The oppositional unity between careerism and critical public engagement: A reflexive ethnography of sociologists in neoliberalising universities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This thesis develops and offers a dialectical-relational analysis of how contemporary neoliberalisation configures the academic identities of sociologists at universities in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

The dissertation draws on an internal relations philosophy, particularly Bertell Ollman's Marxist dialectic, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology, to identify and examine the tensions marking the academic identity of sociologists at these universities. Through the use of Marx's method and based on an internal relations ontological commitment, the thesis identifies an underlying contradiction which characterises the neoliberalising university: between insular careerism and critical public engagement. However, it is argued that these sociologists experience and understand the tensions – in their identities and practices – in terms of paradoxes rooted in an external relations conception of the world.

Sociologists provides a particularly fascinating case for studying the tensions characterising the neoliberalising university. This distinctiveness stems from the unique position they occupy, associated with an intellectual commitment to social justice and emancipation while simultaneously becoming embedded in an insular and (self-) commodifying ethos of practice. Neoliberal incursions include the heightened focus on individual competition, performance-auditing, and instrumentalisation, which distorts the principle and call to public engagement.

This is a reflexive ethnographic study which employs in-depth interviews with full-time academic sociologists as the source for primary data. The academics were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, and hail from three universities in the Eastern Cape Province. The researcher's social positioning and experiences also shape the impetus and framing of the study, inevitably incorporating elements of self-disclosure and self-analysis. Ultimately, however, the focus is on capturing relational dynamics from the respondents' perspectives.

This study is located at the intersections of higher education research, Marxist dialectical critique, relational sociology, and reflexive ethnography to analyse the nature of contradictions in academic work and what conceptualising them more fully can mean for social change.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the women who made me—the matriarchs whose stories, ideas, and desires often go unsung. To my mother, who made this possible, and whose passions I carry with me; to Mamma and Ma, for your untold resilience; to Miranda and Cynthia, for showing me the courage to be different and choose independently. In my hardest times, I carried your silence in my own, and when I stood up, it was your dreams which carried mine forward. To my father, who taught me first, to think beyond the given, and showed me the integrity of a life well-lived.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study engages with the experiences and perspectives of sociologists at universities in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, as they navigate the nexus of tensions inherent in the neo-liberalising university. By focusing on sociologists' recognition and understanding of tensions, the research seeks to uncover the sense-making mechanisms through which they frame the challenges and possibilities presented by this context. The concept of dialectical contradiction is specified as central, drawing on Bertell Ollman's Marxist internal relations philosophy, which emphasises the interconnection of opposing processes.

The term *neoliberalising* is used alongside *neoliberal* to denote the impact of capitalism on higher education as processual in nature, highlighting its ongoing incursion, contested dominance and incomplete outcomes.

This introduction outlines the social context, research objectives, methodological reflections, and the thesis's structure and contributions.

1.2 Context

Social tensions shape every social identity, including the unique circumstances which influence how academic identity is configured. Academics work within university institutions upheld by a general reverence for their presumed social and economic value. If asked to momentarily set aside this customary deference to their positions and engage in the uncomfortable task of self-description, what is it that academics would reveal about their relationship to society?

It is one thing to imagine the value of the university's functions from the perspective of the state, including what the institution might mean as an apparatus of democracy and political interest. Or to imagine what the university is to the market, as an input into human capital development and the expansion of consumerism. Or even the distant and indifferent view which society holds of the university as an august bastion of education. But what of those who labour within the university, who have made it their home and a site of personal identification? How do academics make sense of the value of the university to society? How do they decipher the chiaroscuro of purposes to which they are intimately connected every day, as they experience the institution of the university up-close, its intricacies magnified? How do they perceive the tensions informing the functions of academic life?

In what follows, I draw attention to the significance of neoliberalism as the evolving context through which academics make sense of their value to society. For this reason, 'the neoliberal university' is presented as an institutional context mirroring the social rifts wrought by capitalism. Entrenched divisions such as public from private, political from personal, collective from individual, and the possible from the real, are boundaries which are widely associated with the "sundering" of human dignity under capitalism (Holloway 2019:129). Universities reflect these divisions but are not mere repositories of capitalist ideology. They function as "heterocosms" with distinct histories, rules, and semi-autonomous constituencies that shape their meaning and direction while simultaneously constituting and being constituted by capitalism (Damrosch 1995: 18).

Like other modern institutions, universities are host to multiple, often misaligned, interests. The most defined anti-capitalist discourse, for instance, develops from within the university, illustrating that the scholarly community has never been purely a servant to the economy, possessing, as society's principal knowledge institution, a proven capacity for systemic critique. However, as a result of neoliberalism, the ethos of criticality and consciousness is under the threat of erosion.

Capitalist values have been entrenched globally in processes of expansion spanning 600 years. Neoliberal capitalism is definitive of the latest wave of globalisation, in which demand-side economics replaced Keynesianism as the dominant political hegemony. This phase has intensified the mechanisms through which markets dictate state policy and the organisation of society. Universities have subsequently faced the pressure for reconstruction as sites of state and business investment aimed at economic growth, thereby transforming students into consumers. Academics have been refashioned not only as suppliers of commodities but as commodities themselves, shaped by the logic of exchange. Ensnared in a self-commodifying culture of performance, their worth is measured through output, citations, rewards, and grants.

Over time, neoliberalism has rearticulated higher education in such a way and to such an extent that the functioning of universities within the commodity trades and metrics of the 'knowledge economy' is much easier to define than are its social and public benefits. Neoliberalism has thus violated an ethos of education that centres on public pedagogy, popular education, and solidaristic activity between academics, students, and society. According to Maisuria and Helmes (2019:17),

> [I]n neoliberalism, public service is not valued and rewarded. With reduced state funding, universities with a civic ethos will increasingly struggle.

While the intensity of capitalist influence varies across countries, in South Africa – as in many other places – the dominance of neoliberal capitalism has deeply entrenched its core principles of individualism and self-interest into academic practices. As capitalism continues to accelerate, the world each day moves further away from emancipatory visions of the public good. People, including those in the humanities and social sciences, increasingly question whether society can actively pursue alternatives to competition, individualism, and privatisation.

This thesis is inspired by 'critical university studies' which seeks to understand the relationship between the liberatory ethos of the scholarly community and the fullness of humanity in modern society (Bartel 2021). Having said this, it is acknowledged that humanist imperatives and moral certitude have never been the mainstay of university life, even before the rise of neoliberal capitalism. As far back as the medieval university, scholars have been "linked to economic imperatives, competitiveness and self-promotion", a tendency that has persisted throughout history (Page 2020: 589-591). Academia in South Africa has had a complex and uneven history, aligning itself not only with capitalism but also with race-based social exclusion, and only in rare instances standing on the side of freedom. The history of higher education internationally shows that there is nothing new about hegemony influencing the relations between academics and society.

Therefore, the thesis does not submit to the temptation to phrase the current situation as the decline in the essential purity of purpose of the university. The reality is accepted that justice and public connection have never been a *sine qua non* for the development of the university, or sociology as a discipline for that matter. The problem is not that the effervescence of the humanist academy is in remission, but that neoliberalism is dramatically intensifying (not creating) the conditions of insularisation, pushing academics even further away from the purpose of the public good.

While the university has never been a primary vehicle for social justice and emancipation, and while neoliberalism strives to further intensify and homogenise its functioning as insular, hope springs in the form of critique, and in the examples weaved throughout history of moments where a shift towards political self-expression has emerged from within the ranks of the

academy in contestation against social domination, suggesting a latent potential for a more engaged scholarly community.

Historical accounts of scholar-activism, while not encompassing the full scope of who academics were in the past, offer a vital seed of possibility for our deeply unsettling and volatile present, where human connection and freedom face mounting threats. Walter Benjamin (1940:4) underscores the value of partial memory when he writes, "[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was', It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." This perspective reminds us that even fragmented recollections can illuminate paths forward in times of crisis.

Despite sociologists' specialisation in society and social change and the incredible archive of language and explanation for 'possibility' that they nurture, they are often unable to find purpose or connection within the broader world, thus leaving their work – and its potential to humanise – disconnected from the societies it seeks to serve. Neoliberalism reconfigures academic work by attributing economic and social value through rewards, ratings, and peer recognition to promote insular and commodifying orientations over public-facing, emancipatory interpretations, and efforts.

In this context, the thesis explores South African sociologists' interpretive framings as they move through this (and their) institutional reality. Neoliberal governance in plotting the academic terrain has made critically engaged sociology seem untenable. Many academics crave more significant social impact from their work, more genuine human connections, and the opportunity to actively contribute to a fairer world. However, despite these desires for broader and more meaningful public engagement, they nonetheless comply with insular careerism. Many face this challenge, and their disillusionment deserves attention. Addressing sociologists' narratives of the dominance of individualistic practice and their desire for 'more' is ultimately an exploration of dehumanisation under capitalism and the possibilities toward rehumanisation.

Burawoy's (2004:15) claim is compelling, namely, that sociology is "obsessed with means, often its own survival" instead of caring about "its ends" for public enrichment and social change. Adesina (2006:250) tempers the recurrent concern with "the waning" of good sociology, which Sitas (1997) prominently articulated early in the democratic transition. For Adesina (2006), "anxiety about the future (indeed the nature of sociology) is neither new nor peculiarly South African". Indeed, debates about the public value of sociological practice and

education have a longstanding global history. These discussions remain ongoing today, resonating strongly in South Africa, partly in response to the nationwide student movement that emerged a decade ago. This movement prompted a welter of difficult questions about the fundamental purpose of higher education in 'the new' South Africa, questions that continue to act as a form of social conscience for the post-Fees Must Fall (FMF) university.

Therefore, researchers must create more room in the bountiful domain of higher education studies for investigations that start with the quest to uncover the conceptions and sense-making mechanisms of the scholarly community as they decipher their societal role, laying the groundwork for new, hopeful pathways. In higher education studies, neoliberalism is well known for its policies and quantifiable impacts. Neoliberalism's influence on the subjective and unconscious dimensions of experience among ordinary people, including scholars, is less commonly explored. The unfinished transformation agenda should include critical dialogue on the institutional character of knowledge producers and the modes of organisation of the intellectual vocation itself. This oversight must be addressed because, as Damrosch (1995:225) argues, for genuine transformation within the university to be achieved, the "scholarly community needs to be more fully understood and then creatively reconceived".

By examining how sociologists frame their realities in South Africa's neoliberal universities this study suggests that scholars' ability to envision possibilities beyond the present depends on how they understand the relational nature of the academic world. The analysis draws on Bertell Ollman's Marxist-inspired philosophy of internal relations to argue that viewing social tensions as dialectical contradictions provides the best perspective. Alongside this, Bourdieu's theory of practice and insights from relational sociology are incorporated. I argue that dialectical thinking offers a nuanced view of how social tensions shape identity and orientations to practice.

1.3 Main Objective and Secondary Objectives

As its main objective, this thesis pursues a dialectical-relational analysis of sociologists' academic identities in neoliberalising universities in contemporary South Africa. In achieving this, it responds to the following secondary objectives:

a) To determine the significance of a philosophy of internal relations for understanding the character of universities within neoliberal capitalism.
b) To uncover the key contradiction, understood as an internal relation, that structures the character of neo-liberalising universities in South Africa.

c) To explain how this key contradiction manifests in the tensions marking the academic identities of sociologists at neo-liberalising universities in South Africa.
d) To explore the significance of reflexive ethnographies for analysing academic identities at universities.

1.4 Methodological Overview: Reflexive Accounts of Academic Identity

The fascinating views of academic sociologists are brought to the surface through qualitative research. This is a reflexive ethnographic study which employs in depth interviews with nine full-time academic sociologists as the source for primary data. The academics are recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, and hail from three universities in the Eastern Cape.

Reflexive accounts of university and disciplinary realities are important. The reflexive vantage is detailed in Chapter Five, discussing my journey as a lecturer, highlighting race and gender identity and how prominently these standpoints have shaped my institutional experiences thus far. In Chapter Five, I do not emphasise the aspect of age quite as much, and it might be worth noting here. Contributions to the scholarship on the 'idea of the university' are often made by seasoned academics reflecting upon rich, life-long careers and the shifting of educational landscapes to which they have borne witness. It is less common for someone in the early or intermediate stages of their career to weigh in on the sociology of intellectual life.

As such, my contribution does not rest on the assumption that my modest experience within the university has been substantial or varied enough to grant me the authority to credit or discredit certain intellectual practices over others. Instead, this thesis emerges not from the assured weight of a well-established life's work but from the speculation and wonder of someone discovering what it means to be an academic – within a discipline so riddled with contradiction that the uncomfortable question of purpose chimes, like a persistent undertone, embodied in all exchanges, yet largely unanswered.

The epistemic terrain of Sociology cultivates rich internal spaces for understanding the collective, historical processes that shape human meaning and for generating critical insights into the forces that structure material reality. Yet, at the same time, it often neglects to share these insights as matters of urgency beyond the institutional boundaries of peers and students. This tendency could equally apply to academic departments of fine art, musicology, political studies, or any other discipline within the humanities and social sciences. The issue lies not so

much in the department and discipline itself but in the pervasive sense of insularity – an intensification of disconnection – that is felt in Sociology and across the university as a whole.

The realisation on my part was that the norm of insularity described above was not solely an effect of individual choice or the shiftlessness of sociology departments, though this may sometimes be true. Instead, it seemed to me the product of a much deeper cultural and ideological conditioning shaped by the imperatives of capitalism and the rationalities it inculcates. While writing this thesis from South Africa as a Sociology lecturer, I could not help but notice the systemic quality of careerist insularity, and how it seeped into everything around me. It shaped how colleagues related to one another, how they saw themselves and their purpose, their joy in their work, their perceptions of students, and their anxieties. The tensions in sociological practice between insularity and social obligation is ubiquitous but rarely sees the light of day in departmental dialogue. I hope to contribute to thinking beyond this impasse.

This study highlights the importance of reconceiving the academic community from within by revisiting the importance of understanding the 'gaps' between intention and practice, ideal and reality, as dialectical – not dualistic.

1.5 Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline

The deftness with which Bertell Ollman's work foregrounds contradiction as a tool for understanding society is central to this study. Ultimately, my examination of contradictions within academic identity rises to Ollman's (1990) invitation to "put dialectics to work".

I put dialectics to work by exploring the state of the art in sociological practice and academic identity from the lens of his internal relations philosophy. In the tradition of dialectic theory, concepts of the 'whole', 'parts' and 'relations' are incorporated to show society as an integrated, and antagonistic totality. A conception of social totality ('the whole') is sustained in the form of neoliberalism and the neoliberal university. The parts which are abstracted are academic identities. The interviews reveal that the relations between the parts and wholes are defined by tensions. The dialectic is put to work, in deciphering the feedback which results from the research process, to arrive at a posited primary contradiction.

An interpretation of Marx's method of abstraction is employed, which guides the structuring and scope of the thesis. This method incudes *two distinct epistemic journeys* – initially the totality ("whole") is suspended and broken into parts which lead to the identification of the primary contradiction (first journey). The first journey is captured by the discussions of Chapters Two, Three and Four. These chapters play a definitional role and encompass the first

journey of "abstracting things and social positions into the relations that constitute them" – that is – where the key concepts of the research are selected (Krupa 2005:310). The aspects of reality which we 'suspend', name and define after the first journey are the 'academic identity' and the 'neoliberal university', as well as a single primary contradiction which constitutes their internal relation. The single primary contradiction – careerist insularity in tension with critical public engagement – is retroductively abstracted from the findings. The purported existence of this contradiction (one of many inherent to neoliberalism) acts like a central hypothesis.

The second journey is where we build from the simple abstractions, we have delineated by incorporating new evidence to develop a more comprehensive dialectical understanding of the whole. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven capture this journey. These chapters thus explore the real-world implications and conditions of the proposed contradiction.

Together, the two journeys illustrate how the theoretical framing influences the structure of the thesis, guiding its passage from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete. In this light, I provide a chapter outline below.

In Chapter Two, 'dialectics' is introduced as a general worldview which is derived from Marxist thought and which finds its primary expression in this thesis through internal relations philosophy. The ontological and epistemological implications of adopting 'dialectics' is outlined. This chapter shows the unique power of dialectics to renew sociological critique through its explicit vision of complexity and social change. The philosophy of higher education provides the context for highlighting the strength of Marxist internal relations in its treatment of structure and agency. Finally, the overlaps between Bourdieu's logic of practice and dialectic thought are discussed, thus completing the introduction of the dialectical-relational framework guiding the thesis.

Chapter Three situates neoliberal university as the totality within which dialectical relations unfold. A three-point delineation of key features of dialectical contradiction in academic practice is established here, which will find resonance later, in Chapters Six and Seven. The implications of careerist insularity are discussed in the context of academic identity.

Chapter Four explores 'critical public engagement' emphasising public sociology and public intellectualism as key traditions. It highlights Burawoy's call to public sociology, alongside endogenous South African critiques and debates in this subfield. An embattled sense of public value is raised as a constitutive characteristic of the historical makeup of the South African university. South African higher education's ties to capitalism and colonialism are examined,

showing how neoliberalism and neo-colonialism shape its public role today. Historical efforts to establish academic democracy – prefiguring broader liberatory struggles – are highlighted.

Chapter Five presents this study as a reflexive ethnography, detailing my personal interest in the research question as well as the process of data collection and analysis. In this chapter, my subject-position is set out. The chapter continues the foregoing conversation on dialectics, contradiction, and academic identity and practice in the neoliberal university, while also developing a methodological framework through the overlapping principles of qualitative ethnography, constructivism, feminist epistemology, and dialectical theory. These overlapping principles build upon the argument that significant underexplored room remains for dialectical theory to unlock contemporary formulations for reflexive sociology. In addressing the phenomena of sociologists' reflexive self-understanding, notions such as perspectives, feelings, perceptions, viewpoints, and imagination are used interchangeably throughout. Ultimately, the research design and process seek 'thick descriptions' to reveal academics' insights into the potential existence of the primary contradiction in practice.

Chapters Six and Seven are joined as the analyses chapters. These two chapters give detail to 'the second journey' by incorporating a particular spatial and historical moment by which we may flesh out the primary contradiction. Together they outline how academics conceive of tensions in academic practice, as external paradoxes, *not* as dialectical contradictions. Because of the connection of these two chapters, the introduction for both is placed at the start of Chapter Six (Section 6.2 and 6.3), and the conclusion for both at the end of Chapter Seven (Section 7.4 and 7.5).

Chapter Six presents the first major form which the paradox (external relations thinking) takes from the perspective of interviewees, that is, that sociologists embrace the ideal of public intellectualism but see it as ontologically distinct from the conditions of professional practice. Sociologists displayed the remarkable maintenance of an image of their value in terms of an idyllic notion of a free-floating intellectual who influences public life but tend to dissociate it from everyday reality which they see as dystopic in comparison. This chapter works through some of the interesting insights and provocations which their pervasive tendency to regale an ideal existing only transcendently brings to the fore. In this first paradox, sociological practice is viewed as sharply segmented from a utopian, sometimes revolutionary, conception of the sociologist, framed as a binary of ontologically distinct realities.

Chapter Seven outlines the second significant paradox: sociologists view the academic sphere as detached from other spheres—precisely, management and society. Many respondents argue that the university's managerial dictates reinforce a separation between the managerial and academic spheres of practice, often diminishing and co-opting the latter. Similarly, they perceive a divergence between the academic sphere and society, viewing it not as intertwined with society but as standing apart in an external, dualistic relation.

Chapter Seven concludes with a discussion on how sociologists might move beyond viewing academic identity and practice in undialectical ways, suggesting alternative counter-hegemonic practices as a final reflection in the analysis chapters.

The methodological, empirical and theoretical significance of the thesis will be summarised in the conclusion.

1.6 Key Concepts

A number of key concepts appear throughout the thesis and it is important to precisely set out how I am using them from the start.

Academic Identity: It is the interest of the thesis to understand clearly how academics perceive the co-existence of alternative trajectories of practice under neoliberalism. Academic identity is therefore an integral theme. There is no agreed upon definition in higher education literature for what academic identity means. It is however a central and recurrent concept which generally denotes the processes by which academic's orientation to different values and practices are shaped by past experiences, expectations, and contemporary circumstances. It involves an interplay between professional-institutional expectations, disciplinary norms, societal responsibilities, and personal experiences, which culminates in an individual's identification of values, roles and activities as primary and others as not. It is widely accepted that there are aspects informing academic identity which are recalcitrant and enduring and aspects which can be resisted and renegotiated (Pillay *et al.* 2021). Some scholars highlight academic identity in affective terms, such as "*the attitude* … that determines the approach to the concept of work" (Ching 2021:1; my emphasis). Others conceptualise identity in discursive terms, understanding it as "*a set of significant stories* about an individual that are created and recreated over time" (McCune 2019:22; my emphasis). My view of academic identity aligns instead with Jiménez (2024) who highlights activity and interaction (not concepts) – that is, current practices, and dispositions as the core expression of academic identity.

Counter-publics: The concept of counter-publics challenges liberal bourgeois and androcentric conceptions of the public (usually associated with Jürgen Habermas). 'Counterpublics' speaks to the inclusion of those systematically excluded from dominant conceptions of the public sphere, such as women, children, the youth, the poor and working class (Majewska 2021). The notion of counterpublics entails creative and transgressive reappropriation of 'the public sphere'. From the perspective of education, counter-publics could take the form of the historical movement of People's Education in South Africa, the student movements of 2015-2016 or Freire's critical pedagogy.

Dialectical Contradiction: One way that tensions can be understood is as interconnected and mutually constitutive (that is, as dialectical contradiction). Dialectical contradictions see the sides of a tension as interconnected where aspects of a tension are viewed as constitutive, enabling and subordinating the other in an immediate sense. Opposing forces are understood to presume and precondition its 'other'. To identify actual dialectical contradiction, we need to adopt an internal relations perspective which is seldom the philosophical orientation of higher education research. In this Marxist-inspired understanding of contradictions, each side is actively internalised in the creation, undermining, and changing of the other. This synchronicity and symbiosis between opposing forces, understood dialectically, is not power-neutral. Dialectic contradiction is certainly not the interaction of two halves, equal in power for whose interaction there is a final, stable resolution. Rather dialectic contradictions are power-laden, reflecting the prevailing power hierarchies and imbalances in society, in flux, with no final resolution.

Paradoxes: Tensions can be understood in many ways, including as externally related dualisms (what I refer to as paradoxes, borrowing from Ollman). Paradoxes is the conception of tensions as dualistic pairings where two poles are juxtaposed as parallel oppositions. This is an external relations framing which depicts elements of a tension as incommensurables with each negating the other from the outside. The problem with the framing of tensions as paradoxes is that, through its conceptual separatism, it precludes a substantial view of the internal relations between aspects marking a tension.

Practice: This thesis adopts a definition of practice attuned to Bourdieu's sociology and its fusion of structure and agency through his famous concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'. Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' allows us to understand individuals' dispositions and predispositions toward certain actions as the products of collective, historical conflict and conditioning (Colley 2014:

668). The invisible operation of domination in society engenders regularities in practice (Bourdieu 1977). Therefore, practice is not merely a subjective, spontaneous expression of agency but an embodiment of the mechanisms by which powerful actors and systems attribute place and purpose to others. Practice understood in this way emphasises that it is only through human doing that domination is transmuted, and only through human doing that it can be re-evaluated and challenged (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Practice understood in this way encompasses both individual desires and aspirations as well as the collective conditioning of academic work.

CHAPTER TWO: DIALECTICS AS EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK FOR CONTRADICTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the onto-epistemological foundations for exploring the tensions underpinning academic identity and practice, on which this study focuses. Dialectic theory is introduced as component to a broad tradition encompassed by relational thought which includes Marxist and non-Marxist strands. The focus of this study, however, draws specifically on the oeuvre of Marxist philosopher Bertell Ollman (1976; 1990; 1998; 2003; 2014; 2015).

Ollman's 'philosophy of internal relations will demonstrate the continued relevance of Marxist ontology and epistemology for understanding 'contradictions' in modern social institutions, including higher education. Ontology, a branch of philosophy, examines the primary constituents of reality by asking, "What fundamentally exists, and what is the nature of reality?" (Blaikie 2000:8). Blaikie (2000:8) describes epistemology as "the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known".

Bertell Ollman's dialectic theory opens to new dialogues on the nature of the contradictions constituting all phenomena. Ollman's formulation of dialectics will be blended with Bourdieu's concept of 'practice' and the developing field of Relational Sociology to present the key theoretical and philosophical tenets guiding this thesis.

