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# Hope Amid the Ruins? The Project of Critical University Studies

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## Abstract

This paper explores the project of Critical University Studies (CUS). Rather than rehearsing the already well-rehearsed critiques of the contemporary academy, however, the paper adopts a more unusual approach and offers a philosophical exploration of the structure of hope to be found within CUS. Drawing on recent research within the philosophy of hope, the paper explores CUS as a project of hoping against hope. A detailed study of the anatomy of such hoping is presented via an analysis of its key constituent concepts and practices: justificatory rationale, mental imaging, pathways and agency thinking, and cognitive resolve. The paper has three aims. Firstly, by approaching the field from an angle not typically associated with it (i.e., hope), to contribute toward a richer conceptualization of CUS. While CUS has sometimes been chastised for painting a picture of unremitting gloom, the project outlined here is one that finds hope amid the ruins and is oriented toward a collective rebuilding. Secondly, to contribute to the philosophy of hope by exploring how key concepts deployed within the field play out in the ideas and practices of a contemporary political project. Finally, and most significantly, the key aim of the paper is a practical and political one—to unpack CUS' hoping against hope in order to assess whether and how this might be mobilized. This is not without its problems and the paper concludes by offering a critical assessment of the project of CUS, locating its potential within a broader strategy of "non-reformist reform".

**Keywords**  Critical University Studies · Higher Education · Philosophy of hope · Utopia · Praxis

## Introduction

The term Critical University Studies first appeared in print in 2012 to name a new field of criticism, emerging in the mid-1990s, responding to the corporatization of the university (Williams 2012). The field is now firmly established, with book series published by Palgrave and Johns Hopkins and a dedicated journal *Workplace: A Journal for Academic*

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*Labor*.[1] There is certainly no shortage of literature analyzing—to borrow titles from some of the earliest texts in the field—*Academic Capitalism* (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), *The Corporate Takeover of Academia* (Soley 1995) and *The University in Ruins* (Readings 1996). It is not my aim here to rehearse the already well-rehearsed critiques of the contemporary academy or to present another survey of the blasted landscape of higher education (see Webb 2018 for this). Adopting a more unusual approach, my aim is rather to offer a philosophical exploration of the structure of *hope* to be found within Critical University Studies. This speaks, I think, to questions of some significance. Given the realities of what has variously been termed the corporate (Tuchman 2009), neoliberal (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000), colonizing (la paperson 2017), imperial (Chaterjee and Maira 2014), institutionally racist (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021), toxic (Smyth 2017), zombie (Murphy 2017) and, indeed, hopeless (Hall 2021) university, is it possible to find hope amid the ruins? If it is, where can it be found and how might it be mobilized?

Critical University Studies, as presented here, is a project of social hope. This is no small thing. Commentators have frequently noted the *privatization* of hope characteristic of late capitalism (Aronson 2017; Thompson 2013; Tiainen et al. 2019). It is increasingly difficult to conceptualize hope in social terms; as a *social* endeavor directed toward a *social* good. The public realm is no longer perceived as the locus of struggle and change. Hope has withdrawn to the private sphere and sets its sights on individual notions of getting ahead. As Thompson wryly notes: "The dreams of a better world are dreams of a better world for oneself or one's family" (2013, p. 5). To the extent that any hope at all is invested in the university as such, for many this is the hope of career advancement and individual betterment (Fleming 2021). Or perhaps, as Allen (2017) has suggested, a "weak cynicism" pervades the academy. The cynical educator knows full well that the university has lost all value and meaning beyond the reproduction of itself within the regime of capital but cannot, in spite of themselves, quite shake loose the desperate hope they place in an educational good.

For Allen, "[t]he great curiosity of contemporary education is that hope and belief limp on" (2017, p. 97). But that they do. And not just the privatized hopes for individual advancement or the desperate hopes of the cynic who, for fear of fully embracing nihilism and the absurd, feels the need to cling onto something. There are those still who seek to mobilize and bolster social hope and there are those still whose hopes are grounded in something other than weakness or desperation. It is these hopes to which the present paper turns. To this end, I draw on the philosophy of hope to develop a conceptual mapping of the structure of hope underpinning the project of Critical University Studies (hereafter CUS). I draw in particular on readings of hope within analytical philosophy and explore CUS as a project of *hoping against hope*. The bulk of the paper then consists of a focused study of the anatomy of such hoping via an exploration of its key constituent concepts and practices: justificatory rationale, mental imaging, pathways and agency thinking, and

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[1] *Workplace* is an open access activist journal founded in 1998 by Marc Bousquet, author of one of the defining early texts in the field of CUS (Bousquet 2008). The two "Critical University Studies" book series were established in 2016 and have, at the time of writing, published 33 books between them. Although Jeffrey Williams is the first to have used the term "Critical University Studies" in a published paper, Heather Steffen (a graduate student and colleague of Williams at Carnegie Mellon University) had organized a panel under the banner at the 2011 MLA annual convention. For Williams, CUS emerged as a response to the specific context of neoliberalism and marketization (which is the reading being adopted here). Steffen, however, traces it back much earlier, to Upton Sinclair's critique of the conditions of academic labor in *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Higher Education* (1923) (see Steffen 2010).

cognitive resolve. This has value in and of itself in that it contributes to a richer conceptualization of CUS. It also contributes to the philosophy of hope by exploring how key concepts deployed within the field play out in the ideas and practices of a contemporary political project. In other words, the study of CUS offered here illustrates what "hoping against hope" looks like as a practical enterprise. More urgently, and politically, however, it helps us better to evaluate the ways in which such hope might be mobilized. This is not without its problems and the paper concludes by offering a critical assessment of the project of CUS, locating its potential within a wider strategy of "non-reformist reform".

