

Writing a history of now: the Campbell House rent strike

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Abstract

Against a backdrop of unaffordable housing, students from University College London (UCL) undertook rent strikes that won concessions from University landlords. This paper examines one of the first UCL strikes - the dispute at Campbell House Halls of Residence.

The UCL, Cut the Rent (UCL,CTR) group was arguably crucial in this struggle. One of the outward facing tools for organising was the Facebook page - and this paper begins by presenting an account of the strike assembled solely from material posted on this page.

The process of assembling this account is outlined, describing the criteria for inclusion as a source, before drawing on Walter Benjamin and Steven J. Jackson to present the epistemological position that underpins the paper. The historiographical concerns that arise from this process are explored, with Eric Hobsbawm's lecture 'The Present as History' referenced as a basis for these discussions

Feedback on the account by the minority of UCL,CTR activists who engaged with the researcher highlights a desire to construct an accurate narrative - albeit from differing motivations. Finally the narrative presented is closely examined and gaps in the account are highlighted. To demonstrate the limitations of the methodology, these gaps are addressed using material from oral history interviews.

Keywords: Benjamin, Facebook, historiography, Hobsbawm, Jackson, rent, rent strike, social media, strike, student

Introduction

It was against a backdrop of unaffordable housing that students from University College London (UCL) undertook a series of rent strikes that won concessions from University landlords. The UCL, Cut the Rent (UCL,CTR) group was arguably crucial in this struggle, bridging the gap between residents, the student union, radical groups and the wider university populous.

One of the outward facing tools for doing so was the UCL,CTR Facebook Page. Blogging in a previous wave of protest, Paul Mason identified the crucial role of a new social type - the graduate (or soon-to-graduate) with no future, who has “access to social media... so they can express themselves in a variety of situations...” and ensure that “...therefore truth moves faster than lies...” Social

media arguably remains a crucial tool for student activists to network and present counter-narratives that ensure “...propaganda becomes flammable” (Mason, 2011), with the UCL,CTR Facebook Page having over 2,750 Likes at the time of writing in October 2016.

It is in this context that this paper examines one of the first UCL strikes - the dispute at Campbell House Halls of Residence - and seeks to answer three interconnected questions.

1. *What would a history of the rent strikes at Campbell House Halls of Residence look like written solely using the UCL, CTR Facebook Page?*
2. *What opinion would participants from UCL,CTR have of this narrative?*
3. *What would be left unanswered in this account?*

This paper begins by addressing question 1, presenting an account of the strike assembled solely from public material made available via the UCL,CTR Page. It does not present a *definitive* account of the strike and contains minor inaccuracies. Rather it is presented to evidence the narrative assembled using social media and as a source to help contextualise the responses to question 2 and 3. The reader is presented with a redraft of material presented to participants from UCL,CTR for comment in the autumn of 2016.

The process of assembling this account is outlined in the Methodology section that follows, describing the criteria for inclusion as a source before drawing on Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and Jackson’s *Rethinking Repair* to present the epistemological position that underpins the paper. It then addresses some of the historiographical concerns that arise in writing a “history of now”, using Hobsbawm’s text *A History of the Present* as a basis for these discussions.

Question 2 is addressed in the Opinion section. This collates feedback by key activists in UCL,CTR after being presented with the account of the rent strike. Anonimised for ethical reasons, these responses present a critique of the narrative from the position of actors in the events depicted, and highlights that the overwhelming response from the minority who engaged is a desire to construct a more accurate narrative - but with differing motivations for doing so.

Question 3 is addressed in the Analysis section, where the narrative of the rent strike is examined closely and gaps in the information highlighted. In doing so the researcher touches upon micro-level questions related to how UCL,CTR organised. Answers to these questions were largely unavailable from the Facebook Page - and to further underline the limitations of the methodology, interview transcripts are used to begin to fill in these gaps in the researcher's knowledge.

Rationale

The value of this study can be illustrated by two experiences. Greene's presentation of his paper *Thatcherism and Homelessness* at the Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism conference (2016) presented a view of squatting in London during the 1980's seemingly based - primarily - on sources in the 56a Infoshop's archive of radical zines. The perceived over-reliance upon written material led attendees connected to the Advisory Service for Squatters to respond critically, questioning why Greene had not yet engaged in oral history research with those who were involved. This underlined the dangers of over-reliance on one type of source, with new media here analogous to the DIY small press publications that were arguably crucial to radical movements in previous decades. Greene had only told part of the story, as seen through the 'mouthpieces' of the movement. It also highlighted one of the strange experiences inherent to writing modern history – that research may focus on the actors who may become an audience for their work, and seek out active engagement with it.

Despite this there is a need to engage in original research without access to interviewees. During the researcher's Masters study on the International Labour and Trade Union Studies course at Ruskin College, access to interviewees was problematic for colleagues studying movements abroad or controversial topics, meaning that dissertations were occasionally difficult to complete. Actors may be rightly wary of engagement with academia, due to negative experiences, fear of criticism etc - leading to an impasse for the researcher. In this context, research based on publically available information is one way to complete projects, albeit a problematic one as this paper illustrates.

This paper also forms the beginnings of a case study into rent strikes at UCL. Whilst this paper focuses largely on methodology, the narrative of the Campbell House strike has value as a study from which conclusions may be drawn – although this analysis is beyond the scope of this project.

Cost of living

Although this paper focuses on a dispute that resulted primarily from the *standards* of accommodation offered by UCL, it is important to contextualise the general crisis of affordable housing in London.

In 2015, rising accommodation costs continued to outpace increases in earnings. House prices increased in England by 5.8% in the year to May 2015, with the average price in London reaching £503,000 (ONS, 2015). Rent on a two bed room flat was below £1,000 a month in only 4 boroughs, with the Valuation Office outlining that, between 2010-2015, rent on a one bedroom flat had increased by 22% (O'Carroll, 2015). This was paired with a decade of wage depression, estimated (pre-Brexit) to not return to a 2007 peak until at least 2018 (Tily, 2016).

For students in London, a NUS/UniPol reported 26% increase in rent in 2012-13, followed 13% each in 2014-2015 and 2015-16 with an average weekly rent of £225.83 (2016, p. 7). Taking the UK as a whole, the average price of purpose built student accommodation in August 2015 “now represent[ed] 95% of the maximum student loan (Asquith, 2015)”, with one potential student outlining that their accommodation costs left them with a weekly shortfall of £30 (Bachelor, 2015).

It was in this context of unaffordable housing that the Campbell House residents undertook strike action, with 87 strikers from Campbell House West winning a term’s rent in compensation from UCL of £1,386 each (Sherriff, 2015).

The Campbell House Rent Strike¹

Conditions in Halls

The rent strike at Campbell House was not an isolated dispute over poor living conditions. UCL,CTR itself was formed at a Halls Assembly for the Ifor Evans Halls of Residence in Camden in November 2014 and from the outset, campaigned for lower rents and better standards of accommodation. As well as increased hall fees:

...more tangible factors have also played a part within this student movement: broken fridges, toilets and showers, extortionate fines, inequality of conditions between floors and rooms only seem to scratch the surface.²

An Evening Standard expose of conditions at UCL’s Camden Halls showed photos of damaged accommodation, whilst interviewees commented on poorly maintained cookers, broken furniture, windows that let in the cold and the disparities between the quality of kitchen facilities.³ These poor conditions were not limited to UCL accommodation; the location of Imperial College’s Woodward Hall was described in less than flattering terms⁴ whilst SOAS students living in Kings Cross undertook a rent strike of their own in April with one student explaining:

¹ See Hedges, P (2017), *Rent Strike May Day*, <http://ruskin.academia.edu/PhilHedges> for a more accessible revised account of the strike, particularly sections 8-10.

