of the two movements that preceded the formation of critical realism has been exposed. Transcendental realism, a philosophy meant to underlabour for natural sciences, states that the world exists independently of human knowledge and, furthermore, that it has ontological depth. Critical naturalism, as a philosophy for the social sciences, argues that the social world, although emergent from the natural world, incorporates intentional human agency as its essential constituent.

In his exploration of critical realism, Marxism and education, Banfield (2016, p. 3) makes the point that critical realism supposes a double movement in science: (i) from epistemology to ontology and (ii) from empirical phenomena to the mechanisms that generate the phenomena. That double movement entails, in turn, working with what Bhaskar calls *transcendental arguments*, that is,

asking what the world must be like for science to be possible. According to Bhaskar, the world must be *stratified*, *differentiated* and *emergently real* to allow for the possibility of knowledge (Bhaskar, 1998). It is to explore those features that the analysis turns in the next sections.

2.2.1 On ontology and ontological depth

Hartwig (2007c, p. 335) defines ontology as the study of "real world objects and their intrinsic structures, properties, causal powers and so forth". It derives from this definition that reality (natural and social) is neither transparent nor flat, but complex, structured and layered. Therefore, the goal of science should be a movement "from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of the structures that generate them"(Bhaskar, 1998, p. 14).

That movement implies going from superficial to deeper levels of the phenomenon under study. Therefore, in a critical realist study, ontological questions are foundational. Those questions are intended to build what Bhaskar calls a *transcendental argument*. Such an argument is an attempt to explain "what must the world be like for some social practice to be possible" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 3). Examples of ontological questions are: is this phenomenon real? Does its existence depend upon other things? What are its intrinsic characteristics? What causal mechanisms make it possible? Is it a social phenomenon? Critical realism assumes a realist stance regarding ontology, arguing that reality exists independently of human knowledge about it and that social life is part of that reality (Bhaskar, 1998, 2016). In researching the ontological reality of activism, it is essential to ask ontological questions such as: What makes activism possible? How can it be known to exist? What conditions make it possible? What are the inner characteristics of an activist?

By taking ontology seriously, critical realism offers a way of looking at the social world that differs from the classical sociological traditions split along Humean and Kantian lines. Instead of

perpetuating a dualist understanding of the world, which immediately translates into unreal antagonisms (nature vs. social, structure vs. agent, mind vs. matter, social sciences vs. natural sciences, and a long list of et cetera), critical realism aims to transcend those dichotomies (Archer et al., 2013; Bhaskar, 2016). Critical realism "turns dualisms into interactive dialectics" (Alderson, 2016, p. 203) by elaborating a layered and structured view of reality, as is shown in the following sections. In this way, critical realism can hold complex and diverse perspectives on any social phenomenon, like activism, without reducing or oversimplifying it.

2.2.2 Domains of reality

In *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar (2008) establishes that "the world is stratified" and that "(i)t is contingent that the world is such that science is possible" (Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 198-199). In other words, the fundamental premise of critical realism states that the world must be stratified for scientific knowledge to be possible. The differentiation of the scientific knowledge of nature mirrors that fundamental fact. Physics and chemistry, for example, are more basic than biology which, in turn, is more basic than psychology (Danermark, 2002, p. 4).

Critical realism recognises an ontological distinction between three different levels or domains of reality. These levels are not reducible to one another and they are not in isomorphic correspondence. In that regard, Bhaskar (2008) notes that:

> Mechanisms, events and experiences thus constitute three overlapping domains of reality, viz. the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical. (…) Now, these three levels of reality are not naturally or normally in phase. It is the social activity of science which makes them so (pp. 46-47).

In short, what exists in deeper levels of reality may not be the same as what is actually manifested at the more superficial levels. The level of the *real* comprises everything that exists in the world. Every object, every structure, natural or social, belongs to this level. These structures possess

generative mechanisms or causal powers, even though the powers may be unexercised. In other words, in this realm, not only real structures and their actualised powers exist, but all their potentialities are also encapsulated (Connors, 2015, p. 16). Emotions, cognition and reflexivity are some examples of deep generative mechanisms that operate in the world (Archer, 2000; Archer, 2003; Lamb-Books, 2016). Although unobservable to the researcher, these kinds of mechanisms, as explained in Chapter 6, are essential to make sense of activism as an emergent social phenomenon.

The domain of the *actual* consists of events that occur when the structures existing at the level of the real activate all or some of their powers. Again, those events may exist in complete independence of our awareness of them. The realm of the *empirical* encompasses – from the totally of structures, mechanisms and events existing in the other two levels – only those that become evident to our perception and, therefore, those that we actually experience. This domain also contains the subjective, therefore incorporating concepts, and sings along with the empirical. In this way, experiences, concepts and signs are real but they belong only to the human subjectivity (Hartwig, 2007c, p. 401). Christian Smith (2011, p. 93) puts it like this: "(…) what we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual), and neither is identical to that which is (the real). The three must not be conflated". The following table offers a visual representation of the relations among these domains and the entities in the world.

Table 2:1 Stratified Ontology (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 2)

Entities/Domains	*Real*	*Actual*	*Empirical*
Mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences/Concepts and signs	✓	✓	✓

An important consequence of this ontology is, according to Sayer (2000, p. 12): "the recognition of the possibility that powers may exist unexercised, and hence that what has happened or been known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen or have happened". In this way, a realist approach to the ontological nature of activism can illuminate what mechanisms are set in motion in order to allow certain powers of human beings to be actualised. For instance, it could be identified that the experience of certain emotions is essential to trigger a sense of connection with other human beings, shifting the focus from the self to the broader community, and making it possible for a person to manifest dispositions towards activism that were not previously displayed.

Another critical result of holding to a stratified ontology is related to the concept of emergence. Emergence, as the following section shows, is crucial to understanding causation.

2.2.3 Emergence and causation

The critical realist distinction between the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical suggests that the reality we live in is multilayered (Christian Smith, 2011) or stratified (Sayer,

2000). Each of the three domains of reality (real, actual and empirical) has its own powers and structures and is conditioned but not determined by the lower levels (Danermark, 2002). Those powers and structures are considered to be *emergent*:

> Emergence occurs when an entity possesses one or more 'emergent properties'. An 'emergent property' is one that is not possessed by any of the parts of the entity individually, nor when they are aggregated, without a structuring set of relations between them. (Elder-Vass, 2005, p. 317)

The most commonly used example to represent emergence is the case of water (Elder-Vass, 2005, p. 317). The constituent elements of water – oxygen and hydrogen – are, in themselves, flammables. Water, however, has the emergent property of putting fire out. Grammatical structures are another example of emergence. A sentence may have explanatory powers, but if we isolate the single words that form that sentence, they will not explain anything at all. At the level of social formations, it is possible to think of institutions as having emergent properties. A university, for instance, has the power to grant degrees to its students, a capacity that no individual or group of that university has. In this instance, the power of individuals and groups to act is conditioned by the positions they hold within the university.

Emergence is essentially interwoven with causation (Elder-Vass, 2005). Attending to both mechanisms positions a critical realist study differently from positivist or interpretivist research. Positivists and interpretivists, alike, gravitate around Humean classical empiricism which, as already discussed, equates scientific work with the inference of causal laws from empirical regularities. Quite the opposite, critical realism, by accepting a stratified and differentiated ontology, demonstrates that structures, mechanisms, and events exist in the world beyond the human possibility to experience them. Therefore, it assumes causal laws to be "independent of the patterns of events that might be used as symptoms for the presence of laws" (Hartwig, 2007c, p. 61). In summary, against empiricism, the critical realist view of causation insists that scientific

explanation cannot be reduced to the description of empirical regularities and actual events.

It may be useful to turn to a concrete case to illustrate the differences between the positivist and the critical realist views on causation. Statistical co-variance, for instance, does not explain the causes for two events to occur at the same time. Danermark et al. (2002, pp. 53-54) offer the example of the co-occurrence of storks and babies in some German villages. The correlation of those two variables was unmistakeable. Therefore, according to an empiricist view, it would have been scientifically accurate to hypothesise that storks brought babies. However, when looking beyond the statistical correlation of events, it was possible to find another cause that both events had in common: countryside. Storks, due to a multiplicity of reasons, were more common in the countryside at a time when the birth rate was higher in rural areas than in cities. It is possible now to conclude that the statistical co-variance of the two events was a spurious correlation.

As shown in the previous section, the level of the real contains structures that have generative causal powers. Some of them are actualised, therefore expressing their effects at the level of the actual; some of them remain un-exercised. A causal power refers to the capacity of making things happen in the world. Hence, a cause is not the same as a statistical correlation (Danermark et al., 2002). In order to identify and explain the causal mechanisms at work in any phenomenon, it is the purpose of science to *dig deep* (Collier, 1994, p. 50). In Sayers' words:

> What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening. Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions. (Sayer, 2000, p. 14)

The example given of the correlation between storks and babies may seem absurd, but its purpose is to show the reasoning behind empiricist methods in social sciences. When statistical correlations are not absurd, predictions and decisions are made using those regularities as

justification. It is in those opportunities that the dangers entailed by empiricism become evident.

The example of *free labour* gives an idea of how pernicious the effects of empiricism could be. In capitalist societies it appears as if workers sell their labour to the capitalist in a free exchange. On the surface of things, the *free will* of workers is evident. However, a transcendental realist account would dig deep and search for the causes of that deceptive free exchange in the structures of society. As Banfield (2004, p. 59) explains, those structures "are social relations and not the events, actions or behaviours they generate". They may be unobservable (like gravity, social class or reflexivity), but they are possible to be known and studied by the effects they produce. In the example given, by adopting a transcendental realist vantage point, generalised *master–slave-type* social relations (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 55) become powerful explanations, and what appeared to be, at first sight, a voluntary exchange between free individuals can be re-conceptualised as a *relation* of oppression and exploitation. It is precisely this capacity to go beyond appearances which makes science necessary. As Collier (1994) emphasizes: "without the contradiction between appearances and reality, science would be redundant, and we could go by appearances" (p. 7).

On the one side, then, critical realism embraces naturalism inasmuch as it recognises that social sciences, like natural sciences, should aim to uncover the deep structures of reality that are independent of human knowledge (e.g. social relations and economic relations). The logic used, however, is not that of empiricism that would assume a flat ontology and would, therefore, look for causes at the level of events. Transcendental arguments are used to move beyond appearances and look for the deep real causal mechanisms of simply observable events.

On the other side, critical realism recognises that the social world differs from the natural world in a crucial way: it is made of human beings and their reflexive and social-making capacities. In this way, critical realism is "only partly naturalist, for although social science can use the same

methods as natural science regarding causal explanation, it must also diverge from them in using 'verstehen' or interpretive understanding" (Sayer, 2000, p. 17).

Sayer's differentiation between method and explanation is instructive. Critical realism does not reject the use of interpretative or hermeneutic methods in social science. However, it does reject the idea that interpretive understanding is sufficient for causal explanation. Porpora (2015) puts it succinctly when he explains that if the social sciences require interpretative methods, "it is because hermeneutics is the way to access the distinct mechanism through which human actors behave" (p. 64). For critical realism, those mechanisms can include reasons which are as real as the structural circumstances actors face, and both causally interact with each other (Maxwell, 2012, p. 21).

Therefore, a critical realist underlaboured social science will set out to offer causal explanations for not only structural change but also for the reasons motivating agents to bring about those changes (Bhaskar, 1998). Those two kinds of causal explanations should complement, rather than exclude, each other.

A further qualifying difference between the natural and the social sciences for Bhaskar is the observation that the latter cannot achieve experimental closure. It must aim for causal explanations in open systems.

2.2.4 Open and closed systems

The differentiation between closed and open systems plays a significant role in critical realism (Faulkner, 2007). Closed systems are those where the researcher can control the variables at play and isolate one single causal mechanism, provoking, in this way, certain regularities to occur (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 55).

The problem with closed systems is that they are, most times, artificially created – even in the case of natural sciences. In the social sciences, as Archer explains, "it is quintessential that society is an open system" (Archer et al., 2013, p. 190). Even if social researchers could achieve a situation of experimental closure from external variables, because social systems are necessarily 'peopled' and people have inner powers such as reflexivity and creativity, the closure would never be complete. *Intrinsic sources of openness* are impossible to avoid since they are ontological constituents of human beings (Archer et al., 2013, p. 190).

The real world is an open system where "an unlimited number of ever-changing causal processes operate simultaneously, interfering with each other in irregular ways" (Porpora, 2015, p. 43). It is, therefore, in open systems where social scientists should, as previously discussed, aim for causal explanation. According to Porpora (2015), causal explanations operate at three different levels in accordance with the nature of an open, emergent and stratified reality. The first level corresponds to the identification and description of the causal mechanisms and powers that are constituents of the phenomenon or thing under study. Secondly, typically via narrative means, explanations are produced to account for the contingent (not necessary) conjuncture of mechanisms that were activated, in a unique moment of history, to produce the phenomenon or thing. Finally, among all the possible methodologies, one is explicitly chosen to explain that phenomenon or thing. The choice of one explanation above others does not imply rightness or superiority. It rather reflects the fact that, according to critical realism, "ethnographic description, statistical correlation, and narrative explanation are all equally important but different aspects of a scientific approach to a causally open world" (Porpora, 2015, p. 32).

Whereas more detailed description of this process is offered in Chapter 3, it is worth noticing here that the causal explanations offered by social sciences are necessarily complex, partial and fallible.

Not only do social scientists need to deal with an ontologically open reality, they also must elaborate causal explanations contemplating reflexivity on at least two levels. On the one hand, people's beliefs and ideas affect the ways they behave and the world around them and should, therefore, be considered. Even more so when that relationship becomes conscious and they actively decide to influence it, as in the case of activism. On the other hand, qualitative researchers cannot avoid interacting with the participants in their research, in the process affecting the reality they are studying. This makes the social world different from the rest of the natural world, by adding openness and reflexivity to it as ontological constituents.

2.2.5 On epistemology

Once a realist ontological position has been defined and ontological questions have been identified, it becomes necessary to raise questions about the nature and possibility of knowledge. This is the domain of epistemology, which Danermark et al. (2002, p. 205) usefully define as "the examination of the conditions, possibilities, nature and limits of knowledge". For realists like Bhaskar, the questions of epistemology take on significant importance. As Collier (1994, pp. 6-7) explains, Bhaskarian critical realism, committed to a strong form of realism, is able to articulate the following claims about knowledge:

- Objectivity: there is an objective reality that does not depend on our knowledge of it. Something can be real, and unknown to science, at the same time.
- Fallibility: the fact that the real world exists, independently of our knowledge of it, guarantees that every claim made about reality is always subject to refutation by additional and novel information.

- Trans-phenomenality: in the sense of going beyond what is apparent. Critical realism suggests that science should seek knowledge of the deeper structures and mechanisms that produce appearances.
- Counter-phenomenality: knowledge of the underlying structures of reality may not only explain but also contradict what appears to be true on the surface. It is in this sense that science becomes an emancipatory endeavour.

It follows from these claims that what exists, reality, is qualitatively different from the knowledge humans construct about it. Accordingly, for critical realism, the distinction between ontology and epistemology is crucial. Indeed, Bhaskar considers this distinction to be one of his most important contributions to the Philosophy of Sciences (Bhaskar, 2016, pp. 6-7).

As advanced in the preceding sections, Western philosophy of science tends to collapse real things into concepts, ontology into epistemology (Bhaskar, 1998, 2008, 2016). As a result, the real objective world is reduced to what human knowledge can apprehend about that world. Bhaskar called this reduction the *epistemic fallacy* and it entails the danger of confusing real things with our constructions or representations of them, e.g.: real human activists with abstract representations of activism. In this sense, "theories partly illuminate, but they also limit and fragment" (Alderson, 2016, p. 203) research about activists' complex inner and outer lives.

When it comes to epistemology, critical realism makes a clear distinction between the *transitive* and the *intransitive* dimensions of knowledge. The latter comprises the knowledge of things that are not produced by people at all, like gravity, rainbows, or photosynthesis. The former refers to the socially produced objects that are also a matter of scientific study, like theories, paradigms, surveys, or experiments. While the intransitive objects of knowledge are independent of and invariant to our knowledge of them, the transitive objects of knowledge are not. The transitive

objects of knowledge are used to study the intransitive, unknown, structures of the world (Bhaskar, 2008). In other words, the intransitive dimension of knowledge corresponds to the world as it is (its objects, structures, processes, phenomena, etc.) independently of our knowledge of it; whereas the transitive dimension, on the other hand, refers to the relatively stable accumulation of knowledge that humans produce about the real world (science) (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 6). None of these dimensions of knowledge should be reduced to or assimilated with the other because, as Alderson (2016, p. 203) eloquently articulates: "although our thoughts can affect real people and events, they do not create those realities".

This distinction between the world and our knowledge about it reflects the critical realist commitment to a "non-epistemic conception of truth" which "allows for the possibility of a divergence between what there is in the world and what is issued as existing by an epistemically right theory" (Psillos, 2007, p. 399). In other words, it implies that science, namely human knowledge about the world, is fallible. It is precisely because of the fallibility of our knowledge that we can be certain about the existence of an independent reality. Otherwise, how could we ever be mistaken (Sayer, 2000, p. 2)? By assuming the independence of reality (ontology) from our knowledge of it (epistemology), critical realism avoids the *epistemic fallacy*.

This differentiation has real uses and consequences, not only for philosophy but also for sociology and applied research. In Chapter 6, the case is made that traditional representations of activism (epistemology) only partially reflect the reality (ontology) of activism. Most representations have assumed activism as engagement with reactive, dramatic and even hostile practices. However, by adopting a critical realist standpoint, it can be shown that all persons are potentially activists inasmuch as – at deeper levels of reality – the production and reproduction of society is made through them, yet not all take a conscious and reflexive stance towards their place in the overall

context. In this way, what lies at the core of activism, that is the choice of positioning oneself reflexively and responsibly in the world, is missed at the epistemological level. One reason for that to be the case may be found in prevailing empirical realism. Empirical realism, as explained above, assumes the world consists of observable events (Sayer, 2000, p. 11). In this way, only what is visible is real; unobservable causes are dismissed, resulting in a flat ontology. The underlying causes of actions and behaviours, like inner reflexive deliberations and emotional states, are disregarded by empiricism. In contrast, as emphasized in Chapter 5, critical realism offers a stratified and emergent ontology capable of accounting for agents' reasons, emotions, and values as the real causes of observable behaviour.

By studying, with the tools offered by critical realism, deeper and more complex levels of activism, the gap between epistemology and ontology becomes evident and, thus, workable. During the two movements that followed the early stage of critical realism, Bhaskar developed additional conceptual tools to underlabour for those deeper dimensions of reality. Those conceptual tools – that include notions like dialectics, intentional agency and ground-state –constitute the foundation for the critical realist analysis of academic activism developed in Chapter 7. The focus of the following sections is on exploring the contributions of Dialectical Critical Realism and the philosophy of metaReality.

2.3 Dialectical Critical Realism

Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) entails a materialist diffraction[5] of the dialectic already implied in

5 In physics, diffraction is used to refer to the multiple phenomena that occur when a wave (i.e. light, sound) encounters an object. Bhaskar employed this term to illustrate how, in the structured and differentiated reality of the social world, dialectic breaks up into a plurality of forms. In Norrie's words: "Once we loosen the grip of idealistic

Basic Critical Realism. As Norrie (2010) explains, the two movements of basic critical realism, i.e. transcendental realism and critical naturalism, were already dialectical. Accordingly, those movements were attempts to resolve the tensions and antagonisms that were hindering the work of natural and social scientists. According to Bhaskar, DCR was "the dialectical enrichment and deepening of critical realism" where the latter was "understood as consisting of transcendental realism as a general theory of science and critical naturalism as a special theory of social science" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 2). That entails, as described below, a dialectical process.

According to Bhaskar (1997), within the social realm, dialectic "constitutes a general schema for a learning process in which absence (2E), signifying incompleteness, leads to transcendence and a greater totality (3L), in principle reflexively (4D) capable of situating itself and the process whereby it became" (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 141). In other words, dialectic entails a process of ongoing learning and changing. That process emerges from the rawness of the social realm and it is driven by the reflexive capacities of social agents. This understanding of dialectics is significantly different from the meaning assigned by Hegel to the same word in the XIX Century.

In *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993), Bhaskar builds his argument for a dialectical critical realism by offering a "non-preservative sublation" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. xiii) of the rational and idealist ontology advanced by Hegel. Whereas the term *sublation* usually refers to a negation or elimination that preserves partial elements of the previous thing (Merriam-Webster, (n.d.)), Bhaskar's sublation of the Hegelian dialectic entails such a radical reformulation of it, that it does not keep any of its original elements. Even when some of Hegel's categories are retained, i.e.

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dialectics, we are able to look for dialectics where we find them, in their real-world habitats, in terms of their forms, in their natural, irreducible complexity" (Norrie, 2010, p. 75). Importantly, Norrie stresses that materially diffracting dialectic opens up the "forms of critique available to social science" (Norrie, 2010, p. 73).

negation and totality, the meaning Bhaskar gives to those words is radically different. Hegel described the dialectic process as comprising three main movements: (i) identity, in thought, with the actual world; (ii) negative critique of that identity; (iii) a new rational totality (Norrie, 2010, p. 12). The drive of this process, as Norrie puts it, is " to secure identity against the results of negative critique by viewing them from the perspective of a new totality" (Norrie, 2010, p. 12). The Hegelian dialectical process conflates the world (intransitive) with our knowledge about it (transitive) by trying to impose a rational order to the objective world. In this way, it falls prey to the epistemic fallacy.

In contrast to Hegel's idealism, Bhaskar's dialectic puts the emphasis on ontology and is developed in four movements:

First Moment (1M) – Non-identity. True to his commitment to a realist ontology, Bhaskar's First Moment refers to the world – natural and social – as it is, prior to our attempts to make sense of it. This is the moment of ontology, the moment concerning early critical realism. As such, as shown in the previous section, it is associated with "concepts of causal powers and generative mechanisms, (…) natural necessity and natural kinds" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 392). It is evident, from the very beginning of Bhaskar's dialectic, that there is a fundamental difference from Hegelian dialectics. While Hegel begins with thought of "identity in a concept or a thing", Bhaskar's dialectic starts with "the sheer, real difference that exists in the world" (Norrie, 2010, p. 12). It is important to mention here that Bhaskar's early critical realism – by upholding a deep, differentiated, and stratified ontology – was countervailing a key issue in classical and modern Western philosophy, namely the "problem of actualism": the collapse of the domain of the real into the domain of the actual (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 393). The problem that actualism gifts philosophy and the sciences is the closure it brings to thinking about and acting upon real

but unactualised possibilities. In early critical realism, Bhaskar refers to "dispositional realism" whereby "possibilities are real and may be actualised in alternative and better ways" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 201). Dispositional realism opens up space for explanatory knowledge in its many forms (i.e. science, personal reflexivity, indigenous knowledge, etc.), to inform individual and collective praxis and produce real change in the world (Bhaskar, 2016).

Second Edge (2E) – Negativity. In DCR, Bhaskar introduces the concepts of negativity (i.e. in 'absence') and change. Absence, in the real world, has ontological reality and causal implications. For instance, the absence of rain may cause the loss of crops. Bhaskar differentiates 'absence as ontologically real', that is the absence of real mechanisms, from 'absence as real negation'; namely, mechanisms might exist but are *negated* by the operation of countervailing mechanisms (Banfield, personal communication, April 6, 2020). The latter, absence in the form of real negation, is what produces movement and change in the world (in sharp contrast with Hegel's negativity as a movement in thought). In Norrie's words, absence as real negation "brings out the world's dynamic and processual quality, and establishes *change* as integral to it" (Norrie, 2010, p. 14). This idea of absence as having causal efficacy stands against another deep-rooted misconception in Western philosophy (Norrie, 2010) and was already implied in the 1M emphasis on the problem of actualism. Bhaskar calls that misconception "ontological monovalence". By that term, he refers to "a purely positive account of reality" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 400) which fails to consider absence as ontologically real. Ontological monovalence had, and continues to have, profound social and political implications. Norrie (2010) explains those implications by alluding to the historical roots of the doctrine of ontological monovalence:

> Absence has been systematically underplayed in western philosophy, starting with the

> ancient Greeks, in a way that has affected the entire tradition. Starting with Parmenides and Plato, there was a concern among elites to deny the possibility of change in society, what Parmenides called 'generation' and 'perishing'. To avoid talk of such things and thereby to protect the status quo, Parmenides banned talk of non-being, and thus of change, in favour of a theory of the world as an undifferentiated positive whole, 'the One'. (Norrie, 2010, p. 19)

With the emphasis of 2E on non-being or absence as a central element in ontology and as the driver of his dialectic, Bhaskar is elaborating an insightful metacritique of Western philosophy as a whole (Norrie, 2010). In the same movement, he is re-instating the possibility of thinking and talking about non-being, about that which is absent from the world (i.e. freedom, human flourishing, equality, etc.), therefore bringing to the front of the picture the possibility of changing and subverting the status-quo.

Third Level (3L) – Totality. In contrast to Hegel's understanding of totality as rational and complete, Bhaskar's places totality in permanent motion: always *becoming* and therefore incomplete. For Bhaskar, totality is a process that is open and therefore workable. In Norrie's words, 3L Totality:

> (…) emphasises that life must be understood as about both being and becoming (and 'begoing' – passing). Every process of becoming involves the determinate absenting of the old in favour of the determination of the new, and this is at the core of the *dialectical* sense of natural necessity that has come to constitute Bhaskar's newly developed theory of being. (Norrie, 2010, p. 15)

We see how, in 3L, the interaction between being (1M) and non-being (2E) becomes the driver of change: the whole generates and enables the parts but, at the same time, it can only operate *through* its parts. From this understanding of totality, Bhaskar develops the notion of *constellationality*. A constellation entails the "interlocking of distinct entities within a whole" providing, in this way, "a sense both of the autonomy of the part and of their dependence on the broader relation" (Norrie, 2010, p. 17). This sense of *constellationality* was already anticipated in the (1M) concept of emergence (see Section 2.2.3) and it is crucial in order to

understand the notions of agency, as "embedded in structure", and of structure, as "dependent on agency for its reproduction of transformation" (Norrie, 2010, p. 100). That constellational relation is captured in the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) that is explained in Chapter 5.

Fourth Dimension (4D) – **Transformative Praxis**. Because Totality (3L) is re-signified as an open, ongoing process of becoming, the importance of ethical human praxis comes to light in DCR. Bhaskar adds, therefore, a fourth movement to the dialectic process to incorporate human agency. According to Bhaskar, 4D is crucial because "it is human agency that must resolve the contradictions and dilemmas of social life" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 131). Human agency, in turn, is best conceived in terms of the four-planar social being, which is presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

The critical realist understanding of *power* is crucial, at this point, to elucidate why Bhaskar incorporates agency as the fourth movement in the dialectical process. According to Bhaskar, "*human beings are the only moving forces in geo-history*" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 69), and the reason supporting that claim lies in the critical realist perception of *power*. Critical realism sees power not only as inscribed in social-historical relations, but also as an emergent property of the natural world. Thus, power is: (i) a natural 'built-in' feature of human beings, conferring them capacities (labouring, reasoning, feeling, creating) and limitations (i.e. the laws of nature); and (ii) a property of social structures, acting back on human agents to either offer possibilities or impose constraints upon them. Bhaskar (1993) further develops this distinction in what he refers as '$power_1$' (P_1) or transformative capacity and '$power_2$' (P_2) or master–slave-type relations. In general terms, P_1 refers to the ability 'to do' or 'to make' things happen in the world. On the other side, P_2 alludes to relations of domination or 'power over' other beings or

things. Significantly, for Bhaskar, P_2 is emergent from P_1, conferring on the agent real ontological possibilities for transforming reality (Banfield, 2016, pp. 164-166). Moreover, emancipation from master-slave-type relations depends on the increase of the transformative capacity of $power_1$ (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 55), which is the main theme of the philosophy of metaReality, as the following section will show.

The dialectical development of critical realism brings the ontology of *being* face-to-face with the movement of history, capturing it in the idea of *becoming* (Norrie, 2010). Or, as Banfield (personal communication, March 12, 2020) puts it, "if the revindication of ontology was the focus and achievement of original critical realism then dialectical critical realism was to bring the importance of movement and change into focus". Furthermore, intentional human agency plays the central role in this dialectical process of movement and change. It is the focus of the next development of critical realism which was to delve into the ontology and possibilities – actualised or not – of human agency.

2.4 Philosophy of metaReality

This third stage in Bhaskar's realist philosophy is, by far, the most controversial – even amongst critical realists (Gorski, 2013; Morgan, 2003; Price, 2016). This is probably the case, as Price has put it, because the message that Bhaskar intended to communicate "cannot but sound spiritual" (Price, 2016, p. 342). However, the guiding principle of the philosophy of metaReality (PMR) is that of a depth ontology in which the most fundamental level of reality is one of non-dualism and interconnectedness. According to Bhaskar, by learning how to dive into that fundamental level, human beings can realise their full potential and work towards the development of a eudaimonistic society, that is, a social world where the flourishing of all is the condition for the free flourishing of each (Bhaskar, 2002b; 2016, p. 164). It is imperative to explore here some of the

main ideas of the PMR, as they will reveal themselves to be of crucial significance for a critical realist analysis of the reflexive capacities of academic activists.

The significance of the philosophy of metaReality (PMR) for this project resides in the fact that, while DCR entailed taking critical realism further by means of a dialectical movement that incorporated human agency as a *sine qua non*, the PMR deals with the potentialities of human agency. As Morgan (2003) puts it, the PMR explores "how humans can work on themselves and an emancipated society simultaneously in virtue of posited powers and properties that are more than social" (p. 119).

In Chapter 5 the critical realist argument that structures and agents are different *kinds* of things is developed in detail. It is enough, at this point, to note that human beings have distinctive powers and qualities that are, as Morgan says, "more than social". PMR claims that some of those powers and qualities of human beings emerge from a non-dual level of existence that Bhaskar calls the *ground-state*.

The PMR makes a distinction between three kinds or domains of being: (i) non-duality or absolute reality; (ii) duality or relative reality; (iii) demi-reality. According to Bhaskar, human beings exist in the world of duality, where they experience themselves as separate from other human and non-human beings. Consistently with the notion of emergence, that world of duality is, in turn, underpinned and made possible by a realm of non-duality. This level of non-duality is called ground-state and described as the field of the "free, loving, creative, intelligent energy and activity of non-dual states of our being and phases of our activity" (Bhaskar, 2002c, pp. vii-vii). Finally, the world of duality is overshadowed by the domain of demi-reality, which consists of a human-made network of dualisms, contradictions, alienations, illusions and conceptual errors that, nonetheless, have causal efficacy.

These three domains can also be conceived in terms of the *kinds* of relations they create. While the first domain, non-duality, sustains relations of interconnectedness and identity with everything that exists, the second domain expresses relations of duality that interpret the world from a self–other binary perspective. Examples of such binary relations are those involving nature–society, mind–body, reason–emotions, mind–matter, men–women, etc. These binary relations are everywhere present in social life, and this is the domain where our experience of the world is usually situated. We can, however, experience non-dual states of being when, for instance, while reading a book or contemplating a sunset, we temporarily suspend our judgements and become completely identified with the experience. Bhaskar calls these non-dual states 'transcendental identification in consciousness' and argues that, although everyday experienced, they are under-theorised in Western philosophy and social theory (Bhaskar, 2002c, 2016). Finally, demi-reality dominates the world of duality by imposing on it master–slave-types of social relations. These kinds of relations are based on the false belief that one part of the binary should subjugate the other, and translate into multiplicity of P_2 or master–slave-type relations at different levels:

- Relationally/socially: as heteronomy, servitude, oppression, poverty, strife, environmental degradation, commodification.
- Emotionally/individually: as fear, egoism, unhappiness, alienation, possessiveness, hostility, apathy. (Bhaskar, 2002c)

These features of demi-reality correspond to an error of perception that translates the reality of our bodily individuation into an isolating feeling of fundamental separation or absence of connection (Morgan, 2003, p. 122; Seo, 2010, p. 110). Human beings can, however, rectify this by getting rid of the web of illusions and errors of perception that sustain the structures of

oppression and alienation of the demi-real (Bhaskar, 2016). Through the PMR, Bhaskar is seeking to illuminate the fact that, by diving into the ground-state or the realm of non-duality, human beings can progressively gain awareness of the fundamental relations of interconnectedness with the rest of nature and fellow human beings.

The concept of ground-state is important in order to understand the real praxis of activism. In Chapter 7, the analysis of the data from interview participants shows how activists deliberately look for ways to connect with the ground-state qualities and powers described by Bhaskar. It will, therefore, become evident that "(…) acting in terms of one's ground state means accepting/perceiving/experiencing the inter-connectedness of all things" (Morgan, 2003, p. 126).

Furthermore, it is important to clarify that the domain of demi-reality, although populated by dualisms, illusions and contradictions, is real, in the sense that it has causal significance and its effects are empirically experienced by social agents in the form of oppression and alienation (see Chapter 6 for an analysis of neoliberalism in terms of a series of concatenated contradictions between theory and practice). For this reason, Bhaskar defines the PMR as a philosophy intended to transcend reality, therefore the name *meta* (beyond) Reality. MetaReality is better conceived as a philosophy of truth. In Bhaskar's words: "(…) On the position that I am articulating here, truth is in fact a more basic conception than reality – for truth, unlike reality, is not necessarily implicated in a dualistic mode or structure of thought" (Bhaskar, 2002c, p. 50). In short, in this final stage of critical realism, Bhaskar's main goal is to shed light on the existence of a realm of non-duality which on the one hand is dominated and hidden by a domain of dualism and on the other hand makes dualism possible (Seo, 2010, p. 107). This goal is of crucial importance in current times because, as Bhaskar expresses:

> In becoming aware of this we begin the process of transforming and overthrowing the

> totality of structures of oppression, alienation, mystification and misery we have produced; and the vision opens up of a balanced world and of a society in which the free development and flourishing of each unique human being is understood to be the condition, as it is also the consequence, of the free development and flourishing of all. (Bhaskar, 2002c, p. viii)

The concept and practice of activism should, as the following chapters illuminate, be expanded to include self-transformation as the condition for expanding awareness of non-dual states of being, therefore triggering the possibility of transforming and transcending current structures of oppression and alienation.

2.5 Summary

Throughout this chapter a critical realist perspective for understanding reality has been highlighted. The fundamental difference that critical realism makes is that it takes ontology seriously. In so doing, it provides a view of reality as a deep, structured and emergent totality (early critical realism) that is continually becoming. In that process of becoming, social agents, and the knowledge they collectively produce, play a central transformative role (DCR). This transformation is possible only if the possibility of imagining and theorising that which is absent from the world, as DCR does, is restored. In this way, the critical realist understanding of reality entails profound implications for the study of activism as fundamental in that process of ongoing becoming.

The next chapters build on the critical realist framework exposed in this chapter and take up a specific area of importance for this thesis. In particular, Chapter 3 details and argues for the particular research design and methods chosen for this project.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

"It is the task of science to discover which hypothetical or imagined mechanisms are not imaginary but real; or, to put it the other way round, to discover what the real mechanisms are." (Bhaskar, 2008)

Chapter 2 presented the critical realist case that the social world is stratified, emergent and hierarchically organized into identifiable levels such that mechanisms operating at deeper ontological levels are non-determining conditions for the higher mechanisms. In other words, higher order mechanisms are rooted in, or emerge from, lower order mechanisms. As such, human beings are natural beings rooted in the natural world. They are also social *beings*: emergent features of deeper historical and social relations. Importantly, as both DCR and the PMR point out, human beings are also constantly *becoming* and, in the same movement, reproducing or transforming the social structures in which they are embedded.

This chapter brings the content of Chapter 2 to matters of methodology framing the research. It begins by presenting a realist approach to the design of a research project for a stratified social world. The issues of causality and abstraction are given particular attention to demonstrate the appropriateness of an intensive research methodology for this research project. Next, an argument for in-depth, theory-driven interviews as the principal data collection method is provided. Finally, the attention turns to the strategies used for coding, analyzing and presenting the data.

3.1 Research design for a stratified social world

Assuming a depth and stratified ontology brings methodological implications with it. This section explores those implications in detail.

3.1.1 Causality

Prime amongst those methodological implications is the issue of causality. Chapter 2 described the search for causality (in lieu of the search for empirical regularities) as a *sine qua non* of the scientific method. As Danermark et al. (2002) put it, this is "the most fundamental enterprise in science, in natural as well as in social science: to find the inherent mechanisms that generate events" (p. 198). The causal mechanisms of interest in this research are actualised in the *modus vivendi* of academic activists through the inner conversations that they maintain with themselves. All agents have the capacity to be active forces for progressive social change. Evidently, though, agents have also the capacity to put their time and energy at the service of perpetuating, or being complicit with, current relations of oppression and exploitation. This acknowledgement begs the questions: what are the inner mechanisms that are active in people with dispositions towards 'progressive' social change (see Chapter 1), and how and when did those mechanisms activate? In this study, causal mechanisms are traced to the level of the embodied personality, where reflexive processes take place. Additionally, the ways in which those mechanisms interact in situ with the broader social structures are also considered.

3.1.2 Abstraction

Recognising the stratified nature of the social world demands acknowledging that causal mechanisms are generally unobservable. As discussed in Chapter 2, this is well-known in natural science. It is why experiments (as artificial techniques of controlled enclosure to expose otherwise unobservable mechanisms) are necessary. However, unlike the natural sciences, experimental closure is difficult, if not impossible, in the social sciences (see Chapter 2).

In order to 'observe' the workings of the unobservable operating below the Empirical and the

Actual, social scientists employ theories and abstractions. This is why explanatory critique is basic to critical realism (Bhaskar, 2009). Explanatory critique, as explained in Chapter 1, involves identifying false values, beliefs and theories because, according to critical naturalism, reasons are causes. In its effort to find and remove false beliefs, values and theories, social science advances towards its ultimate goal: the transcendence of oppressive structures (Banfield, 2016, p. 102) and, thus, the full realisation of human potentialities.

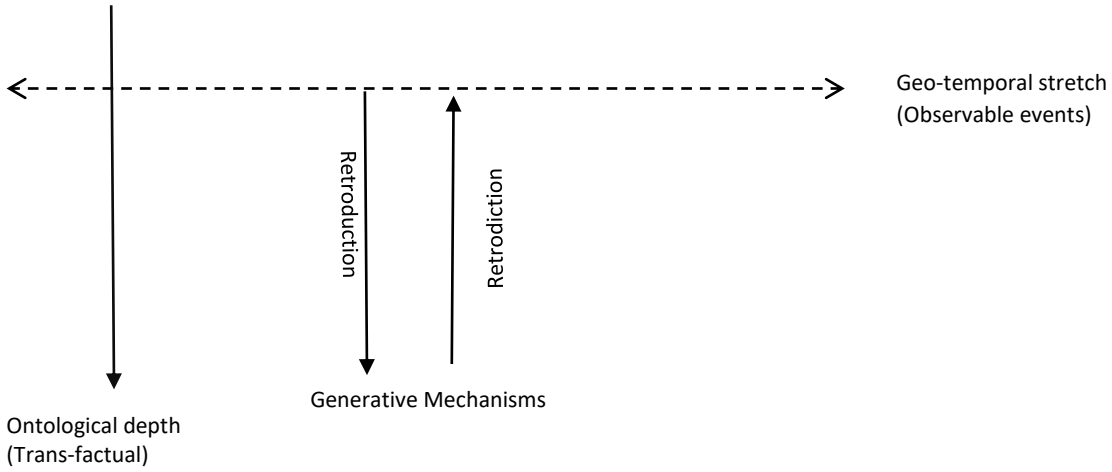
Following Marx, Ollman explains that the role of abstraction is to allow the researcher to conceptualise reality 'by breaking it down into manageable parts' (Ollman, 2001, p. 286). Ollman (2001) describes Marx's abstraction method as consisting in the following three aspects: *extension*, *generality* and *vantage point*. The first aspect of abstraction, *extension*, consists of setting the boundaries of the object of study in time and space. The researcher should decide how to carve up the problem spatially and temporally. The second mode, *generality*, refers to a matter of specificity versus generality. The thought movement implied here acts like a zoom function, that is, the closer we get to the object the clearer it appears but, at the same time, the context becomes blurrier. The opposite happens when we zoom out; the unique qualities of the object begin to fade away but its connections and similarities with the broader context and other equivalent objects appear with greater clarity. According to Ollman (2001, p. 293), this movement is vital to abstract to the level of generality that allows the researcher to focus on the mechanisms primarily accountable for the problem in question. Finally, there is the *vantage point* that refers to the place from which the researcher positions herself in order to make sense of and produce an explanation about the problem in question. Any given problem can be analysed from myriad perspectives, i.e. class, gender, race, age, etc, and the greatest number of *vantage points* included in the analysis will deliver a more comprehensive explanation.

Critical realism, underpinned by the notion of a stratified ontology, also relies on abstractions to break down and reorganise reality in "a variety of new and often very helpful ways in order to highlight the particular connections and developments that it finds there" (Ollman, 2001, p. 284). Both modes of abstraction, those employed by critical realism and those used by Marx, are grounded in a materialist diffraction of Hegel's idealist dialectic (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3) (Banfield, 2010b, 2016; Ollman, 2001). To identify the unobservable mechanisms underpinning the social reality, Bhaskar refers to two main modes of abstraction. In the simplest account, it can be said that the first movement goes, by means of analogies and metaphors, from observable phenomena to the identification of possible causal mechanisms that generate those phenomena. This initial move is referred to as *retroduction* and its aim is to produce *theoretical explanations* of the phenomena under study (Banfield, 2016). Drawing from a concrete example based on this study could be helpful to illustrate retroduction. From simple observation it can be noted that academic activists appear to have strong empathy towards fellow human beings, especially the most vulnerable. To explain why this is the case, it is possible to theorise, via retroduction, that these activists have a deep and robust connection with those human qualities that arise from the non-dual, ground-state level of existence, as explained in Chapter 2. The ground-state is, like the force of gravity, not directly available to observation or any other form of empirical measurement. We can, however, *imagine* that it exists because we are able to observe and experience its effects in people.

However, for social science to realise its emancipatory trajectory, practical explanations are needed. The second movement proceeds, therefore, in the opposite direction. It goes all the way back from the identified generative mechanisms to the phenomena under study, with the aim to test the explanatory power of the theorised mechanisms. If the generative mechanisms identified

by means of the retroductive movement can explain the phenomena, we have now a *practical explanation*. This second movement is called *retrodiction*. To continue with the example given above, this study used retrodiction to test the assumption of a strong connection of activists with ground-state levels of being. During the interviews, activists were asked to recall a key moment, person, or experience that they associated with their empathic disposition towards others. As Chapter 7 shows, participants consistently recalled a relationship, always in their childhood or adolescence, with a person who loved and/or cared for them. This profound emotional bond enabled them to experience, firsthand, a real connection with another human being, therefore *bypassing* the illusion of separation and alienation that pervades the level of demi-reality and fostering a sense of interconnectedness with others. In this way, the *imagined* link between ground-state awareness and empathic, compassionate action in the world becomes a practical explanation. In other words, what was – via retroduction – merely theorised, can now – via retrodiction – be sustained as a causal link between a generative mechanism (i.e. ground-state qualities) and the empirical observation (i.e. empathy towards the most vulnerable). Figure 3.1 visually depicts the two abstraction movements of stretch and depth:

Figure 3:1 Dimensions of analysis of the social world. Adapted from Banfield (2016, p. 138)



It could be said that critical realists (including Marxists), via these abstraction modes, make explicit the existence of unobservable dimensions necessary for the analysis of the social worlds. While positivist and some anti-realist hermeneutic approaches limit the analysis to the layer of the actual[6], that is, the level of observable events, critical realists delve deeper into the dimensions where unobservable generative mechanisms operate. Being clear about the modes of abstraction used to carve up the particular phenomena under study is essential for critical realist researchers. As Sayer stresses:

> Social systems are always open and usually complex and messy. Unlike some of the natural sciences, we cannot isolate out these components and examine them under controlled conditions. We therefore have to rely on abstraction and careful conceptualization, on attempting to abstract out the various components or influences in our heads, and only when we have done this and considered how they combine and interact can we expect to return to the concrete, many-sided object and make sense of it. Much rests upon the nature of our abstractions, that is, our conceptions of particular

6 This tendency of Western philosophy, consisting of collapsing the realm of the real into the domain of the actual, was identified by Bhaskar as "the problem of actualism", as discussed in Chapter 2.

> one-sided components of the concrete object; if they divide what is in practice indivisible, or if they conflate what are different and separable components, then problems are likely to result. So much depends on the modes of abstraction we use, the way of carving up and defining our objects of study. Unfortunately, the bulk of the methodological literature on social science completely ignores this fundamental issue, as if it were simply a matter of intuition. (Sayer, 2000, p. 19)

In sum, anti-realist approaches work with observable connections between empirical events to describe what is apparent at the level of the empirical, but they have little explanatory power. Unlike those traditional approaches, critical realist methodology is designed to access unobservable layers of reality. It involves various modes of abstraction and theoretical moves with the aim to help the researcher to break the social reality into *manageable parts*. As already discussed in Chapter 2, the product of that process will always be fallible but, like Phillips (2012, p. 22) stresses, it can also result in a better and more useful explanation of reality .

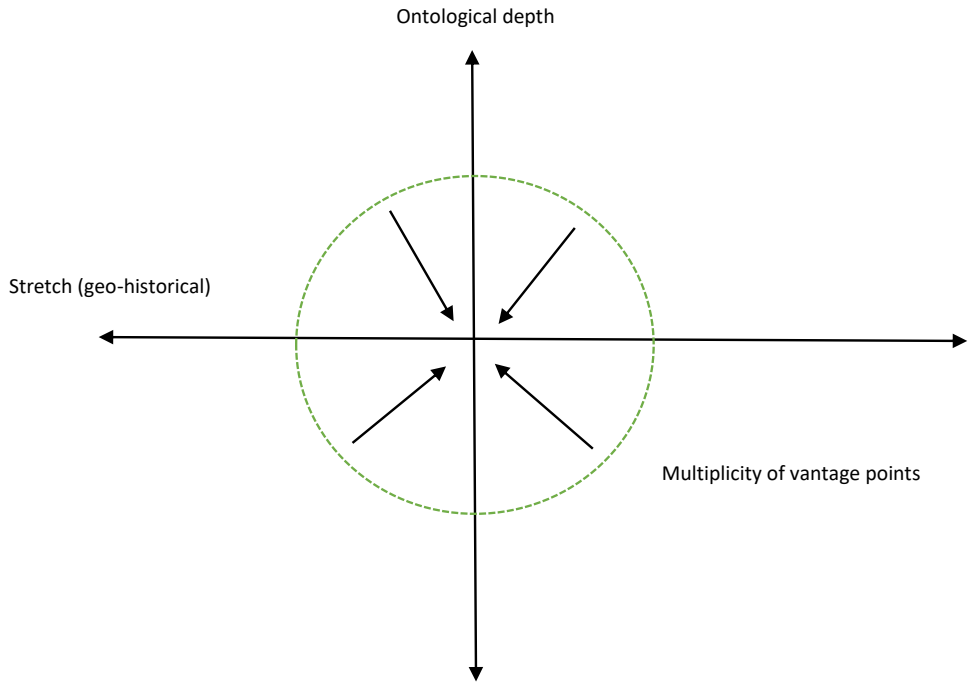
3.1.3 Intensive research design

A critical realist investigation of the interplay between structures and agents will need to account for the determining and co-determining powers of social arrangement and the capacities of agents as well as for the structural properties. Therefore, methodologically, "any investigation can only take place at the intersection or vertex of agential and structural objects, and thus indicators that researchers use have to reflect this close relationship between the two" (Scott, 2007, p. 15). In this regard, Scott continues, "a mathematical or statistical explanation may be appropriate if the property of the object can be expressed extensionally; and likewise a qualitative approach is appropriate if the property can be expressed intensionally" (Scott, 2007, p. 15). Scott uses the phrase 'intensional expression' or 'intensional idiom' to refer to the inner estates of agents. When looking for causality in the form of the unobservable generative mechanisms within the internal world of human persons, as is the case in this study, the mechanisms are best expressed 'intensionally'. The research strategy that fits such purpose must then be aligned with what Sayer

(2010) calls ‘intensive research design’.