## Hope and Critical University Studies: Preliminary Definitions

In its broadest sense—in the sense that it can be distinguished from belief, desire, expectation, wish, optimism, faith, etc.—hope can be understood as a positive orientation, open to disappointment, toward an uncertain and future good. Hope is also, however, a complex category of human experience. Zembylas is right to suggest that hope "needs to be recognized as an act that is situated in socially, historically and politically specific conditions… orientations to the future cannot be viewed apart from the social and cultural patterns that give rise and materialize specific capacities to aspire" (2022, p. 37). For Ghassan Hage (2003; 2016), the question is not whether people possess "hope" or how they can be given "hope". It is rather what *kinds* of hope are produced by and unevenly distributed within society. Hope is a situated practice (Cruz 2014) and a multidimensional and highly differentiated experience (Standish 2019; Webb 2024). Like others writing in the field (e.g. Jansen 2016; Wrangel 2021), my own work has highlighted how the construction and distribution of hope can operate as a tool of governance (Webb 2019). Hope comes in different forms, with uneven effects, and there are different ways of governing through hope.

It is important, then, to avoid simplistic readings. Hope is not a singular undifferentiated experience nor does it operate unquestioningly as a virtue. It is neither an unmitigated good nor a moral or educational imperative. Hope is experienced in different modes situated in different contexts, and these different modes of hoping will best be understood in terms of different conceptual matrices (for more on this, see Webb 2007; 2013). My argument in this particular paper is that the hope of CUS can be understood as a form of "hoping against hope" and that concepts drawn from analytical philosophy prove useful in helping to explore and unpack this. To hope against hope is to hope for an outcome one considers both extremely important and extremely unlikely. This is often situated in the context of a trial; hoping in the face of challenging circumstances which place one's values or wellbeing under threat. These are "very strong hopes for extremely improbable outcomes" (Martin 2014, p. 141). To take an example, "hoping against hope" is a common point of reference within radical environmental activism, where the objective towards which activists' hope is directed (e.g. global decarbonization) seems almost impossible to attain but the significance attached to attaining it keeps the hope alive (see, for example, Alberro 2021; Gunderson 2020; Macy and Johnstone 2012; Stuart 2020; Williston 2015).

While initially coined to describe a field of criticism focused on the United States, Critical University Studies has geographical reach extending to the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other countries with Higher Education systems impacted by neoliberalism and the New Public Management.[2] CUS is typically defined in relation to the

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[2] In addition to Williams and Bousquet, a key figure in the USA is Christopher Newfield (Series Editor, with Williams, of the Johns Hopkins CUS Book Series). Newfield is central to the CUS project, writing

objects of its critical ire—the marketization and corporatization of the university, managerialism and the deteriorating conditions of academic labor, threats to academic freedom, escalating debt and other problems faced by students (Morrish and Saunston 2019; Petrina and Ross 2014; Samuels 2017; Williams 2012; 2015). What also unites writers in the field, however, is the project of reclaiming, recovering, reimagining and generally working for the renewal of the public university. This I take as the objective of hope, as that toward which hopeful activities are directed. This is especially true of CUS *since* its naming in 2011/12 (to designate a collective project with a distinctive mission) as opposed to the texts collected under its name published before then (more concerned with unmasking and dissecting the inner workings and logics of the academy). The main focus of this paper, then, is that aspect of CUS referred to by Newfield as "the project of rebuilding the public university" (Newfield 2016a, p. 161).

"The public university" operates as the short-hand signifier for a vision of higher education as a public good with a public purpose. Notwithstanding differences of tone and emphasis within CUS, there is a shared understanding of the university as a public good—aligned with values such as equality, inclusion, and social justice—with an important role to play in fostering conditions for individual and social understanding, development, flourishing, mobility, and freedom.[3] This is precisely what is taken to be under threat, however, and discussions are often animated by a profound sense of grief, anger, and despair. What had once been a "priceless asset" (Ingold 2020) serving the interests of humanity (Darder 2019) now faces extinction as decades of neoliberal brutalism have destroyed the very foundations of the public university. Reclaiming the public university "may seem impossible", requiring as it does a break with forty years of policy and an entirely new political economy (Newfield 2021, p. 85). Although the objective of hope "is extremely unlikely ever to materialise", its significance for human wellbeing is such that it must be fought for (Barnett 2013, p. 110). Thankfully, "even as universities are increasingly under attack by

Footnote 2 (continued)

extensively across different media and establishing the influential blogpost *Remaking the University* (now called *Remaking II: Long Revolution*) around which many in the field coalesce. In the UK, Stefan Collini (2012; 2015; 2017) and Thomas Docherty (2015; 2016; 2018) have offered important interventions and Liz Morrish's blogpost *Academic Irregularities* helped to establish CUS as a field (see Morrish and Staunton 2019, pp. 23–46 for a survey of CUS in the UK). Two edited collections titled *Resisting Neoliberalism in Higher Education* (published in 2019 as part of the Palgrave Critical University Studies book series) offer perspectives from Australia. For South Africa, see Fataar et al. (2023) for a fascinating symposium. There is, of course, work in the field stretching across many other countries. In each case, the field itself has been shaped in response to particular contextual conditions. The present paper speaks primarily to CUS in the USA and UK, countries where the field has taken hold (with an explicit owning of the name) most firmly. As Singh and Vora rightly highlight in their critical survey of CUS (2023, p. 43), there are absences and silences to be addressed: more ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches are needed that foreground the experiences of marginalized scholars, and more transnational studies are required, especially in and by the postcolonial Global South.