² <http://anticuts.com/2014/11/04/ucl-student-tenants-organising-for-action-on-poor-conditions-and-high-rents/>

³ <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/ucl-halls-appalling-conditions-rent-expensive-london-accommodation-9850286.html>

⁴ <http://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/news/west-london-news/north-acton-monstrosity-building-nominated-9765208>

I killed 38 cockroaches on the first day of university... There were dead and living cockroaches in every single room. There was also a massive infestation in the kitchen.⁵

Living in what NUS Welfare Officer Shelley Asquith described as “squalid conditions”,⁶ the students striking in Campbell House, along with their sister strikers in Hawkrige Halls, were additionally forced to deal with disruptive construction work. This led Hawkrige residents to withhold rent from April 2015,⁷ with Campbell following in May.⁸ Resident Shaniquah Hunter described noise from the demolition work on next-door’s Waites House as making conditions “unliveable”,⁹ whilst Campbell House rent striker Jamal Rizvi remembered:

Students who wanted to revise in their rooms couldn’t do so. In rooms nearest to the works, mirrors were bouncing off walls and desks were shaking. We took decibel readings in every room on our smartphones and in those closest it reached up to 95 decibels, and up to 75 in the rooms furthest away. The university responded with reluctant acceptance and tried to brush it under the rug. There were stairs leading from the street to the basement kitchens and the rats could just go down the steps.¹⁰

Despite assertions from UCL management, demolition began at 7am – an hour earlier than council regulations - and went on through exam periods.¹¹ Signatories to the Campbell House e-petition described conditions variously as:

It is virtually impossible to study efficiently in such an environment. For the amount of rent we pay, it is unacceptable”; “It’s impossible to be in my room for 9 hours a day, 6 days a week”; “...UCL are entirely responsible for the poor timing of these demolition and expect students to simply deal with it...”¹²

⁵ <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/students-living-in-cockroach-and-rodent-infested-halls-launch-rent-strike-10201579.html>

⁶ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/dear-ucl-own-up-pay-up>

⁷ <http://uclu.org/articles/support-hawkrige-house-students>

⁸ <http://uclu.org/articles/students-step-up-rent-action-across-ucl>

⁹ <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/students-demand-compensation-from-ucl-over-building-works-wrecking-exam-revision-10247510.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/16/ucl-students-100000-compensation-strike-demolition-rat-accomodation>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/403289819855342>

¹² <https://www.change.org/p/ucl-management-university-college-london-i-support-the-rent-strike-ucl-pay-compensation-to-the-students-at-campbell-house-who-have-suffered-and-had-their-revision-ruined-because-of-ucl-s-demolition-work/>

December 2014 to May 2015

Despite the dual focus on improving standards and winning a rent cut, organising during the winter of 2014/15 largely focused reducing halls fees. After delivering a petition to the head of student accommodation calling for compensation for poor conditions in the Camden Halls,¹³ the actions undertaken in January to April focused on rent costs at UCL. This is perhaps unsurprising given that a status update in April outlined that links were so close between UCL, CTR and Defend Education that they were holding joint meetings.¹⁴

Certainly the mass petition¹⁵ made no mention of accommodation standards, only rising fees; accommodation costs and attacks on UCL dominated the placards and signs of the rent hike camp on 19th March¹⁶ and the provost balcony occupation on 27th March.¹⁷ Despite this, the statement accompanying the camp made clear the poor state of UCL accommodation and the need to invest in their upkeep¹⁸ whilst Angus O'Brien can be heard chanting in support of a rent strike during the occupation.¹⁹

The focus on standards became more acute in April, with UCL, CTR and UCLU targeting conditions at Hawkrigde. Early advice to withhold rent²⁰ turned into a rent strike by an 8th April Evening Standard article.²¹ On 5th May, around 100 residents of Campbell House followed suit.²²

Rent strikers at Campbell outlined two key demands, most concretely in their e-petition – the end of demolition work until the end of the third term, and “Compensation... paid for each resident, in the monetary value of the whole of the rent for third term (as this is the time period the demolition work began, and will continue until)”.²³ In his UCL Union Halls Representative role, David Dahlborn had already reported that UCL were not willing to offer compensation,

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/338955342955457>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/389714697879521>

¹⁵ <http://uclu.org/articles/ucl-cut-rent-how-you-can-get-involved>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/380380442146280>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/383393015178356>

¹⁸ <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/03/19/statement-students-stage-mass-camp-out-in-the-ucl-quad-to-protest-the-rent-hike/>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/videos/383403885177269/>

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/ucluhallsrep/photos/pcb.433346973506238/433346903506245/?type=3&theater>

²¹ <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/students-demand-compensation-from-ucl-over-building-works-wrecking-exam-revision-10247510.html>

²² <http://uclu.org/articles/students-step-up-rent-action-across-ucl>

²³ <https://www.change.org/p/ucl-management-university-college-london-i-support-the-rent-strike-ucl-pay-compensation-to-the-students-at-campbell-house-who-have-suffered-and-had-their-revision-ruined-because-of-ucl-s-demolition-work/>

instead offering limited alternative accommodation, and did not believe themselves to be in the wrong over building work²⁴ despite it taking place during exams.

Indeed, UCL's response to strikers was to impose financial sanctions for late payment of rent.²⁵ This was met with a Crowdfunder entitled *Buy a UCL striker a pint! Solidarity support!* With UCL levying £25 fines, 14 backers pledged £129,²⁶ a figure that reached over £250 with face-to-face collections.²⁷

June and July 2015

Two key events took place in June and July that escalated the rent strike. UCL threatened academic sanctions against rent strikers.²⁸ This led to protests at the open days in early July, supported by the Radical Housing Network (RHN).²⁹

UCLU reported on 5th June that in addition to £25 late payment fines, UCL had threatened that if rent strikers did not pay by 12th June, they would be barred from reenrolment and would be unable to attend their graduation ceremony. This was despite academic sanctions being ruled illegal by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) in 2014.³⁰ PI Media reprinted an email sent to a Campbell House striker, outlining that summer accommodation would also be withdrawn should a balance be outstanding.³¹ In typically forthright terms, Dahlburn described these threats as “...a cowardly, vile, aggressive and illegal action by UCL”, whilst NUS Vice President Welfare Colum McGuire wrote to the UCL Provost Michael Arthur in protest.³²

By 11th June, UCL were claiming that the letters were sent in error;³³ this did little to placate things, since rather than drop sanctions completely, they were put on hold until compensation claims were resolved, with summer

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/396820620502262>

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/400771466773844>

²⁶ <http://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/buytherentstrikeapint/>

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/402730126577978>

²⁸ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/dissent-is-not-tolerated-here-no-graduation-for-rent-strikers/>

²⁹ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/rent-strike-ben-beach-839

³⁰ <http://ucl.org/articles/ucl-makes-vile-threats-to-striking-students>

³¹ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/dissent-is-not-tolerated-here-no-graduation-for-rent-strikers/>

³² <http://ucl.org/articles/ucl-makes-vile-threats-to-striking-students>

³³ https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jun/11/university-college-london-students-withhold-rent-over-building-works?CMP=share_btn_fb

accommodation still being withdrawn.³⁴ Given that sanctions remained in breach of the OFT ruling and that the university were likely also in breach of the Student Accommodation Code (SAC) calling for maintenance to be undertaken outside of exam periods, this did little to placate strikers. Moreover, non-strikers in arrears were also threatened with illegal academic sanctions³⁵ that presumably were *not* on hold.