Sayer distinguishes between ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ research designs. The former aims to describe the extension or quantitative dimensions of certain phenomena and is required when studying large population groups. The latter, in Sayer’s words, “seeks out substantial relations of connection and situates practices within wider contexts, thereby illuminating part–whole relationships” (Sayer, 2000, p. 22). Sayer’s affirmation brings us back to the significance of abstraction inasmuch as ‘substantial relations of connection’ are only revealed by means of the abstraction modes described earlier. It is illuminating here to refer to Banfield (2016) who took Ollman’s taxonomy of abstraction modes of ‘Horizontal’, ‘Vertical’, and ‘Vantage Point’ to complement the critical realist ones. According to Banfield, on one hand, the ‘Vertical’ mode of abstraction (employing vertical abstractions of generality) is equivalent to what Sayer refers to as ‘intensive’ research design. On the other hand, the ‘Horizontal’ mode (employing horizontal abstractions of extensions over time and space) corresponds to ‘extensive’ research designs. It is essential to note here that ‘extensive’/ ‘horizontal’ and ‘intensive’/’vertical’ research designs do not correspond to the traditional division between qualitative and quantitative strategies. Critical realists, like Banfield (2016), have claimed that ‘quality’ refers not simply to qualitative methods but rather to the (ontological) *kinds* of relations. Furthermore, intensive and extensive kinds of research are not enough. The third abstraction of Marx’s dialectic, Vantage Point (Ollman, 2001, pp. 292-294), is required to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue being studied. Banfield’s ‘Tripartite Model of Abstraction’ is represented in the following figure:

Image 1 Tripartite Model of Abstraction. Adapted from Banfield (2010a, p. 145)



Banfield's tripartite model strengthens the critical realist approach to research by reminding the researcher of the importance of simultaneously contemplating all the domains of reality. In this regard, Geuenich (2019) stresses that:

> (…) the critical realist researcher must explore and seek to explain each of Bhaskar's three domains/worlds. First, the world of the actual by considering phenomena across time-space. Second, the world of the real, by developing and testing theoretical assumptions. Finally, the empirical domain, which the researcher explores from the perspective of different subject positions. (p. 90)

In line with the nature of this research project, an 'intensive' research design was adopted to work with a small number of cases to gather 'intensional' data. This enabled the identification of specific generative mechanisms at work, whether they were actualised or not (Sayer, 2010). In drawing on Banfield's tripartite model of abstraction, it was possible to identify 'substantial relations of connection' and, therefore, illuminate 'whole–part relationships' (Sayer, 2000, p. 22). Furthermore, abstraction plays a fundamental role in addressing the issue of generalisability of the results through intensive research designs. As demonstrated in some empirical critical realist

studies (Archer, 2003; Connors, 2015; Decoteau, 2016; Geuenich, 2019; Horrocks, 2009; Wimalasena, 2017), abstraction plays a fundamental role in supporting the generalisability of the results through intensive research designs.

As noted in Chapter 1, this project is explanatory. In regards to the stages in an explanatory intensive research design, Danermark et al. (2002) propose that critical realists research projects guided by the following non-sequential processes:

i. Description: in this stage a thorough description of the concrete situation where the 'problem' is located is elaborated and, using everyday language, its complexity and structure are explained.

ii. Analytical resolution: here, the main components or dimensions of the situation under examination should be analytically discerned. Due to the complexity of any given context, the researcher must make decisions about the aspects that the study will focus on.

iii. Theoretical redescription: this step raises the level of abstraction and moves from description to explanation (Fletcher, 2016, p. 8). Here, the key aspects of the situation under study are redescribed and re-signified using "new contexts of ideas" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 110) in order to produce original explanations. This movement corresponds, in Banfield's tripartite model, to adopting a theoretical *vantage point* from which to think about the problem.

iv. *Retroduction*: as above explained, this stage is crucial in a critical realist research project because it allows the researcher to connect 'social structures and social action' (Decoteau, 2016, p. 15) in the context under examination. It requires the recognition of the 'necessary contextual conditions' for a particular generative mechanism to become active and cause the phenomenon observed (Fletcher, 2016, p. 9).

v. Comparison between different theories and abstractions: in this stage, the relative explanatory power of the different causal mechanisms and structures identified in steps iii. and iv. is compared (Phillips, 2012).

vi. Concretization and contextualization: In this stage the researcher returns to the concrete situation examining, this time, the interaction between the mechanisms and structures at play and distinguishing between the structural conditions and the accidental circumstances. This step, along with the previous one, corresponds to the *retrodictive* movement in Bhaskar's schema.

This scheme was used to guide the research process in this study. The plan recommended by Danermark et al. (2002) is designed to aid the researcher to move between different levels of abstraction: from the concrete to the abstract, and back to the concrete. The stages do not necessarily follow the order described and, usually, the steps iii. to v. occur simultaneously. It is worth highlighting here that the process of research, as Blaikie (2007) explains, is to be seen as organic and spiral (see Appendix I) and, as such, it can be structured in different ways (Danermark et al., 2002). In this case, the intensive research design was dialectical.

3.2 Methods and Ethical Considerations

This study utilised a qualitative method to collect the data. Qualitative data collection methods are those where groups or individuals are studied in situ. Qualitative researchers seek to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participant's situation, but also of the participant's interpretation of that objective situation (Connors, 2015; Sayer, 2000). Since, as seen in the previous chapter, reasons can be causes for social actions, the understanding of those reasons is an essential step in achieving causal explanations of the social world. In this sense, intensive

research always involves a hermeneutic dimension (Sayer, 2000).

Following Archer's work on agency (2003), in-depth interviews were selected as the main data collection method for this study. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, agents' relative autonomy from structures implies that social researchers need to have a way of accessing the individual experience, and interviews serve as one such method (Chris Smith & Elger, 2014). The section that follows explores the strategies used to select the participants, the interview method chosen, as well as the tools used to code, analyse and present the elicited data.

Regarding the ethical approach followed, Chapter 1 (Section 1.5) stated that this project has been guided by a methodological framework underpinned by ethical naturalism. Therefore, it embarked on an effort to identify misleading or false ideas about the practice of academic activism, by questioning and revealing the deep causal mechanisms generating that deceived perception of reality. Its aim was, therefore, profoundly ethical: to inform action towards moving away from those false ideas.

In what relates strictly to the formal ethical requirements involved in a project that gathers information via direct or indirect interaction with other human beings, ethics approval was required from the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC). Following the principles of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the participants were recruited through an unbiased and transparent process, and all participants were treated fairly. Information about the scope and objectives of the research were provided to the participants in advance by means of an information sheet and consent form (Appendix D).

All interviewees participated voluntarily and had the right to withdraw from the study at any

time without needing to give reasons. Information about the research was provided to the participants beforehand and the researcher followed all the required procedures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees (i.e. data was stored in a de-identified form). Finally, the researcher has been entirely committed to academic honesty and integrity and, even though the potential for harm or risk is minimal, participants were always respectfully involved in the research process as active partners or co-researchers.

3.2.1 Selection of Participants

According to Danermark et al. (2002, p. 170) intensive research designs require *strategic sampling*. Therefore, participants for this study were selected following the types of academic activism identified by Flood et al. (2013), namely: 1- production of knowledge to inform progressive social change; 2- conduct of research which itself involves social change; 3- use of advanced pedagogical strategies; and 4- challenge to the power relations within the University (p. 17). These four types of academic activism were used to identify possible participants through the researcher's professional network, i.e. the researcher asked people in her job place to identify possible participants according to criteria proposed by Flood et al. (2013). In addition to being identified as academic activists using these four criteria, the participants selected should identify themselves as socially progressive activists and be, or have been, effectively employed as academics.

In total, seven academic activists (four men and three women) were interviewed. They were chosen from four Australian public universities, in three different states (Queensland, Victoria and South Australia). Additionally, participants were selected to represent all age groups (varying from early thirties to late sixties or early seventies) in all career stages. The limited number of participants is explained by the kind of research design guiding this project. Intensive research design relies on small samples because it seeks to produce causal explanations that not necessarily

can be taken as representative of, or generalisable to, wider populations (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 165). Furthermore, as the following section shows, the method used for data collection requires a time-intensive process of interpretation that makes it very difficult, for a sole researcher, to work with large numbers of participants.

In accordance with the organic and reflexive nature of the research, a staged plan was adopted. In the first stage, four participants were identified through the researcher's own professional network. These initial interviews were transcribed and used to detect emergent leads, themes and ideas. Participants in this first stage were asked to suggest other possible interviewees for the second part of the interview process.

The second stage followed up on the main leads generated in the first one and three new participants were interviewed. The structure of the interview was refined according to the emergent themes. For instance, in the second round of interviews, although the interview guide did not change (see Appendix E), the researcher put more emphasis on exploring the emotional aspects of activism, as *emotions* and *feelings* appeared as a strong lead in the first stage.

This non-probability method of selecting participants, known as 'judgemental' or 'purposive' sampling (Blaikie, 2010), has the advantage of allowing the researcher to select 'information rich' cases: "individuals, groups, organizations, or behaviours that provide the greatest insight into the research question" (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264). The interview method employed to conduct the interviews is described in the next section.

3.2.2 Theory-driven interviews

In an intensive critical realist research project, the aim of in-depth interviews is to produce an illustrative case of the various ways in which differently positioned people think about the same

topic. In other words, interviews are instruments to detect “inner mechanisms of thought” about people’s real concerns (Archer, 2003, p. 159).

According to Clegg and Stevenson (2013), the purpose of the interview is “to explicitly explore the understandings, reflexivity and potential agency that participants experience in relation to the practice under investigation” (p. 12). In this research, interviews sought to examine the participants’ reflexive processes in relation to the ways in which they made sense of their practices as activists in a neoliberal work context. Interviews also provided an opportunity to understand what inner mechanisms were active and were triggering participants’ drive for progressive social change.

Building on the critical realist premise of a stratified ontology, Pawson (1996) highlights the multi-layered character of social reality and, thus, claims that a critical realist approach to interviewing must seek to address the ways in which “social events are interwoven between these various layers” (p. 301). Pawson continues to make two important points about the pre-assumptions of a critical realist approach to interviewing. First, following Giddens’ concept of ‘knowledgeability’, Pawson explains that it is essential to recognise that both participant and researcher bring to the interview their own expertise in addressing different dimensions of the practice under study. In this sense, both take different active roles during the process:

> People are always knowledgeable about the reasons for their conduct but in a way which can never carry total awareness of the entire set of structural conditions which prompt an action, nor the full set of consequences of that action. (…) In attempting to construct explanations for the patterning of social activity, the researcher is thus trying to develop an understanding which includes hypotheses about their subjects’ reasons within a wider model of their causes and consequences (Pawson, 1996, p. 32).

On this basis, Pawson argues that in every interview setting there is a *division of labour* based on the different type of knowledge that both participants possess. For example, the researcher brings

expert knowledge about the broad *contexts* and *outcomes* of the topic under investigation, whereas the interviewee holds the privileged insider perspective about the *mechanisms* underlying her decisions and actions within that broader context. In this regard, Pawson (1996) explains that the researcher will often accept that the informant has more suitable knowledge when it comes to understanding the way in which her reasoning promotes social transformation.

However, Pawson (1996) goes on to explain that interview should be 'theory-driven' in the sense that the interviewer remains the expert about the topics being explored and the interviewee's role is to confirm or disprove the theory (Chris Smith & Elger, 2014). Therefore, the interview process should be led by the theoretical knowledge of the researcher in order to *channel* the interviewee's reflexive processes about the subject under investigation (Pawson, 1996).

Archer's framework guided the process for conducting the interviews. Specifically, interviews were designed to address the three stages identified by Archer in the 'interplay between objectivity and subjectivity': 1– *objective*: social and cultural constraints and enablements; 2– *subjective*: agents' particular constellation of concerns; 3– *reflexive*: the process through which agents reflexively decide courses of action in relation to their objective circumstances (Archer, 2003, p. 135). The research questions, already detailed in Chapter 1, corresponded to these stages.

Interviews were semi-structured and approached in a dialogical manner (Archer, 2003, p. 161). The method involved an active process of the researcher listening closely and asking questions to gain nuanced understanding of participants' accounts (Chris Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 10). A semi-structured interview guide was used throughout the interviews to generate dialogue (see Appendix IV). Seven individual interviews were conducted overall, and interviews ranged from 40 to 130 minutes in duration. Six interviews were done face-to-face and recorded using a voice recorder. For face-to-face interviews, participants were given the possibility to choose a place that

most suited them. Generally, the interviews took place either in the participant's office or in a café near their workplace. For the one interview that had to be done remotely Zoom software was used as a platform to conduct the interview on-line and safely record it on the researcher's personal computer. All interviews were transcribed *verbatim*.

In-depth 'theory-driven' interviews require the interviewer to have a high level of interpersonal skills and a capacity to engage conceptually with the content of the developing interview (Pawson, 1996). To assist with this skill and capacity development, pilot interviews were arranged. These pilot interviews were done in addition and before the other seven interviews took place. Two academics within the researcher's network volunteered their time for this purpose. The pilots were essential for the researcher to gain confidence in the process and in her own abilities to establish a good rapport with the future participants. Moreover, they allowed the researcher to learn how to keep a good balance "between silence and encouragement" (Connors, 2015, p. 112) to keep the conversation flowing.

The pilot phase also enabled the researcher to refine the interview structure to elicit richer data. Particularly, the use during the pilot interviews of metaphors and mind-mapswas found beneficial to trigger and deepen the reflexive process of both interviewer and interviewee. Consequently, these were incorporated into the interviews by means of a 'map of activism' (see Appendix V for pictures of 'before' and 'after' of the map) which was presented to the interviewee at the beginning of the conversation. This was a useful strategy to 'break the ice', develop rapport, and introduce the (theory-driven) path that the interview was expected to follow. This map was designed to trace the active mechanisms that triggered (past), sustained (present) and motivated (future) the activist dispositions in the participants throughout their lives. A map was made for each interview using an A3 drawing pad. A selection of key words was already placed on the map,

like ‘upbringing’, ‘core values’, ‘activism’, ‘internal conversation’, ‘neoliberal university’, to prompt participants’ reflexive processes. The interviewee was asked to reflect on those key words and freely add more words, links or drawings to the original map. In most instances, this triggered an interactive reflexive process where both the interviewee and the interviewer drew and wrote on the map.

Taking the ‘map of activism’ as representing a tree, all interviews were approached following the same sequence, as explained below:

1)Looking first at what constituted the roots of the tree, namely the upbringing, core values and the structural conditionings where the participants began their life journeys. Here, the participant’s attention was deliberately brought to key persons or moments that she or he would associate with their current activism.

2) Then, the conversation moved to the present context of their academic activism, taken to the tree trunk. Questions were asked about the neoliberal turn in the institutions where they worked, as well as the ways in which they made sense of their activism within that context. Although the institutional structures were similar for all participants, their personal embodied properties were very different, triggering dissimilar courses of actions.

3) Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked to detail their future projects in relation to their activism. Those projects were depicted as the fruits of the tree. Along the way, the focus was always on trying to delve into their inner reflexive mechanisms in relation to the particular experience being recalled. This reflexive process was taken to be the sap that nurtures the tree.

Theory-driven interviews require a strong emphasis on finding causal explanations and, therefore,

this interpretation process makes intensive research very time-consuming. Consequently, it can only work with a reduced number of cases (Sayer, 2000, p. 21). The process of coding and analysing the data obtained from those cases is detailed in the following section.

3.2.3 Transcription, Coding and Analysis

Coherent with the emergent critical realist methodology of this research, the processes of transcribing, coding and analysing the data were conducted in a simultaneous and organic way. This meant that, for instance, as the researcher was transcribing the data verbatim, she was able to get a sense of the overall data set as well as some clues about the emergent themes in it. In this way, notes taken during the transcribing process were the first starting point for coding and analysing the data.

NVivo software was used as the main tool for organising, systematising and coding the data set. The interview transcripts were also printed to help the researcher develop a better sense of the data. The coding process was done using both the printed transcripts and NVivo simultaneously. According to Saldaña (2009), coding is an 'interpretative act' which mostly depends on the researcher's ontological, epistemological and theoretical orientations (p. 4). For this project, three cycles of coding and analysis were done. Each cycle aimed to elicit different kinds of interpretations from the same data set.

The data obtained in the first round of interviews were firstly approached through an 'initial' coding strategy. 'Initial' coding is described as an appropriate approach to attuning oneself to particularities of each participant in terms of language, perceptions and ways to interpret the world (Saldaña, 2009, p. 57). NVivo was used to create the first nodes and node clusters. This first instance provided the researcher with an overall sense of the depth and breadth of key themes

(i.e. structural conditionings and enablements, reflexive modes, key persons and experiences, etc). It also enabled the researcher to identify emergent themes that were not anticipated (i.e. emotions and feelings, like anger, belonging, compassion, empathy, fear, etc). These emergent themes helped, in turn, to refine the interview structure in order to gather more fruitful data in the second round of interviews. For example, after the 'initial coding' of the first round of interviews, the decision was made to put more emphasis on delving into the emotions and feelings that appeared as fundamental in the participants' internal conversations during the second round of interviews. After all the interviews were done and transcribed, the full data set was interrogated in the same way and more generative mechanisms were theorized. This 'initial' coding phase helped to determine the content described in Chapters 2, 5 and 6 and, in turn, the content of those chapters was used as the main framework to interpret the data. Maintaining this dialectic, iterative and organic dynamic was essential for the development of this project.

The first cycle of 'initial' coding was followed by a second cycle of 'theoretical' coding (Saldaña, 2009). Under the light of the theoretical framework built in Chapters 2, 5 and 6, the data was analysed to test the explanatory power of the 'new context of ideas' introduced (retrodiction). Archer's Morphogenetic Approach (MA) was used at this stage to identify the morphogenetic cycles in each participant's account. Here, the researcher was attentive to find references about the ways in which participants made sense of their involuntary place in the social structure, their own agentic capacities to mediate social conditionings and the reflexive processes along the way.

In the first two coding cycles, i.e. initial and theoretical (Saldaña, 2009), a strong emotional and relational component was identified in the participants' accounts of their inner dialogues. Therefore, the decision was made to do a third coding cycle in which special attention was given to emotions and values. According to Saldaña (2009):

> Emotion Coding and Values Coding tap into the inner cognitive systems of the participants. Emotion Coding, quite simply, labels the feelings participants may have experienced. Values coding assesses a participant's integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work. (p. 86)

This final way of coding the data was useful to identify active generative mechanisms operating at the level of the embodied personality (via retroduction) and explain the data under the light of these newly identified mechanisms (retrodiction).

3.2.4 The Morphogenetic Portraits

It was essential to this research that an effective empirical method of capturing the reflexive processes of the activist participants was established. Equally important was settling on a method that provided a means of both encouraging and recording the participants' internal conversations that was faithful to the meaning and intent of the academics. To these ends, two methods (portraiture and morphogenesis) were employed in combination. In the context of this project, this innovative approach has been called: *morphogenetic portraiture*.

Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020) describe the portraiture method as useful to "depict social phenomena through people´s stories of everyday life experience", it being possible in this way "to bridge the gap between individual and society" (p. 3). Portraits are constructed to capture the participant's own voice in "one fluid vision" (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). According to Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020) the portraiture technique offers a double advantage: acknowledging, on the one side, the researcher's own previous knowledge on the phenomenon under study, and holding enough space to tell the participants' stories in their own words, on the other. In this way, through the use of portraits, researchers are able to disrupt "the common research practice of privileging the researcher's interpretation and over-analysing people's narratives" (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020, p. 3). A research portrait incorporates "large, verbatim chunks of interview

data" and it also details the "researcher's feelings about the setting and the individual participant" (Golsteijn & Wright, 2013, p. 308). In this way, it allows the incorporation of the participants' voices in an almost unfiltered way, while retaining the researcher's own knowledge and reflexivity throughout the process. These features of the portraiture technique were considered particularly important to present the participants' inner dialogues and mechanisms of thought (Archer, 2003, p. 159), avoiding the researcher's intervention through paraphrasing and interpretation. Furthermore, these key features of the portraiture method, i.e. the possibility of achieving a balance between the researcher's knowledgeability and the participants knowledge and expertise on the subject matter, were found to dovetail smoothly with the interview method chosen. As Section 3.2.2 outlined, the theory-driven interview recognises the expertise and knowledge that both participant and researcher bring to the interview about the topic under investigation.

However, to paint a portrait, one needs a canvas. Portraits cannot be drawn in the air. The Morphogenetic Approach (MA) served as that canvas (see Chapters 1 and 5). It allowed for the capturing of the recurrent interplay between structure, culture and agency while paying particular attention to the role of inner reflexive processes in that interplay. The outcome, *morphogenetic portrait*, evokes the reflexive, the personal and the professional to illuminate the mediation between structure and agency.

The *morphogenetic portraits* are presented in Chapter 4. At the end of each of the seven portraits, a summary, in the form of a process chart, is presented. These charts portray each stage of the recurrent morphogenetic process, i.e. structural, subjective and reflexive, as it was expressed in the reflective accounts of each participant.

3.3 Summary

This chapter has made the point that assuming a multidimensional and stratified ontology[7] , as this project does, has certain methodological implications. Firstly, it involves searching for causal mechanisms beyond the empirical. In this study, the emphasis is on tracing causal mechanisms at the level of the embodied personality, where reflexive processes take place. Secondly, because causal mechanisms are unobservable, the use of different modes of abstraction to carve up the object of study is required. Retroduction, to theorise causal mechanisms, and retrodiction, to test the explanatory power of the identified causal mechanisms, were the main abstraction modes applied in this study. Finally, an intensive research design was implemented in order to access the inner states of agents and illuminate the *kinds* of relations between the agent (academic activist) and the broader social and cultural structures (the neoliberal university).

The methods used to elicit the data for this project were also specified. A strategic or purposive sampling method was employed to identify the seven participants who were then asked to participate in an in-depth interview. The interviews, in turn, were theoretically driven, i.e. Archer's framework was used to guide the interview process. The data were transcribed verbatim and coded both manually and in NVivo. Three cycles of coding and analysis were done: initial, theoretical, and emotion and values coding. The results were captured and presented using a combination of the portraiture technique and Archer's MA approach, i.e. the *morphogenetic portraits*, which are offered in the following chapter.

7 It is important to clarify here that, in critical realism, a stratified ontology does not simply refer to social stratification. Human beings, persons, are also stratified. This idea is further developed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4: BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.
(Camus, 2005, p. 121)

How do people *become* activists? Are there events or figures in peoples' early lives that predispose them to be active participants in society? How do they make sense of activism? What do academic activists do in their everyday lives? How do they dovetail the constraints and difficulties impinged by neoliberalism in their workplace with their activist practices? What are the values that sustain their practice? What keeps them going in the face of adversity? How do they talk to themselves? What place does self-transformation occupy in the practice of activism? What are the dreams and projects guiding their actions? How do they make sense of the purpose of their lives? Given the option, would they choose the same lifestyle again? Seven academic activists were interviewed for this project with the aim of shedding light on the source of the 'invincible summer' that Camus told us about.

The previous chapter argued that a critical realist methodology requires any empirical investigation to begin with the real, material, embodied experiences of the phenomenon under investigation before moving to the abstract, analytical dimensions of the study. That is precisely the task of this chapter: to present to the reader the concrete lived experiences of academic activists as they chose to tell them.

This chapter proceeds then to present a *morphogenetic portrait* for each participant. As explained in the previous chapter, these portraits highlight the recurrent interplay between structure, culture, and agency, paying special attention to the participant's inner reflexive processes in relation to that interplay. At the end of each portrait, that recurrence is captured in a process

chart that, using the voice of the participants, encapsulates what their inner conversation were revealing at each stage of their lives.

The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the reflexive capacities of the academic activists, as they emerged from the data. These capacities are considered in relation to: (i) the structural conditions in which they arose; (ii) the subjective configuration of concerns of the participants; (iii) the self-transformative aspects of the practice of activism; and (iv) the values that the participants brought to their activism within the neoliberal university.

4.1 Grace

> *At the heart of my activism is countering separation, marginalization of any child and many groups in our society. The internal conversation is a very gendered conversation.*
> *(Grace)*

When I interviewed Grace, she was about to retire after a long and fulfilling career in education. Having begun as a schoolteacher and principal, she transitioned, later in her life, to academia. Grace's expertise was in the field of early childhood education.

After I introduced the research topic to her, she looked surprised that her professional network had identified her as an activist. She said:

> I'm curious... So, [my colleague] must have sent you to me because he got some understanding of my work here as a university teacher and as a researcher. So, he must have identified some of the things and some of my work and the conversations that we've had. That would identify me as an activist and it's interesting [...]. I've always had a perception of an activist out holding placards and in protests.

As I did more interviews, I found that it was common for participants to be surprised by the fact that their peers recognised them as activists. This may respond to the common idea that activism involves – exclusively – energetic and visible actions (see Chapter 6). Some participants felt it strange, therefore, to realise that their colleagues noticed their ongoing, humble, and – most

times – quiet actions to advance progressive social change.

Grace's family belonged to a fundamentalist church. She was indoctrinated within that belief system and sent to one of the church's boarding schools from the age of 13. Although her mother did not fully adhere to the church's doctrines, Grace was profoundly marked by that early experience. Significantly, she seemed aware, from a very young age, that the values she was being asked to adopt caused in her a sense of 'deep uneasiness':

> I was thoroughly indoctrinated in a fundamentalist church, which believed they had the truth. And that truth separated them from the rest of the churches and so I had this deep uneasiness around segregation and separation of people from an early age.

Grace mentioned the same feeling of uneasiness when I asked her to recall an incident or a person that she associated with her activist dispositions:

> I think that's where the intersection of my passion for working toward social justice comes from: from that sense of '*I didn't belong*'. I knew I didn't belong in either world. I didn't really belong in the church, and I didn't really belong in my mother's world either, and that was not a good feeling.

In this world of separation and alienation experienced in her childhood, the figure of Grace's father stood out as a caring, loving figure:

> Iris Murdoch said: '*pay careful attention*'. It was a bit the same with my father. You knew that he was really, really, giving you his time, his focus. It comes down to the individual, doesn't it? Paying careful attention, which is exactly what good teaching is about.

Her father's capacity to 'pay careful attention' to others and to their needs inspired Grace to become a teacher. Therefore, after finishing high school, she completed a teaching degree and soon after she got a job in a public school. Again, the sense of alienation experienced in her childhood influenced her job and her activist practices in fundamental ways:

> I taught in many different contexts but […] what drove my teaching was this idea that education could change that, had the potential to change some of that marginalization. So, that's where my activism comes from.

> Of course the other aspect of my work, and this is probably where my activism has played out, is around early childhood education, because early childhood education is often marginalized, as a field, in terms of being seen as women's business: *'anyone can do it!*', '*you don't need qualifications to look after young children'*, '*nice women can do that work'*.

The feelings of alienation from her real self and marginalization intersected with issues of gender and strongly emerged in Grace's narrative as one of the ways she made sense of her internal conversations:

> I do agree with the notion that it's your internal conversations with yourself that are so, so important. For many years, because I came to academia late, I have and still continue to feel sometimes like an impostor, like '*I don't really know this well enough*', you know... There are other people who know more about this than I. So, you know, that internal conversation... is a very gendered conversation.
>
> I just think, looking back, I think the dominance of my mother's ideas, the dominance of the church's ideas, the gender, all worked together to reduce my sense of agency.

Following the path pre-conceived for her, Grace married one of the church's ministers and began working as a teacher in a public school. Significantly, as an adult, when she was at her workplace, she continued to feel the need to conceal the identity that had been imposed on her real self:

> I would go to the staff room at morning tea and people would start to ask '*what does your husband do? What are you doing here?*' You know? And I used to lie! Because I knew that, if I said what he was doing, there would be all these questions about our church, that I didn't want to answer.

Grace finally resigned from that job and she and her husband spent ten years as missionaries overseas. During that time, they started to question the church's doctrines. When they returned to Australia, they both decided to leave the church and, soon after, the couple got divorced. Grace still recalled with great clarity the conversations that she had with herself back then. Meaningfully, her real self shone brightly in those difficult moments:

> I did a lot of thinking about... well.... what's left, particularly after our marriage broke. '*What do I still believe in?*' And I did still come back to equity and fairness and compassion. I did have those core values, but he went on a very different path.
>
> One of the most wonderful things my son, who's now 48, said was: '*mum, I can't believe that we were stuck on the side of a mountain [overseas] and you taught us compassion!*'

> One of the most lovely things I think any of them have ever said!

Grace was 30 years old when she found herself divorced, in a new city and in charge of her three children. She went back to teaching and soon became involved in professional learning and leadership positions. Those experiences gave her the language to put in words the feelings that she had experienced in her childhood:

> I had no tools in my teaching repertoire for thinking to understand poverty. But when I came to South Australia, I was teaching in a very disadvantaged school and my role was to get involved in professional learning about disadvantage, and that has continued to inform my thinking. So, they were ideas that I'd never really encountered in my teacher education […]. It was when I came to South Australia, that I really embraced social justice and had language to describe, to name what I was feeling as a woman, and then to name what I felt about children living in poverty. Because we were very poor, as a family we were very poor while growing up, continually moving houses.

Again, gender and inequality combined in Grace's internal dialogues, and there were good reasons for that association to take place in Grace's reflexive process. She saw being a woman was the main reason for being discriminated against. She recalled an anecdote that captured the ways in which she resisted that unfairness:

> I was teaching next to a fellow who'd graduated that same year and I was teaching a year two and he had a year three, and I was angry about the fact that he was paid more than I was. So, I used to go into his classroom – I don't know if you call this activism […] – but I look back on it and that sense of injustice was still there, or became evident then, really... The sense of not belonging was there all the time, but teacher's college and graduating and teaching. He used to have a basket with tennis balls at the front of his room, and I'd go in and '*Oh! How are you this morning?*' and then as I left, I just pretended to trip over the basket with the balls, and the balls would go everywhere! And as I left, I'd say quietly '*earn your extra pay!*' Because the children would be scattered everywhere picking up the balls!

Soon after resuming teaching, Grace found herself craving for more intellectual stimuli and began, as she called it, the *torturous* journey of the PhD:

> I've always needed something to sort of feed my intellectual world. So, I started doing a master's and then converted that to an EdD [Doctor of Education] and everybody that looked at what I was doing said *'it's a PhD!'*. So, I started on the torturous journey of a PhD.

> I was working, because I was a single parent. I was working full time all through my PhD, so it took me eight years.

Apparently, she needed to somehow justify the fact that she took longer than the 'norm' to complete her PhD. Instead of honouring the great achievement implied by having done doctoral studies while working full-time and being a single parent, it appeared as if this experience fed the 'imposter syndrome' she mentioned earlier. This is somehow a sample of how profoundly, within our inner selves, the roots of the neoliberal discourse of productivity and performativity can reach. In that present moment, Grace's idea of her role as an academic was closely linked to her true core values:

> I see my role as an academic in the university is to be generating knowledge, but also very much communicating that, with an idea to contributing... to transform the understandings around teaching, and learning, and children, and social justice, and how that contributes to social justice. And connecting, in my teaching, connecting student teachers with the best available knowledge and pushing the boundaries of what it means to teach for social justice.

However, she felt that the neoliberal turn in university was hindering the pursuit of such goals:

> The constraints are huge! Because education is being constructed as an increasingly technicist way both teaching at university and teaching more broadly. So, holding on to the big ideas around transformative learning it's really hard at the moment... because it's all about efficiency and... it's not about questioning...not about challenging. It's about conforming. So, you know, the primary value really of a neoliberal is informing business, competition, individualism...
>
> I've always thought that the best way to work is collaboratively and, in the neoliberal University, you're absolutely being pitted against your colleagues in terms of promotion, in terms of publications. You're measured with metrics. So, it's really hard to see what the future is for universities. But I'm particularly concerned for early career people coming to the academia, because it's a very, very competitive world.

As a specialist in childhood education, Grace felt disappointed by the transformation of the schooling system under the neoliberal project:

> We are working in one of the most inequitable, segregated, systems in the world! With the division between public and private, and such a strong now, private [sector]. That was never like that when I was first teaching, you know? Australian public schools were recognized as some of the best in the world. I find that very sad because I'm passionate

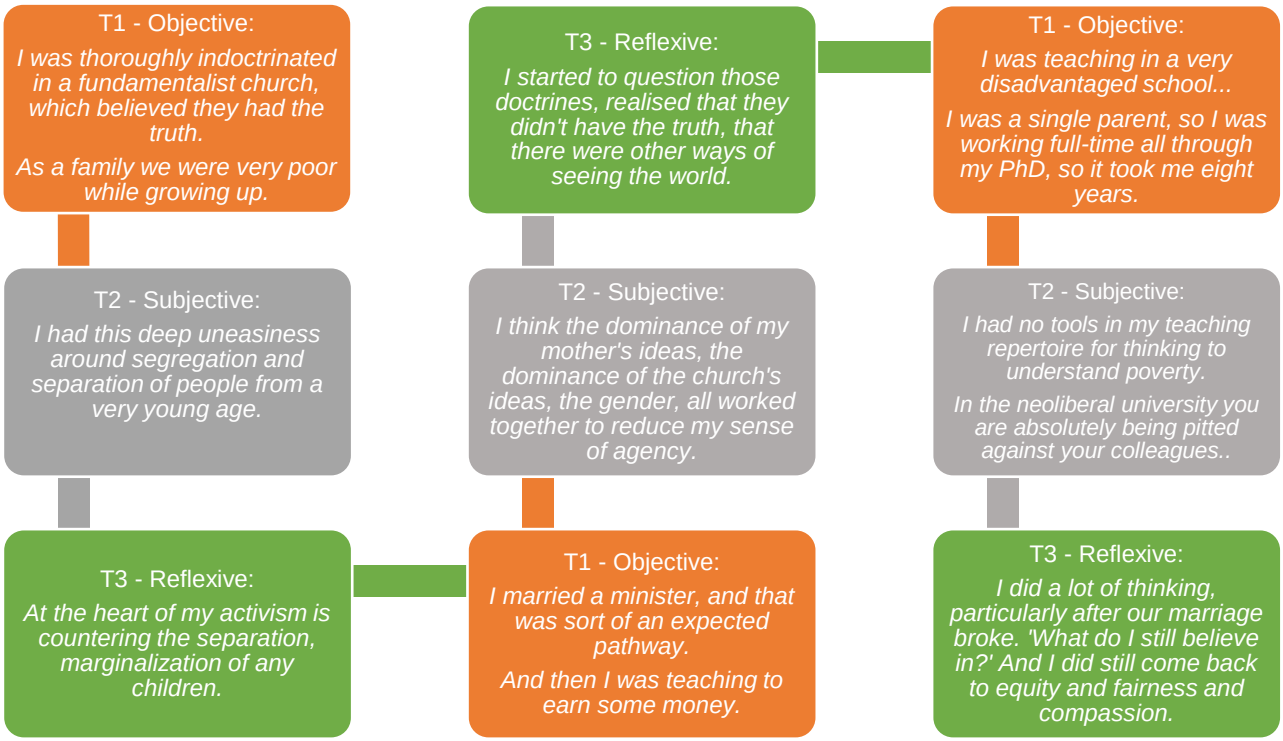
> about public education, not private. Children's education should not be determined by the amount their parents can afford. Just so counter to my values...

As the interview was approaching the end, I asked Grace about her projects for the future. Being close to retirement, Grace was inevitably looking for alternative ways and places to contribute her time and energy to advancing positive social change. It was evident that this was not the first time that she had reflected about the future:

> When you're getting older you sort of think *'well... what is the purpose of my life? What is the purpose of education that I've committed so much of my energy and time to?*' And for me it is about contributing to a world with less division, less hatred, less poverty, less violence. But the challenge is to find something where I can do that work, or maybe... Maybe it's through my grandchildren.
>
> I do think that as a grandparent you can have an influence on your grandchildren and I've got eight, they're all at school now so, the relationships change a little bit, but I do see that as part of what my purpose in life is.
>
> If I compare my ex-husband to myself, for example, his values now are all about money. He's very rich. […] I'm very much about the arts and education and I'm not rich, you know? I guess it's just providing a different perspective on things. I think this is what I contribute to my grandchildren, I think. Haha! But I'm looking forward to having some more time with them, really.
>
> I'm wondering what is going to take that space. I wonder what I would do in my retirement […]. Probably still do some writing, I would do some volunteer work.

Grace's story illustrates how her commitment to fundamental core values influenced her posture towards society. She had walked away from institutions, relationships, and jobs every time the disparity between the values held by those 'others' and her real self became unbearable. In the same way, she had been always dedicated to advancing her core values in each context where she found herself to be. These are all characteristics of meta-reflexivity, as Chapters 5 and 7 demonstrate. A summary of Grace's portrait is presented in the following figure (Figure 4.1), using the three moments of the MA as a basis to highlight the way she threaded her path through the world:

Figure 4:1 Grace's morphogenetic portrait



4.2 Emma

I'm planting seeds. It's not about competitive individualism, it's actually about creating beneficial networks and retaining love and care. (Emma)

Emma was a middle-aged researcher and teacher in a public university in Australia. Her main research interests gravitated around sociology of education, race, and gender studies. She had offered her office to do the interview, so we met there. After I explained the focus of the research, she showed enthusiasm and openness about the idea of talking about her internal conversations:

> That's beautiful! Because I have these conversations in my head around this all the time. So, this will probably be quite therapeutic for me!

The fact that she was used to being reflexive upon her own reflexivity would become apparent throughout the interview. When I asked about the triggers of her activist dispositions, without

hesitations, she pointed to her working-class background:

> I think for me it is […] having some small sense of feeling marginalized and feeling almost like ashamed to say [where I come from].

Evidently, the context where she grew up left some negative imprints in Emma's sense of self. At the same time, within that context of her childhood, her mother appeared in Emma's narrative as a key positive figure in the development of her sense of agency. Emma talked about her mother as someone who encouraged her to become the professional and confident woman she was today. Evidently, the tensions between the context she grew up in and the mother's aspirations for Emma and her brother had significant consequences. On the one side, Emma was aware that she was, somehow, privileged:

> I didn't have the language to understand it at the time, but when I went to primary school, I knew that I was not from really the bad side of the track, so to speak. I knew that there were already differentiations and I wasn't from a broken home. Mum and dad still being together; even that was unusual, you know? We ate really healthy food, like brown bread and fruit and had water; whereas the kids from the housing trust area might have lollies for breakfast, if they had anything at all. So, I could kind of see that there were differences, but I didn't understand what that meant. Also, that went in terms of values: a very strong, at least from mum, a very strong support of education. So, I never missed a day of school, always did my homework. Education was seen as a vehicle for social mobility in the eyes of my mum. So, she was aspirational. She wanted my brother and I to do really well, to go on to university.

However, from the other side, things looked very different for Emma:

> Mum was also supportive of having me involved in lots of extra-curricular things. She started a running club at the school, so I was running. I danced from like the age of two and a half, basketball, you name it! But I came became quite seriously committed to dancing and through that ended up trying out for and getting into state and national teams. So, being involved in dancing took me out of [her neighbourhood] and I was mixing with the other girls that go onto the state national teams. They were from very wealthy areas for the most part, because to be involved at that level really was a sacrifice for my mum. She worked extra jobs as a cleaner and what-have-you to have me involved; whereas the other girls I was associated in the team with, they had disposable income. So, I knew when I would go to their houses and the leafy green parts of town. Again, I didn't have the language for it; I didn't quite understand what was occurring, but I knew enough to know that I should conceal my identity, you know? I shouldn't say where I come from because I knew that that would have some kind of a negative impact.

This contextual incongruity was the starting point in Emma's way through the world. She unambiguously evoked the feelings that these inconsistencies triggered in her and how they became the primary impulse for her practices as an activist:

> I certainly felt the negative effects of being considered from a lower-class area and I think when you feel something like that, that can be an impetus to want to do something about it.

It is worth noticing how Emma's internal dialogues functioned as a bridge between her strong sense of agency – fostered by her mother while she was growing up – and the structural difficulties she encountered later in life:

> I begged my parents at the time "*could I please go into a private girls' school?*" Like the other girls at dancing were going to, you know? Places that have hats and uniforms. 'X' school is really considered to be the pits. But they said: "*no, you can't go there"* […]. And mum actually said to me – bless her – she said: "*if you make it there, you can make it anywhere!*". Which now I realize is not entirely accurate, because it's not down to the individual necessarily. But, anyway, I went to 'X' and I've got to say I had some wonderful teachers!

From the experience in 'X' school Emma did, indeed, recall one of her teachers as an inspiration for her activist practices. Mr. C. arose in the narrative as someone who left lasting imprints in her identity. She remembered him as someone who was especially kind, committed and compassionate. Also, as a figure who cared enough about his students to take the time to engage with them in significant educative experiences:

> Everything he had on the reading list really led us to recognize and start to seriously question a range of social inequalities. And he was just a quiet, a very committed man. […] I remember the rest of the students in the class didn't get it, didn't care, [...] and didn't respect him. But […] I knew from a young age that what he was doing was so important, and I would stay back after school and work on my essays and talk about things. […] He gave me a copy of 'Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance'. I've got it around here somewhere. He was really supportive.
>
> He quietly used education as a vehicle for social transformation, starting with the classroom. And look, maybe he was planting seeds; maybe in some of those students [...] he did ignite something. But he was working with a group of really working-class students who, for the most part, were disengaged from academics.

Later in the interview, Emma evoked another significant event in her experience with Mr. C. that sparked her disposition towards nonviolent social change:

> Oh! I remember what really struck a chord! When Mr. C. led us to think about the life and times of Gandhi and how Gandhi's approach to inequality was peaceful non-compliance. So, he led the people to just not […] go along with the status quo and they didn't, they weren't violent. I think was peaceful resistance… that really struck a chord. So, we thought about Gandhi and that approach… and that approach to resistance, to activism…

After finishing high school, Emma followed the path that seemed 'easier' for her to follow. Here, the workings of Emma's inner reflexive processes were evident: not only was she aware of the ways in which her internal conversation was structurally conditioned, but she also acknowledged the gendered quality of it:

> Hmm… so, in terms of what was available, feasible for me and I think growing up throughout high school education remained quite gendered and I seemed 'naturally' -I'm putting the word 'naturally' in scare quotes- drawn more to the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, than the hard sciences and we know that that leads to lower paid wages and more […] kind of caring roles and what-have-you.

Significantly, similarly to Grace's experience, gender arose in Emma's narrative as an issue that strongly influenced her inner world and the way she positioned herself in society. Once she graduated from College, Emma got a part-time job coaching a team in the call centre of a big finance corporation. Although her parents were very pleased with the way in which she was quickly ascending the ranks, she felt miserable:

> I felt like I was working for the devil and it was soul destroying…

The dissonance between her real self and the values held by the corporation she was working for became evident in Emma's choice of words. It was *soul destroying*. Her commitment to values that are grounded in human nature, like social justice, compassion, and equity, pushed her to pursue other goals. She recalled the dialogues that were taking place inside her head at that moment:

> I remember one day, before work – you'd think I'm crazy! – but I just started crying

> because I thought '*this feels like such a terrible waste of my time and my life to be working for this evil people, the corporation*'.
>
> I was the employee of the month, and I was this and that, and I was on track to become some corporate whatever… and get lots of money; but I thought '*well, this is killing me, that's not going to happen!*'
>
> So, eventually this idea grew, and it was '*I need to do something better with my life. I need to do something that is ethical and makes a difference somehow. I don't quite know how to do that*'.

She finally resigned to that job, sold her belongings, and went to volunteer in a developing country for nearly a year. However, true to her habit to reflect on her own reflexive processes and subsequent actions, soon after she arrived there, she started questioning her decision:

> As soon as I got there, I started to realize, I questioned, '*was I actually doing any good here or was I making things worse?*'
>
> I really did question '*what really am I doing here?*' Because I get to sweep in and then go and I don't know if I've really, really done much good for these people. '*Have I somehow exploited them?*' So, these questions were rattling around in my head and I eventually left, and I thought: '*well, what am I going to do with my life?*'

Back in Australia, Emma decided, reluctantly, to continue her studies at university to become a teacher. Contrary to her expectations, she quickly realized that teaching was a pathway intimately intertwined with her core values:

> I went to 'Z' Uni and really begrudgingly because I did not want to be a teacher, you know? It just seemed to be a role that was mapped out for women, I was living class status and [...] it's kind of an extension of being an institutional housewife. And I thought it would be all about making macaroni necklaces and painting by numbers. And when I got here, actually, I was surrounded by activist sociologists. There was a critical mass of people, and suddenly I thought [Emma clicks her fingers] '*wow! Yes… this is awesome! Education can be a platform for social change, I can really invest myself in this!*' And that, really, looked back to Mr. C. in high school and the way that he's used his role as an educator to raise critical questions and generate awareness. I did that degree and I was absolutely inspired by the lecturers that I was working with.

Some lecturers were so inspiring for Emma that it didn't take long for her to decide that she wanted to pursue an academic career:

> I was sitting in on one lecture one day and I turned to the person next to me and I said: [clicking her fingers] '*I've just worked it out! That's what I want to do!*' And I pointed to

> [the lecturer]. And he said: '*You want to be an academic?*' I said: '*Yes! That's what I want to do*!'… And he said: '*errrr…. are you sure?*' '*Yes!*' And in that moment, I realized, I was absolutely sure. But it took, I think, 10 years from that point onward.

Emma made sense of the academic career as a vehicle for self-transformation and for positively contributing to the world, rather than as a path for moving up the social ladder:

> […] I decided that I would become an academic, and you really need to have a PhD, and I was more than happy to engage in that. I have always really loved engaging in study, I just think it's such a privilege and just a wonderful thing to do. And when you are connected to the level of ideas, I feel like that's very empowering. I think, for me that really feeds into self-transformation, connecting with different ideas because when you see the world differently you can start to see yourself differently and vice versa. So those deep philosophical ideas that underpin activism, critical pedagogy… I saw the PhD is a vehicle for really immersing in that. So yeah… that's why I decided to become an academic because I wanted to be like [two of the lecturers that inspired her].
>
> That's why I wanted to become an academic, because I could see that it was a pathway that was viable to me, but also it was a pathway that potentially meant that I could end up in a role where I felt like had some meaning to it and I could possibly do some good in the world.

Emma had, indeed, embraced academia as a platform to contribute towards human flourishing. In contrast to the corporate world where she began her professional life, university still allowed her a certain degree of academic freedom.

Emma was reflexive and thoughtful regarding the activist practices she chose to be involved in. She extended that reflexivity to areas that transcended the boundaries of the university. From the readings she included in her classes to the brands she bought in the shops, she questioned everything and acted accordingly. She recalled, as a key influence in her reflexive activism, one of her teachers at University:

> [B] in particular, because I felt that she was so inspiring, that she inspired change in my life and it was [...] big and small things. I started to think about the clothes that I wore and where did they come from; were they made in a sweatshop? […] What am I contributing to in my everyday actions?