[3] "The public university" is an imperfect term. It masks differences between higher education funding regimes and (in the US especially) suggests a misleading distinction between "public" and "private" universities. Nonetheless, it is a term commonly used within CUS to capture the broad parameters of the objective towards which hopes are directed—see, for example, *The Public University as a Real Utopia*, one of the most recent books published in the Palgrave CUS series (Aidnik 2024). For differing perspectives on universities as public goods, see the special issues of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (Volume 57(2) 2025) and *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education* (Volume 6(3) 2024). Here one finds slightly more complex and nuanced formulations: "higher education as a public *and* private good for *the* public good" (Petrovic 2025), for example, or higher education as "the good for multiple publics" (Shumar, Robinson and Bengtsen 2024).

neoliberal and neoconservative forces, hope remains for its resurgence as a public good" (Petrovic 2025, p. 148). The task ahead, as the theme of the inaugural Critical University Studies Conference (2024) tells us, is to *Rage against the machine: Remaking universities for hopeful futures* (https://chelps.eduhk.hk/cusc2024).

## Hope: The Bare Bones Model

Hope has received a lot of attention within analytical philosophy. In John Patrick Day's classic formulation, "a hope is identical with a desire plus a probability estimate", where "A desires in some degree that Q, and A believes that the probability of Q is > 0 < 1" (Day 1969, p. 89; 1991, p. 37). Hope is thus directed toward an objective (a desire) which is neither impossible (hence a probability estimate > 0) nor certain (hence a probability estimate < 1). "Hoping against hope" in Day's terminology becomes *A fervently desiring Q but assigning a probability estimate close to zero*. Many have pointed to the insufficiency of this "bare bones" or "lowest common denominator" model of hope (Snow 2019; Pettit 2004). As Martin (2014) notes, two people may each fervently desire Q and assign a probability estimate close to zero and yet one may hope for Q and the other not. In our case, a great many people likely *do* strongly desire the renewal of the public university and consider it unlikely but *do not* place their hope in it or engage in hopeful activities toward it. Hope is thus something more than a desire + a probability estimate: it is an orientation or a stance one takes toward one's situation. What is it, then, that structures the hope of those who hope against hope for a significant outcome in the face of extremely poor odds? And importantly, is it possible to mobilize the hope of others, shifting the stance they take towards their situation? Seeking to develop the bare bones model, a host of additional notions have been proposed in order to capture a thicker conception of hope. Here I draw on some of the more influential of these—justificatory rationale (Martin 2014), mental imaging (Bovens 1999), agency and pathways thinking (Snyder 2002), and cognitive resolve (Petit 2004)—in an attempt to understand the hoping against hope characteristic of those seeking to reclaim the public university.

## Hoping against Hope: Justificatory Rationale

For Adrienne Martin (2014), hope involves standing ready to offer a *justificatory rationale* for the hopeful activities (cognitive, affective, behavioural) one engages in in pursuit of one's desired objective. Key here is how one represents to oneself (and others) the desired objective and the associated probability estimate. One person may look at a situation and say "I grant you it is *possible*, but the chance is only one in a thousand!" whereas another says "I grant you the chance is only one in a thousand, but it is *possible*!"" (Martin 2014, p. 45). The hopeful person represents the attractive features of the desired objective, and frames the possibility of attainment, in ways that *license* hopeful activities in pursuit of that one in a thousand chance. This is not always easy. Williston (2015) notes that hoping against hope is an exceedingly difficult psychological state to sustain. For Williston, one needs to represent the hope against hope (in his case for global decarbonization) as a moral duty grounded in the claims of justice that the people of the future place on us. He argues that "our recognition of the duty—the moral reason—can sustain the hope. Indeed without

the sustaining moral reason, the hope will fade to a wish and is unlikely, as such, to be robustly motivating" (2015, p. 139).

What, then, is the justificatory rationale for hoping against hope for the renewal of the public university? There are parallels again here with radical environmental activism. The imperative claim that *it's still not too late to save the university* (see, for example, Collini 2017; Newfield 2023) is structured around a sense of urgency on the one hand and an emphasis on the meaning and value of what is being lost on the other. We are thus mobilized to fight a rearguard action against *The Assault on Universities* (Bailey and Freedman 2011) and *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Giroux 2014) while constantly being reminded of the necessity of the university for sustaining meaningful civilized life. Appealing to the moral duty placed upon us by future generations, Thomas Docherty proclaims that: "There is a war on for the future of the university, and the students of today and tomorrow need to win it" (2015, p. 19). Tim Ingold adds: "For anyone of good conscience, who cares about fashioning a world fit for coming generations to inhabit, no task could be more urgent" (2020, p. 47). Why? Because the university constitutes "the centre of an ecology" and we need to recognize the role it plays in enabling us "to inhabit a world of constant change" (Docherty 2015, 40, p. 9). The survival of the university is thus tied to ecological survival, to the survival of "the larger social and political ecology" of which it is part (Docherty 2020).