The support of RHN was announced in a Vice article published on 16th June,³⁶ linking housing struggles across the capital and calling for mass rent strikes. RHN's involvement may have stemmed from connections made with UCL,CTR at a demonstration in March in support of the PAH Movement in Spain.³⁷ Regardless, the sudden involvement of RHN saw an immediate call for demonstrations in "full solidarity" with rent strikers on 3rd July – the day of the UCL Open Day.³⁸

This was coupled with an open letter to the Provost linking the student strikes to wider housing struggles in London and expressly referencing the "implicitly violent" threats made by UCL. With graphics reading "Support the UCL rent strike. No Justice. No Peace" and the event suggesting attendees should "BRING NOISE - BRING FRIENDS - BRING SMOKE," the demonstration was a clear escalation of the dispute.

The demonstrations that disrupted the open days on 3rd and 4th July 2015 were in fact organised by a collation of 12 groups organising around issues of equalities, tuition fees, housing, austerity and the environment.³⁹ UCL,CTR debuted "shields" in the shape of tower blocks,⁴⁰ that - coupled with smoke from orange flares - resulted in iconic imagery that would be referenced throughout the campaign.⁴¹

³⁴ https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jun/11/university-college-london-students-withhold-rent-over-building-works?CMP=share_btn_fb; <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/dissent-is-not-tolerated-here-no-graduation-for-rent-strikers/>

³⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/411309175720073>

³⁶ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/rent-strike-ben-beach-839

³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1632699003609551/>

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/events/877892685619234/>

³⁹ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/ucl-left-plans-day-of-action-to-disrupt-open-days/>; <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/416845561833101>

⁴⁰ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/uk-universities-marketing-radicalism-webb-bethell-732?utm_source=vicefbuk

⁴¹ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/chaos-caused-on-ucls-open-days/>; <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.327689464082045.1073741828.325834490934209/417691398415184/?type=3&theater>

Reports focused on 3rd July, when 300 protesters gathered on Mallet Street before marching to cloisters, where each group took the opportunity to talk about their concerns.⁴² Vice memorably described the event:

On the open day, this allied anti-bastard squad marched around the campus, letting off smoke flares and handing out leaflets to crowds of wide-eyed, post-A Level 17-year-olds. People sitting on the different stalls looked awkwardly on.⁴³

Webb somewhat ironically went on to outline that the protests were more interesting to future students than the official Open Day, might benefit the university's radical reputation and suggested this was why UCL took a hands-off approach to policing the protest.

August to October 2015

Dahlborn might have been writing about rent strikes in July as if the Hawkridge and Campbell House disputes had already been successful⁴⁴ but it took until 15th October to win the Campbell House strike, when UCL,CTR posted a teaser status declaring victory,⁴⁵ with details made available the day after.⁴⁶

August saw Shelley Asquith - former president of University of Arts, London (UAL) – elected to NUS Welfare officer. UAL students had occupied the reception area of Central St Martins College of Art and Design following proposals to cut foundation courses,⁴⁷ an action supported by UCL,CTR.⁴⁸ Asquith raised the visibility of student housing issues in the Guardian in August,⁴⁹ and was forthright in her condemnation of UCL's treatment of

⁴² <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/chaos-caused-on-ucls-open-days/>

⁴³ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/uk-universities-marketing-radicalism-webb-bethell-732?utm_source=vicefbuk

⁴⁴ <http://www.thestudentassembly.org.uk/news/-the-rent-strike-at-ucl-soas-was-successful-well-do-it-again-with-better-planning-and-greater-numbers>

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.327689464082045.1073741828.325834490934209/447606792090311/?type=3&theater>

⁴⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.327689464082045.1073741828.325834490934209/447647735419550/?type=3>

⁴⁷ http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/24/students-occupy-central-st-martins-in-protest-against-cuts?CMP=share_btn_fb

⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/382380965279561>.

⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/04/student-lives-put-at-risk-by-negligent-landlords>; <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/15/soaring-student-rents-college-accommodation-crisis>

Campbell and Hawkrigde rent strikers⁵⁰ and in support of rent strikes as a tactic.⁵¹

For UCL,CTR , September and October saw an attempt to bridge the gap between the 2014-15 generation of activists and the 2015-16 via a number of blog posts that outlined what had been won in the previous year,⁵² how to organise in halls⁵³ and the levels of profit made by UCL via its halls of residence.⁵⁴ O'Brien took on the role of UCL Union Halls Representative and a series of open meetings were organised⁵⁵ to ensure the campaign moved forward in to the new academic year.

In September, through “admin error or arbitrary punishment”, a Campbell House rent striker was prevented from reenrolment. UCL,CTR responded by vowing to “...never tolerate UCL's illegal and immoral sanctions against rent strikers at Campbell House!”⁵⁶ Although UCL’s Director of Student Support and Well-being, Denise Long, confirmed that this was due to changes needing to be made to registry systems, this and other reenrolment issues were inflammatory given the threats made to rent strikers.⁵⁷

In this atmosphere of organising and escalation, UCL agreed to a hearing on the Campbell House dispute in early October. The hearing took place on 12th October, with PI Media outlining the panel, with representatives from the higher university echelons and UCLU present including, as chair, Professor Anthony Smith, Vice Provost of Education and Student Affairs. Dahlborn, acting on behalf of Campbell House rent strikers, was pessimistic that the hearing would resolve the issues without recourse to a review or an appeal to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.⁵⁸ Two days later, UCL,CTR reposted a

⁵⁰ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/dear-ucl-own-up-pay-up>

⁵¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/15/universities-students-rent-controls-strikes>

⁵² <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/09/28/5-things-the-cut-the-rent-campaign-won-in-2014-15/>

⁵³ <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/6-ways-you-can-fight-for-lower-rent-and-better-halls-at-ucl/>

⁵⁴ <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/10/11/ucl-rent-myth-number-1/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1371382112991350/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/events/964826676907267/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/events/859177480869532/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/439776126206711>

⁵⁷ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/ucl-student-participating-in-rent-strike-is-unable-to-re-enroll/>

⁵⁸ <http://pimediaonline.co.uk/news-investigations/complaints-panel-hearing-to-take-place-for-former-ucl-campbell-house-residents/>

somewhat atypically neutral 12th October status from the UCL Union Halls Representative account outlining that an outcome could take up to ten days.⁵⁹

As it happened, the Campbell House strikers didn't have to wait that long. The day after the repost, the hearing ruled that 87 former residents of Campbell House West⁶⁰ were due compensation equal to a terms rent – worth £1,368 per student and almost £100,000 overall.⁶¹ UCL management's response to students' issues was found to have “not only demonstrated a lack of empathy towards student's circumstances and an understanding or appreciation of what would be an acceptable student experience, but was disingenuous to the student's concerned.”⁶²

The Campbell House rent strike was over.

Methodology

Having presented a narrative of the strike at Campbell House Halls, this section examines the methodology used to construct this history.

“Focus” briefly outlines the parameters of using the UCL, CTR Facebook page to write a history of the strikes and details the deliberately restrictive filter imposed upon the literature available.

“Theory” begins with addressing the epistemological position of the researcher and the positionality inherent in the narrative presented. Likening the researcher to Steven J. Jackson's Repairer, repurposing the debris left behind by Benjamin's conception of progress, the researcher's role in creating an interpretivist version of history is highlighted. This theoretical exploration concludes with looking at historiography.