The dialectic, warmed over for contemporary times, presents new possibilities for how we imagine reality (and thus change). In this thesis, dialectical entanglements act as the starting point for how we better grasp the university as "a location of possibility", as bell hooks (1994:207) calls it. Dialectic thinking invites us to think of the emergent future for academic work in the humanities and social sciences in terms of the in-betweenness of tendencies, positions, and practices. Section 2.2 explores the dialectic framing of reality which supports a dedicated focus on the in-between and underlying contradictions animating social reality.

Section 2.3 discusses the importance of revitalising dialectical ontology for contemporary social theory, particularly for its superiority in defining contradictions as an ineluctable property, constituent to all beings. While highlighting the possibilities inherent in recognising

contradictions as animating every aspect of the social system, including higher education and, by extension, every part of academia as expressions of underlying contradictions, it also demonstrates a method for deciphering these contradictions. Section 2.4 describes the epistemological process of bringing contradictions to the fore through the process of abstraction.

The study offers ontological and epistemological considerations aimed at thinking differently about oppositional tendencies throughout the university. When we think of contradictions facing and constituting the university, certain oppositions may come to mind – such as colonial repression against decolonial epistemology, internationalisation against indigenisation, or careerism in opposition to activism. Dialectic thinking shifts the discourse away from pitting one side of opposition against the other and, instead, acts as an injunction to understand all parallel distinctions as part of the same whole, each side deriving sense and shape from the other, ultimately part of the same system of internal relations. Seeing the world from a dialectical perspective such as this has implications for framing social change. Section 2.5 establishes the theoretical foundation for discussing social change that unfolds later in the thesis.

It is worth noting that the terms "whole," "holism," "totality", and "reality in its entirety" used to denote the social system in this chapter differ significantly from their functionalist usage, which implies all parts moving in tandem and exhibiting an integrative synchronicity toward equilibrium. Quite differently, the totality referred to here, as will become more evident in the upcoming chapters, does not produce statis; instead, it is a totality in tension, and flux where,

> The logic of the totalising system contradicts itself, generating irreconcilable antagonisms within the social order…. (Powell 2013a: 89).

According to Powell (2013a: 94), "Contradictions arise precisely from the integration of society," whereas functionalist holist theories conceptualise social conflicts or contradictions "as pathological exceptions to the strong integrative tendency of the social system."

The use of "totality" in the dialectical sense acknowledges contradiction as an inherent property rather than an aberration. Section 2.6 explores the implications of this perspective as both a foundational starting point and a critical intervention in emerging philosophies of higher education. Section 2.7 examines the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, and how this compares with conventional paradigms in higher education studies. In Section 2.8,

Bourdieu's ingenious conception of practice is introduced and an argument is made that an alignment exists with internal relational thought, posing his relational insights as a critical and ancillary conceptual device for exploring the hermeneutically fraught arena of academic identity which I explore.

Ultimately, Chapter Two delves into the intricate domain of dialectical theory, highlighting the key constructs that underpin the thesis's interpretations: internal relations, external relations, abstraction, dialectical contradictions, parts-totalities, sublation, and Bourdieu's relational concept of practice.

2.2 Dialectics as ontology

'Marxism' as a body of scholarship encompasses four key domains: Marx's general theory of social progress known as historical materialism; his empirical analysis of capitalism known as political economy; the political strategy within his communist project; and the methodological and philosophical foundation underpinning these domains, the dialectic. The dialectic is described as "the most generalised level of discourse in Marx's thought" (Paolucci 2008:357–358).

To young South African sociologists, the term dialectic is a faintly familiar emblem of "classical" Sociology seen peripherally in sociological discourse, used adjectivally in papers, and mentioned in passing. Its specific meaning as a theoretical device, its vaunted history, and the usefulness of its long-standing principles, are no longer a core interest of contemporary theory. Marxist concepts have been steadily substituted over the past decades by other more current exemplars of critical social thought such as decolonial, postcolonial, postmodern, post-structural, feminist, and cultural theories. Goran Therborn (2007:69) mournfully diagnoses the situation as one where, "the Marxist triangle of social science, politics and philosophy has been broken – in all likelihood, irremediably". And with the demise of Marxism's popularity as a defining pillar of Sociology, so too do we bid farewell to the dialectic as an analytic lens?

I argue that this need not be the case and that there exists considerable promise for the dialectic, even within a disciplinary environment in which historical materialism per se is no longer a rallying point. The continued relevance of the dialectic resides in its powerful conceptualisations of the "big picture" by way of its emphasis on contradiction, internal relations, and opposition as ineluctable constituents of social institutions.

The dialectic transcends Manichean dualities, effectively serving as a sophisticated precursor to complexity theories. But the dialectic stands on its own, unparalleled in its expansive conceptualisations of reality framed through polarities. The specific interpretation of the dialectic explored in this chapter offers the potential for its renewal and cross-fertilisation with contemporary theories that shape modern Sociology.

Dialectical thinking is commonly traced as far back as ancient Greece to the time of Socrates around 400 BC (Dybicz and Pyles 2011: 302). But the characteristics of dialectic thinking can be found in several ancient philosophies in the non-Western world too (Tong 2021). The spiralling infusion of opposite forces into 'one' is patent in Daoist thinking and in Buddhist *Bhaviveka* for instance (Brincat and de Groot Heupner 2020: 125). Decolonial revisions which attempt to diversify intellectual histories of "the" dialectic are timeous, and indeed gaining traction (Ciccariello Maher 2016). This is worthy of mention as we look towards new ways of knowing which decentre the West as the referent point for all knowledge. But this is not the focus of this discussion.

Instead, what this chapter seeks to illuminate are the core principles of dialectical thinking which can be applied to sociological research in any context. Dialectical thought, as Ollman (2003:3) notes, has been integral to understanding social life since the very inception of philosophy. Renowned philosopher Frederic Jameson (2009:4) reinforces this, observing: "So, it is, that to speak of the dialectic with the definite article cannot but reinforce the more universalistic claims of this philosophy, as well as its unity."

The dialectic is presented as a universally applicable worldview, drawing on the philosophy of internal relations to explore its present-day implications. Marxist dialectics intervenes in the organisation of ideas by impressing a recognition of "social relational forms, their ontological depth, and the ever-present need to be wary of the foreshortening effects of undialectical abstraction and reifying practices" (Jones 2011: xvii).

Reification in capitalist society arises from undialectical understandings of social reality, where individuals fail to account for the antagonistic origins of historical and social relations that underlie phenomenal forms. Phenomenal form is taken here to mean "objects of experience for living human actors", or life as we see its outward existence and animation (Pula 2022:509; Smyth and Westerman 2022).

Reification, as the outcome of undialectical ontology, includes the representation of relations between people as 'static', 'apparent' or 'things'. Marxist analysis attributes the prevalence of reification to a consciousness of society informed by the capitalist social structure, that is, "a society dominated by commodity production" (Burris 1988:24). Reification as the process by which human life is perceived in terms of the mediation of 'things' reproduces the "transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world" (Petrovic 1991: 463). Dialectics as ontology ultimately acts as an antidote and enrichment against unconscious tendencies towards reification, and the presentation of dynamic life through rigid forms of 'social facts' which reinforce the objectification of human reality under capitalism, where Marx (1844:159) contends, we see "the personification of things and the reification of people". If "all reification is an act of forgetting" as Horkheimer and Adorno famously said, then the dialectic is an act of vitalism and remembrance (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 191).

The dialectic is understood as a generalised worldview. And though Marxist contributions to its philosophical underpinnings is considered unsurpassed, Sayer (2015:27) reminds us, the dialectic is ultimately a "theory about the nature of the world in general", valid beyond strictly Marxist economics. As such, Ollman's internal relations philosophy applied to academic identity and practice applies Marxist ideas of relationality and contradiction in an exploratory and heterodox manner.

2.2.1 The Philosophy of Internal Relations

Karl Marx inverted Hegelian idealism, producing what became known as Marxist dialectics. According to Ollman (1971:163), "internal relations; though generally unrecognised, is the epistemological basis of the dialectic that Marx took over from Hegel". In *Dance of the Dialectic* (2003:5), Ollman describes the philosophy of internal relations as a doctrine which takes inter-relationality, not unitary things as the fundamental constituent of life. As such, it

> [T]reats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what it is, so that a significant change in any of these relations registers as a qualitative change in the system of which it is a part. With relations rather than things as the fundamental building blocks of reality, a concept may vary somewhat in its meaning depending on how much of a particular relation it is intended to convey.

Ollman (2003:25) contends that the concept of 'internal relations' constitutes the core subject matter of Marxism, a focus that, he argues, is often inadequately acknowledged by many social theorists:

> …The relation is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx's conception of social reality. This is really the nub of our difficulty in understanding Marxism, whose subject matter is not simply society but society conceived of "relationally". Capital, labour, value, and commodity are grasped as relations containing in themselves, as integral elements of what they are, those part with which we tend to see them externally tied.

In other words, for Marx, relations are so pervasive a substance of reality to the extent that even things are conceived of as relations, insofar as things only have meaning and function through their interiorised interdependence with other things (Ollman 2003:36). Ollman, therefore, attributes to Marx an internal relations philosophy which sees all things as ensembles of relations such that – for example – subject and object forms, and nature and society, are contained within one another.

Marx's influential works, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) and the *Grundrisse* (1857), shaped by his early engagement with Hegel and German idealism, are often referred to as 'early Marx' and reflect his inspired exploration of dialectics, the interconnectedness of relations, and human subjectivity, including questions of alienation. These early writings, which emphasise relationality, gained recognition only after Marx's death but played a crucial, albeit quiet, role as the foundational texts for his later, more widely circulated works, such as *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* (1976).

Bertell Ollman, drawing on Marx, suggests that our philosophic understanding of reality is itself a reflection of the operation of that reality. Ollman interprets this as the significance of framing a subject in relation to explanatory categories, noting that "our contact with reality is contact with conceptualised reality" (Ollman 2003: 23). This insight is central to the findings in Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis.

While Marx did not explicitly develop internal relations philosophy, his work inspired its interpretation in these terms. His perspective on the interplay between concepts and reality was remarkably ahead of its time, foreshadowing the rise of poststructuralism in the 1980s.

Poststructuralism similarly challenged fixed meanings and teleology, promoting fluid and dynamic relations and identities—ideas traced back to Marx's earlier writings.

The dominance of mechanistic and orthodox Marxist approaches, which downplayed the relational aspects of his thought, frequently leads to overlooking Marx's contributions to this interpretive tradition of dialectical inquiry. Bertell Ollman's work on internal relations ontology revisits and revitalises the dialectical perspective, challenging interpretations that favour atomistic views of Marx's theory.

The dialectic as understood through the philosophy of internal relations is chosen for this research because it offers a unique lexicon for understanding the entanglement of the parts of reality as organically interior and presupposing of the other instead of as forces existing externally and only contingently related to the other.

Ollman's philosophy of internal relations posits that ontological contact and connections between aspects of reality are not contingent but necessary. The qualities of any 'thing' he argues is its relation to everything else or, said differently, a thing's relationality is its constitutive ontological property. This "philosophic commitment" to internal relationality implies that "things/phenomena exist only insofar as they are in contact with other things … and they manifest themselves in as many different ways as there are other things with which they enter into relations of time and space" (Dietzgen 2010, cited in Brincat and de Groot Heupner 2020: 128). While all aspects of reality are necessarily co-evolving and co-constitutive from this philosophic lens, Ollman (1976) makes clear that these internal relations are not always self-evident. As such, the constitutive properties of reality are often mistaken as ontologically exterior by those who interpret them. In other words, instead of seeing reality as it is (as internal relations), people often see it as its inverse, through the logic of external relations.

2.2.2 The Philosophy of External Relations

The philosophy of external relations forwards an anti-relational logic that portrays things as existing 'in and of themselves,' externally and independently of other things, and only contingently entering relations as pre-constituted entities. An external relations orientation involves the representation of things as possessing ontological exteriority to one another. This philosophy considers the world primarily as a system of independent, conjunctural, and externally linked units, where relations between things are accidental, causal or contingent—

in other words, relations are neither necessary nor essential. The tendency to model causal relations by depicting the "bumping" of one social phenomenon into another reflects the dominant framing of social issues in terms of external relations.

An external relations viewpoint frames objects of inquiry according to "how to relate separate entities" (Ollman 1971:166). For internal relations, the necessary contact between co-constituent units of reality shapes the problem of social inquiry, quite differently, as that of "disentangling a relation or group of relations from the total and necessary configurations in which they exist" (Ollman 1971:166).

According to Sawchuk (2023:4), while it may be the inverse of external relations, dialectical methodology does not dismiss external relations in toto but instead "places them firmly beneath the rubric of a philosophy of internal relations." This implies prioritising internal relations so that external relations function as merely "moments, dimensions, or features of a relational process" (Sawchuk 2019:107). Reordering the primacy of internal relations over external ones reveals a common oversight: treating forms as ontologically independent obscures the deeper goal of analysing the co-constitution of internally related phenomena, which may only superficially appear separate. For Ollman (2015:9), the distinction between an external relations view or an internal relations view is "the most important philosophical question of the day."

2.2.3 Dynamic Totalities

Internal relations insist on the inseparability of all relations that comprise social totalities as the starting point of all inquiry. The argument emphasises ontological interiority as primary and the increasingly rare idea of the larger, moving totality. With an internal relations approach, the identity and existence of each object depends on other objects; therefore, if there is a shift in an internal relation, then the entire totality shifts.

The dialectic relies on dynamic social totalities, i.e., the larger "whole" and the internal contradictions that constitute it. The idea of totalities ('the whole') is enduring for dialectical and internal-relational thought. Totality itself is the moving and unified whole of the trajectories of endless, opposing and internally entwined forces as they work themselves out as reality. Though internal relations to this totality are regarded as asymmetrical and conflictual, they are still considered the foundation of a unified system.

It is far less common today to philosophise in terms of totalities. For some time, totalities—whether dynamic or static—lost favour with contemporary thinkers who viewed holism and universalism as relics of modernism, treating them with deep suspicion. The popularity of postmodern critiques during the 1990s and early 2000s further marginalised such notions. Postmodernism successfully linked grand theories, to rationalisations for political hegemony and the perceived vanguardism inherent in totalising views of society, which were criticised for underpinning problematic political programmes. Therborn's (2006) argument in *After Dialectics: Postmodernity, Post-Marxism, and Other Posts and Positions* encapsulates this.

However, there are signs of resurgence. Scholars suggest that "dialectical thought is making a come-back" (Sawchuk 2017:159; Shannon *et al.* 2024), reflecting renewed interest in these comprehensive frameworks. This, if true, is a positive development because we cannot adequately understand the nature of contradiction without conceptions of dialectic totality. Through Ollman's depiction of dialectic, we are encouraged to see the ontological basis of social life as "an interconnected, contradictory, and dynamic whole or larger totality" and the epistemological bases as geared to "understand[ing] the contradictory nature of our world" (Brincat and de Groot Heupner 2020: 121). When considering parts and the dynamic totality, it is crucial to highlight that relations are interiorised, so that they exist in, with and through all the other relations within the system. Once abstracted, relations are like a reflective surface or camera obscura into which one may gaze, from the particular (or part), the characteristics of the whole system at any point in time. Ollman (2015:10) declares that by examining parts of the totality, the philosophy of internal relations allows us to see how the system "functions, where it is tending, and how we can affect it". Ollman (1976:32) explains this by illustrating that while mathematical equality is 1=1, for Hegel one aspect of the system is equal to "the whole it relationally expresses". The interplay between the whole and its relational parts is defining of the philosophy of internal relations, where a partial view of the whole may be evoked through its parts and the internal relations between them, as explained by Ollman (2003:41):

> [T]o state what is known about any one thing is to describe the system in which it exists; it is to present, as Hegel invariably did, each part as a facet of the whole.

Central to this thesis is the practice of abstracting parts from the whole, where these parts partially reflect the whole. This concept and the specific process that makes such abstractions possible are unpacked in Section 2.4 of this chapter.

In the philosophy of internal relations, the parts are "points [internal to the whole] where the properties of the whole are concentrated", therefore the interactions between parts and whole are not contingent but internal to and constitutive of the other (Levin 2008:34). Abstractions which represent these parts thus also depict a slice of reality in its entirety (Chatterjee and Ahmed 2019: 381-383). This means that there is "no top without a bottom, or identity without difference. The whole and the part always mutually presuppose and imply each other" (Sève 2008: 87). Every abstraction of a part we make or every part we isolate from the entirety will reflect the characteristics of the entire social structure differently, influenced by both the specific spatial and temporal context and the perspective from which these parts are observed.

2.2.4 Centring Contradiction

What remains the most valuable imprint of dialectics is its delicate grasp of the i dea of 'contradiction'. In this respect, Ollman (2014a:576) defines contradiction as Marx's most important dialectical category, defining it as "the strained interaction of two or more processes that seems headed for some kind of resolution". In Ollman's formulation, contradiction is not an anomaly, an aberration of balance, or a glitch in the working out of a system, but the very motive force for its dynamic existence and progress. Marx says that "in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory" (Marx 1963: 218; cited in Ollman 1990:68). An internal relations perspective on contradiction enthusiastically advances the notion that opposing elements are mutually constituting, entangled, co-elements occurring "within the frame of reference of a unified, organic system"—that is, within the totality (Ogasawara 2017: 180).

Totalities and wholes take precedence "even as elements of the system are moving, waiting for the [possible] moment of implosion" (Ogasawara 2017:180). Hegel (1993:439), widely regarded as the foremost figure for modern dialectic philosophy, explains in the *Science of Logic* that: "Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only insofar as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity".

In this context, contradictions can be understood in light of three principles: that contradictions are part of the same unified state, that the interaction of contradictions reflects the patterns existent in the broader totality of society and, finally, that any significant change in the constitution of contradictory social relations will create shifts in the larger totality which in turn will limit and determine the parts which make up the whole (Ollman 2003:1-3). These principles will become clearer in this chapter.

Callinicos (2008: 574) defines dialectical contradiction as "the coexistence of aspects of a totality which are at once intrinsically related but tendentially mutually exclusive". This definition is significant in that it highlights that while contradictory elements exist in states of necessary contact and interaction, the elements or poles of the contradiction themselves are not reducible to the other. Rather, they are distinguishable at a phenomenal level as unique, albeit essentially, opposed forces. Ollman (2003:38) provides the illustration given by Marx for how entities can be considered as having distinctive, irreducible "outside natures", but whose relational essence overcomes what we may perceive as visible difference. Ollman (2003:38) highlights how that which is "apparent or easy to isolate" (irreducible) on the outside is in actual fact internally and relationally connected to other aspects. His example is that of the sun and a plant, each clearly distinguishable but each also only what it is because of the existence of the other. The sun and plant are not merely causally linked but the sun is the object of the plant, as the plant is the object of the sun. The sun's effect on the plant, "is considered by Marx to be an expression of the sun itself." At the same time, the plant is not just an effect of the sun but a part of it or "an expression of the life awakening power of the sun".

Dialectical methodology pushes us to an appreciation of the endless array of sides to a thing (a phenomenon, an institution, an event) by regarding the manifold, and moving opposites which comprise it, how those opposites come together, and how they unfold and define the world through necessary, mutual interaction. Marx took from Hegel the tenets of dialectical philosophy and produced from it, "the law of the unity of opposites", which Lenin regarded as the most important of the dialectics contributions to thinking (McGill and Parry 1948).

To borrow from McGill and Parry (1948: 421), the unity of opposites is defined by the following principles, though relational philosophy is unlikely to abide by rock-ribbed interpretations as earlier noted. Nonetheless the law of the unity of opposites includes:

> -1(a) The conception or perception of anything involves the conception or perception of its opposite.
>
> -(b) The existence of a thing involves the existence of an opposite.
>
> -2. A concrete thing or process is a unity of opposite determinations.
>
> -3. A concrete system or process is simultaneously determined by oppositely directed forces, movements, tendencies.

Considered as a universal philosophy, dialectics is foremostly an avowal of the power of contradictions as the central force underpinning all of our statuses and movements as human beings and nature, where contradictions are “accepted as a true aspect of the world, which [is] continually overcome and which continually renews itself in the process of change” (McGill and Parry 1948:419).

In this section, we centre contradiction as a primary pillar of dialectic theory, not only for its description of the ‘state’ of things but also for its illumination of movement and change unpacked in Section 2.5. At the heart of social life is a network of clusters of “unity of opposites” where the reconstitution of clusters of internal contradictions marks multiple possible trajectories of reproduction and transformation of life. Contradiction as a tenet of the philosophy of internal relations is surely applicable beyond the economic theories typically associated with Marx.

This thesis does not aim to identify and comment on all the contradictory relations constitutive of higher education in South Africa – these are endless. Nor is it the intention to posit the university as being unique for simply having contradictions. Contradictions are undeniably omnipresent and constitutive of all spheres, a reality that underpins how scholars have historically approached the dialectic. Scholars across diverse fields have celebrated dialectic thought for its capacity to uncover the unity within seemingly opposing forces. It offers a powerful tool to uncover the hidden interplay of purpose and form that shapes human life, extending beyond traditional class, labour, and capital categories. Dialectic philosophy continues today to serve the need for writers across disciplines to describe contradictions and the unity of opposites in fields spanning critical race theory (Harris 2018), social movement studies (Krinsky 2021), legal studies (Norrie 2000), linguistics (Xi 2024), psychology (Elhammoumi 2015), international relations (Brincat and de Groot Heupner 2020), business studies (Farjoun 2019) and beyond.

Dialectic ontology offers amazing avenues of convergence with sociology. In the following section I explore how the sociological imagination is enriched by a remembrance and restoration of dialectic thinking. The dialectic tradition is presently backgrounded in sociology, where internal relations philosophy seems long forgotten as an affectation of ‘early Marx’ who is caricatured as being more interested in relationality and subjectivity than in the "serious" endeavours of programmatic science. While not new to sociology, dialectical traditions have been overshadowed by the predominance of external relations. A renewal of dialectical thought

in sociology is about shifting the hierarchy of methods of critique, not eradication. Perhaps the re-volution of dialectic thought simply starts with reading Marx differently, appreciating unexpected aspects of lesser known but still characteristically prophetic work.

2.3 Dialectic Ontology and Sociological Critique

Sociology's rooted engagement with Marxism as a tradition points to the potential for more relational perspectives to grow from within, that recognise the significance of internal relations philosophy. Currently, Sociology's engagement with dialectic philosophy is hampered by its tendency to think in terms of typologies and causality. However, a recent revival in relational social science points to the aim of retaining and integrating external relations within a framework that recognises the essential superiority and importance of relational thought in the conceptual hierarchy of sociology (Dépelteau 2008, Paoulucci 2011, Crossley 2015). The following section discusses some of Sociology's existing overlaps and opportunities for a renewal of the 'dance of the dialectic'.

2.3.1 Overlaps

Dialectic ontology allows us to analyse repression and freedom (and other 'opposites') not as disembodied things but rather, to quote Marx (1988a: 99), as reality in "its *active connection*, its *internal relation* … grasped as *contradiction*" (original emphasis). Internal relationality, is a logic, as suggested, far more elegant than that of external relations. In discussing the relevance of the Marxist dialectic for twenty first century social theory, Chatterjee, and Ahmed (2019: 384) claim that its magic exists in "treating society as a whole and looking at the internal connections and interrelations (in time and space) [which] reveals the complexity and richness of society". 'Inter-relations' and 'inner relations' are alternative terms for internal relations. According to Bidell (2024:2), Hegel himself did not use the term 'internal relation', instead he used "inner relation, essential relation and necessary relation to characterise relations between parts and wholes".

Dubbeld (2009) contends that Marxist relationality, which emphasise the interconnectedness of the whole, revitalise sociology by enabling a deeper examination of the underlying processes that influence and shape surface-level social phenomena. However, the dialectic is not new to Sociology and is rooted in well-worn Marxist tropes within the discipline. One of the popular dialectic distinctions claimed by sociology is that of 'the base' and 'the superstructure'. 'The base' refers to the relations of production which give rise to the economic foundations for modern society, whereas 'the superstructure' are the ideals, laws, politics, aesthetics, and

consciousness invoked by the structure. However, dialectic distinctions in Sociology often betray an appreciation of internal entanglement, tending to external relations instead. For instance, standard interpretations of base and superstructure see them as separate "levels". Sayer (1987: 19; my emphasis) contends that this misrepresents Marx's intended ontology where each of the spheres, the base, and the superstructure, "is what it is only by virtue of its *relation* to the other and must be conceptualised accordingly". The same is true for Marx's distinction between wage labour and capital, as "the concept of capital implicitly contains that of wage-labour and vice versa": they are not conceptualised as mere opposites (Sayer 1987: 19). Marx's approach was implicitly relational and stood against analytic philosophy which tended to see social categories as nominal. Interpretations of Marx over time have downplayed the relational substance of his ontology, a neglect which filters into definitions of Marxist Sociology in South Africa.