This habit of pondering the broader impacts of her daily actions may become a source of conflict in the current neoliberal university which, as Chapter 6 discusses in detail, values skilled and

productive but docile workers. In fact, when reflecting about the current neoliberal turn in her workplace, Emma could not avoid feeling worried about what the future may bring:

> I've been thinking a lot about the neoliberal University. Who knows if I'll even have a job here? At this point in time, the topics that I coordinate and that I work in are highly political and students are forced to grapple with questions of social inequalities that play out, in complex ways, in all parts of society but certainly through the institutions of Education both here and in schools, and […] it's part of their assessment, they have to think seriously around what their standpoint is and what their agency is and what actions will they take as an educator in the clear light of these realities, of these social inequalities.

She knew that being *highly political* was a risk in an institution that, ironically, should be encouraging its students to acquire critical thinking as a key asset in an increasingly complex world. Emma cherished, nonetheless, hope in the University as an institution that could contribute towards a more equitable and sustainable future:

> I still think that we have a bit of a Trojan horse capacity to work within the structures of oppression, to create change from the inside out and if we can't, then what? Do we give up on higher education all together? I'm not ready to do that. Maybe I'm naïve…

Her hopes might be innocent but, in her daily teaching practice, she encountered enough reasons to support her arguments:

> There is this similar pattern every year: there's a very small number of students who, just for whatever reason, you plant those seeds and immediately they get it, they see it, they start to roll with it, and they take action! They actually change the course of their lives, self-transformation. But for others I think we're still planting seeds. Maybe the conditions aren't ripe yet, but maybe there will be a time and they… you know... I had a student email me today, a student from years ago. […] He's working in a remote Indigenous community now and he said, '*I've been thinking about some of the things that we were talking about and I could see it now*...' And '*what do you think about this?*' And '*can you send me this information and that'*. So that was, well, that was only three or four years ago, but that's taken some time to germinate.

These kinds of events fed Emma's hope in the powerful ripple effect that she could have, through her teaching practices, in the lives of others. Apart from teaching, Emma also found inspiration in other sources, like Buddhist literature:

> I haven't mentioned it, but I probably should, because it really is underlying and I think it was inspired by some of the ideas that Mr. C. in high school, but I've, over the years, done a lot of reading into Buddhist literature.

Of course, she questioned that choice too:

> I guess this comes up! Haha! And I think '*Oh! Look at this clichéd westerner…*' But, actually, those ideas mesh in my mind so well with critical pedagogical work and that is how I can position myself in relation to students; that's how I […] talk with them.

Despite her own criticism, those non-academic sources of knowledge allowed Emma to approach her activism and her academic job from a radically different place than the purely competitive and individualistic perspective imposed by the neoliberal narratives:

> One of the ways that I'm endeavouring to negotiate the neoliberal University is that... In Buddhism they say: '*whatever is occurring in your life, that is your curriculum*'. So, right now, the changes to the neoliberal University - I'm not saying that these are 'natural' changes – but I'm saying […] '*okay, this is coming up, so right this is what needs to be grappled with*'. How do I do that in a way that is still infused with love and respect? I think the reason that I'm not ready just to walk away from the university and say '*well, universities have lost any capacity for love and critical intellectual work'*, is because I see these things in students all the time, and this is still human encounters that we're engaging with, despite these frameworks that oppress us and within those frameworks and when we're talking about them and how the university is changing. In those human interactions [...] there's care. It's evident and it hasn't managed to kill that. We still have some agency there. I still have some agency in terms of how I relate with people.

It is worth noticing how she turned to fundamental human feelings – love and respect – as a powerful resource in the face of neoliberal anti-human constraints. She had experienced the force of deep human encounters in her own life in the past, and she was able to recognise them in her present daily interaction in the classroom. That recognition empowered her to infuse her actions with love, kindness, and respect to re-shape the social fabric:

> I think it's so inspiring to be able to re-vision what it means to be an academic. […] Rather than being this competitive individual, I think we're stronger together.
>
> I think: '*actually, what it means to be an academic?*' I have some agency in shaping that! And I don't have to follow this staid path, you know? It's not just all about being intellectual and up in your head, but it's actually about feeling what you do as well.
>
> We're shaping the world that we share and we're shaping the social fabric that we share. So, if we only think of ourselves as individuals [...] that's crazy! Neoliberalism would have

us think that way, but we're all connected!

When I asked Emma to reflect about self-transformation as a dimension of activism, she quickly mentioned some self-transformative practices that she engaged with to calm her busy, academic mind, such as meditation and running. However, a few hours after our interview she sent through an email:

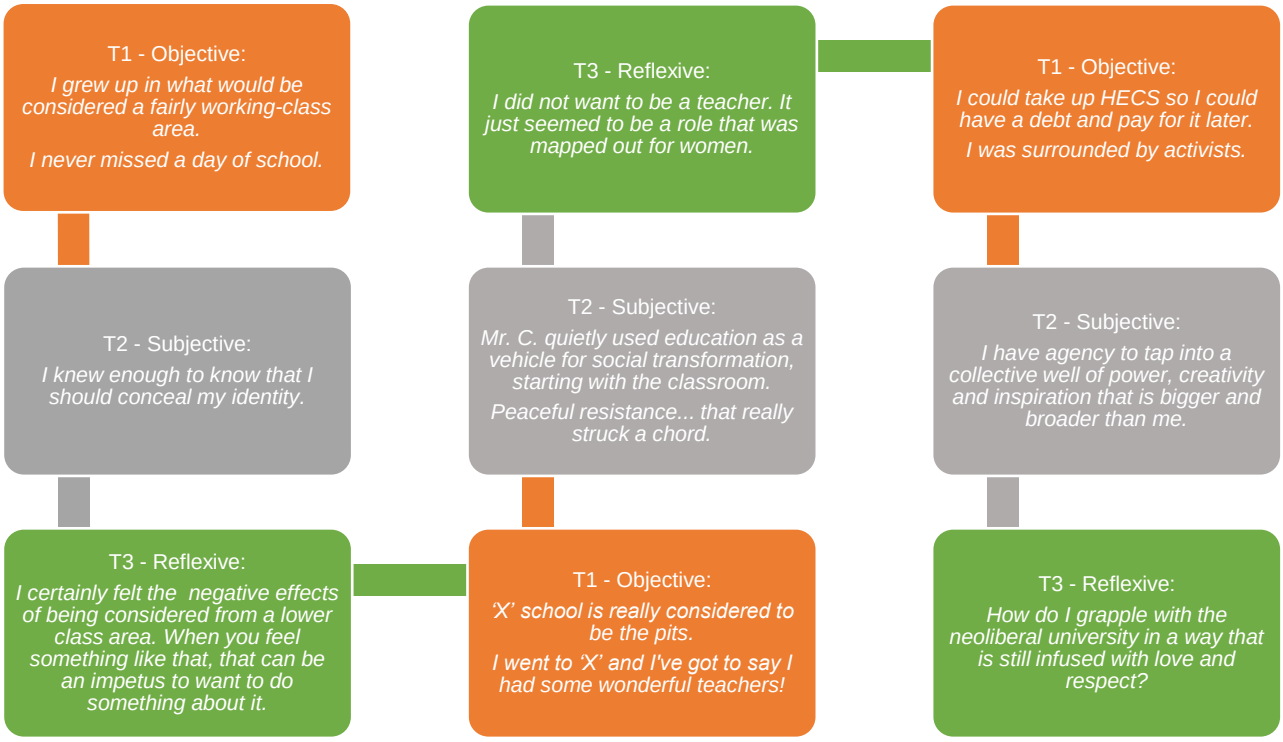
> I had a feeling after our interview today that I hadn't quite responded to one part of the 'mind map', specifically, the theme about the 'self'. You asked what self-practices and self-conversations I engage in as a vehicle for sustaining an activist modality [...] Whilst walking tonight I realised that I'd missed out some lines of thought and self-practices that I engage in quite regularly, and I probably failed to mention them because they sound a bit crazy. But I should mention them.
>
> So... in addition to meditation and running and spending time in nature, I also listen to hardcore metal, particularly protest songs. [...] This might seem rather odd, but the way I rationalise this self-practice it is thusly: hardcore music not only constitutes a gender transgression (i.e. 'good girls don't listen to metal'), and hence is a pathway for me to access a form of power that is normatively reserved for 'masculine men', protest music is also a means of tapping into a much broader community of activism with long roots, that I can imagine I belong to, however tangentially.
>
> I also at times (particularly times of stress) spend time in the gym lifting weights and, you'll notice, I paint my nails black. These are small ways I remind myself that I have agency to tap into a collective well of power, creativity and inspiration that is bigger and broader than me, and has been operational for far longer than the modes of neoliberalism (and their foot-soldiers) now colonising higher education and indeed, nearly all social spaces. These small acts remind me that, despite being a woman in a white man's world and a white man's institution, that they can't colonise my thoughts; they can circumscribe my working conditions and undermine the work I do and fail (time and again) to give me the promotions I bloody well deserve, but they can't colonise my thoughts [...].
>
> I also failed to mention that in terms of people who have been influential and left a 'stamp', [B] was very consciously critical of the literature on her reading list [...]. [B] was life-changing for me in the way I've always aspired to be with my students. I think one of the things I gleaned from her is that 'love' (i.e. interweaving love into our work as academic activists) is not about being fuzzy and feel-good; it's about seeing the highest self in ourselves and others and consciously endeavouring to live up to that vision. To that end, in my work with tertiary students I maintain very high expectations, of them and me. [...] I provide them with ample spaces to exercise their voices and opinions, but I demand that their opinions are strong, well-researched and deeply considered so that I am, essentially, playing a part in producing a powerful, politicised teaching force. [...] They know that we're engaging in this work, not for the individual, but for the society we share. And they know, upon completing my topics, that the road we're walking is not an easy one. They get my passion in spades.

Emma's words showed how her approach to activism went in both directions. On the one side, she

engaged in self-transformative practices, she continuously reflected on the way she positioned herself in the world and she felt internally connected to, and empowered by, a broader community. On the other side, she translated those inner processes in external actions in her workplace. Not only did she critique the status quo and aspire to transform it, she also consciously infused her actions and her work with subversive human values, with the intention to trigger in others the mechanism that put in motion the process of change.

Emma's story shows how a commitment to core values that favour human flourishing, like love, compassion, social justice, can be used a source of motivation to sustain ongoing activist practices. They are also a way to enact that concept that struck her activist chord in her teenage years – Gandhi's idea of peaceful non-compliance – by disrupting the market-driven values that neoliberalism is imposing on universities. Furthermore, spreading those values is a way to 'plant seeds', as Emma put it. The long-lasting effects that Emma's mother's and Mr. C.'s compassionate actions had in her adult life are illuminating of the ways the *seeds* that we plant have the potential to flourish in powerful ways that are often impossible to foresee. A summary of Emma's portrait is presented in the following figure (Figure 4.2):

Figure 4:2 Emma's morphogenetic portrait



4.3 James

> *It should be the very central premise of being an academic that activism is part of the job description. What's the alternative? To live in silence, fear? That would just eat me alive. (James)*

James was a middle aged academic and a very committed union member. We met at his office. He was a warm and kind person, though very cautious with his words. He was knowledgeable and humble at the same time. His narrative was self-contained, and I found it challenging to have him talking from a more personal level and sharing the content of his internal dialogues.

James' personal and professional lives were very much connected to the point that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. That may be the reason behind the fact that James used his 'academic hat' more than any other, even when talking about his personal life. Looking through his

academic lenses, the idea of the internal conversation looked familiar to James:

> The first thing that struck me about [...] the internal conversation that a person has with himself or with themselves, is that it actually ties in with one of the central kind of claims that Gloria Anzaldúa makes, and that is the famous quote that says '*first we imagine and then we enact*'. [...] There's a beginning point that it is through imagining, through conceptualizing, as a precursor to enactment, to a place where you can role model, in your own mind, how to do things or how to change things. And, of course, that ties in with Paulo Freire's ideas of praxis, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.

Significantly, James made sense of his inner dialogues as a place where he had the capacity to imagine possible alternatives to the actual state of the world. In other words, it was the place where the seeds of transformation were planted. The following chapters will show that the same understanding of the internal conversation, as a powerful cause in the world, is fundamental for critical realism.

Growing up, James' family was different from other families in that he was raised by his widowed father. James' father was a positive role model for him and a key influence in the activist way of life that he would later embrace:

> I would say that the start has always brought up being a single parent family, raised by my father. Because as children my father often spoke to us as actualized people rather than incomplete projects, he often spoke openly, I guess, to his children in the way he may have if my mother were alive.

James clearly remembered the way in which his father shared his own internal conversations with him:

> So, he had quite explicit conversations about what he was thinking or reflecting upon in the state of politics in Australia and internationally through my childhood. [...] My father was talking to me quite explicitly, and I remember this driving along in the car, before elections about what his thinking was on the major parties and without proposing, as he was kind of trying to come to terms with where he thought he would vote. I think for didactic reasons he was trying to impart to me that you think very carefully before you vote.

It is worth noticing that James' father made him partaker of his reflexive processes. In this way he

was, on the one hand, role modelling a specific reflexive style and, on the other hand, fostering in James a strong sense of agency.

The schooling years were for James a period of contradictions. On the one side, he experienced school as a place of participation and debate:

> I went through primary schooling in the 70s, I think that's probably one of the more radical times in education in Australia. It was imbued with open space classrooms, critical literacies, things that were informed by the whole critical pedagogy movement, there were a lot more alternative teachers, I imagine. And so, I remember in my day-to-day kind of schooling, in primary school, that debate and having to establish positions was normal; it wasn't abnormal. […] I found the same thing in high school that it was quite normal to behave democratically.

On the other side, although he found some inspiring teachers, he resented the oppressive structures of the school system:

> The structure itself and the punitive nature, the discipline of high school, I felt completely suffocated and controlled. But individual teachers, in particular courses I took – not all teachers – that permitted within the structure, the punitive structure of schooling, those golden moments where there could be open debate about particular issues, you can engage things from your own life world, the things of relevance.
>
> I found English classrooms quite often were places where you could have really meaningful conversation. Art rooms were the same, because there was a certain freedom to express yourself through different media and to engage in subversive art works, of history. But schooling itself I found dreadful.

After finishing secondary school, becoming a teacher was not in James' plans, however it was an opportunity that he took and, eventually, it opened for him the path into the academic life:

> I did a degree in Literature and Philosophy, and then I did in an Honours degree in Literature, and then went back out into the world and eventually…. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I had done lots of different sorts of jobs that I found pretty unremarkable and unrewarding. So, eventually, almost to my own horror, I decided [...] the only thing really opened to me was to become a schoolteacher. And it was the thing I most dreaded, because everyone had been telling me that – from the beginning – '*you'd be good teacher!*' But I said to myself: '*I can't be a teacher! I hate teachers!*' Well, I don't hate all teachers, I hate the idea of teachers, of the powerful, domineering, kind of autocrat. So, with much reluctance, and always with my back against the wall, I enrolled to do a Bachelor of Education. I did that, did well enough that I was then invited to do a PhD. I finished all that some while back and landed a job at the university, a continuing job, and have been here ever since then. And I now enjoy teaching, yeah… ha ha!

For James, his job at the university was inevitably intertwined with being an activist. He was passionate about activism and it became evident through his narrative that he reflected a lot about its praxis and meaning:

> The university should not want academic staff members or professional staff members that don't want to participate in open, democratic commentary about the world around them. Otherwise they're wasted. Their wisdom, their knowledge, their expertise, their views, are wasted. In fact, they're buried. It should be the very central premise of being an academic that activism is part of the job description.

Significantly, for James, activism was not limited to transforming social structures. In his view, social change and self-transformation were two sides of the same coin:

> If we're engaged in reflection and critical reflexivity whereby we dare to question our own values, motivations, actions, contradictions, etc., we're some way empowered to then changing our own behaviour and therefore transforming the world.
>
> Obviously there has to be self-transformation which itself can be very, very difficult. I mean, the practice of overturning our own ideas is so very hard. Vast majority of people will never walk away from their viewpoints, regardless of how enlightened they might be! So, critical reflexivity in that is really a challenge and it's way beyond mindfulness and metacognition. It's not just like an observation of thinking; it's an active disruption of own thinking and being prepared to, kind of ruin, you know, the erected structures of the mind. To say: '*I've got to rethink this, or reimagine this, or conceptualize this and afresh…*' Enormously challenging! It sounds so simple to say, you know?

It became apparent that James understood the practice of activism as occurring at various levels: to transform the outer world, one must be willing to critique and disrupt the own inner world. In that process, however, one can be deceived by the appearances of the outer world:

> The danger here is that transformation isn't by itself always affirmative, useful or constructive. People can start off good and turn bad […] depending on what your values are. I'm all to change […] I'm sure there's plenty of good people that, you know, have fallen foul of neoliberalism.

To prevent this from happening, James was of the opinion that self-transformation was not something that people should do alone. On the contrary, in James' eyes, it is through the interactions with others that we can change ourselves for the better:

> I suppose the only way to transform the self has to be through that internal dialogue and the shared conversations we have with others, which inform those internal dialogues. It could be no other way!
>
> It's a self and collective transformation, because it's you in conversation, collaboration, partnership with others. Because, if learning happens through dialogue and interaction with others then part of your learning is always something that you owe to others, you know what I mean? We're sharing in those transformative moments, so…

The commitment to work with others for the collective freedom and flourishing was rooted in James' most fundamental ideals and values:

> [...] that's an act of love, you know, it's an act of commitment, it's an act of participation, to receive history and inheritance and decide to participate in its change or alteration, to make it fit new contexts, new circumstances, new possibilities. [...] I believe the heart of activism is that fundamental kind of negotiation with the past to create the future.

We can see here how, at the most basic level, James' activist practices were driven by love and by the belief that alternative futures are not only conceivable but real possibilities. As an active union member, James was very articulate in expressing his opinion about the role that universities should play in shaping a human-interested society and the place academics must take in it:

> Universities should be the paragons of democratic, participatory, open, transparent organizations. They should role model that, they should teach that, they should practice that, they should theorize that in a robust way. And, in fact I would go so far as to say that an academic staff member, indeed a professional staff member, isn't participating or contributing fully to a university if they're not an activist or if they're not participating in democratic practice. Silence and complicity are complicity with the status quo, and the status quo at the moment in universities and more broadly in society is anti-democratic. So those people that remain silent become complicit.

Reflecting on the current trends happening in universities, James was fearful about what the future may bring if the neoliberal turn continued its course:

> My fear is that we're actually retreating from the promise of a university as an open, democratic, participatory, robust, energized, creative, emotional, you know, uplifting place where knowledge, the creation of knowledge and research is the hallmark of a successful university. At the moment, with the neoliberal turn and universities being viewed as corporations, run by a CEO, and that staff themselves are just cogs in the machine, and students are customers, and so on and so forth, it's eroding what I understood a university to be.

At the same time, with his core values so strongly tied with his practices, he could not conceive of

doing something different to what he had done so far. The alternative was unthinkable:

> I hope to continue to be an active union member. [...] I plan to continue to write robust critiques of the university. [...] I plan to continue to do those sorts of things and I might not be at this university for long… There are restructures coming and they may see that as an opportunity to knock me off but, heavens above, I mean, what's the alternative? To live in silence, fear? That would just eat me alive, internally, to say that I'm just going to become silence and complicit. So, I'll continue to do the things that I believe that I have to do. Participating in ways that I think are appropriate, and that includes intellectual and academic freedom to speak openly and freely on things to do with the workplace in the university in general, and to comment fearlessly, as much as possible, [...] and try to role model for others because people do look to me for leadership, obviously, to be role model.

He was aware that, in the neoliberal university, his commitment to activism was not well received, but he was willing to deal with the consequences of his choices:

> I take my responsibility as an academic and exercise the academic and intellectual freedom very seriously. I do exercise that right. It's not lost on me, though, that the university would hate what I'm doing and will probably look to ways to penalize me for doing that. So, whilst our 'Enterprise Agreement' says that, you know, you're allowed to contribute to open debate and so on so forth, I know in my recent experience, the times when I've been punished and penalized for the work that I do. There is a price that is paid…

James' stance towards society was infused by love and the belief in a better future for all and, therefore, it is subversive of the neoliberal values. It is, moreover, a denial of the classical economic conception of human beings as mere bargain hunters (see Chapters 5 and 6) that is so influential in contemporary social sciences. James was not guided by the maximisation of profits. On the contrary, he was driven by the collective ideal of a more democratic and healthy society where every human being can thrive in freedom.

James' inner conversations were a place of struggle, but also a place where his commitment to fundamental values was renewed and strongly intertwined with his actions in the world:

> So, it is very sad, and I've wrestled with this stuff sometimes late at night, when I can't sleep, tossing and turning on my responsibilities…
>
> The internal conversation is constant but, like I said before, Anzaldúa says, and Garth

> Boomer says, '*first we imagine then we enact'*. So, I'm constantly going over this stuff in my head and having to reaffirm my commitment to people and to social justice, to collective action, what what we do is important in the social fabric, that if we don't do it, who the hell will?! And I constantly lament and feel quite depressed about the fact that so many people have given up the activism, or the commentary, or their activity, for complicity. That's how the sickness works, and that's how the neoliberal turn works.

He also made sense of his inner dialogues as the space where he could critique and transform himself for the better, in order to enhance his contributions to the world:

> You have to break down the binary between oppressed and oppressor. And at some point, both have to stand in a different location, rather than one simply becoming the oppressor and now the other oppressed and repeating the crop and around and around. Now this is a deeply difficult thing to do, deeply difficult thing to do! [...] It does require, I think, enormous amount of wisdom and compassion for the oppressed to overturn a structure and then not oppress those that were formerly the oppressors, and to somehow become a community that works together.

Clearly, for James, achieving a better society involved disrupting the commonly held binary between oppressed and oppressor. All relationships in society are, at a certain level, crossed by the oppressed–oppressor or, in critical realist terms, the master–slave dichotomy. The relations between social classes, between genders, between races, but also between mind and body, reason and emotions, mind and matter, men–women, are all relations where one part of the relation dominates the other (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 131). Crucially, James acknowledged that the way to overcome oppressive relationships was through the distinctively human capacities for wisdom and compassion which, according to critical realism, arise from deeper levels of reality (see Chapter 2). The critical realist understanding of the different levels of social reality, and the kinds of relationships possible at each level, highlights the significance of James' insights.

James, like Emma, was constantly questioning and critiquing his own reflexive practices:

> The time for self-awakening will always happen well after the event of your enculturation. You can't actually be self-awakened prior to your indoctrination into the existing system. [...] So, critical awakening always happens too late, by default! But better late than never… because only at that point can you start to undo or revise or revisit or reimagine or deconstruct […], in the loving, affirmative, constructive way, the narratives of self or

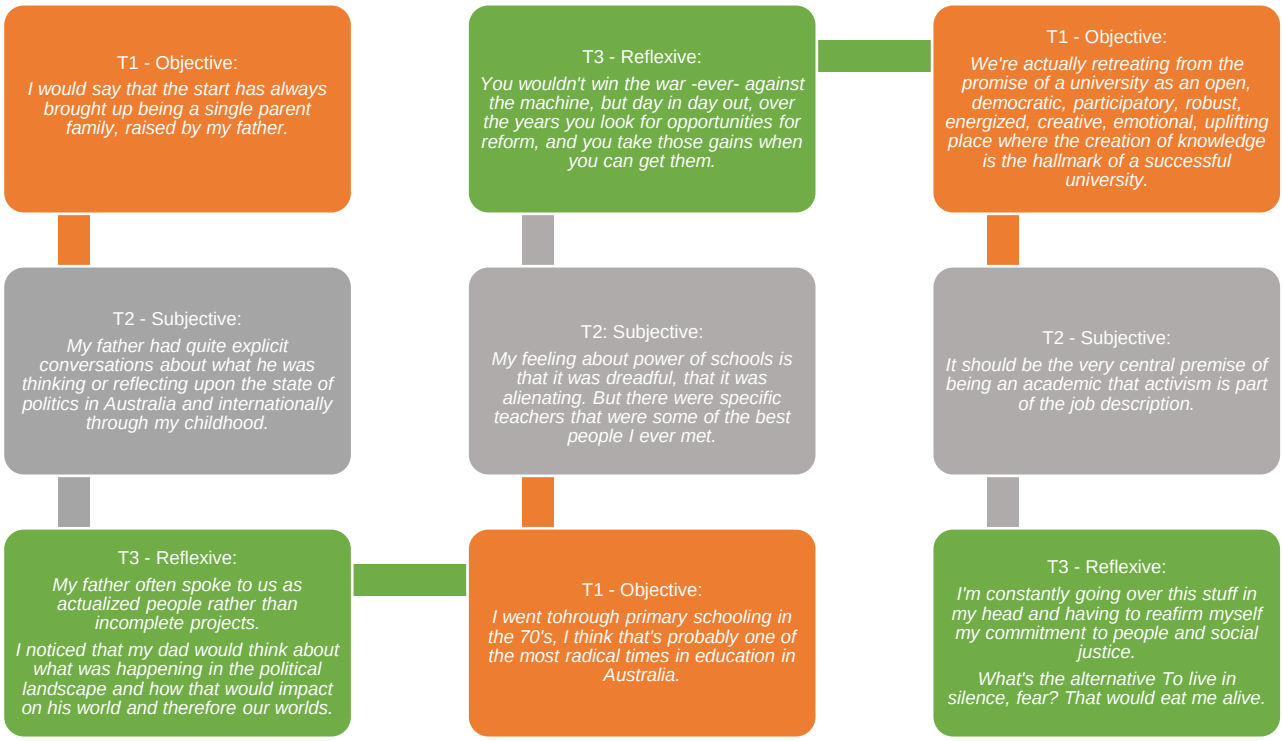
> the discourses or the ideologies.
>
> So, it's like you can't necessarily blame a society hundreds of years ago for not having thought what we're thinking today, if we're standing on the shoulders of those who come before us. But what we can do, I guess, is taking active interest in our own self-transformation. If we believe, according to the values over here [pointing to the mind map], that people matter, that human integrity matters, that human dignity matters, that social justice matters, that love matters, that shared collective justice matters, then you might see it as your moral and ethical duty to participate as an active and informed and courageous citizen, family member, person in the world made up of multiple worlds.

Summing up, James' story is one led by the awareness that it may not be a good idea to wait for the one opportunity to revolutionise the world. Through that awareness, he embodied ongoing reflexive activism and concrete utopianism, as they are described in Chapter 6. James knew that every day, with every reflexive action, he was already changing the world around him:

> You will never change the overall fabric in one go. It's strategic little games, here and there, and it can be in the atmosphere of the classroom, or the discussions you have with colleagues that can start to undermine some of those oppressive power relations that happen in schools.

James' portrait is presented in the following figure (Figure 4.3), using the MA as a canvas:

Figure 4:3 James' morphogenetic portrait



4.4 Thomas

> *If we could get more people thinking about themselves and how they affect others this world will be a better place … I've had those moments that have shaped me in my life … certain sporadic moments that shaped who I became and who I am becoming … (Thomas)*

Thomas was a young academic working at a public university on a casual basis. He was also, at the time when the interview took place, actively looking for a permanent academic position. Thomas' interview was different from the other interviews I did for this project. He asked for one of his good friends and his mentor to join us for the interview. This was, for him, a way to create a more friendly and comfortable setting. His request also showed that his reflexive style needed validation and completion from a close friend or a family member (see Chapter 5). For privacy and confidentiality concerns, the comments made by the third participant were not transcribed in

Thomas' portrait. Only Thomas' voice is shown here. However, it is possible that Thomas' portrait occasionally reflects the presence of the third participant in the interview.

As with many other migrant families, Thomas' family underwent hardship when he was a child. That experience was deeply rooted in his mind and he related it with his current activist dispositions:

> Both parents being illiterate, I had no help around, no support. So, [...] my aspect of social justice and social inclusion is my lived experiences, that I don't want others to go through the same hardship at school, or have the same opportunities that I had or didn't have when I went to university.

Despite the struggles, Thomas' family found the way to provide nurturing emotional support while he was growing up:

> I have been privileged to have a good social architecture around me, a family architecture. This architecture builds on my capacity of who I am today, but I couldn't have done it without that architecture around me [...]. It allowed me to build those walls of the house that I've become, that I've made.

Thomas' family history was one of contextual incongruity and contradictions:

> I guess, growing up in Australia, but having Persian heritage roots, were in itself sometimes contradictory in terms of activism. In the Persian culture of my upbringing we tend to be quite conservative and go by the norms. Try not to disrupt unless needed. But having said that, there is a broader connection of my family heritage and culture of religious values, and being Baha'i, whilst I am not religious, has elements of religious freedom, has aspects of cultural and equal rights between men and women. So many of these things were actually activist roots from the Baha'i religion against the cultural norm of Muslim dominating in Iran. So, growing up with an activist culture of my parents leaving Iran for many of the reasons of being persecuted in terms of their own culture, well they were, you know, activists in many ways, and if I've learned anything in my life has been through their struggles to leave the country, to leave a whole society for a better society and a better life. So that goes for, I guess, how I've become, in a modest capacity, an academic activist.

When asked to clarify why he referred to himself as a 'modest' activist, Thomas explained how the constraints of the neoliberal university hindered his activist practices:

> I am no activist through forums or initiatives, whilst I would like to do and I'd like to take

> up more and more of those initiatives, I feel as if, in the current university, in my current environment and my situation within that environment, [...] these walls confine my practice, these walls tell me what I can't do, these walls tell me to be complicit, these walls tell me not to fight back.

Within those same walls that constrained his practice, Thomas also found a support network for his projects and a sense of belonging to a collaborative endeavour that transcended the self–other binary:

> Co-lla-bo-ra-ting [spells while writing on the mind map] on projects with others, while I might not have that internal feel or sense of empowerment, I feel through my collaborative reflexivity I'm able to gain what others, and through others, my form of reflective practice. So, to work on the team is my way of being an activist, because in that way I can share, I can contribute, I can engage, I can feel, and my happiness is drawn from others and a sense of others. So, academic activism is more about 'us' than is about 'I'.

Once more, we see in Thomas' narrative that the need for completion of his own reflexivity through others became noticeable. At the same time, Thomas appeared to feel whole only when tapping into a shared source of power. Significantly, this sense of belonging, of being an 'us', rather than an individual 'I', defined what activism was for Thomas.

Thomas expressed a deep curiosity when pondering about reflexivity. For him, this topic brought lots of questions to the surface. Among all the questions, one thing was certain for him, that is, reflexivity is intrinsically connected with basic human emotions:

> To put ourselves in other people's shoes is a fundamental component or a principle of human and being reflexive. I think we need to understand others, to know what they're going through, you know, for us to understand ourselves. [...] How do you become more reflexive through practice? Is it something that I could do a training session on? You know what I mean? Is reflexivity an aspect, or a skill, or a model? Or is it a form, or something, that must be learnt over time? Is it something that is only realized through moments of self-transformation? Is it only through certain hooks in the road that you realize these self-reflexive patterns? Is it an aspect of controlling our internal conversations, at certain moments and times, before they become behaviours or make any positive connections? Or is it something that's well beyond that? Or there's something linked to our cultural belonging in our histories? I think it is more than that. There are aspects of love, belonging and trust; and for me there's a triangle again [...]. Look: love, respect, and trust, as the triangle of life, that I look for others, in partnerships; I look them for my family and what I get for my friends. So that love, trust and partnership is [...] is the triangle, because they all feel one another, you know?

Love, trust, respect are then the foundations that Thomas identified as underpinning his reflexive practices. They also informed values that supported his activism:

> I guess my whole way of being comes back to my values, going up to my values now and being transformed within those interactions all throughout my life. And I guess what I really would hope to be, looking now back, past and present, in the future I hope to just leave some type of dent in society, a good dent, a positive dent, through my work as an activist, or as an academic, or as an academic activist, or even through just self-reflexive practice. If we could get more people thinking about themselves and how they affect others this world will be a better place.
>
> For me, social inclusion is big, as an aspect of activism, social justice and equity, equity for all.
>
> I know when you do the right thing, for the right people, for the right purpose. Honesty and truthfulness and acting being an academic activist there's always going to be the right thing to do. Because you do it for the right reasons and you're doing it for a better, socially just, society that we want to live in, not a corporatized model of commodified, product based, marketized, education products which are consumed as chocolate bars and are credited with skills. So, that's what I'm against and I'm trying to be an activist for, but the constraints are real.

For Thomas, then, his *being* was informed by the core values that sustained his actions in the world. Those values gravitated around social inclusion, equity, and fairness. The right actions stemming from those values sharply contrasted with the *commodified* and *marketized* values of the corporate logic pervading higher education.

Looking back, Thomas recalled key moments that influenced his way of being in the world:

> I've had those moments that have shaped me in my life. Certain sporadic moments that shaped who I became and who I am becoming. [...] There was a moment when my academic activism became a thing for me. It was on my second year of my doctoral study and I was halfway through my research and I was presenting my research and my supervisor at the time came up to me and goes: '*now this is your research, you own it, you're the activist, you're that person now!*' And for me that was [...] a self-transformation, identity moment, in my capacity of understanding that it wasn't just words on the paper anymore! I was living, breathing, and sharing this experience about, you know, activism through my presentation. I've had those moments in activism. I thought I'll give an example around that [...] about activism.

Looking forward, he had certainty about what aspects of the academic life he would like to see transformed:

> An academic environment of a traditional conference would ensure that the power, the authority, is still the 'sage on the stage', who then speaks and presents, and we all listen and we still get poured that knowledge. So, we need to disrupt, I guess, conventions in academic literature, in academic debates. How us, as academics, discuss will determine our activism. We need to change and shape how methodology is done in new ways of reflexive behaviour. I think we needed to change and shape the ways conferences are developed. How academics come together. I think there has to be a change in these projects, disrupting these projects.
>
> Academic activism is in many ways about disrupting your methodologies, about disrupting academic conventions, about disrupting reflexive behaviours. It's about disrupting who we are, who we want to become.

In the future, he also envisioned his own transformation as a fundamental task for him to carry out:

> Who I want to become? And what steps am I going to do? Setting a five-year plan in my intellectual, social, physical, emotional, family, political, personal, objectives for those five years. Where do I want to see myself at the best of my physical or emotional capacity and what steps am I going to do, being reflexive, to get there? Well, I guess it starts, you know, with the emotional: starting yoga this year, and Pilates, and then mindfulness training, you know. And I see all these gaps that I'll try to fill, in becoming a better 'me', a 'wholer' me, a more reflexive me. Not just an intellectually better me, but a holistic better me.

Interestingly, Thomas saw himself as a work in progress rather than as a finished product. In that way, it was possible for him to create a plan to fully develop his human capacities. Moreover, Thomas understood his well-being as arising, in part, from contributing to the flourishing of others:

> Some of these are internalized aspects of well-being, others are gained from providing that well-being to others through my intellectual or my social work or community engagement. So, work like this, through collaborative academic activism, community activism. [...] There's one thing to list on my work: what I really want to give back.

This same desire to contribute to the flourishing of others was what drove Thomas' practice as an educator. When reflecting on the impact his educative practices had on others, he immediately related it to love and other basic human feelings:

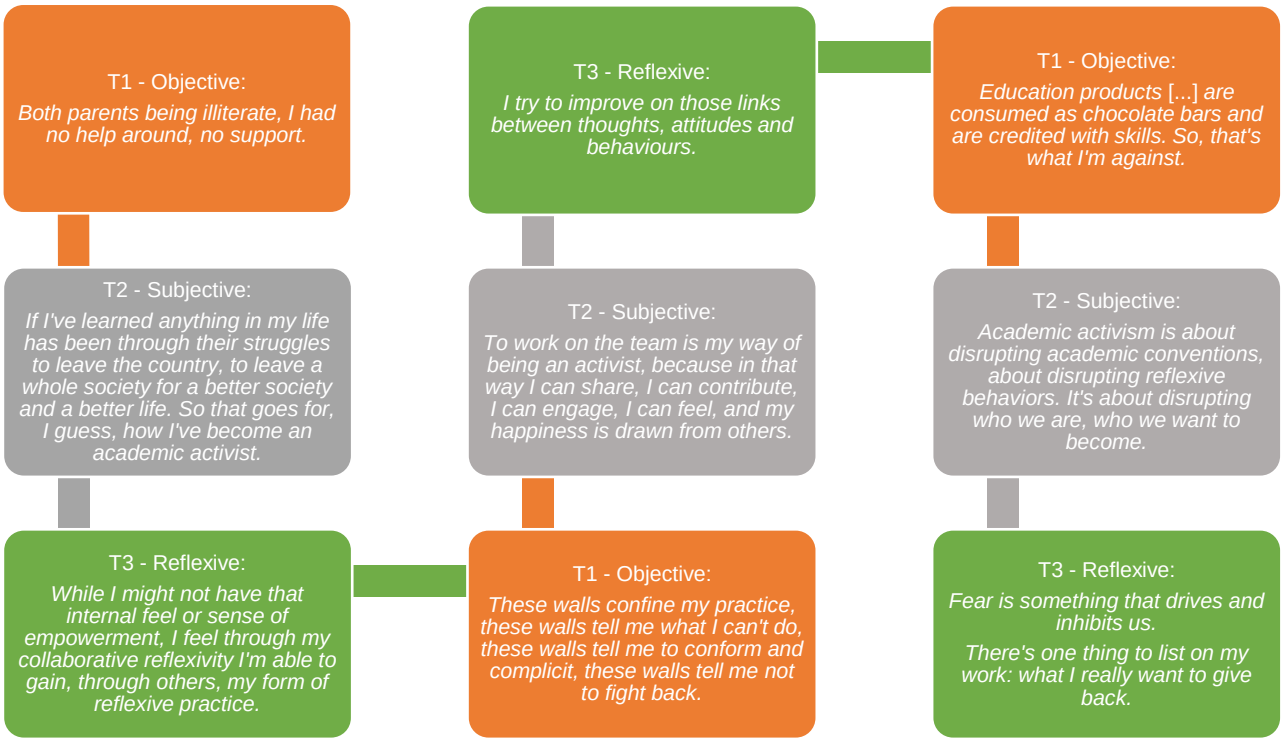
> Love is always there, isn't it? I think it also is passion, is purpose. I think it's something that inspires others in making an impact of their contribution in society, knowing that their classroom of 20 students this year will go thirty-two hundred thousand students in

> their lifetime, so I've met an impact of a 1 million reach of what I've got to say and how I would change the world. So, reach, impact, purpose, autonomy, and compassionate love. I will extend to love as a broader thing.

In Chapter 2 the case was made that, in a depth, stratified, emergent ontology, the feelings that Thomas referred to as guiding his teaching practice, like love and compassion, emerge from a realm of existence that is linked to non-dual states of being. It was also argued that it is by deepening our comprehension of that domain of non-duality that people can understand the interconnectedness of everything that exists and, thus, fully develop their capacities to work towards a eudaimonistic society.

To recap, Thomas' activism was driven by the yearn to contribute to the well-being of the people around him and by the need to feel accepted. It was in the interconnection to others where his activism flourished. In this story, emotions and activism are inseparably intertwined. A summary of his portrait is presented in the following figure:

Figure 4:4 Thomas' morphogenetic portrait



4.5 William

I actually want to contribute in some way that involves creative intelligence towards something purposeful in life. When you become activist, you enter into a world that is more than you. (William)

I met William in person. He was clever and knowledgeable and, maybe because of his age, he appeared to me as the archetype of the 'wise old man' or sage. He was also quite talkative, which was made evident by the fact that this was, by far, the longest of the seven interviews. It exceeded the two hours.

While he came to the academic world quite late in his life, his career had been prolific. He had retired ("not really retired from the field, just the institution", as he said) just a few months before we met.

I asked him about his upbringing and the environment where he grew up. He told me that he was born and raised in the United States, in a Jewish middle-class family:

> My parents were progressive, Jewish, secular Jewish family, and that was the neighborhood I lived in. My grandparents had been poor immigrants from the Shtetlekh, who spoke Yiddish and had fled the pogroms of the Czar. [...] And my parents lived through the Great Depression when they were young. So, they were poor to begin with and the Great Depression had a strong effect on people's senses of possibility. My father wanted to do socially just things, he wanted to burst the big trusts, and his first job was in the Securities and Exchange Commission trying to do just that. But he was also very materialistically concerned about supporting a family and he got children, so he became a corporate attorney and by the time I was born they were comfortably professional class.

Although he traced the firsts seeds of his activist dispositions back to his nuclear family, he knew from a young age that he didn't want to follow the path that was pre-established for him:

> My family was a supporter of civil rights struggles, you know, Martin Luther King and things like that. [...] They played Paul Robeson on the record player in our home. So, I was disposed to be progressive, but not radical.

> I always felt like I never really wanted to be what my parents were the models of. I didn't want to be a corporate lawyer or doctor or something professional. I wanted to do something creative or intelligent. I didn't know what it would be. I think I was like looking for a counterculture in some kind of a way that I didn't understand or couldn't articulate, and that I saw it was there, it was small but it was forming, and I felt... It just drew me, you know? I wanted to think and live and act and in that. But of course, then you're moving out of the trajectory, you're on to something else and that's, you know, that's scary.

It may have been the fear of delving into the unknown that led him, contradicting his inner voice, to follow the pre-set path. It was not difficult for William to access one of the Ivy League universities in the United States ('Y' University). At first, he felt that he did not quite fit in that environment, but then he found his tribe within the anti-war activist movement:

> I was a kind of a nerdy kid in high school, but I had friends who were also selected for the advanced classes. And then you leave your cohort and you go off to a university, and you have to find yourself all over again. And 'Y' University, at that time, was a gigantic fraternity and the male–female ratio and the undergraduate was about 3 to 1. So, most males join fraternities because the fraternities connect them to partying and social life beyond just that University. They were sort of the system for a social erotic life and I just found that system too unbearable [...]. And then the anti-war movement, at the time that I discovered it, mainly it was one person that I had met briefly who tore up his draft card and he gave a very significant speech. I was so struck by the community around him [...] They clearly were a different sort of person from the fraternity system people that had been coming into the freshman dorms the year before and trying to recruit us to join fraternities. And [...] I just wanted a society that was meaningful, and they were it, I could see they were it. I think I probably joined it, initially, more for that reason than because of its radical, its political purposes. I was vaguely turning against the war at that point but, you know, [...] whatever it was that these people were building their lives around made more sense.

At 'Y' University William also found teachers who inspired him, and he talked about them at length. He concluded by condensing what they represented in his life thus:

> So, these were people who I was talking to, who intimately were shaping how I thought about things. They were so much more exciting and were meaningful in what they could explain to me about the world than most of my classes.

When I asked him whether he remembered a moment or person earlier in his life who influenced his stance towards the world, he recalled a friend from high school:

> I had a friend in high school who was as intelligent as all of us, but he was... rebellious. He

> didn't participate in the advanced classes. He often didn't do his homework. He learned how to make rockets and set them up in his backyard. He would talk about this guy from Cuba that he met. [...] There was something about him that, again, both frightened and attracted me. I wanted to know what made him tick. As I got to talk to him a little more, he was teaching himself jazz piano. I was taking piano lessons, but I would play classical piano. He was playing jazz and he didn't know how to read music, but he'd listened, and he played, and he was quite good. I was kind of awed by the model of creativity and rebellion and it made more articulate my recognition that school curriculum was a hoop I was jumping through to get somewhere, but not something that was moving me or meaningful to me, really. There was very little in the academic contents of high school that reached, that made me feel like '*I want to be something in life around this...*'. So, he was a very influential friend. That probably was part of the setting of the trajectory to look alternatively, to think outside mainstream.

We find here again, as in all portraits so far, the difference that one person alone can have in influencing someone else's worldview. William's friend opened for him the possibility to 'think outside the box' and, thus, to become someone different. He then spent the rest of his life looking for a place where he had the freedom to be the person he envisioned – through his friend's lens – that he could be. Although he had encountered a peer group in the anti-war movement, that was not enough to compensate for the wide gap between his real self and the values symbolized by 'Y' University. He finally dropped out of university. It took more than two decades for him to find his way back:

> It took me a long time to come to a career. I mean, my first academic job, I was already in my 50s and my drop out period was long. The anti-war movement taught me a lot about the University. 'Y' University is a prestigious university and has wonderful things in many ways, but you could also see how much it was caught up in so many ruins of the society and my alienation from the institution became strong. And after the anti-war movement kind of fizzled, I ended up living on communes for about eight years, where I was just living a horizontal life, you know? Like gardening, building yurts that we lived in. One of the communes was more spiritually, I meditated...

During the years he was living that 'horizontal life', William gained certainty about his identity and his life purpose:

> I made that [spiritual] turn and did some traveling in India in 1973-74. But, after a certain number of years, I came away from it thinking '*this has been useful to me in certain ways... I've learned to be less egotistical, to be less selfish, to be less caught up in my own inner dramas, but I really am Western*'. Having traveled in India you could see the spirituality in context, and it wasn't the same as reading about it in texts. And I could see that this is not

> who I am culturally, and I actually do want to contribute in some way that involves creative intelligence towards something purposeful in life.

After this realization, William decided to return to the United States. Once back in his home country, he did various odd jobs like driving taxis and tutoring in an institute for disadvantaged kids, until he found his way back to 'Y' University where he finished his undergraduate studies. He was then accepted as a PhD student by a renowned critical pedagogue in another Ivy League University. It was then when, as he put it, his "radicalization became studious". After finishing his PhD he moved to Australia where he did the greater part of his career as an academic and activist.

After spending much of his life looking for a purposeful job, he finally decided to settle in the academy. The university was, in his view, one of the few areas where he could enjoy the freedom to work on meaningful projects. However, he soon discovered that the neoliberal trend in universities was at odds with his desire to lead an ethical and meaningful life:

> I think a lot of my life was based around not wanting to do things. I mean schooling was alienated work, in my view, and I didn't want to spend my whole life feeling alienated. [...] Academic work has the potential to be a labor that isn't alienating, you know? You can believe in it. But so much of the institution, you know... I didn't come back to universities expecting universities to be better than what I discovered they were in the 60s and they didn't fail to disappoint me either. And they've gotten worse in the time that I've been working in them. My first job was in 2000, they've gotten far worse. The governance of universities is really despicable.

William was convinced that he could not have gone far in his academic career if the neoliberal turn had taken place when he first started:

> It [the university] works on principle where many are called, but few are chosen, and to be chosen you have to somehow dive into super production from the second you are in. And I think if that had been the case when I was moving into it, I wouldn't have succeeded, you know? I needed time to gestate, and find my way, and figure out how to write well and all those things and they don't give you that now. [...] Why is it that the use value of knowledge work isn't of interest to our managers? It's the exchange value of it.

The neoliberal bias to focus solely on productivity and market value was a source of concern for William as he reflected on the younger generations who are coming into the academia today. He

planned, thus, to concentrate part of his activist efforts to counteract that trend:

> I think one of my domains of activism is going to continue to be trying to get wider publics to see that universities are not going to be serving them well if they keep going in the direction that they are going. I'm very concerned about what's happening to young people, people like you.
>
> We need to be expanding the number of people who do research, not contracting it. And not killing off the idea of the teaching and research academic, which is another thing that's happening. It's sort of like 'the one or the other' and if you're the teaching academic you're becoming exploited to the n^{th} degree, with lower pay and more workload; and if you're the research academic, you spend most time writing grants, and tearing your hair out, and worrying that you'll fall from your position, as I was told by people in those situations. The older generation academics have to care about the younger generation, and we have to be political about this.

Another aspect of the neoliberal turn that worried William was the loss of academic freedoms:

> Here [in Australia] it's just total controlling! It's like Foucault's nightmare! It's the disciplinary regimes of governmentality. Every word permeates the fabric of academic existence right now.
>
> I think people are so disappointed. It's a career field full of disappointment.