Zinn and Hobsbawm provide a foundation for understanding politically relevant research. A position of sympathy with housing activists is acknowledged - and again referencing Benjamin, celebrated. The section concludes by using Hobsbawm's text *The Present as History* as a tool to explore issues directly related to writing a history of the near-present.

⁵⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/447274645456859>

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/16/ucl-students-100000-compensation-strike-demolition-rat-accomodation>

⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/pcb.447649945419329/447649872086003/?type=3&theater>

⁶²

<https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/pcb.447649945419329/447649888752668/?type=3&theater>

Focus

This study began with a single question: *what would a history of UCL,CTR look like only written using the UCL,CTR Facebook page?*

This intellectual experiment was inductive (Bryman, 2008, p.26) in that there was no pre-existing theory – the purpose was to see what this narrative would look like using a limited range of sources and analyse this further. This question narrowed from UCL,CTR as a whole to the strike at Campbell House Halls due to more information being available than initially anticipated.

The criteria for inclusion as a source was kept focused due to a concern that the amount of material uncovered would become unmanageable, and that the ability to examine information principally provided by Facebook would be diluted. An attempt to filter content in-line with viewing the Page as a Follower was abandoned for epistemological reasons outlined below.

The material included in constructing the narrative was limited to:

- Posts on the UCL,CTR Page between the first Post on the Page, 5th November 2014, and the day after the Campbell Halls dispute was resolved on 16th October 2015.
- External links Posted on the UCL,CTR Page between the first Post on the Page, 5th November 2014, and the day after the Campbell Halls dispute was resolved on 16th October 2015 - but only the *exact* webpage linked.
- Embedded PDF's in these external links.
- Events Posted on the UCL,CTR Page between the first Post on the Page, 5th November 2014, and the day after the Campbell Halls dispute was resolved on 16th October 2015. This was regardless of who Hosted the Event.

The examination of a particular time period and a single Page immediately limited the topics that could be addressed in the narrative. The “pre-history” of UCL,CTR – the formation of an awareness and culture that would enable an activist grouping – is difficult to construct, given that the Facebook Page presented a group part formed. What happened before this falls by definition outside of the scope of the narrative presented. Just as E.P. Thompson’s working class “...did not rise like the sun at an appointed time [but] was present at it’s own making.... (1963, p.8), the makings of a student activist culture oppositional to the university predated November 2014 (Cant, 2016). Likewise, discussion with participant’s revealed useful retrospective material about Campbell House was published after the somewhat arbitrary 16th October 2016 cut off.

Theory

Epistemology

Referencing thesis IX of Benjamin's *Theses On the Philosophy of History*, Jackson's image of the Repairer picking through the debris in the wake of the Angel of History (Jackson, 2014, pp.237-238) offers a starting point for understanding the process of writing a history based on Facebook. The Repairer is akin to Benjamin's rag picker in his *Arcades Project*, repurposing the waste of 19th century Paris and building something useful from the ruins as progress blows the helpless angel further into the future. This mirrors what the researcher is attempting to do with fragments of information gleaned from the Page, with content as electronic 'debris', forgotten as history moves on, being repurposed by the researcher into a coherent narrative.

This can be understood as an interpretivist epistemology (Bryman, 2008, p.30). The narrative constructed is not a reconstruction of an original form, but a repurposing; the researcher is not putting back together a narrative that existed as a coherent whole. In this way, it is a reading of information that runs counter to the original purpose of the material.

For Facebook users, information nearly always appears as a decontextualised fragment on the News Feed, juxtaposed in-between unrelated content and spread out temporally. Rather than a coherent narrative, fragmented content is presented in a format where Posts are isolated, divorced from other Page content through the sheer volume of information, meant to be read and discarded - and may not be available to be read by a Follower at all. Facebook, in the period studied, prioritised around 300 Posts on users News Feeds from an average of 1500 per day (Blackstrom, 2013). News Feed content is filtered for user preference as indicated through interaction with other Posts. In short, information has to compete for visibility.

This realisation led to the early abandonment of attempts to filter the content in-line with what a Follower would see. The researcher, scouring Benjamin's wreckage, collates content that was arguably never meant to be a coherent whole. From this debris, a narrative is constructed that is grounded in evidence and reflective of events - but a narrative that is likely incomplete and one of many. It is important to underline it is the researcher who decides which fragment fits with another in what order, how contradictions are resolved and to what end. In this way, the researcher writing history from Facebook has a distinct epistemological position outside of the Page Owner/Follower duality, just as the Repairer is outside of the Producer/Consumer duality (Jackson, 2014, p.234). This removed position renders the objective understanding of events impossible.

The quality of the content accessed is equally problematic. Over-simplifying for clarity, using a Facebook Page to write history can be compared to sorting through collections of correspondence where every letter is an open letter (Post) and the content written accordingly. In this hypothetical archive, responses to open letters are present (Comments), but not the replies (Comments) of the

author to other open letters (Posts). Important discussions take place elsewhere in private correspondence (Messages) and the researcher is unsure who exactly the letters (Posts) address and if this audience witnessed the material. It can be understood as incomplete, self censored or biased and part of a larger dialogue. The desire to politically influence the actions of others is a clear consideration when examining content of campaigning groups such as UCL,CTR.

Fig. 3.1 partly presents this dynamic, focusing on status updates that report on off-line events:

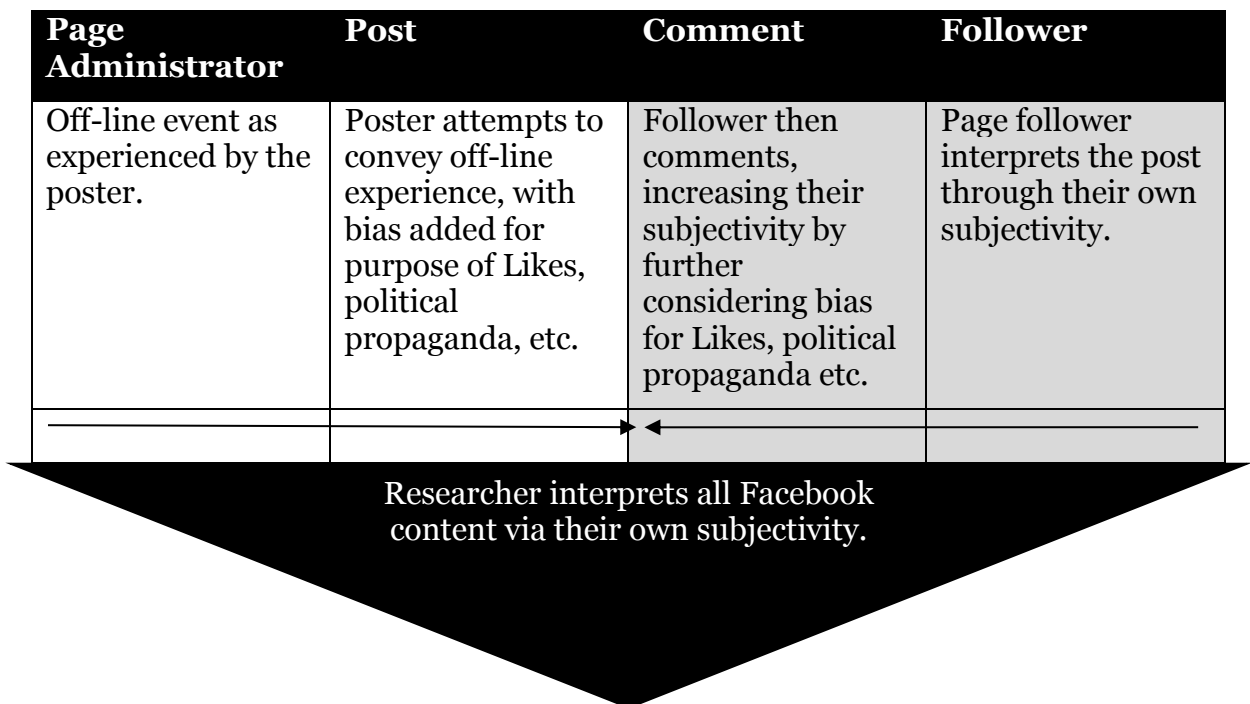


Fig 3.1: Interpretive epistemology

Historiography – Questions and values

The American historian Howard Zinn argued that “...too many scholars abjure a starting set of values, because they fail to make the proper distinction between an ultimate set of values and the instruments needed to obtain them (Zinn, 1997, p504).” Zinn’s point is echoed by Eric Hobsbawm, for whom “...historians must tell the truth about history...,” for whom the crucial distinction is remaining bound by “...historical statements based on evidence and subject to evidence...” (1999a, pviii). The point here is that the means by which radical histories are constructed must be evidence based and that their authors must “...subject their assumptions to critical scrutiny”, not that historians “...must stand outside their subject matter as objective observers” (Hughes-Warrington,

2000, p.168). The researcher's "...values should determine the questions we ask..." (Zinn, 1997, p504) and how evidence is combined and interpreted; in the terms outlined above, how the "debris" is put together.

The initial question asked in this paper is more nuanced than it appears and it is important to ask exactly what narrative has been written. Nominally a history of the rent strike in Campbell House Halls, the limit on available sources means that this is a more complex history - not of the strikes "as they happened" but how they were presented by UCL,CTR and assembled by the researcher. The narrative written from the perspective of UCL management, evidenced with posts from an official university blog, would look very different. Again, this is an interpretivist position, and one that reflects the oppositional set of values held by UCL,CTR by the nature of their activism and the researcher in his positionality. These have shaped both the evidence collated and the how these have been assembled.

The researcher's background as a victim of negative rental experiences and one of the few in the UK to benefit from co-operative housing (Walker and Jeraj, 2016, p.149) underpins a positionality that is antagonistic towards a landlord's perspective. Momentarily remaining theoretically grounded in Benjamin, this sympathy towards housing struggles can be read in the context of Thesis VII of *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, as "brushing history against the grain" (Lowry, 2005, p.46) – against history's winners, whose achievements were built on "barbarism." This means going against a history that can be "...seen as an enormous, single triumphal procession occasionally interrupted by uprisings on the part of the subordinate class (ibid, p.49)." Embracing a pessimistic view of progress, Benjamin advocates writing history in solidarity with the oppressed rather than the oppressors.

In a larger context, the struggle for affordable housing is arguably one that working people are losing. Whilst the wider context of housing in the UK is beyond the scope of this paper, the rent strike took place amongst a backdrop of general crisis. Walker and Jeraji (2016) collate bleak and familiar narratives from the rental sector; as one columnist disingenuously wondered – as if the rent strikers were ignorant of wider conditions –

“..what happens when [strikers] enter second year of university and leave the (dubious) comfort of halls, or graduate and leave university. How can they hold the corrupt and fundamentally unfair property market to account then, when everything becomes more complicated? (Baxter, 2016)

Meanwhile, at the time of writing, an apartment reached a record price tag of £150million in London (Tobin, 2016), an extreme example of a general trend of soaring property prices. This history is not invalidated by the view point it is written by; rather, echoing Benjamin, this particular history is written in solidarity with those struggling for decent, affordable housing, with the tenant

sick from mould, with the key worker unable to buy a home. Someone else can write the history of landlords and property speculators.

Historiography – writing the history of now

Hobsbawm's lecture *The Present as History* provided an overview of his concerns surrounding writing a history of recent events. He highlighted three main problems, which will be addressed in turn here to frame a general discussion of radical historiography. A probable 4th concern for Hobsbawm, the difficulties of writing a history critical of the researcher's own political affiliations (Kaye, 1995, pp.134-135), was presumably mentally resolved by this stage.

I shall consider mainly three of these problems: the problem of the historians own date of birth... [1].; the problems of how one's own perspective on the past can change as history proceeds [2]; and the problem of how to escape the assumptions of the time which most of us share [3] (1997b, p302).

(1) Hobsbawm referred to the work of John Charmley on Churchill, noting that it was easier for him to write a revisionist account of appeasement and Britain's resistance to Nazi Germany in 1940 given that he had no experience of living through the events (ibid, p305) – "...our generation knows without having to go to the archives, our appeasers were wrong and Churchill for once was right" (ibid, p306). Having direct experience, it was easier to understand the spirit of the age, given the dramatic changes that have taken place since (ibid, p308).

It seems possible to turn this argument on its head. Whilst the aging historian might be able to *read* of the crisis in higher education, the generational experience of a university education may make it harder to understand the precarious situation faced by students and graduates. It is one thing to know that almost 1 in 3 employed young graduates are unable to secure highly skilled work, and another to wonder if you will be one of the 30.8% who fail to do so (BIS, 2016, p.10). It is a reminder that the explicit positionality outlined above underpins the interpretation of the sources just as Hobsbawm's war experience influenced his reaction to Charmley.

(2) Hobsbawm's next argument was that "...even the recorded past changes in the light of subsequent history," as illustrated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The events of 1989-91 put the history of the previous decades immediately into a different context – it "...inserted a punctuation mark into its flow (1997b, p311)", quickly turning the Twentieth Century into a "trptych", two periods of major crisis split by a period of stability (ibid, p313).

In terms of the narrative presented in this paper, the events described have immediate political relevance and resonance. The successful wave of rent strikes at UCL in 2015 led to further strikes in 2016 (Ali, 2016) and a national network of groups attempting a wave of strikes across the UK (Cant, 2016) - and the paper is written in this context. Would the narrative have looked different if the strikes in 2016 had been unsuccessful – would there be an implicit or explicit attempt to understand why Campbell House had been successful where other strikes had failed? Less counter-factually, what effect will the success or failure of the new campaign have upon future interpretations of the Campbell House dispute?

The researcher has argued that the Campbell Strike went “against the grain” of progress; however, this could also be argued as premature and disempowering because it is not yet clear how successful the current wave of strikes will be in reforming housing. E.P. Thompson’s famous declaration that he is “...seeking to rescue...” his subjects from “...the enormous condescension of posterity (1963, p12)” is one example of Benjamin’s influence on historiography (Lowy, 2005, pp115-16). But the strikes are not yet forgotten, they are not yet “casualties of history”... “condemned in their own lives, as casualties (Thompson, 1963, p12)”, and in need of redemption. To suggest that they are may be demobilising for current activism – as if rent strikers are as against the direction of history as Thompson’s Luddites – and is incompatible with Thompson’s own commitment to celebrating human agency (Hughes-Warrington, 2000, p314).

Benjamin’s friend Bertolt Brecht provides a more appropriate conceptual foundation in his poem *A Worker Reads History*. A likely influence on Thesis VII (Lowy, 2005, p.54), for Raphael Samuel, Brecht’s poem also brings together the disparate political stands of People’s History (1981, p.xxxiii), of which the Marxist “history from below” is one (1981, p.xv). Brecht essentially asked how historical events could have been delivered by great individuals without the nameless, forgotten people who actually made them happen. In his speech *Swan Honk May Day*, Peter Linebaugh used the final couplet as a tool to frame his observations. Here “...our ‘particular’ is University Hall and our ‘question’ is who hauled it’s craggy blocks of stone?”