Ball (1979:788) argues that "the dialectical position is pre-eminently sociological". A dialectic-relational approach is distinctively sociological in the sense that it centres the subject position of researchers themselves as vital to understanding the nature, limits, and potential for knowledge in any given institutional context. This ties in with decolonial, indigenous and feminist philosophies which regard knowledge as socially situated, conditioned by the social location of the knowledge producer (Gutierrez y Muhs *et al* 2012; Khunuo *et al.* 2019). The perspectival element of dialectical ontology ties in with the key philosophies of Karl Marx, who himself critiqued "the positivist assumption that observation is natural or neutral" (Dubbeld 2009: 221). Ollman (2003: 16) highlights the importance of acknowledging positionality in dialectical relational thought in the form of the philosophy of internal relations:

> The perspectival element – recognising that things appear very different depending on who is looking at them – plays a very important role in dialectical thought. This doesn't mean that the truths that emerge from viewing reality from different vantage points are of equal value. Involved as they are in the work of transforming nature, workers enjoy a privileged position from which to view and make sense of the developmental character of the system.

Scholars have not adequately explored the connection between the perspectival element of dialectical philosophy and standpoint epistemologies on race, gender, and class in the context of higher education studies. We will come to understand during this research that vantage is essential, not only for understanding the subject position from which the whole, parts and

relations of a system are perceived, but also for understanding how and why the contradictions which underpin the system seldom appear clearly to the bearers of the system themselves.

2.3.2 Opportunities

External relations thinking unfortunately continues to animate the register for sociological scholarship. Dominant trends in sociology tend to implicitly and inadvertently identify relata as separate phenomena. Studies are less interested in "the in-between" or ontologies of contradiction than in the common-sense approaches to social inquiry which categorise, as par for the course, 'A' and 'B' as distinct. This "thereby overlooks the mutual implication of relationality itself, to instead focus on the relations as inherent to A and B in-themselves" (Brincat and de Groot Heupner 2020: 122). We are made to realise through Ollman's awakening of dialectic ontology that Sociology is stuck in an epistemic trap in which causality and not relationality is understood as the basis of social interaction. Paolucci (2011:87) understands the issue thusly:

> An external relations approach views the world as a conglomeration of separate but interacting parts – most often institutions (e.g., normative rules, familial relations, economic organisation, religious practice, and so on) with functions (e.g., socialisation, production of goods and services, moral education, and the like) and individuals with traits (e.g., income, attitudes, skills, values and so on). Causation here is the outcome of some social facts "bumping" into others.

By valuing theory for its ability to produce distinctions rather than fluid interconnections, sociology often misses the luminous vitality of dialectical ontology, which rejects the rigid separation of analytical categories that the discipline tends to embrace. Internal relations philosophy transforms how ideological and political matters are theorised by challenging the habitual separation of opposing poles—of form and content, cause and effect, subject and object, abstract and concrete. It is an opportunity to explore what sociology might be if the assumed ontological universe was one of overlap and indistinction, porous boundaries and in-betweenness. This is not to discount that sociology has a natural proclivity to analyse mutual constitution, but this takes place within an external relation dominated hierarchy where relationality is a secondary consideration, and not the priority of inquiry.

Bertell Ollman's oeuvre can be read as a lifelong insistence on the importance of the dialectic for understanding complexity in twenty-first century social science, and is a fitting starting point for thinking about how to apply dialectic ontology to sociology today. But Ollman

(2003:12) also makes clear that the dialectic *does nothing,* it leads to no set programme or model, it does not offer up facts or pathways for resolving crises, and "it proves nothing, and causes nothing to happen". The dialectic also does not cater to causal explanations or deductive proofs. But it does enable us to grasp the world from the perspective of the complex, contradictory, relational and interdependent 'whole'.

There is much work to be done in refreshing our view of its potential because of the way in which so many theorists have hitherto turned dialectic materialism into a stodgy mechanistic framework which Marx never intended, at least according to Ollman (1978). He argues that Marx specifically expressed the dialectic in loose, flowing linguistic terms so that it would be capacious enough to be applied to a variety of social problems. It was never intended to be the "rock ribbed" formula which many have famously reinterpreted it as, such as Fichte's thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad which is widely rejected as a fitting interpretation of the dialectic (Budd 2015: 1031; Ollman 2003:12).

Formulaic modelling of the dialectic is commonplace in what Roemer (1986; cited in Callinicos 2006:255) calls the "yoga of Marxism", the contortion of Marx's writing into whatever intellectual posture is required to shape a given argument. For instance, in traditional scientific Marxism, the language of the dialectic tends to be cauterised to fit objectivist, closed-ended and typological interpretations of Marx in what some have dubbed the "dogma of the Diamat"[1]. Approaches to dialectical materialism rooted in external relations as the dominant ontology give licence to an overriding determinism which is depicted in standard modernist interpretations of Marx (including the inevitability of communism) which historically "took a stranglehold against thinking dialectically" in Marxism (Brincat and de Heupner 2020: 122).

Ollman (1978: 10-17) argues against the distillation of Marxist ontology into rigid taxonomies which betrays Marx's fierce attempts to capture the flux and interiorisation of social relations. Marx's characteristically lofty language and fluid classificational boundaries actually move 'and dance' in service to the intricacies of social reality to which it purposefully commits its imagery. And at the heart of this framework is his attempt to unravel the world without tearing its truths into tiny dislocated analytical pieces in the process (Ollman and Badeen 2015: 3).

The philosophy of internal relations challenges the normal celebration of boundary specification as an endpoint or feat in the making of sociological argument. To illustrate the

[1] "Diamat" referring to dialectical materialism.

value of dialectic ontology to social critique: in considering repression and freedom, not as contingently related but as organically contained within the other, our consciousness of what anti-repression struggles mean shifts as we move toward an awareness that the relations which propel the restriction of freedom and those that push towards revolution are not independent or self-subsisting phenomena but are ontologically contained as practices within their seeming opposite. Though they phenomenally appear independent and self-subsisting, freedom and human repression are internally constitutive of the other. This dramatically shifts the framing, analysis and goals of studies which focus on aspects of power, agency, and transformation.

Another example is the naturalised boundaries we accept between intention and practice, theory, and action, where the gap between them is often seen as a shortfall or fault that must be bridged. Dialectically speaking, there is no hard ontological distinction between intention and practice, which do not exist externally as causally related impulses of human activity. Intention and practice are inner related in necessary ontological contact as two intertwined trajectories which rely on each other's opposition and tension for their nature and form. Intention constitutes practice, and intention is only what it is because of its relationship with practice, even though the two often appear to take on forms pulling in opposite directions along two different planes. From a dialectical perspective, what is closer to the truth is that practice and intention exist on the same ontological plane and are entangled. Practice and intention consist of the multiplicity of relations between them. Therefore, the "difference" between the two does not indicate a problem to be solved by simply subtracting one category from another. Instead, it is necessary to study how inherent to the existence of each concept is their mutual coupling, co-evolution, and recursive conditioning. This ontological reorientation stands as an invitation for innovative reworkings of desiccated, worn lines of analysis across the social sciences and humanities.

Understanding the nature of contradictions, and the manner in which they have effects at the phenomenal level does not only enrich self-understanding. It is also a potential pathway to new approaches for political action. Prominent sociologist Michael Burawoy (2000:152) sees the value of Marxist critique for Sociology not only in its methodological strength for identifying capitalism as a totality and earmarking its contradictions, but for its "engagement with capitalism on its own terrain … and its imagination, daring to postulate a freer world beyond capitalism, knowing full well capitalism's ability to deny, obliterate, and ridicule the very idea of an alternative world to itself".

Students and academics located in South Africa everyday live amid the reproduction of contradictions of race, class and gender inequalities. Dialectical philosophy provides an onto-epistemological foundation around which new ideas of political action, intention and organisation can be built. It responds to the creeping nihilism which so many, young and old, feel in the face of enduring and unresolved structural contradictions in society and its education systems. Without a sociology which promotes action, students and intellectuals are left maimed by information, and frustrated and overpowered by the prevailing inhumanity of the pervasive damage caused by the neoliberal capitalist market logic in society.

2.3.3 In Defence of A Renewal Of Marxist Philosophy

It is recognised that, in Sociology, it is important and unavoidable to conceptually isolate specific phenomena to study singular aspects of society. However, by external relations thinking currently dominating the field, isolated phenomena are not seen as strategically distinguished but rather as ontologically autonomous entities thus excluding a view of internal relations and the broader system in which these relations constellate. Currently, trends in sociology reify the boundaries between concepts. Dialectical philosophy does not suggest that these conceptual boundaries do not exist. According to Sawchuk (2019:107) it shows that boundaries are always relational, porous and in motion. Becker (1973:1, my emphasis) argues that (in Sociology) we ignore this and instead opt for dualisms because they oversimplify the issue and thereby render programmatic and actionable solutions, but at the cost of "a slow disengagement from truths that help [wo]men get a grip of what is happening to them, that tell them where the problems *really are*."

Dialectic philosophy, and its appreciation of dynamic totalities, internal relations and contradictions certainly does not deserve to perish amidst arguments against Marxist theory in Sociology (at best) and indifference to it (at worst) (Ally 2005; Hyslop 2007). The dialectic can certainly be read into and contained in a whole host of sociological scholarship. While universalist in substance, the dialectic is not at all inconsistent with the bottom-up focus – that is, the emphasis on local, specific, and grounded realities – of sociology. Indeed, when discussing the broad ontological insights of dialectical thinking, it is important to acknowledge that in all of Marx's work, including the dialectic, the main subject is real, situated humanity, as Smith (1994: 22; my emphasis) underlines.:

> Marxism, of course, has no pretensions to being a "pure theory". It is defiantly a theoretically informed programme and a programmatically informed theory – a

> practical project embracing *a specific vision of human history and the struggle for a better future.*

Despite being unfashionable for many decades, Marxism refuses to go away. And there is good reason for that. It is hard to scrap, for whatever ideological reason one may want to, a body of scholarly work with pronounced explanatory powers, and which has helped to language the mechanisms of modern society vis-à-vis capitalism, as well as the desire for social revolution against capitalism. It has sustained the discourse of workers and popular movements, and it has introduced everyday meanings which we as people globally hold in common such as 'working class', 'bourgeoisie', and 'capital'. And, for better or worse, it provided a leftist scientific scaffolding for the development of Sociology in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The criticisms against Marxism are often valid and must be considered. In particular, its historical dictation as a Eurocentric doxa to be applied universally must be challenged. Black scholars have long bemoaned the offensively authoritarian application of Marx's science to an African society conceived of as passive and epistemically vacant (Nyoka 2013). The dialectic must work through and respond to the nuances of the societies and institutions with which it engages, as it can no longer take precedence as an unrelatable schema taped over the edges of 'distant' societies in which it finds no points of direct connection.

The sociology community risks losing a rich intellectual heritage by abandoning Marxist ontology in our present and future approach to Sociology, which encompasses essential visions and concepts, and new manifestations found in schools of thought such as Marxist postmodernism, feminism, and anti-colonialism—all of which trace their origins back to the dialectical pulse emerging from Hegelianism and the early works of Marx.

After all, how can it not be an exciting invitation to study our ever mystifying and intricate realities from the perspective of a paradigm which says of its forebear:

> Marx did not conceive social reality atomistically, as made up of clearly bounded, separate, interacting entities: the kind of analytic particulars which can be grasped in clear consistent and exclusive definitions. He saw the world, rather, as a complex network of internal relations, within which any single element is what it is only by virtue of its relationship to others (Sayer 1987: 19).

Ollman (2003) beautifully outlines in the *Dance of the Dialectic* a potential approach to social critique that stands against the seduction of the appearance of things (i.e., the appearance of the

two sides of a contradiction as separable phenomena) as the basis for how and what we study. This applies to Sociology where, despite our many victories over Comte's positivism, the analysis of events and phenomena in Sociology still relies too heavily on appearance-as-facts and the implicit and unintentional use of the philosophy of external relations and its positing of absolute, enclosed entities with external inter-connections (as opposed to inner-relations) as the image for what the world is made up of. The dialectic sociologist rejects the view of social experience as either based on harmony or conflict between external factors. The dialectical sociologist according to Weinstein and Weinstein (1972: 173), sees:

> Human existence … as a series of situations characterised by polarities in decisional processes, relations, and cultural objects. Problems such as the relations between freedom and order, love and respect, conflict, and consensus, are placed at the centre of analysis ... The important units of analysis for dialectical sociologists are social structures such as institutions, organisations, stratification systems and modes of solidarity.

The 'Sociology' in the "Sociology of Higher Education " which I propose here will take on a revitalised usage of Marx different from many traditional portraits of Marxist theory which focus on the commodity form. My proposal foregrounds the relevance of Marxism today as "a critique of labour and recognition of contradiction as the starting point of an emancipatory project" (Dubbeld 2009: 215). To keep Marxism relevant in sociology, following the philosophy of internal relations, we must show that its value goes beyond economic determinism. Though universities in South Africa are widely seen as sites of capitalist commodification and enclosure, they remain underexamined in contemporary Marxist analysis. Applying dialectical analysis to a study of academic identities and practices underpins the necessity today of seeing how late capitalism operates as a dynamic social totality which influences all forms of labour in the contemporary organisation of social life by producing a particular kind of subjectivity which academic work itself cannot escape, at least not entirely. In fact, Szadkowski (2017:40) argues that "the very method of revealing the contradictions within a socioeconomic subsystem [higher education] subsumed under capital is the most basic way of practising critique in the Marxist sense".

2.4 The Epistemological Process of Bringing Social Contradictions into View

The preceding discussion underscores the importance of relational perspectives that foreground contradiction in renewing the dialectical turn in sociology. In Marxist theory, contradictions are brought into view through an epistemological process known as abstraction. In Marxist

terms, abstraction is a process by which we journey from the "real concrete", that is, the world as we experience it in its messiness, towards the "thought concrete", that is, "the reconstituted and now understood whole, present in the mind" (Ollman 1990:27; see also Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2024:236). Marx describes this process as moving from "a chaotic conception of the whole," Marx (1857, Section 3: The Method of Political Economy):

> I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations.

The process described above by Marx essentially has two 'legs' or 'journeys. The first journey of the dialectic process is all about abstracting or isolating phenomena, that is moving from the real concrete to the simplest determinants. From there the second journey reconstructs the whole through adding or synthesising abstractions together to recreate the 'thought concrete' (Brown *et al*. 2002:776). The second journey of abstraction returns to the complex whole but reconstitutes it systematically by infusing living detail and context to the simple contradiction to 're-complexify' the abstracted concept to produce a rich analytical picture of reality. The dialectic cycle begins with the first journey, which is the initial process of distilling chaotic, messy reality ('the real/imagined concrete') as we experience it into simple abstractions which we posit as animating the whole. Another way of seeing abstractions is as "conceptualised variables" which are "the product of our mental act of abstracting parts out of a totality" (Paolucci 2011: 87). The choice that a sociologist makes on what conceptualised variables she will abstract out to express contradiction is ultimately a choice determined by individual analysis, social experience, and observation (further discussed in Chapter Five). Furthermore, there are two different types of abstractions taking place in the first journey, first abstracting out a part (at the 'level' of phenomenal forms) and then, subsequently, deconstructing the form/part through deep abstraction to reveal the internal relations (including contradictions) constituting or animating the part, as explained in the following section.

According to Marx (1993:100): [In the first part of the dialectic journey], we moved from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until arriving at the most straightforward determinations. [In the second part] the journey would have to be retraced … but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. The two journeys involve moving from the real concrete, suspending complexity to abstract out its

simplest determinations, shaped by dialectical contradictions, and then later placing complexity back into the whole as thought concrete. Marx (1973:101) outlines the two journeys as follows:

> The [real] concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.

This approach identifies real underlying processes through abstraction, constituted by internal relations in the concrete world. Unlike positivists, who treat abstractions as isolated notions or concepts, this method ascribes the simplest determinations a fundamental ontological status, acknowledging their real-world effects. While the process of distillation and back to synthesis is well rounded as an ideational mechanism there is much debate about how this can be systematically executed in practice (Brown *et al.* 2002:777).

2.4.1 The Parts, The Internal Relations, The Totality

Abstractions are theoretical constructs which allow us to break down the components of society to focus on aspects of phenomenon. There are distinguishable forms of abstraction, one which abstract parts and the other which abstracts internal relations. The first happens within phenomenal forms where simplified representations isolate specific parts of reality to stand as placeholders such as 'the public', 'academic identity' and 'the university'. According to Brown *et al.* (2002:774), "first, at the level of the actual, abstraction allows particular aspects or moment of social reality to be identified". Another form allows us to expose underlying internal relations. And so second, "on this occasion, social phenomena at a level beneath appearances" are abstracted out (Brown et al. 2002:775).

The formulation which Ollman promotes as the internal relations philosophy and which should form the basis of a more hopeful understanding of society, posits the foundation of all social institutions as,

> [A] constantly developing totality of relations to which nothing is external, including time … [Marx's] ontology begins with relations and processes, and therefore things, such as they are, can be apprehended only by a method of

> abstraction – taking a part out of a whole and relating it to other parts – and yet always provisionally and complexly (Krinsky 2021: 181).

The whole, as argued, is not merely the sum of its parts but a system of organic interdependence (interrelations) between parts which are essential to the existence of the whole and, further, are a partial reflection of the whole. Parts within the whole are related to all other parts through necessary relations. In other words,

> What is referred to as a 'part' is the relational construct, a unit abstracted from reality for some particular end whose interdependence with other similarly constituted units is kept in view; and 'whole', is just this interdependence, which, again for a special purpose, may be conceptualised within any of its parts. No exacting knowledge of particulars is required … The world is not being forced into a gopher hole. It is simply that, on the basis of this philosophy [of internal relations], concepts of 'part' and 'whole' are acquired that allow one to speak of what is going on in this manner (Ollman 2003:55).

Key to exploring and identifying contradictions in society is understanding the process by which the interacting units (parts) of an internally related totality are defined. Marxist dialectics is based on a method of abstraction by which parts of the system are made distinguishable from the whole. Marx's method of abstraction, like other aspects of his dialectical reasoning, builds on his interpretation of Hegel's contributions on how to define the link between specific qualities and their relation to the "absolute" or the "whole" (Biddell 2024: 5-6).

Hegel employed terms such as "determinations," "abstractions," "moments," and "phenomena" to suggest that the parts of reality abstracted for discussion represented only partial reflections of the whole (Ollman 2003: 41). Marx borrowed the notion of "abstraction" from Hegel to make the same argument.

In this context, concrete reality ('the real concrete') is a cacophony of history, the material and the possible, pulsating all at once through us individually and collectively as we try and make sense of that very reality from within it. The process of abstraction allows us to produce "the mental representation of an isolated element of empirical reality, as it is directly reflected in thought" (Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2022:4). To grasp reality, we *make abstractions or abstract out aspects or parts of reality to* infer concepts necessary for examining broader relations and processes:

> We can see certain buildings, but we cannot see the 'built environment' as an abstraction. We can see housing estates, not 'the real estate' [as an abstraction]. We can see roads, cars, trains, and airports, but not 'the infrastructure' [as an abstraction]. We can find and interview owners of buildings, but we cannot interview the abstraction 'capital' (Holgersen 2021:365).

Abstractions are placeholders for complex and expansive phenomena that cannot be seen in totality but are rooted in experience. Marx had a materialist view of consciousness and believed that abstractions had to be connected to the material historical underpinnings of our existences or they were merely reifications. While Marx gave countenance to Hegel's dialectical conceptions, even saying in his magnus opus *Capital* (1976), that the source of all dialectics is the Hegelian dialectic, he still opposed Hegel's *application* thereof (he did not oppose the doctrine of internal relations itself). His opposition to Hegel's application of internal relations was due to Hegel affording a certain independence to consciousness about which Marx disagreed. Like positivists' depiction of concepts, contradictions for Hegel are perceived as merely concepts or notions, used to grasp, and explain the various forms of real phenomena.

In contrast, for Marx, contradictions represent the antagonistic real relations, which capitalism attempts to conceal. These contradictions, such as the capital-labour contradiction which belies the commodity form in capitalism, are not mere conceptual abstractions but hold underlying significance and presence in the world. Marx views phenomenal forms, like 'the commodity form', as what we perceive in the concrete world, but he emphasises that their true existence lies in the intricate systems of antagonistic real relations at play beneath the phenomenal surface of things and through which things are constituted.

The dialectical contradictions proposed in Marxist analyses serve a purpose beyond theoretical testing or rhetorical devices. They act as tools for uncovering fundamental relations, penetrating the concrete complexities of existence to reveal the core relational realities of society expressed outwardly through phenomenal representations. Marx's method of abstraction aims to delve deep into concrete realities, deciphering these contradictory forces that underpin what is often falsely perceived as stable entities.

That said, how the world is divided into parts depends on the choices of the scholar, who views the world from a specific vantage point. In other words, the Marxist method is not fixed or univocal; the choice of concepts is shaped by the specific relations present at any given time. As a result, abstractions are influenced by the particular social relations at play and the

individual scholar's interpretation of that context. Good abstractions are those that are "fruitful and true", and which "are firmly rooted in specifiable processes and denote internal coherence" (Holgersen 2021:366). Thus, the process of abstraction may appear to be a pedestrian exercise in conception but it is not, as it entails a set of criteria: scholars intentionally select phenomena to abstract which conveys to them a picture of the concrete real not as a sum of discrete units but as an entanglement of relations; and the process recognises that these abstractions represent prominent relations as they appear from the specific vantage of the scholar under particular social conditions in space and time. Therefore, the process of abstraction is neither criteria-less nor an exercise in unbridled relativism (see elements of the process of abstraction in Section 2.4.2).

Ultimately, the process of abstraction (epistemology) allows us to uncover the internal relations and contradictions (ontology) of our dialectically constituted reality. The depth of the process of abstraction is determined by the various movements contained within the first journey. I now introduce the modes of abstraction which Ollman identifies as important in order to understand my arrival at the basic contradiction posited in this thesis, careerist insularity in tension with critical public engagement which is unpacked in Chapters Three and Four. Chapters Six and Seven will detail the second journey of abstraction.

2.4.2 Modes of Abstraction

The process of abstraction does not involve consecutive stages but rather modes which a scholar must consider simultaneously when employing what Ollman (2003) calls the '*dance of the dialectic*', that is, the process of bringing into focus particular primary determinations. The primary determinations, even as an endpoint, remain ever-changing and open-ended. According to Brincat and de Heupnner (2020: 134):

> After the initial step of choosing the subject matter… [the next step] is abstraction ..This mental activity involves the deliberate and systematic selection and deconstruction of certain elements (or abstraction in the noun form) of a thing/phenomenon that constitutes a particular totality removed (for the purposes of analysis) from the larger whole.

Borrowing and modifying from Brincat and de Groot Heupner (2020) but referenced mainly to the work of Bertell Ollman (1990), I outline four modes of abstraction occurring throughout the two journeys, that is, in the movement from the real concrete to the internal relations (first journey) and back to the concrete-in-thought (second journey). These four modes are the

vantage point, extension, level of generality, and naming of contradictory/internal relations. The open-ended nature of the results of the processes of abstraction is also discussed.

2.4.2.1 Vantage point

Abstractions according to Ollman (2014a :576) are specific to "the vantage point from which one begins to describe their union". As such, it is acknowledged that the choice of phenomenon to be explained is shaped by "dialectical relativity," which means that the resultant abstractions are uniquely influenced by the researcher's social location and perspectival position from which the real concrete is observed. Ollman (1990:41) acknowledges that chosen abstractions inevitably shape and are shaped by the scholar's perspective, such that "Marx only finds what his abstractions have placed in his way."

Ollman (2003) recognises that the vantage point from which abstractions are made inherently limits the extent to which one perceives identity and difference in a given 'extension' and thus how one perceives the underlying relations beneath a phenomenal form. The specific "knowledge, understandings, values and interests of the individual scientist" condition the recognition of and focus on parts and their relation to the whole (Brown *et al.* 2002:775). Vantage for Ollman (1990: 67) is that which makes the abstractions which extension and generality have "placed there" clearly visible. Each (phenomenal) part is a unique embodiment of and entry point into the whole, as is the vantage from which these parts are understood from. As a result, primary contradictions are refracted in multiple ways depending on which part we are looking at and from where we are looking at it from.