In the face of all the negative changes affecting academic labour, William had his own theory about what could be happening within the reflexive processes of university managers, for these changes to occur:

> I read a lot of Gramsci and, you know, Stuart Hall. It keeps you thinking that consciousness is a very complex mish mosh of dominant common sense, some really bad sense, and some good and critical sense. No matter what position of the social structure people are in, there is a mixture. Sometimes I have trouble believing that when it comes university managers. I don't think they have any good sense at all! There is an increasing phenomenon of bracketing out conscience and I think some structural positions are starting to select for people who lack conscience, almost as a virtue, like psychic diseases or sociopathologies. But I think that in most cases, even those people, deep down they know what they're doing is mean-spirited, wicked, but deep down they have enormous denial mechanisms.

Despite everything that was occurring in the neoliberal university, William cherished hope in the possibility of building a new model of relationship between universities and communities:

> There's a lot of people I know who are saying *'well, look... we have to give up on universities. Universities aren't gonna be the place anymore, but we can be activists in*

> *other ways*'. I have nothing wrong with being activists in other ways, but I'm not prepared to give up on the idea of the university either. Because I really do think a key problem for the current moment is that democracy has to become knowledgeable, you know? A strong, participatory democracy that is inclusive of difference has to create new kinds of what I call 'knowledgeability'. [...] But that kind of 'knowledgeability' I don't think could happen properly if there weren't universities of the right sort, with the right attitudes, about communities and their needs. If universities become just the 'enterprise University', then we're not gonna have a knowledgeable public.
>
> We need a different kind of university that is not sequestered from the public and we have to defy our managers and do our work in connection with publics.

It was evident that William often thought about and built in his mind alternative models for the role of universities in society. Based on his expertise, William knew that universities had the potential to be more than mere producers of instrumental knowledge. They could be key players in building a *knowledgeable democracy*. He also knew that activism and disruption were needed to realise those alternative models.

William's internal conversations showed that he was critical of his own thinking and had a strong commitment with fundamental values:

> I always felt like I learned more about what's in the way than how to really make this work successfully. Sometimes I thought I'm a better writer–thinker than I am a practitioner–researcher.
>
> I think that the same happens with any kind of activism. You want mass, because nothing's gonna happen if there isn't mass, but there is responsibility in that and so […] you have to become reflexive. You have to become reflexive about your own motives. Why are you doing this?
>
> I remember one day, in the Students' Union, there was this woman sitting behind a table that said 'Women's liberation', and I went and sat next to her, and she started explaining to me… I was realizing I might be one of the good guys in terms of behaviour, but I didn't really pay attention to how the men did all the talking in the meetings and the women baked casseroles and cleaned up and, you know, those gender differences we were very sort of blind on that and now I had to pay attention, you know? It's like everything is like a constant paying attention... I can sort of understand why people freak out and become conservative, you know?
>
> It's hard to figure out where, around what, because there are so many possibilities and it's such a troubled time, you know, historically. […] Do you go after the big things or do you go for local where you can actually do something? And where do you belong? Do you belong working with immigrants or with Aboriginal people? Those are the things around this that you can see. You know that there are callings for efforts here, but are we the

> proper people to do them? I mean there's so many questions about activism...

These interview excerpts show how William mulled over key experiences or decisions in his life, how he questioned his own reflexivity, and how his reflexivity had evolved throughout his lifetime. For instance, he acknowledged that gender inequality was a 'blind spot' for him until someone pointed it out and he started to *pay attention*. This experience taught him that activism requires effort, a *constant paying attention*, to go beyond the appearances of the world. To give up on paying attention, to surrender to mystifying appearances, is to become conservative.

When he turned his attention to what the future might bring, he shared his vision with me:

> If I have a vision in the future, it's that kind of pragmatic democracy around issues that are controversial and important to continue. They would draw me to have a reason to contribute that goes outside of just my habitus, my location.
>
> My sense of the future would be that kind of humble. You're not gonna grab the big structures and break them and create a counter-hegemony. Things like capitalism are just too powerful, even as they're going awry. But the fact that they're going so awry is creating the glitches, that are the opportunities for congregating and aggregating and practising […] 'actually practise democracy' around them. And I think intellectuals should increasingly be looking to find ways to connect their work to those kinds of struggles.

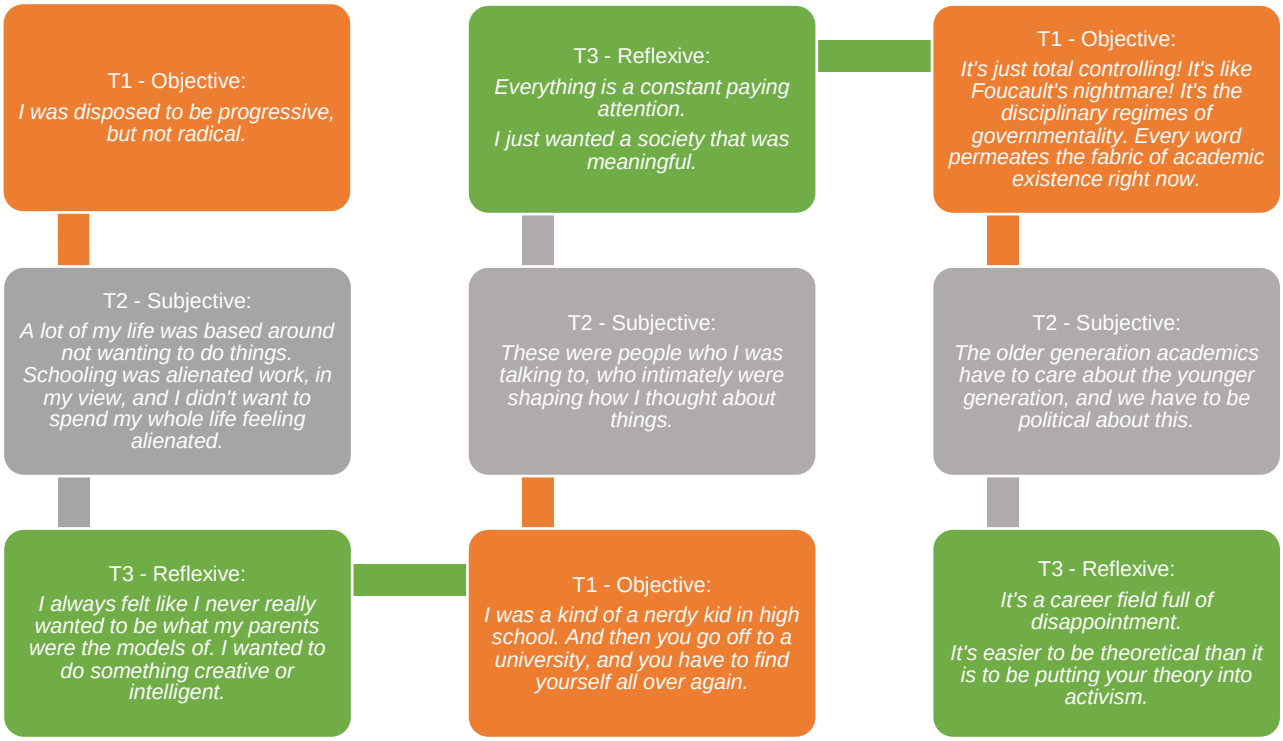
Clearly, William's idea of the future was not unreal or fantastic. Rather, his hope for *pragmatic democracy* was based on existing resources and real opportunities to contribute to a better society by taking advantage of the *glitches* of capitalism.

During more than one occasion throughout the interview, William got emotional. He experienced strong emotions particularly when remembering the people who were his role models. He also showed deep feelings while talking about the projects in which he invested a lot of himself. In William's experience, life could not be compartmentalised into clearly labelled boxes, i.e. reasons – emotions, personal life – working life, theory – practice, etc. Emotions, for better or worse, underpinned all areas of life, including activism:

> I think I'm a pretty good melancholic. And I think activism breathes melancholia, you know? But I'm not a depressive, for the most part. But during that period of time, I was feeling this bleakness about whether life was worth living, and feeling like I was a failure, you know? I was doing it all wrong. I didn't know how to lead this […] All that kind of stuff. It was such turmoil. I think it was because you're trying to do something that matters, to that degree the things in the way get to you. I think this helps explain why people give up on being activists, and why some people who are scholar activists end up becoming just scholars: it's easier to be theoretical than it is to be putting your theory into activism.

In short, William's was a life-long story of progressive activism powered by strong emotional affinities and an exceptional intelligence. A summary of William's portrait is presented in the following figure, using the three moments of the MA as a basis:

Figure 4:5 William's morphogenetic portrait



4.6 Olivia

> *These are really important issues that universities must address for humanity and yet we want to turn them into a theme park! There's an insanity in this that I just struggle to deal with. It's not just love, it's also anger. (Olivia)*

Olivia was a middle aged academic. The interview took place on Zoom. Even through the online platform, her warmth and kindness were palpable. Her background was in social work and she had always been an active union member.

A few years after graduating as a social worker, Olivia got a permanent position at 'Z' University:

> I was working in sexual assault, as a counsellor advocate, as a fairly recently new graduate. I was also working as a research assistant for a professor at 'Z' University, who supervised my Honours thesis and she really invited me to apply for this academic position, which I never kind of really imagined that I would get. I went for the job and was offered the position. And then thought *'Oh gosh! Now I'm going to have to learn how to do this thing very quickly!'* So, that was that was pretty much how I became an academic.

Since the time when she got her first job, Olivia had recognized how much the university culture had changed:

> When I started as an associate lecturer, [...] at least from my first year of working with that professor, I felt significantly supported, I felt that I could ask questions, I didn't feel overwhelmed by my workload. Because I was learning, there was probably an expectation that I didn't do quite as much in terms of the research basics, etc, that we probably expect now of new academics. I am also aware that I moved into being an academic in quite a privileged way, because I went in as a permanent tenured continuing appointment, which I'm also aware is more rare for people, and I did that without having a PhD, which is almost unheard of now. I think that I have had particular privileges here, which have enabled me to develop as an academic. Whereas now we seem to expect people to have PhDs, and publications, and be amazing teachers and also have practice experience. And there are less appointments of level A staff as well. So, [...] we want more out of our level B people.

Apart from the pressure to produce more in less time, the consequent rising workload, and the increasing casualisation of the academic working force, Olivia was concerned about the more profound implications of the neoliberal turn in universities:

> Why do we infantilize universities in this way? Universities actually occupy a very serious role. If you're interested in the future that's not just more divided along the lines of social class, and gender, and ethnicity, and more unequal in terms of wealth inequality, and where climate change just advances down the track, and we have no kind of awareness of human contributions to that and how we might arrest it then, you know, these are really important issues that universities must address for humanity and yet we want to turn them into a theme park! There's an insanity in this that I just struggle to deal with.

For Olivia, this trend towards the trivialisation of the role of universities in society was not innocent. For that reason, she believed that the nature of academic work should be closely interwoven with activism:

> I think we [academics] always make a decision about whether we stand to support hegemonic interests and knowledge or whether we engage in counter-hegemonic practices. I don't think neutrality or objectivity are possible nor desirable in an academic role and I think we just need to be honest about that. If there is no innocent knowledge, there's no neutral knowledge, so every decision that you make about what you include in your curriculum, the kinds of readings that you have, if you invite guest speakers in, you are filling a space with particular kinds of discourses and so, even what you write, obviously, is political. The sort of research that you do, how you interpret your findings, even what you choose to research. None those things is objective or neutral. They're all highly political and contested spaces.

Reflecting on the consequences of the neoliberalisation of universities, Olivia articulated all the different emotions that those changes triggered in her. At the same time, she recognised that those emotions are precisely what makes us human and, therefore, academic activism entails resisting the current neoliberal impulse of depriving education of those emotions:

> I would talk about it as anger, and I would talk about it as being outraged by the system, and I'm wanting to just engage in resistance and rebellion against those changes. But also, what happened was this incredible sadness. I hope I can talk to you without crying! But it's a real sadness for the changes that are happening [sobbing]. And I can't totally make sense of it, I suppose. […] I wonder if academics are expected to be neutral and objective and not engage in activism and not have this kind of critical analysis, because robots don't have it and we need to make the workforce seamless for artificial intelligence. I see the same thing happening within the Social Work discipline where we just position people as technicians to undertake risk assessments, and of course robots can do that, you don't need humans to do that. But if it's about empathy and connection and authenticity and reflexivity and a capacity to engage in critical analysis and direct them to global social forces that you see are undermining democracy, or the kind of things that we would value in social justice and human rights. Then, you know, that's the stuff that's being stripped out of education and what's left is what robots do. And I do think that there is potentially this kind of bigger agenda for capital to liberate itself from the workforce. So, that's the stuff I feel that is some of the most pernicious stuff that we are resisting when we become activists in this space.

Olivia felt that neoliberalism in the university was not only denying the power of human emotions, it was also precluding academics from the possibility of finding purpose in the job they do:

> I take my work as an academic really seriously, I think that education, being positioned as an educator, gives you an amazing capacity to make a difference in other people's lives and for them to potentially make a difference in the life of the people who they will subsequently work with. So, I think, in terms of capacity to have impact on this world, which hopefully is positive, I take that really seriously. And I am so profoundly offended by these managerial kinds of processes which take that capacity away from us, and I'm so outraged by that! So, it's not just love, it's also anger. And it is disgust with what's occurring, that drives and fuels this kind of energy to just channel it.

Evidently, Olivia felt very strongly about the example she was setting for others and the difference it could make in the world. So, when I asked her about the people who made a difference in her life, she mentioned a university teacher and her husband as inspirational figures:

> I think when I became really engaged in Social Work education, it was a lecturer who I met, maybe in the second year of my studies, and she was just a really inspirational, charismatic and smart woman who had also worked in sexual assault and inspired me to do the same. So, and then when you, I guess, work in something like sexual assault, it's pretty difficult I think to not have an analysis of injustice and victimization and oppression and the way that society creates that for some people and creates particular vulnerability and powerlessness. So, it sets up almost an automatic intention to want to counteract that and want to create a more equitable kind of state of affairs and, I suppose, I mean to intellectualize this stuff, the person who I've learnt most from is probably my husband. But before he was my husband, he was my colleague and his influence on my development as somebody who has a profound appreciation of justice, would in part be to him. He has helped me to articulate it, to identify it more.

Significantly, she also recalled a period during her teenager years when she confronted the reality of death and the fragility of human experience very closely. That period appeared in her narrative as a key moment in her commitment to the core values that sustained her activism:

> As a young person, aged sort of 16 and 17, I had an incredible amount of death in my orbit. Like about 20 people died within that really short kind of twelve months' period. And there had been a number of suicides, there had been car accidents, and family members who just died of old age, my neighbour died. [...] All these people just died, and so I became really quite overwhelmed with that.
>
> It was really strange, and I haven't had anything like it since. But I suppose I just became more heightened to death. [...] So, even though like I might not have been best friends with these people, it affected me really profoundly and it felt cumulative. [...] I became really quite depressed for a couple of years. And then when I went to university and I sort of became interested in critiques of medicalization of psychiatry. I suppose it was my own kind of journey in there, and so it became a way of seeing the world in a way that wasn't the dominant way, and it made so much sense to me. These critiques of medicalization which just really spoke to me about power and knowledge and the way that particular ideas become constructed as truth, and how that gets built up at a particular moment in

> history and the capitalist interests in a link to things being seen in a particular way. It all just spoke to me! So, that experience, I suppose, in some ways led me to social work, and particularly having a critical analysis of the world where you start to think outside dominant discourses and what the hegemonic truths are, and start to examine whose interests are served by them and who benefits and just wanting to contest that and feeling just like it was so important to do that.

For Olivia, that was a turning moment in her life. As she reflected on it, she acknowledged that that experience transformed her own sense of agency in relation to established discourses and practices around mental health. This recognition, in turn, took the interview into the issue of self-transformation:

> Self-transformation is a part of being an activist. It has to be! It has to be, otherwise how would you know if you're being an activist about things that matter, or things that you care about? You know, even in relation to that article[8], I guess my own kind of reflexive process, after I wrote that article, is to say: "well, that was my initial construction of it". But since then, you know, I've become more willing to look at what was my part in that conflict. What assumptions did I make? And I kind of used the educational process that I teach to understand that more.

She continued to explain what she learnt about that experience in a way that indicated she was able to critique and change her own reflexivity. The internal transformation that had taken place in her was evident:

> I think if you can open up for more collective responses, then that's a better way forward. And I would seek to do that now; rather than getting involved in more "*I'm going to take this action on behalf of others"*, it will be now "*I'm prepared to take this action with others"*.

In that regard, Olivia knew that building collective agency was key to resisting and disrupting the neoliberal process occurring in universities:

> The people who talk about neoliberalism or the people who reject and resist things in meeting are often the ones who are positioned in a particular way that is not seen as valuable. And our colleagues get irritated because they actually just want the latest formula or the latest metric, so that they can conform to that; and I'm raising questions

8 Olivia referred here to an article that she had written about her experience with 'Z' University, where a dispute over workload was taken to the Fair Work Commission, which is Australia's national workplace relations tribunal.

> about, well, '*why are we going down this process?*' And because maybe they have a perception that it's pointless to kind of challenge, they see it as a waste of their time. I don't think it is pointless to challenge. I think it's really fundamental that we do challenge these things. But I suspect that you can get constructed as foolish or easily 'targeted' like a squeaky wheel and dismissed on that basis.
>
> How do we find ways collectively, I guess, to push back against that and to resist that? I think that there's not going to be universal rules about that. I think it will depend very much on the particular dispute, in the particular context, at the time, but I would want to be sensitive to that and to know that that's my responsibility and to be finding ways to negotiate that system, to be able to still do good work. And I think if it comes to the point where we can't, then I would leave the University and try and advance that work elsewhere.

For Olivia there was no other possibility of being in the world, apart from that of being an activist. In that regard, she affirmed:

> It feels that way. Sometimes I wish it was different! Haha! I thought this morning when I was at my exercise class: *'it's exhausting to be me!*' You know? I wish I didn't sometimes think how I did, and I wish I didn't feel compelled to act on everything that I have issue with.
>
> I'm supposed to be an activist, I'm supposed to be in education at this point in time. I hope that that continues because I really think universities can provide good opportunities to do this kind of work, but if they cease to do that, then I will find something else where I can.

Activism represented, in Olivia's mind, the path to enjoying a meaningful life. As she explained, envisioning a world where that possibility was taken away from her motivated her activist dispositions further:

> If you think that you're kind of here to do justice, or to find ways to work towards justice for others, then you've got people putting massive barriers in that and massive barriers in for you to be able to achieve that. Then activism is inevitable in that space, isn't it?

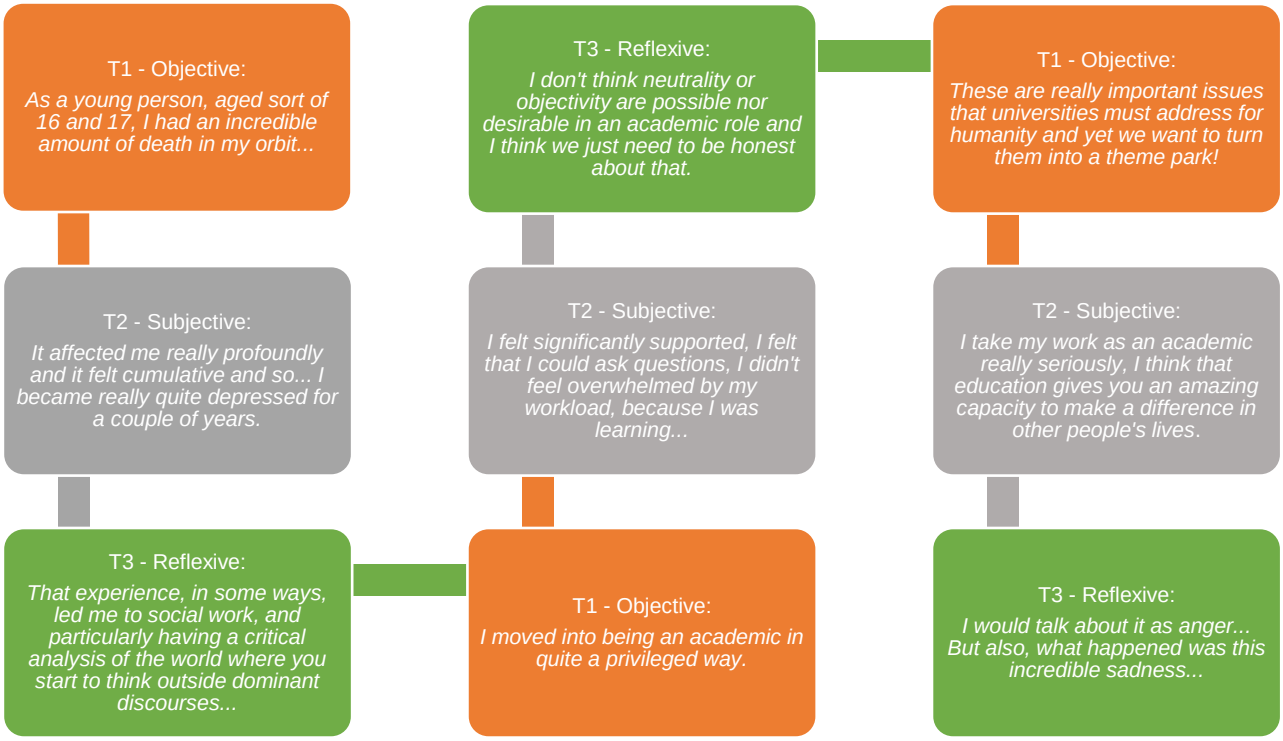
Olivia's future was, of course, packed with activism related projects and she looked forward to it:

> It's so full, but it's all really exciting stuff and so, I suppose, I love this work! And I suppose my experiences have really fuelled that and shaped that more down this path, to make it more explicitly political and so on. I'm grateful for that.

Briefly, Olivia's story is one where a strong sense of social justice was interwoven with powerful feelings of love, anger, sadness, hope, and seriousness, to create real change. A summary of

Olivia's *morphogenetic portrait* is captured in the following figure:

Figure 4:6 Olivia's morphogenetic portrait



4.7 Anthony

> *To have a social movement that is based on changing 'out there' only is missing where most of the action is. Without the counter narrative all you've got is compliance. So, we're keeping a flame alive. (Anthony)*

Anthony was an academic with a long career path already travelled. I met him in a café, near his office. We chose a quiet corner to start the interview. He was eloquent and chatty. Not much effort was needed from my side to have him talking about his background.

Anthony grew up in the countryside, in a working-class family with scarce resources to share. Anthony's mum appeared spontaneously in his narrative as a key figure in promoting his sense of agency:

> I had only ten books in the house, and my mother kept on telling me I was intelligent and that I was going to go to university from early as I can remember. […] I think she finished primary school and that's where it ended. So, she didn't have any idea what she was saying to me, really. She just had that as something she wanted to say to me: that I could.

During the early years of his life, the family discussions around the *kitchen table* played an important role in forming his activist dispositions:

> My father was a working-class guy. He was a union activist in a couple of his workplaces. My mother was quite committed to us being able to argue about politics at the kitchen table and whatever sort of left credentials I ever want to claim I can track back to our kitchen table when I was in primary school, fundamentally.

Once he finished high school, Anthony went to University and studied to be a teacher. From that time, and in the same spontaneous way, he recalled two authors that shaped his stance towards transforming society through education:

> When I was doing my one year of teacher preparation, I met this South African anti-apartheid activist, who had escaped the apartheid regime, in his Sociology course. He just gave us hard sociology books to read. There were some options and I chose 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', which is the famous Freire's text, because it was a smallest one. So, I read that and got very inspired by what Freire had to say. My understanding about what it might mean to be a teacher was really, really formed inside of reading that book.
>
> I started looking around for similar sets of ideas that were more local. In South Australia, at the time, there was a guy called Garth Boomer, who was advancing what he called 'negotiating the curriculum', which seemed to me to be the first cousin of the sort of Freirean things. I started to read Garth Boomer and trying to negotiate the curriculum in the way that he was describing it. Probably my whole career from then has really been trying to advance what that means. He called it ‘negotiating the curriculum’ and the Freireans call it ‘dialogic pedagogies’. So that's how I understand what I'm on about. I try to enact that sort of approach. It's still a work in progress.

After working as a teacher for more than 10 years, Anthony got a job as research assistant at university. While doing that job, he became interested in developing his academic career further and did a PhD. During 26 years in academia, Anthony had pursued multiple research interests, but all of them had two themes in common: education and social class. Anthony reflected on how his core values underpinned all the projects he chose:

> Well, you're still driven by your own experience of how injustice works through schooling

> for the working-class. But then you pick up these other injustices that you've got some empathy for and it's sort of implied that you've got to turn your attention to them. Girls, Indigenous people, Indigenous learning outcomes in the country...

In general, Anthony's reflexive processes seemed to be balanced between two different modes of reflexivity. On the one side, he showed a self-contained kind of reflexivity that was career-oriented and focused on upward social mobility:

> I'm not working-class any longer, I make too much money, but I have got some connection to a working-class history and so I can still think like a working-class person, even though my material realities are, you know, different.

On the other side, when reflecting about certain topics, like his involvement with Indigenous issues, Anthony appeared to perform mostly in a reflexive mode that was conscious of its positionality in the social context and oriented towards a critique of its own reflexive processes:

> One of the things, of course, that comes into play here is, you know, I'm the white fella and I enter into this really, really tortured site. So, it's been important to me to work out what am I doing there.
>
> So, as a white fella who goes into the space, what are you doing? Well, you're not speaking on behalf of them, because they can speak for themselves. There's no way that a white fella can speak for Indigenous peoples about their stuff. So, what is your role? It seems quite clear to me that the white fellas are the problem actually, it's not the Indigenous people. We f**ed up their lives! White fellas need to get their own act together, that's what I'm doing. I'm not speaking on behalf of them, I'm trying to learn, trying to sort out, at least in my own mind, what white fellows might be able to do that's a bit helpful.

Apart from his formation as a teacher and as a sociologist, Anthony had a strong background in Buddhist theory and practice. This was reflected in the fact that self-transformation was a theme always present in his reflexive processes. Throughout his career, Anthony had made great efforts to connect the self-transformative practices offered by Buddhism with his academic life:

> I think conventional sociology argues that the society is in the self and then forgets that it comes back out, okay? Buddha theorized self to society. He didn't go the other way. So, bringing the two solutions together you can see how there's a loop, actually. It's not just one way. The self is not being over determined by the society. There's some spaciousness in there, that one can engage with what comes back out.
>
> The problem wasn't just out there, it's internal and out there and got to work on both

> places at once. Trying to reclaim some self-transformative dimension to social movements struggles seem to me to be really important and that's where I think the sort of Buddhist tradition's got something to offer there because that's all it's got, actually. Given that Buddha lived in an Indian village, 2500 years ago, where there were no social institutions, there was just the every day.

In his PhD thesis, Anthony worked, in fact, at the intersection between Buddhism, self-transformation, and Western social sciences. He explained his motivation to choose that thus:

> I'm quite angry at how f**ed-up the world is, and so this is a problem for me, and being angry is one of the things that sort of drove my thesis actually, because I was sick and tired of angry social movements, angry feminists, and angry labour struggle, and angry environmentalism, and angry peace movements. It seemed to me that the sort of angry thing was sort of undermining all the social movements, actually. Because there wasn't enough self-transformative work going on to get past that stuff.
>
> My thesis was that you needed to put both the outer and the inner project together. One without the other gets itself into silly places, which is what's wrong with Western sociology and Western social movements as they only do the one thing, I'm changing out there, and forgetting about the internal and transformative project that's really, really important.

Significantly, drawing on his personal experience, self-transformative practices have the capacity to transform people's internal conversations. He offered some examples from his own inner dialogues:

> Whenever I get strong negative emotions I tend to sit and not act out all that, because I know that that's not all that flashes. I wait until I subside and then I work out what I'm gonna do. So that's one thing I try. Those things are all pretty straightforward, but... I got halfway to work [and I'm really pissed off with my boss] and then I just remember my meditation teacher's advice. He only ever said one thing, over and over and over, and which I just thought it was really banal. He said: '*you've got to maintain harmony in the centre*'. That's was what he'd say... But I'm driving to work and '*you've got to maintain harmony in the centre.... you've got to maintain harmony in the centre...*' Yes, I think he's right! I think one of the things about those self-transformative projects, like what Buddhism offers, is that you do work on the cushion, but then that changes the way you think. Some of that comes out into everyday life and so you find yourself having these internal conversations, like I just described, which is learnt on the cushion.
>
> Without doing a lot of meditating on the cushion, you can't learn to think differently. And again, fundamentally, you're trying to actually transform your internal emotional life, that's the project to me.

According to Anthony, in the same way that the only path to transform our internal emotional life is from within, activists also need to work within the system to transform it:

> That's probably the best that teachers can hope for really, to be able to drive the change from the classroom, and from a collection of classrooms that makes up a school. So, whilst we work in a sort of a policy regime, often the policies are awful but you have to work in the system, so you've worked with the policy, but there're multiple ways to interpret policies and that's the sort of activist part.
>
> That's how I understand what we're all doing: with/against. If you're not with them, of course you're not in the system, you're outside. You have to pay the rent, so there's always the 'with' part. But the part that I'm interested in is the 'against'
>
> If you're trying to be an activist in education, as a teacher or as a researcher, then you're trying to interrupt the reproduction. That's the 'against'.

Anthony's perspective on the connections between social change and self-transformation implies, then, that when activism is considered against the broader neoliberal background, it entails resistance at all levels:

> [Neoliberalism] it's out there and it's in here twice: values and how I understand myself. So, activism then fundamentally is trying to resist all three of those, in which case two of them are internal projects. So, to have a social movement that's based on changing out there only is missing where most of the action is, because most of the action for neoliberalism is values and subjectivity, how one understands oneself and so on...
>
> Trying to understand how power is operating through our own subjectivity, that's, I think, the most important work for us at the moment. That's where the struggle has to be.

In the case of universities, the neoliberal turn has brought novel ways for power to operate through the subjectivities of academics. One of them is the constant pressure to perform:

> I find myself talking to my colleagues quite often saying '*the main game around research hasn't really changed much*'. When I first started working 26 years ago, you tried to publish as much as you could, you tried to publish in the best journals that you could, you tried to publish with reputable book companies, you tried to get money to do your research... The game's always been the same. What's happened in the last 15 years is that, you know, the neoliberal universities generated all these metrics for all of those things and then it beats you with the metrics!
>
> Liberate yourself from the performativity is the thing that one needs to do.

Another way in which neoliberalism operates within the academics' subjectivities is by demanding compliance:

> There's a demand for compliance and if you're not being compliant then that's when you can get sort of 'worked on'. So, the word 'against' gets quite complicated then. Are you

> compliant? In fact, if you're a leader, you're a director of compliance management. That's what the new leadership role is. If you're committed to some form of activism, then you're trying to actually help yourself and everyone else get outside of the sort of compliance technologies.

The increasing demands for compliance and performativity, powered by the neoliberal turn in universities, are shrinking the spaces for activism. Therefore, in Anthony's view, it was every day more difficult to find pockets of resistance within the institution:

> [Neoliberal turn in universities] undermines activism, absolutely. I mean all four of those things [chronic work overload, re-skilling, de-skilling, and precarization] undermine activism. I'm too busy, I can't make any decisions, I've got these new skills I've got to learn. You give it away, don't you?
>
> It's increasingly difficult to actually locate any resistance, because the regime is just so powerful. Where is the against?

Faced with this context, Anthony made the conscious decision to direct his efforts on imagining and producing hopeful alternatives:

> The first thing that comes to mind is 'refusal'. But then, what's the alternative trying to produce? […] If we're being pushed towards particular nasty forms of individualism, then the obvious antidote to that is trying to actually sustain communities and solidarities. I think that if you're trying to be an activist on the ground, then trying to actually sustain even small communities is some better than giving yourself away to this of just being an individual. And that has its own difficulty as well. I don't know about you, but everyone drives me mad at some point!
>
> Once you go there then of course there's compassion, altruism, and empathy and all those things. So, how do you actively abandon the individualizing impulses and try and develop these other more virtuous emotions?

Did Anthony have an answer for his own questions? When I asked him, he turned to his background on Buddhism and contemplative practices to offer a response:

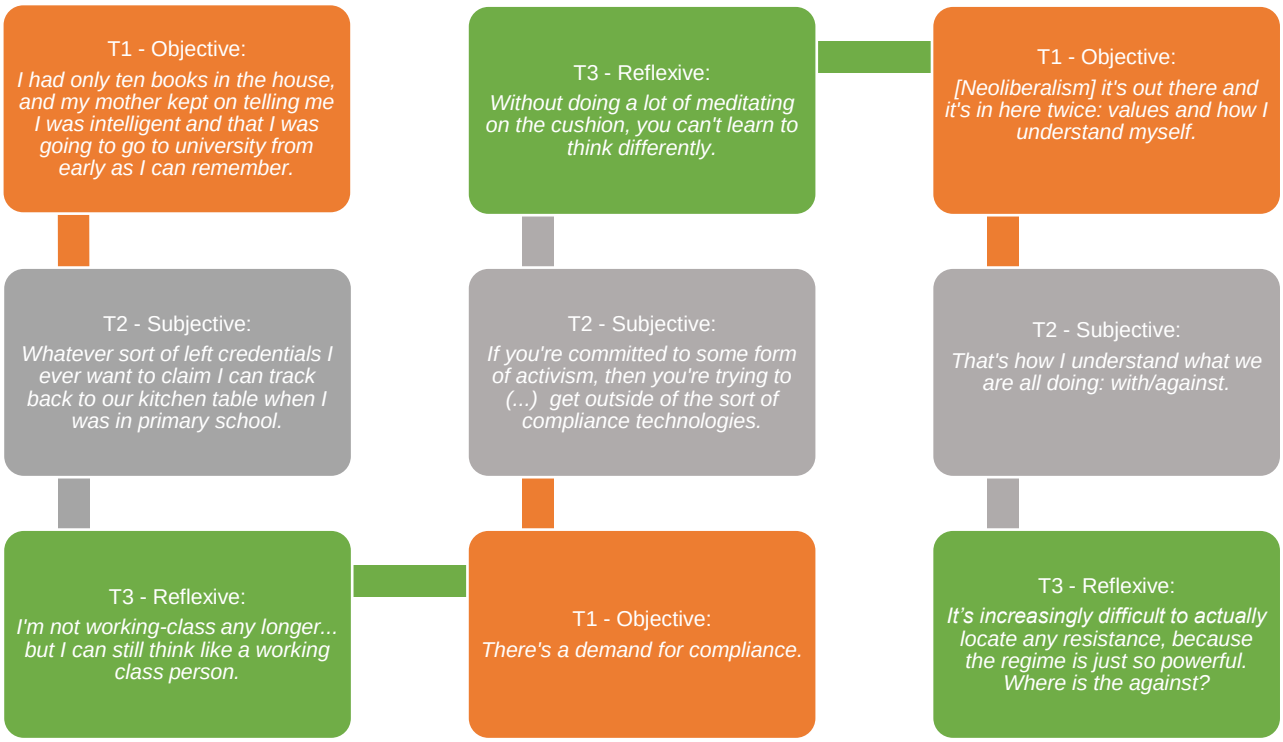
> Well, you know, the Buddhist tradition has all series of meditations to generate those [virtuous emotions]. The sort of Tibetan Buddhist Dharma centres and, having hung around a few of them for a while, [I know that] the students that go there, often their lives are f*** up, which is how I went to one. […] They are looking for some sort of peace of mind and the mindfulness practices that are offered actually do work if you practise them even for a small amount of time. So, that works. The Tibetan meditations on love and compassion are incredibly powerful.

It is worthy to note how, in Anthony's view, the alternative to the individualism promoted by

neoliberal narratives, namely, the attempt to build solidarity-based communities, brought its challenges. Those revolved around learning how to maintain harmony in a community based on strong social ties. Significantly, part of the solution entailed the transformation of the internal *life of the mind* to develop more virtuous emotions, like love and compassion.

In short, Anthony's story is one of activism channelled through scholarly research and self-transformation. Anthony's *morphogenetic portrait* is presented in the following figure:

Figure 4:7 Anthony's morphogenetic portrait



4.8 Summary

This chapter has presented a *morphogenetic portrait* for each participant. By showing the data in this way, attention is drawn to the inner reflexive mechanisms driving social change in everyday, habitual practices. Contrary to widespread views of activism (I. Maxey, 1999), the practice of activism appears in these portraits as a reflexive ongoing capacity. At the same time, the process

of social change emerges as a continuing process rather than as a landmark on the horizon. An understanding of activism that is able to incorporate these characteristics is presented in Chapter 6.

From these portraits, we can see how all participants considered activism as their way of being in the world. All of them showed a strong sense of agency and an unquestionable belief in their power to make a positive difference in society. These dispositions, developed in the early years of their lives, framed their current activist practices within academia.

Another common characteristic shared by the participants was related to the structural conditionings framing the emergence of their activist dispositions. Apart from working-class backgrounds, all participants associated their activists' dispositions with a positive emotional attachment to a caring figure early in their lives. Chapter 7 examines how the interactions between a background of class struggles combined with a strong and healthy emotional connection with a parental figure may explain the development of certain reflexive capacities.

In what concerned their life trajectories, most participants led quite steady lifestyles and had found a sense of balance in their careers. Some of them had frequently moved geographically but, in terms of socially mobility, the generalised pattern was one of upward mobility. A possible explanation accounting for the causal mechanisms operating here is offered in Chapter 7.

All participants embodied subversive stances towards current oppressive social structures. These stances, in turn, were underpinned by fundamental core values and they translated into life projects aimed to resist and subvert the social inequalities and injustices that they refrained from accepting as 'natural'. Significantly, an emergent feature of the participants' activism was associated with the fact that they consciously adopted kindness and care as their way of

resistance. This reflexive capacity to embrace care and kindness, along with their commitment to altruistic causes, and the ongoing practice of self-transformation, are addressed in Chapter 7 under the concept of the *politics of reflexive activism*.

Finally, the morphogenetic portraits reveal that participants showed reflexive features that are emergent from the deeper layers of existence explored in Chapter 2. The strive for constantly critiquing their own reflexive processes in order to liberate themselves from conceptual errors; the will to transcend self-other binaries; the continued exercise of concrete utopianism; and the capacity to pursue projects that aim to human flourishing, are all features that may be clustered under an emergent type of reflexivity. Those elements are discussed in Chapter 7, drawing on Bhaskar's later developments of critical realism, under the name of *emergent enlightened reflexivity*.

These shared qualities of the concrete, historically situated, experiences of academic activists allow raising of the retroductive question: What must the world be like for the reflexive capacities of academic activists to appear in the data in this way? It is this question that draws attention to the relation between social ontology and practical theory and to which the next chapter turns.

CHAPTER 5: BEING ACTIVIST

(…) Methodology, broadly conceived as an explanatory programme, is the necessary link between social ontology and practical theory. (Archer, 1995, p. 5)

Chapter 4 presented the lived experiences of academic activists in times of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on the shared qualities of those embodied experiences, it asked what the world (inner and outer) must be like to make those similarities possible. It is the purpose of the present chapter to explore a critical realist approach to that question.

Activism is, in its essence, the actualisation of the power of human agents vis-à-vis the various structures that are both the raw materials and the products of agency. It was therefore central to this project to establish a solid basis around those two key sociological understandings, namely structure and agency.

In Chapter 2 a sharp distinction between ontology and epistemology was established and the ontological nature of the social and natural worlds was described in critical realist terms. In this chapter, attention turns to exploring different approaches to the study of the structure/agent problematic.

The first two sections of this chapter contrast the critical realist approach to the problem of structure and agency with what I refer to as 'classical approaches' in sociology. This serves to establish the former's greater explanatory power. Then, the focus turns towards the analysis of Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity as the basis for Archer's Morphogenetic Approach. The latter is explored in depth, since it constitutes the model for social change that this project has drawn upon to explain how academic activists can bring about changes in the social structures and social beings around them.

The final section describes in detail the role of reflexivity in Archer's model. The aim is to show the ways in which the inner processes of human agents –such as in their inner conversation – have real consequences in the social world. Finally, the implications of this critical realist conceptual structure for the study of academic activism are considered.

5.1 Approaches to the Structure/Agency problem

5.1.1 Classical Approaches

In *Realist Social Theory* (1995), Archer argues that classical social theories are conflationary inasmuch as they are concerned with one-dimensional theorising. In other words, they collapse one side of the structure/agency equation into the other and therefore negate the interconnections between the two. Moreover, as Archer (1995) continues to explain, classical social theories assume that the structure/agency problem is only a matter of degrees of aggregation and disaggregation. Because they lack ontological depth, the only difference they assume between structure and agency is a quantitative one. Critical realism, on the contrary, by incorporating ontological depth in the analysis, claims that the difference between those two elements of the social realm is qualitative in nature (Archer, 1995).

The first of the classical approaches to the structure/agent problem is derived from Émile Durkheim's understanding of social structures and is represented by sociological holism or structuralism in social sciences (Porpora, 2015). Within this approach, society is a totality that represents more than the sum of individual agents; explanation, thus, should not be reduced to the level of the person. This Durkheimian conception perceives structures as governed by covering laws, with the task of social sciences being to find those laws. In this way, the Durkheimian model leads to a positivist and quantitative approach to the study of societies that continues to be very

influential (Porpora, 2015, p. 105). Here, social structures are considered as completely independent from social actors, and human reasons and motivations have no place in this approach. The underlying belief is that small groups or even persons are no more than miniatures of larger social groups with no agency whatsoever (Archer, 1995) . In this way, agency is collapsed into structures, aligning with what Archer (1995, p. 3) calls *downwards conflation.*

The second approach is represented by classical theorists, like Max Weber and J.S. Mill, who considered the study of society as a matter of disaggregation into its smallest units, i.e. persons (Archer, 1995, p. 4). The explanatory programme for this approach corresponds to methodological individualism, that is, the explanation of social phenomena in terms of the individual. Accordingly, this approach aligns with interpretivist and qualitative methods in social sciences. Social structures are defined as "stable patterns or regularities of behaviour" (Porpora, 2015, p. 106) with no real causal powers. The common understanding here is that society holds the same powers and capacities that persons have, though at a larger scale. Structures and its powers are absorbed into agency in what Archer understands as *upward conflation* (Archer, 1995, p. 4).

Though they may appear to stand in complete opposition to each other, these two first approaches are deeply rooted in the same philosophical assumption: empiricism. Both models assume, as advanced in Chapter 2, that social sciences are restricted to describing that which is simply observable. Size is, in this case, the only criterion to distinguish structures (macro) from agents (micro) (Archer, 1995, pp. 8-9). The purpose of scientific inquiry remains circumscribed, in both cases, to find the laws that cause the behaviour of structures and agents. Because sociological structuralism maintains the existence of social structures governed by deterministic laws and independent from individual agents, there is no place for human freedom in this model, resulting in a view of human persons as automata; mere cogs in a machine (Porpora, 2015).

Methodological individualism, on the other hand, sacrifices the scientific endeavour of finding causal explanations in order to uphold human freedom. In other words, because human behaviour is spontaneous, creative, and unpredictable, it is not susceptible to being studied by a science that aims to control and predict. The role of social sciences is, in this case, restricted to interpreting human reasons and meanings (Porpora, 2007, p. 423).

Finally, the third kind of conflation is exemplified by Giddens' structuration theory (Archer, 1995, pp. 93-105; Porpora, 2015, pp. 108-109). Society is conceptualised in this approach as a set of "rules and resources that structure behaviour" (Porpora, 2015, p. 109). With this definition, Giddens was seeking "to transcend the duality of structure and agency in one conceptual move by considering the two as being mutually constitutive and necessarily linked to form a duality" (Archer, 1995, p. 13). According to Giddens' theory, structures only come into existence in the moment when agents enact them. They do not seem to have a prior existence, independent from agents' instantiation. Therefore, it becomes impossible to differentiate structures from agents and they collapse – centrally – into each other.

The three approaches so far described have serious limitations. They stem from two seemingly opposed fallacies that, in reality, operate in mutuality. On the one hand, the epistemic fallacy – discussed in Chapter 2 – is the error of reducing the real things into our conceptual representation of them which, in effect, involves a *de-realisation of the real*. In the end it leads to epistemological relativism, i.e. giving too much weight to the social construction of knowledge (G. Banfield, personal communication, December 10, 2020). This is the case with the upward conflation typical of methodological individualism. On the other hand, the ontic fallacy entails the reverse movement, that is, the *ontologisation* of knowledge, i.e. the view that there is a direct correspondence between objects and knowledge of those objects. The social processes of

knowledge production are concealed (Collier, 1994, p. 104). Knowledge is naturalised and eternalised in a way typical of the downwards conflation of sociological structuralism. Hartwig (2007d, p. 174) notes that the epistemic and ontic fallacies are "dialectical counterparts […] which, while apparent antagonists, in reality mutually presuppose and support each other" because, while the epistemic fallacy reduces the world to our sensory experience of it, the ontic fallacy assumes that our knowledge of the empirical world is unmediated. In both cases, the possibility of critiquing the build-up of knowledge acquired through the scientific method is neutralised. Gidden's model, in turn, does not resolve the contradictions either. It rather collapses structure and agent in an irrealist move of structuration (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2007c), where the possibility of reflexivity, and thus critique, also becomes disabled.

The following section describes the critical realist solution to avoid both fallacies and bring about a realist explanation of the social world and how it is produced and reproduced by agents.

5.1.2 The Critical Realist Approach to Structure

As opposed to the first two types of conflationism, namely downwards and upwards, where the difference between social structures and individual or aggregated agents is one of degree or size, critical realism proposes a radical approach to the structure/agency dilemma. In Archer's words, the macro/micro approach:

> (…) needs to be replaced by an emphasis upon the incidence of emergent properties which delineate different strata – an emphasis which does not assume that observable differences in the size of groups automatically means that they constitute distinct levels of social reality. (Archer, 1995, p. 9)

It follows from this quote that critical realism rejects downwards and upwards conflationary theories on the basis of the empiricism they uphold. But it does more than that. It also opposes Giddens' central conflationism by highlighting the importance of ontological *emergence* (see

Chapter 2) in the relation between structures and agents, instead of simply *transcendence*. The idea that it is possible to *transcend* the structure/agent dilemma implies that both concepts should be regarded as mutually constitutive, as if they were "the two faces of a single coin" (Archer, 2007c, p. 18). By amalgamating subject and object, the agent's possibility of reflexivity about her own objective positioning becomes seriously compromised.

To avoid this problem, critical realism considers that structures and agents are best understood as "two radically different kinds of things" (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 33) with diverse powers. For instance, "structures can be centralised, whilst people cannot, and people can exercise reflexivity, which structures cannot do" (Caetano, 2013, p. 18). In this way, the ontological differences between structures and agents are not conflated at the epistemological level and the study of their interplay becomes possible (Archer, 2003, p. 2). To research the interconnections and interplay between structures and agents, Archer suggests the employment of *analytical dualism*. Analytical dualism refers to the fact that the relation between structure and agents can be separable only in thought (see Section 3.4).

Having clarified the way in which critical realism approaches the study of the relations between structures and agents, it is possible now to attend to the underlying reasons for that approach. Contrary to the empiricism underpinning the classical conflationist theories in social sciences, critical realism upholds a conception of causality that is not deterministic. This means that the way human beings respond to structural conditionings is *ontologically open* (Porpora, 2007, p. 423). In this way, critical realism argues for an understanding of the relation between structures and agents that is aligned with Marx's conception, in which agents retain the power to creatively change the world around them, but within the inescapable conditionings of a social order that precedes them (Porpora, 2007, p. 423).

Accordingly, Bhaskar describes social structures as being a "system of relations between the positions and practices (or positioned-practices) which agents reproduce or transform" (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 124). In other words, critical realism assumes a *relational* conception of social structures (Porpora, 2015, p. 98). As already discussed in Chapter 2, Bhaskar introduces the idea of *constellationality* to explain the interaction between social structures and agents. A constellation refers to a *relation* between the parts or entities that constitute the whole. In that relationship, the parts have autonomy and, at the time, depend on each other to constitute a totality (Norrie, 2010, pp. 16-17).