For this paper, a more appropriate stanza might be “Each page a victory / At whose expense the victory ball? / Every ten years a great man / Who paid the piper? (2016, p.163)” Students living in the conditions described paid for the victory ball, whilst “great man” Provost Michael Arthur took home a package worth £359,195 (Grove, 2016) – and this paper is an examination of their resistance to exploitation.

(3) Hobsbawm concluded by examining the Cold War from the perspective of “...the famous imaginary Martian observer...,” (1993, p.315) asking if, with the benefit of distance, the binary assumptions (such as the division between capitalist and communist countries) made *within* a historical period about how the world is structured will endure, or if viewed from the future, other patterns

of understanding will be more relevant. As Hobsbawm noted regarding his work on the short Twentieth Century, “we shall have to leave it to the twenty-first century...” – or at least, what is left of it – “...to make its own decisions” (ibid, p.316).

It is equally impossible to predict how future historians may view the Campbell House strike. For example, students are not the only exploited actors within the university. With on-going pay disputes for academics at the time of writing - following a real terms pay cut of 14.5% since 2009 (UCU, 2016) – it may be that from a distance the binary distinction between student and academic exploitation becomes less distinct. But it is for our descendents to make these observations.

Opinion

This section seeks to uncover the views held by activists from UCL,CTR concerning the narrative presented. It begins by outlining the methodology employed in answering question 2, before presenting and analysing findings. In doing so, it is clear that minority of participants who engaged with the research process were concerned with providing information identified as missing to present a fuller narrative. The section concludes with a typology outlining the various reactions to the study.

Methodology

A draft of the account presented in section 2 was circulated to participants who were identified via Facebook as having a sustained involvement in the rent strike. As Tagging of individuals on the Page was haphazard, involvement was determined by a Tag reoccurring across a spread of months rather than examining the total number of Tags for each individual. These participants were contacted using Facebook.

Of the ten, one no longer had an active Profile, and only a single reply was received from the other nine. Two participants had published email addresses during the period studied, but neither replied to email. One was approached in person, but ignored follow up contact. The participant (PART1) who made contact agreed to a semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2012, p.471) via Skype.

Because of the methodological focus on employing Facebook as a filter, a snow-ball technique (ibid, p.424) was not employed pro-actively in order to secure contacts and only utilised when offered. Despite prompting from the PART1, no reply was received from the other eight participants. However, two further participants were identified, one of whom agreed to a semi-structured interview via Skype (PART2) and another (PART3) signposted material published after the period examined. These contacts were strikers based in Hawkridge and Campbell House Halls respectively. These sources attempted to address an issue that PART1 had identified - “...what became sort of invisible are the people who were on rent strike themselves.”

Facebook allows accounts to send Messages directly to Profiles that are not linked as Friends. This Message however goes into the Message Request folder – a “spam inbox” that is separate from the main message inbox and often goes unnoticed. This may help explain the low response rate. The session on dealing with the media (Elle & Anabel, 2016) at the Rent Strike Weekender highlighted an awareness amongst activists of the need to be wary of providing information that may later harm their careers. This wariness may extend to academics, and highlights the difficulties for outsiders in gaining access to participants. Without feedback from these activists, it is conjecture why they declined to respond to requests for involvement.

Reflecting on the account of the strike

All participants were keen to help complete the narrative presented in the literature review. For PART2, this meant “...I can just give you a story, like... description of what happened...” whilst PART1 outlined that “...I know which bits, where to fill in basically...” PART1 also outlined that the account served as a reminder both in terms of the events covered that had been forgotten and as a prompt to revisit parallel organising activity missing from the narrative. PART3 declined an interview due to time commitments but signposted published material that provided information missing from the account (Rizvi, 2015).

PART2, perhaps reflecting pragmatic reasons for engaging in the rent strike, expressed less complex feelings about the account. It was “...very surprising...” that the researcher had chosen the strike as a topic to study. Approaching the paper from an unrelated discipline, it was “...very different from whatever I had read before...” The thought that someone might study the strikes was inconceivable, having adopted an approach in 2015 that “...your facing a problem, you’re just going to solve it...” Having done so, PART2 spoke positively of Hawkridge - and although surprised to be approached by a stranger who had contacted her because of her activism, was happy to recommend residency in 2015/16. This was in contrast to PART1, who had contributed content to the Page with an awareness of how the messaging might be interpreted and for whom “... it was kind of exciting to see that... published message that I was expecting it to convey.”

PART1’s continuing involvement in housing activism coupled with an overtly political stance also meant that the account dovetailed with a personal desire to re-examine the strikes, going as far as to note that “...I wanted to write something about it looking back...” The purpose for doing so, beyond an interest in history, was that “....next time people do a rent strike they won’t have to invent the where, how, whys themselves again...” – the recording of events was closely tied to the development of a praxis, and it was clear that many topics discussed were “...something I’ve put quite a lot of thought into myself...” Related to this was an awareness that the strikes at SOAS and UCL revived a tactic forgotten on the British left; PART1 outlined an event where the theory of rent strikes are discussed, to which his reply was “There’s one going on literally

right now! Look at it...” That Glasgow 1915 remained the model for rent strikes remained a subject of concern.

PART1 engaged in direct reflection on the narrative, feeding back that “...as an account of events... I think its towards the right... it’s accurate... in terms of like, historic business.” Conversely, PART2 showed less commitment to engaging with the narrative directly, being keen to tell her story whilst admitting “...I have to be honest, I did read it, but I have kind of forgotten [it]”.

Typology

The UCL,CTR activists can therefore be split into two broad categories. Of the 10 activists identified via Facebook as being key, plus two participants suggested by PART1, a maximum of 11 could have contributed to this study (with one striker no longer contactable via Facebook). Of these, 3 in some way were keen to **Complete** the narrative whilst 8 (PART4 - PART11) for whatever reason **Declined** to reply to requests for feedback. Of the 3, they can be loosely split into the categories of the **Politically Motivated**, expressly looking to appraise the strike in order to develop praxis to help with rent activism going forward, and the larger category of the **Apolitically motivated**, sign-posting corrections to the narrative with varying degrees of engagement but no overt commitment to developing praxis.

This sample is too small to be conclusive but it does highlight the different relationships that activists had to the writing of history. Mirroring to Greene’s experience at the Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism conference, it does reinforce the idea that participants in historical research, when engaged, are keen to ensure an accurate account is presented and suggests that there may be multiple motives for this.

PART1	PART2	PART3	PART4 - PART11
Complete – 27.2%			Declined – 72.8%
Politically Motivated	Apolitically Motivated		Unknown

Fig. 4.1: Typology of motivation for participation

Analysis

Whether for brevity, positionality or lack of evidence, any study of historical events will be incomplete. The researcher can-not know or evidence everything about a subject. Whilst some details are lost to history, others sign post areas for future research. This section raises several questions highlighted by the researcher as areas missing from the presented account.

These are chosen subjectively and do not represent an exhaustive list. Questions were developed inductively, and drafted as part of the writing of the narrative rather than pre-existing concerns at the point the project commenced. Care has been taken to select a mix of issues that are both methodological - in that they result directly from the strict filter imposed on sources - and those likely to be difficult to answer conclusively with further field research. Although assembled from publically available material, care has also been taken not to present theories that are harmful to participants in UCL,CTR or the rent strikers.