In this study, the specific position from where I look, shapes my identification of the key abstractions in the changing post-apartheid South African university. My position as a young, coloured woman working in sociology, influences "what I will look for, and even see, and of course, emphasise" (Ollman 1990:40). Essentially, in this study sociologists, including myself and the interviewed sociologists, shape during self-reflection the vantage point from which abstractions are made. As such, Brown *et al.* (2002:775) argue that vantage is directly related to level of generality. Admittedly this study's recognition of identity and difference is limited because it does not assume additional vantages other than those of professional sociologists, extending for instance to the vantage of students, higher education experts, society, or the managerial class. Nonetheless, I will explore intellectual practice in relation to the university's development from the vantage of sociologists working in South Africa's higher education sector, an environment in which I am also embedded.

2.4.2.2. Abstraction of extension

Ollman's work highlights the *abstraction of extension* as a primary mode in the first journey. This is where we set spatial and temporal boundaries in such a way that we decontextualise the phenomena (parts) and pretend through suspension that the rest of the world temporarily dims from view around the elected time-space extension. The abstraction of extension entails an assessment of "how much of the world's interrelations to focus on … or how big (or small) both in space and time to make one's immediate subject" (Ollman 2014b:368).

In the case of this thesis, this mode of abstraction involved subtracting out *sociological practice in the South African university, in the post-1994 period*. As such, 'extension' connects the present moment of inquiry with the historical transition of the South African university, as such inculcating the past as a basis for considering the future. Indeed, this is a lofty extension, but its breadth aligns with Marx's dialectic method, where large abstractions are often necessary for "adequately" capturing "a complex, internally related world" (Ollman 1990:42).

This serves as a precursory mode for outlining the specific subject of inquiry for and from within a dialectical paradigm, in particular, the level of generality as the next mode to follow. The mode of extension sets time and space boundaries on a specific dialectical inquiry (Ollman 1990:28).

2.4.2.3 Level of generality

Every study, according to dialectic methodology, operates at a particular level of generality. Level of generality "involves locating the real causes of the social phenomenon under investigation…The less context-specific the phenomenon to be explained, the higher the level of generality of abstractions required to achieve an adequate explanation" (Brown *et al.* 2002: 775). For Ollman (2003) in the *Dance of the Dialectic*, there are seven levels of generality ranging in ascending order from the specific (the unique individual person) proceeding to modern capitalism, capitalism, class society, the human species, animal species up to the most general level described as 'material bodies. The upper levels of generality are said to create the conditions of possibility for lower levels whose actualisation of possibilities sets conditions for higher levels.

For Ollman (2003), it is important for the organisation of one's thinking to understand the level of generality on which a study takes place, because though it is recognised that certain qualities (for instance consciousness) move between levels, ultimately one's interpretations will apply

specifically to the unique movements that take shape when a level of generality is brought into focus.

For instance, the level of generality for my study happens at a lower level and is quite specific. My study pertains to the properties and movements that take place on the level of a profession, where the generality applies across individuals working as professional sociologists in South African universities under neoliberal capitalism.

The abstractions that emerge from the modes of extension and generality develop from within the 'abstraction of vantage point,' "determining where, when, and with what to begin one's investigation" (Ollman 2014b:368).

2.4.2.4 Naming contradictions

In the process of abstraction, we are opening up and delving into phenomenal forms to expose and identify underlying relations which ultimately structure and constitute those forms. What the process of abstraction does for exposing contradiction according to Brincat and de Heupner (2020:138) is it "expose[s] these contradictions in their various movements and gives content to the internal relations of each, helping thought to move beyond the appearance of contradiction to its essence as the possible outcomes of this interaction at a given moment". In other words, dialectical methodology shows contradictions not as static externalities as they may appear in the real concrete; rather, through abstraction, the movement and entanglement of their relational aspects are exposed.

For my study, the abstracted parts arising from the first form of abstraction are the relationship between intellectual practice and the university's development, leading to the primary determinant: the outcome of the second form of abstraction—careerist insularity in tension with critical public engagement. From my vantage point, I assert that this contradiction has a strong presence and explanatory power in reality. If the data gathered demonstrates the existence of this contradiction through its impact on the lives of academics shaped by these relations, then this contradiction will be empirically validated as valuable as a primary determinant for explaining the phenomena under study. The backward logic of asserting an underlying relation that cannot be seen but which one posits as an explanation of reality and then assessing the proposed explanation against its ability to account for observed empirical evidence is known as retroductive logic and is applied in this thesis (See Section 5.5.5).

2.4.2.5 Openendedness

The process of abstraction is potentially never-ending. There is no teleological pathway resulting in a moment of objective conclusion. While there is an end to the first journey in terms of an arrival at contradictions, or primary determinants which can be named, this knowledge is always provisional as described by the process of abstraction. It is a multi- directional and ongoing process. All knowledge claims are therefore recognised as piecemeal and transient. Many Marxists adopt the metaphor of Althusser that the world should be understood as a "moving train" (Althusser 2006: 189; cited in Georgiou and Michaelides 2022:5).

The open-endedness is further inscribed by how the primary contradiction inherently produces and encompasses other contradictions, and that its manifestation at the phenomenal 'level' are refracted via these other contradictions leading to multiple potential pathways for the production of alterative abstractions and primary determinants.

In this research, we go below the level of appearance of the phenomenal parts to hypothesise retroductively a simple underlying determinant or essence: the contradiction between critical public engagement and neoliberal careerist insularity. However, the social system implicitly contains endless contradictions, and this study presents only one vantage. Therefore, after simplifying the university system by abstracting out the primary contradiction in the first journey (Chapters Two, Three and Four in this thesis), we move back towards complexifying and synthesising the system in the second journey. The second journey is highlighted in the empirical chapters (Chapters Six and Seven) as we move to the second leg of the journey by "building up" contradictions by weaving together the unique impressions which interviewed sociologists have of their lifeworlds to move back towards unique representations of the concrete, complex whole in thought.

However, the dialectic method is not only about the method of enquiry and synthesis or the procedures of abstraction, it is ultimately emancipatory. This study does not only posit a contradiction but takes a position: challenging neoliberal insularity in sociological work and championing the strengthening of critical public engagement. According to Brincat and de Groot Heupner (2020:40), internal relations philosophy is an "emancipatory theory" which uses "ideas to change the materiality of social conditions – to change how we relate to each other and nature". Dialectics is about social change, and not simply "using ideas to change ideas".

2.5 Social Change in Dialectic Theory

For Marx, the capitalist system reproduces itself through its constitutive parts and internal relations, which are seldom in harmony so that contradictions abound. According to Chatterjee and Ahmed (2019: 375), "out of these contradictions come conflict. Resolution of conflict leads to transformation of the whole and the parts". For this reason, contradictions and social change are intimately connected. As Ollman (2003:18) argues, "contradiction offers the optimal means for bringing such change and interaction as regards both present and future into a single focus". In other words, for Ollman (2014b:363), every contradiction represents both a pre-condition for what comes after it, as it does a result for what came before. According to Ollman (1993:51; cited in Sawchuk 2017:162[2]-163; original emphasis), there are five notable movements in contradiction-driven change. These include, at the most fundamental level, the reciprocal push and pull of "*mutual support"* and "*mutual undermining"*, in which opposing forces are in a state of perpetual tension; the "*immanent unfolding"* is the third movement where the unequal power behind the aspects of a contradiction leads to the intensification of relations; the fourth are the "*change in the overall form"* of the contradiction that result due to the inter-relation between the contradiction and changes in the social system; and finally "*resolution"* where the influence of the dominant aspect overcomes it limitations and thereby transforms the nature of the contradiction either in part or entirely.

Social change is the process by which the elements of a contradictory relation work themselves out. There is an ever-present push and pull between the elements of a contradiction where power tends to be concentrated behind one element of the contradiction more than the other. The resolution between the affirmation (dominant tendency) and the negation (the counter tendency) is resolved situationally and contingently, that is, in a multitude of ways depending on the individual context in which the relations are embedded. Broadly speaking, the dominant tendency tends to incorporate or "sublate" the other tendency so that it is not destroyed but reformulated for the purposes of the dominant tendency (Ollman 1978: 57).

Hence, contradictions are subject to 'sublation' (from the German *aufheben*, as a verb, and *Aufhebung*, as a noun). This Hegelian term describes how a contradictory relation can be reconfigured—deconstructed and reconstructed—into a new contradiction when the balance between subdued and dominant tendencies or practices shifts. Sublation is a concept denoting how, in the process of transformation of the elements involved in the contradiction, the

[2] The five movements are paraphrased from Sawchuk (2017), whose emphasis is retained in italics.

contradiction is preserved in some ways, and transcended in others. The elements of the contradiction which exist latently, in absence or as possibility, may become active when sublation occurs. Successive sublations give us insight into the processes of social change, as understood through "dialectical negativity": as a term "closely related to Hegel's concept of Aufhebung, sublation means the dialectical movement that both surpasses and conserves" (Brincat 2009 :456).

'Sublation' first developed by Hegel and later used by Marx to describe how one contradiction transforms into another through the movement of its units. Sublation considers how sublated elements are not simply discarded but are transformed by internal relations into new, or more comprehensive forms. A dialectical relational view leads us to inspect public engagement-careerism, the primary contradiction identified for examining the neoliberal university, as working out in society and individuals in ways that lead to new contradictions, not necessarily to equilibrium (Elhammoumi 2017). This highlights the processuality of contradictions which are constantly in motion as the relations tend in different directions and take on different characteristics. Social change occurs as contradictions transform while still retaining, in the final instance, their nature as contradictions. Hegel (*Logic of Science*, cited in Palm 2009:9) himself revelled in the complexity of a concept such as sublation which could at once describe both negation and preservation as central to social change:

> To sublate has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to reserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to.

With Marx's materialist dialectic, hidden within the present existed the conditions on which the improved socialist future could be realised through changes in the development of society's internal relations (Ollman 1998: 338). Marx's conception of dialectical movement included the potential for the rise of socialism from within the social relations of its seeming opposite, capitalism. Marx's forebear, Hegel, held the idealistic notion that the pursuit of freedom in the bumpy progression from one contradiction to the next, was "a process [where] increasing freedom [was] already in a dynamic sense the full actuality of freedom" (Biberman 2019:104). As a result, the dialectic foreshadows the prefigurative ethic of some contemporary anarchistic and postmodern theories of social change, that is, building the alternative future within the interstices of the present (Gordon 2007; Newman 2015). A notion of dialectic time, pertinent to conceptions of dialectic change, includes the realisation that the possible emerges from within the actual and that the future exists within the present.

The connection between the temporal dimensions of social change in the philosophy of internal relations and deconstructivist frameworks of prefigurative politics is too seldom acknowledged. The lack of recognition for this atavism probably serves the quest of many 'post-'theorists who present their theories as wholesale improvements on the "grand narratives" of an "outdated" Marxism. Yet more than half a century ago, Herbert Marcuse (1964: 295-296) of the Frankfurt School saw the clearly prefigurative characteristics of Marx's philosophic formulations of social change when he said:

> His categories are negative and at the same time positive: they present a negative state of affairs in the light of its positive solution, revealing the true situation in existing society as the prelude to its passing into a new form. All the Marxian concepts extend, as it were, in these two dimensions, the first of which is the complex of given social relationships, and the second, the complex of elements inherent in the social reality that makes for its transformation into a free social order.

Similarly, like sublation, "emergence" as a concept for social change in dialectical theory should be prioritised and understood by seeing the social system as a living organism in which the elements are constantly in motion, by virtue of necessary internal relations, pulling and moving in multiple directions, like with quantum cosmology and other non-linear conceptions of science. The notion of emergence for Sève (2008:93) can be summarised by how new forms do not emerge out of nowhere but out of interaction of the thing with and within itself or inner-relations. As the elements of a contradiction pull in multiple directions, when one of the aspects of a relation reaches certain limits environmentally or contextually, it jumps to a different quality and through this development suppresses the opposing element along the relational lines which connect them.

> …[W]hen [each element of the contradiction] inherent in each measure 'develops beyond a certain limit', the corresponding quality that is enclosed in this limit is also suppressed by a 'jump to a different quality'. As this gets repeated again and again, the relationship involved takes on the form of 'a nodal line connecting differences', like the scale of harmonic sounds or the ordered series of chemical compounds… Thus, one can think of continuity and rupture together, or, better still, one can only think of them together as aspects of the same movement of passage or of change in which one quality becomes another (Sève 2008:92)

According to Sève's (2008) explanation, social change happens when conditions for the existence of one element (in the contradiction) can no longer be upheld and maintained. It is crucial to note that internal relations scholars do not present a general theory for social change (Ollman 2003; Sayer 1987). What is common, nonetheless, in the demotion of the common-sense and learned discourse of external relations is that change is no longer conceived of in unilinear terms; instead, it is inevitably a process of an indeterminate, complex and even chaotic movement. Having unpacked the ontological and epistemological foundations for the dialectic-relational framework and the general conceptualisation of social change with which its foundations are associated, we now look to what the promise of this philosophical paradigm might mean for the enrichment of higher education studies below in Section 2.6. We unpack dialectic as an alternative to approaches to higher education philosophy, which is currently dominated by critical realist understandings, which the philosophy of internal relations stands to challenge and replace (Section 2.7). We highlight what structure and agency from a dialectical-relational context may look like by introducing Bourdieu's logic of practice (Section 2.8).

2.6 Internal Relations and The Philosophy of Higher Education

This thesis aims to identify the underlying contradictions that animate academic practice in the neoliberal university. The social "parts" of the moving capitalist totality that I focus on are academic identity. These parts are the phenomenal embodiments of underlying contradictions and constituents of the whole. The task is to explore the reflection of the system's animating contradictions as it manifests in academic identity.

Szadkowski and Kreski (2022) argue that Marxist critiques in higher education studies have been rare due to an exceptionalist view of universities, which assumes their autonomy from the general logic of capitalist production, and because of the perceived impossibility of fully reconciling Marxism with higher education research. Nonetheless, Critical Marxist theory has demonstrated tremendous breadth and complexity as an analytic frame for higher education (Green *et al.*, 2007; McArthur, 2013; Hall, 2018).

This thesis undertakes a dialectical analysis of academic identity using Marxist philosophy and considers the meaning of Marxist terms, such as contradiction, for academic practice under contemporary conditions of capitalism. In doing so, it demonstrates the relevance of Marx for higher education research—a particularly significant task given the relative newness of the philosophy of higher education as a distinct field of inquiry.

In 2017, renowned higher education researcher Ronald Barnett recognised the lack of a subfield that might be termed the "philosophy of higher education" (Barnett 2017:78). Therefore, not so long ago, the "philosophy of higher education" was deemed lacking as a domain of scholarly research. This situation is rapidly changing with the increasing search by social scientists for ways to apply philosophical paradigms to the questions of higher education. The rapid development of this subfield is captured by Barnett's observation a mere four years later (in 2021) that "the philosophy of higher education is a field, albeit still relatively small [but] yet fast enlarging, in its own right" (Barnett 2021: 2). Today the subfield has grown even more impressively in size internationally. Critical realism has hitherto attracted great applause for achieving in many what Barnett (2024) sets out as "best conditions for a philosophy of higher education". I put forward the philosophy of internal relations, which I propose exceeds in many ways critical realism's ability to pronounce on criteria such as "nuances of practices" and "the interconnections" between higher education and "other social institutions" (Barnett 2024:932).

In a South African context, the field of higher education studies in general relies on a wide index of theorists and disciplines. Influential scholars in what can be called critical university studies include inter alia Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017), Saleem Badat (2009; 2015; 2020; 2023), Crain Soudien (2015; 2020), Ramose Mogobe (2004) and Yusef Waghid (2009). This is to name but a few forebears who have opened the dialogue on philosophical questions and contributions (indigenous and colonial) in relation to the role and function of the university in African society more broadly and who have made a major impact on contemporary thought and scholarship pertaining to universities in Africa. However, a bona fide subfield of research which can be called the philosophy of higher education does not exist in any strong sense in South Africa.

In higher education studies, the exercise of imagining the social philosophy of the university through dialectics and internal relations stands in contrast with the philosophy of critical realism and decolonial critique which currently holds pride of place in the field of higher education studies. My thesis aims to demonstrate that the Marxist philosophy of internal relations, as set out in this chapter, can serve as a powerful framework in the sociology and philosophy of higher education.

In this section I single out critical realism which has proven to be a very attractive paradigm to those working within the scholarship of higher education in South Africa (Boughey and McKenna 2017; Emsley and Modiba 2024; Masehela 2015). The key theories for purveyors of

critical realism in education studies are referenced, expectedly so, to Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. An off-shoot of critical realism focused on the work of Margaret Archer is known as social realism. According to Moore (2013:334), social realism is in part the result of efforts to specifically apply critical realist philosophy to education. Social realism and critical realism are bounded by core shared assumptions and so will be dealt with simultaneously.

The major appeal of critical realism lies in its assertion that, while reality exists independently of our thoughts ('out there'), there are many subjective influences on how the truths of that reality are understood. In this way, it combines the concrete conceptions of reality associated with positivist-realism whilst also recognising that knowledge production of that reality can never be a purely positivist pursuit. It therefore overcomes both relativism and rigid empiricism. This has made it an engaging paradigm for post positivist studies in South African higher education.

The philosophy of internal relations and critical realism part ways significantly. Critical realism tends to conceive of reality in terms of causality between ontological layers, such that it represents an external relations philosophy:

> In Critical Realism, the ontological acceptance of the existence of a stratified reality provides a framework for analysing data. The tenet is that observable events arise as a result of activities within social structures – structures that are constantly changing as a result of those activities. ... Critical realists think in terms of three relatively autonomous levels of reality: the empirical level (the experiences and sensed perceptions of knowing subjects), the actual level (objects and events that occur in the real world) and the 'real' level (deeper-lying structures and causal mechanisms) (Strutchbury 2022: 115).

Critical realism is interested in the "causal power of objects" and the impact of generative mechanisms where "structures endow entities with powers which may be possessed, exercised or actualised" (Brown *et al.* 2003: 6; 16). Structure and agency are presented as semi-autonomous layers in critical realist thought. Critical realism is rooted in a perception of life as an iceberg, with near autonomous layers, so that the 'actual' is ontologically separate from and caused by the 'real'.

In internal relations thinking, there are no distinct layers as all relations are necessarily entangled within one another in totalities. Because of this, critical realism is quite different to

the philosophy of internal relations in that internal relations ontology is made up of relations which appear as parts of the system, where each part has interiorised within it all the other parts to which it is related within the whole – all relations are internal to one another, and boundaries are never absolute. We are only able to imaginatively suspend or embody parts as individualised for the sake of communication, accomplished through the process of abstraction (Ollman 2001: 290). In living society, however, everything is believed to be internally related. The internal relations view of structure and agency is one of mutual conditioning, not of causality.

Ollman affords contradictions some sort of ontological primacy but does not render them as ontologically distinct as 'underlying structures' (critical realism's 'real relations'). Phenomenal forms, as occurring at the critical realist 'levels' of the empirical and actual, are themselves crystallisations of deep-seated contradictions. This is very different to critical realists who believe that social structures exist independently of actions, including in the work of Margaret Archer (1995) who vouches for ontological dualism. As Strutchbury (2022:115) outlines, Archer makes two propositions: that "structure necessarily predates the actions which transform it" and that "structural elaborations necessarily post-date those actions".

One of the purposes of critical realist research is to determine causality between the different layers of reality and their influence on actors. This is complementary to external relations. For an external relations approach, with which I associate critical realism, "the boundaries are taken as given in the nature of reality as such" (Ollman 2001:290). Apart from the ontological separatism detectable in critical realism, Brown *et al.* (2002) argue that there is also a significant methodological difference between it and internal relations philosophy. They argue that, while critical realism has a process of abstraction where it individuates components for study, it lacks something akin to internal relations' second journey where revealed forms are reintegrated into a conception of the concrete, rendering internal relations a more substantive methodological approach. According to Brown *et al.* (2002:776), critical realism "offers no method to aid the social scientist in the process of combining abstractions. Hence, fundamentally, there are no tools offered by critical realism to aid in comprehending the 'inner connection' of social reality." Therefore, critical realism's interest in particularist and nominalist aspects and its tendency to regard layers of reality as separate makes it better suited to advancing local and specific studies rather than those that emphasise relations within a

contradictory and totalising unity, including the historical aspects of reality (Brown *et al.* 2002:786).

Clearly there are significant philosophical and methodological differences which certainly distinguish internal relations as beneficial for thinking alternatively about structure and agency in higher education. But internal relations are also worth exploring for the ways in which it shows consistencies with critical realism too. Ollman (2001) agrees that doyen of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar has a sophisticated external relations view which relies on a differentiated and stratified ontology. However, throughout Bhaskar's writings he also veers sharply from ontological exteriority at times to exude the main tenets of an internal relations approach. Take for example Bhaskar (1993:54) writing on the internal relations of all things wherein he shows that relations between aspects of reality are intrinsic and necessary constituents without which things would not be as they are: "[E]mergent social things are existentially constituted by or contain their relations, connections and interdependencies with other social things".

Another example is when Bhaskar (1994:93) writes on the relationship between structure and agency in ways reflecting a dialectical internal relations perspective:

> All social life is embodied in a network of human relations. This may be demonstrated by the mental experiment of subtracting from society the human agency required for it to be an ongoing affair. What we are left with are dual points of articulation of structure and agency, which are differentiated and processually changing positioned practices human agents occupied, engaged, reproduced, or transformed, defining the (changing) system of social relations in which human praxis is embedded. Here again, on the relational model we have a figure of a duality-with-a hiatus, preventing reductionist collapse in either direction.

Here, he highlights the endlessly interconnected nature of structure and agency, articulating it only through 'mental experiments,' a process that one can interpret as 'abstraction.' Bhaskar's work contains numerous statements that align with internal relations thinking. Nevertheless, a position on the philosophy of internal or external relations is not one which Bhaskar explicitly develops except to mildly and ambiguously claim that reality exhibits both approaches depending on the context. Bhaskar never fully establishes a position on internal relations and never entirely spells out how he abstracts totalities into the myriad of terminologies and parts he claims for critical realism. As such, Bhaskar never reasonably responds to the challenge

posed to critical realism by the philosophy of internal relations. For this reason, Ollman (2001: 291) concludes, "Bhaskar opts to use internal relations whenever it is convenient while refusing to offer the only philosophical defence that would justify his using it."

The incompatibility of the main ideas of critical realism with that of internal relations, as depicted above in Bhaskar's writing, makes the place of an internal relations philosophy especially exciting for the humanities and social sciences. Critical realism falls short of the philosophy of internal relations when it comes to theorising particular realities, such as the co-constitutive nature of opposing tendencies or the contingent and contradictory forms configured by the inter-relational entanglement of structural and agentic forces. Dialectic thinking as a basis for research is currently only sketchily applied in higher education discourse, leaving room for enrichment by Marxism and the philosophy of internal relations. For example, in higher education research, there is a tendency to focus on curriculum without addressing academic capitalism, to debate decolonisation without considering the neoliberal commodification of intellectual work, and to study intersectionality without situating it within the historical development of racial capitalism.

As key contributors to the synthesis of Marxist critique with higher education research, Szadkowski and Krzeski (2022:197) argue that the tension between related yet opposing tendencies—such as the isolated and the social individual—represents the kind of issues in education through which Marxist dialectics can make significant contributions. For instance, this is by opening up pathways for exploring the multitude of relations which enable capitalism to function in the university, "overriding itself on social productivity and transforming it into individual form – measurable, commensurable, and, thus, ready for valorisation" (Szadkowski and Krzeski 2022:197). This is at the heart of the exploration at hand – the impact of neoliberalisation on academic practice – and the contradiction between intellectual labour's purpose as a social (public) good or marketable product or, as stated as the primary contradiction of this thesis, between public engagement with careerist insularity.

Having distinguished external and internal relations as competing philosophies, we now delve into their divergent representations of agency and structure. The suggestion that internal relations philosophy posts relations as assemblages of structuring and agential trajectories which are internally entangled is a starting point for thinking differently of academic practice. This will be further developed in 2.8. through Bourdieu's relational logic of practice.