It is important to highlight that the relations at stake are material relations, that is, they possess ontological objectivity beyond the beliefs and ideas of their transient occupants. For example, the structure of a book or the structure of a wireless network are given by the relations between the constituent parts: sentences, paragraphs, chapters in one case; internet, modems, wireless routers in the other. In the latter, the case is similar to social structures in the sense that the structure is mostly invisible. Nonetheless, when a person enters a building and sees a sticker with the wi-fi icon, she knows that the structure exists and that, with the appropriate device and password, it is possible to connect to that invisible structure. Although social structures possess ontological reality they are, unlike natural structures, dependent on human activity. Decoteau (2016) explains this 'activity dependent' feature thus:

> Social structures are ontologically real, even if they are socially constructed and gain objectivity and exteriority through processes of institutionalization and historicization, but they are also transformable through radical action or slowly over the longue durée. Actors sometimes experience structures as exteriorities which are constraining, but actors are also consistently constituting said structures – the relationship between the two is one of mutuality, not uni-directional constraint. (p. 14)

Likewise, social structures are invisible but, like the air we breathe, they are everywhere, making social life possible. When a person buys a product from a market, he is taking part in a social

relation of consumption (made possible by certain social relations of production). A student going to school is participating in a social structure involving many social relations and social practices. Similarly, a person looking for a job is seeking to enter the social structures of job markets. A student, consumer or job seeker may or may not be aware of the realities of those social structures, but the constraints and possibilities they present them with are very real.

Despite the myriad of social structures present in any society, Archer emphasizes that all social structures possess three specific features that allow them to impinge “an irreducible influence” upon agents, who belong to a different level of reality. Those characteristics are temporal priority, relative autonomy and causal efficacy. Temporal priority refers to the fact that social structures “always pre-exist any round of human agency” (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 12). Relative autonomy denotes the independence that structures have from any individual agent. Finally, causal efficacy points to the reality of the effects that structures have upon agents.

Agents, on the other side, as the temporal occupiers of positions in the system of relations that constitute social structures, are not puppets. They have specific human powers and capacities to mediate the influences of social structures. Based on an emergent and stratified ontology, critical realism has provided the social sciences with a power-fully realist understanding of agency.

5.2 The Critical Realist Approach to Agency

Contemporary sociology was shaped in the tension between structuralism and hermeneutics (Archer, 2000; Archer, 2003; Banfield, 2016; Bhaskar, 1998; Porpora, 2015). Structuralism, as discussed earlier, is associated with a hyper-naturalist positivism which upholds social structures as completely independent from human agency, embracing the covering law model of scientific explanation. Hermeneutics, in turn, is derived from an anti-naturalist understanding of the social

world, which results in reducing the scientific task to finding meaning at the level of atomised individuals, abandoning the pursuit of causal explanations. Both approaches lack explanatory power to account for the relation between structure and agents. While the subjacent understanding of structures has already been exposed, this section explores the conceptualizations of agency underpinning both approaches before addressing the critical realist stance.

On the one side, the positivistic account of the relationship between human beings and society appeals to what Margaret Archer refers to as 'Modernity's man'. Here, society is reduced to the actions of individual *under-socialised* agents (Clegg, 2005) who, at the same time, are guided only by their instrumental rationality. In a market society, the result is the Homo Economicus: a being who is rational in his behaviour but devoid of all human relational capacities like, for example, empathy and kindness. Archer describes him in the following way:

> Modernity's man was much more like the Clint Eastwood of the eighteenth century, the lone stranger who walked tall through the townships of the western world: the man from nowhere who arrived on the scene ready-made, imposed the order which he taciturnly deemed justified, and strode off into the sunset, unchanged by his encounter. The major question about this stranger was why he should have any concern, however temporary, for the well-being of others who were never discovered to be constitutive of himself? (Archer, 2000, p. 51)

On the other side, hermeneutic approaches tend to emphasise what Archer refers to as 'Society's being': an 'over-socialised' human being whose human properties are entirely wrought by society and who is, therefore, incapable of sustaining any social transformation[9] (Archer, 2006, pp. 262-265). Archer argues that this version of the human being is the consummation of *downwards*

9 It is necessary to note that these two sociological models of human beings, against which Archer builds her argument, are 'ideal types', tendencies that represent the extremes of a continuum and not specific theories. However, they do represent unresolved tension points around which social science has been pulled.

conflation because “all the recognisable properties of human beings come from their joining in ‘society’s conversation’. Symmetrically, no properties of this individual are derivative from his or her natural environment or practical activities […]” (Archer, 2000, p. 86)

The models of human being underpinning the positivistic and the hermeneutics approaches are incapable of explaining agency. There is, as a consequence, an empty space at the core of social theory, which is usually left to psychology to fill (Clegg, 2005). In his analysis of the history of American sociology, Porpora (2015) arrives at the conclusion – which could be extended to history of the discipline in general – that agency is, indeed, a troublesome mechanism for social scientists. In his words:

> Contemporary sociological theory is uncomfortable with persons, selves, or Cartesian subjects. Contemporary sociological theory does not want consciousness or at least centered, reflective, self-aware consciousness. It expressly does not want intentionality. In their place, contemporary sociological theory wants – at most – the unconscious, hypnotized responsiveness to surrounding stimuli of Bourdieu’s habitus. (Porpora, 2015, p. 130)

Porpora (2015) argues that the reason for this discomfort resides in the difficulty of grasping and explaining human purposive, intentional behaviour. Thus, for a long time, the place of sentient, thoughtful, reflecting humans in social theory has been occupied by ‘zombies’. What he means by this is that contemporary social theory denied human beings the capacity for agency and assigned causal efficacy to impersonal social forces. Zombification entailed the reduction of human beings to inert entities. They were certainly not active authors of their own destinies.

In contrast, critical realism insists that the social sciences must take account of the weight of social structures and the power of human beings in social explanation. By explicitly embracing an ontological distinction between structures and agents, critical realism allows for the ontological causal powers of human beings to play a central role in social change. That is to say that, while

society – as systems of material relations that they do not create – always pre-exists agents, those agents do hold the power to transform or reproduce it (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 34). The following sections will turn the attention to considering those human causal powers. Before moving on, it is central to expose the critical realist understanding of agency.

In general terms, agency may be taken to refer to the capacity to make things happen in the world. While objects and non-human beings possess agency, what is distinctive about human agency is conscious, intentional behaviour (Porpora, 2015, p. 133). Human beings are, then, special kind of agents: they are *persons*. Christian Smith (2011) puts it this way:

> By *person* I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who – as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible action and interactions – exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the impersonal world. (Christian Smith, 2011, p. 61)

We can see here how the critical realist stance is trying to recover conscious agency from reification. In that regard, as Porpora notes, the critical realist position about human agency is vital not just for its explanatory powers:

> It has a moral dimension as well. Already, even below the level of humans, conscious agents confront us as thou's, centers of experience that feel as well as think and with whom to varying degrees we can meaningfully communicate. […] That means that, morally, we cannot respond to such agents as if they were just things, instrumentalities to be treated simply as means to our ends. Morally, even below the level of humans, we already encounter self-hood, conscious agents that already demand their treatment to some extent as ends in themselves. (Porpora, 2015, pp. 141-142)

The critical realist's conscious, reflexive, embodied and self-transcending person is a radical departure from the mysterious person that conflationist social theories offer. The concrete person is ontologically grounded and the centre of their subjectivity, which provides a "nucleus of coherence and a continuity of awareness and action" (Christian Smith, 2011, p. 62). Archer refers to this as the 'continuous sense of self' which emerges through practical engagement with the

world and is independent of and prior to language (Archer, 2000, p. 3). In Archer's words:

> In contradistinction to both 'Society's Being' and 'Modernity's Man', social realism introduces a stratified view of 'the subject' whose different properties and powers (PEPs) emerge at each level. […] the four strata involved are the *self*, the *person*, the *agent* and the *actor*. The latter two are undoubtedly our 'social selves' which emerge respectively through our involuntary embroilment in society's distribution of resources and our voluntary involvement in society's role-array. However, they are themselves dependent upon the prior emergence of a continuous sense of self and are co-dependent with the emergence of personal identity, which reflectively balances its social concerns with those embedded in the natural and practical orders of reality. (Archer, 2000, pp. 254-255)

According to Archer, then, human persons are ontologically stratified. Within the different strata, it is possible to distinguish between a 'social self' and a 'human self' (Hartwig, 2007e, p. 448). The former comprises the *agents*, defined as "*collectivities* sharing the same *life chances*" (Archer, 2003, p. 118), and the *actors*, possessing distinctive social identities derived from the way in which they choose to personify the array of social roles that they embody. In other words, as persons we are involuntary placed in a group of *agents* with whom we share the same constraints and opportunities, i.e. middle-class, white, heterosexual women born in a developing country. Now, the specific array of roles each person chooses to participate in and the peculiar ways in which she embodies those roles, form her unique social identity, the *actor* she plays in society, for instance, a university teacher who actively works for humanising her workplace, or a feminist mother who volunteers her scarce free time to advance the rights of women and children within a patriarchal society.

Which roles one individual embodies, and how she does it, is a matter of the *person*. Archer affirms that the person has a responsibility to consider "his or her object status in society, deliberate upon it and have the possibility of determining to do something about it" (Archer, 2003, p. 119). In other words, the person acts as the bridge between the social self and the human self. According to Archer (2000), what grants coherence between the different levels of the person is

the self-awareness, or continuous sense of self, from which certain powers and capacities emerge (i.e. self-consciousness, reflexivity, embodied memory, intentionality, etc). Those powers and capacities, called Personal Emergent Powers (PEPs), are exclusively human and independent from social structures (including language). In the end, the development of the social selves is possible thanks to the human self and its ontologically grounded PEPs. That is to say that the unfolding of the social selves happens in the interplay between the human self and the social structures she involuntarily encounters. It is on the basis of the recognition of this stratified ontology that critical realism confers both structures and agents with their own independent properties and powers.

As Chapter 2 showed, human agency – being ontologically differentiated from social structures in early critical realism – acquires a fundamental role in DCR and the PMR. There, human agency has the ultimate purpose of changing history and changing itself at the same time (Morgan, 2003). In light of these later developments, Hartwig (2007e, p. 444) offers an account of the critical realist insight of the human person. He suggests that human beings are "changing embodied persons who are also transcendentally real selves, profoundly interconnected with each other and the rest of the cosmos." From Hartwig's words, we can distinguish that a human being is: (i) a transcendentally real self which is connected to all human beings and to the rest of the cosmos, and (ii) an embodied person, which changes over time and contexts. So far, we can see a clear correspondence with Archer's *human self* (the transcendentally real self) and *social self* (the embodied person)

Now, according to Hartwig (2007e) and Bhaskar (2016), on top of these two ontologically real distinctions within the human person, there is a (iii), a third layer. That layer corresponds to our sense of ego and is imposed over the other two creating a perception of the "self as an island" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 162). This sense of ego lies at the "heart of the philosophical discourse of

modernity and of capitalist economic life, which depends on it for its ideology of possessive individualism and the experience of emotions such as greed and fear […]. But this sense of self, the ego, is totally illusory" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 162). According to Hartwig (2007e) the distinctions between: (i) the transcendentally real self, (ii) the embodied person, and (iii) the illusory ego, "map loosely" onto those between the real, the actual, and the empirical (in early critical realism), and on the realms of non-duality or absolute reality, duality or relative reality, and demi-reality or the domain of dualisms, alienations and contradictions (in the PMR). Hartwig (2007e) goes on to say that, to advance towards a eudaimonistic society, humanity should break free from the illusory sense of ego. In his words: "In PMR explicitly, and implicitly in CR, the virtuous or enlightened person sheds her ego and brings her embodied self into phase with her essential self, entraining an in principle indefinite expansion of powers and potentials" (Hartwig, 2007e, p. 444). We can see now how critical realism not only rescues the human person from reification and provides him with distinctive powers and capacities (PEPs), but also allows him the possibility to change himself and society simultaneously.

To summarise what this chapter has discussed so far in terms of the critical realist position on structure and agents, it could be said that:

(i) Structures are systems of relations amongst material social positions;
(ii) Human agents are stratified, self-aware, temporary occupiers of positions within that system;
(iii) Both structures and agents have their own independent capacities and powers with the potential to influence each other in different ways.

Bhaskar captured these insights to the structure/agency relation in his Transformational Model of Social Activity.

5.3 The Transformational Model of Social Activity

In making sense of the tensions in the interplay between structures and agents, Karl Marx's influence on Bhaskar's thought is evident. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx wrote:

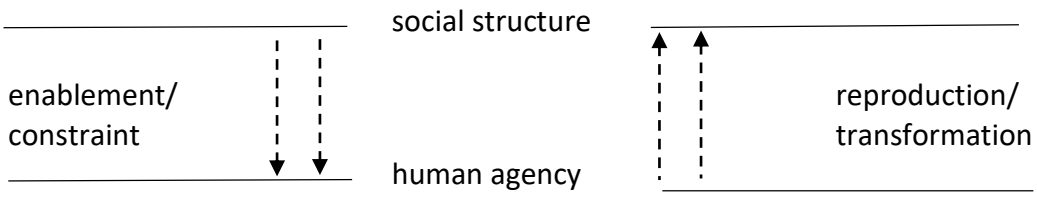
> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx, 2001, p. 7)

Bhaskar, in turn, summarises his *Transformational Model of Social Activity* (TMSA) using the following words:

> On the T.M.S.A., society is not the creation of unconditional human agency, but neither does it exist independently of it; and individual agents neither completely determine, nor are completely determined by, social forms (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 125).

This model, informed by Marx's materialist theory of history, constitutes "the core of Bhaskar's social ontology" (Collier, 1994, p. 141). The two main features of the TMSA are: i) the characterization of human agency as intentional, which is the crucial element that distinguishes the social strata from the natural; and ii) the assumption of the ontological structure of human activity as fundamentally transformative, implying "the transformation of pre-given material (natural and social) causes by efficient (intentional) human agency" (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 82). The TMSA can be represented in the following manner (see Figure 5.1):

Figure 5:1 The Transformational Model of Social Activity (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 52)



In line with the stratified ontology underpinning critical realism, Bhaskar further elaborated the

TMSA to what he called *four-planar social being*. The main idea of the *four-planar social being* is that every social action involves four planes, namely: material transactions with nature; social interactions between people; social structures; and the stratification of the embodied personality (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 53). This stratification of social activity offers a solid foundation on which to look for the deep, underlying mechanisms that cause observable events at the empirical level. The acknowledgment that social activity has the potential to transform many levels of the social world is crucial to reconceptualizing the meaning of activism.

According to Collier (1994), the TMSA has the advantage of accommodating the classical perspectives on social sciences, namely structuralism and interpretivism, and relating them in a way that is not conflationary. The TMSA recognises the *truth of structuralism*, that social structures determine the options that, at any given time, agents must choose from and, often, the outcomes of those actions too. On the other hand, it also respects the *truth of interpretivism*, which is that those structures depend on human agency to reproduce themselves over time.

This mutually constitutive relationship between structures and agents is, as Bhaskar highlights, asymmetrical. Pertaining to different ontological strata, and possessing distinctive kinds of powers and capacities, structures do not influence agency in the same way that agency impacts on structures. Bhaskar explains this asymmetry in the following terms:

> Society is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, conscious production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, that is society. One could refer to the former as the duality of structure, and the latter as the duality of praxis. (Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 34-35)

This implies that agents must work under structural constraints and enablements that they did not create nor choose. In Marx's words: "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx, 2001, p. 7). Nonetheless, critical realism acknowledges – as Marx

did – that agents have the potential capacity to recognise those pre-existent structures, reflect upon their objective position in them and act accordingly.

To summarise: with the TMSA, Bhaskar accomplished one of his main goals in underlabouring for the social sciences. This was to transform dualisms into interactive dialectics. In this case, the classic binary opposition between structure and agent loses its *raison d'etre* when transformed into a dialectic relation, where a fundamental causal power takes a primary role, that is reflexivity. In Collier's words, the TMSA:

> (…) gives an account of how we interact with society, being both its effects and its causes, yet not mere links between social causes and social effects, but the beings by which a unique kind of causal power comes into the world: the causal power of reasons. (Collier, 1994, p. 151)

As section 5.5 explores, reflexivity is essentially the process through which agents ponder the reasons for taking one course of action over other possible courses (among the available pre-established spectrum). Although limited, the choices that agents make can have powerful impacts in and on the structures around them. The importance of the TMSA is that it allows for those agentic powers to be acknowledged, explored and, eventually, enhanced by social sciences.

Margaret Archer was the first to take on that challenge. Her Morphogenetic Approach was an elaboration of Bhaskar's TMSA.

5.4 The Morphogenetic Approach

Bhaskar published his TMSA in 1979. In that same year, Gidden's theory of structuration was also released. At that time, both authors agreed, as Bhaskar has reported on various occasions (Bhaskar, 2016, 2017; Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010), that their models for social change were very similar. It was Margaret Archer who proved Bhaskar wrong in that assumption, by rightly pointing

out the decisive role that historicity plays in the TMSA. She claims, indeed, that: "(…) the TMSA has a 'before' (pre-existing social forms), a 'during' (the process of transformation itself) and an 'after' (the transformed, since social structures are only relatively enduring)" (Archer, 1995, p. 140). In contrast, in Gidden's structuration theory, structures appear as not having any history at all but, rather, as being instantiated through agents' actions. Historicity is, then, the main feature giving Bhaskar's TMSA advantage over central conflationist theories.

However, the TMSA was still incomplete in relation to its capacity as an explanatory model of social change (Archer, 1995, p. 136). Although Margaret Archer's work on morphogenesis and morphostasis (M/M) or the Morphogenetic Approach, as she later called it (Archer, 1995), was developed independently from Bhaskar's TMSA (Archer, 2007b), the former can be considered as an "elaboration of the ontology of the TMSA" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 51). Archer explains this elaboration thus:

> […] Bhaskar employs the image of a sculptor at work fashioning a product out of existing materials using the tools available. The M/M approach would merely add that some materials are more resistant than others, that tools vary in their adequacy and that the sociological identification of such differences is indispensable. What this is indispensable to is the key question, 'when are we going to get transformation rather than reproduction, or vice versa'? (Archer, 1995, p. 140)

As a meta-theory, the MA does not intend to explain anything. It plays a different role in the social sciences. It acts as a bridge between social ontology and social theory. Although it may be compatible with different practical theories, it is always consistent with a realist social ontology. For that reason, the morphogenetic approach should be used as a regulatory framework to identify and avoid "*any form of conflationary theorizing* at the practical level" (Archer, 1995, p. 6).

With the cornerstone of the MA being the structure–agency analytical dualism, Porpora (2013) suggests that a correct application of the MA requires holding to a triple set of ontological

distinctions. He identifies those distinctions as being between: (i) structure and agency; (ii) structure and culture; and (iii) culture and agency. The first of those distinctions has already been addressed in this chapter. In relation to the second, the particular difference can be best understood by referring to the traditional distinction made in sociology between the ideal and the material, the subjective and the objective, or the discursive and the extra-discursive. In each pairing, the cultural refers to the former and the structural to the latter. For instance, relationships of oppression exist and impinge their restrictions upon people, regardless of people being aware or not of those relations. Therefore, they are material, objective, or extra-discursive relations. On the other hand, a friendship cannot exist without the awareness of the participants. In that case, it is correct to describe that relation in subjective or discursive terms.

In relation to the third distinction, culture is understood to be collectively produced, individually appropriated and mediated through agency. Language is a good example to illustrate this point. Critical realists claim that it is each person, using his personal capacities, who speaks through one language or another to say what he chooses to say. In this way, critical realism strongly rejects the tendency in poststructuralist accounts to dissolve the agency into culture by suggesting that language, or culture, speaks through agents. In contrast, a differentiated account of the structure–agency relation enables a nuanced analysis of the interactions of the "real powers of structurally emergent properties (SEPs), cultural emergent properties (CEPs) and the emergent properties of people (PEPs)" (Clegg, 2016, p. 500).

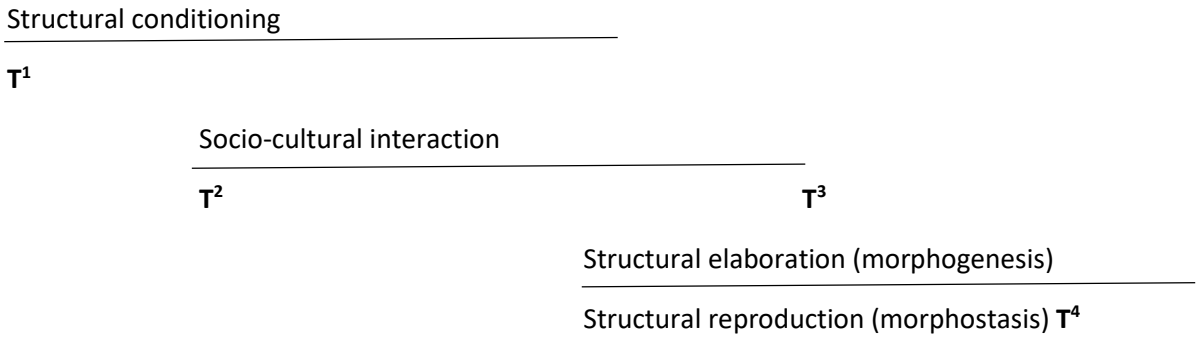
Once the three analytical distinctions have been established, it becomes clear that the main tenet of the MA is the fact that "persons are more than just inert occupiers of subject positions" (Porpora, 2013, p. 28). In the MA, the actions of agents are not determined by structure or the culture. While their actions are influenced by context, the ultimate choice of action remains

subject to the reflexive deliberation of the agent. If that were not the case, there would be no possible explanation to the question of why different people act differently while exposed to the same circumstances. Archer puts it like this:

> Because the response of the agent to a constraint (or enablement) is a matter of reflexive deliberation, it can take very different forms: from compliance, through evasion and strategic action to subversion. (…) Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between the objective existence of structural (and cultural) emergent properties and the exercise of their causal powers, since the realisation of their causal powers requires them to be activated by agents. Hence, the efficacy of any social emergent property is at the mercy of the agents' reflexive activity. (Archer, 2007c, p. 21)

However, the question remains as to how the MA can explain *social* change. To begin this exploration, a visual representation of the MA is offered (see Figure 5.2):

Figure 5:2 The basic morphogenetic/static cycle with its three phases (Archer, 1995, p. 157)



The MA complements the TMSA by incorporating three key features[10]. The first of those features is emergence. Because of emergence, it is possible to acknowledge the pre-existence of structures and the dual purpose they fulfil; on the one side, the irreducible influence they impinge upon agents and, on the other side, the acknowledgment that structures offer the material conditions

10 Bhaskar, in *Reclaiming Reality* (1989), included these three refinements to the TMSA. In that way, as Archer (1995, p. 156) claims: "the model now superimposes neatly onto the basic morphogenetic/morphostatic diagram".

to be transformed by agency.

The second element is temporality. In the MA, temporality has, too, a dual role. As historicity, it incorporates the weight of the past as structural conditioning, and the possibility of different future outcomes, morphogenesis or morphostasis, depending on the agent's choice. Time is also in-built as repetitive cycles (T^1, T^2, T^3, T^4). In T^1 the structural and/or cultural circumstances are considered as the starting point of the morphogenetic/static cycle, regardless of it being involuntary (as with people's social context at birth) or voluntary (like the career chosen). T^2 represents the agent's elaboration of the initial circumstances. The result of that elaboration is featured in T^3. That result can either be morphostasis, that is structural reproduction, or morphogenesis, meaning structural elaboration. Independently of the outcome, T^4 represents the beginning of a new cycle, where the result of the previous cycle becomes a new T^1.

Finally, the mediating process represents the interplay between the objective social position and the individual agent occupying that position. Here, human agency is seen as dialectically related with – but ontologically different from – the structural and cultural contexts in which the agents find themselves. Analytically, structure, culture and agency remain distinct. Therefore, human agency is considered undetermined and retains its transformative capacities. According to Archer:

> The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as pregiven, nor as socially appropriated, but rather these are emergent from our relations with our environment. As such, they have relative autonomy from biology and society alike, and causal powers to modify both of them. (Archer, 2000, p. 87)

By incorporating historicity, emergence and mediation as built-in ontological features, the MA can provide a comprehensive model capturing the process of social change. In doing so, the real powers and capacities of human beings are made visible and ineluctable to the process, and explanation, of social change. As Chapter 6 will show, the structural conditions emergent from the

neoliberal turn in universities were broadly similar for all the participating academics. However, the way each academic mediated those conditions through their inner reflexive processes and the actions they took varied considerably. The morphogenetic portraits presented in Chapter 4 showed how some participants, for instance, incorporated in their daily life personal routines to remind them that they could draw from a source of collective power that transcended them and supported them in their resistance to neoliberal onslaught. Other participants, in turn, understood that their job as academic activists was to disrupt the scholastic traditions at every opportunity they encountered: from the methodologies used, to the way they approached their relationships with the students, their ways to resist and transform were through disruption.

Moreover, as morphogenesis appears to be escalating, the capacity for reflexivity becomes more necessary than ever. In a recent article, Archer (2019) draws attention to the fact that, in current societies, the process of morphogenesis is becoming intensified and, in so doing, is pushing its boundaries. Archer describes this as a process of 'unbound morphogenesis'. The generative mechanisms explaining this process of augmented morphogenesis are partially related with the increasing variety of new ideas, technologies, processes, and products in all areas of society, and the synergy produced as a result of their interaction. This ever-expanding diversity of innovative products, processes and opportunities forces agents, in turn, to be more and more reliant on their own judgment and less on tradition or habit. Unbound morphogenesis has notorious effects in the reflexive processes of scholar activists, as Chapter 7 will highlight.

As the present section has shown, the MA provides a solid basis to incorporate reflexivity and the internal conversations of agents as essential aspects of sociological analysis. If, as the MA states, human action is undetermined by structural and cultural constraints and it exhibits irreducible creativity, then it is crucial to explore the ways in which reflexivity influences human action. This

brings the question of reflexivity squarely into focus.

5.5 Reflexivity

The sociological interest in the reflexive process resides in the fact that, as Archer (2013) claims, it is a source of self and social change. As Wimalasena emphasises, reflexivity is the dominant mechanism through which individuals effect agency (Wimalasena, 2017).

Following Archer, we can take reflexivity to refer to "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (Archer, 2007a, p. 4). However, maintaining the ontological distinctions via analytical dualism is critical in registering the significance of reflexivity in the analysis of social change. As Archer claims:

> Reflexivity depends upon a subject who has sufficient personal identity to know what he or she cares about and to design the 'projects' that they hope (fallibly) will realize their concerns within society. Equally, it depends upon the objectivity of their social circumstances, which, under their own (fallible) descriptions, will encourage them to follow one course of action rather than another. Deliberation consists in people evaluating their situations in the light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances. Any form of conflation fundamentally precludes examination of this interplay. (Archer, 2013, p. 6)

Basically, then, reflexivity is a process through which agents deliberate upon their own position in the objective social structures. The only way to make sense of that process is by upholding a clear separation between the subject and the object of her reflexive processes. It is in this analytical separation where the possibility of the sociological study of reflexivity resides (Caetano, 2015).

Traditionally in social sciences, "individual reflexivity is treated either as a nuisance or a threat" (Sayer, 2009, p. 114). Positivists tend to look at it as an obstacle to finding empirical regularities to make sense of social life. Economists have reduced it to instrumental rationality used with the purpose only of maximising profits and reducing costs. Psychoanalysts have put their attention on

unconscious motivations rather than on the ways people consciously talk to themselves. For classical sociology, reflexivity has always been something to either ignore or regard as a mere effect of socialisation.

Archer, via critical realism, brings a new light to study the significance of reflexivity. She claims that reflexivity is an emergent mechanism with real causal power for social change. She, therefore, introduces reflexivity to transform the classical dualistic, 'hydraulic' model of change into a dialectic, three-stage model (Archer, 2003, 2007c). Much social theory, as Sayer explains, adopts a model in which "objective circumstances are responded to by actors in terms of assumed subjective properties that are imputed to them, such as vested interests or the dispositions of their habitus" (Sayer, 2009, p. 114). Archer, on the other hand, proposes a model where reflexivity becomes a key element. That model has three distinct moments: (i) There are *objective* structural and cultural properties shaping the contexts that agents involuntarily meet; (ii) Agents possess their own constellations of concerns, that have been *subjectively* defined in relation to nature (e.g. their physical bodies), practice (e.g. hobbies, education, work) and the social (e.g. status, friendships, family); and (iii) "courses of action are produced through the *reflexive deliberations* of subjects who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances" (Archer, 2007a, p. 17) .

By introducing reflexivity as an essential step in the process of social change, Archer achieves several things at once. Firstly, she avoids the reductionist tendency of subsuming (ii) to mere products of (i) (Sayer, 2009, p. 115). Furthermore, it is now possible to analyse the causal powers of (iii) as sociologically relevant, since personal reflexive deliberations exert causal influence in the world. Finally, she brings back to social theory a real, whole human being who is not reduced to a zombie or a market soldier. In other words, Archer advances a humanism of a different kind, one

that is underpinned by a realist ontology. Now, human beings and their internal processes are worthy of study as real agents with causal powers for social transformation.

5.5.1 The Causal Powers of Reflexivity

Archer gives the name of Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs) to the causal powers of human beings; PEPs, because exercised reflexively, allow agents to prioritise what they care most about in this world and act accordingly. To illustrate the importance of considering PEPs in the analysis of social processes, Archer offers an illuminating example:

> (…) structural factors do constitute deterrents, capable of depressing agential motivation. They do so by attaching different opportunity costs to the same course of action (such as house purchase) to different parts of the population. This is how 'life chances' exert causal powers, but their outcomes are only empirical tendencies. What they cannot explain is why *x* becomes a home owner and *y* does not, if both are similarly socially situated. That is a question of the agents' own concerns and deliberations which govern whether or not they find the cost worth paying. (Archer, 2007c, p. 22)

In this way, social position should not be immediately assimilated to individual disposition in terms of empirical courses of action. Time, as a key factor incorporated in the MA, allows for a gap between the social position and the individual disposition. It is in that time-gap where human reflexivity has the potential to be actualised and the relevance of accounting for personal reflexive processes becomes evident.

In relation to the interconnections between structure and agent, Bhaskar (1998, p. 25) argues that "social forms are a necessary condition for any intentional act, that their *pre-existence* establishes their *autonomy* as possible objects of scientific investigation and that their *causal power* establishes their reality". He also affirms that "the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency" (Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 25-26). He does not, however, unpack the ways in which agency mediates the influences of social structures. Archer, as a continuation of Bhaskar's work, has dedicated much of her intellectual effort to fulfilling that task. She has concluded that

personal reflexivity is the answer to how human agency mediates social and cultural influences. In other words, human reflexivity has the causal power to arbitrate structural and cultural properties (Archer, 2007c, p. 25). It does so via the internal conversations that the agents maintain with themselves. Archer's main contribution, as Caetano (2015) points out, resides in:

> (…) the way reflexivity is defined as an internal dialogue, a condition of existence in society, which activates the causal powers of structures and allows individuals to project their actions based on the articulation between personal concerns and the conditions that make it possible to accomplish them. (p. 62)

Through this internal dialogue, where courses of action are established to achieve goals in accordance with personal concerns, most agents actualise the potential to become 'active agents' in society, instead of 'passive agents', that is people "to whom things just happen" (Archer, 2007c, p. 24). In that process they activate structural and cultural powers that would, otherwise, remain inactive, as the following section (5.5.2) shows.

Archer synthesizes the progressive identification of concrete courses of action in the following manner: **concerns → projects → practices →**. This process constitutes the *modus vivendi* of an agent, that is the personal way in which she chooses to be and behave in the world. The election of one's *modus vivendi* is done progressively through the internal conversation (Archer, 2003, p. 113).

Before moving on to the next section (5.5.2), where the focus will be on explaining the internal conversation and its properties, it is vital to consider the contents of reflexivity. If, as Archer claims, reflexivity is the domain where agents ponder their concerns in relation to their objective positioning in the social structure, those concerns are based on the recognition of objective interests. In his Marxian consideration of this point, Banfield (2016) stresses that "[t]he transformation of oppressive social structures by human agents is not only an ever-present

possibility but it is impelled by real, interest-driven human needs" (p. 150). Referring specifically (but not exclusively) to class interests, he notes that objective interests are not always obvious or available to be grasped without the mediation of critical thinking. This is a reflexive process: a human struggle. Again, from a class interest perspective, Callinicos (2004) puts it succinctly:

> The class struggle is, in a sense, the process through which agents discover their interests by exploring the extent of their powers. The concept of interests acts as a hinge connecting conscious experience and objective structures, since it refers to the way in which agents' realisation of their interests depends on their structural capacities. (p. 150)

The relation between structures, agents, and objective interests can be represented in the following way (see Table 501):

Table 5:1 Structures, agents, and interests. Adapted from Banfield (2016, p. 175)

Ontological Domain	Structures	Stratification of Agency	Interests
Natural being	Natural	Human Being	Biological Psychological
Species being		Person	Cooperative social labour Conscious reflexivity
Social being	Socio-economic	Agents	Class
	Socio-cultural	Actors	Cultural
	Institutional		Institutional

Table 5.1 captures the essence of the argument this chapter has so far developed. It shows the

relation between stratified and differentiated domains of reality and emergent structures (natural and social). It links structures and interests "whereby both are understood as objective, i.e. they exist whether people have conscious knowledge of them or not" (Banfield, 2016, p. 175). It also highlights the role of the person, as the reflexive bridge between the human self and the various social roles available. As the person develops a greater recognition of her objective interests, the *need* to act accordingly becomes obvious and compelling. But this does not determine or guarantee action. The gap between recognition and action draws attention to the importance of the internal conversation.

5.5.2 The Internal Conversation

The internal conversation refers to the dialogues that agents have with themselves inside their own 'heads'. Archer defines it as the "process of mediation 'through' which agents respond to social forms – fallibly and corrigibly, but above all, intentionally and differently – (…)" (Archer, 2003, p. 16). The 'internal conversation' is held to have three main properties: (a) reality, (b) irreducibility, and (c) causal efficacy (Archer, 2003, p. 16).

The first significant feature of the internal conversation is its reality as a subjective ontological inner process. As opposed to other kinds of things like a tree, a car or a song, which share an objective ontological nature, the nature of the internal conversation is comparable to a feeling, a headache or dream. Although it is possible to explain to someone else the characteristics of those internal processes, that third person would not be able to experience them in the same way. This fact does not imply, however, that what happens inside the person is not real or that it does not have the causal powers to influence objective reality. Even if a doctor is not able to feel the pain that a migraine is inflicting on the patient, he would, nonetheless, extend a certificate to justify a sick leave, based on the patient's report of the pain. Similarly, although the texture of the internal

conversation has a subjective existence that prevents it from being shared, it is possible to communicate the outcomes of that process in terms of ideas, concerns, reasons for action, etc.

The second property of the internal conversation is related to what Archer calls 'first-person authority' (Archer, 2003, pp. 45-51). First-person authority refers to the fact that a person bases his social conduct in the outcome of his inner deliberations about his place in society. That outcome is, of course, fallible, in the sense that the person can be wrong about what that place is and the implications it has. However, the courses of actions taken are attributable only to that fallible inner process. What first-person authority implies, then, is that the causal powers of the internal conversation are irreducible to social or cultural properties. In other words, agents act based upon their beliefs about their social positioning, therefore their subjectivity is essential to sociologically explaining their actions. In Archer's words:

> (…) the 'inner conversation' is a matter of referential reflexivity in which we ponder upon the world and about what our place is, and should be, within it. Social reality enters objectively into our making, but one of the greatest of human powers is that we can subjectively conceive of re-making society and ourselves. (Archer, 2000, p. 315)

The internal conversation is the means through which agents delineate their fundamental concerns, define their projects and determine (fallibly) the most appropriate social practices. It is in this way that agents' PEP(s) are exercised. Of course, as Archer warns, agents do not operate in a social vacuum. They do not choose the circumstances they face. What they do, through the internal conversation, is to "mediate by activating structural and cultural powers and in so doing there is no single predictable outcome" (Archer, 2007c, p. 28). The third property of the inner conversations refers, then, to the power they possess to activate structural and cultural properties that would, otherwise, remain inactive. To illustrate this point, it could be enlightening to think about one property of water: that of offering resistance to swimming bodies. This property remains inactive until a person decides to jump into the water. It is, therefore, the fact of entering

the water which activates the water's properties. Whether that person consciously decided to do so, was pushed or accidentally fell into the water, is irrelevant: the resistance of the water to her body remains the same. Likewise, in the social world, it is only when a person decides to pursue a certain project, like becoming a member of a political party, having children or studying a university degree, that certain structural and cultural properties are activated. Although, in this case, the position the person occupies in the structure plays a fundamental role in determining which constraints and possibilities become active, the decision about following that course of action remains in the realm of the person's inner deliberations. These examples show how the internal reflexive processes are causal mechanisms that activate structural and cultural properties and that they are, therefore, different and irreducible to those social forms.

It is worth advancing here[11] that the internal conversation should not be conceptualised only in 'linguistic terms' (Chalari, 2013, p. 69). It is better described as an inner process where reasons, emotions, feelings and values are juggled before deciding on a course of action. In this regard, some feminist theorists have wrongly claimed that critical realism privileges "reason, abstraction, and precision over emotion" (Nelson, 2003, p. 110). Much to the contrary, critical realists reject the separation between reason and emotion because it is considered artificial and functional to capitalist social relations. In this sense, Dean (2007) suggests that the split between reasons and emotions emerged into being along with the development of capitalism. In her words:

> The splitting of rationality and the emotions is grounded in the experience of systematic differentiations of relations and activities rendered necessary and possible through capitalist industrialisation. What results is a depersonalised or disengaged mode of 'abstract rationality' – the rationality of philosophy and science on the one hand and, on the other, the atomised, privatised rationality of homo oeconomicus (Dean, 2007, p. 403)

11 The relationship of the internal conversation with emotions will be extensively addressed in Chapter 6.

The re-fusion of rationality and emotions is, then, a necessary step towards the emancipation (Dean, 2007) and human flourishing to which critical realism aspires. Archer has, coherently, incorporated emotions in the ontological analysis of reflexivity. In *Being human: the problem of agency* (Archer, 2000), she states that:

> The central assumption made here is that our emotions are among the main constituents of our inner lives. They are the fuel of our internal conversation and this is why they matter. (…) The importance of the emotions is central to the things we care about and to the act of caring itself. (p. 194)

Other critical realists have also acknowledged the role of emotions in human reflexivity and behaviour. Christian Smith (2011), for instance, states that human emotions "spring from and redound through deep wells of human subjectivity with profound consequences for perception, motivation, and behaviour" (p. 46). Another example is Lamb-Books (2016), who has clearly stated that emotions, like consciousness and social structures, are "real generative mechanisms with irreducible causal powers and tendencies towards social action and communication" (Lamb-Books, 2016, p. 1) and that are, consequently, a *sine qua non* for human intentional agency.

While it is clear that critical realists take emotions seriously and that critiques of the likes of Nelson (2003) are a "misapprehension" (Clegg, 2016), other sources of critique are worthy of attention. Burkitt (2012), for instance, has pointed out the fact that, while Archer acknowledges the role of emotions theoretically, in practice she neglects it. Burkitt shares his concern in the following terms: "Surprisingly, in her (Archer's) book on reflexivity and the internal conversation there is little discussion with her research participants about their emotions" (p. 463). This is one of the flaws in the morphogenetic approach that this project has addressed by incorporating the emotional dimensions of reflexivity in the collection and analysis of the data, as detailed in Chapter 6.

To recap, this section has shown that it is the human capacity of reflexivity that enables agents to try to do, to be or to become what they care about most in society. Without delving into the reflexive processes of agents, social sciences have no explanatory purchase on what agents do (Archer, 2007c). Hence, as Sayer (2009) puts it, "it is extraordinary that social research has taken scarcely any interest in internal conversations, either theoretically or empirically" (p. 113).

Archer took the exploration of human reflexivity further to recognise that, although we all exercise our reflexive capacities in relation to our social positioning, not all reflexive processes are equal. She identified four reflexive modes, which are outlined in the next section.

5.5.3 Reflexive Modes

In her study of the reflexive processes of people, Archer (2003) recognizes four different *reflexive modes* exercised by agents in their inner conversations. Generally, individual agents show one predominant mode of reflexivity, but all modes are exercised at different times, according to the circumstances faced. In turn, these reflexive modes determine the *stance* that the agent takes towards society (Archer, 2003, p. 163). Wimalasena (2017) summarizes the main characteristics of each reflexive mode as follows (see Table 5.2):

Table 5:2 Main features of Archer's reflexive modes. Adapted from Wimalasena (2017, p. 387)

MAIN FEATURES	REFLEXIVE MODE			
	Communicative	***Autonomous***	***Meta-Reflexive***	***Fractured***
ULTIMATE LIFE CONCERN	Family and friends	Work	Self-inflicted value ideologies	Not clear
SOCIAL MOBILITY INTENTIONS	Immobility and contextual continuity	Upward mobility and contextual discontinuity	Lateral/volatile, often finds contextual incongruence	Unclear, more concerned about present moment
INTERNAL CONVERSATIONS	Need completion by an interlocutor	Self-contained	Self-contained and critical about own reflexivity	Underdeveloped
STANCE TOWARDS STRUCTURAL POWERS	Evasive, tends to be under community pressure, guided by tradition	Strategic and not hesitant to contradict tradition	Subversive and own ideologies that supersede collective ideologies, engages in constant social critique	Unclear
CAREER ORIENTATION	Voluntary step-downs, degree of underemployment, keen on work near home, modest occupations or voluntary unemployment	Clear career vision, many false starts, keen on career progress, committed to acquire qualifications and experience	Focused on jobs located in the social sphere, aims to realize value ideologies through work, work is an avenue of expression	Unclear
REFLEXIVE LIFE PROJECTS	Aimed at enabling contextual continuity	Anticipatory and opportunistic, aimed at upward social mobility	Solutions to overcome contextual incongruity	Unclear

MODUS VIVENDI	To be with family and friends	Occupational success and material gains, autonomy	Social and occupational contexts that support value ideals	Unclear
OUTCOME	Reproduction and continuation of existing structural and cultural forms	Transformation of structural and cultural forms	Reorientation of structural and cultural forms	Lacks purposeful action

This taxonomy is used here to identify which reflexive mode, with its concomitant characteristics, is the prevailing one for each participant. In Chapter 7 special attention is given to the identification of sub-types or new types of reflexivity that are not included in Archer's original classification.

The ways in which reflexivity and the internal conversation are empirically researched in this project was the matter of Chapter 3. Delineating the theoretical grounds for the study of reflexivity has been the main purpose of this chapter. To conclude the chapter, the next section considers the implications that incorporating reflexivity in the study of activism could have.

5.6 Activism, reflexivity and the internal conversation

By incorporating ontological depth and emergence in sociological analyses of the relationship between agents and structures, it is possible, as this chapter has shown, to understand that reflexivity and the internal conversation have irreducible causal powers for social change (Archer, 2003). In other words, agents' inner lives, in the form of reflexive processes, values, feelings, reasons and emotions – even though unobservable – have real impacts in the 'outer' world. They do not create reality but do affect it. This radical way of understanding agency brings several implications for the research of activism.

First, the incorporation of reflexivity is essential to provide a full account of the interplay between the two ontologies, namely, the socially objective and the personally subjective (Archer, 2007c). That is, social ontology should not be accounted for as an intransitive reality but as a social form, subject to being evaluated and mediated by subjective ontologies. In the case of the study of activism, exploring the personal reflexive processes of activists in a rapidly changing context becomes a powerful way to account for the courses of action they choose to follow, in accordance with their heterogeneous constellations of concerns. As Archer claims: "if subjectivity is not properly investigated, it will be improperly imputed for it cannot be eliminated" (Archer, 2007c, p. 29)

Secondly, it is important to find out how and under which circumstances a person goes from 'reflexive deliberation' to 'reflexive activism' (see Chapter 6); that is, understanding why some agents, despite being reflexive and critical about the world that surrounds them, do not become 'active' agents, whilst for others, activism is their *modus vivendi*.

Thirdly, considering the stratified ontology of social activity (elaborated in the four-planar social being) underpinning the TMSA and the MA, the practice of activism should include actions at various levels of reality, and ways to achieve coherence in all those levels should be investigated. An agent can be, for instance, inclined to reflect on and transform oppressive social structures, but not be equally keen about reflecting on his own internalized social conditionings at the level of the embodied personality. Elder-Vass (2010) offers the following example:

> Consider, for example, the radical male political activist who is highly reflexive in his response to globalisation, war or capitalism, yet uncritically reproduces the attitudes and behaviours towards women acquired from the culture of his upbringing. (p. 111)

It is evident that transformation should be sought at many levels. In that regard, Chapter 2 showed how Dialectical Critical Realism re-conceptualised agents as "partial totalities" (Norrie,

2010, p. 90) in constellational relations with other agents and with the structures that constrain and enable their agency. As such, they are not just human *beings*, but also humans constantly *becoming*. In that *becoming*, the reproduction or transformation of the structures (psychological, social, cultural, economic, etc.) is an ongoing possibility. On the other hand, Chapter 2 also exposed the philosophy of meta-Reality as a philosophy that entails human beings with the capacity to consciously transcend the world of duality, one which creates unhappiness, oppression, alienation and conflict everywhere in society. By seeking to dive into deeper levels of reality, human beings begin to actualise ways of thinking and being that are consistent with ground-state qualities (i.e. interconnectedness, freedom, flourishing, care, love). Traditionally, however, when it comes to social change, the attention of the social sciences has been located overwhelmingly in solving problems at the level of social structures, while underestimating the deeper levels of reality (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 164). It is, therefore, essential to broaden the understanding of activism to encompass a stratified and emergent ontology. That will be the task of the following chapter.

5.7 Summary

This chapter has presented a detailed account of the critical realist approach to the study of structure and agency. According to critical realism, structures are to be understood as systems of relations amongst material social positions. Agency, on the other hand, is a different kind of thing. Agency is embodied by human beings who are stratified, self-aware, temporary occupiers of positions within social structures. Crucially, the critical realist account stresses that both structures and agents have their own independent capacities and powers, with the potential to influence each other in different ways.

This approach to the study of the interplay between structures and agents allows for the reflexive

PEP's of agency to be analysed as sociologically relevant. According to Archer (2003), reflexivity holds the irreducible property to activate and mediate the causal powers of social and cultural forms. It is through a process of inner deliberation - the internal conversation - that people decide what they care the most about in the world. In the case of activists, it is essential to delve into those reflexive moments to find out why and how they go from 'reflexive deliberations' to 'reflexive activism'. Most people care about something in the world. Not all, however, act in that direction. To go from a 'passive' agent to an 'active' agent involves more than inner deliberations; it requires long-term commitment along with core values and practices.

The following chapter explores the changes in the structural and cultural contexts where academic activism, triggered by the implementation of neoliberal strategies and polices, is embedded. It describes and explains the neoliberal turn that has taken place worldwide and how it has been implemented in Australian Universities for the past 30 years. The intense flow of transformation that has characterized higher education has had several implications for academic activists. Those implications are explained and the definition of activism itself is critiqued under the light of the critical realist ontology advanced in Chapter 2. Reflexivity and the internal conversation are suggested as powerful concepts to reconceptualize activism.