Finally, in order to demonstrate that another mythology may offer more useful insight, interview transcripts have been used (somewhat uncritically given the small sample size) to begin to answer the questions posed. It is worth noting that these answers were received after the questions were originally conceived and examined, meaning at that stage, the researcher genuinely did not know the answers.

Question: What is the difference between Campbell House and Campbell House West?

One of the initial problems identified was confusion about the nature of the Campbell House site - and which residents had won the rent strike. Early in the dispute, the site is referred to as Campbell House.⁶³ By the end of the dispute, victory is announced for Campbell House West – although UCL,CTR sometimes use both terms simultaneously, as in the status update on 16th October 2015⁶⁴ and the press release.⁶⁵

A closer examination of the sources identified that 200 students lived at Campbell House,⁶⁶ with over 100 taking strike action⁶⁷ in May 2015. But the

⁶³ <http://ucl.org/articles/students-step-up-rent-action-across-ucl>

⁶⁴

<https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.327689464082045.1073741828.325834490934209/447647735419550/?type=3>

⁶⁵

<https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/pcb.447649945419329/447649872086003/?type=3&theater>

⁶⁶ <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/students-demand-compensation-from-ucl-over-building-works-wrecking-exam-revision-10247510.html>

⁶⁷ <http://ucl.org/articles/students-step-up-rent-action-across-ucl>

dispute was *won* for 87 residents, around 60 of whom were on strike⁶⁸ in Campbell House West. This suggested that there was more than one site or that Campbell House was multiple buildings.

One reading of this could be that the narrative presented on the Page is incomplete, and the remaining 113 students had had their dispute collapse over the summer. Although not Posted on the Page, this information could be common knowledge for participants, who would read the press release and news updates in this context. Another reading, equally likely, could be that the narrative of the dispute constructed by the researcher finishes early, and that compensation was awarded to these strikers later than their counterparts in Campbell House West.

In any case, this issue demonstrates the difficulties of assembling a narrative from the 'debris'. Temporally disjointed and posted as fragments, arguably no one reading the Page in the intended manner would have seen material from October 2015 and noticed the shift from one term to another - particularly when used interchangeably to some degree. Decontextualised material could be understood at face value. This underlines the unique epistemological position of the researcher, distinct from the Follower of the Page.

Answer:

Campbell House was split into two blocks on opposing sides of the road. It was the west side that was adjacent to a demolition site and had the majority of the issues with noise. Whilst Campbell House and Campbell House West were used interchangeably by UCL,CTR, the strike only took place in the west section.

The discrepancy in the number of strikers can be explained by inaccurate statistics; organisers never knew how many residents of Campbell House withheld rent. In the interview, PART1 estimated that of around 70 residents, at least 30-40 took action, again, contradicting figures presented in written accounts.

Question: How did rent strikers organise themselves within Campbell House Halls?

The day to day strategy of organising and maintaining a rent strike within Campbell House Hall itself is largely missing from the narrative, although day-to-day activism is occasionally hinted at. The strike bulletin contained a photo of a petition pinned to a door, pledging that signatories would withhold rent,⁶⁹

⁶⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/16/ucl-students-100000-compensation-strike-demolition-rat-accomodation>

⁶⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/397400973777560>

whilst students recorded noise levels on their smart phones to present as evidence.⁷⁰

The UCL Free Education blog *6 Ways You Can Fight For Lower Rent and Better Halls at UCL* from early in 2015/16 academic year⁷¹ outlined a series of steps for organising in halls. These may have changed from the previous year, when the Campbell House strike began, but potentially still offer some insight into how halls were organised. Students were encouraged to take part in their local Halls Assembly, which were described as:

...Where residents get together to decide for themselves how they would like their halls to be run... This is real democracy in practice.... Many of the rules and conditions that UCL enforces are unfair – Halls Assemblies are where you and everybody else in your halls decide what to do about them.

The Post went on to outline that each hall should have a union rep and residents committee, where they are allocated a budget and meet with management to resolve resident's problems. It concluded with a call to get organised, make individual disputes collective and demand improvements from UCL.

Beyond this, there is little information. For example, how often were halls assemblies in Campbell House during the strike? How did strikers interact with university staff? How did they support each other practically? What was life like for those who refused to go on strike? Was there conflict between strikers and non-strikers? Did all the residents committee support the strike?

In their seminal paper on rent strikes, Moorhouse, Wilson and Chamberlain (1972) outlined the difficulties of obtaining evidence of rent strikes, partly because they are not considered news worthy, or covered in a way that key details are obscured. In terms of the day to day activities of rent strikers, the methodology employed in this paper appears to offer little improvement.

Answer:

Campbell House strike would not have taken place without the Hawkridge strike, from which strikers drew inspiration; Hawkridge "...really broke the ice on it... (PART1)". In this way, the two strikes are closely linked. The conditions of organising were different however; Hawkridge required extended door step conversations (PART1), given the lack of close social ties between the international post-graduates without "...many... chances where we could

⁷⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/16/ucl-students-100000-compensation-strike-demolition-rat-accomodation>

⁷¹ <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/6-ways-you-can-fight-for-lower-rent-and-better-halls-at-ucl/>

fraternise with each other (PART2)”. This demographic proved to be vulnerable to threats from the university. When in June UCL threatened to prevent strikers graduating, the strike in Hawkridge collapsed (PART2). Conversely, for the UK undergraduates in Campbell, threatened with being prevented from reenrolment, this threat was “...comical due to its illegality” and resulted in a formal apology (Ravi, 2015).

At Campbell House, a petition with over 60 signatures, alongside decibel readings taken from the hall, was presented to the unsympathetic Head of Student Accommodation at UCL, William Wilson. Following this, there was a meeting close to deadline for withholding the final rent payment that fewer than a third of residents attended. However, information was passed on in conversations between residents who lived in “..flats, 5 rooms... with a shared kitchen...” either face-to-face or via private Whatsapp or Facebook groups. There was a close network already in place that was able to facilitate two way conversations during the strike between student union officers and a large number of residents within the hall (PART1), who were independently committed to taking action.

Question: What was the political ideology of UCL,CTR during this period?

The political ideology of UCL,CTR is not explicitly defined in the material shared on the Facebook Page during the period studied. This section outlines some of the evidence that demonstrates that solidarity was offered to and received from myriad radical struggles. It then compares the aims of the founding petition with some of the more radical calls made on behalf of the group and suggests that a mix of radical and pragmatic messaging may have meant that activists coalesced around mutual goals for diverse reasons.

Solidarity was offered to a variety of groups during the period studied. Support was demonstrated for wider housing struggles from an early stage, evidencing an understanding that housing issues were not limited just to students. Activists supported the March for Homes demonstration in January 2015, calling for an end to the broader housing crisis.⁷² Notably, a meme was posted to the Page shortly after, linking student rent exploitation with that of ordinary Londoners.⁷³ UCL,CTR were attending meetings connected to wider housing

⁷² <https://www.facebook.com/events/576375515827729/>

⁷³

<https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.327689464082045.1073741828.325834490934209/359898004194524/?type=3&permPage=1>

struggles⁷⁴ and information critical of the starter home housing policy was shared in October.⁷⁵

This solidarity extended to supporting eviction resistance in Barcelona⁷⁶ and closer to home, the Sweets Way estate.⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly UCL,CTR were also supportive of student struggles. In addition to attending the National Student Demo in November 2014,⁷⁸ the LSE occupation,⁷⁹ housing struggles in Durham⁸⁰ and Derby,⁸¹ and the rent strike at SOAS in late April were all supported.⁸² But it was the UAL dispute that led to the most teasing of photos - a meeting of activists from across London universities in the occupied university.⁸³ There are no details of what was discussed.