2.7 Structure and Agency in The Context of Dialectical-Relational Frameworks

The "stuff of Sociology textbooks" according to Bob Jessop (1996:123) is the representation of structure and agency. Usually, the two are represented as distinct but causal entities, with structure informed by social action and action informed by structures. In such traditional sociological conceptions, structure and agency are conceptualised as different layers. When we separate parts from one another, totality from its parts and parts from the totality as we so often do in nondialectical sociology, we end up with sociological theory where:

> Both perception and conception tend to concentrate on small, relatively isolated, and static things, with their many relations and changes only receiving serious attention when they "bump" into us (or we into them). But changes and relations are the basic building materials of the "bigger picture" in every sphere of reality and reducing them to the role of bit players in a drama whose overall plot is of little concern results in the kind of partial, static and one-sided thinking characteristic of most bourgeois ideology (Ollman 2015: 10).

An internal relations philosophy is not interested in discussing the influence of structure on agency and vice versa as two separate albeit interdependent realms. Rather, an internal relations philosophy concentrates on "relations", "praxes", and "contradictions" as that which contains elements of both structure and agency. The concept of practice, as the dialectical synthesis of structure and agency, will be further elaborated later in this chapter through Pierre Bourdieu's logic of practice. Bourdieu's theory of practice is consistent with the philosophy of internal relations and serves as a parallel framework for eliciting the possibilities of relational thought in higher education studies.

One may wonder how we can distinguish structural and agentic tendencies in the elastic and motion-full world of parts and totalities offered to us by the philosophy of internal relations. Indeed, there is no single theory on structure and agency which fits neatly into a theorisation of internal relations but we can, in the context of the university, illustrate how the key terms of reference for an internal relations philosophy might be utilised to offer a unique view on higher education in ways which do not rely on conventional approaches to structure and agency.

It is important to note that while the philosophy of internal relations disparages ontological positivism and an external relations ontology, it does not discount the need for analytical distinctions – this was addressed in the earlier discussion on the process of abstraction, and it applies as well to the concepts of structure and agency. In other words, the Marxist-Hegelian

inspired philosophy of internal relations recognises the necessity for conceptual distinctions. The retention of analytic and even dualistic categories such as structure and agency and macro and micro, act as heuristic devices.

Internal relations accept the analytical distinction between sides of a contradiction but rejects their existence as ontologically separable. Dualisms are engaged with to the extent that categories satisfy analytical requirements for distinction in the expression of complex reality. For Powell (2013b) processes can be "temporarily resolved" into thingified elements for the sake of communication:

> [S]ome kind of movement or transformation or interaction or transaction, something exchanged or relocated or altered or copied or transmitted, something produced or destroyed. Social life appears not as a succession of states with movement between them but as movement that may be more or less arbitrarily resolved into states (Powell 2013b:195).

Dichotomies are regarded as "contingently useful heuristics rather than as essential features of phenomena" (Powell 2013b: 188). In other words, notions such as agency and structure are simply two different entry points for understanding social reality rather than a significant ontological distinction. For relational sociology, as is the case with internal relational philosophy, specific states (or external relations) are mere moments in ongoing processes (or practices), with contradictory tendencies contained in these moments and unfolding in unfixed ways. Accepting analytical dualisms does not equate with an acceptance of ontological externality or external relations. The philosophy of internal relations asserts that structural and agentic tendencies hold sui generis qualities but do not exist independently of each other at any time.

To clarify the accepted properties of agentic and structural processes that are intertwined in internal relations, we will adopt the following general definitions from relational sociology:

Structure: Structure is understood as a process, that is, as structuration. Agency is not considered to exist outside of structuration (Powell 2013b:200). Agentic processes and structuration exist internal to the other. (Powell 2013b: 198).

Agency: Agency is understood as agentic processes which are structured and structuring, not external to structure (Powell 2013b:198). Agency appear as manifestations of structuration

such as through the exercises of "thinking, intending and determining courses of action that are performed differently in different situations" (Powell 2013b: 200, see also Annala *et al.* 2021: 4).

Christopher Powell (2013a;2013b), a leading relational sociologist, makes the compelling argument that all things can be described as agentic or structural depending on why the description is being done, or by whom. Unlike conventional higher education studies which focuses on "clashes between structure and agency" as the motive inquiry (Liwane and Rossouw 2019:5) , relational thought is interested in how one side of the contradiction exists within the other in an ongoing dialectic.

Beach's (2011) suggestive quote raises a significant concern in higher education studies, about the tendency of portraying agency and structure as oppositional, which leads to the privileging of narrow conceptions of agency. Beach (2011:573) argues:

> Much more emphasis is placed on agency than on structure as active; structure is instead seen as passive or an almost innate property of the settings researched. Agency is also clearly described and illustrated in concrete terms more often than structure, which is often instead talked about in a more ambiguous way as an invisible or constraining encumbrance or obstruction to the former. This is very common these days. It has meant that although agency and structure are referred to as a pair, agency is more illustrated … The emphasis on (concretised and illustrated) positive agency at the expense of (a negative encumbrance of constraining) structure(s) is thus a common denominator.

Novel pathways await what we might term a dialectical-relational sociology of higher education. Social relations, and not static dualisms or substantialist categories, should be "the ultimate object of analysis for sociology, [as] all phenomena should be understood as constituted through relations, and relations themselves should be treated as processes of transformation" (Powell 2013b: 187).

Bourdieu's insistence that "identity and difference can only be understood relationally" which he summarises in the dictum, "the real is relational" is considered a significant root of all commitments to develop relational sociology and is certainly consistent with Ollman's approach (Bourdieu 1998: vii; see also: Vandenberghe 1999:44, Papilloud and Shultze 2018: 344). Emirbayer's (1997:287) publication *A Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* is considered

a hallmark for relational sociology and forwards the call for Sociology to fully adopt an ontology where "a dynamic, unfolding process becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves", including elements of structure and agency.

Regrettably, Ollman's master concepts are not commonly or explicitly recognised as an inspiration for the approach in which relational sociologists

> [C]onnect rather than separate subjects and objects [thus inspiring a] framework which allows us to treat structure and agency as unopposed on the grounds that we can parse the same phenomena in structural or agential terms depending on our perspective (Powell 2013b:188).

There are not many works which explicitly compare the field of relational sociology with dialectic critique, surprisingly, given the radically relational premise which the latter proceeds from according to its attendants:

> A thing manifests colour only by reflecting light in a certain way; an object manifests mass only in and through its mechanical interactions with other bodies; a thing shows its shape only through its relations to other things in space … [Marxist philosophy] maintains that social relations are internal and essential features of the nature of both people and productive forces (Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2020: 4).

It seems absolutely clear that Ollman's (2014a: 574) description of what an internal relations philosophy is fits so seamlessly with relational sociology when he posits ontology as one:

> [C]onsisting of an infinite number of processes undergoing constant change of one kind or another …With this, both 'process' and 'relation' become equal means of referring to the basic unit of reality, the only difference being the vantage point from which one begins to describe their union.

Herein lies an opportunity for fusing dialectic thinking with relational sociological theory. Ashwin (2009: 19, cited in Annala *et al.* 2021) agrees that in the scholarship of higher education it is becoming more and more important to emphasise "that structure and agency are not different kinds of processes but different ways of grouping or conceptualising complex social processes".

These seven dialectical-relational properties adapted from Powell (2013b: my emphasis) summarise the remarkable overlaps which Relational Sociology has with Ollman's philosophy of internal relations:

- 'Everything is made up of relations, and every action is performed by configurations of relations acting through other relations' *(i.e., Necessary internal relations*).
- Relations are taken as the fundamental unit of analysis, neither reducible or emergent to or from anything else.
- Relations should be treated as processes/movement/transformation.
- Relations are not fixed connections but are relative to a field and to the vantage of the knowledge-producer.
- Relations are constituted by multiple forces, often moving in opposite directions such that relative positions contain internal 'contradictions' which can be phrased as simultaneously possessing 'actual' and 'potential' relations.
- Contradictions work out contingently in open-ended everyday processes.
- Structure and Agency are unopposed 'complementary ways of parsing the same phenomenon' *or totality.*
- Relations can be conceived of as *work* or *practice.*

According to Rikowski (1996:446), relational theory is truly significant because it offers a way out of debilitating ontological externalities in the sociology of education by placing at its centre a picture where:

> [S]ocial phenomena [only] appear to be separate. [Until] their internal relations are theorised within a conception of the totality, this necessarily involves a critique of their apparent separateness … and dissolves the apparent separations (within bourgeois social theory) of "politics" and "economic" ... subject and object, agency, and structure and so on.

Many may be on edge at this point about where to begin with a dialectical-relational framework for the sociology of higher education. If all things are relations, and all relations are internally related, then how do we know where a study ends and begins? Ollman (2015) has two responses which refer to the earlier discussion on abstraction. Firstly, the material world itself contains the qualities of the relations we are studying, and the boundaries by which those qualities are distinguished from one another appear to us in our material lives. This forms the basis for the beginning of the process of abstraction through the abstraction of extensions and generality. We see these sets of relations all around us and it is us who decide which sets of relations to

abstract from like relations and from the whole. Secondly, what we know of a chosen set of relations is always going to be less than what is in front of us. “Knowing” is to see only a fragment of our materialist reality, from one of many vantage points. And, so, we take the totality and abstract it into patterns and distinctions (abstractions) for the sake of gaining a partial view of the largely unseeable whole. As Ollman (2015:15) himself notes regarding our everyday constructions of knowledge through abstractions out of the totality:

> There is a crucial difference between seeing everything that is in our line of vision and looking at the part of it that is of special interest to us; between hearing all the noises in close proximity to us and listening to a particular sound or voice; and so on through all five of our senses. In perceiving anything, we are usually focusing on something inside the field that a given sense (or a few of our senses working together) opens up to us. We all do this, which is to say everyone engages in the process of abstraction, and it plays an essential role in how we learn and come to understand anything.

As argued, the logic of internal relations foregrounds the existence of multiple and contradictory relations as the lynchpin of the society's existence. Dialectical ontology deepens this starting point by arguing that visible forms of dominant practices are invariably internally related to other potential, competing and opposing practices which are not clearly visible.. It is not structure and agency but relations (as practices) which are given ontological primacy in the philosophy of internal relations, as I argue more fully below by delving into the specific relational framework offered by Pierre’s Bourdieu theory of practice.

2.8 Bourdieu, Relational Sociology, and Academic Practice

2.8.1 Habitus and Field

Bourdieu offers a particularly compelling relational lens through which constructs such as academic identity and practice can be studied. His relational sociology resonates with the philosophy of internal relations, creating an exciting synergy and opening possibilities for a dialectic-relational philosophy of higher education. Bourdieu’s theoretical insights introduced in this section are invaluable for the discussion of this thesis, as will become more evident later. Pierre Bourdieu's definition of practice is vital to a relational-dialectical approach. His conception of practice is compatible with internal relations, as it integrates structure and agency into a unified, mutually constitutive relation. According to Evens (1999:8), Bourdieu’s work on practice responds specifically to the arch predicament of the social sciences, that is:

> His principal task is to supersede misguided theoretical dualism. He proposes a dialectical theory according to which organising consciousness and automatic behaviours are intervolved rather than simply contraposed … The ontological synthesis of this dialectic is practice [for Bourdiuesian sociology]!

The dialectical relationship between agency and structure is contained within Bourdieu's ingenious concept of 'habitus' which is "a system of dispositions, or embodied knowledge of what is possible in different contexts" (Farrugia 2013:289). Habitus is an "ensemble of relations … a kind of stock of resources at the disposal of each actor, of which the actor is, however not fully aware because he inherits them from the social environment in which he lives" (Papilloud and Shultze 2018: 345). Habitus is the structural and regulatory elements of society embodied within individuals and specific groups and is configured over time. For Bourdieu (1990: 190), habitus encapsulates that "[t] he body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body". The notion of habitus captures Bourdieu's admitted attempt to escape the dualism of structure and agency, as he says that

> [T]he uses of the notion of habitus [...] can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice between a structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject (Bourdieu 1990:10).

Habitus understood us "social forces represented within me" is therefore both structured and structuring as it is formed by practical interaction within wider structures (which Bourdieu calls 'fields') (Joseph 2020:109). Fields, such as the social field of education, are where an infinite number of interactions condition a social agent's daily life (Walther 2014). An agent's relative position within a field and their differentiated access to various forms of scarce capital (economic, social, symbolic, and cultural) configure the dispositions available to and embedded in their habitus. A summative formula for the relationship between habitus, capital, field and practice is: [H x C] + F = P where H means habitus, C capital(s), F field(s) and P practice (Bourdieu 1982: 175, cited in Papilloud and Schultze 2018: 345). There is a dialectic relation between the field (F) and the subjective dispositions (H x C) of agents in which the outcome usually tends towards reproducing the rules of the field. If one reads this from the perspective of internal relations, it will mean that the one pole of the contradiction (the one conserving the social order) tends to prevail over the other. For instance, the careerist insularity aspect of a contradiction prevails, such that habitus configuring practices lead to practices that can be labelled as predominantly careerist and insular. But this is not inevitable.

In this way, Bourdieu proposed that "habitus and practice exist in a recursive relation, such that habitus is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions" (Archer *et al.* 2021:171). For Bourdieu, then, structure and agency are mediated through and internal to practice; in other words, practice is the result of the dialectic between structures and agency. This is different to critical realism where agency has autonomy in its engagement with structures, as the two represent different layers of reality (Farrugia 2013:287).

Bourdieu famously applied his theory of practice to gain insights into the relationship between the university and society in France (Bourdieu 1988). Undoubtedly, his contributions have significantly impacted educational sociology (Walther 2014). According to Naidoo (2004: 558-559):

> Bourdieu develops an understanding of the operation of practices occurring in higher education by the use of the concept 'strategy' which is understood as a specific orientation of practice. In contrast to the way the term is used in ordinary language, where it is based on conscious calculation, strategy in Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus is dependent on 'habitus' which as a result of socialisation engenders in individuals a 'disposition' below the level of consciousness to act or think in certain ways; and on the network of objective relations between positions that agents or institutions occupy in the field.

The various practices which academics assume in the university are configured by the possibilities and limitations generated in relation to their dispositions by and in the field. To stress, practices do not entail deliberate strategic thinking: rather, orientations of practice entail undertaking what is unconsciously regarded as rational and reasonable to do given the situation without necessarily any pronounced reasoning and rationalising taking place. Therefore, using Bourdieu's practice is a very particular term because this conception of practice does not distinguish between perspective and action, but see's rather one's perspective of the world, its nature and limitations, as inherently embedded within the trajectories of practices in which one engages.

Within the field of education, then, agents engage in 'position takings' below the level of consciousness but in reasonable ways given the position in which they find themselves in the field (Bourdieu 1993: 35). According to Evens (1999:19; my emphasis), Bourdieu views 'strategies' by actors as entailing "playing the game" in the field, so that the "structure [of the field of education] governs the habitus, which in turn structures the structures, while the overall

process is driven practically as an exercise in *survival*". Admittedly, Bourdieu's work tends to lean towards highlighting the social stability of fields. But Naidoo (2004: 468) argues that Bourdieu's theories can be made more dynamic by including theories which highlight "process, contradiction and change".

Bourdieu's work on the invisible power relations shaping habitus in understanding social reproduction is widely recognised. However, we must push interpretations beyond habitus and individuals' positioning within a field. The focus should instead be on theor ising transformations possible within these positions. Bourdieu already provides the groundwork for thinking about transformation by underlining in his work that habitus is "durable but not eternal" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133). In this way, many agree that his theory accommodates reflections on subversive practice, and the creative dimension of habitus (Herepath 2014: 859) .

2.8.2 Illusio

"Illusio" is another important concept in Bourdieu's theory of practice. The notion of illusio captures the processes by which we become not only unconsciously immersed in "the game of the dominant system" (the 'doxa') but unreflexively take pleasure in succeeding according to its implicit values (illusio). Illusio is the relationship which players have to the field, and it defines their investment in the outcomes of the game by virtue of their participation within it:

> [W]hen a game is being played each individual player agrees with the objective or the rules of the game, or both'. [A]lthough [illusio] points to a seemingly unquestioned acceptance of the importance and belief that the game is worth playing, in other words, the stakes matter and so there is interest in maintaining the game as it is played and abiding by established pre-determined rules. As Bourdieu maintains this is about, '…the sense of investment in the game and the outcome' (1990a, 66) where belief in the game as it is played means accepting the field relevant pre-suppositions that comes with it (Skourdoumbis 2024:11).

'Illusio' has been referred to as an "underutilised concept" in Bourdieu's relational sociology. Illusio gives rise to what Bourdieu calls "social gravity" which keeps individuals locked into a trajectory in which they have invested time, effort, and emotion, whether they consciously agree with it or not (Threadgold 2019:39). This provides the foundation for exploring the extent to which even critics of a system can be subject to collusion with, and visceral commitment to, its rules. 'Illusio' explains an academic's motivation to excel within the neoliberal

university while disagreeing with its ideology and principles. Or it assists in understanding why nations in the global South continue to adopt neoliberal educational policy reforms despite its disastrous local effects (Skourdoumbis 2024: 3). It allows a basis for understanding an individual, institution, or nation-state's sub-conscious or pre-conscious integration of competing values in such a way that the doxa is triumphant in steering lines of engagement in self-contradictory practices, given the values, actions and practices commanded by dominant ideologies.

The inescapability of capitalism as the playing field in which we are told to do our best in, a system accepted as beyond our realm of influence, has a religious quality to it. Walter Benjamin (2005:259) argued that capitalism "essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion." Late capitalism's eschatological quality shapes human practice, promoting practices of piety and path dependency as the goals of self-actualisation while deactualising humanism, commoning, and collectivity. As such, Bourdieu's notion of practice also goes contrary to external relations because it does not separate intent and practice but shows that they may be embodied in a state of internal contradiction, for example when 'illusio' informs an agent's active engagement in the field even while they may be idealistically and aspirationally intent on alternative trajectories to dominant practice. 'Illusio' is therefore consistent with internal relations and the argument that different and even opposing sets of relations and practices are entangled together ontologically.

Bourdieu's embodied (that is, internalised and below the level of consciousness) position-taking holds particular significance as we delve into the present-day relationship of academics to neoliberal contradictions, including possibly actions taken by academics to resist and transform processes of the commodified enclosure of radical, lively and socially active academia. In this thesis, academic identity will form the basis for understanding how the perceived limits of possibility in academic practice are unconsciously embodied by academics who, without being fully aware of it, abide – for the sake of survival and success – by the enclosures set by the very system of capitalism which they so often and so ardently critique in their work and in their self-presentation as intellectuals.

2.9. Conclusion

This chapter begins by defining the philosophy of internal relations as the conceptual framework. This philosophy's ontological and epistemological bases are unpacked, demonstrating continuities with Bourdieu's logic of practice and relational sociology. The

unparalleled power of the dialectical thought contained within these frameworks is emphasised. Ultimately, the integration of sociological critique, grounded in the philosophical principles of dialectical internal relations, is proposed as a foundation for advancing new explorations in higher education studies.

After exploring the ontological domain, the chapter shifts its focus to dialectics as a method and process, emphasising movements of abstraction. The ontological and epistemological foundations of dialectical-relational thought are addressed in relation to their potential alignment with the requirements for the development of sociological theory Combining dialectical thinking with sociology renews the character of dialectics from being stultified and old hat, to having real empirical potential. For Hansen (1972: 546), the dialectic is "not mere poetry, but is instead the sole method which enables us to understand the concrete character of our philosophical and aesthetic efforts". To be consciously dialectical in one's work is not merely to recognise the co-existence of opposing forces such as repression and freedom but to recognise that instead of repression acting upon freedom that repression and freedom exist entangled in the same ontological forms. That is, that opposite social forces together, as active relations of each other, constitute the basis for what we know to exist and be true. To be consciously dialectical means that one recognises that social change does not occur when good trumps evil, or repression eclipses freedom, or public intellectualism vanquishes knowledge commodification but when the two impulses move in such a way that they reconstitute the other and therefore the whole.

For higher education, this may mean a different way of practically imagining binaries in transition, such as decolonisation and colonisation, bureaucracy and academic autonomy, and commodified work and creative intellectualism – not as dualisms but as dialectic relations. The postulate which lays at the heart of this discussion is that capitalist repression and public intellectual activism are interlocking forces defining the purpose of higher education and this is expressed through the multiple and contradictory perceptions which Sociologists have of their roles and purpose in society.

My contention is that the interaction between repression and freedom defining academic identity should be conceived of as dialectical, and that its movement below the level of consciousness is central to the misrecognition of opportunities for greater self-reflexivity in the humanities and social sciences. We must view the university as a site where "virtually every kind of contradiction that exists in our societies finds its expression within the academy as

well" (Chachange 2008:2). Academic life, therefore, is as riddled with contestation, difference, and ambiguity as social life at large.

Chapters Three and Four examine the tension shaping South African sociology, where careerism threatens to overshadow critical public engagement. This tension is complex, with no simple resolution—neither an idyll nor a desideratum, but something in between. Chapter Three identifies neoliberalising forces in the South African academy, building on the primary contradiction. Chapter Four explores how neoliberalisation has impacted traditions of public intellectualism, focusing on South African Sociology past and present.

CHAPTER 3: CONTRADICTION AND THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

3.1 Introduction

Animating contradictions as central, this study offers a unique exploration of society's principal knowledge institution, the university, as an "idea", though not only as an idea, by interrogating the relation of the university to the academics within it and its functioning in terms of society at large. This study adopts and applies a dialectical-relational approach to ontology and epistemology to explore how neoliberal restructuring shapes academic practice and influences the expression of social purpose within academia.

The previous chapter made a case for using Ollman's internal relations philosophy to enrich sociological critique through specific philosophical and methodological innovations. This includes outlining sociological enquiry in terms of conceptions of the 'whole' (or moving totality) and the dialectical relationality of parts internal to this totality. Admittedly, the initial organising themes of the philosophy of internal relations invite a bewildering fusillade of abstract terms and imagery, notably "totality", "relations", "wholes", "parts", "relations", and "contradictions". Ollman (1976:3) acknowledges that Marxist theory contained "words like bats", which are hard to pin down as one tries to make sense of its depiction of the relations of moving parts and wholes. In this chapter, the outlined philosophical framework will be given greater clarity through the introduction of the neoliberal university, which will be presented as the 'whole' for which academic practice and identities are suggested as analytic parts. These elements are interconnected through internal relations and often manifest as contradictions.

The main task of this chapter is to set out the context in which the neoliberalisation of academic practice is occurring. This argument unfolds as follows: the study disarticulates the subject into the "whole," identified in this chapter as the 'neoliberal university' (Section 3.2), and the parts, 'academic identity' (Section 3.3). The chapter first defines the whole and its parts, then examines, in Section 3.4, the social implications of adopting a dialectical-relational framing to understand the university and academic identity. Focusing on social change towards the end of the chapter enables a contextual application in Section 3.5 through a discussion of contradictory academic practice in the decolonial context of neoliberal higher education in South Africa.

The twenty-first century has renewed the importance of examining the configuration of intellectual subjectivity and practice in the humanities and social sciences. The global expansion of higher education under conditions of late capitalism and the virulence of individualism in the face of the decline of old conceptions of the public have recast an urgent gaze upon defining the role of the public university, in particular the role of its intellectuals in publicly responding to a world wrought by new intensities of alienation, exploitation, and conflict. The movement of university environments to new forms have led academics to call into question, given their unique positions to do so, what the critical interventions are that academics think about making in the changing world, can make, do make, or do not make in fulfilling a public intellectual role.

Contradictions are intrinsic to capitalist society and animate it. However, for Marx, crises in society bring to the fore more forcefully, or at least signal, the underlying existence of contradictions. Neoliberal capitalism exemplifies such a crisis on a global scale, with its public education systems reflecting these tensions (Giroux, 2023).

Now more than ever, it is crucial that we sharpen our grasp of the idea of the university. And rightfully so, as Collini (2012:3) remarks:

> Universities worldwide in the early twenty-first century find themselves in a paradoxical position. Never in human history have, they been so numerous or so important, yet never before have they suffered from such a disabling lack of confidence and loss of identity … At a moment when the number of students currently enrolled in these institutions across the globe is several times larger than was the case only a generation ago, there is unprecedented scepticism about the benefits (both intellectual and material) of a university education.

Chapter Two identifies a key contradiction that is 'public engagement (associated with change agency) in contradiction with careerist insularity (associated with neoliberal conformity)' which marks the end of the first journey of abstraction. Chapter Three is a part of the first journey of abstraction where aspects of reality are singled out , to study as if in isolation of other moving parts. In Chapter Three, neoliberal capitalism and its ideologies are identified as a driving force behind the restructuring of academic identity.