Like Docherty, the work of Christopher Newfield is devoted in part to articulating a justificatory rationale for placing one's hope against hope in the public university. For Newfield, their survival as public goods is essential "in order to help produce the new knowledges that the world needs to heal and transform itself over the next thirty to fifty years" (Newfield 2023, p. 2). Indeed, "the public university's unique product—low-cost, no-debt, high quality university learning on a mass scale" underpins a "collective enlightenment" that "is the only thing that will solve the planet's problems" (2016b, pp. 16–17). Continuing with the ecological theme, it is common to find the language of conservation being mobilized as a rationale for hope. As Mittleman tells us,

> hope is not always about change. *It is also about conserving the practices and institutions that support meaning, which have been inherited from the past and still endure in the present*. Hope can be about the defence of meaning in the face of change (2009, 14).

In addition to its necessity in the face of future challenges, the public university is presented as fundamental to preserving the fabric of democratic life (Manathunga and Bottrell 2019b; O'Neill and Smith 2022). More than anyone perhaps, the work of Stefan Collini (2012, 2015, 2017, 2018) has emphasized this. In one of his favorite sentences, he says of public universities: "They have become an important medium—perhaps the single most important institutional medium—for conserving, understanding, extending, and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage of mankind" (Collini 2012, p. 198; 2015, p. 33).

The justificatory rationale licencing and sustaining hopeful activities is thus that universities oriented first and foremost toward the public good are essential for our very ecological survival, for enhancing our capacity to confront the "huge catalogue of challenges facing the world—of disease, illiteracy and unduly limited education, climate change, dire poverty, lack of capability and basic resource, misunderstandings across communities, excessive use of the earth's resources, energy depletion and so on" (Barnett 2011, p. 452). The public funding of universities is seen as crucial here in ensuring that they remain devoted to disinterested research (Newfield 2016b, p. 5). And raising awareness of their

distinctive value becomes key to mobilizing mass, collective, social hope for the renewal of the public university (Collini 2015, p. 32). As Collini puts it: "we need to do a better job of explaining to wider audiences—audiences beyond universities but beyond narrow policy-making circles also—what universities are really for and why their true long-term value to society is increasingly jeopardized" (Collini 2017, p. 60).

## Hoping against Hope: Mental Imaging

A key element in the process of representing the desired outcome in a way that justifies a practical stance toward it is "mental imaging". For Luc Bovens, mental imaging—defined as "devotion of mental energy to what it would be like if some projected state of the world were to materialize" (1999, p. 674)—is a necessary component of hope. One distinction between those who *desire* the reclaiming of the public university but do not *hope* for it is that those who simply desire it expend no mental energy imagining what it would be like to attain the desired outcome. There is a vague abstract desire (which may nonetheless still be a strong desire) but very little time and effort given over to thinking about it. There could be various reasons for this, including preoccupation with other matters and intentionally refraining from mental imaging to avoid future frustration (Bovens 1999, p. 674). Why devote time and energy to what may likely prove a lost cause? One might possess a strong inchoate desire for the renewal of the public university but there are simply too many tasks at hand requiring attention to bother imagining what this might entail.

A positive feedback loop exists between mental imaging and standing ready to offer a justificatory rationale. While the justificatory rationale provides reasons to engage in mental imaging, the mental imagining is in part constitutive of the justificatory rationale. Plenty of mental energy has been devoted to imagining what it would be like if remaking the public university were to materialize. This is partly backward looking—often very consciously appealing to a past that has been lost (as in the work of Collini, for example) and positively harnessing the power of nostalgia (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019a)—but also partly seizing the opportunity to rethink the public university anew: "we need to look ahead: both to defend what is most progressive about the higher education system we have inherited and to imagine new policies, practices and structures for universities on which to focus our campaigns" (Bailey and Freedman 2011, p. 6). Barnett (2023) and Newfield (2021) each stress that multiple paths lie ahead of the university and both regard it as an important task to devote mental energies to depicting what these possibilities (positive and negative) would be like if they were to materialize.

Erik Olin Wright's notion of "real utopias" has been drawn on to offer visions of a radical renewal of the public university that are presented as both visionary and yet realizable (Aidnik 2024; Aidnik and Sharma 2024; Suoranta and FitzSimmons 2017). It is the work of Ronald Barnett, however, that stands out in terms of the hopeful activity of mental imagining.[4] For Barnett:

[4] Barnett explicitly eschews the "forlorn terminology" he sees in the work of writers such as Readings and Docherty (Barnett 2022, p. 3). Nonetheless, his critique of the "performative" or "entrepreneurial" university sits comfortably alongside theirs and his work on "the ecological university" aligns perfectly with the project of reimagining a university for the public good as an objective of hope. Barnett's work establishing the Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society is significant. The pages of its journal *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, together with the book series *Debating Higher Education: Philosophical Perspectives* (of which Barnett is Series Editor), contain some of the most hope-filled work seeking to reimagine the contours of the future university. It could be argued that the publication of Barnett's *Being a University* (2010) marks a shift of register within critical work on the university. While hitherto focused on

As I see it, the task ahead is to develop feasible utopias. That is to say, it is to develop ideas not as to how the university might be in the best of all possible worlds but rather how it might be its best in this world. Such ideas would be utopian in that they would be unlikely to be realised given the empirical character of the world, with its power structures, interests and ideologies. On the other hand, such ideas would also be feasible in that we can identify instances of those ideas being instantiated to a certain extent—at least, embryonically—in the world even now (2011, 440).

