

# FIGHTING FOR E/QUALITY

## COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIES OF NEW STUDENT MOVEMENTS



'Why is my curriculum only written by old white men?'



'critical student collectives'



Gaza solidarity encampment  
University of Copenhagen

Gritt B. Nielsen [gbn@edu.au.dk](mailto:gbn@edu.au.dk)



DANISH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

CGHE PRESENTATION, OXFORD UNIVERSITY  
22 OCTOBER 2024

GRITT B. NIELSEN  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR



# OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

---

1. The wider project – notions of comparison and circumstantial ethnography
2. Notions of student activism
  - everyday activism, articulations and translocality
3. Cases from Denmark
  - social and academic activities
4. Translocal cosmopolitan responsibility
  - a wider ‘consciousness’, rather than a ‘movement’; a moral (knowledge) economy



# INTERCONNECTED MOVEMENTS?

**(New Zealand fieldwork in 2012 & 2015):**  
from austerity/anti-NL protests to identity politics

**South Africa (2015ff):** the Fallist movements

**US and UK (2015 ff):**  
Safe spaces, no-platforming VS free speech  
Decolonise education, DEI,  
trigger warnings, micro-aggressions

**Denmark (c 2015ff)**  
'critical student collectives', curriculum critique,  
inclusion/diversity  
policies to prevent harassment

→ Debates around Ac. Freedom/free speech



# PROJECT IDEA

---

Investigate student activism for social justice at 3 public universities in different contexts: **Uni of Berkeley (US), Uni of Goldsmiths (UK) and Uni of Copenhagen (DK)..**

1. How are **social justice-based claims and actions** for social justice and e/equality in public HE promoted and negotiated by students (and others)
2. (how) do students claims and actions **interconnect and resonate across different contexts?**
3. How do the claims and actions affect and **reconfigure the university** as a place for (academic) debate and knowledge production?

What kinds of comparison?



# COMPARISON AND ANTHROPOLOGY

---

- **Explicit analytical strategy:** comparing contexts/units constructed by the researcher.
- **Implicit ethnographic comparisons:** Cross-cultural perspective, Positionality and cultural experiences shape what one 'sees'
- **Emic comparisons:** Our interlocutors' comparisons as ways of ordering the social world they inhabit.

Comparison part of ongoing analytical process, combining the above.

Political contexts – similar yet different (Covid 19, BLM, MeToo; international uni, etc)

See e.g. K. Valentin (forthcoming) 'Educational anthropology and the comparative challenge'. *Compare.*)



# CIRCUMSTANTIAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

---

## **US project (Berkeley)**

Renaming, language use, curriculum (CRT), institutional context free speech mov. and  
– settler colonial context, hauntology (Lærke Cecile Anbert, PhD)

## **UK project (London):**

queer and racially minoritised individuals/collectives, partially linked to university;  
arts-based, collaborative, co-producing alteric spaces and knowledges → hope, the  
otherwise, alternative knowledges (Maya Acharya, PhD)

## **DK project (Copenhagen):**

everyday activism, contact activism, following frictional events

Exploring recurrent conflicts around inclusion and free speech/ac. freedom (Nielsen, PI)



# DENMARK - COMPARATIVELY

---

## Small 'local' initiatives

- Letter from HoD/student with good advices to include non-binary students
- Abolishing tradition of using countrybased groups, games during induction week

## Huge media coverage + debate in Parliament:

- Critique of 'fake problem import' from US/UK. Imported identity politics/wokeism
- Seen as threat to free speech and/or ac. freedom

## Few public actions, e.g.

- Statue of King Frederik V from Academy of Arts thrown into a canal in Copenhagen (2020)
- Ghaza solidarity encampment, protests, occupation, no-platforming Copenhagen University (2024)





# STUDENT ACTIVISM

---

“the **collective public expression** of ideas by students aimed at creating politically pertinent **public** debate on a topic and seeking to bring about significant (moderate, radical or even revolutionary) **socio-cultural and political change**”  
(Luescher 2018: 300, drawing on Altbach)

- which ‘collectivity’, which ‘public(s)’?
- Is all activism ‘collective’ and ‘public’?





# EVERYDAY ACTIVISM

---

- Exertion of influence through **‘more hidden everyday activities’** (Skovdal and Benwell)
- **‘individual and collective efforts to change, adapt or disrupt one’s own and others’ everyday practices** in response to concerns about the negative impact of these practices’ (Walker 2017)
- **‘talk and action in everyday life** that is **not consciously coordinated** with the actions of others but is (1) to some degree **caused (inspired, encouraged) by a social movement** and (2) consciously intended to **change others' ideas or behavior** in directions advocated by the movement”. (Jane Mansbridge 2013)



# TRANSLOCAL ACTIVISM

- Situated and formed in connection with processes that crosscut spatial and temporal registers
- beyond state-centric focus and scalar fetichisms

## Pay attention to

- **Articulations (S. Hall)** of place, socio-spatial positionality, social justice
- Actors' efforts to situate and (de-/re-)localise particular situations, practices, ideas, people
- micro-level activities, local-to-local interaction and multidirectional networks



# CASES FROM COPENHAGEN

---

- 1) Critique of institutional social traditions (costume parties, jokes)
- 2) Curriculum critique and Critical student collectives

My argument:

In their (everyday) activism students connect and assess specific activities at their universities in relation to wider contexts of injustices – in doing so they articulate a form of rooted or **translocal ‘cosmopolitan responsibility’** based on ethics of care and universal respect - aiming to responsabilise themselves, their institutions and others.

a shift from a knowledge economy based on individualism, competition and marketisation towards a moral (knowledge) economy based on equity and justice?