Chapters Three and Four form a set in the sense that they each provide contextual and definitional discussions for the primary contradiction. As a set, they are a part of the first journey where the concrete appearance of reality is distilled into isolatable categories:

neoliberalism, the neoliberal university, academic identity, careerism, public engagement, and so forth.

This sets the stage for Chapters Six and Seven, which complete the second journey by synthesising isolated concepts into a new conception of the living whole. The study reinserts the primary contradiction into a spatially and temporally delimited context, enriching it with details from lived, individual, and real experiences embodied in phenomenal forms (the analysis chapters). While the second journey in the analysis chapters synthesises the inner connections of social phenomena, the current chapter highlights certain features of the world while pushing others into the background to identify the impacts of neoliberalism.

3.2 Neoliberalism

The focus on the "whole" under investigation aligns with Marxist dialectics which, while abstracting specific parts, always maintains a view of the dynamic totality of all relations (Ollman 2001: 286). Relational-dialectical thought focuses on how "social relations are understood and analysed within the frame of reference of a unified organic system, that is, the totality of relations" (Ogasawara 2017: 180). This is a shift from traditional trends in the Sociology of Education which tend to separate specific phenomena largely in isolation of totalising conceptions of the whole. The "dance of the dialectic" as introduced to us by Bertell Ollman begins by grasping totality, and only then are relations abstracted (chosen by the author based on the levels of extension, generality and vantage apparent to them), with the process ending with the placement of the abstracted parts back into the totality/whole.

Scholars distinguish neoliberalism as an integrated totality from classical liberalism. Classical liberalism promotes laissez-faire economics, where the state is regarded as effective when *removed* from the affairs of the market. Neoliberalism, popularised in the 1980s by right-wing theorists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, advocates for the *state's role in serving* the capitalist market through measures such as corporate tax cuts and the deregulation of commodity and labour markets. In the Global North, this had the effect of undermining the welfare function of the Keynesian state. At the same time, in the Global South, i t undercut the developmental intentions of the state and ultimately crippled the ability of nations to sustain endogenous economic development and the social relations necessary to support them (Guilherme and Picoli 2019). According to Hall and Lamont (2012: 9), the defining feature of neoliberalism:

> [H]as been the rise of market ideologies which, at their apogee, approached 'market fundamentalism' … marked by a resurgent faith in the power of markets to secure efficient outcomes, whose corollary was declining confidence in the capacity of states to allocate resources efficiently … Such issues are central to the collective imaginary of a society. We use the term collective imaginary to describe the overarching narratives that tell people what their society is about, what its past embodies and its future portends, who belongs to it, and what kinds of behaviour merit social respect … [I]ndividuals faced profound redefinitions in the criteria for social worth, as economic performance and market status become more central markers for social and cultural membership.

This is a broad definition sufficient for the purposes of my argument, though I recognise that delimiting neoliberalism is challenging and often leads to ambiguity, disagreement, and a variety of interpretations complicated by neoliberalism taking different forms across time and location. However, it is generally understood as the philosophy or doctrine, as well as sets of practices, that shape the peak of capitalism in which we exist, known as 'late capitalism.'

It is this version of capitalism which has to date, furthered capital's interest in the control of society beyond mechanisms of direct control so that today illusions of choice obscure the evolving mechanisms of capital's dominance, "curiously leading [people] into thinking they can freely choose and are in control of how their body is used for labour production" (Troiani and Dutson 2021:15). It is by the success of such covert mechanisms of control understood as late-capitalism's victory in colonising all non-economic domains of humanity under characteristically neoliberal doctrines, signifiers and practices which include: the rule of the market; the reduction of state expenditure on the public sector; deregulation of markets; privatisation of anything with the potential to be regarded as property, including the natural world; the elimination of the public good, community and the commons; and the centre-place of the self-interested and supposedly autonomous individual (Bramley and Morrison 2022) .

According to McKenna (2024:2), "neoliberalism can be understood as the financialisaton of everything we do, say, think, and produce such that 'value' becomes allocated explicitly through monetisation". Under neoliberalism, the class struggle is no longer between capital and labour but between capital and all aspects of life. In other words, with neoliberalism comes the planetary extension of the market logic of capitalism to every aspect of our waking lives. At a societal level neoliberalism undermines collective political practice and popular social movements by replacing the human propensity for developing the commons with a distorted

and magnified consciousness of the individual's material wealth and wellbeing. The neoliberal regime "fragments democratic solidarities, privatises notions of agency" while "eviscerating [radical] conceptions of politics" (Giroux 2007: 79; 188).

3.2.1 The Public University

Universities, at their most celebrated are fortified in the collective consciousness as oases of progress, removed from the strictures of convention, places where creativity and inventive thinking are encouraged. This image of the public university is inspired by lasting impressions of the 19th Century Humboldtian model, characterised by academic freedom, the unity of teaching and learning, and humanistic values "shielded from the political and economic vicissitudes of the world" (McCowan 2016:508). This reference to European origins of the public university is notwithstanding the contested geographic and cultural origins of the university, including assertions of its modern roots in India or its premodern existence in medieval and Arab societies. Keeping these contestations in mind, Mamdani (2016: 14) makes the point that the form of the public university is decidedly European in its genesis, emerging in twelfth and thirteenth century Europe, institutionalised in Berlin in the nineteenth century, and spread globally through colonisation.

It is indeed the global entrenchment of the grand idea of the public university as a catalyst for societal advancement which offers us such a compelling opportunity to confront (and disrupt) the inherent incongruities that underlie its established presence within society. As Hall (2020:831) underlines, "the idea or symbolism of the University can be contested, and this symbolism often bears little resemblance to how the University is experienced by those who labour inside it."

Without a doubt, universities are far more than symbolic. In all eras and places, the university institution has served to both reproduce the conditions of the status quo and create the agents who seek to change it. While carrying symbolic significance, it also reflects the prevailing operation of capitalist, patriarchal and colonial norms, inequalities, and power, including active contestation of these norms. Therefore, the chiaroscuro of purposes associated with the university is not merely illustrative of its symbolic diversity and the co-existence of its varied forms, but more so, it is reflective of active contradictions as the very motive forces in which education is formulated and in which it progresses. This chapter argues that in today's neoliberal academia, the mutual constitution of market forces and bottom-up resistance mirrors the dialectical reproduction of capitalism evident across society. This system of relational

functioning between repression and agency is reflected in the history and development of tertiary education and the academic identities shaped within it.

3.2.2. The Neoliberal University

Bramley and Morrison (2022:97) sets out three priorities of higher education under neoliberalism:

> (a) the development of knowledge and data as a tradeable market commodity; (b) pushing for instrumental productivity and performance in the global education market; and (c) building a culture of auditing and measurement.

These priorities are achieved through the development of organisational mechanisms which, according to Maasen and Cloete (2004: 9), include:

> (i) The rise of academic institutional managers and professional administrators; (ii) the idea of the sovereignty of the consumer, especially students; and (iii) the re-stratification of academic subjects and academic staff on the basis of their use value.

The rampant infusion of market and corporate logics within the institutional context and role of the public university manifests primarily in the compulsive rhetoric and signification of competition and rankings. These rankings measure the value of academic work in instrumental and financial terms, rather than emphasising the intrinsic contributions of knowledge by prioritising criteria like the quality of theoretical, humanistic, and socially responsive knowledge production. This has given rise to self-interested performativity creating an environment in which academics are increasingly encouraged (due to pervasive competition and career insecurity) to accept that peer-reviewed output should crowd out other practices such as "shaping change within society, [actively] addressing inequality… along with ambitions to engage with activism" (Spolander *et al.* 2022: 62).

Wendy Brown (2015), in her book on neoliberal capitalism's "stealth revolution," describes people living and working under this regime as "little capitals"—the reconstitution of humans as self-policing 'little' capitalists who compete amongst one another for investment. Applied here, the concept of "little capitals" refers to scholars at universities who are governed by the invisible hand of the market. Like the state and businesses, their performance is evaluated by management, which serves as "a watchdog" to ensure that these "little capitals" remain productive (Maassen and Cloete 2004: 9). Little capitals capture how under late capitalism

workers are subjectified, but the measures of surveillance and management, engender a unique orientation to self-subjectification too.

Across the world, a common feature of neoliberalism is the tendency to frame the function of education through an economic lens, positioning the university's overriding purpose toward economic growth. This prioritises technological, entrepreneurial, and management courses through strategic allocations of state and private funding, gradually hollowing out the standing of the humanities and social sciences. In these contexts, university degrees are touted for their market value, as opposed to 'higher' education, which leans towards producing the moral consciousness of society, political-intellectual development or the drive for collective social movement against the status quo and towards the public good. In other words, the doctrine of neoliberalism in higher education is geared toward the veneration of one type of person and eradication of another. In this reality, where capital flows and profit maximisation act as the "ultimate arbiter of worth" – and the value of human existence- "so the competitive and self-interested individual unencumbered by mutualistic-moral-bonds reigns supreme as the standard bearing agent, the one to be celebrated, emulated, embraced, and embodied, or else"(Robbins 2021:28).

The decline in state expenditure on public services, known as 'austerity', including that of the education sector, to channel resources to the private sector is a brutal feature of neoliberal education systems worldwide. However, for many, including Huisman (2014:100), it is not austerity per se but its consequence in terms of "how accountability has been instrumentalised as performativity… [that] is the most scary [sic] element of neoliberalism". Austerity not only reduces resource allocations but also shifts the interpretation of how and for whom public institutions function, recasting them as competitive bodies that jettison values of collectivity.

The denaturalisation of social inclinations to collegiality, freedom of thought and the pursuit of social change profoundly marks the neoliberal moment. This changing vernacular of the public university away from the public good towards market logics is reflected in the definition of social engagement as domesticated in-house enterprises where terms like "civic engagement", "ethical capitalism", and "the entrepreneurial good" permeate conceptions of "social impact" (Hlatshwayo 2022:7). Furthermore, academic involvement in these programmes is often perfunctory and subject to increasing controls, reporting and accountability to management for the sake of job promotion. In the language of neoliberalism, academics are 'incentivised' to take on (often short-term) community projects. Pursuits of

social freedom, the creation of sustained and meaningful relationships with communities on the ground, political encounters in the name of revolution and transformation of society are generally collapsed in a university system where action towards equality and public connection is "subsumed inside the evidenced-based imaginary of the market" as management- vetted pantomime and performance of 'engagement' by faculty for recognition where even when meaningful contributions are made to local society it is usually within a context where neoliberal norms and values are constructed, more than contested (Hall 2020:833).

Rhodes *et al.* (2018:143) use Ranciere's (1998:29) distinction between 'policing' and 'politics' to argue that neo-liberal policing replaces politics in universities' current approach to defining social responsibility. Politics is "an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing" (Ranciere 1998: 29). 'Policing' is about the suppression of alternatives to the status quo and is reflected in university ranking systems where politics is either rendered irrelevant or stands to diminish a university's position in rankings (McKenna 2023). The non-disruptive (status quo-preserving) and constrained forms of community engagement align with the perspective that good scholarship is apolitical and that the university's ideal role is to serve as an impartial neighbour to society (Long 1992:13-14).

The "organisational gaze" created by the infusion of corporate measures and management controls gives rise to frantic "careerism" where "projects of self-aggrandisement" pursued through rankings, auditing systems and the strict quantitative measurement of intellectual output outstrips the recognition of less measurable intellectual practices such as teaching and public intellectualism/activism (Clarke and Knights 2015: 1866). Contemporary academic subjectivities become burdened by the performative requirements shaped by corporate managerialism and the concomitant heaviness of its smothering weight against alternative nodes of practice.

The splintering of progressive from regressive intellectual purpose in neoliberal institutions may create the perception that activism and academia exist in totally separate worlds, that is, that the intellectual project ought to be seen as primarily about output growth so that scholarship and public reach be treated as externally related dualisms (Archer 2017, Swartz *et al.* 2019). On the contrary, we put forward the dialectical-relational view, namely, that the tensions between activism and academia are necessarily internally related, a contradiction constitutive of academic identity. As a result, the push for public intellectualism and political activism, no matter how eclipsed, must be seen as a latent potential in all we do. In the cracks

of our strait laced and self-interested academic systems, the potential for the disruption of the status quo is omnipresent. Individuals always retain the capacity "to develop their own art de vivre [art of living] alongside the dominant ethos" (Bardon and Josserand 2011: 511). From a dialectical perspective, the chasms which appear to separate activist/public intellectualism from the neoliberal academy do not mark the void of change but, rather, its possibility, as will become clearer and discussed more fully throughout the thesis.

3.3. Academic Identity

One of the key abstractions for conceptualising the lives of sociologists in the university is that of 'academic identity'. Academic identity is a rich concept which has assumed many different meanings and inflections in scholarship. The definition of academic identity which best aligns with dialectical relational theory is that which defines it in terms of the valuation of and orientation towards practices. Individual academics see certain practices and professional trajectories as priorities over others, and this individual valuation is informed by a much broader network of historical and institutional relations. Academic identity as understood through the lens of practices is the core definition of the term used here. Academic identity, for the purposes of this study, is captured by the following definition:

> The experiences, ideas, beliefs and values of academics regarding the core values and principles of academic work. It is significant in defining the professional judgements, and behaviours of academics, and is fundamentally (re)constituted in the social, economic, cultural and political context of the academy (Tülübas and Göktürk 2023: 139).

This section elaborates on the practice-centric definition of academic identity introduced in Section 1.6. It explores the dialectical interpretation of the term while examining the influence of neoliberalism on the construction of academic identity.

3.3.1 Values, Practice, and Academic Identity

Billot (2010: 711) highlights that identity in general (including academic identity) can broadly be framed in the context of practices:

> [I]dentity involves a subjective interpretation of our individuality in the context of activities.

Furthermore, there is some agreement that it is the overall and expanded institutional context, and the formal and informal organisational systems which it deploys toward the valuation of academic work, more than the specific disciplinary space, which determines how academics process their academic identities (Tierney, 2008; Billot 2010:2). In other words, academic identity is formed relative to and in conversation with institutional norms.

Academic identity is about "what academics do, what they should do, what they can do and what they want to do" (Zulu 2022:2). It is an amalgam of aspiration, expectation and organisationally defined activities and duties. Academic identity therefore binds together for an individual the past, present and future imaginings of what the academic ought to be doing in society (Dai and Hardy 2024). Identity is performative and enacted through practice: in other words, academic identity is an ongoing process (Delanty 2008: 126).

But academic identity is not only shaped by the tension among actions performed and unperformed, practices desired and those sanctioned; it is also shaped by how one's actual position and power within the historical and institutional hierarchy inform what one believes one should do and what one prioritises. One's disposition to practice expresses academic identity and with it the "multiplicity of lenses" with which an academic makes sense of their social position (Churchman and King 2009:513). Academic identity is positional, as Matthies and Torka (2019:347; my emphasis) make clear when they say: "This disposition is a crucial part of habitus formation and is tightly linked with *each academic's entire biography*".

Academic identity is forged in an academic's practical and evaluative responses to dominant conditions and cultures. To use Bourdieu's logic of practice, habitus formations are "embodied in practices" and "function as informal selection criteria" for what is deemed valuable and status forming, and what is not (Matthies and Torka 2019: 348). Bourdieu (1977:79), in *Outline of the Theory of Practice*, argues:

> Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning. Because his actions and works are the product of a modus operandi of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery, they contain an "objective intention," as the Scholastics put it, which always outruns his conscious intentions.

This is important as it underscores how academic identities are inherently linked to the collective structuring of their reference environment. What may appear as self-description at the molar level are invariably also a description of an individual's relative position within the

field which breeds a combination of paths including identification, disidentification and ambivalent identification with various aspects of the organisation (Kreiner and Ashforth 2004). Academic identity is therefore not singular but derived from dialogical and changing experiences within the environment. Mitchell and Pithouse-Morgan (2014) advance the insight that recognising academic identity as contingent and unstable, as it moves in response to its environment, instead of fixed, fosters the grounds for reflexive and honest ethnographic work in education.

But identity is interesting, because while provisional, contextual and collaboratively defined, it is also an expression of the hegemonic ideology which we reproduce through participation in the system. In this vein, habitus and its dialectic of structure and agency as embodied remains significant for depicting how dominant systems survive through expressing themselves as enduring behaviours ("durable dispositions") at the level of identity:

> The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organism (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence (Bourdieu 1977: 85).

While academic identity is agentic and processual, it is also historically and collectively defined. After all, as dialectic thought teaches us, our subjectivities are defined as parts within a dynamic and internally contradictory whole understood as totality . This sustains identity as subject to the collective and antagonistic reproduction of relations, making it somewhat durable but never completely cohesive, always fecund with the possibility for sublation.

In other words, while individuals situated in an academic habitus are conditioned by the same 'structuring structures' (objective structures) of neoliberalism, their experiences are always variable and agentic. Bourdieu might not highlight the latter quite enough, that is, the possibility for change in the modus operandi of the habitus. Nonetheless, his concept of habitus tells us why reforming the contemporary university is difficult to pursue and do: it does not tell us that it is impossible to do. Emphasising the possibilities for reform and transformation may be, however, where dialectic critique has an advantage over Bourdieusian thought as a theoretic frame for academic identity.

Dialectical-relational thinking after all is acclaimed for emphasising that people are not passive beings caught in webs of dialectical relations but acting subjects with the power to change material conditions through shifting the balance of forces of internal relations.

3.3.2 Neoliberalism and Academic Identity

For Marx (1859), it is the material organisation of capitalist relations (today, in the form of neoliberalism) which determines prevailing identitarian forms, including those pertaining to intellectual life. He believed that our understanding of prevailing identities can only be explained from contradictions stemming from material reality in the form of capitalist social formations.

There is a growing body of scholarship on the perception amongst scholars of disjuncture, between expectation and experience in the modern neoliberal university (Delanty 2008; Di Leo 2017; Nordbäck *et al.* 2022; Sutton 2015), though tension between what intellectuals do and ought to do has existed perennially and is therefore surely not unique to the neoliberal phase of capitalism. In fact, as far back as 1917, Max Weber spoke of the antagonism between the scholars "inward calling" and "external conditions of the academic man's vocation" when describing the academics' inherent passion for engagement in contrast with the conditions set by professional academic work (Weber 1946a: 134). Weber (1930) believed that ultimately 'disenchantment' was inevitable in capitalist societies where the expansion of bureaucratism was always linked with the expansion of capitalism and the instrumentalisation of work. Therefore identity-conflict is surely definitive of human life and not necessarily attributable to the existence of a particular economic and ideological system. Giddens (1991) for instance describes an identity project as a continuous process with no end point, an ongoing effort to understand who we are. This is not a project restricted to higher education nor to modern higher education, as dialectic relations run through all social life.

The argument is not that neoliberalism has generated tensions in academic identity, rather that it has defined a particular nature for these contradictions as inevitable, through its hegemonic intensification of insular careerism as the celebrated principle of academia. Naming the contradiction between public engagement and careerist insularity as primary is not done to suggest in any way that this tension develops only within systems of neoliberalism. But it is recognised through Marxist theory that capital imposes itself on existing logics in order to exploit forms of organisation already present, that is, it embeds and inscribes itself in the internal logic of the university sector. If the university sector is based on status and elitism in

ways which are already alienating vis-à-vis individuals and society, then capital will reconcile itself with this logic to further rigidify and homogenise academic identity and restrict the promise of the educational commons (Szadkowski and Kreski 2022:198).

Academic identity is formed in the push and pull of ambivalences in the pressure keg of the neoliberal workplace. Academic identities are fluid because internal conceptions and external forms are in dialectical relation. To understand academic identity under capitalism is to grasp not only academic resistance but also processes of social and cultural reproduction as Hall (2020:841-843) puts it:

> This dialectical unfolding of particular, concrete experiences of the world, in relation to universal conceptions that normalise or stabilise thinking, is overlain by individual and structural factors in reproducing the totality of capitalism.

This can be understood as the way in which modes of dominant rationality in society indirectly impel the functioning of the university, as the university in turn is implicated in reproducing conceptions which are consistent with and thereby stabilise capitalist values. In other, words neoliberal principles transmitted through austerity policies and corporate managerialism emphasise competitive, individualising subjectivities understood as a "universal conception that normalises or stabilises" academic identity and is experienced as an incursion rather than a source of empowerment for academics' societal roles.

Neoliberalism incurs on academic identity, slowly eviscerating meaningful experiences of the 'public.' Capitalism's flattened conception of public life incorporates academic identities, where the neoliberal public subject is only able to act to change themself " in the image of the market"(Gillies 2011:215). Academics, therefore, feel increasingly alienated from how institutional values are determined as primarily responsive to production and market values in managerial and bureaucratic institutions and thus are experiencing a tension between personal values and professional identity (Delanty 2008). Ronald Barnett (2000) calls the contemporary age, the age of "supercomplexity" in the university. The denomination of supercomplexity is rooted in the intense co-existence of the academic-as-object (or objectified by neoliberalism) and the academic-as-subject (critical actor against neoliberalism). This is reflected in identity-today based research which stresses the unviability of viewing academic identity and practice as fixed constructs, highlighting the need for new epistemological footholds for addressing the uncertain, ambiguous, and conflicted nature of academic identity (Pifer and Baker 2013).

The philosophy of internal relations could be crucial for helping us move beyond simple binary thinking and the misleading static conceptualisations this supports, by showing how complex, fluid social interactions shape identity, for instance, academic identity, in contradictory ways. Engaging with dialectic thinking ultimately makes a difference in framing social constructions, including that of identity by highlighting the endlessness and inevitability of contradictions.

3.3.3 Dialectical Conceptions of Academic Identity

While the literature seems to show fundamental disjunctures as definitive of how identities are perceived in the academic habitus, the dialectic framework compels us to question whether these are best described as 'disjunctures' or, better, as 'internal relations. The conjecture here is that the fault lines informing academic identity are not to be understood as de-linked oppositions between subjective aspirations and actual practice but are composed of a combination of subjective conceptions *and* 'external' structuring forms which are in dialectical relation to the other, and to the larger system of capitalism, and now neoliberal capitalism, of which it forms a part. Therefore, the tension constituting academic identity is not the product of an impasse between conceptions and structures. Instead, it emerges from the co-constructive interplay of practices—shaped by both the conceptions individuals hold and the social structures in which they are embedded—as embodied in academic habitus. The resulting tension arises from competing practices.

This dialectical-relational approach to higher education allows us to conceptualise the overlapping bounds of academic identity by suggesting, for instance, that academic identity expresses how domination *and* resistance, decolonisation *and* colonisation, and intellectual creativity *and* vocational constraints mediate academic tension*s and* their solutions, revealing them as internally related and mutually constituted. An internal relations perspective allows us to grasp academic identity not as the sum of discrete aspects of identity but "the whole as a single process" while "abstracting out some part or instant of this process for a particular purpose by treating it relatively autonomously" (Ollman 2001:288). Suppose we take the abstracted contradiction – careerist insularity with critical public engagement. In that case, we see that while neoliberalism induces a tendency towards careerism, this tendency is intertwined internally with alternatives to itself, in much the same way that decolonisation is mutually constitutive with Eurocentrism or, formalisation and imagination give meaning to the other in educational processes.

This sharply contrasts with dominant approaches in the sociology of education, which typically frame reality through rigid dualisms and external forces. As Shilling (1992:70) puts it plainly, the prevailing convention in educational studies is one where:

> Educational research is typically constructed as addressing either large-scale structural processes or small-scale individual interaction patterns; the assumption being that social life exists on different levels. As well as being a false assumption, since individuals do not occupy different 'levels' of existence, splitting life into hierarchical levels makes it difficult to conceptualise change as a dynamic process involving both structures and human agents.

This quote is suggestive of the deficit of reductive approaches in educational research which are reflective of the philosophy of external relations because they veer from dialectic thought and towards conceptual and ontological separatism in the establishment of cut and dry opposites (positive aspects of education versus adversarial, progress versus repression, and so forth) in ways that elude the playing out of our daily realities. When analysed through the lens of Ollman's dialectical philosophy, we see instead that academic identity entails "the incompatible development of different elements within the same relation, which is t o say between elements that are also dependent on one another" (Ollman 2003:17). Opposing forces shaping professional academic identity are integrated as dialectical relations. The task of the dialectic, as impossible as it may seem, is to capture real-life entanglements, what Ollman (2003) calls the "dance of the dialectic" and Henry Giroux (2016:161) calls "concertinas of the dialectic … rooted in the very basis and origins of being itself".