Barnett has been prolific in giving expression to his idea of "feasible utopias", to articulating (mental imaging) positive possibilities for the unfolding structure, culture, and mission of the university. This he sees as essential for "working out a social hope for the university" (2011, p. 445). Framed by his overarching notion of the ecological university—a university that takes seriously its entwinement with larger global ecosystems and approaches this entanglement with an ethic of care (Barnett 2011; 2013, 2018, 2023)—Barnett glimpses spaces of potentiality opening up and insists that depictions of "unremitting gloom" are not the only readings of the university (Barnett 2019, p. 66). Identifying interstitial traces of otherness amid the ruinous present, we are offered mental imagining of various forms that the "a university-for-the-other" might take: "the thoughtful university" (Barnett 2019), "the creative university" (Barnett 2020), "the activist university" (Barnett 2021), "the socially responsible university" (Barnett and Guzman-Valenzuela 2022), all of which have the potential "to help improve the world and to enable it to reach a state of heightened wellbeing" (Barnett 2013, p. 39).

Exercises of mental imagining are not enough, of course, to bring about that which is being imagined and hoped for. They are, however, considered necessary for the wider mobilization of hope. For Barnett, one of his aims in developing feasible utopian visions of the university is to paint "a picture sufficiently detailed and robust for others to take it up in their own imaginations and act upon it" (2013, p. 26). Mental imaging, if done well, can offer an inspirational "practical poetry" by means of which the power and force of the imagining makes the thing imagined a real possibility (ibid.). For others, what is important about mental imaging is the way it opens out onto pathways thinking (Fleming 2021, p. 161). As Facer and Newfield put it:

Futures are coordination devices. They are central to the creation and sustenance of political projects and material practices. They act as programs around which people, tools, finances, and organizations are mobilized… The structured imagining of futures is a precursor to political mobilization, to the coordination of action, and to the creation of path ways to new possibilities (Facer and Newfield 2022, 79).

## Hoping against Hope: Pathways and Agency Thinking

For Victoria McGreer, "hoping always has an aura of agency around it because hoping is essentially a way of positively and expansively inhabiting our agency, whether in thought or in deed" (McGreer 2004, p. 104). A very clear and concerted attempt to explore this expansive inhabiting of agency—and by far the most influential reading of hope within the

Footnote 4 (continued)

offering a detailed and trenchant critique of developments within higher education, this has since been supplemented by efforts to imagine alternative futures and to plot pathways to their realization.

field of psychology—is offered by Rick Snyder. He defines hope as "goal-directed thinking, in which people appraise their capability to produce workable routes to goals (pathways thinking), along with their potential to initiate and sustain movement via a pathway (agency thinking)" (Snyder 1989, p. 143). Hope is a cognitive activity that involves setting concrete goals, finding pathways to achieve those goals, and tapping one's willpower or agency to move along these pathways (Snyder 2002). To hope is to perceive oneself as capable of producing plausible routes to one's desired goals and to perceive oneself as capable of achieving one's goals by moving along the identified pathways (Snyder 2000).

The work of many within the broad field of CUS can be read as an attempt to engage in sustained pathways thinking and to construct a collective subject capable of navigating these pathways. Christopher Newfield, for example, has taken various opportunities to outline step-by-step the processes by which the public university can be recovered and the strategies needed to realize this (e.g. 2016a; 2016b; 2023; 2024). In its fullest articulation (Newfield 2016b, pp. 310–40), this comprises an eight-stage recovery cycle: stage (1) the university is recognized as a public good; stage (2) reduce public subsidies to outside partners to zero; stage (3) public university tuition is capped and reduced to zero; stage (4) public funding is reset to replace tuition; stage (5) student debt is reduced to zero; stage (6) universities rebuild educational core for creative capabilities; stage (7) equal and higher overall learning across race and class: stage (8) creative capabilities increase pressure for productivity wage. This is a prime example of pathways thinking, with universities embracing the need for confrontation and becoming the architects of their own recovery accompanied by the insistent assertion that *we can fix things*!

Newfield has also been instrumental is seeking to shape a sense of collective agency, to construct a collective subject with the "militant organizational capabilities" (2023, p. 3) to move us along the pathways. Indeed, when Jeffrey Williams first gave the name of Critical University Studies to a nascent field in 2012, the very aim was to create a collective force that would engage in hope-driven activities "to change policy through direct action in unions or the student loan movement, as well as in reportage, analysis, and pragmatic proposals" (Williams 2015, p. 152). Barnett, too (2022, 2024), has been working to create an active field of the philosophy of higher education (both in thought and in deed via the establishment of the Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society) to name a collective endeavor that not only resists the pernicious features of the performative university but also works to construct the university anew (see Krzeski 2023). For his part, Newfield has been seeking to bring learned societies together under an umbrella organization that he sees as having real force. In the rousing conclusion to his 2023 MLA Presidential Address, he declares: "We organize, we explain, we advocate, we celebrate—relentlessly, until the world of higher education and well beyond is unable to forget about us" (2023, p. 17).

