

**A MORAL ECONOMY OF  
STUDENT PROTEST  
NETWORKS**

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

### **The rise in UK HE tuition fees as a 'new toll' (Ibrahim, 2011)**

- Nationally and locally organised student protests 10th, 24, 30 November and December 9 (2010)
- At least 23 university occupations
- These were a direct response to the publication (in October 2010) of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, widely known as the Browne Review (after its chair, Lord Browne)

Fees from £3000- (possible) £9000. Also cuts to HE funding from £7.1 billion to 4.2 billion

My argument: moral economy of protest. Explains the grievances and provides the WHY?

## **The politicisation of students on university campuses (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012)**

Analysing the network structure of the university campus

Student activists/ organisations as nodes

What resources facilitate political activity? ( Communication networks, funds/  
budgets, rooms, movement around the campus, status as chairs/ or executive) .

Network foci: students union, political societies, meetings, demos etc.

Under what conditions is protest possible: HOW?



# A MORAL ECONOMY

- Drawing on E.P. Thompson notion of M.E., protestors constitute a ‘political crowd’. (1971, 1993)
- Political protest is a negotiation between cultural norms and economic pricing
- Based on what is considered fair by ‘the community’
- I argue that the rise in fees are seen as unjust, unfair, a barrier to a traditional entitlement and an assault on moral sentiments
- Action is based on normative political motivations
- No (effective) mediating political institutions
- A student custom to protest against injustice?

# STUDENT CRITIQUE

The moral outrage had been building for some time. Wider ideological critique:

**‘as a student seeing the effects of cuts... and more business involvement in university life... universities are being commodified, education is now a commodity (Interview, January 2009, Student R1).**



A rejection/ disavowal of the system:

**‘I have no faith in any of the parliamentary groups like Labour and the Conservatives’  
(Interview, December 2009, Student R53).**

Moral high ground further raised by other issues: critique of wars, bank bail-outs, and MP expenses scandal.



# NOTES OF CAUTION

## Is it OK to apply Thompson's ideas to 21<sup>st</sup> century?

- Thompson's analysis of 18<sup>th</sup> Century- pre-capitalist protests
- No free rider problem then. Community could bring sanctions. Communities bound tightly- gemeinschaft
- Markets weaken the moral economy (Sayer, 2000) rise of individualism, rational self interest.
- Can we talk of a student community? Yes, but perhaps not in the same way! No crowd is homogeneous- not even in the 18<sup>th</sup> C
- Not just local and parochial action but national action (students of today rely on national repertoires of contention)
- Sayer (2000) cultural norms and economy not separate. Moral values are embedded in the system
- Have to be aware of reversals of the moral argument:
- Is it fair that the tax payer pays for education?
- I'm working your protesting!

# CONCLUSION: A NEW SYNTHESIS?

## Moral economy

- Thompson offers a powerful framework to understand the grievances of politically motivated groups who take direct action against injustice.
- Arguably a disavowal of institutional structures, including parliament, NUS etc.
- As well as grievances we need to consider resources. Under what conditions are campaigns mounted?

## Social network analysis

Some university campuses have a political network-like structure which facilitates mobilisations.

- For example, student unions and political societies provide foci for the politically inclined and interested- leads to formation of a connected critical mass.
- The student's union or other foci could be considered to be the political organising space ( the equivalent to the markets in 18<sup>th</sup> C, where discussion, spread of rumours, pol action is organised)
- This is a community of sorts, not homogenous but perhaps a political community, albeit with a certain amount of mutliplexity.
- Unlike an 18<sup>th</sup> C one, actors are not compelled or forced to act in the same way.
- However, there is enough common ground to take action against perceived injustices.