There are studies like Clegg's (2008; and similarly, Sutton (2015)) which highlight the integration of opposing tendencies within individual academic identities, though they are not usually framed in terms of dialectics. In Sue Clegg's (2008) enlightening study on the social construction of academic identity, she unravels the phenomenon of academics who appear to seamlessly integrate (professional) performativity with (principled political) agency in their daily lives, reflective of the hyper-complex, labyrinthine and ambiguous relations in which academic practice unfolds. Through her interviews, Clegg (2008: 339) aptly observes that universities are "imaginary spaces as well as real and lived ones". Thus, the theoretical frameworks we employ to grasp the changing but always ambivalent nature of the university's function, as it traverses both the symbolic and the real, becomes profoundly significant.

My suggestion is that a dialectical framework gives us our best chances of clearly conceptualising the true character of academic identity. Large-scale and small-scale processes are merged in dialectical analysis such that each part of a contradictory dichotomy is always "taken in its dialectical unity with the other member of the same set, if any sense is to be made of either member" (Hansen 1972: 543). By highlighting the inter-penetration and inner-relations of forces which the philosophy of internal relations emphasises, we avoid oversimplifying the dilemmas of higher education as domination *or* resistance, decolonisation *or* colonisation and public engagement *or* individualist insularity. As such, the trajectory of careerism and its alternatives, while seemingly incompatible, are co-constitutive and intersect in ways that inhibit and transform one another, thereby shaping academic identity dialectically over time. In everyday academic practice, these opposing dynamics engage in a dialogue, each giving meaning to the other.

Thus far, this chapter has examined the pervasive rise of neoliberalism and its consolidation of careerism and insularity within public universities. In these institutions, neoliberalism profoundly shapes how academics conceive their purpose and practice: their identities. Its relentless affirmation of individualism deeply impacts the role, nature, and form of the other pole of this contradiction, namely, public engagement. The following section explores critical considerations about the interrelation between the two sides of this dialectical contradiction, how it reflects broader neoliberal societal conditions, and what it entails for social change, using the posited contradiction as an illustrative context.

3.4 Key Features of Dialectic Contradictions in Academic Practice

The primary contradiction between careerist insularity and critical public engagement, as will become clearer, does not suggest that neoliberalism offers academics a choice of only two trajectories. What it does represent is an opposition in values and practices which I suggest conditions fundamentally the experience and perspectives of academics.

The combination of the three frameworks of the philosophy of internal relations, Bourdieusian practice and relational sociology (each described in Chapter Two) provides a theoretical basis for identifying and highlighting what this particular contradiction, and others, may mean for developing principles for a dialectic-relational sociology of higher education. Drawing on these traditions of thought I posit, as a starting point, the following descriptors for internal relations and contradictions in academic practice:

1. Academic practice reflects larger system-wide contradictions.
2. Change in academic practice occurs interstitially rather than cataclysmically, given the complex interplay of multiple contradictions.
3. Change takes place as we transition from one system of contradictions to another.

3.4.1 Academic Practice Reflects Larger System-Wide Contradictions

Individual contradictions with regards to academic practice are partial and/or mediated reflections of system-wide contradictions. The primary contradiction under discussion within the university is reflective of general social patterns contextualised by capitalist globalisation and neoliberalism beyond the university, where "the desires of capital trumps human needs" so that life is defined by the prioritisation of individualism, competition, and commodification as the mainframe for human activity, and the resultant struggle for rehumanisation which this inculcates (Hall 2020: 830). The multiple paradoxical perceptions of academic identities are "parts" of the system which mediate and express the structural properties of the system of higher education ("the whole") (Bruff 2009: 333).

It is thus important to underline that the primary contradiction identified in this thesis – public engagement and careerist insularity – refers to systemic, socially embedded practices, and not merely expressions of individual psychology or choice. As a result, the binary distinctions do not refer to simply attitudes of individuals towards either activism or individuality. According to Becher and Kogan (1980:147), "the main constraints on change are social, not psychological: they depend more on the way the system operates than on the particular stand that its individual members choose to take". This does not mean that the unique history, and moral and conceptual framework, of the individual academic is excluded from how contradictions play out in everyday practice. Rather, as a relational construct, the contradictions of individual academic identity and practice are influenced by and reflect the normative order produced by the disciplinary, institutional, and social context in which academics operate (Tülübas and Göktürk, 2023: 141). After all, the focus of a relational dialectical sociology of higher education is neither the individual nor the system as concrete sets of separate objects of study but the internal relations between them.

3.4.2 Contradictory Relations and The Associated Likelihood Of Interstitial Change In Academic Practice

The notion of contradictory totalities supports the likelihood of interstitial change and not cataclysmic, seismic shifts in academic practice as the form which transformation takes. The

ways in which systemic contradictions unfold in the everyday settings of higher education are characterised by 'in-between' positions as opposed to the sudden domination/subordination of one relation over the other. The contradictions in higher education are not resolved in straightforward ways but are influenced by complex institutional settings.

The internal relations are constantly shaping and being reshaped by the other and so our experience of them in the world is more subtle than two massive forces bumping into one another. What we experience are mainly subtle reconfigurations and adaptations as the poles of a contradiction interact. As a point of emphasis, this is different to claiming that in practice neoliberal forces are tearing apart critical public engagement. There is subtlety in the playing out of contradictions which are 'resolved' in a multiplicity of possible ways. This is consistent with Ollman's idea of totality which emphasises reality as an entanglement of relations, where the movement of one relation influences all others. It also aligns with Bourdieu's approach to seeing structure existing as patterns conveyed only through human practice, so that systems change incrementally as manifest practices shift within social fields.

Careerist insularity and activism are not separate processes but are imminently and intrinsically tied together in practice. Therefore, when an academic pursues intellectual practice dedicated to publicly relevant or emancipatory thought, it effects the university's formation as an insular space of professional individuality. However, these impacts are most likely to be incremental and piecemeal. In everyday reality, academics are not subject to a cataclysmic and dramaturgical playout between public activism and careerist insularity or change-agency and conformity. Instead, they are subject to gradual adaptations, acquiescence, accommodation, hybridisation, and alteration in dialectically constituted realities.

John Holloway (2010:51) argues that when we view the capitalist synthesis as "the gelatinous suction" that entangles the entire array of forces of repression and freedom, we begin to reimagine revolution as partial, interstitial cracks "on the edge of impossibility" (Holloway 2010:71) *within* the system—rather than as the cataclysmic undoing of one period of history by another or the wholesale eclipsing of one system by another. This is true for how the relations between oppression and resistance, emancipatory praxis and proceduralism, or colonial order and decolonial rupture unfold in academic practice. Ultimately, activating critical public engagement as a practice of sociology contributes to the broad "interstitial revolutionary process which undercuts everyday cohesion in capitalist societies and that, in a

prefigurative manner, will build the new humanity which South Africa so desperately needs" (Helliker and Vale 2013:39).

3.4.3 Sublation And the Potential For "The New" In Academic Practice

Change takes place as we transition from one system of contradictions to another. Contradictions do not always exist as empirically realised pairs. Sets of practices can take on many contingent forms (including co-existence, domination, and absence). In other words, a contradiction (or practices pulling in opposite directions) does not always exist explicitly. The binarist presentation of even dialectical contradictions as I have done here, as two categories separated only marginally by a 'hyphen', can create the impression that they are two active and fully fledged domains existing in proximity and which can easily be identified in society as reactions to other. However, it is not unusual for one side of the contradictory pair to exist only in the shadows as a latent possibility. In other words, contradictions tend to possess dominant (actual) and subordinate (potential) relations. When contradictions are represented textually, as I have done here, they appear as equally weighted binaries, presupposing that both sides are activated. However, what happens in practice cannot be read from this.

The force with which neoliberal rationality arrays against its opposites renders the latter imperilled and often invisible. The unadulterated hegemony, for example, of audit culture, labour precarity, output orientation and the vocationalisation of higher education, for instance, has hollowed out the presence of intellectual work as collaborative, open-ended, cross-disciplinary and public-facing so that the latter is often not evident beyond its status as an alternative vision. Dallyn *et al.* (2015: 1031, 1041; my emphasis) position public intellectualism as a "temperament, orientation or sensibility" expressed as a commitment by academics to engage with society beyond their peers and students, an inclination which is "*in* but not *of* the academic profession". This means that having an important role in creating the public good is seen as intrinsic to academic identities but not manifest in normative practice. Alongside the potentiality of emancipatory academic practice is the actual relation of insular conformity, which usually prevails. Academia generally regards the emancipatory, humanistic appraisal of what an academic-intellectual ought to be as a latent ethos, contrasting it with the more assertive pursuit of "professional rewards, promotion, and material acquisition" (Dallyn et al. 2015:1034).

We will see that, for many academics, the subverted practice of emancipatory work is often more defining of what they believe the humanities ought to entail than the dominant practice

of status acquisition, peer competition and recognition. For many academics, the notion of the university as a site for broad social change, while seldom experienced in practice, is animated in their mind as the lynchpin of their academic identities. The fascinating identification with that which does not exist in daily practice is forcefully brought to the fore in times of intensified pressures for conformity to careerism. According to Oladeinde (2022 :32), as contradictions are intensified by managerial pressures, so academics are more inclined to revolt through the pursuit of alternative temperaments and orientation towards intellectual practice:

> [A]s managerial practices [crystallised in structures] contribute to the "manufacture" of subjectivities in individuals, [it activates] the embedded resistance, by the workers; the transit of workers from "current self" to an "aspirational" or "resistance" identity. Through liminal processes, "workers work" on self to dis-identify from work-imposed identity so as to become their "authentic self" in the workplace.

Sublation (introduced in Section 2.5) represents the process through which new relations emerge by transitioning from one set of contradictions to another. As discussed in Chapter Two, sublation—meaning to cancel, preserve, and elevate a contradiction—transforms contradictions without annulling them, instead reconstituting the balance of forces within the relation (Brincat 2009: 461). The ongoing shifts between the 'real' and the 'possible' poles of a contradiction offer a way to envision new possibilities as contradictory aspects shift between presence and absence. This aligns with Barnett's (2017: 81) view of the university as never reaching a final resolution but continually evolving across time and contexts, embodying a multiplicity of futures understood non-teleologically:

> [The university] is understood to be occupying widening and evermore complex spaces in the world, its present manifestations and its present accompanying and dominant ideas – 'the entrepreneurial university', 'the digital university', 'the corporate university' – will be largely understood as ephemeral phenomena, open to giving way to quite other incarnations and self-understandings. … such a sense of its potentially widening social ontology – as we may term it – opens the way again to yet other kinds of vision of the future university.

Social change, including of the university, occurs when power shifts between the poles of a contradiction. Ollman (2003: 18, cited in McCusker 2016: 65) writes,

> [W]hereas non dialectical thinkers in every discipline are involved in a nonstop search for the 'outside agitator', for something or someone that comes from outside the problem and is the cause for whatever occurs, dialectical thinkers attribute the main responsibility for change to the inner contradictions of the system or systems in which it occurs.

The concept of sublation represents a juncture in the life of a contradictory relation in which power shifts take place, introducing a new relationality between the poles so that their internal relationality is arranged anew. In essence, sublation entails both the acknowledgment of contradictions and the necessary adjustments to transcend and reconstitute them. As Krahn (2014:48) evocatively phrases it,

> [T]his transformation occurs as the result of a mutual lack that is shared, one that is not to be understood as the harmonious complementing of one another, whereby the process of sublation would indicate some moderate third-way, but rather as the articulation of a common difference, the affirmation of the truth of both sides – together, but together in their incompatible negation of one another as well.

The quote above describes how when we activate latent practices and shift internal relations in higher education, we also fold unresolvable differences back into the new relation or defer incompatible parts of the old contradiction into the new. According to McCusker (2016:74): "[t]his endless cycle of confronting contradictions and sublating, or folding them together, is part of the dynamic motor of social change." Sublation is a recursive process, continuing endlessly. And it is how social change occurs using a dialectical-relational understanding of social processes.

3.5 Neoliberalism and Decoloniality

The decolonial turn serves as a living context in the South African academy for observing the tensions implicit in neoliberal performativity and work conditions. By way of explanation, decoloniality provides a refractive local lens for viewing the concrete animation of primary contradictions in practice.

Decolonisation dominates the interpretation of transformation at South African universities. It has unanimously come to be associated with resolving, on the one hand, the scourge of racial exclusion and, on the other, redressing colonial epistemicide through the vigorous construction of decolonised curricula which include Indigenous, black, and female philosophies, languages,

pedagogies and social theories. The politics of race and its subsumption of knowledge production dominate interpretations of the primary mission for emancipation in and through the university institutions in South Africa. Decolonial discourses centre Africa's historical and epistemic location in re-constructing university cultures which (de)flect and reflect African society, knowledge and culture.

It is relatively uncommon for scholars in South Africa to begin their social critiques of the university by focusing on capitalism and its ideological influence as the primary object of analysis. The paradigmatic importance of the issue of racial injustice in knowledge production often grounds analyses of racial inequality as the main focus of higher education transformation, even in instances where neoliberalism is a guiding theme of the research. This has limited discourse on university emancipation in South Africa as understood through the world-historic lens of capitalism's development, including acute analyses of the formidable forms of psychosocial oppression for those working within universities through which the evolving cultures of capitalism are reflected (affecting all academics globally), albeit in ways that are diffracted differently across various identities. Machingambi (2014: 210) reminds us that "central to the Marxist view of education is the idea that the education system cannot be understood independently of the main economic relations of the society of which it is a part".

Decolonial discourse does not commonly foreground the division of professional academics from the public, which neoliberalism has fastened- as a matter of importance. It does not reveal the class interests that keep academics' gaze fixed on professional accumulation and status formation in neocolonial institutions. Questions of epistemic transformation (decolonising knowledge) do not go far enough in challenging the fervour of self-marketing and competition, which connect professional academics as "little capitals", even when pursuing progressive decolonial theory. In fact, decolonial discourse has been consistent with neoliberal practice thus far. Decolonial texts and publications are almost exclusively circulated in the elite market of peer-reviewed output, allowing academics to engage in emancipatory talk without undoing the silos of professional self-interest which guard this discourse from reaching a wider public.

Academics' role conflict and ambiguity in public universities is thus no more intriguing than when it comes to radical emancipatory scholarship such as decolonial theory. Pillay (2020:309) argues that in South Africa, the steady corporatisation of the public university is unwittingly supported by academics who, despite the decolonial or radical tenor of the content of their work, always abide first by the call to publication rather than grassroots engagement.

Admittedly, the energetic proliferation of the notion of decoloniality within universities in colonised societies punctuates an important moment in the historical resistance to the legacy of colonial education. However, the hegemonic tendency to interpret decoloniality as intramural practice – as curriculum change, and peer-reviewed publication – reasserts the academic as private entity, not as public intellectual. This is in keeping with the marketplace functions of research, however innovative or decolonial the methods claim to be (Pillay 2020: 309). Decoloniality in South Africa is primarily an 'academic' rather than a 'social' transformational goal, which limits its force as a transformation discourse to address the gap between university practices and the broader public. The institutionalisation of decolonisation within the marketised bureaucratic university has entailed the flattening of political subjectivity because the discourse is driven not by social agents embedded in popular struggle against power but by "academics [who have been] turned into de-individualised members of an auditable group" (Angervall 2018:106). Humanities and social science academics immerse themselves in conceptualising the present problems, crafting beautiful prose on inequalities and social change while embedded in neoliberalising institutions increasingly designed to obscure the need for action in the service of such change.

Transformation discourse in the South African university is often "packaged" as a peer-centred project of publications and closed conferences, rather than as an 'open' and 'social' project in the spirit of public intellectual engagement. As Maistry (2019:171) describes, in South Africa this leads to hollow, "fetishistic disavowals" of the status quo made by academics in safe earshot of the applause of colleagues. More than the repressive policing and constant audits keeping academics in tow is the allure of prestige, recognition and prizes which weigh heavily on efforts to think beyond the present.

What university-defined transformation means *for* society is deeply embedded in the constitution of the academic community itself. University structures and the academics within them are co-determining. How academics are themselves constituted (from within university structures) means something for what intellectual life means in relation to society. Changes which affect the university, such as transformational pressures, also affect the multiple, intersecting identities which academics assume. Conversely, who the academic is, and how they choose to operate in the face of decolonialism, also conditions what university structures mean *for* society.

Ten years after the 2015-2016 student movements, it appears that academics rephrased the consciousness-changing and creative calls to dialogue by students by making their message fit quietly into the monologues echoed on the academic podium, away from the students who sparked the ideas, and away from the public to whom the students spoke. In this regard, a "clear epistemological dividing line for decolonial knowledge" emerges, with the popular praxis of the student movement on one side and middle-class intellectuals "concerned with status and career" on the other, eager to act as custodians of decolonial discourse (Gibson 2017:16). Caught between egalitarianism and elitism in the South African humanities, academics in spite of their best intentions often eclipse the very activists and snuff the very energy from the movements they wish to preserve. Bourdieu (1990, cited in Pels 2000 :2) clearly expressed that, "spokespersons by definition speak in the name of, and hence in the place of others, who must first be reduced to (or seduced into) silence before they can effectively be spoken for".

How do well-intentioned academics imagine new configurations for the careerism-engagement contradiction, where those whose messages we preserve are not themselves dismembered, mummified, and silenced during our representation of them? This is particularly important in the case of the decolonial movement where students have been silenced in the course of the institutionalisation of decolonisation as a professional academic, no longer political, paradigm.

There exists a state of tension in academics roles which has a direct effect on 'who' their work is for, including work on transformation. Academics mediation of the meaning and social value of 'university transformation' (including decolonial transformation) happens through a vexed sense of academic identity – between professional individualism and the capacity to publicly profess for good.

The decolonial turn has not gone far enough in unsettling the fundamental relationship between the professional intellectual and society; instead, it secures the separation of academics from society by confining the 'decolonial transformation' conversation to an intramural discourse by academics. Decolonial discourse in South Africa is not unique for being a radical discourse facing fetishisation under the wide arch of academic analysis. For example, Mirza (2006:101, 103) critiques discourses of 'diversity' in Great Britain led by "professionals ... recruited to produce complex, bureaucratic, target-led, glossy action plans and strategies", while the "endemic racialised class and gender divisions … showed little sign of abating". Diversity, like decolonisation, is a transformation discourse often repurposed for bureaucratic and careerist ends.

In South Africa, we publish in a language outside of the reach of the public in journals that cannot be accessed easily and most certainly not affordably. It is an act of 'concealment' where academics shield themselves from public scrutiny and self-doubt about their relevance by seeking peer recognition, prestigious titles, and awards, thus enclosing themselves within the academic community.

Moten and Harney (2004: 101) argue that, for radical intellectuals, the only possible relationship to the insular institution of universities is "a criminal one", as "it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment." Typically, in South Africa, universities are regarded as credential mills for aspiring academics and students alike, for whom intellectual empowerment is often defined myopically from a position of refuge from society—narrowly focused on securing employment or individual access to bourgeois hegemony. Empowerment via universities is, therefore, not typically framed as the subversive and critical enlargement of the public sphere through redistributing knowledge resources and power. Moreover, as we move into the future, it seems increasingly unlikely that we will find academic intellectuals prepared to take on the 'criminal' role mentioned by Moten and Harney (2004): that of anti-heroes and irreverent figures who resist the enticement of bourgeois certification in South African institutions.

These are major challenges indeed for those who seek to foster collective engagements with broader publics, including decolonial engagements, beyond the scholastic myopia. It is not impossible, however, in the current climate to achieve this. Nor is it the first time that South African academics have had to foster progressive intellectualism from within university spaces configured by the interests of the capitalist market (see discussion in Section 4.4, The higher education landscape in South Africa).

Indeed, dialectical thinking steers us from looking upon the current situation as a brand-new gap expanding between the idealised capacity to think and act against power on the one hand and, on the other, academic complicity with dominant hegemonic forces. The character of academic work is a combination and has always been a combination of both. What is ultimately of interest is the nature of the internal relation between these forces under specific temporal and spatial conditions.

The origins of the modern university across the world attest to the truism that capitalist ideologies have, at different levels of intensity, been interwoven in the fabric of what

universities stand for, as much as has been the desire for universities to be the heart of transformative thought and action. According to Olivier (2007: 7; my emphasis),

> philosophical, intellectual, or scientific knowledge is always already compromised – *it empowers even as it limits*; it can never be regarded unconditionally as a source of freedom from power, including other forms of power such as the political and economic.

In this light, it is important to defend critical thinking and action from the enclosures of neoliberalism, but we must acknowledge that we are defending relative and contradictory (never complete) freedom and critical thinking. The fight is for the maximisation of critical and emancipatory roles, the broadening of critical space, and the push for the humanities and social sciences to triumph – but all from within the internal contradictory relations it necessarily shares with power.

Ultimately the fight of the South African academic against neo-colonial and neo-capitalist hegemony is also one against anti-dialectic self-reflections as we think about the purpose of the university from within. The society-wide transformations shaped by neoliberalism have opened up opportunities critique,

> "[T]he implementation of neoliberal agendas seeks to underpin the commercialisation of academia but also increases its contradiction with the academy's traditional intellectual social obligations (Spolander *et al.* 2022: 68).

The current intensity of neoliberalism is making the long-standing tensions between individualism and collectivism in university transformation more visible (and potentially resolvable) than in less strained times. For Badat (2023: para, 4; my emphasis), for us to become decolonised, African universities' knowledge production must "advance both decolonial thought and the public good", and therefore should develop the following five trajectories of practice:

> [E]ncouraging students to be critical thinkers; undertaking more than just Eurocentric research; engaging proactively with the societies in which they are located; using their research and teaching to tackle development problems; and, finally, promoting critical and democratic citizenship.

The five trajectories provide a basis for showing how decoloniality links to the current neoliberal trajectory. Two of these five roles suggested for decolonising the university, as

emphasised in Badat's quotation, unambiguously focus on the 'public' as the beneficiaries of the universities' practices.

3.6 Conclusion

In the context of the steady neoliberalisation of public universities, it may appear as an increasingly dystopic situation where it has become so much more difficult to detail the university's relationship to emancipatory social change and transformation than it is to describe its exact role in the social reproduction of capitalism.

However, hope remains. From the historical perspective of the ever-shifting dimensions of the relationship between the university and society, the certainty of constant change allows us to assert, as Soudien (2015) does, that forces of repression are never totalising and, therefore, hope for transformation always remains. Over time, the university, in its ebb and flow across the horizon, moves toward and away from its role as a public good or as a site of individual accumulation through ongoing changes in the constitution of society. However, the broad assurance offered by history that ongoing change is inevitable may appear as cold comfort to academics who, in the mill of everyday work, encounter deflation and dislocation experienced across the corporeal and psychological terrain in which they simultaneously face the pressures to fulfil and nurture "the existence of a world which is recognisably human" from within increasingly narrow and egoistic institutions aimed at self-quantification and promotion (Olivier 2009:78).

Chapter Three positions neoliberal practice at the regressive pole of the contradiction. Sections 3.2 and 3.3 examine the implications of the public university's shift towards neoliberalisation processes and how these changes influence the definition and form of academic identity from the perspective of practice.

Social change is central to the discussion in Section 3.4, which outlines three key characteristics of dialectical contradiction in academic practice. These characteristics provide a framework for understanding how the thesis conceptualises and approaches the dynamics of social change, and the forthcoming discussion in Chapter Seven will adopt them.

Intellectual life within the neoliberal university demands resilience and resistance, so conceptions of social change are important. However, the dialectic thinking is not a crystal ball. It cannot offer universal answers or produce immediate action. Instead, it serves as a perspective on the nature of reality and a method for knowledge production. The search for

Marx in this thesis embodies "the desire for narrative—not as a simplistic notion of linearity or telos, but as the challenging effort to represent the multiple and incommensurable temporalities that shape our existence" (Jameson 2009: xxxviii). However, dialectics goes beyond merely describing reality; its intricate narrative provides a vital framework for reimagining institutional change in transformative ways.

Thinking about advancing new avenues for change is important because the pressures of neoliberalism on academic practice have led to a crisis of purpose, detectable in the uneasy dominant approach to decoloniality as private intellectual enterprise in the academe argued in Section 3.5. Di Leo highlights in *Higher Education Under Late Capitalism* (2017: xiv) that when neoliberalism achieves its aims, it *fails* higher education because it robs academics of the full extent to which they can act upon the betterment of themselves and society by turning them into "docile subjects". We must critically reflect on how our intellectual work on transformation develops contradictorily within the constraints of capitalism to foster a courageous view of individual agency and the collective freedoms we have yet to attain. In our quest to reshape academic society, we must go deeper in trying to uncover the internal relations which define today what Soudien (2015) calls the constitutive "perverse ambivalence" at the heart of South African academic life, particularly as we consider the increasing imposition of neo-liberal forms of capitalism upon the identities, work, and sense of purpose of those who transfer and create knowledge from within universities.