## Hoping against Hope: Cognitive Resolve

Hoping against hope, then, calls on the hoper to engage in collective organizing to influence policy. It also calls on the hoper to act with cognitive resolve. This is a concept first introduced by Philip Pettit (2004). In cases of hoping against hope, when the chances of attaining one's hoped-for objective are very slim, there is a strong possibility that the hoper will lose heart and start withdrawing from hopeful activities. How does one keep going in these circumstances? For Pettit, those who maintain their energies and their agency thinking when hoping against hope do so by acting *as if* their hoped-for objective stands a good

chance of being realized (2004, p. 158). Forming the hope that an unlikely objective has a high chance of obtaining if one engages in effective action "frees you from the bleakness of beliefs that would reduce you to numbed inaction" and prevents our "collapse in a heap of despair and uncertainty, beaten down by cascades of inimical fact" (Pettit 2004, p. 158–60). In situations such as these: "To have hope is to have something we might describe as cognitive resolve" (ibid., 159).

The work of the late Mike Neary stands as a testament to cognitive resolve. In keeping with the mission of CUS, his Student as Producer initiative (at the University of Lincoln, UK, 2010–2014) sought to *reclaim* the nineteenth-century vision of a liberal-humanist university, to situate this within a radical politics seeking to *recreate* the university as an institution of the common and thus to *recover* the university as a radical project (Neary 2010; 2012, 2016, 2020). Fully cognizant of the pragmatic realities of the corporate-imperial university, Neary pushed the project with the absolute conviction that establishing staff-student collaborative research as the organizing principle for the whole university was "a version of revolutionary reformism" that would "radicalise the mainstream" (Neary 2020). When this failed to materialize—"Student as Producer did not transform the neoliberal university–it was recuperated within the capitalist university" (Neary 2020, p. 36)—Neary did not lose heart. Continuing his involvement in projects seeking to establish alternative models of higher education provision, Neary's work with the Social Science Centre in Lincoln extended to attempts in the UK to establish a Co-operative University (Neary 2017; Neary and Wynn 2017). In many ways, Neary was the embodiment of Beckett's infamous "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett 1983, p. 1).[5]

Hoping against hope are those who act in the conviction, against all evidence to the contrary, that pedagogical initiatives within the university stand a good chance of transforming the university itself. Henry Giroux is another good example. In spite of decades spent critiquing the corporatization and militarization of higher education, together with its authoritarian management, Giroux is still, now, in spite of everything, speaking the language of hope, the hope of reclaiming the public university as a democratic project (Giroux 2020; 2022, 2023). Indeed, critical pedagogy as a movement is characterized by cognitive resolve. The essays contained in the two-volume collection *Resisting Neoliberalism in Higher Education* catalog a diverse range of small-scale "everyday resistances" enacted with cognitive resolve, with the specific aim of prizing open "spaces of hope" (Manathunga and Bottrell 2019a, p. 14). The editors of the two volumes tell us that: "A problem for the project of neoliberalism in universities is that academic resistances are fundamentally continuing assertions of the idea of the university as a contributor to public good" (Manathunga and Bottrell 2019b, p. 193). While the chances are slim that any particular act of everyday resistance will reclaim the humanist mission of the university from the grips of neoliberal managerialism, they are enacted in the hope against hope that transformative

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[5] This is consistent with Paulo Freire's characterization of hope as "the patiently impatient wait" (Freire 1972, p. 64; 1996, p. 154; 2007, p. 81). On the one hand, hope is spurred on by an impatient No to injustice that compels one to act; on the other it is characterized by stubbornness, persistence, and patience in the face of the obstacles one inevitably encounters. As the references to critical pedagogy in this section illustrate, there are affinities between Freire's philosophy of hope and the "hoping against hope" of CUS. However, the anatomy of this hoping against hope is better understood using concepts drawn from Anglo-American analytical philosophy. There is so much that is central to Freire's understanding of hope (e.g. the radical unfinishedness of the human condition, humanization as an ontological vocation) that is absent from (or at the very best, marginal to) discussions within CUS. For a fuller d and pedagogy of hope, see Webb (2010; 2012; 2013; 2025).

change may culminate from many specific and nuanced acts. As the editors again remark: "These "everyday resistances" keep hope alive and "may also coalesce into larger projects" linked to a broader "politics of change" (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019b p. 318; 2019a, 2).

Hoping against hope in this way is to practice a group level version of cognitive resolve. As Pettit puts it: "We make a ceremony of each agreeing to act as if it were the case that others will act in corresponding ways and as if the overall effect of our concerted action will be to bring about a certain desired result" (2004, p. 163). We act with cognitive resolve in the hope against hope that others will join us, that scattered individual practices of hope coalesce into collective hope. In his review of the *Resisting Neoliberalism* volumes, Neil Ballantyne notes that, while they offer many fruitful examples of micro-resistances, little is said about how higher education might be reinvented at the policy level or how academics might organize collectively (Ballantyne 2020). This is why the kind of everyday resistances outlined in the volumes—together with other texts offering examples of pedagogical resistance at a classroom or course level (e.g. Coté et al. 2007; Hammond 2017)—need to be read alongside the collective organizing at policy level advocated by Newfield, Williams, Barnett, Collini, and others. One could in fact argue that cognitive resolve is underpinned by the justificatory rationale, the mental imaging, the pathways and the agency thinking one also engages in when one hopes against hope.