# COUNTRY GAMES AND DRESSING UP

---

## **An internal ‘tradition’ and rite of passage at an Pol. Sc. education programme**

- transition to academic community, sense of belonging within/across cohorts
- Dressing up and making slogans ‘just for fun’ → part of wider ‘humor regime’ using irony and sarcasm to address (ambivalence of) privilege and power hierarchies

## **Critics: Rearticulating the games to a wider scale defined by global inequalities**

- Stereotypical images exclude and marginalise certain students
- Locating the games within wider societal and geo-political context (e.g. racism during covid-19) – inspired by literature, BLM, conversations...

Negotiating the proper ‘scale’ of the games

Free speech, social justice – contested universals? Free speech for the privileged/majority?

Who should decide? Students, leaders? The ‘public’



# CURRICULUM AND COLLECTIVES

- **Questioning ‘tradition’ and canons;** developing alternative curriculum
- **Creating safe spaces** for sharing and discussing texts in different way.
- **Mapping the curriculum:** categorising and counting authors, based on assumed (socio-spatial) positionality within wider (geo-)political context



*” We know that counts like these can appear rigid, but we see them as a valuable tool to uncover structural inequalities”.*

Humor as everyday activism - appropriating ‘just for fun’ logic

*”for a couple of weeks I said to people, I don’t want to read more literature written by white men. It was both for fun and for real. Many took so much offence”*



Tensions and dilemmas: an a priori frame, reproducing stereotypes

DANISH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

CGHE PRESENTATION, OXFORD UNIVERSITY  
22 OCTOBER 2024

GRITT B. NIELSEN  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR



# WORKING ON ONESELF AND OTHERS

---

- Working on language use and bodily conduct – prevent discrimination,
- Calling out, being a killjoy in own family, but not shaming and being ethically superior?
- Using SoMe, Instagram and Memes :

*"it shows that critique can be incorporated in so many different ways.  
It's not necessarily just like Martin Luther King inflammatory speeches (...)  
it's also something which has much more potential in like small things right" (...)  
it's like a secret form of communication (...) and using non-established ways of raising  
critique is in itself a form of critique"*

→ makes her feel part of something bigger, seeing resistance happening elsewhere.

→ but **not part of a wider movement** – rather of a wider **'consciousness'**, revolving around common values of 'decency', 'care', 'universal respect', and a sense of solidarity.





# A PROCESS OF RESPONSIBILISATION

---

”I don’t think it’s about politics – i think it’s about **universal respect**, about **showing consideration** for people in the room, showing consideration for the minorities.

You have **a responsibility for making yourself aware and being sensitive towards others (...)** **there’s a responsibility as researcher, as teacher and student. The responsibility should be with all , but the more power and influence, the more you have to take your responsibility seriously.** (...) yes academic freedom is important, but it’s just as important to treat other people well”



# TRANSLOCAL COSMOPOLITANS?

---

A new student subjectivity:

- **Their assessment of 'local' everyday activities is shaped in and through a translocal space** - informed by soc.mov (BLM), literature, social media (memes), networks etc
- committed to **universal moral equality** – starting in their everyday life and working to responsabilise themselves, their universities and others  
- expanding the 'moral circle of affiliation' and solidarity to a global community
- Attitude of openness towards divergent cultural experience; valuing (certain forms of) pluralism and diversity
- **Unsettled tensions between universality-particularity, essentialisation-constructivism; the political and the beyond-political**



# RESPONSES – POLITICIANS AND LEADERS

---

## Leaders

- often sympathetic to agenda of inclusion, diversity – balanced with FS/AF
- But ‘reputation management’ → sometimes at the expense of student involvement

## Critique of students raised by right wing populist/nationalist/right-libertarian politicians

- The scale of the nation emphasised,
  - ‘Fake problem import’ from esp. the USA
- Chicago Principles as solution? → import of ‘culture wars’ rationale?



# ENCAMPMENT - 2024

---

- Continuation of logic of responsabilisation -
- From petitions, reports, dialogue to public actions:  
occupying space (tents) and buildings (w G. Thunberg)  
no-platforming (of foreign minister)

## Leadership reacting harsher than ever before

- calling police, disciplinary cases → securitization?
- Students covering their heads w. Keffiyeh – fear of doxxing, hate crimes, disciplinary cases.

Escalation? Looking to US campuses ?  
Culture wars as polarising frame?



# INTERCONNECTED MOVEMENTS?

## The case of everyday activism in Denmark

- Resonance in articulations
- A 'consciousness' rather than a movement
- Shaped in translocal spaces of engagement

Conjuring a moral knowledge economy, based on values of epistemic and social justice?



Insert Quote text, for next level ENTER and TAB  
- INSERT NAME







AARHUS  
UNIVERSITY