In terms of sharing platforms with other, broader, activist groups, in addition to those taking part in the Open Day demonstration, arguably most interesting was involvement in the Anti-Freshers Fair at the Free University of London⁸⁴ in October 2015 - at which Corporate Watch, Fuel Poverty Action, Reclaim the Power, English Collective of Prostitutes and the London Anarchist Federation also appeared. Many of the struggles identified had a common commitment to direct action tactics, which UCL,CTR were evidently happy to employ themselves.

A broad socialism was occasionally hinted at in other material on the Page. In the message of support to SOAS strikers, there is an early call to abolish landlords;⁸⁵ addressing the Brick Lane debates in June, Dalhborn labelled rent

⁷⁴ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/pissed-off-london-renters-are-talking-about-having-a-rent-strike?utm_source=vicefbuk

⁷⁵ <http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/if-youre-a-family-on-the-national-living-wage-heres-where-you-can-afford-david-camerons-new-starter-homes--b1VsYqUHDe>;
http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/10/07/david-ferguson-starter-homes-policy-blasted_n_8255858.html

⁷⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/375342429316748>

⁷⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/428304170687240>

⁷⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1438512509748733/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/379183358932655>

⁸⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/367188673465457>

⁸¹ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/434901000027557>

⁸² <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/393224910861833>

⁸³

<https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/photos/a.360387217478936.1073741829.325834490.934209/381575262026798/?type=3&theater>

⁸⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/445404662310524>

⁸⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/393224910861833>

theft,⁸⁶ whilst on 16th August a status update suggested that abolition of rent was preferable to rent control.⁸⁷

This is a long way from the petition demands laid down in November 2014 to “reverse the rent hike; equal standards across the site; accountability and direct student influence; transparency in spending; sustainable investment for students, not profit”, as well as the goals of the rent strike at Campbell House. In terms of concrete activism, this radical position on private property may have given way to a more pragmatic approach, with the UCL Free Education blog in October 2015 making a clear case for the university spending its finances differently in order to facilitate a rent cut (UCL Free Education, 2015d).⁸⁸

What is not clear is the political make up of UCL,CTR and the politics underpinning the rent strikers at Campbell House, given the lack of an explicit ideology and a messaging that combined radical and pragmatic elements around private property. It is worth underlining that UCL,CTR was a broader organisation than the two halls that undertook rent strikes; whilst it is unlikely that every rent striker was involved in UCL,CTR, it is clear that, with its roots in the Camden Halls, not every member of UCL,CTR was a rent striker. The two were not the same. How far did concern for housing issues extend for the average striker beyond conditions in UCL Halls? How many of the rent strikers were active in UCL,CTR? Were elements of one or both groups approaching the same issues from different positions? These questions begin to mirror the debate between Melling and Damer over the radicalism of the 1915 Glasgow rent strikes (Damer, 2000, pp.72-73).

Answer:

In PART1’s account, UCL,CTR grew out of Defend Education (DE), a group that had formed from connections made within the student movement in 2010 and was “...somewhere between... a student activist network... and like a faction within the student union.” DE had become “...inward... more interested in, like, theoretical debate than kind of organising,” with UCL,CTR a crossover group of activists keen to be more outward looking.

UCL,CTR drew on students who were not previously politicised; PART1 estimates that 95% of strikers and 70% of organisers were involved in activism for the first time. This coalition came together around the conditions and costs of UCL halls, adopting a grass roots community organising approach, with a conscious discussion to function as a network, an open group united around the issue rather than have a political line or membership.

⁸⁶ <http://www.citymetric.com/politics/britains-left-theres-growing-talk-national-rent-strike-1152>

⁸⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent/posts/430609140456743>

⁸⁸ <https://uclfreeeducation.wordpress.com/2015/10/11/ucl-rent-myth-number-1/>

PART1 highlighted that the issue of the rent was chosen strategically as well as pragmatically from a range of campaigns and that activist ideology can be expressed “...what they do [more] than what they say”. In targeting housing issues, there was theoretical awareness amongst organisers of where the issue fitted into larger problems within wider society and that these “deeper issues” were related to more profound “structural problems”.

This coalition therefore paired core organisers who in some cases had a strong leftist stance with strikers who in some cases were entirely pragmatic and would have not been involved in a more ideologically explicit campaign. PART2 articulates the later position, outlining “...I’m sure there were politics involved, there was... but I couldn’t bothered with it... I didn’t care”. This mix resulted in messaging that occasionally reflected both elements.

Conclusion

This paper has answered three interrelated questions. It has outlined a narrative of the strike developed from the UCL,CTR Facebook Page, alongside a detailed exploration of the methodology used to construct it; it has explored how UCL,CTR participants responded to the narrative; and it has concluded by addressing areas that are missing from the narrative in order to highlight the limitations of using a single resource to construct history. Paradoxically, in doing so, the study presents the beginnings of answers to other, perhaps more fundamental questions. This exploration concludes therefore with future beginnings, highlighting areas for further research.

The narrative presented in response to question 1 is partial and forms the foundation for further study; the areas highlighted as being missing in question 3 begin to sign post further study, but answering these robustly requires access to wider sources and remains beyond the scope of the paper.

Therefore the researcher has only begun to answer ‘*what is the narrative of Campbell House rent strike?*’ - a fuller answer lies teasingly on the horizon, alongside robust answers to both the questions presented *and* answers to questions that the researcher cannot conceive with the information available from the Facebook Page. It is probable that many of these questions may never be answered, but it is equally clear from interview transcripts that there is key information readily available that is missing from the account.

The methodology used to answer question 1 is likely transferable to other historical events; but attempting to do so is beyond the scope of this paper. And whilst Zinn is correct to highlighting that radical scholarship should transcend disciplinary boundaries (1997, p.504), the researcher’s academic limitations curtail this; it is only possible to stray so far from a discipline as a well intentioned amateur before one is out of one’s depth. So whilst the historiographical exploration is illuminating, what insight could be gained (for example) using an identical filter but grounded instead in discourse analysis? Closer to home, it seems likely that other theoretical frameworks may frame discussions in revealing ways - for example, what would it mean to conceive

social media as part of James C. Scott's Public Transcript (Scott, 1990, p.2)? It is for more qualified academics to answer this; the questions 'is the methodology presented transferable to X historical event?' and 'what insights can be gained from X field of study?' remain to be addressed.

What would it mean to apply a similar methodology to other forms of social media? What would it mean to apply the methodology across more than one account or Page or to use a hash tag (for example) as a filter to an historical event? In doing so, what would be revealed and what would be hidden?

Finally the typology presented in response to question 2 has begun to illustrate both the difficulties of obtaining oral history interviews and that those who do participate may do so from multiple motivations. The small sample size means that this requires further investigation. Are there other motivations than those presented and are these different depending on the subject being researched? One example might be the desire to "right a wrong", to "set the record straight" by highlighting how events were wrongly represented at the time. Is it possible to identify motivations – beyond the speculative – as to why interview subjects were reluctant to participate? Adapting question 2 – 'What opinion would participants from UCL,CTR have of this narrative?'- for other histories, with other struggles, locations, demographics and periods, may prove illuminating.

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