## Hoping against Hope: Mobilization

The ultimate aim of those working in the field of CUS is the mass, collective mobilization of hope. From the very naming of the field itself to all the mental imaging, the pathways and agency thinking, and the time spent expounding the justificatory rationale, the energies of CUS are directed toward mobilizing social hope. Various manifestos have been written to this end (Halffman and Radder 2015; Reclaiming our University 2016; University of the Future 2018) and various lobbying groups have been established to organize and carry forward the work (e.g. Campaign for the Defence of the Public University, Higher Education Labor United, Council for the Defence of British Universities). The extent to which these efforts are likely to bear fruit depends, at least in part, on whether we (you, me, others, us) are convinced by the justificatory rationale, are inspired by the real and feasible utopian imaginings offered to us, are persuaded that pathways can be found or that collective agency exists to navigate such pathways. Addressing these questions, I offer a few points here by way of critical evaluation before concluding on a positive note.

Firstly, the justificatory rationale has rightly received a great deal of criticism. The typical CUS narrative positions the university as an a priori "good", reaching the zenith of its goodness in the golden age of the 1960s and 1970s only to face a neoliberal assault from which, for the sake of our very futures, it must be saved. Much of the work is therefore driven by a "salvific methodological imperative" (Boggs and Mitchel 2018, p. 436) which occludes the ways in which the public university is and always has operated as a site of reproduction, extraction, violence, exclusion, and oppression founded on colonial dispossession and inscribed with carceral logics (Chaterjee and Maira 2014; Harney and Moten 2013; Kelley 2016; Rodriguez 2012; Stein 2022; Wilder 2013). In contrast—and in opposition—to CUS, a new field of Abolitionist University Studies has emerged which challenges not only the salvific justificatory rationale and mental imaging but also the pathways and agency thinking underpinning CUS' hoping against hope (Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell and Schwarz-Weinstein 2019). Rather than reclaiming the public university through critique

and policy advocacy, an abolitionist approach seeks to hack, dismantle, take apart, and tear down the structures of the academy and to repurpose them in the service of black, indigenous, poor, queer, disabled futurities (Grande 2018; la paperson 2017; Rodriguez 2020; Stein 2019; Meyerhoff 2019).[6]

Secondly, there are serious limitations to the mental imaging offered by notions of "real" or "feasible" utopias. Wright's Real Utopias Project was self-consciously "partial", rejecting totalizing visions of systemic change in favour of "specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions" (Wright 2010, p. 246; 1996, x).[7] Barnett's prolific writings on "feasible" utopianism, together with Aidnik's application of Wright's conceptual apparatus to envisioning "the public university as a real utopia" (Aidnik 2024; Aidnik and Sharma 2024), reject "blueprint" utopianism (the derisive term often applied by critics to utopian visions of a fully reconstituted society) and focus on re-imaging a single institution (Barnett 2013, p. 111). Education, however, cannot be abstracted from the social, economic, and political relations in which it is embedded. Any utopian vision for education needs to be nestled within a wider vision of the social totality. Without this, currently existing socio-economic "realities" are taken as a given and set the parameters of "feasibility" within which the utopian imagination is constrained to operate (see Webb 2016). Barnett's mental imaging is also grounded in an exclusively Western philosophy and thus (however unintentionally) risks foreclosing possibilities that lie outside/beyond dominant ways of knowing. As Sharon Stein rightly notes: "limiting our engagement to alternatives that can be deemed feasible from within existing ontological categories also limits the available possibilities. This is particularly concerning given that those dominant categories sanction the invisibilization of colonial violences that subsidize existing possibilities for existence" (2019, p. 152).

Thirdly, the pathways thinking within CUS has a tendency toward a weak meliorism. Returning to parallels drawn earlier between the hope of reclaiming the public university and the hopes articulated by some radical environmental activists (REAs), the analysis offered by Stuart (2020) is instructive. In her study of XR, she describes how many REAs had lost hope in a future without global temperature rises and species extinction but goes on to say that "there is still a possibility for a less bad future that is worth fighting for. This requires a new kind of hope that is not blind…it accepts the reality of a hotter and more catastrophic world, but actively works to save whatever can still be saved" (Stuart 2020, p. 497). Fiala likewise claims that "a melioristic and pragmatic sensibility should prevail" as we adjust our sights and revise our understanding of what we may hope for (2016, p. 42). This melioristic hope for saving whatever can still be saved runs through some of the pathways thinking one finds within CUS. Although Newfield articulates his eight-stage recovery cycle, and stresses the importance of visionary futures thinking, he also argues for mobilizing hope around the more modest and self-consciously reformist goal of tuition free

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[6] These critiques have not gone unchallenged. Talking of public universities in the 1960s and 1970s, Newfield claims that they offered mass quality education, deep personal development, egalitarian social inclusion, and the possibility of "a solidarity society" (2016a, p. 163). Defending these claims against abolitionist critics, he adds that while public universities may not have fully realized these goals, "they once came within a country mile" (ibid., 165). Ingold likewise defends the public university against abolitionist critics, rejecting the idea that they are "so tarnished by the historical legacy of colonialism" that they are beyond recovery (2020, p. 46).