CHAPTER 6: STRUCTURING ACTIVISM

Where Chapter 2 made explicit the critical realist ontology underpinning the study, Chapter 3 outlined its methodological implications. Chapter 4, in turn, presented the lived experiences of academic activists and Chapter 5 outlined a critical realist, morphogenetic model of social change to start making sense of those embodied experiences. The present chapter draws attention to the interplay of the objective *outer* conditions of scholar activism and the subjective *inner* selves of the academic activists.

Following on from the participants' contextual descriptions of their work (Chapter 4), the first section of this chapter provides a critical realist explication of the current structures of possibility for academic activism, e.g. neoliberalism. It takes neoliberalism as a TINA formation (namely, a series of contradictions between theory and practice), as Bhaskar (2016) referred to it, and explores what implications this has for understanding activism in current times. From this general rendering, the second section gives specific consideration to the neoliberalisation of higher education and the changes to academic culture it implies. In the third section, academic activism is approached from the point of view of the human capacities enabling scholar activism, i.e. the capacity to be reflexive, to experience deep emotions, and to exercise concrete utopianism. The chapter concludes with a critique and reformulation of activism under the light of those capacities as fundamental causal mechanisms triggering social change.

6.1 What is Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is a political (class) strategy directed to securing the material interests of capital (Harvey, 2005, 2014). As such, it entails an intransitive dimension (i.e. real ontological

mechanisms) and a transitive dimension (i.e. the various conceptions of neoliberalism). It is with the former that this section is most concerned. The various epistemological positions (theories of neoliberalism) are relevant because they represent conceptions of the world that, in turn, advance certain material interests. For example, neoliberalism as a 'theory of everything' (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013) obscures the specific P_2 mechanisms (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3) of exploitation, thus enabling their continuation. Here the focus will be mainly on the ontological dimension, drawing attention to the views of human nature and society that the neoliberal political project advances.

First, it is important to establish the relationship between capitalism and neoliberalism, for they are related but should not be conflated. According to Banfield (personal communication, March 23, 2020), the critical realist approach to understanding this relationship should begin by noting that capitalism and neoliberalism are different *kinds* of things. The concept of *natural kinds* is essential in a critical realist analysis (see Chapter 2). According to Engelskirchen (2011), a successful realist explanation depends on identifying "a cluster of causal properties or mechanisms capable of accounting for how a thing maintains itself in a stable relationship to its environment" (p. 8). That cluster of properties or mechanisms is referred to as *natural kind*. Therefore, from a realist perspective, it is possible to talk about *social kinds* as "the natural kinds of social life" and explore "the causal relations among them" (Engelskirchen, 2011, p. xxii).

In this regard, capitalism refers to historically specific *societal* formation emergent from the logic (mechanisms) of capital. On the other hand, neoliberalism is a historically specific *political* project developed by the capitalist elite to overcome the (very real) contradictions and subsequent crises of capitalism (especially after 1970). In critical realist terms, the relationship between these two *kinds* of things – societal and political – is expressed hierarchically, with the latter emerging from

crises arising in the former. In other words, neoliberalism is a political strategy developed as a response to the recurrent crises of capitalism.

The dominant tendency, however, does not take into account the realist concept of *kinds*, therefore ignoring the "causal structures of social life" (Banfield, G., personal communication, March 23, 2020), i.e. ontology. This leads to conflating the natural and the social and, in turn, to portraying the origins of capitalism and its developments as "the natural outcome of human practices almost as old as the species itself, which required only the removal of external obstacles that hindered its realization" (Wood, 2002, p. 11). From a historical materialist perspective, some Marxists theorists (Engelskirchen, 2011; Harvey, 2005, 2014; Wood, 2002) explain that capital (as the driving logic of capitalism) is a *social (*and thus a *historical)* relation. Capitalism, far from being the result of a natural process, is a social formation in which the majority of the work in a society is done by workers who are dispossessed of all means of production and, therefore, forced to sell "their labour-power in exchange for a wage" (Wood, 2002, p. 96). As a social system, capitalism has a long history that can be traced back to the XVIII Century (Beckert, 2014). Along that history, it has passed through different stages (i.e. agrarian, industrial, monopoly capitalism) necessitating, thus, different forms of state to secure its needs (i.e. absolutist, liberal, interventionist) (Jessop, 1978). Following Maisuria and Helmes (2020), in their account of academic life in the neoliberal university, the most important lesson to learn from the study of capitalism as an historically emergent social formation is that "history is changeable" (p. 2). This lesson, echoing Bhaskar's idea of dispositional realism (see Chapter 2), creates confidence in the possibility of transforming away from any particular stage of capitalism (Maisuria & Helmes, 2020, p. 2).

In the past 50 years, neoliberalism has emerged as the political strategy developed by capitalist elites "against organised labour after the crisis of the post-war mode of growth in advanced

capitalist economies (…)" (Jessop, 2013, pp. 69-70). The historical origins of neoliberalism were rooted in post-WWII geo-politics where the Keynesian economics framed Western economies and Marxist–Leninist economics shaped Eastern economies. Both Keynesian and Marxist–Leninist economic doctrines helped the rise of the power of organised labour world-wide, thus challenging the rule of capital and the interests of the capitalist class. It is against this background that Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as a "project to achieve the restoration of class power" (p. 16).

By the early 1960s, as Harvey (2005) explains, the political arena was polarized around the interests of two opposite groups: those supporting the idea that state intervention should be deepened, with the aim of preserving a fair compromise between labour and capital, on the one side, and those favouring the complete liberalization of the markets in order to re-establish optimal conditions for capital accumulation, on the other side. It is worthy to note that the objectives of this latter group went, as Jessica Whyte (2019a, 2019b) asserts, far beyond the economic sphere alone, incorporating issues related to politics, morals, human rights and social peace. In her words:

> [T]he neoliberal argument for the competitive market was itself moral and political rather than strictly economic. Early neoliberals attributed to the market a series of anti-political virtues: checking and dispersing power, facilitating social cooperation, pacifying conflict, and securing individual liberty and rights. They presented commercial or 'civil society' as a space of mutually beneficial, voluntary relations that contrasted with the violence, coercion and conflict that they argued were endemic to politics—and especially to mass politics. (Whyte, 2019b, p. 15)

By the mid-1970s the neoliberal group succeeded in imposing its view. By 1990, the economic policies agreed upon to restore market-freedom came to be known as the 'Washington Consensus' (Williamson, 1990). Succinctly, those polices consisted of a set of ten policy instruments:

> (…) fiscal discipline, meaning fiscal austerity, which in turn translates into cuts in

> welfare spending; public-expenditure priorities on education, health and infrastructure; tax reform; exchange rates established by markets; competitive exchange rates; trade liberalisation; promotion of foreign direct investment; privatisation; deregulation; and the enforcement of private property rights. (Patomaki, 2007, p. 327)

To ensure the effective implementation of these measures, the supporters of the neoliberal project were aware of the primary necessity to impose their model at the level of ideas. In fact, Harvey (2005) states that:

> Hayek, author of key texts such as *The Constitution of Liberty*, presciently argued that the battle for ideas was key, and that it would probably take at least a generation for that battle to be won, not only against Marxism but against socialism, state planning, and Keynesian interventionism. (p. 21)

Therefore, the advocates of the liberalization of the markets from the intervention of the state had systematically worked their way through the field of ideas. As early as 1947, a group of economists, historians and philosophers from Europe and the United States gathered around the above mentioned Austrian political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek to establish the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) (Harvey, 2005). Amongst the members of this society, it is worth mentioning the presence of notable figures like the American economist Milton Friedman and the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper. The MPS's Statement of Aims asserts that "[t]he central values of civilization are in danger", those values being identified as human dignity and freedom. It continues to claim that what is threatening those values is the development of policies fostered by the "decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved"[12] (Mont Pelerin Society, 1947).

[12] It is noteworthy that the Mount Pelerin Society is still active and, on its website, it is possible to read the above

It is thus possible to identify how, from its outset, neoliberalism has been underpinned by political ideals of human dignity and freedom. This "theoretical utopianism" was, as Harvey (2005) illuminates, used to justify and legitimate "whatever needed to be done" (p. 19) to achieve the goal of restoring the power of capitalist elites. In this regard, as above anticipated, the neoliberal view of *human rights* sees the market as the exclusive realm of human freedom (Whyte, 2019b). Politics is, on the contrary, the place of coercion. Thus, although it may appear contradictory, a *strong* state – even a coercive one – is justified if its goals are to "defend the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey, 2005, p. 21).

We can see how the theoretical model of neoliberalism presents, on the one hand, a fictitious model of the human being that finds its freedom and dignity only within the confines of the markets. That archetype resembles Archer's Homo Economicus, namely the "lone, atomistic and opportunistic bargain-hunter" (Archer, 2000, p. 4) that has profit maximisation as its ultimate concern. On the other hand, that theoretical model symbolizes the market as the exclusive domain of human freedom, peace and true democracy, and neoliberalism as its guarantor (Harvey, 2005; Whyte, 2020).

This theoretical fallacy, as already discussed, was backed up and spread by a broad institutional network until it was accepted as self-evident: "[p]owerful ideological influences circulated through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society—such as the universities, schools, churches, and professional associations" (Harvey, 2005, p. 40). The fundamental role played by universities in creating a "climate of opinion in support of

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quoted Statement of Aims: https://www.montpelerin.org/

neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2005, p. 40) will be discussed in the next section.

Central to the neoliberal discourse is the attempt to inculcate a series of values and practices in social agents (Hamann, 2009; MacLeavy, 2008) with the intention of synchronising individual values with those of the markets and, thus, increasing legitimacy. This is what Bhaskar, with reference to Margaret Thatcher's dictum that 'There Is No Alternative', calls a TINA formation. Bhaskar (2016) defines TINA as a "compromise formation, in which basically a truth in praxis is combined or held in tension with a falsity in theory" (p. 4). It is important to highlight that Bhaskar is using 'formation' here in order to refer to emergent forms (practices, ideas, beliefs, events, etc.) of the workings of deeper causal mechanisms.

TINA is a false theory that works to institute a "closure of the political imagination" (Whyte, 2019b, p. 9) by imposing a fictitious history on the world. According to Potomaki, Bhaskar's idea is:

> (…) that false philosophical theories tend to generate necessitarian interpretations of the world, precluding other possibilities from consideration. However, as the real world consists also of unactualised possibilities, and as new mechanisms, structures and beings may emerge, any necessitarian account is necessarily incomplete and involves various lacks and contradictions. (Patomaki, 2007, p. 328)

In its incompleteness and its lack, a TINA formation "parallels the fetishism of commodities" and "alienation under capitalism" (Patomaki, 2007, p. 466).

To illustrate this point, a contemporary example can be used: the ecological crisis. On the one side, humanity is inherently dependent on, and interconnected to, the planet it inhabits, as well as to other human and non-human beings. That interconnection is essential for our survival as a species. On the other side, however, the logic of capital and the tendencies of capitalist societies are to take nature "as nothing more than a vast store of potential use values – of processes and things – that can be used directly or indirectly (through technologies) in the production and realisation of

commodity values" (Harvey, 2014, p. 142). Moreover, the continuance of the capitalist mode of production relies on a perpetual economic growth that inevitably leads to environmental destruction (Næss, 2016). The advocates of neoliberalism understand the ecological crisis to be an external problem (rather than a problem internal to the capital–nature relation) that can be solved by applying the logic of the market (i.e. the same capitalist relations that are fundamental to the contradiction) to the problem, e.g. putting a tax on carbon or promoting environmentally wise decisions at the consumers' end. Furthermore, neoliberal capitalism, faithful to its nature, is profiting widely from current ecological issues (Harvey, 2014). As Næss (2016) forcefully puts it: "the dream of a green capitalism is an illusion" (p. 188).

In short, capital's relation to nature is one of contradiction. The appropriation and exhaustion – to the point, in some cases, of permanent destruction – of natural resources is inherent to its functioning logic (Harvey, 2014; Næss, 2016). The TINA formation at work here lies in the inconsistency between a globalized capitalist mode of production that requires infinite growth at the expense of a finite and perfectly equilibrated eco-system (Hartwig, 2016).

The contradictions of capitalism are not exhausted there. Being social forms, TINA formations operate at all levels of the four-planar social being (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3). The example above shows how the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism function at the level of the material transactions with nature. Harvey takes the analysis further to explain the way in which capitalism, and its current neoliberal project, operates in antagonism towards human nature itself. He claims that, in the same way capital denies natural diversity in agriculture by means of a monocultural and extractive mode of production, it does the same with human life. Urban life, in capitalist societies, has become *monocultural* and barren. Harvey's point is that the deep logic of capital drives an ontological split between human beings and nature. In Harvey's words "capital's relation

to nature and human nature is alienating in the extreme" (Harvey, 2014, p. 149). Inevitably, this tendency provokes rebellions and resistance:

> The seeds are sown for a humanist revolt against the inhumanity presupposed in the reduction of nature and human nature to the pure commodity form. Alienation from nature is alienation from our own species' potential. This releases a spirit of revolt in which words like dignity, respect, compassion, caring and loving become revolutionary slogans, while values of truth and beauty replace the cold calculus of social labour. (Harvey, 2014, p. 150)

Bhaskar (2016), in turn, summarises the contradictions induced by the capital mode of production in the following way:

> (…) on the plane of material transactions with nature, it is most obvious in the form of *ecological* crisis; on the plane of social interactions between people, it most obviously takes the form of an *ethical* or moral crisis, stemming from the growing inequalities and imbalances in already skewed distribution of resources (…). On the plane of social structure the most obvious crisis is an *economic* one; while on the plane of the stratification of the embodied personality we have various acute *existential* crisis. (p. 204)

In a nutshell, the "theory–practice inconsistency" (Bhaskar, 2002a, p. 16) intrinsic to neoliberal capitalism has led to a *crisis system* (Bhaskar, 2016) that, as shown above, can be identified at all levels of the four-planar social being. Consequently, activism in neoliberal societies, as following sections will discuss, should not be reduced to one level of existence but should encompass the whole four-planar social being.

In addition to operating at the four levels of existence, there are multiple ways in which the term 'contradiction' is used. Collier (1994, p. 184) identifies three different, though inter-related, types of contradiction within capitalism. There are: (i) cognitive contradictions, that is, contradictions between appearance and reality, for instance the appearance of 'free' labour in a system based on the exploitation of dispossessed workers forced to sell their labour power in the job market; (ii) ontological contradictions, meaning that the needs of capitalism and human beings are

fundamentally at odds, as in the need of capitalism for infinite growth on a finite planet; and (iii) functional contradictions, namely contractions internal to the system that cause it to malfunction, like the overproduction crisis that periodically arises within capitalism. In times of generalised crisis, these contradictions become more acute and tangible, and capitalism seems "peculiarly vulnerable" (Harvey, 2014, p. 11). Especially in times like this, activism should be advanced at all levels and address all contradictory forms in capitalist societies in order to produce alternative ways to think, act and be in the world.

In that regard, Bhaskar (1993) argues that TINA formations, like neoliberalism, are "liable to explanatory critique" (p. 120). The intention of that critique is to demonstrate that there are, after all, valid alternatives to neoliberalism (Hartwig, 2007f). However, TINA formations "will not bend to explanatory critique alone" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 120). According to Bhaskar, explanatory critiques must be partnered with four types of politics that he refers to as: *life* politics, *movement* politics, *representative* politics and a *participatory emancipatory* politics that are "coordinated by a concern with fundamental structural change in a rhythmic to Eudaimonia, understood as human flourishing" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 120). What Bhaskar is proposing here is a strategy to overturn neoliberalism that requires an effort to attain coherence between theory and praxis at all levels of existence, an effort that entails, as forthcoming sections will demonstrate, reflexivity as a *sine qua non*.

Summing up, the logic of capital is one driven by capital accumulation and commodification of everything and neoliberalism is the most recent political project set up by the economic elite to achieve that goal. The imposition of a strong discourse is required to ensure the successful adoption of neoliberal practices which aim to achieve the expansion of market relations into all areas of social life. The logic of neoliberal capitalism – translated into a commodification of

knowledge – has penetrated deep into the field of Higher Education. It is towards exploring its effects within the University culture that the analysis turns in the next section.

6.2 The Neoliberal Turn in Universities

Universities are not isolated from society. On the contrary, they are active participants in the broader network of power relations in which they are embedded (Heath & Burdon, 2013). In the process of transition from the welfare state to a neoliberal one, universities have been nodes of struggle to impose neoliberal worldviews (Ball, 2015; Connell, 2013, 2015; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020). As anticipated in the previous section, for neoliberalism to become the new 'common sense', the battle has to be won, in part, at the level of ideas. However, that imposition of ideas is never complete. Hegemony must be continuously worked at. Even the kind of knowledge taken as legitimate and imparted in universities represents a constant source of conflict. In his book, *Economics for Sustainable Prosperity*, economist Steven Hail (2018) reflects on what he was taught in his university economics education:

> I learned an economics which normally serves powerful vested interests, albeit often without economists being aware this was the case. It is an economics resting on a set of assumptions which, though demonstrably invalid, were convenient both for the development of particular types of mathematical models, and as a justification for the neoliberal transformation which followed, not only in the USA and the UK, but across most of the world. (p. 2)

As we can see, the imposition of neoliberal ideas is implemented as a comprehensive strategy, starting from the most fundamental levels of production and reproduction of knowledge. This point is eloquently made by Maisuria and Cole (2017), who note that the neoliberal agenda for universities explicitly assumes that the role of such institutions should concentrate on developing

> […] specific capacities in the next generation of workers, such as entrepreneurialism and a competitive spirit, to reproduce neoliberal capitalist relations of production and an

> ideological agenda for and in education (i.e. 'for' education to be a neoliberalism enterprise in its operation and outlook, including the possibility of it being fully privatized, and 'in' education to prepare workers for neoliberalism). (p. 605)

This section explores the consequences of the neoliberal turn within universities, however, before turning to that task, it is important to bring attention to the fact that the neoliberal strategies, as everyday experienced by academic and professional staff, are indications of the deeper mechanisms that were exposed in the previous section. Following Harvey (2014), it is crucial to recognise "the general possibility that we are often encountering symptoms rather than underlying causes and that we need to unmask what is truly happening underneath a welter of often mystifying surface appearances" (p. 8).

In that regard, Sotiris (2012) explains that the neoliberal turn in universities involves more than the "radical proposition that capitalist social relations of exploitation are being directly reproduced within academia" (p. 118). In addition to the fact that universities have become a source of capital accumulation and a tool to discipline labour power, he claims that the neoliberal turn in universities should be understood "as the condensation of class strategies related to the imperatives of hegemony in a period of capitalist restructuring and deterioration of the balance of forces between capital and labour" (Sotiris, 2012, p.118). As a general political project, those class strategies are not limited to the economic realm. As the previous section advanced, they also involve ideological and political tactics to achieve and maintain consensus, or at least compliance. The fact that the opening to the market logic has been accompanied – as this section will show – by an implementation of strict forms of control and surveillance of academic labour, is evidence that the neoliberal turn in universities transcends a mere economic purpose. It also involves strategies directed towards the production and reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities. It is in the sense proposed by Sotiris (2012) that the present study assumes the process of neoliberalisation of universities:

> (…) we can use the notion of the entrepreneurial university, provided that we treat it as a reference to a complex process of adjustment to capitalist imperatives and not as simply the transformation of Universities into actual corporations. Consequently, in our defence of education as a public good, we must focus our criticism on all aspects of these strategies, not only economic, but also political, ideological and distributive. (Sotiris, 2012, p. 121)

In that complex adjustment to capitalist demands, universities have been, as already stressed, used as channels to disseminate the neoliberal project. At the same time, they have incorporated the values and the logic of the market into their own structures and practices (Ball, 2015; Davies, 2005; Lynch, 2006). The market-driven logic has been translated into the idea that universities should function to advance private interests over public interests (Giroux, 2014). The assimilation of the neoliberal rationality "changes the nature of the university" as well as the purpose of academic work (Maisuria & Helmes, 2020, p. 15). Consequently, higher education today is increasingly commodified. It is well documented that the outcomes of its research and teaching are, more and more, seen as products for purchase and market consumption (Connell, 2013; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005; Wadham et al., 2007).

Simultaneously, 'audit technologies' have been implemented as ways of creating standardized and docile workers (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 9), transforming them into manipulable beings willing to become exactly the kinds of subjects demanded by the neoliberal administration. Sotiris (2012) captures the kind of labour power created by neoliberalism in a powerful way by affirming that it should be "a labour force more skilled but having fewer rights, more productive but also more insecure, over-qualified and at the same time underpaid" (p. 121). We could confidently describe this as the process of *proletarianization*, anticipated by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto as a feature of the historical development of capitalism (Banfield et al., 2016; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020).

The cultural life of the university has also been dramatically neoliberalised over the course of the

past decades. Australian higher education, for instance, has undergone several consecutive waves of changes in the past 30 years:

> (…) [M]assification during the 1980s, marketisation in the early 1990s, corporatisation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and a fourth wave from 2003 to 2007 marked by increased managerialism, greater efficiencies, compliance, quality and research measurements. (Ryan, 2012, p. 4)

The implementation of these strategies, in Australia and globally, has seriously affected the lives of academic workers. In terms of governance, the appointment of managers, usually from the corporate world, combined with a growing pressure to achieve ever increasing standards of productivity, has brought to the academics' lives a sense of 'constantly living to perform' (Lynch, 2010). In this 'toxic environment' (Smyth, 2017), the collective voice of academics becomes hushed and they are 'reduced to workers instructed from above' (Ryan, 2012, p. 5).

Working under unceasing scrutiny brings a deep sense of 'ontological insecurity' closely connected with a 'loss of a sense of meaning' (Ball, 2015). The permanent audit and surveillance are strategies aimed at nullifying human agency:

> Students are reduced to test scores, future slots in the labor market, prison numbers, and possible cannon fodder in military conquests. Teachers are reduced to technicians and supervisors in the education assembly line – 'objects' rather than 'subjects' of history. This system is fundamentally about the negation of human agency, despite the good intentions of individuals at all levels. (Lipman, 2004, p. 179).

Academics' workloads have soared (Brown et al., 2010; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005). The increased number of students combined with the burden of being under constant supervision and the pressure to 'publish or perish', or the most recent 'collaborate or crumble' (Matchett, 2015), are contributing factors to unmanageable workloads (Ryan, 2012). At the same time, new cohorts of the academic labour force are facing a process of constant casualization and precarization (Brown et al., 2010; Connell, 2013). This encourages 'cut-throat competitiveness' (Maisuria & Helmes, 2020, p. 16) among colleagues. A growing 'culture of compliance' is arising as

a result (Lynch, 2010), where both the spirit and possibility of collective action are dampened. Moreover, the reduction in the number of administrative positions, in seeking 'cost reduction' and 'improved efficiency', has translated into what one of the interviewees referred to as 'administrivia'. This means that the administrative work is, more and more, done by the academic staff, taking an insidious amount of time out of their working hours. As Harvey explains, in relation to what he calls 'weapons of mass distraction' ideated to kidnap our attention from more vital tasks:

> Capitalist economic rationality is difficult if not impossible to refute when people's lives, mental processes and political orientations are taken up and totally absorbed either in the pseudo busy-work of much of contemporary production or in the pursuit of alien consumerism. Getting lost in our emails and on Facebook is not political activism. (Harvey, 2014, p. 158)

In terms of teaching practices, neoliberalism has also had great impacts. Higher education is compelled to produce neoliberal subjects through particular pedagogical strategies (Clegg, 2010, p. 354). To be a 'neoliberal subject' is to be an "individual who is morally responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculations grounded on market-based principles to the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests" (Hamann, 2009, p. 37). By focusing only on the rational aspects of the human experience, neoliberalism reduces education to only one dimension, rendering human beings "increasingly powerless to act and reduc[ing] them to only behave" (Bai, 2006, p. 8). The purpose of teaching fades, constraining the spaces for activism in the classrooms.

The fact that universities have deeply assimilated the neoliberal logic translates as a source of cognitive dissonance (Ryan, 2012), especially for the academic worker:

> The single most important feature of neoliberal government is that it systematically dismantles the will to critique, thus potentially shifting the very nature of what a university is and the ways in which academics understand their work (Davies & Bansel,

2010, p. 5).

Within the overall neoliberal project of reshaping the role of universities and the meaning of the academic work, the issue of academic freedom emerges as problematic (Miller, 2019). As the previous section discussed, neoliberalism entails a certain view of the human person and the 'good' society. According to the neoliberal dogma, the human person is one that finds its dignity and freedom solely within the confines of the markets, and a 'good' society is, therefore, one that protects the freedom of the market at all cost. Logically, the push towards the commodification of knowledge in higher education finds academic 'freedom' restricted within the boundaries of what the market regards as valuable, i.e. competing for publications in top journals, battling against each other for research funds, working an impossible number of hours to keep up with the metrics, among other survival strategies. In this context of exacerbated individual competitiveness, the freedom to reach out in search of solidarity, organisation, and political action against the oppressive structures of the marketized university becomes overshadowed by the fear of losing one's source of material sustenance (Banfield et al., 2016; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020). By adjusting to the neoliberal logic, universities take the path that, according to Whyte (2019a, Section 2, para. 5), human rights Non-Government Organizations took: that of defending "the same (anti)-political virtues the neoliberals attributed to the market: restraining political power, taming violence, and facilitating a margin of individual freedom". This orientation, as Whyte continues to explain, results in making these institutions "both reluctant and unsuited to challenge the structural and impersonal effects of market processes" (Whyte, 2019a, Section 2, para. 6). The analysis of the negative effects that the neoliberal turn is having on academic freedom led Maisuria and Helmes (2020) to conclude that "[t]he culture and ethos that is being generated is dystopian" (p. 26).

Against this background, Smyth and Hattam (2000) suggest that academics find themselves simultaneously pushed towards opposite directions. On the one side, academics, especially those who see themselves as public intellectuals, have a passionate commitment to question the social processes and discourses that are shaping the institutions and the society they live in. Because these processes and discourses are "increasingly oppressive, undemocratic and less than dialogical" (Smyth & Hattam, 2000, p. 167), academics feel a strong urge to unmask and subvert the underlying mechanisms and causes of neoliberalism. But, on the other hand, they also feel the urge to pursue a successful career by securing research grants and contributing to elevating the prestige of the institution they work for (Smyth & Hattam, 2000, p. 167). This tension represents another ongoing source of stress for academics.

The neoliberal project (as a TINA formation) sits as a barrier to human flourishing. While the former aims to rule, oppress and divide, the latter demands freedom, creativity and interconnection. The effects of this contradiction are profound, especially at the level of the embodied personality. Not only is the academic culture debilitated (Ryan, 2012), but the physical and mental health of academics are also damaged. Feelings of frustration, alienation, and unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress are being reported increasingly by academic workers (Berg, Huijbens, & Larsen, 2016; Hall, 2014; Lesnik-Oberstein et al., 2015; Lynch, 2010; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020; Ryan, 2012). Not surprisingly, academia boasts one of the highest incidences of mental illness when compared with other professions (Lau & Pretorius, 2019).

When presented on their own, the structural and cultural contexts of academic activism look daunting. This is one of the common pitfalls of many sociological accounts: to offer a one-sided account of the issues around structure and agency (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). The focus tends to be on the side of the structural constraints and struggles, ignoring the powers, capacities and

possibilities of individual and collective agents (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). From a critical realist vantage point, these one-dimensional analyses disregard any account of the capacities and powers of agents, while favouring detailed descriptions of the power of structures. In this way, the bridge between structure and agency collapses. Critical realism, as seen in Chapter 5, offers a different perspective, where human agents "although they are everywhere in chains, have the resources and capacities to build a sustainable planetary sociosphere of free flourishing" (Hartwig, 2016, p. 248). The following section draws on this critical realist perspective to present a different approach to the study of academic activism.

6.3 Academic Activism

The scope and impact of the neoliberal political project is vast and deep. The extent to which it has infiltrated social institutions and seeped to the very core of individual subjectivities has been well documented (Ball, 2015; Banfield et al., 2016; Berg et al., 2016; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020; Zipin & Brennan, 2003). In fact, the neoliberalisation of universities has been so damaging that some authors have suggested that neoliberalism is turning academic workers into zombies (Ryan, 2012).

According to Ryan (2012), the image of zombies, or the undead, is suitable to describe the deceptive submissive behaviour of academics in the face of the neoliberal onslaught on universities. Different strategies of adaptation and resistance are adopted by academics to cope with the paralysing effects of the neoliberal turn. Most of those strategies are limited to individual tactics of self-preservation (Ryan, 2012) and – apparently – do not imply any attempt to change or actively resist the current circumstances. Collective action is the less popular of the choices among academics (Ryan, 2012, p. 9). For Bronwyn Davies and Eva Bendix Petersen (2005), neoliberalism hinders collective resistance in universities 'by persuading each individual academic to treat the

effects of neoliberalism as personal successes, responsibilities and failings rather than as a form of institutional practice in need of critique and transformation' (p. 77). The failure to plan and implement individual and collective strategies for resistance is, thus, an unequivocal indication of the effects of the neoliberal turn in universities.

Despite its undeniable victories, the neoliberal project, as Connell (2010) explains, faces very solid limits too. Like any other social and political project, neoliberalism relies on "alliances and the temporary solution of cultural tensions" (p. 35). In this sense, it is vulnerable to any change in the coalitions that sustain its fragile legitimacy. For instance, the increasing social awareness around environmental issues, like global warming, is a threat to neoliberalism's historical destructive impulse. Secondly, the fact that neoliberalism has colonised so many areas of life is a double-edged sword: it also creates multiple battlefronts to confront neoliberalism and, hopefully, turn it back. Thirdly, in parallel to the growth and expansion of international trade, the deepening of social and economic inequalities has become a source of increasing tensions and conflicts on a global scale. Finally, the process of commodification meets impermeable edges when it tries to infiltrate human relationships: the ontological needs of mutual love, care and trust are irreplaceable in human interactions (from romantic love and educational encounters to economic transactions) and signify "irreducible barriers to the expansion of competitive individualism" (Connell, 2010, p. 36).

These limits described by Connell are, according to Harvey (2014), inherently related to the contradictions at the root of capitalism. Those contradictions represent theory–practice inconsistencies (Bhaskar, 2002a, p. 16), as was discussed earlier in this chapter regarding TINA formations. It is in moments of acute contradiction that capitalism "appears peculiarly vulnerable" (Harvey, 2014, p. 11) to human activism, and opportunities for resistance and change abound. To

succeed, the mobilization of individual and collective agency becomes imperative.

First though, it is important to understand and reconceptualise what is involved in the practice of activism. In the academic field, it is crucial to recognize that the notions 'academic' and 'activist' are socially constructed and, therefore, contested. As such, they are subject to change and re-definition. In the present section, the focus is on revising the different approaches to academic activism, the attempts to re-conceptualise it and the gaps that are yet to be addressed. The section begins by analysing the epistemological 'state of the art' and then moves to compare it with the ontological reality of academic activism. In this way, light will be shed on the distance between the conceptual representations of activism and the reality of its praxis. Or, to put it in critical realist words, how distant the transitive dimension of our knowledge is from the intransitive dimension of reality (see Chapter 2). The focus then moves, in the subsequent section, to expose some of the missing dimensions of activism in order to enrich the analysis and begin to close those gaps.

From an epistemological standpoint, the expression 'academic activism' is pulled in contradictory directions. The word 'academic' is seen as purely theoretical, formal and unpractical knowledge whilst 'activism' refers to what is given to outward action (R. Martin, 2009). There appears to be tacit agreement, within academic circles, that activist work is not intellectual (Blomley, 1994). When doing activism, academics are using their 'own time', outside of their work. They are acting as citizens, not as academics.

Outside academia, traditional representations of activism in the media promote dramatic, impulsive and even aggressive forms of activism (I. Maxey, 1999) that are in the antipodes of what an 'academic' should be. Scientists are expected to 'stick to the science' – avoiding any ethical issues – and social scientists are supposed to study structures and offer explanations but not

strategies for action (Flood et al., 2013; Jasper, 2008).

This apparent 'conflict' between theory and praxis, or academia and activism, is based upon a fabricated dichotomy that pretends to establish false frontiers around 'knowledge' in order to devalue any form of intellectual engagement that intends to actively challenge the status quo (G. Martin, 2007; L. Maxey, 2004).

Blomley (1994) was among the first voices to suggest that an alternative model of academic activism should be elaborated: 'one that navigates between the opposed perils of academic elitism and political disengagement' (Blomley, 1994, p. 31). From a critical realist perspective, it could be added that a more realist definition of academic activism is needed, one that aligns with the stratified ontology of social reality and that does not create artificial divisions where there are none (see Chapter 2).

There have been, in fact, attempts to make sense of the ways in which academic work can be combined with activism. According to Flood et al. (2013), for instance, academia can be a site for activism in at least four ways: (i) creation of knowledge which advances social transformation; (ii) developing of research projects which themselves comprise social change; (iii) implementation of progressive pedagogical strategies; and (iv) challenge to the power relations within the University (p. 17).

Young (1999) goes further and claims that activist work is inherent to academic life. He acknowledges that the relationship between academia and activism is not simple. However, the responsibility of academics and intellectuals is to link their work with the transformation of the world and to actively participate in guiding society towards a future where issues like racism, injustice, and inequalities are transcended. In his words:

> The ways in which the world is organized, the value systems according to which its politics are determined, and the institutions that uphold, develop and enforce its practices, are all matters in which academics are involved both in academic and personal terms. (Young, 1999, p. 30)

R. Martin (2009) also stresses the importance of recognising activism as a fundamental component of academic work, especially for the wellbeing of future generations:

> Activist (faculty) voices that question war, foreign policy, and urban reconstruction, or that advocate abolition and reparation, speak comprehensively to the direction of society. These critical inquiries have organizational resonance for related populations and help develop platforms by which people, regardless of where they work or live, can inhabit this world. (…) Clustering these interventions and engagements under the sign of activism may strike some as overly generous or insufficiently rigorous. Yet (…) a generosity of concept toward action oriented outward may be required to overcome the sense of scarcity that otherwise clouds our future. (R. Martin, 2009, p. 844)

The works of Flood et al. (2013), Young (1999) and R. Martin (2009) have been crucial in re-signifying the relationship between academic work and activist. However, all these attempts to re-signify activism remain, somehow, on the surface of academic activism. While the forms of activism proposed by these authors link agency to structural change, agency involves more than social transformation. As previously discussed in this chapter, academic activists are dealing with what critical realists call TINA formations. TINA formations, according to Bhaskar (2016), involve contradictions (cognitive, ontological and functional) at all levels of the social being. Therefore, activism should entail social change encompassed with transformations on the other three planes of the social being. More importantly, it demands reflexivity. As Davies and Bansel (2010) rightly argue, academics need to free themselves up 'to engage in an ethical reflexivity that gives us the insight and the courage to engage in incisive critique, however dangerous that might seem to be' (p. 18).

After all, working, as Gorz (1989) explains, "is not just the creation of economic wealth; it is also always a means of self-creation. Therefore, we must also ask apropos the contents of our work whether the work produces the kind of men and women we wish humanity to be made of" (Gorz,

1989, p. 80). In a capitalist society, Harvey insists, “it is only outside of work that the worker has the possibility to achieve personal fulfilment” and this fact “defines the heart of the contradiction within the labour process” (Harvey, 2014, p. 155). Academic work might have been considered the exception that confirmed the rule, since it provided a source for personal and professional satisfaction. As Chapter 5 anticipated and Chapter 7 will explore in depth, this was the case for most participants in this study, especially for those who had a longer trajectory in academia. However, the commodification of higher education is undermining that relation by producing subjectivities that are submissive to neoliberalism and, therefore, alienated from self.

As advanced in Chapter 5, reflexivity is a complex phenomenon. It comprises more than a mere cognitive process of pondering the pros and cons of a certain course of action. Reflexivity is informed by emotions (Burkitt, 2012). Therefore, reflexivity with its emotional dimension must be taken into account in order to provide depth to the analysis of activism. The following section will address the links between activism, reflexivity, emotions and unactualised possibilities.

6.4 The Missing Links of Activism

Widespread representations of activism – not only in the academy but also in the media and in popular discourses – promote ‘dramatic, physical, ‘macho’ forms of activism with short-term public impacts’ (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 200). The English Oxford Dictionary (2018a), for instance, define activism as “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change”. Activism is, thus, reduced only to actions that can be seen and, somehow, measured.

These representations assume that what needs to be changed belongs solely to the ‘empirical world’, to the world that we perceive with our senses, the world of actions, facts and events. Seeing activism as limited to what happens in street demonstrations or in political bunkers is

assuming a shallow understanding of reality. These views of activism are, finally, functional to the same structures of oppression that they should be standing against:

> Given the scale and depth of oppression and exclusion in this increasingly brutalized and globalized world, reflecting on our minuscule individual contributions could be disempowering, leaving us to shrug our shoulders and reject the whole reflexive challenge (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 206).

In this way, traditional understandings of activism, by focusing on grandiloquent actions, discourage the power of reflexive, transformative, daily practices. Moreover, as seen in Chapters 2 and 5, social reality is structured, emergent and multidimensional. The notion of activism should thereby incorporate this fact. From a critical realist perspective of reality, for any phenomenon to manifest at the level of the empirical, causal mechanisms should have been actualised previously at the other two levels – the real and the actual. To tackle any issue that is empirically manifest, deeper and more proactive strategies to activate causal mechanisms at the real and actual levels are needed. These strategies may need to be equal to or even more effective than dramatic, impulsive and short-term forms of activism.

Among those strategies, reflexivity – as a distinctive human power used to examine our own place in the reproduction and/or transformation of the world (see Chapter 5) – becomes an essential dimension of activism. Moreover, not only is reflexivity a crucial part of the process of actively co-creating reality, it is, in contemporary societies, an historical necessity. In her book *The reflexive imperative in late modernity*, Archer (2012) argues that in times when the contradictions of capitalism are acute, and uncertainty and rapid change become the norm, reflexivity becomes an inescapable necessity to existing in this world.

6.4.1 Towards Reflexive Activism

By questioning traditional representations of activism as a dramatic but short-termed enterprise

and embracing a broader and subtler notion of activism, the whole task may look humbler but also more do-able and capable of producing long lasting effects. Drawing on critical theory (feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism and queer theory) and on Gandhi's tradition of Satyagraha (a process involving ongoing reflection and practice), I. Maxey (1999) offers a different perspective on activism:

> (T)his approach emphasizes the contingent, ongoing nature of activism, placing it within a wider process of seeking spiritual, political and moral unity (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 200).

Maxey's understanding of activism coheres with a critical realist view of social transformation requiring action on several planes. In Bhaskar's words:

> Most projects of trying to build a better society have been oriented to action *only on the plane of social structures*. (…) Transformation on the plane of social structure and in particular the abolition of master-slave-type relations is of course essential, but it needs to be complemented by equal attention to the other three planes. (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 164)

With such a multi-planar understanding of action for social change, I. Maxey (1999) reminds us that reality is constantly produced and reproduced through each social agent and, proposes a different approach to activism:

> Everything we do, every thought we have, contributes to the production of the social world. I understand activism to be the process of reflecting and acting upon this condition. We are in a sense all activists, as we are all engaged in producing the world. Reflexivity enables us to place ourselves actively within this process. (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 201)

Here we see emphasis on the production and reproduction of the social world being enacted by consciously engaged human agents. In this sense, Maxey is able to claim that 'we are all activists'. However, this is only true in potential. It is safe to say that not all people, at all times, realise or enact their activist capacity. It is the choice to position ourselves *reflexively* in the world that has the potential to activate causal mechanisms for social change that are present in every human being.

In this way, activism is not something to engage with every now and then when opportunities arise in a timely manner. On the contrary, the conception of *reflexive activism* gives rise to an understanding of activism as an ongoing process in which reflexivity opens the possibility to question and challenge the illusory and oppressive demi-reality imposed upon social life. Moreover, instead of discouraging action, it enhances real praxis through understanding the potential of 'small', but reflexive, actions.

Some important implications derive from this conception of reflexive activism. First, in the same way that the notion of activism should be put to question and reformulated, the traditional understandings of reflexivity should go through the same critique. Reflexivity, like activism, may also conceal relations of power and domination (I. Maxey, 1999). As seen in previous sections, neoliberal theory–practice contradictions (TINA formations) permeate all levels of the social being, including the level of the embodied personality. In that sense, reflexive activism should involve a process of self-transformation, where we examine and question the social relations (of class, gender, race, etc.) which we are caught up in, not just as workers, but also as family and community members (Cox & Nilsen, 2014, p. 188).

A second consequence of this approach is the challenge to traditional binaries and divisions, everywhere present in social sciences. The artificial oppositions between theory and practice, reasons and emotions, or academia and activism, are conceptual illusions that separate us from our human essence. Human beings are not zombies or robots. Self-inquiry, emotions, feelings, values are all ontological constituents of our being. Denying that fact, in any circumstance, implies the denial of our humanity.

Reflexive activism, on the contrary, is experienced as a continuum throughout a person's life because it does not recognise boundaries. Uncovering, resisting and transforming structures of

oppression and domination is something that should be done on external structures, such as neoliberalism, and on internalised structures, such as our own inner assumptions and values (L. Maxey, 2004): on a macro scale, as when exercising the right to vote, and on a micro scale, as when relating with our selves, friends and family.

Finally, by putting reflexivity at the core of agential actions, Maxey's understanding of reflexive activism enhances the role of personal agency and its subjective, embodied processes. In his words:

> Paradoxically, activism under this interpretation often starts from a mental rather than physical process. By actively and critically reflecting on the world and our place within it, we are more able to act in creative, constructive ways that challenge oppressive power relations rather than reinforce them. (I. Maxey, 1999, p. 201)

By acknowledging that mental and physical processes both have causal powers, Maxey takes the realist view that the nature of reality is structured and layered and that all dimensions should be addressed in the praxis of activism. In a similar way, G. Martin (2007) also highlights the relation between self-transformation and activism. Drawing from a Marxian vantage point, G. Martin (2007, pp. 254-255) sees no separation between the individual and the social. His approach resembles Margaret Archer's critical realist position, in that the only possible de-coupling between structure and agency is analytical (see Chapter 5). G. Martin (2007) stresses the importance of self-emancipation as a principal tool for progressive social change. He puts forward the following question: how is it possible to "transform the totality of social relations (property, family and work)?" (p. 254). The answer is found in Marxist dialectics: it is only through involvement at the most deep and embodied level of class struggle, "as complexly registered in the emotions, imaginations, and practices of "real" social actors" (G. Martin, 2007, p. 254). As discussed in Chapter 5, it is in this way that the critical realist assumption that the inner world of human agents is essential to understand and explain activism, begins to gather strength. To put it in Bhaskar's

words:

> The free flourishing of each as a condition for the free flourishing of all involves not only the abolition of the ego, but the *shedding of all heteronomous elements* in the embodied personality, that is, all elements that are inconsistent with one's ground state. […] Hence one could say, paraphrasing the Buddha, that what you should do in your life is seek to become enlightened or *self-realised*, because this is the only thing that you can ultimately do to be sure to have the capacity to achieve; and attaining it is moreover a condition for your maximally efficacious agency in the world. (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 164)

This process of "shedding of all heteronomous elements" or self-liberation is a difficult one. Our inner worlds, as social agents, are complex and structured. Within these inner worlds, it is through reflexivity that decisions are made. The internal dialogues that we all maintain in our heads are the means to negotiate our possibilities and decide on courses for action. The inner conversation is not, however, purely discursive. It continuously juggles emotions, feelings, ideas, judgements, values, and concerns.What is more, without the emotional component, the bridge between thought and action would be non-existent. Emotion is essential for praxis and this idea is not new. Socrates had already observed that "thought alone moves nothing" (Franks, 2006, p. 40). However, emotion remains almost missing from the theorising about activism. The following section will address that gap.

6.4.2 Emotions

Etymologically, emotions are the essential link between thought and action. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2018b), originally the word emotion comes from "the French émotion, from émouvoir 'excite', based on Latin emovere, from e- (variant of ex-) 'out' + movere 'move'" . Emotion clearly denotes movement. It means 'to move', 'to act', to be 'active'. Based on the etymology of the word, it is safe to conclude that emotion is what moves us to action.

From an ontological perspective, the same claim about the influence of emotions in human behaviour has been made. The American sociologist Douglas Massey (2002), after reviewing the

evolution of human societies and human cognition, arrived at the conclusion that the role of emotions is more influential than rationality in what concerns reflexivity:

> (…) because of our evolutionary history and cognitive structure, it is generally the case that unconscious emotional thoughts will precede and strongly influence our rational decisions. Thus, our much valued rationality is really more tenuous than we humans would like to believe, and it probably plays a smaller role in human affairs than prevailing theories of rational choice would have it. (Massey, 2002, p. 25)

Emotions are embedded in every cognitive act. As David Franks (2006) puts it in an article where he brings sociology and neuroscience together: "It is extremely difficult to find an empirical case of pure emotion because in any normal situation, emotion is inseparably intertwined with cognition" (Franks, 2006, p. 39). If that is the case, an analysis of the emotional dimensions of academic activism is essential to understand the whole picture. It is to that task that the current section is dedicated.

In the first two sections of this chapter, the point was made that neoliberalism is affecting the world around us. Especially when it comes to the workplace, the structural changes that neoliberalism encourages have been translated into the working culture as 'audit technologies' aimed at deepening the alienation of human labour. In his analysis of the contradictions in capitalism, Harvey (2014) explains that the alienation from our own human nature affects us at deep ontological levels. He continues to clarify that, among the different meanings of the term 'alienation', there is the psychological interpretation of the term. Alienation, in that sense, can be active or passive:

> As a passive psychological term alienation means to become isolated and estranged from some valued connectivity. It is experienced and internalised as a feeling of sorrow and grief at some undefinable loss that cannot be recuperated. As an active psychological state it means to be angry and hostile at being or feeling oppressed, deprived or dispossessed and to act out that anger and hostility, lashing out sometimes without any clear definitive reason or rational target, against the world in general. Alienated behaviours can arise, for example, because people feel frustrated at the lack of life chances or because their quest for freedom ended up in domination. (Harvey, 2014, p.

152)

From Harvey's analysis, it is clear that the workings of capital go beyond the level of social structures and penetrate deep into our embodied capabilities. In the case of the university, the neoliberal turn pushes constantly to reduce real human agency, or personhood, to mere academic labour through the imposition of managerial practices. To put it in the words of G. Martin (2007):

> With regard to Marx's notion of alienation, the constant reshaping of internal conflicts within our personhood whenever we directly confront the agonizing contradiction between the source of our material privilege and our political convictions is symptomatic of how our lives, work, and consciousness are being "remade" under the negative influence of these capricious forces inside the prison structure of the corporate university. Under this dehumanizing value system, education and pedagogy have been reduced to commodities that are being put forward as instruments to suppress critical thought and creativity. (p. 252)

These violent practices reshape, in a negative way, the emotional landscape of each person and of the institution as a whole. According to recent queer-feminist theories (Burford, 2017), paying attention to the kind of emotional patterns constituted within particular times and places can be a powerful diagnostic tool. The body of work exploring the emotional consequences for academic workers within the neoliberal university has increased significantly in the last two decades (Ball, 2015; Berg et al., 2016; Burford, 2017; Davies, 2005; Bronwyn Davies & Eva Bendix Petersen, 2005; Elizabeth & Grant, 2013; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015; Hall, 2014; Hey, 2011; Kelly, 2015; Kenway, Boden, & Fahey, 2015; Kinman, 2014; Klocker & Drozdzewski, 2012; Lynch, 2010; Smyth, 2017; Sparkes, 2007). These works expose the stress (Kinman, 2014), the anxiety (Berg et al., 2016; Hall, 2014), the fragmentation (Elizabeth & Grant, 2013) and the overall feeling of 'ontological insecurity' (Ball, 2015) that academics experience in their workplaces, under neoliberal rules.