[7] The Real Utopias Project led by Erik Olin Wright stretched over twenty years and six edited volumes, each exploring real utopias in action across various social fields. Wright's own reflections on the project can be found in Wright (2010). A good critique is offered by Riley (2020).

college (Newfield 2021). Conceding that this will do nothing to address the classed and racialized inequalities inscribed within higher education systems—"college would become cheaper but also remain as unjust as it is today" (Newfield 2021, p. 79)—he also argues that this "half-way measure" could lead to further things (ibid., 80). For his part, Williams signals "free tuition" as a rallying cry, stressing that "CUS is realist rather than idealist" (2015, p. 152). As with REAs, one wonders whether sights might be lowered too far when working from the premise that "meliorism can be considered a mechanism for providing hope" (Lueck 2007, p. 259).

Looked at more positively, however, the notion of "non-reformist reform" has become popular in discussions mediating between reformism and abolitionism (e.g. Akbar 2023; Engler and Engler 2021). A strategy of non-reformist reforms seeks, by means of partial victories gained through a succession of attacks, to weaken capitalism, unsettle its equilibrium, modify relations of power, and intensify counter-hegemonic struggles (Gorz 1967). Non-reformist reform embraces the need for broad coalition building in order to remake the rules, relations, and institutions through which we live (Gilmore 2007). As such, it operates as "a framework for reconceiving reform: not as an end goal but as struggles to reconstitute the terms of life" (Akbar 2023, p. 2507). The project of "remaking the university" might be viewed in these terms *less* as a discrete singular reformist goal and *more* as a node in a network of struggles across which alliances need to be built.[8] One sees this being enacted (to varying degrees) in the practice of scholar-activism. On the one hand, scholar activism can be read in abolitionist terms as subversive, insurgent praxis through which the technologies of the university (access to library resources, printing, hardware and software, teaching spaces, time for research, grant funding) are stolen and repurposed for decolonizing and democratizing ends (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021; Routledge and Derickson 2015). On the other hand, this is accompanied by efforts to "reimagine" and "fight over the very function of the university" so that it supports radical engagements with the social world (Russell 2015, p. 227). It is thus a dual strategy of seeking to transform the university at the same time as hacking it in the service of forging alliances with insurrectionary desires and movements (Choudry 2020; Derickson and Routledge 2015). Reclaiming the public university might best be seen, then, as a form of organizing aligned to, and in the service of, broader struggles to build new democratic spaces and engage in an ideological and material project of world-building.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented Critical University Studies as a project of social hope. It is a project oriented positively toward an uncertain future good (reimagining, reclaiming, and rebuilding the public university) and offers a justificatory rationale that licenses a cluster of other hopeful practices (mental imaging, pathways and agency thinking, cognitive resolve).

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[8] Akbar (2023) identifies three intersecting areas of struggle: abolition and decarceration; decolonization and decommodification; and democratization. Within these, there are movements with clear affinities to the project of CUS—movements to cancel debt, campaigns for housing as a public good, broader struggles to rehabilitate collectivist notions such as nationalization, taxation, and redistribution of wealth. A strategy of non-reformist reform would see alliances forged across diverse coalitions including, for example, prison abolitionism, campaigns to defund the police, the BDS movement, Black Lives Matter, Palestine solidarity campaigns and encampments, feminist and LGBTQI + movements, indigenous struggles and campaigns (such as that resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline).

The ultimate aim of these practices is to mobilize collective hope in the service of realizing the hoped-for objective. The justificatory rationale instils a sense of urgency as we are told that reclaiming the public university is essential for our very ecological survival; the mental imagining proffers a practical poetry designed to inspire and ignite our own hope-filled imaginings of what a university-for-the-other might look like; pathways and agency thinking persuades us that workable routes can be found to achieve our objective and that effective collective agency exists to navigate these routes; cognitive resolve sustains us as we act and keeps the hope against hope alive that individual practices will coalesce into collective praxis.

In offering a conceptual mapping of the hoping against hope underpinning and driving the project of CUS, my aim here has been threefold. Firstly, to contribute to our understanding of CUS by approaching it from an angle not typically associated with it, i.e. from the perspective of the philosophy of hope. While CUS has been chastised for painting a picture of unremitting gloom replete with forlorn imagery (assault, war, ruins), the project outlined here is one that finds hope amid the ruins and is oriented toward a collective rebuilding. Secondly, to contribute to the philosophy of hope itself by exploring how key concepts deployed within the field play out in the ideas and practices of a contemporary political project. In working through the justificatory rationale, the mental imaging, the pathways and agency thinking, and the cognitive resolve characteristic of CUS, a thicker and richer understanding of these concepts has, I hope, emerged from the discussion. Finally, and most significantly, the key motivation behind this paper is a practical and political one—to unpack CUS' hoping against hope in order to assess whether and how this might be mobilized. A number of issues were raised in this regard relating to the justificatory rationale, the mental imaging, and the pathways and agency thinking; issues problematizing the prospect for wider mobilization. Nonetheless, if conceived less as a discrete project and more as a node in a network of struggles comprising a strategy of non-reformist reform, CUS as "the project of rebuilding the public university" (Newfield 2016a, 161) could play an important role in the broader project of world-building.

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