However, understanding that feelings are influenced by the social and cultural context is only half the story. Feelings and emotions are also causal mechanisms that trigger decision-making and social and political practice (Burford, 2017). For that reason, Ahmed (2004) emphasizes that:

> We need to consider how [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psyche and the social, and between the individual and the collective. (p. 119)

In other words, Ahmed (2004) suggests that emotions play a fundamental role in the mediation process between structure and agent, not only because emotions are shaped by the structural and cultural contexts, but also because emotions constitute powerful resources for changing those contexts.

Within the field of activism, some scholars have highlighted the importance of emotions in starting an activist practice and maintaining it throughout time. Askins (2009), for instance, puts it like this: "for me, the role of emotion is central to activism, and I would argue that most accounts of activism touch upon 'sense', 'feeling', that inexplicable desire to 'do something' in some way" (p. 11). Grant and Elizabeth (2015) argue that emotions are more than just a target of neoliberal governmentalities; they also "provide impetus to find creative and enjoyable ways of resisting the depredations of intensified individualism and competition for those whose values and inclinations run in other directions" (p. 299). More recently, Burford (2017) has denounced the unilateral attention given to 'good' or 'strong' feelings like hope, anger and frustration, in triggering activism. He proposes that 'bad' or 'weak' feelings, such as shame, depression and anxiety, are also important in sparking self and social transformation. King (2007) acknowledges a need to educate activists in the recognition of and reflexion on their own emotions, to help them sustain a long-term practice. This instruction, however, should not lose sight of the social and political context as to remain critical and avoid the prevailing tendencies to regulate and pathologize the person. Drawing on the work of Barker, Martin, and Zournazi (2008), Lawless (2017) goes a step further, arguing that activists should consciously and reflexively embody certain emotions and core values as a *prefiguration* of the kind of society they hope for, that is to say, of their concrete utopias (see next section for a thorough development of the concept of *concrete utopianism*). Lawless (2017)

eloquently explains how this works: “if you want a compassionate society because your analysis tells you the current one is alienated and alienating, practice compassion here, now and everywhere” (p. 51). *Prefiguration*, similarly to Maxey’s (1999) notion of reflexive activism, is a kind of emotional work that cultivates *activist wisdom* as a practice embedded in day-to-day work (Barker et al., 2008; Lawless, 2017).

These accounts of the role of emotions for activist practices are recent. Not surprisingly, then, the theoretical developments to make sense of them are limited within the field of sociology. Traditionally, the sphere of the emotional life of the agent has been regarded as a matter of personal incumbency. Because emotions were seen implicitly as irrational and unpredictable, they were not considered to be subject to social rules (Hochschild, 1979). Consequently, emotions were relegated to the fields of biology or psychology and treated only as a matter of individual concern.

That explains the relatively recent emergence of the Sociology of Emotions (SoE) (Olson, McKenzie, & Patulny, 2017; Turner & Stets, 2006; Wettergren, 2017). Broadly, SoE is the study of emotions as historically and socially produced and determined. Despite its short history and the many issues waiting to be theoretically addressed, the SoE has clearly established that, as Turner and Stets (2006) claim, emotions “are what drive people to tear down macrostructures” (p. 48). This claim strongly resonates with the critical realist claim, advanced in the previous chapter, that emotions are powerful generative mechanisms with predispositions towards social action (Lamb-Books, 2016) and, as such, a sine qua non for activism.

In summary, both the emotional and the cognitive dimensions of activism are necessary to give a consistent sociological explanation of activism in general, and of academic activism in particular. In this project, critical realism is used to clear the theoretical grounds and to offer an approach to the study of the inner world of social agents without isolating them from the context in which they

exist. In this regard, Collier (1994) emphasises that, from a critical realist vantage point, self-liberation depends on the underlabouring of our own emotions. In his words:

> The work of personal liberation is a work of transforming one's emotions by means of explanatory critiques of them. As one comes to understand one's emotions better, one can eliminate contradictions and misconceptions of them. This understanding is never achieved by pure 'introspection', for our emotions are what they are because of our interaction with the world. The increase of self-understanding is equivalent to the increase of our powers both to act on the world, and to be affected by it through the senses. (Collier, 1994, p. 185)

We see that, for Collier, our agency to change the world – and to be transformed at the same time – depends on the work we do to liberate ourselves from *heteronomous elements* and, eventually, become *self-realised* (Bhaskar, 2016). In this way, the critical realist approach transcends persisting dualisms (agent/structure, academic/activist, rational/emotional, etc.), paying simultaneous attention to the layered and complex ontology of human agents and to the inner and outer worlds they live in.

Finally, it is important to stress the fact that, in any given context, every person is constantly producing and re-producing the reality around her, regardless of her awareness of that fact. Therefore, reflexive activism is a choice; it is a way of being in the world, a consequence of a reflexive process. As such, it does not rely solely on a cognitive process. It is also intimately related with the emotional world of human beings. Both cognition and emotion are vital components of reflexivity. They form the inner worlds of human beings and are, simultaneously, cause and effect of the social world. They are also a contested terrain: a battlefield where human and anti-human forces fight to prevail. Reflexive activism occurs in a place that has subjective ontological reality but is invisible at the empirical level. The conclusion can be drawn, then, that there is much more to activism than what meets the eye.

6.4.3 Concrete Utopianism

A final missing element in the conceptualisation of activism is related to the idea that the impetus to subvert current oppressive social structures needs to be supported by "visions of utopia as feasible" (Maisuria, 2018, p. 438). As Maisuria emphasises, "[…] promoting a belief in the feasibility of alternatives to the neoliberal class-based status quo is probably the greatest task for critical educators and activists for social justice" (Maisuria, 2018, p. 437)

To close the circle around the absent links of academic activism, Cvetkovich's work on public feelings is instructive (Cvetkovich, 2012). Cvetkovich brings together the necessary elements to make an argument for a different conception of activism. She outlines a conception that, on the one side, recognises the complexity of the reality to be transformed and, on the other side, the potential of small, conscious actions. Accordingly, social transformation is described as:

> (…) a slow and painstaking process, open-ended and marked by struggle, not by magic bullet solutions or happy endings, even the happy ending of social justice that many political critiques of therapeutic culture recommend. It suggests that when asking big questions about what gives meaning to our lives, or how art or politics can promote social justice or save the planet, *ordinary routines* can be a resource. The revolution and utopia are made there, not in giant transformations or rescues. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 80) (Emphasis added).

Among those *ordinary routines*, Cvetkovich includes creative and spiritual practices such as knitting, writing and painting, or practising yoga, meditation or running. They are viewed as embodied responses to the feelings of alienation, spiritual despair and political depression that are so common in academia nowadays, as advanced in previous sections.

Cvetkovich's understanding of ordinary routines as a resource for activism resembles L. Maxey (2004) conception of reflexive activism as a continuum during a person's life history, rather than activism being regarded as vigorous but sporadic actions. This way of re-signifying activism allows for the ongoing reflexivity necessary to achieve coherence throughout all planes of the social

being. This coherence is, in turn, a powerful strategy to recognise and overturn the ubiquitous contradictions of TINA formations, widely spread in neoliberal academia and in the social world in general.

More importantly, Cvetkovich's contribution resonates with the critical realist notion of *concrete utopianism* (Bhaskar, 1993, 2016) as a fundamental step on the way to a better society where human "flourishing in freedom" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 9) is the predominant paradigm. According to Bhaskar (2016), concrete utopianism refers to:

> [A]n exercise that invites us to think how we could better deal with a constraint or a necessity with a given set of resources. It is grounded in dispositional realism, the idea that possibilities as well as their actualisations are real. From this perspective the actual is only one (contingent) instance or manifestation of the real, and other, different and better manifestations of it are possible. (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 93)

In turn, Cvetkovich concludes her ideas on activism and concrete utopianism by saying that:

> The *utopia of ordinary habit* would be a version of Avery Gordon's "usable utopia", a utopia of the "here and now" that is "oriented toward the future" but "doesn't treat the future as either an off-world escape or a displacing fetish," as do the forms of utopia often found in the otherworldly exoticisms of science fiction and colonialist dreams. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 191)

Both authors seem to concur in assigning concrete utopianism a fundamental role in the activist job of underlabouring for a better society. According to Bhaskar, concrete utopianism serves the invaluable function of "constructing models of alternative ways of living on the basis of some assumed set of resources, counterbalancing actualism and informing hope" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 395). Bhaskar first introduced the notion of concrete utopianism in *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993) and developed it with the central DCR concept of *absence*. As Norrie (2010) explains, absence is implied in the ethical dialectics of agency "as the absenting of constraints upon freedom" (p. 15). Concrete utopianism – as the exercise of imagining what real possibilities are implied in the world, although not yet actualised (Norrie, 2010) – is what informs and sustains

activism.

In a recent attempt to operationalise the concept of concrete utopia, Archer (2019) asks the question: what characteristics should utopia possess to be considered 'concrete'? She then proceeds to offer a set of criteria to distinguish a concrete[13], and thus possible, utopia, from an unreal or impossible one. Those criteria are: (i) it should identify the real, but maybe not yet actualised, possibilities inherent in a specific situation, i.e. what could be achieved if a limit is imposed on the capacity of private individuals to accumulate money?; (ii) it is underpinned by dispositional realism (see Chapter 2): in Archer's words, here "real means realizable" (Archer, 2019, p. 240) and that is the main difference between concrete utopias and plain fantasies, i.e., imposing a limit to wealth is indeed realizable; (iii) concrete utopias depend on human agency to be actualised, i.e. strong collective political agency is needed for such possibility to become realised[14].

Interestingly, Archer claims that meta-reflexives (see Chapter 5), although well positioned as possible agents of social change, lack concrete utopias to guide their praxis (Archer, 2019). In Chapter 7 the case will be made that, at least for the type of activists interviewed for this project, concrete utopianism appeared as a fundamental and ongoing practice in their *modus vivendi*.

13 It is important to note that Archer is talking about concrete utopias and not what some authors (like Erik Olin Wright) refer to as 'real' utopias. It might seem strange that a critical realist is not advocating for real utopias, but it is not. She is emphasizing the point that Wright's realism is, in fact, actualism. The ultimate purpose of operationalizing concrete utopias is to reveal, precisely, that critical realist utopias are 'concrete' because they are based on what is real, not just actual. They are, thus, able to allow for novelty and, in this way, to inform hope (Archer, 2019).

14 A very interesting exercise on concrete utopianism that fulfils the three criteria suggested by Archer can be found in the Epilogue to Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Harvey, 2014).

6.5 Summary

In this chapter, neoliberalism as a structural lived reality for academics has been outlined. On a macro level, neoliberalism is understood as a political project where discourses of human dignity, individual freedom and free market competition occlude a material reality of exploitation, oppression, and alienation. The result of these contradictions has been explained with reference to the critical realist concept of TINA formations, namely, theory–practice inconsistencies at all levels of the social being. At the meso level, it was argued that the neoliberalisation of universities demands the making of a new kind of neoliberal academic through a transformation of the workplace into a space where individualism, competition, commodification and performativity are the new rules of the game. In turn, this impacts individual academics as they resist (or accept) this re-making of their academic identity and their being. As the review of the literature outlined in this chapter revealed, this has had a generally negative impact on the wellbeing of academics, with increasing levels of insecurity, anxiety and depression being noted. At the same time, the spaces for creativity, freedom and connection with fellow human beings are fading, and so too, any impulse towards individual and collective action.

Against this backdrop, the common understanding of academic activism was re-considered. By acknowledging the stratified and intentional ontology of human agents, the role of reflexivity, emotions, and concrete utopianism in the transformation of social forms was brought to the foreground. In this way, it was possible to move towards a more realist understanding of the inner causal mechanisms of activism. Bringing a new light to exploring the reality of activism is fundamental because, as Sue Clegg (2005) explains:

> If we want to theorize about change in education we need a theory that can account for the selves who make choices as academic workers and students, how we engage in constant internal and social debate about the conditions of practice, and how we should

> act to resist, restructure and preserve aspects of the complex system called higher education (p. 153).

With the explicit intention, then, to 'account for the selves who make choices as academic workers', the notion of reflexive activism was proposed. Reflexive activism understands the practice of activism not as sporadic episodes but as a continuum throughout a person's life. Since TINA formations are intertwined in all planes of the social being, uncovering, resisting, and transforming these theory–practice inconsistencies is a task better conceived as a routinised, but reflexive, habit.

Drawing on the critical realist elements so far exposed, the following chapter takes on the task of exploring plausible answers to the research questions guiding this study.

CHAPTER 7: GROUNDING ACTIVISM

The most general goal of critical realist philosophy is enhanced reflexivity or transformed practice (or both). (Bhaskar, 2016)

As previously outlined, this research is about the conditioned capacities of academics *to be* activists. In broad terms, its intent has been to bring critical realism to an exploration of the relation between academic reflexivity and the possibility of transformative practice. This chapter works to the partial fulfilment of that intent. It presents the interpretation of the project's empirical data. To this end, it is useful to recall the guiding research question:

- *What kinds of reflexive capacities do academic activists possess and draw upon in their activist work?*

Further, to operationalise the above, four interrelated sub-questions were identified:

- *What are the objective conditions that allow the emergence of activist dispositions in academics?*
- *What is the subjective configuration of concerns that lead academics to adopt activism as a significant practice within their modus vivendi?*
- *What subversive values do academic activists bring to their practice?*
- *Do academics consider the transformation of their own subjectivities a main concern in relation to activism?*

The method of presentation in this chapter follows a temporal, morphogenetic consideration of the data. The four operationalising questions frame past, present and future time. The first section deals with *past* structural constraints and enablements that shaped participants' early lives. The

goal is to identify some of the mechanisms that triggered activist dispositions. The second section addresses the daily struggles of scholar activists by highlighting their *present* **concerns → projects → practices →** (Chapter 5). Taken together, the concerns, projects, and practices of agents constitute their *modus vivendi* (Archer, 2003). Throughout this section, the participants' core values guiding their activism as well as their understanding of self-transformation are discussed. The third section, in turn, considers the participants' perceptions of the *future* in the light of concrete utopianism (Chapter 6). Finally, the fourth section offers a possible explanation for some reflexive capacities identified in the internal conversations of the participants that are not fully addressed in Archer's taxonomy of reflexive modes (Archer, 2003) (Chapter 5).

7.1 The past conditionings of the emergence of reflexive activism

In this first section, attention is drawn to the past conditionings of the participants' early life experiences or, in other words, the social contexts into which they were born. In particular, it deals with the enablements and constraints that are part of the conditioning process which "involves both objective impingement and subjective reception" (Archer, 2019, p. 251).

This section addresses, first, those objective conditions that relate with positive social enablements, present in the stories of all participants, nurturing a key ontological mechanism: 'recognition' or primal engagement with ground state. As will be shown, recognition awakens in the person a strong sense of agency and, at the same time, a knowledge of profound inter-connection with other human and non-human beings.

The section then explores how, once recognition has triggered the sense of agency and interconnection in a person, social constraints, injustices and inequities are met with an understanding that what needs to be changed belongs, primarily, to the social context and not to

the person. In this way, neoliberal narratives based on ideas of meritocracy, individualism and competence, encounter solid limits and strong critique.

As the Morphogenetic portraits presented in Chapter 4 showed, from the infinite interactions that a person has during his or her life, only a few become significant for enabling that person's sense of agency. The encounter with a caring and loving human being is one of those. Significantly, all participants mentioned either a parental figure or a teacher (or both) as key figures who triggered their dispositions to activism. As we have seen in Chapter 4[15], Thomas acknowledged the privilege to have had a 'good social architecture' around him, because that architecture represents the scaffolding of the person he is today. Thomas' reference to the 'social architecture' speaks of the structural enablements that were significant in building his identity.

For James, the fact that his father recognised him, and his siblings, as 'actualised' human beings and had with them 'explicit conversations about what he was thinking or reflecting upon' taught him about self-worth and helped build his reflexive capacities. In Grace's story it was also her father who, by paying "careful attention" to his daughter, showed her that she was loved and cared for.

Anthony's mother's trust in his intrinsic capacities provided a fertile ground for the fulfillment of his goals. She made sure to constantly reminding Anthony that he was 'intelligent' and the he 'was going to go to university'. The message she intended to convey to her son, i.e. that he was worthy and capable, remains with him today as he is asked to identify the origin of his activist dispositions. The same happened between Emma and her mother, who explicitly told her 'if you

15 This chapter will draw on fragments of participants' interviews presented in Chapter 4. In this way, participants' experiences will be interweaved with the 'new context of ideas' (See Appendix A) outlined in Chapters 5 and 6.

make it there, you can make it anywhere!'. Later in life, Emma encountered a high school teacher who, by showing care and respect for his students, was 'planting seeds' of recognition and using 'education as a vehicle for social transformation'.

These stories indicate that participants consciously connected the attention (Grace), respect (James), care and love (Emma, Anthony) they received in the early years of their lives with their current dispositions to be activists. What must the world be like for that connection between early life experiences with significant adults, such as parents and teachers, and the making of future activists to be possible?

To explicate a critical realist understanding of love and care, it is useful to briefly note the work of Alex Honneth (2008) that sets love and care as the basis for what he refers to as 'recognition'. From a developmental perspective, a child is only able to gather knowledge from the world once she first emotionally identifies herself with a figure of attachment. For Honneth, recognition is prior to, and essential for, a later cognitive relation with the social world. He understands that, in social interactions, "recognition and empathetic engagement necessarily enjoy a simultaneously genetic and categorial priority over cognition and the detached understanding of social facts" (Honneth, 2008, p. 124). Bhaskar would agree, with qualification. He situates Honneth's work as part of "a long line in post-Hegelian philosophy […] that thematises the struggle for *recognition*" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 152) as an expression of the primordial need to have one's own existence valued or recognised by others. However, Bhaskar points out that there is another post-Hegelian interpretation of the struggle that rests in the master–slave relation:

> … the slave, working hard and objectifying himself in the process of his work, grows stronger (augmenting his transformative capacity or his $power_1$) until he is in a position to overthrow the master and indeed the master-slave (or $power_2$) relation itself… (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 152)

In both cases, the critical realist perspective considers that love, care, and recognition have to be considered alongside conditioning P_2 relations to understand the emergent transformative capacities (G. Banfield, personal communication, October 8, 2020). The explanation for Bhaskar's account on recognition is found in the principle of 'primacy of identity and unity' developed in the PMR, as seen in Chapter 2. In the PMR, Bhaskar adopted the notion of ground-state as underpinning all human practices at the level of the social structures. The ground-state represents the realm of non-duality from where everything that exists come into being. To remind the reader of the earlier discussion, Bhaskar identifies the ground-state qualities of human beings as those of intelligence, creativity, love and capacity for right action among others. The abuse and distortion of those qualities in emergent levels of the social being constitutes the ground for "all our alienation, suffering and ills" (Bhaskar, 2002a, pp. xiii-xiv, pp. xiii-xiv).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of a ground-state of foundational qualities coheres with the emergent and layered structure of reality advanced in basic critical realism. Ground-state is the most basic layer of reality from which all the other layers emerge, including human and non-human beings. All living beings are united at this most basic level. It is the source of "the free, loving, creative, intelligent energy and activity of non-dual states of our being" (Bhaskar, 2002a, p. vii). Because we are all interdependent beings supported by the same ground-state, cooperation, love, and capacity for spontaneous ethical action are the necessary conditions for humans to thrive.

Recognition rooted in love and care at an early age is of fundamental importance for developing the capacity to be in touch with the ground state. In this regard, James' narrative is compelling. He firmly believes on the intrinsic value of 'people', 'human integrity', 'human dignity', 'social justice' and 'love'. This set of beliefs ethically compels him to actively take part as an 'informed and

courageous citizen, family member, person in the world made up of multiple worlds'.

The beliefs and values that guided James' present ethical duties and commitments were sown in the early years of his childhood, as we can recall from James' morphogenetic portrait in Chapter 4: on the one side, through the way in which his father made him part of his own inner debates, as showed earlier in this section; on the other side, through the critical pedagogical practices implemented in Australian education systems in the 70s, when James attended school.

In a similar way, it was through her mother's love and sacrifices during a rather marginalised childhood that Emma had a privileged access to ground-state qualities, particularly a sense of self-worth: 'Mum was also supportive of having me involved in lots of extra-curricular things […]. She worked extra jobs as a cleaner and what-have-you to have me involved'. Also, through the kindness and commitment of her high school teacher, Emma connected with her inner sense of intelligence and capacity for humanly informed ethical action. The seeds of that connection grew strong roots from soils of love, care, and recognition. Emma's self-identity emerged from the interplay of objective impingement and subjective reception. When interviewed, she was actively looking for ways to re-connect with an inner power that she described as 'bigger and broader' than herself. Emma referred to it as a 'collective well of power, [of] creativity and inspiration' and she mentioned meditation, running, spending time in nature and listening to hard core metal, as some of the 'small ways' in which she tapped with that collective well.

Both James' and Emma's stories suggest that having a loving and caring parental figure, coupled with early educative experiences that promote ethical and democratic participation, may be the beginning of a life in which active involvement in creating a better world is the only thinkable option. According to James, opting for silence and fear would 'eat [him] alive'. So, the only viable option he sees is to continue to do what 'he] ha[s] to do'.

The participants' experiences show that early access, through recognition, to their ground-states triggered at least two mechanisms. The first one was a strong sense of P_1 and self-worth underpinning their social agency. The second mechanism related to a yearning to re-connect with the ground-state qualities in themselves and in others. In turn, the ground-state expressed an open and dynamic sense of being and becoming (3L Totality of DCR; see Section 2.3). It denied monovalence (see Chapter 2) and revealed the ethical imperative to subvert the status-quo. As James put it: 'what's the alternative?' Furthermore, from the ground-state emerged a clear sense of the PMR principle of interconnectivity and the importance it registered for grasping that the totality of human capacities comprises more than socially given powers (G. Banfield, personal communication, October 8, 2020).

Having explored the social enablements identified in the participant's accounts, it is important to consider the social constraints they noted. To this end, all participants experienced some form of socio-economic disadvantage during their lives. When asked to reflect upon this, they uniformly stressed it was an important element in the formation of their activism. Grace, for instance, situated a feeling of not belonging: 'I didn't really belong in the church, and I didn't really belong in my mother's world either... and that was not a good feeling', along with a past of poverty at the core of her passion for social justice.

Emma recalled the stigma of growing up in a working-class neighbourhood which was 'much maligned in everyday talk'. For Thomas, having illiterate parents meant a lack of support in his efforts as a student. At the same time, this acted as an impetus to work towards social inclusion because he doesn't want 'others to go through the same hardship'.

Anthony, in turn, recognised that in terms of social mobility he had made good progress. However, his working-class background still allowed him to empathise with the working-class vantage point,

because he ‘can still think like a working-class person’.

Considering the analysis made earlier in this section about social enablements, it can be said that, although the activists had suffered a past of socio-economic struggles, they had also experienced the privilege of being loved and cared for. Combined, both experiences seemed to ‘condition’ a strong commitment with social activism. An under-privileged childhood, with no love or care, may result in depression, unworthiness, self-harm. In other words, it might result in the person blaming herself for the structural settings she was ‘thrown into’ at birth. However, the fact that each enjoyed strong affective relationships, and received love and care in their early years, allowed them to connect with the ground-state qualities in themselves and in others. Therefore, the participants tended to meet social inequalities with a strong sense of self-worth and P_1, leading to an acknowledgment that what is wrong belongs to society and to the internalised P_2 or oppressive social relations within them but not to their human capacities. This perception, in turn, led to a committed action to change those external and internalised oppressive structural relations. Love and care are powerful causal mechanisms that allow the emergence of certain embodied characteristics, like a strong sense of agency and self-worth, counteracting, in this way, the different alienations imposed by social structures. In Bhaskar’s words:

> (…) Ultimately human beings are fine, they are absolutely fine, there is nothing wrong with them, they are beautiful. (…) Some people have even said that we are all enlightened already. It is only this mess that we have on top of it which stops us from realising our enlightenment. (Bhaskar, 2002a, p. 304)

From the analysis made so far on the social contexts of the emergence of activism, it can be said that although all participants showed marked meta-reflexive features, they did not share a past that Archer calls ‘contextual discontinuity’ (Archer, 2003, p. 257), i.e. the lack of stable social and emotional interlocutors in their childhood and youth. Rather, most of them referred to a background of socio-economic disadvantages combined with strong and positive emotional

connections with a parental figure. The participants' experiences highlight the significance of the 'quality' of social relations for fostering a strong sense of agency and self-worth and, therefore, the emergence of progressive social activism instead of entirely 'intra-punitive' (Archer, 2003, p. 258) dispositions. Emerging from their past conditionings, the participants developed a commitment with fundamental concerns and, thus, chose a '*modus vivendi*' through which they faced their present struggles.

7.2 Present struggles: The politics of reflexive activism

The previous section dealt with the formation of participants' reflexivity and sense of agency. This section turns to exploring how participants, through their reflexive activism, faced and acted upon current challenges. Here, what I will call, the 'politics of reflexive activism' are discussed. The expression 'politics of reflexive activism' is taken here to represent the active enactment of the participants' concerns into projects and practices which, taken as a whole, constitute an essential aspect of their *modus vivendi*. The importance of exploring how the participants acted upon their configuration of concerns and values resides, precisely, in that their enactment transformed them into 'active' participants in society.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the *modus vivendi* of a person entails a variable degree of freedom from the social structures inasmuch as they are the consequence of the intentional choices that agents make in order to fulfil a concern. According to Archer, agents engage in intentional courses of action because they - fallibly – believe that by following that particular course of action, instead of others, they realise their concern. The constellation of intentional practices of a person in what forms her *modus vivendi*. Ultimately, the *modus vivendi* constitutes the way in which agents externalises their personal concerns in society(Archer, 2007c, p. 24). Olivia expressed how her *modus vivendi* is echoed in her teaching and researching. She affirmed how 'every decision' she

makes in terms of what readings she includes in the curriculum, which guest speakers she brings to the class, or the kind of research she does, is 'highly political'.

Olivia's words are a clear example of how ultimate concerns may be lived out in her projects and practices. As Chapter 5 noted, the process of prioritising concerns and deciding on courses of action involves the workings of internal conversations emergent from different reflexive modes. Each reflexive mode adopts a unique stance towards society, namely evasive, strategic or subversive. Archer explains that these stances are "generative mechanisms, at the personal level, with the capacities to regulate relations between the personal and her society. In short, they *constitute* the micro-macro link" (Archer, 2003, p. 343). As a meta-reflexive, Olivia was well aware of the importance of consciously using that link to pursue her most pressing objectives.

Beyond Olivia's experience, Chapter 4 showed that every participant had an enhanced capacity for meta-reflexivity as the main way their inner conversations developed. Accordingly, they tended to adopt a 'subversive stance' towards society. The expressions of that subversive attitude were, of course, different for each participant. However, some commonalities were found. All participants showed enacted capacities to: (i) consciously choose courses of actions based on subversive values, such as kindness and care, in order to fulfil their fundamental concerns; (ii) commit to a cause greater than themselves; (iii) adopt self-transformation as an ongoing practice.

In what follows, the ways in which participants exercised the generative mechanisms of reflexivity to influence the micro–macro link and, thus, transform the social contexts in which they participated are highlighted.

7.2.1 Fundamental concerns: Sustaining subversive values

From the analysis of interview data, the participants' constellations of concerns gravitated around

issues of social justice, equity, and fairness. Underlying these concerns were core, subversive, values such as kindness, compassion, and altruism. Together, these concerns and values provided the reasons (i.e. had causal efficacy in) shaping the ways participants chose to make their way through (and make themselves in) the world. In other words, they framed the 'politics of reflexive activism'.

Without exception, participants expressed deep concern about the effects of the neoliberal turn in universities and society more broadly. They all spoke of the practices and values they saw as being imposed on higher education and the fact those were not just at odds with good education but also, and much worse, alien to the fundamental human values to which they were committed. As the process of conforming to capitalist needs (Sotiris, 2012, p. 121) within universities deepened, the alienation was becoming unbearable and they struggled to cope with it. Grace, for instance, found it difficult to 'hold on' to her 'big ideas around transformative learning' in a competitive and efficiency-oriented environment, where the value is put in 'informing business, competition and individualism'. She also encountered that the neoliberal University, where 'you're absolutely being pitted against your colleagues', contradicted her long hold belief that the 'best way to work is collaboratively'.

Emma shared Grace's belief on the importance of cultivating a collaborative work environment. She took this belief even further and maintained that, since we are 'all connected' and 'shaping the social fabric that we share', the neoliberal efforts towards fostering individual competition made no sense. James, in turn, felt that the neoliberal turn had reduced universities to mere 'corporations, run by a CEO', employees to 'just cogs in the machine' and students to 'customers'.

This reduction, as James expressed, impoverishes the meaning and purpose of education and diminishes the socially progressive role of universities. In the same line, Olivia felt that universities'

role is to address ‘really important issues’ such as climate change and wealth inequality. However, Olivia believed that the neoliberal management is trying to ‘turn [universities] into a theme park’ and she considered that attempt an ‘insanity’ that she ‘struggle[s] to deal with’.

Confronted with this reality, participants chose a stance that implied resistance and subversion of the neoliberal forces. Significantly, they resisted this alienating process by – among other strategies – holding to and enacting ground-state values. Those values, like kindness, care and compassion, are subversive because, as Clegg and Rowland (2010) explain, they “cannot be regulated and prescribed” (p. 733). Emma’s affirmation that despite ‘being a woman in a white man’s institution’ no one could ‘colonise’ her thoughts was compellingly illustrative of this stance.

Emma’s words expressed an inalienable confidence in her own judgement and sense of ethics. That confidence, in turn, opened up an inner space where she was free to reflect, think and imagine possibilities. Importantly, that space of reflexivity cannot be ‘colonised’. Olivia’s narrative pointed in the same direction. She considered that human beings’ inner powers for empathy, reflexivity and critical analysis could be directed to those ‘global social forces’ that are ‘undermining democracy’. She was concerned that those human capacities were being ‘stripped out of education’, leaving space only for ‘what robots do’.

We can see how participants held a strong commitment to fundamental human powers and values that they embodied, particularly in the workplace. In their eyes, being stripped of those powers and values meant being reduced to ‘robots’, and that impoverishment should be resisted. The retroductive question becomes, at this point, unavoidable: what must the world be like for the commitment to fundamental human values and capacities to appear in the data so strongly? Hartwig (2016) provides us with a starting point to explore this question. He shares memories about his mother in order to illuminate the critical realist stance on the topic of human values and

capacities. Hartwig describes her as a very simple, country Australian woman, with little formal education. However, or maybe precisely because of that, she was very much in touch with her ground-state and clearly perceived the importance of love and kindness for human flourishing:

> Like many critical realists, she understood that love and trust have priority over reciprocity and exchange and that spirituality, as the deep yearning to transcend alienation and realize unity, is pervasive, though hidden, in everyday life in the demi-real. (Hartwig, 2016, p. 245)

Drawing on this critical realist understanding of reality, Hartwig (2016) explains that some values, like love and trust, are rooted in deeper and more fundamental levels of reality. By contrast, market-driven values, such as profitability and competence, belong to emergent levels. Hartwig refers to those surfacing levels as the 'sociosphere', which consists of "humans and their material, social and cultural structures and infrastructures" (p. 246). The sociosphere emerges from the 'physio-bio-sphere', which is a more fundamental level of reality. All things pertaining to the sociosphere are dependent on human practices and relations and most of them are – at this point in history – based on P_2 or power-over paradigms and are, therefore, illusory and reified. At the same time and for the same reasons, they are temporary and changeable. Kindness, love, and trust, on the other hand, are properties pertaining to the realm of the real, permanent or transcendent level of existence that connects humans with nature. In other words, they are 'transfactual', indicating "a level at which things are really going on irrespective of the actual outcome" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 41).

According to Archer's theory of the MA, people revisit this cyclic process many times in their lives, where they are constantly revising and reflecting on their past, previous, and future life projects. The data emerging from the interviews imply that participants' cyclic and reflexive processes were very much influenced by strong commitments to certain human values when they have been fostered early in life, at the time when the 'continuous sense of self' is developing (see Chapter 5).

The mechanisms activated through the nourishment of these values possess causal powers that transcend time and space limitations and expand and flourish in later stages of life, underpinning personal commitments to different life projects.

In adult life, these people adopted care as a way of being in the world and translated it into their academic life as kindness. Care and kindness are interrelated values, but this analysis will follow Clegg & Rowland's (2010, p. 721) suggestion about the suitability of kindness as a useful concept for thinking about teaching and academic practices. In contrast to the notion of care which involves physical care, kindness is a more versatile concept able to go across public and private concerns.

Clegg and Rowland (2010) reinforce the critical realist perspective of certain values as entailing ontological priority over others. Along with Archer (2000), they see in kindness a natural predisposition, an ontological component of being. Kindness, not surprisingly, has been downgraded and displaced since the times of the Industrial Revolution. Before that, as Adam and Taylor (2012, pp. 37-42) demonstrate, kindness was a central value in public life. With the rise of industrialization and Protestantism, kindness was relegated to the domestic realm and, thus, feminised. As a human virtue, however, kindness extends beyond the private domestic sphere and is built upon a commitment to social justice, embracing critique and possessing always a 'subversive edge' (Adam & Taylor, 2012, p. 37).

The embodied experiences of the participating scholar activists show that, in the face of an increasing imposition of market logic in their working lives, they looked for ways to re-connect with their humanity. This recognition begs the question: what is it to be human? What capacities distinguish persons from social structures and institutions? As the current section suggests, a critical realist analysis of the inner conversations of academic activists shows that foundational

values, like compassion, care and kindness, are part of the answer. Activists reflexively draw upon those qualities to sustain and spread certain values in the worlds around them. Although we tend to associate kindness and compassion with innocence or naivety, there is nothing more politically subversive than 'absenting the absence' of kindness in a world that promotes fierce competition. As the data show, caring and kindness are conscious decisions, they are not innocently made, and they have real impact in the world. Moreover, these values bring the anti-human contradictions of capitalism to the surface of attention. In this way, conscious acts of kindness are a political statement against the dissemination of market values in any given institution. James expressed this powerfully when he claimed that being true to his values implied the 'moral and ethical duty' of participating as an 'active and informed and courageous' agent in the world.

As James' words suggest, knowledge and courage are necessary to take ethically informed actions, particularly in an increasingly coercive workplace. The experiences of academic activists show that they consciously adopted love and care as a way of being in the world and translated them into the academic life as kindness. It is in the human encounters that they found reason and the courage to subvert the current anti-human neoliberal forces taking over Higher Education institutions. Emma, for instance, made it clear that she was not ready to 'walk away from the university' because she could see in the 'human encounters' she held within the institution that 'there's care'; and that gave her hope in that she still has 'some agency' in the way in which she relates to people.

Emma demonstrates how some activists intentionally draw on ground-state values in daily interactions within the oppressive structures of the neoliberal university. P_2 'frameworks of oppression' had not 'managed to kill' the care that kept Emma working at a university for its transformative possibilities. In her role as a teacher, she could witness how, while for some

students the change was immediate and 'the course of their lives' was transformed for good, for others it was like 'planting seeds' because the 'conditions aren't ripe yet'.

Emma's lived experience suggests that scholar activism, when reflexively embodied and practised, acts through a ripple effect. Its commitment with fundamental values expands slowly but widely. It should not be dismissed or underestimated by the fact that it cannot be measured or prescribed. Its power lies precisely there, that is, in the boundless altruism driving the human possibility to think and act selflessly. Despite the claims of neoliberal discourses, the participants' stories show how human persons are capable of pervading every layer of the stratified agency with a sense of altruism by getting involved, as social agents, in projects that are of benefit for the wider society, not just for themselves. That capacity is discussed in the following section.

7.2.2 Projects: Commitment to a cause greater than the self

As social agents (see Section 5.5.2), we all have a set of inexorable concerns arising from our participation in the three orders of natural reality, namely, nature, practice and society. These orders of reality are respectively related with matters about our physical health, performative skills and social self-worth. All social agents, as Archer explains, need to establish relatively successful practices at each level to be able to function in the world. At the same time, social agents, throughout their reflexive deliberations, prioritise and accommodate those concerns and practices in different ways (Archer, 2003, pp. 148-150).

The distinguishing characteristic of meta-reflexives is, in this respect, the need to invest themselves in projects where they feel they can align their concerns with the fundamental values that guide their existence. As Archer claims, meta-reflexives are "idealists" (Archer, 2003, p. 258), therefore they are ready to quit when they feel that the project they are investing in does not fully

express their fundamental values. What they are not willing to do is to negotiate their values and ideals. However, since they are not loners or individualists, they are also constantly looking for a context and a kindred human group where they find the support they need to develop their projects (Archer, 2003, p. 278). In this sense, all participants appeared to have found that supportive environment in the academic life. It was their jobs that gave a sense of meaning to participants' lives. Emma wanted to be an academic because she saw it as 'a pathway' where she potentially could 'do some good in the world'. For Thomas, it was what he called a 'passion' and a 'purpose' to 'inspire others'. William, in turn, wanted to contribute his 'creative intelligence towards something purposeful in life'.

Interestingly, participants believed that the role of the academic was intrinsically related to being an activist, particularly in the current neoliberal context. It was in that association, more than in any other factor, that they found that sense of purpose and the alignment between their jobs and their most fundamental values. James believed that 'the very central premise of being an academic' should be that activism is 'part of the job description'. Otherwise, he claimed, the 'wisdom', the 'knowledge' and the 'expertise' of academics are 'wasted'. In the same line, Olivia considered that the role of academics was to 'do justice' or to 'find ways to work towards justice for others' and, in that sense, she claimed that 'activism is inevitable'.

The stories collected here support Archer's claim that meta-reflexives devote themselves to projects that contribute to the alignment of values and concerns. However, they also show that participants were involved in projects that transcended individual matters of physical health, performative skills and self-worth. All modes of reflexivity, as described by Archer, are focused on aligning their concerns with projects that redound in self-benefit. Communicative reflexives' sense of well-being depends, for instance, on maintaining stability in their social world, to the degree

that they are willing to evade personal upward mobility in order to achieve the desired steadiness in their surrounding social circles. Autonomous reflexives, in turn, choose involvement in strategic projects, "riding the enablements and circumventing the constraints" (Archer, 2003, p. 253) with the aim of achieving the social mobility they desire. Finally, meta-reflexives' inner conversations spin around their commitment to those contexts and projects where they can best express their ideals.

A significant emergent theme from the interviews refers to the fact that participants seemed to be involved in projects that did not necessarily involve a self-centred goal. In this regard, most participants possessed an understanding that they were tapping into a 'collective well of power, creativity and inspiration' (Emma) and that they must keep the 'flame alive' (Anthony) for those who would come after them. In the long run, those goals relate with the need to overcome capitalism and replace it with a more equitable and fairer mode to produce and reproduce life on earth. William's idea of the future, for example, was 'kind of humble' because he believed that 'things like capitalism' are 'too powerful' even when they are going wrong. However, he insisted in that activists should 'actually practice democracy' in and around the 'glitches' generated by the crisis of capitalism. For intellectuals, this practice of democracy involves looking for ways to 'connect their work' with broader struggles against capitalism.

In the short term, participants translated their commitment to that higher purpose into smaller, though strategic, practices in their everyday lives. For Anthony, the struggle of resisting 'nasty forms of individualism' was translated into the effort of sustaining 'communities and solidarities'. Emma expressed her subversive stance by contributing to 'producing a powerful, politicised teaching force'. James, as William, was aware of the impossibility of changing the 'overall fabric in one go'. For him, it was 'strategic little games', like 'the atmosphere of the classroom', that had

the potentiality to 'undermine' the 'oppressive power relations' in a school.

The participants' stories reveal that they achieved a sense of purpose by investing their time and energy in jobs that allowed them to express their reflexive activism in daily practices, especially within the adversity of the current context. Participants were also committed to personal and collective projects that allowed them a feeling of connection with others. Regarding their personal projects, the interviews suggest that participants invested significant energy in self-liberation from erroneous and oppressive (P_2) thoughts and relations. These were ongoing practices.

7.2.3 An ongoing practice: Self-liberation

Do academics consider the transformation of their own subjectivities a main concern in relation to activism? This was the fourth research question guiding the project. As the previous section anticipated, the data suggested that the participants did, indeed, devote a good amount of time and energy to examining and transmuting their inner worlds. This section explores how thoughts and emotions play a fundamental role in the search for self-liberation from hegemonic P_2 relations.

As we have seen in Chapter 5, reflexivity is not a matter of pure rationality. Emotions are a fundamental aspect of the reflexive process. Data gathered for this project suggest that the daily practices of academic activists are indeed inspired and supported by a whole range of human emotions. Having demonstrated in Chapter 6 that, under capitalism, the alienation from our own human nature deeply affects our emotional states, it is evident that self-transformation attuned to emotion should be a fundamental aspect of reflexive activism.

As explored in Chapter 4, the participants' accounts of their inner conversations indicate that emotions are intertwined in activists' reflexive processes. Emma 'felt' how P_2 relations like class,

gender and race were ‘inscribed’ in her and she affirmed that ‘feeling something like that’ was a strong motivation to do ‘something about it’. For Olivia was ‘not just love, but anger’ and ‘disgust’ about what she saw happening in her workplace what moved her to take action. Anthony’s inner conversations were also fuelled by anger at the current situation of the world. Thomas, on the other hand, reflected about how fear is an emotion that, at the same time, ‘drives and inhibits’ him.

These feelings of anger, outrage and fear surfaced every time they were recalled by the academic participants. Their responses were not of a measured intellectual kind. It is clear that emotion was a powerful wellspring motivating their daily practices. But blind emotion is not reflexivity. Reason plays its part. As Anthony put it: ‘reasoning comes from one's emotional life so, if one is angry, one's reasoning comes from anger’. For Grace, reasoning was the capacity to name the injustice she felt. Reason gave her ‘the language to describe, to name’ her feelings about social injustices.

Grace pointed to the self-work of the activist. Emma recounted such work as ‘loving’, but she was quick to stress that it is “not about being fuzzy and feel-good; it's about seeing the highest self in ourselves and others and consciously endeavouring to live up to that vision”. Significantly, all participants acknowledged their continuous work – and reflections upon those primary emotions. For James, the fusion of emotion and rationality brought the activist to a place of wisdom that extended a vista beyond the immediate urgency of overturning hegemonic relations of power. He contemplated the ‘amount of wisdom and compassion’ necessary for the oppressed to ‘overturn a structure’ and then restraining from doing the same to their former oppressors.

In these academics’ lives, reflection was not a mere intellectual exercise. On the contrary, it was intertwined with emotions. For critical realists, in the same way, the split between reason and emotion is artificial or unreal and, thus, meaningless. Interestingly, in her contribution to the

Dictionary of Critical Realism, Kathryn Dean draws attention to the concept of 'kinesthetic rationality' as a the pre-capitalist mode of rationality "which is inscribed directly on the body rather than being mediated through reflexivity" (Dean, 2007, p. 403). She explains that the divide between reason and emotion emerged along with the multiple differentiation of relations and activities necessary to the development of capitalism. The result was a detached kind of rationality: 'abstract rationality'. Abstract rationality underpins both, Western philosophical and scientific developments and the individualised logic of the homo oeconomicus, being functional to capitalist social relations. In line with the participants in this research, Dean argues that: "[t]he emancipation to which [critical realism] aspires requires the transcendence of these complementary modes of rationality through the re-fusion of rationality and the emotions" (Dean, 2007, p. 403).

What do the implications of this re-fusion mean for the theory and practice of activism? To offer a possible answer to this question, it is illuminating to turn to Collier's analysis. Collier (1994), as anticipated in Chapter 6, offers an interesting point of view from which to approach this issue. He examines Spinoza's work on ethics and agrees with the Dutch Philosopher on the claim that "we are free to the extent that we have rational emotions, based on adequate ideas" (p. 185). In this way, Collier argues that self-transformation involves a process where, by the means of reason, inadequate ideas are replaced by adequate ones, transforming, in this same movement, irrational emotions into rational ones. This process of explanatory critique enhances not only our agency but also our vulnerability in the world.

The participants' experiences support Collier's explanation about self-liberation. According to the data, the re-fusion between rationality and emotions implies that participants were in a good position to identify with great lucidity the TINA formations around and inside them. This being the

case, they were more prone to direct their efforts to resist the real underlying cause of their sufferings, that is capitalism and the different alienations it produces, instead of wasting their energies fighting "mystifying surface appearances" (Harvey, 2014, p. 8). Reflexive activism is, in this way, an ongoing project where the production of explanatory critiques helps activists to dig deep and see through the appearances of the capitalist world. Anthony expressed this with great simplicity by saying that neoliberalism is 'out there' but, more importantly, it is 'in here twice: values and how I understand myself'. In this way, activism is about resisting forces that are as external as they are internal.

Anthony's claim supports the argument that reflexivity entails "practices of altering one's life as a response to knowledge about one's circumstances" (Holmes, 2010, p. 139). In this sense, Collier maintains that "explanation is emancipation" (Collier, 1994, p. 185) and, as this section has demonstrated, the work of the activist in a multi-layered reality underlabours simultaneously for self-liberation and for social change.

Before moving on to the following section, it is important to emphasize the fact that the decision to live up to subversive values and ideals has its costs – and those costs can be considerable. Participants acknowledged that fact but uniformly expressed their willingness to pay the price. As James clearly noticed, although he took his 'academic and intellectual freedom very seriously', he had been 'punished and penalized' for exercising that right.

It was important for James that he hold to value–practice consistency. This was true of all participants, but some have 'paid the price' in the time since I interviewed them. Some have lost their positions or left their university. As a group, it is a characteristic feature of meta-reflexives to display "a willingness to pay the price, thus subverting the causal powers of society in the attempt to realise their ideals" (Archer, 2003, p. 289).

The analysis to this point shows that the reflexive activist invests herself in projects that allow her to align her daily practices with the fundamental and subversive values she upholds. Furthermore, it reveals that reflexive activism also entails a commitment to projects that transcend individual goals, aiming to fulfill the collective endeavour of human flourishing. In this sense, the politics of reflexive activism are progressive, since they aim to advance social justice, solidarity, and fairness. It appears that reflexive activism finds a strong base on critical thinking, but it directs that critical thinking not just to society but as also explanatory of the inner emotional worlds. The result translates in informed and mature emotional and practical responses to the current contexts.

7.3 Embodying the Future

In Chapter 6, it was stressed that reflexive activism brings alive the notion of concrete or real utopianism. To remind the reader, concrete utopianism is a process that "differentiates those possibilities that are real from those that are not" (Gansmo Jakobsen, 2018, p. 283). James expressed this idea with the clarity that arises from practice. He asserted that the starting point for change is 'through imagining' and 'role model' inside one's own mind different ways to enact or to change things for the better.

In a way that resembles James' enunciation, Norrie (2010) describes the exercise of concrete utopianism as a process that "moves from what exists to what is logically implicated by it, but which is not, or not yet, in existence" (p. 152). The notion of future takes on a new dimension under the light of concrete utopianism. The future is not something that we will encounter along the way but, on the contrary, it is what will emerge from the inner deliberations and the resulting actions we engage with, working with the tools that we have in the present. William articulated this notion when he claimed that what we need is 'an idea of emergence' more than 'some utopian idea of a future society'.

Participants' ongoing practices were clearly underpinned by an implicit understanding of concrete utopianism. In this regard, they appeared to challenge Archer's claim that meta-reflexives' concerns for the "underdog, the oppressed, and the globally deprived" do not make them political activists and that meta-reflexives "care about the present 'victims', instead of engaging in revolutionary politics to give jam to everyone tomorrow" (Archer, 2003, p. 258). According to the understanding of reflexive activism underpinning this thesis, it rather seems that *being* an activist is to be concerned with doing one's best in the present, from which the future will necessarily emerge in ways that are not entirely predictable. In that regards, Archer's idea that there is a choice between caring for the present victims and engaging in revolutionary politics is not sustained in practice. After all, as Maisuria (2017a) eloquently points out, "nothing in the social universe is constant and fixed, and minor struggles mean transitions are taking place in the totality of the social universe all the time" and, among those subtle shifts, there are some that "open the window of opportunity for new historical transformative possibilities" (p. 56).

Significantly, in their willingness to advance a fairer and more equitable society, participants did not refer to great, otherworldly goals. They all engaged, instead, in concrete and meaningful ongoing projects that were, nonetheless, directed towards achieving a better future. Emma, for instance, was convinced that through every day 'micro practices' - like 'going to the supermarket' - we could contribute toward 'breaking down inequitable power relations' instead of 'just reproducing them'.

In referring to everyday matters, Emma illustrated the fact that the projects and practices of reflexive activists transcend the artificial boundaries upon which modern life is built, i.e. those separating academia, politics, activism and spirituality (L. Maxey, 2004). The participants' stories show that their commitment to high ideals permeated all aspects of their lives: from personal

relationships to the choices made while shopping for everyday groceries. As Emma continued from the comment above: "[…] it might be the toothpaste that you buy, you know? What kind of impact are you having on the world? So, I think it is a daily practice. Well, it is. You can't unthink those things".

This constant awareness of the possible impacts of their own actions appears to echo the process of 'unbound morphogenesis' (Archer, 2019, p. 244) described in Chapter 5. As we can recall, the process of unbound morphogenesis generates increasing variety and opportunities for change, leading agents, in turn, to be more and more reliant on their own criteria and less on tradition or habit (Archer, 2012, 2019). According to the participants' accounts, this increasing dependability in one's own reflexivity does not come without a toll. Olivia, James, and William expressed how it felt to be a meta-reflexive activist. Olivia expressed that how 'exhausted' she was and that sometimes she wished she didn't feel 'compelled to act on everything' she had an issue with. James was overwhelmed by his ongoing internal conversation and his need to constantly remind himself his 'commitment to people and to social justice'. He also reflected on how 'depressed' he felt about 'how the neoliberal turn works' and how so many people had 'given up the activism'. In the same tone, William expressed that 'activism breathes melancholia'.

From these reflections, it appears as if the current trend towards intensified and limitless morphogenesis generates stress, exhaustion and even depression in scholar activists. In this regard, the view that Cvetkovich (2012) held on concrete utopianism (see Chapter 6) can be used to counteract those tendencies and generate hope in the face of the feelings of burnout and despair triggered by being a meta-reflexive activist in a capitalist society. In her words: "daily life in all its ordinariness can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds in response to both spiritual despair and political depression" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 191). As highlighted in

Chapter 6, in the face of *absence* (2E) of real freedom and flourishing, concrete utopias are not a "prescription for the future" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 297); rather they represent an "inner urge that flows universally from the logic of elemental absence (lack, need, want or desire)" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 299). They are best conceived as "the heartbeat of a positively generalized concept of freedom as flourishing and as autonomy and as reason" and are, in this sense, "irrepressible" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 299).

7.4 Towards an emergent enlightened reflexivity?

During the interviews, participants showed characteristics of the three reflexive modes as described by Archer (2003). Meta-reflexivity was, however, predominant among all participants. In that sense, their mental life reflected an inclination to constantly question their own position in relation to society. Although their embodied powers were harnessed in different ways, all participants possessed a strong sense of agency and self-worth and, therefore, an inclination towards progressive social activism. In this regard, they assumed a subversive stance towards the cultural and structural contexts where they were involved. They translated that subversive stance, in turn, into projects that contributed to the alignment of their core values and concerns with those contexts. Interestingly, all participants shared – along with Archer's meta-reflexive interviewees – a current professional middle-class 'status'. Also significant is the fact that they all were invested in caring professions.

Overall, the data from this project supports Archer's categories of reflexive modes, especially her depiction of the meta-reflexive type. Importantly, it also illuminates reflexive powers that are either absent from or not fully developed in any of Archer's reflexive styles. The powers, which have already been discussed in this chapter, can be summarised as those displayed in the following embodied capacities:

(i) A tendency to underlabour their own reflexivity: participants appeared to continuously and deliberately produce explanatory critiques of their own inner worlds to underlabour for self-liberation;

(ii) A yearn to tap into the ground-state: the scholar activists interviewed for the project showed a strive for connecting with ground-state qualities, which translated in a capacity to transcend, in their inner dialogues, the self–other binary;

(iii) Selflessness: the participants' stories suggested they tended to pursue altruistic goals, sacrificing, many times, their own benefit.

(iv) 'Grounded' optimism: the vision of the future sustaining the practices of scholar activists are grounded on concrete utopias on the one side and, on the other side, on an awareness of the fundamental capacities of human beings.

These capacities show that some of the participants appeared to go a step further in their reflexive processes, moving from meta-reflexivity towards what is called here *emergent enlightened reflexivity*. It is necessary, at this point, to draw on Bhaskar's later developments of critical realism, introduced in Chapter 2, with the aim of offering a possible explanation for these emergent inner powers. In what follows, the analysis turns to focus on that task.

With regard to the first of the inner capacities listed above, participants not only had highly developed intellectual skills, but they also seemed to consciously use those skills to underlabour for their emotional worlds. For example, Emma seemed to believe that intellectual work 'fed into' her sense of empowerment and self-transformation. She felt that 'connecting with different ideas' helped her to see herself and the world differently. For Thomas, the intellectual work was just one of the many aspects he needed to address to become 'whole' and more 'reflexive'.

James considered critical reflexivity as an 'active disruption of own thinking' and as a way of

shattering the 'structures of the mind'. For Anthony, it was a lot of 'meditating on the cushion' which helped him to 'think differently' and transform his 'internal emotional life'. Through different means both, James and Anthony, aimed to the same goal, that is, learning how to disrupt their habitual thinking and, thus, transform their emotional lives.

This capacity to critique and transform one's own subjectivities is essential to the fourth movement of DCR: (4D) – transformative agency. As explained in Chapter 2, DCR entails human praxis as the primary effective cause in the transformation of social structures (Bhaskar, 2016). That praxis, as the PMR describes, is overshadowed by perceptual errors which are translated into a network of dualisms, contradictions, alienations, and illusions. The work towards shedding those conceptual errors is a necessary task in the process of enhancing agency. Bhaskar calls this practice *transformed transformative praxis* or *enhanced reflexivity*. Furthermore, he conceives of this capacity as being the highest purpose of critical realist philosophy (Bhaskar, 2016). As revealed in the participants' stories, the practice of self-transformation is an ongoing task in the lives of academic activists. This fact, in turn, illuminates the dynamic implied by the TMSA, where agents continually transform themselves to enhance their agency in transforming structures (Chapter 5). It is now clear how human agents use their irreducible powers of reflexivity and creativity in a dialectic process to transform themselves and their contexts at the same time. Importantly, by continually questioning and delving deeper in their own reflexive processes, activists seem to become aware of those fundamental structures of reality in which human beings find themselves attuned with non-dual states of being. The consequences of those realisations, in turn, trigger the mechanisms involved in the two inner capabilities described below.

In relation to the second of the above-mentioned capacities, the participants' experiences suggested that their mental processes were habituated, not only to think about their own reflexive

processes and to self-interrogate continuously, but to transcend the self–other binary and reflect from non-dual states of being. James articulated that capacity in terms of master–slave type relations. He saw the need to 'break down the binary between oppressed and oppressor' and stop repeating the same pattern of oppression over and over again.

Emma expressed the idea of interconnectedness eloquently. She believed the neoliberal agenda intends that 'we only think of ourselves as individuals', but she considered that a 'crazy' idea because 'we 're all connected'. For Thomas, significantly, his happiness 'is drawn from others and a sense of others' so, in his view, academic activism is more about a collective 'us' than is about the individual 'I'.

These examples show how the participants' reflexive processes were habituated to understand the world in terms of identity and connection with others, transcending, therefore, the domain of duality and tapping into non-duality (see Chapter 2). This way of thinking, in turn, triggered feelings of compassion, empathy and solidarity with all human and non-human living beings, making the commitment with progressive activism inexorable. Price (2016) explains the significance of the later developments of critical realism (Chapter 2) in the following terms:

> (…) through the existence of a depth ontology, the world is intrinsically meaningful and the way to knowing our connectedness is through our compassion and empathy, facilitated by our reason, which provides us with transcendental understanding. So, when a plant releases oxygen, it means that certain transcendental structures and mechanisms called photosynthesis are likely to have occurred. When humans act to protect the environment, it means that certain socio/spiritual/psychological structures and mechanisms, such as compassion towards future generations, are likely to have occurred. If I want oxygen, I need to provide the conditions for photosynthesis to occur; if I want a healthy environment, I need to provide the conditions for such things as compassion for future generations to occur. (Price, 2016, p. 347)

The same applies when it comes to explaining why humans act towards the achievement of a good or, in Bhaskar's terms, a 'eudaimonistic' society. It is necessary to look for the deeper socio/spiritual/psychological structures and mechanisms that are involved when a person is deeply

committed to improving the social structures around him or her. According to the data, the quality of the relations experienced early in life which, in turn, allow access to the ground-state qualities of love, trust, care and solidarity, is one such mechanism. Later in life, people look for ways to reconnect with those qualities. There seem to be, according to the participants' experiences, multiple ways to tap into that ground state, including sports, meditation, intellectual activities, music, etc. Indeed, any activity, however mundane it seems, that allows the person to become fully present and identified with the experience, serves the purpose of actualising the awareness of interconnectedness. In that regard, the data support Bhaskar's claim that the experience of non-dual states of being is, in fact, quite ordinary (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 161).

A further distinctive capacity of enlightened reflexivity is related to the possibility of pursuing selfless and altruistic goals that transcend individualistic concerns about physical health, performative skills and self-worth (Archer, 2003). Because of the capacity to tap into their ground-state, participants seemed to possess an embodied understanding of the guiding principle of the eudaimonistic society, namely, that the flourishing of all is the condition for the free flourishing of each. In that sense, their involvement in projects that pursued a collective objective was a prerequisite of their activism. According to Archer, a distinguishing feature of meta-reflexives is that they cannot settle in any given context because no context is 'good enough' for the development of their ideals. Participants in this project seemed to understand, however, that as long as capitalism remains the main mode of production, no context will ever be aligned with their ideals. Consequently, they had abandoned the ongoing search for the ideal workplace or project and, instead, decided to focus their energy and time in personifying subversive values in the places and projects they found themselves involved in. Therefore, they were committed to an ongoing enterprise of subverting capitalist values and advancing socially progressive projects.

Finally, it is interesting to note that, contrary to what Gramsci saw as a tendency to conjure "daydreams and fantasies" typical of a wishful idealism that sees "the present turned on its head [and] projected into the future" (Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971, p. 175), the optimism of these scholar activists appeared to be a 'grounded' optimism. By 'grounded', two different things are meant here. The first is that the utopianism the participants embodied meets the three requirements of a concrete utopianism as described by Archer (2019) (Chapter 6). Let's take, for instance, this quote from William's portrait:

> William: […] I really do think a key problem for the current moment is that democracy has to become knowledgeable, you know? A strong, participatory democracy that is inclusive of difference has to create new kinds of what I call 'knowledgeability'. [...] But that kind of 'knowledgeability' I don't think could happen properly if there weren't universities of the right sort, with the right attitudes, about communities and their needs. If universities become just the 'enterprise University', then we're not gonna have a knowledgeable public. […] We need a different kind of university that is not sequestered from the public and we have to defy our managers and do our work in connection with publics.

For William, then, one purpose of universities is to contribute towards a participatory and 'knowledgeable' democracy. To meet that goal, however, a different 'kind' of university is needed. Achieving the 'right sort' of universities is a utopia that can be considered concrete because it is: (i) based on real and concrete possibilities, i.e. all the necessary elements to put universities at the service of a 'knowledgeable' democracy already exist: the material structures, the knowledge, the people; (ii) 'realizable', i.e.: eliminating the constraints currently preventing another kind of university from happening is do-able; but (iii) it is dependent on human agency, i.e. strong agency to defy managers and transform the purpose of universities is needed.

The second meaning refers to the fact that the participants' utopianism was based on an optimism, on a hope, and on a sense of ethics, derived from delving into the ground-state. In other words, in the same way as with the 'non-academic' activist whose story of epiphany opened this thesis, it appears that the participants' connections with their ground-states awakened in them a

solidarity and an inalienable sense of ethics that, in turn, nurtured their activist practices. Anthony, whose years of contemplative practices allowed him to be more articulate about his experiences with delving onto the ground-state, affirmed that once one goes 'there' there is 'compassion, altruism and empathy (…)'. Anthony's words suggest that those essential human qualities are 'there', that is in our own ground states, to be found and developed. The fact that these qualities pertain ontologically in human nature provides a solid 'ground' for hope in the potentialities of 'all' human natures.

7.5 Summary

The research questions underpinning this project were aimed at illuminating the inner reflexive capacities of academic activists. This chapter showed how these capacities are shaped by the enablements and conditionings of social forms. It also demonstrated that some of these capacities are contained within those suggested by Archer as pertaining to the life of the mind of meta-reflexives. Others, however, are not included within Archer's taxonomy.

According to Archer, for the meta-reflexive mode "there is no final *modus vivendi* – no established set of practices which can be deemed both satisfying and worthy of being sustained" (Archer, 2003, p. 348). While that may be true for the life of the mind of meta-reflexives in general, the participants in this project seemed to have encountered a set of practices that they maintained regardless of the context where they happened to be. Those practices are summarised thus:

(i) A tendency to underlabour their own reflexivity.

(ii) An impulse to tap into the ground-state.

(iii) Selflessness.

(iv) Grounded optimism

By drawing on DCR and the PMR, it has been established that these practices represent different ways in which human agents, through the ongoing exercise of reflexive activism, try to work on themselves and an emancipated society simultaneously. For that reason, they have been characterised as pertaining to an emergent mode I refer to as ‘enlightened reflexivity’.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING REMARKS

"When the embodied personality of the self is inconsistent with its ground-state, the intentionality of the agent will be split." (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 206)

This chapter brings the content of the previous chapters together in order to highlight the potential contributions the thesis makes to the existing stock of knowledge in the fields of critical realism, sociology and activism. For reasons of clarity, it begins by briefly returning to the purpose, process and structure of the thesis. Major findings and key contributions to scholarship are then outlined. Finally, the chapter discusses the boundaries of the project before concluding with recommendations for future lines of research.

8.1 Thesis purpose and explanatory process

The main purpose of this thesis has been to describe and explain the nature of the reflexive capacities possessed by academic activists. More concretely, it has sought to illuminate how activist scholars, via their internal conversations, understand their own self-transformation within broader struggles of social transformation in and against the neoliberal university. The project's methodology took the form of explanatory critique. As such, it aimed to identify and inform the removal of erroneous or misleading knowledge and offer a better-informed alternative.

Chapter 1 set the substance and significance of the study, emphasising it was to bring a realist perspective to an understanding of academic activism, located in a particular historical moment dominated by neoliberal capitalism. In this context, it drew on critical realism to illuminate the possibility of human agency to resist and transcend P_2 relations.

Chapter 2 outlined the main features of Bhaskarian critical realism, demonstrating its pertinence

to the framing of the project's methodology. It explored the three stages in the development of Bhaskarian critical realism. It showed how, through its progressive development, critical realism underlaboured for a better and more appropriate understanding of social forms. In taking ontology seriously, early critical realism emphasised the centrality of *being*. It provided an understanding of reality as a layered, structured, emergent and open totality. In turn, Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) put that totality in motion, by bringing it face-to-face with the movement of history where *being* is now re-conceptualised as an ongoing 'becoming'. In DCR, movement and change are driven by non-being and absence. In this way, critical realism restores the possibility of thinking and talking about that which is absent from the world (i.e. freedom, human flourishing, equality, etc.) and, in the same movement, re-instates the prospect of subverting the status-quo. As a result, the critical realist perspective entails reconceptualising activism not just as a possibility but also as a necessity in the dialectical process of becoming. In turn, the process of becoming can be enhanced by gaining awareness of non-dual dimensions of existence, as shown in Bhaskar's philosophy of metaReality (PMR) (see Chapter 2). It is here that Bhaskar postulates the existence of a ground-state described as the source of love, intelligence, creativity and freedom. He argues that human beings possess the capability of expanding their awareness of non-dual states of being and, therefore, transcending dualistic ways of thinking. This awareness is amongst the most transformative of human powers as it contains the possibility to transform and transcend the totality of the social structures that currently oppress and alienate humanity. It is now clear why activist practices should include the enhancement of people's (self-)transformative capacities.

The methodological strategies outlined in Chapter 3 were effective in opening up the data to reveal the changing structures of higher education and the reflexive capacities that academics draw upon in their activist practices to mediate those changes. First, the idea that reality is

multidimensional and stratified offered the possibility to search for causal mechanisms beyond the empirical. Secondly, because causal mechanisms are unobservable, the use of different modes of abstraction to carve up the object of study was required. Retroduction, to theorise causal mechanisms, and retrodiction, to test the explanatory power of the identified causal mechanisms, were the most important abstraction modes applied in this study. Finally, an intensive research design proved necessary in order to access the inner states of agents and illuminate the *kinds* of relations between the agent (academic activist) and the broader social and cultural structure (the neoliberal university).

Chapter 4 brought us face to face with the concrete experiences of the people who day-to-day engage in practices to resist and transcend P_2 within the neoliberal university. Each participant's portrait included profound and rich insights about their internal conversations in relation to their positioning in the social world. The way in which their inner reflexive voice mediated the continual interplay between structure, culture, and agency, was especially highlighted. Some commonalities emerged from the experiences of the seven participants. Those shared features led to asking the retroductive question: what must the world be like for academic activists to possess those reflexive capacities?

Chapter 5 addressed the fundamental issue of activism, namely, the structure/agency dualism. It explained that the critical realist resolution involves thinking about the structure/agency dualism in terms of an interactive dialectic where structure and agents exist as different kinds of things, therefore possessing different kinds of capacities. In this way, structures are always pre-given and agents have the potential to consciously transform them. This methodological strategy, which Archer calls *analytical dualism*, actualises the possibility of studying the interplay between structure and agency without conflating them. In that interplay, reflexivity is conceptualised as the

bridge between structure and agency, mediating the causal powers of social and cultural forms. For Archer, this reflexivity is revealed in the *internal conversations* people have about themselves and their relations to wider worlds. When studying activism, it is crucial to delve into those inner dialogues to find out the ontological mechanisms that allow the leap from *reflexive inward deliberations* to *reflexive outward actions*.

Chapter 6 took the critical realist insights about social ontology and its operationalization in Archer's work and applied them to make sense of the structural contexts of higher education institutions and the possibility of academic activism within those institutions. On the one side, it developed an ontological analysis of neoliberalism and its implications for universities. Neoliberalism was conceptualised as the contemporary emergent form of the oppressive and alienating working mechanisms of capitalism. Within universities, the assimilation of the neoliberal rationality has implied profound changes to the academic culture. Universities have been converted into spaces dominated by individualism, competition, commodification, and a constant pressure to perform. In the same movement, the spaces for creativity, freedom, and connection with fellow human beings are disappearing and, with them, any impulse towards individual and collective action. On the other side, drawing upon the critical realist understanding of human agents as stratified, self-aware, and intentional beings, the analysis moved to explore the (self-)transformative capacities of scholar activism. The roles that reflexivity, emotions, and concrete utopianism play in the practice of activism were analysed. This analysis, in turn, made it possible to advance an understanding of activism as a reflexive practice that, simultaneously, underlabours the internal and external worlds to uncover, resist, and transcend the P_2 relations of oppression and alienation.

Chapter 7 importantly offered an interpretation of the concrete lived experiences presented in

Chapter 4, using the new theoretical elements contributed by critical realism. Analytical dualism was especially valuable in distinguishing the structural and the agentic elements in the lived experiences of activists. The structural elements were analysed in terms of past enablements and conditionings that made possible the emergence of activist dispositions. The Morphogenetic Approach allowed the highlighting of the reflexive mechanisms used by agents to resist and transform structural forms in different stages of the morphogenetic cycle. Those reflexive mechanisms were revealed to be underpinned by fundamental core values that play a key role in determining the life projects of academic activists. Finally, an understanding of reality as a layered and stratified totality that is continually actualising new possibilities was examined. This newfound understanding is useful in making sense of emergent modes of reflexivity that are aligned with non-dual states of being.

The following section presents a summary of the main findings and contributions that this research makes to the broader identified fields of knowledge.

8.2 Findings and Contributions

8.2.1 Critical realist insights on the study of academic activism

Underpinned by critical realism, this study has brought insights to the study of academic activism that conventional sociology, in its positivist or hermeneutic forms, would not have. Contrary to the positivist view of a flat ontology, the critical realist depth ontology and the consequent use of transcendental arguments allowed the analysis to move beyond superficial appearances and look for the deeper mechanisms underpinning empirical events. This perspective proved useful to present an understanding of neoliberalism as an emergent form of capitalism that pervades all levels of the social being. This understanding, in turn, permitted the re-consideration of the

traditional interpretations of activism and proposed a conceptualisation of activism that is better aligned with the reality of its praxis; that is, as an ongoing reflexive practice that is fuelled by powerful emotions, often arising from experiencing the unfairness and inequalities intrinsic to neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, dispositional realism, or the confidence in the possibility of actualising alternative ways of being and acting in the world, is what sustains the praxis of activism.

On the other side, critical naturalism was especially helpful in paying close attention to the hermeneutic dimensions of activism, without losing sight of the ontological structures of the world. In this way, it was feasible to causally link the personal reasons and meanings exposed by academic activists with the deeper structures of the world. Specifically, this opened up the possibility to theorise that certain emergent reflexive features that academic activists possess are the result of diving into non-dual states of being, rather than being merely voluntaristic acts of good Samaritans. The PMR highlights that all human agents have the possibility to act from their ground-state's ontological qualities. The experiences gathered for this project have shown that academic activists are continuously committed to actualising that possibility, hence the similarities in their individual interpretations and enactments of the activist practice. Acting from the ground-state is not an extraordinary capacity of a few rare enlightened beings, like monks or saints. It is not limited to those whose existence is exceptional in a world dominated by a majority of individualistic, competitive, selfish individuals who depend on the structures of the markets to constrain their primitive impulses, as the neoliberal narrative puts it. It is, on the contrary, the result of the conscious decision to face, critique, and get rid of the mystifying appearances imposed by neoliberal capitalism upon our true selves and upon the real structures of the world.

Another significant insight on the practice of academic activism is related to the critical realist

understanding of dispositional realism. As Chapter 2 explained, dispositional realism opens up the space for explanatory knowledge, seen as a transcendental move from the empirically apparent to the deep mechanisms generating those appearances, to inform individual and collective praxis and produce real change. The point here is that dispositional realism supports the practice of *concrete utopianism* which consists in the exercise of imagining what real possibilities are implied in the world, although not yet actualised. The data from this project has shown that both *dispositional realism* and *concrete utopianism* inform and sustain the practice of academic activism. It is, thus, possible to illuminate how the struggles of activists to find new possibilities for being in the world imply that change takes place in the whole of the social universe all the time.

To sum up, the critical realist framework underpinning this project has been of immense value in bridging the gap between the common understanding of activism and the reality of its praxis. Taken together, the critical realist conceptions of: (i) a stratified and depth ontology; (ii) human motives and reasons as causally efficacious on the social world; and (iii) dispositional realism as informing scholar activism, proved to be more aligned to the ontology of activism than the actualism imposed by the neoliberal narrative (i.e. There Is No Alternative). In that way, the conclusion can be drawn that critical realism contributes to good sense in that it elaborates an epistemology that is better aligned with the reality of activist practices.

8.2.2 Social-morphogenesis, self-morphogenesis and the ground-state

The morphogenetic analysis (MA) used to analyse the data emergent from this project was effective in unravelling the complex interplays between social and cultural structures and human beings. It proved particularly useful to draw attention to the multi-layered, structural nature of oppression and alienation under neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, it allowed the use of the analytical distinctions between agency, structure and culture to locate opportunities for resistance

and transformation (O'Mahoney et al., 2018).

Those opportunities for resistance and change emerged from the data and ran in two directions: academic activists aimed to transform (i) the contexts in which they lived and worked and (ii) their inner worlds. Specifically, regarding the latter, participants looked to underlabour their inner worlds in order to achieve self-liberation from oppressive structures. Partly, this was directed towards overcoming the artificial split between emotion and reason. They acknowledged that their activism was both intellectually informed and emotionally powered. In making sense of this characteristic, the critical realist perspective is of great value as it conceptualises intellectual work as directed, partially, to the transformation of irrational emotions into rational ones.

The data showed that participants tended to underlabour and critique their own inner emotional and thought structures. By so doing, they became more aware of the need to transcend the self–other binary and to embody love, care and kindness. Interestingly, they interpreted this embodiment as a political statement – in thought and action – in a world dominated by a narrative that promotes individualism and competition. In that regards, their activist efforts were directed towards both the betterment of the self and of the multiple social contexts.

The possibility of attending to time in the development of agency proved important in order to theorise that early access to ground-state qualities, via recognition, activated at least two mechanisms. The first one was the development of a strong sense of P_1 and self-worth underlying social agency. The second mechanism related to a life-long longing for connecting with those ground-state qualities. Moreover, by tapping into the ground-state, an embodied knowledge of interconnectivity emerges and, therefore, an inalienable sense of ethical action.

To gain some purchase upon the possible causal mechanisms producing these outcomes, it was

necessary to articulate the MA with the DCR and the PMR. As a result, emergent forms of reflexivity were theorised and clustered under the concept of 'enlightened reflexivity'. The notion of a realm of non-duality as the source of the sense of interconnectedness and, consequentially, of ethical and compassionate actions, was especially helpful in providing a causal explanation of the empirical data. It helped illuminate how the participants' ongoing efforts to identify and remove the mechanisms of oppression and alienation resulted in the actualisation of mechanisms acting in the opposite direction, namely: (i) a tendency to underlabour their own reflexivity for self-liberation; (ii) a yearn to tap into the ground-state; (iii) selflessness; (iv) grounded optimism. Taken together, these four mechanisms act in the direction of achieving a eudaimonistic society where the flourishing of all is the requisite for the free flourishing of each.

This articulation between the MA and the later developments of critical realism was an organic process, emergent from growing conceptual understanding of critical realism and the demands of explanation coming from the project's empirical data. The interaction between the two theoretical developments suggests that the process of morphogenesis may be enhanced by delving into the ground-state and embedding our thoughts and actions in the world with the qualities emerging from it.

8.3 Thesis boundaries and implications for future research

Although valuable and needed, the contributions of this study have focused on the inner reflexive mechanisms of academic activists. Other important aspects of academic activism, like collective agency, political affiliations, or pedagogical practices, fell beyond the scope of this research. Further limitations to this research project derived from the racial and cultural homogeneity of the participant group, i.e. six participants were white and Anglo-Saxon and all seven participants possessed highly developed intellectual capacities. The latter, although an expected characteristic

of academics, may not be a common feature of activists in general.

The findings emerging from this study provide some insights for future research and practice in the fields of academic activism, critical realism, and sociology. First, the more comprehensive conceptualisation of activism this study has presented sheds light on the fact that the possibility of activism, in academia or elsewhere, may benefit from an increased familiarity with DCR and the PMR. In particular, the concept of ground-state as an ontologically real domain enabling our empirical reality entails several benefits for the practice of activism. One of these benefits relates to the enhancement of agency through a greater development of human potentialities. Additional benefits may result in the normalising of certain experiences and feelings that have been opportunistically labelled as 'spiritual' or 'otherworldly' by dominant narratives, and therefore disdained. Those experiences relate with "an awe-filled awareness of the interconnectedness of all things" (Price, 2016, p. 341) that most participants, in one way or another, referred to as underpinning their activist practices. This awareness of interconnectedness, and the love and compassion that emerge from it, are the raw materials needed to achieve a eudaimonistic society.

Secondly, this study has shown how personal agency is enhanced by practices of self-liberation (including intellectual, physical, or spiritual activities) that encourage a strong connection with deeper levels of reality. This finding hints at the importance of expanding the frontiers of sociology to include the exploration of those practices and their potential effects on social change. The findings of this study have also pointed to the significance of the *quality* of the relations established amongst persons in the development of a strong sense of agency. Further sociological research on the mechanisms and conditions necessary to foster healthy and positive social bonds is also needed.

Thirdly, the project's empirical data indicate that future analyses may benefit from approaching

the study of reflexivity and internal conversations in terms of gender, race, and cultural backgrounds. Particularly, the topic of gender appeared in female participants' narratives as having a profound, and most times negative, influence on their internal conversations. Studies aimed at exploring how women produce differential reflexive responses to mediate gendered social structures can result in a better understanding of that process and, thus, in strategies to overcome P_2 gender relations.

Finally, the potential of educative practices aimed at underlabouring the internal conversations and reflexive processes of students is also worth exploring. Questions as to whether the internal conversations are workable and, if so, what the appropriate pedagogical tools are for that job, are pertinent. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the potential benefits of educative contemplative practices, like meditation and mindfulness, for the observation, underlabouring, and possible advancement of the inner dialogues. The impact of such research on the internal conversations of academics and students could enrich and enhance education as a tool for the flourishing of all, rather than simply being a commodity for the benefit of a few.

8.4 Closing personal reflection: when there is no need for words

What is being human? What capacities distinguish persons from social structures, institutions and cultural narratives? These questions have framed my internal conversations and guided this PhD journey. The critical realist perspective used to make sense of the human experiences and the inner conversations of scholar activists allowed me to understand that foundational qualities, like solidarity, love and kindness, are part of the answer. Activists reflexively draw upon those qualities to spread certain values in the structures around them. Culturally, however, we tend to associate kindness and compassion with innocence. But in this journey, I have come to understand there is nothing more political than being kind in a world that promotes fierce competition among people.

Caring and kindness are conscious decisions, they are not innocently made, and they have real impact in the world. As the Argentinean psychologist Ana Maria Fernández states: “To speak of tenderness in these times of ferocity is not naive. It is a deeply political concept. It is to emphasize the need to resist the barbarization of the social ties that cross our worlds” (Fernández, 2009, p. 21).

There lies the importance of re-signifying our understanding of activism: not to reduce it to personal actions at the expense of collective actions, but to understand that social change is not limited to attending to matters of the external. Social transformation happens through every one of us, day in, day out. Therefore, understanding and underlabouring the deeper layers of our being is a *sine qua non* to changing social structures.

When we make our activism reflexive, we become participants in positive social change. This study has shown that the process of morphogenesis takes various forms. Some forms may be quick and evident but most of them are slow and mostly unrecognisable to the naked eye. Academic activism, when reflexively embodied and practised, acts through a ripple effect. It expands its impacts slowly but widely. It should not be dismissed or underestimated. As the old saying goes: “though you can easily count the seeds in an apple it is impossible to count the apples in a seed”. It is my hope that this project contributes towards a university and a society where seeds of kindness, compassion, and love are planted every day, everywhere, on every occasion we encounter.

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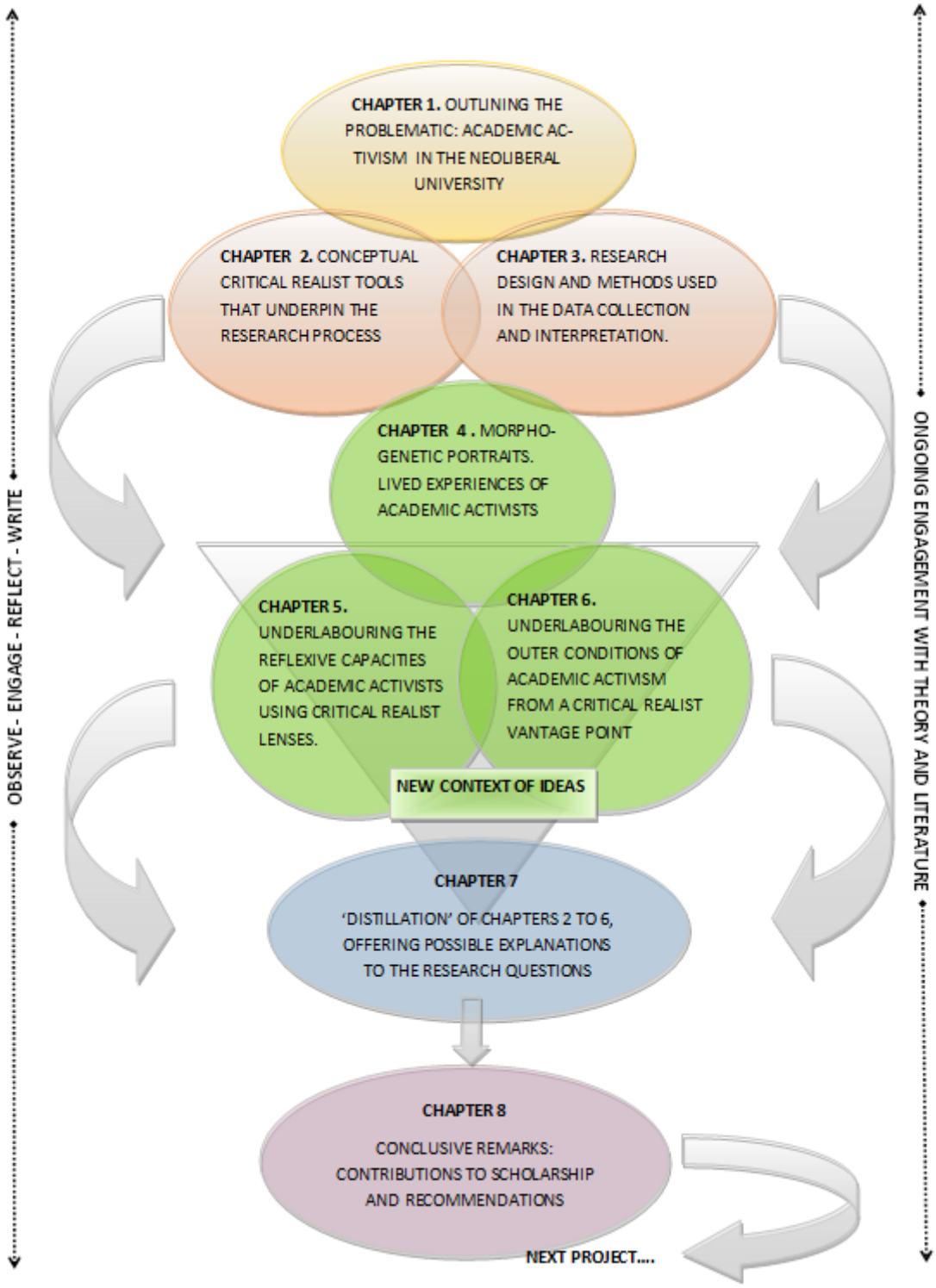
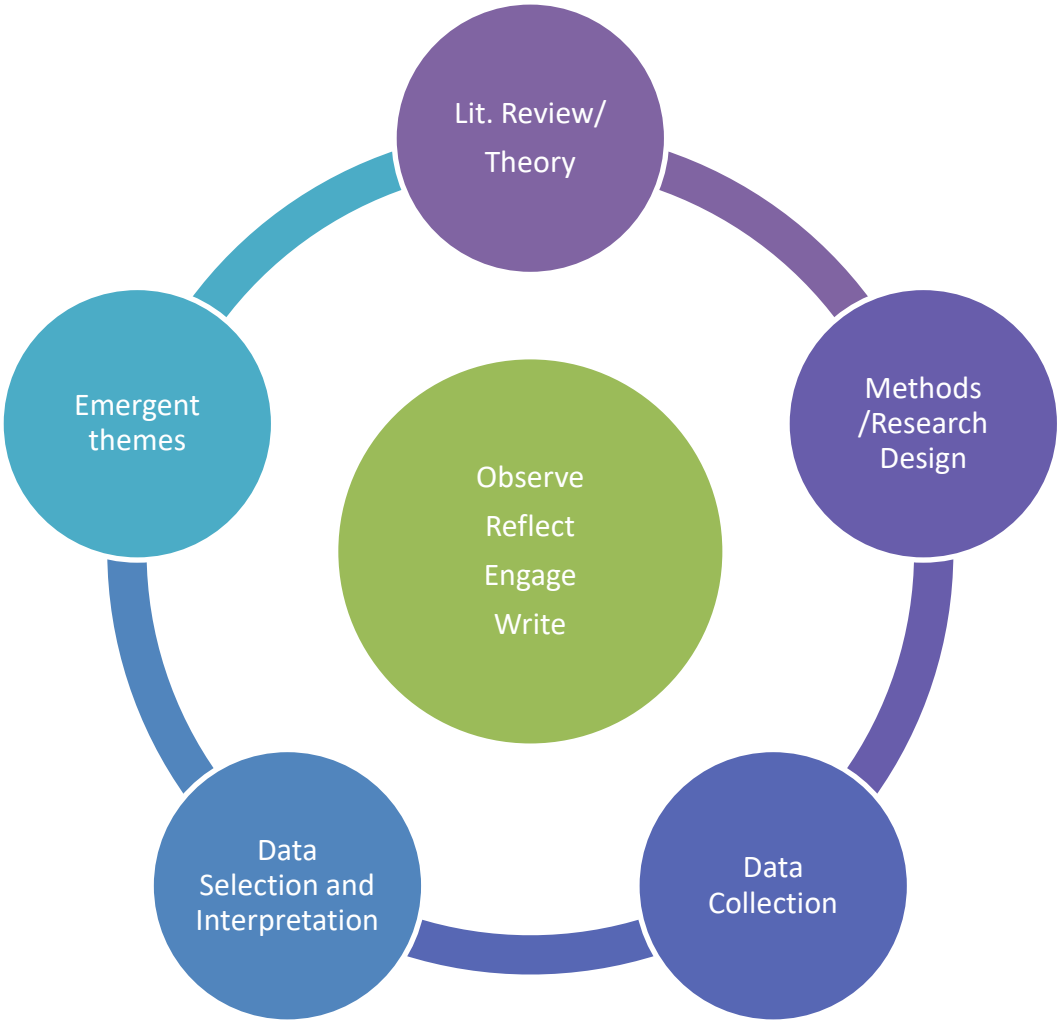
APPENDIX A: STRUCTURED, DIFFERENTIATED AND EMERGENT METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK



APPENDIX B: THE ORGANIC RESEARCH PROCESS



APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL

FINAL APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	**7726**
Project Title:	Academic Activism: Critical Realism, Agency and the Internal Conversation
Principal Researcher:	Ms Celina Valente
Email:	vale0074@flinders.edu.au
Approval Date:	10 August 2017
Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	**31 December 2018**

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided.

APPENDIX D: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

INFORMATION SHEET

(In-depth interviews participants)

Title: 'Academic Activism: Critical Realism, Agency and the Internal Conversation'

Researchers:

Ms Celina Valente

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Flinders University

Ph: 8201 5208

Supervisor(s):

Dr Grant Banfield

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Flinders University

Assoc. Professor Ben Wadham

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Flinders University

Ph: 8201 3358

Description of the study:

This study is part of the project entitled 'Academic Activism: Critical Realism, Agency and the Internal Conversation'. This project will investigate the subjectivity of academic activists in Australia and explore reflexivity as the bridge between structure and agency. This project is supported by Flinders University College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study:

This project aims to:

- explain how academic activists engage in inner dialogues to make sense of their practice;
- elucidate how academic activists articulate their own self-transformation with broader struggles of social transformation in the neoliberal university.

What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher and explore together:

- The objective conditions that allowed the emergence of activist dispositions in your life.
- Your personal history of engagement with activist practices.
- Your thoughts and feelings regarding the current orthodoxy that prevails in the University.
- Your personal configuration of values/concerns/interests and the ways in which that configuration led you to adopt activism as a significant practice in your life.
- Self-transformation as activism.

Participation is entirely voluntary. The interview will take about 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder to help with looking at the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored as a computer file. A transcript of your interview will be provided to you via email for comment and amendments.

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?

The sharing of your experiences will contribute to develop a deeper understanding of reflexivity as a bridge between social structures and human agency, illuminating in this way the essential capacities of human beings for social and personal change.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?

We do not need your name and no identifying information will be published. However, depending on the interview location that you choose, anonymity may be at risk and, therefore, cannot be guaranteed. The

interview will be typed-up and saved as a document along with the voice file for at least 5 years, in accordance with the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password protected computer that only the researcher (Celina Valente) will have access to. Your comments will not be linked directly to you.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?

The researcher anticipates minimal discomfort from your involvement in this study. If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, please raise them with the researcher.

How do I agree to participate?

Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate, please read and sign the form and send it back to me at vale0074@flinders.edu.au.

How will I receive feedback?

On project completion, outcomes of the project will be given to all participants via email.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (**Project number: 7726**). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au*

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(by interview)

Academic Activism: Critical Realism, Agency and the Internal Conversation

I ….....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the 'Letter of Introduction' for the research project on Academic Activism.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the 'Letter of Introduction' and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
   - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
   - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
   - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained and individual information will remain confidential, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.
   - I may ask that the recording be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.
6. I agree to the transcript being made available to other researchers who are not members of this research team, but who are judged by the research team to be doing related research, on condition that my identity is not revealed.

Participant's signature……Date……...

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name…….....

Researcher's signature……..Date……

NB: Two signed copies should be obtained.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

First of all, let me thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. As you know, with my research I'm aiming to understand a bit more about the relation of self and social transformation, by exploring the subjective aspects of academic activism. In this way, the personal facets of your experience as an academic activist are of fundamental interest to me. More precisely, I'd like to focus on the process by which you reflect upon the relationship between your most fundamental interests and the objective circumstances you face in your daily life.

Research question 1: *What are the objective conditions that allow the emergence of activist dispositions in academics?*

a. What do you think the place of the academics is in democratic societies*?*

b. How and when did you start working as an academic?

c. What is activism for you? Do you identify as an activist?

d. Do you recall any particular circumstance or event that triggered your activism in the academia?

e. Do you see activism as a daily practice or something you engage in when the time demand?

f. Do you ever experience a contradiction between what the university expects of you and what you expect of yourself?

g. Can you describe the ways in which the University has changed since you first started working as an academic?

h. In which ways has your relationship with your colleagues and students changed during your academic career?

Research question 2: *What is the subjective configuration of concerns that lead academics to adopt activism as a significant practice within their 'modus vivendi'?*

i. In general, what do you care about the most in life? Has it always been the same?

j. Can you think about a person or event that have had a particular influence in your personal constellation of values?

k. Did those values/interests/cares/concerns influence your decision of becoming and activist in your workplace? What else did?

l. Have you found it difficult to fit those values with your professional life?

m. Do you think you could have chosen, or that you can still choose, not to be an activist? What would you be doing instead?

Research question 3: *Do academics consider the transformation of their own subjectivities a main concern in relation to activism?*

n. How do you make sense of the current work you are doing? What do you notice about the way in which you talk to yourself regarding your activism?

o. Does activism take a lot of mental space in your self-talks? In what ways?

p. Does activism include, presuppose or promote self-transformation? In what ways?

Research question 4: *What subversive values do academic activists bring to their practice?*

q. What are your thoughts and feelings regarding the current orthodoxy (neoliberalism) that prevails in the university?

r. What motivates you to express your disagreement with the mainstream and their activities?

s. Do you consider that there is something that you can do –at a personal or collective level- to help subvert them?

t. What is the most effective form of activism that academics can take?

u. What are your future projects with regards to activism? How do those projects merge with your personal life?

v. Is there anything else regarding the relationship between your personal and social transformational projects that you would like to comment on?

Before we finish, I'd like to know if you would mind me getting back in touch by email if extra questions or a need for clarification arise during the data analysis?

Finally, could you recommend other/s academic activist/s to participate in this research?

Thanks for your time!

APPENDIX F: THE MAP OF ACTIVISM

Image 2: The Map of Activism (Before)

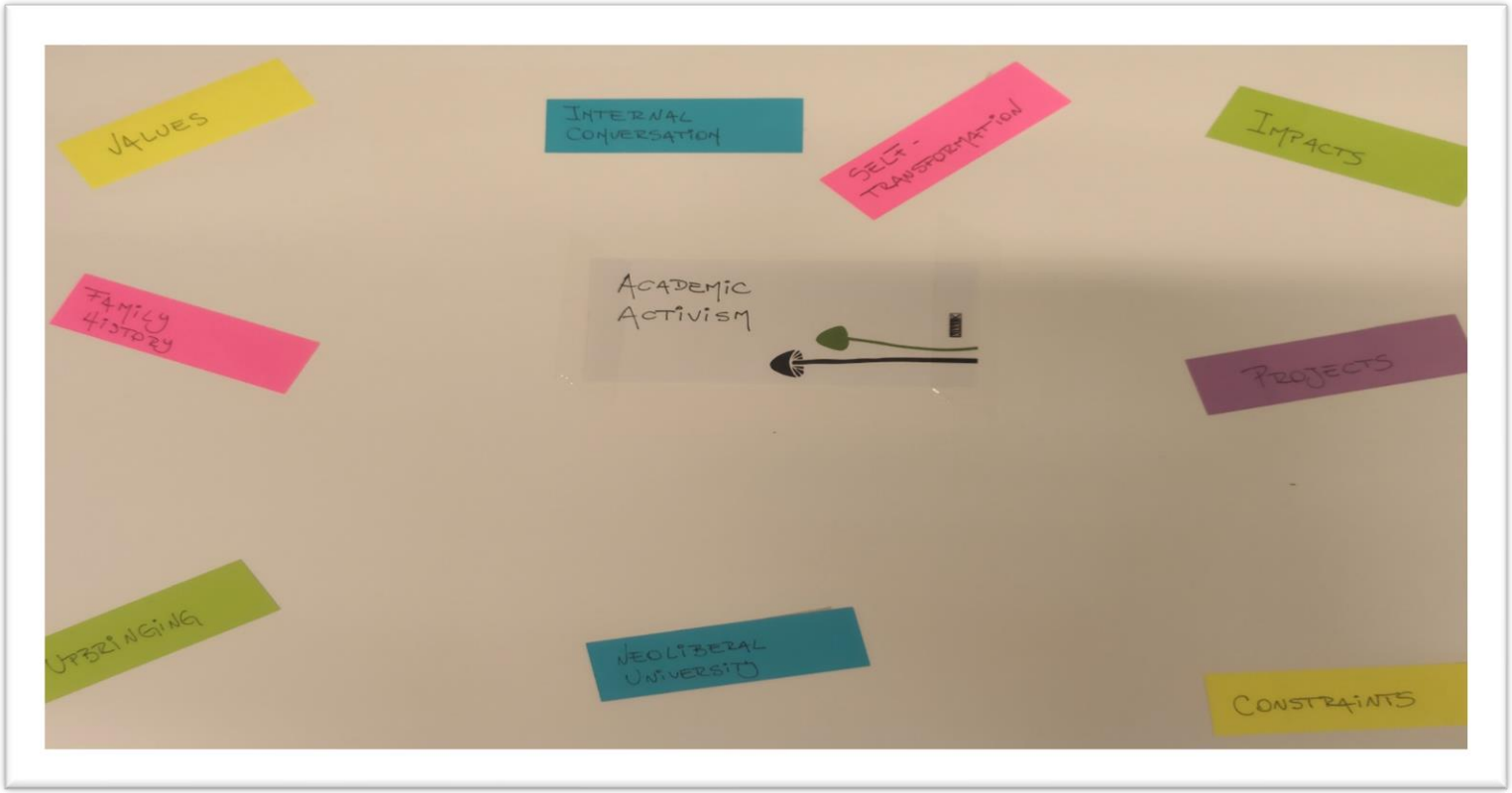


Image 3: The Map of Activism (After)