This is a decisive moment for academics to assess the conditions of their work and attempt the sublation of contemporary contradictions toward more hopeful alternatives. While the aim is not to create a university with a single purpose, it is crucial to bolster the side of the contradiction that champions public engagement and radical thinking in the face of neoliberalism. Dialectical-relational thought forces us to see that change of, within and from the university is never either simply utopian or dystopian but something in between. As a guiding principle for higher education studies, this would mean that we do not problematise the progressive projects of the university and the ethos of individual competition as pulling in purely opposite directions, instead we focus on the internal relations which bind together contrasting forces.

The density of capitalist hegemony often breeds political circumspection. The enormity and omnipotence of the system and its ever-increasing intelligence and victories over freedom can be debilitating. However, a sociological understanding of the dialectical nature of reality and

the unity of opposites within our everyday practice may give us pause for hope. In this regard, radical pedagogist Giroux (1981: 3) encourages studies of higher education which take the totality of the system as a basis for understanding "the promise of oppositional thinking [or] the more encompassing task of radical social change".

CHAPTER 4: CRITICAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

Where Chapter Three unpacked the regressive arm of the posited contradiction, Chapter Four explores the meaning of critical 'public engagement' as the progressive arm of the contradiction. Literature on neoliberalism frequently highlights the marginalisation of public-facing activities, yet a significant gap exists in understanding how the ostensibly diminishing practice of critical engagement is perceived and understood within the everyday realities of Sociology. To date, few studies have delved into the nuanced ways in which academics navigate these tensions, particularly considering the perceived decline of such activities amidst institutional and structural pressures.

The relationship of academics with surrounding communities and their presence in the public political domain has quietly and steadily been instrumentalised – exemplified by community engagement programmes. As discussed, academic accountability and responsiveness to the public have been infused with and repurposed in the image of the imperatives of neoliberalisation. The influence of neoliberalism in university life has been neither loud nor overt but insidious, gradual, and relational, reshaping how academics define and internalise the meaning of the "public". Awareness of this quiet transformation has been limited, if not absent (Bartel and Castillo, 2022). Recently, questions regarding who constitutes the academic's public and what the nature of their responsiveness should be have regained prominence—not because of academics' current influence in the public sphere, but precisely due to their increasing absence from it.

Section 4.2 defines public engagement within its disciplinary context, as 'public sociology' drawing on its roots in South Africa and its unique status as the subfield through which, over the past two decades, sociologists globally have reflected on the intellectual responsibility of the discipline beyond the university. Having established a definition for 'critical public engagement', Section 4.3 demonstrates various contestations to the claim that sociology has a unique normative commitment to an emancipatory ethic – to social change, the development of a counter-public and envisioning a new world. I defend that what sociology brings to the fore as a normative proposition about social justice remains a defining influence of the discipline and its social value, even when in retreat. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 discusses how

neoliberalism and neo-colonialism have shaped the post-1994 South African context, where the deracialisation and desegregation of universities are taking place. Sociology's development in South Africa is imminently entangled with the struggle to forge democracy from within a system of evolving capitalism. This chapter captures the rich archive of South African public sociology, which emerged from the struggle for democracy and later withered in the aftermath of the 'negotiated settlement,' reflecting not only the sublation of intellectual pursuit to the marketplace but also, more hopefully, the enduring reminder of possible alternatives in the face of capitalism.

4.2 Defining 'Critical Public Engagement' In Sociology

The following section magnifies the progressive aspect of the contradiction by firstly defining critical public engagement in its disciplinary and historic context as 'public sociology'. This is followed by a discussion on who 'the public 'in 'public sociology' should be defined as.

4.2.1 Public Sociology

'Public sociology' is an established subfield, closely linked with the ideas of Michael Burawoy. The notion of 'critical public engagement' is chosen for this thesis as a more inclusive term, encompassing various perspectives, including Burawoy's, to define public action by sociologists. This choice in terminology acknowledges as valid the critiques of Burawoy's 'public sociology'; more concretely, its limited representativeness as a Western paradigm and its cautious or guarded approach to discussing the politics of academic activism (Burawoy, 2004, 2005).

Nonetheless, the global public sociology debate begins with Burawoy's (2005a) now-famous and inspired call to Public Sociology during his presidential address at the American Sociological Association. His conceptual framework for public sociology has since been raised to near- canonical status for shaping, in the way it has, the foundational debates for what the 'public' and 'public engagement' signify for a type of sociology committed to direct social change. He is a pioneering figure who, from the supersonic platforms of Western Sociology, issued the following challenge:

> Are we just talking to ourselves (an academic audience) or are we also addressing others (an extra academic audience)? To pose this question is to answer it, since few would argue for a hermetically sealed discipline, or defend pursuing knowledge simply for knowledge's sake (2005a:10-11).

Burawoy introduced a four-quadrant model of the division of labour from which the conundrum of public engagement arose, as he saw it. His analytical model consists of four cells of activity – professional, policy, critical, and public. Professional sociology encompasses knowledge production for its own sake, usually with aspirations of value neutrality and the establishment of procedures for guiding the other three quadrants. The quad of policy sociology is the terrain of consultancy for specific clients, typically the state, providing targeted research to inform decision-making. Critical sociology, like professional sociology, is inward looking but, instead of consolidating the discipline, it engages in modifications of epistemologies and ultimately challenges professional sociology in order to enrich it. Then there is the very asynchronous public sociology, an outlier which is neither instrumental like policy sociology nor directly engages professional sociology intramurally as critical sociology does. It seeks instead to deinstitutionalise the discipline by fostering knowledge and practices aimed at broader society (Burawoy 2005a).

Every sociologist's career is shaped by their relationship to the four cells, the nature of which is determined by individual contexts (Burawoy 2005b). While interdependent, the four cells are arranged hierarchically (Burawoy 2007b). This is the product of the hyper- professionalisation of sociology which subordinates reflexive forms of sociology, that is, critical and public sociology to professional Sociology. Burawoy (2009: 465) reflects on the omnipotent defensiveness—rather than genuine interest—displayed by the professional realm when confronted with its reappraised duty to advocate for Sociology beyond professional solipsism. The dis-ease with reflexivity, which Burawoy points out as characteristic of the professional realm, hold especially true in the face of public sociology, which aspires to "an alternative vision of the university as something more than the pursuit of academic credentials, bureaucratic rankings, 'safe' research topics and refereed publications" (Metcalfe and Cock 2010: 73). Not all forms of public engagement cast their net equally far from the university status quo however or are positioned as equally radical. Some are more anodyne and less audacious from the perspective of the professional status quo, such as marketing the discipline to a broader audience or taking on civic roles. Others are driven by a greater spirit of radicalism, such as writing for popular audiences, or engaging in political organisation and activism (Carrigan 2021; Hanemaayer and Schneider 2022: 8).

Those strategies which are raring to defuse Sociology's professional isolationism through direct activism fall within the category of 'organic public sociology' and align with

emancipatory politics (Burawoy 2005a: 8). Organic public sociology involves the direct, and sustained engagement with a specific, usually community-based audience, based on the principle of shared knowledge production between academic and non-academic participants (Burawoy 2008: 355). But it must be noted that whether practices of engagement are considered benign or subversive, whether they should start through changes on the 'inside' or through outside organisation, is a matter of interpretation. For instance, Metcalfe and Cock (2010) refer to some of South Africa's Eddie Webster's public sociological work—widely celebrated as a doyen of engaged sociology— in terms of his labour movement activism, but also his teaching and supervision.

Burawoy's concept of organic public sociology draws directly from his transformative experience with South African Sociology during his visit at the juncture of the nation's transition to democracy (Bezuidenhout *et al.* 2022:2). In the anti-Apartheid mobilisations there was an engaged presence of sociologists across "a visible, thick, active and local public" incorporating labour movements, popular struggles and the national liberation organisations (Burawoy 2005a:28). In this sense, it was politically charged activism, and direct action politics by sociologists from which his interest in the ethical obligation of being a sociologist arose. It was emboldened and politically imbued social movement activism which inspired him, not the moderate forms of civic engagement. As will become clear, though, he later moderates his conceptions of public sociology to include subtler interpretations. Burawoy (2009: 191) acknowledges, however, that it was the deep political engagement between the South African sociologist and on the ground movement which peaked his original interest:

> I was stunned and exhilarated by the involvement of sociologists in the trenches of civil society, the ardent debates that emanated from those trenches and the originality of their theories of race, state and society. How different they were from what I had become accustomed to in the United States – a hyper-professionalised sociology that fetishised its separation from society.

While 'stunned' by the anti-Apartheid resistance and organisation coming from within South African Sociology, the model that Burawoy subsequently innovates does not adequately capture the spontaneity, ambivalence and formative nature of political engagement by South African sociologists. Instead, the conceptual model he produces reflects the internal culture of where he writes from, the United States academy, and the entrenched divisions among its employed sociologists, his main audience. For instance, his clinical four quadrant model stands

opposed to the more radical, localised context of popular struggle in which South African public sociology arose.

To distinguish itself from Burawoy's public Sociology, South African scholar-activists have adopted the term 'critical engagement' or 'critically engaged Sociology' to recognise in a different way the radical counter public produced at the fringes of sociology and society (Webster 1995). South African Sociology's endogenous innovation of public sociology as 'critical engagement' was a conceptualisation which took its lead from on the ground realities in the anti-state mobilisation of the pre-1994 period. According to Von Holdt (2014:182), any critical engagement normally includes cycling through all four domains and so negates the neat separation of Burawoy's cells from each other. The exceptional historic creation of a sociology which functioned beyond disciplinary bounds was anchored by the subdisciplines of Labour Studies and Industrial Sociology, and privileged the co-production of knowledge and politics alongside non-academic actors, shifting from Burawoy's 'departmental' focus and giving rise to local revisions and rejections of Burawoy's narrow Public Sociology (Webster, 1995; Buhlungu 2009; Bezuidenhout *et al.* 2022). According to Bezuidenhout *et al.* (2022:4),

> In South Africa, critical engagement arose in the context of a radicalised social science responding to the re-emergence of black worker and student resistance in South Africa …. Critical engagement attempted to specify the contradictory challenges of politically engaged scholarly work in this politically and intellectually challenging moment.

Seeking to distance itself from conflation with the politically restrained United States (US) definition of Public Sociology, which it inspired, South African sociology has rigorously critiqued Burawoy's paradigm. I will highlight two key criticisms: first, how Burawoy foregrounds the professional security of the academic as one of the benefits of public engagement (von Holdt 2022: 81). Closely tied to this critique is a second concern—the passive and objectified conception of the 'public' that his model evokes.

In relation to the first critique, Burawoy (2005b) goes to great lengths to stress that it is only through the existence of professional sociology that the potential for public sociology exists in the first place. The tradition of critical engagement in South Africa, though, disrupted instead of consolidated disciplinary stasis. It was built on an appreciation of diverse engagement with society and marked by a much stronger emphasis on political mobilisation and what that could achieve in the general public sphere – it was not a tool for strengthening the standing of

sociologists. On inspection, Burawoy's (2005a; 2005b) approach underscores disciplinary consolidation as a priority, earmarking the expert and their capacity to theoretically solve the problems of society as the basis for active engagement. This model inadvertently mirrors the insularity of the US academy, reflecting the self-referential nature of professional sociology that Burawoy himself critiques. Critical engagement, on the other hand, inverts the focus of public engagement, suggesting it should be more about social change not academic self-assurance.

Diverging motives for engagement—between acting to reverse disciplinary insecurity and influencing real social change—prompts reflection in the current context as we consider the obligation to 'action': while academic identities reflect the decline of public engagement, rescuing academic identities should not be the sole point of public engagement. It is easy to fall into the trap, as Burawoy seems to do at times, of emphasising the redemption of the professional space as the endpoint. The South African tradition of critical engagement is an essential reminder that our interest in the public good should never merely be a means for saving sociologists from feelings of irrelevance and obsolescence. Public engagement is not about the self-actualisation of sociologists in relation to a perceived deservedness of place which they may feel they hold in society. Public engagement should not be a vainglorious exercise in rescuing professionals and their departments by promoting a particular brand of socially conscious sociology. The crisis of purpose for someone employed permanently as a sociologist, enjoying the pleasures of writing, reading, and teaching as their work, is not a crisis that should necessarily concern society at large.

Max Weber distinguishes between an 'ethics of absolute ends' and an 'ethics of responsibility,' arguing that the former, a specious commitment to justice valued for its redemptive appeal, ignores context and overlooks its consequences. In contrast, an ethics of responsibility "gives an account of the foreseeable results of one's action" (Weber 1946: 12) and embodies the unselfishness expected from a public-facing Sociology. Drawing on the renewed emphasis on public sociology from the Global South, the call for public accountability demands an active commitment to addressing human suffering rooted in the daily struggles to resist dehumanisation. The goal should be to engage in concrete practices that challenge the habitual avoidance of answering the critical question: who or what defines the 'public' to which Sociology and its visions of human freedom respond?

Understandably, the threshold to asking about public sociology is sometimes defined by self-referential anxieties. However, the search for meaning in sociology should not settle for professional self-assurance; instead, it should consolidate collective and active courage in the face of power and the unsettledness—not security—that this surely brings. For feminist Patricia Hill Collins 2007: 110):

> By positioning itself in solidarity with ethical principles of democracy, fairness, and social justice, public sociology seemingly offers a path away from provincial careerism and back toward the sociological imaginations that many students felt they needed to check at the graduate school door.

From the South African reconceptualisation of 'critical public engagement' emerges another significant and related critique of Burawoy's brand of public sociology: its occasionally less-than-emancipatory tone. Specifically, it has been observed that his framework can, at times, inadvertently endorse extractive forms of engagement where communities are positioned primarily as data sources or passive audiences. At the same time, sociologists retain the role of knowledge gatekeepers. Meghji (2024: 115) argues that the preoccupation with 'the professional' *vis a vis* the four quadrants overlooks the possibilities for a dialogical relation with the public who are overlooked as worthy interlocutors. Von Holdt (2022:85) contends:

> The space of critical engagement is not for conveying the hallowed truths of sociology to the masses, but a dynamic space shaped by the tensions and contradictions produced within political fields as well as those internal to sociology.

South Africa's tradition of 'critical engagement', which once inspired Burawoy, ironically also produces some of the most ardent critiques of his work. This irony deepens as we recognise that these criticisms are based in part on a pride, memory, and knowledge which South African sociologists have of an engaged homegrown style of doing sociology in the past, which involved mobilising the interests of communities and worker rights against Apartheid. This is a style which has now all but been disabled by the current environment of hyper- professionalised work, akin to the US Sociology from which Burawoy's interpretation of public engagement which they criticise, arose in the first place.

In essence, while South African Sociology possesses within its national archives an exceptional historical moment from which to identify problems with Burawoy's framework, it must also use this as a basis to address the disciplinary constraints which it now mirrors. South African

Sociology in the post-Apartheid period faces circumstances that significantly resemble the insularity of the US academy which sparked Burawoy's attempt to foster public sociology. A thick culture of self-referentialism permeated the neoliberalising US academy, so strong and immersive that ultimately even Burawoy's alternative concept of public sociology gets stuck through his continuous appeasement to the wellbeing of the professional domain. In many ways, we are now facing a similar confinement in South Africa, where the immediacy and density of vocational and bureaucratic prescriptions makes it very difficult to 'see', let alone successfully object to, the isolation and insularity of sociologists from the public.

The desire for public sociology in the US was informed by a context which, while not identical, correlates with qualities identifiable in South Africa's present situation. For instance, at the dawn of Burawoy's (2007) innovations, sociologists shared a disinterest in preserving Sociology as a pure science; instead, they were moved by a concern with its real -world applicability. In South Africa in the past decade, sociology and its traditional canon has undergone epochal pressures for self-interrogation owing to decolonial critiques most recently and feminist critiques before that, which have questioned the traditional canon and who the episteme of Sociology actually serves. The perforation of canonical thinking which supported forays into public sociology in the US is reflected in South Africa.

Another condition which can be observed in South Africa which existed in the US academy at the time public sociology gained attention is the way that, at a theoretical level, leftist voices continue to be nurtured, while the world around it (including the university institution) leans increasingly toward the centre, and right of centre.

In the US in the late 1990s and early 2000s the leftism of the discipline created a disunity between its exponents advocating for radical critique, and a society ruthlessly pursuing self -interest. This set the stage in the US academy for self-reflections on scholarly engagement, and the technologies of power by which its absence was secured in Sociology. The challenges of ideological misalignment and the levelling down of the canonical thinking which existed at the time of Burawoy's insistence on public sociology are similarly reflected in South Africa. The gathering of the neoliberal storm, first felt in the US academy, now faces South Africa. Therefore, while South Africa's alternative model of critical public engagement. is used to critique US conceptions, it must seriously consider its own critiques of public sociology in addressing its internal issues, as it now faces a gap between critique and intervention resemblant of the US sociology it once criticised.

The numerous critiques, endorsements, and reinterpretations of public sociology highlight the impossibility of a universal public engagement theory. Yet, Burawoy's concept of public sociology—and the debates it has sparked—remains central. Despite enduring strong criticism, it has advanced discussions serving as a key framework for exploring the often-overlooked question of the discipline's ultimate 'ends' (Burawoy 2005b), including how 'the public' should be understood.

4.2.2 Conceiving of the 'Public' As Multiple, And Counter-Public

Burawoy (2005b:4) declares that "the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways." He deliberately adopts a broad and flexible definition of the public, describing it as spanning national and local levels, encompassing thin and thick demographics, and including groups that are hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, active and passive, as well as elite and grassroots (Burawoy 2005a).

Evans (2024:3) praises the widely drawn boundaries put forward by Burawoy for what constitutes the public as a strength, suggesting that by viewing the public as "an archipelago of publics," it can be read as ever evolving. Conceiving the public as multiple and introducing the notion of 'counter-publics' offers an alternative to portraying a singular, homogenous domain. The portrayal of the public as singular and homogenous conjures ossified and clinical imaginations of engagement as dipping into a monolithic statis, a society-in-waiting, thus supporting top-down definitions of public engagement, which critical traditions dispute. Moreover, conceptions of public life as singular and arid are promoted by capitalism, where all constituents engage in the primary activity of exchange encircled by the rampart and rules of the market. Critical public engagement carefully separates its conception of the public from this. The notion of the 'counter-public' is potentially emancipatory, redrawing the public as a shifting form occluding singular and common-sense notions, thereby prompting experimental and rehumanising reconceptualisations. The 'public' is not a given, 'found' entity for critical public engagement. In a time where the bounds of the public are rationalised as an expression of the market, the perspective of critical public engagement, which holds that the public is not something that is merely found and given, is appreciated. The public is created and fought for against the forces which seek to actively make absent emancipatory collectivities.

Burawoy (2016: 949), while generally vague about what constitutes the public, occasionally acknowledges "civil society" as the subject whose "critical standpoint" the sociologist must sustain "against the overextension of the market and its accomplice the regulatory state." According to Burawoy (2005b; 2008:345), Sociology's contribution, compared to other arts and social science disciplines, lies not only in its engagement with civil society but also in its approach to studying the world from the standpoint of civil society, even as this concept itself remains contested:

> Sociologists, at the core, take the standpoint not of the economy nor the state but of civil society. They explore and defend the strength of the social… We know that sociology lives and dies with civil society, so sociologists become the guardians of humanity, defending society against the tyranny of markets and the terrorism of states.

However, Burawoy's repeated references to civil society ignores critical race theorist's critique of the conceptualisation of civil society as statist, alienating and racist:

> How can Burawoy claim that 'civil society' is the 'best defence for humanity', when black and Indigenous peoples remain rejected from the concepts of 'civil' and 'humanity' themselves? Burawoy does acknowledge the gendered and racialised genealogies of 'civil society' but refuses to let these origins undo 'civil society' (Mahadeo 2024: 406).

Feminist conceptions of counterpublics provide an alternative to bourgeois conceptions of the public sphere as ringfenced and homogenous. Philosopher Nancy Fraser (1990:67) argues that the public sphere should be ideally conceived of as multiple bottom-up groupings which give rise to:

> [S]ubaltern counterpublics [which] signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

Counterpublics are sites of activism that stand in opposition to 'civil' society. They serve as spaces for un-'civil' resistance—including resistance to representational domination typically performed in academia by men and Westerners (Kinnunen 2019). The bottom-up practices through which counterpublics form also decentre dominant subjectivities, creating dialogical

spaces for new knowledge production (Mahadeo 2024:402). What existed in the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa in the form of 'critically engaged sociology' can be considered as one of the few sustained moments in the global history of sociology where a widespread counterpublic manifested in the form of cooperation between sociology academics and popular movements. In this light, Buhlungu (2009:147) argues that synchronicity between intellectuals and activists was constituted from within different publics, including labour, women, youth and community organisations, which themselves were formative spaces with ever shifting interactions, goals and power dynamics.

This utopic possibility remains constitutive of South African sociology even though it might be in a state of dialectical sublation in relation to neoliberal subjectification. Shifting this current state of 'presence in absence' for public engagement can only be achieved outside of the grammar and illusio of neoliberal academic identity by way of negating professionalisation, not by working through it.

Burawoy's account of public sociology, which centralises and defers to existing disciplinary systems in defining its meaning and function, can be critiqued for its limited dialogical and subversive qualities. It does not fully articulate the emancipatory potential inherent in the primary contradiction. As a result, the term' critical public engagement' is adopted here to signify a broader, more inclusive category of practice that resonates more closely with emancipatory approaches like 'critically engaged sociology' and 'counter-public sociology' than with Burawoy's formulation.

4.3. 'Critical Public Engagement' As A Point of Contrast with Normative Academic Identities

Section 4.2 discusses public engagement in terms of its definitions and traditions, comparing US and South African Sociology. Section 4.3 entertains certain global considerations, such as the question of normativity and the concept of public intellectualism as a guiding lodestone. Now that 'critical public engagement' has been defined in its disciplinary context as the progressive arm of the contradiction, we move from presenting the poles of the contradiction to discussing the normative dimensions, including vying for the promotion of critical public engagement contra insular careerism. This section explores normativity, not from the classic debate of whether we should adopt a normative approach in Sociology but rather which normative position we should bring into visibility.

In Section 4.3, a case is made for sociology's longstanding fidelity to social transformation via its centring of critical theory. At a theoretical level, the public, its freedom, and justice has been the interest of sociology. This theoretic interest has not always translated into action by academics, who are famously hamstrung by the pedestal of scientific distance to which they yield. Rekindling the call for public engagement is not based on the simplistic aim for traditional forms of sociology, and their many alternative orientations to congeal into a single public-facing sociology. Rather, the inspection of the moral obligation to social transformation is a suggestion that the health of the discipline, the protection of its 'heart', resides in pushing the needle away from careerism. No final resolution is possible as the world is in constant dialectic motion and entanglement. However, between reform and revolution, forms of public sociology may be galvanised to restore a more humanistic culture within the humanities and social sciences.

4.3.1 The Question of Normativity

Engagement is not only a practice. It is a "mode of intellectual production engaged with practical efforts" (Powell 2013a: 88). Like any modality, engagement establishes values and expectations by which we evaluate our intellectual production and the state of the discipline. In Sociology, competing systems of normativity shape academic identities, so the hegemonic pole of the primary contradiction derives its dominance not from any inherent superiority but from the success of its prescriptive regime, which is sustained by embedding values through practice within an environment of persistent ideological instability. The previous chapter discusses how academic identity emerges as a process of negotiating ideological and intellectual values through practice. Therefore, public engagement is as much an intellectual intervention as a practice. It represents an evaluation of ethical obligation, an expression of a philosophy of the public, and a statement on the challenges and possibilities we face in dismantling institutionalised values.

The only way for critical public engagement to gain more visible dominance as the tip of the iceberg we see, is for it to suspend below the surface the individualism we now experience as manifest . It is an internal battle between the warring ideals of what constitutes the sociologist's relation to society. In other words, autonomy of academics cannot ever exist, as we are always responsive to the social motivations of the field of practice in which we are located. Academic freedom then is not the freedom towards autonomy, but the freedom to respond to the dominant and subordinate motivations underpinning an academic community at any given time.

The suggestion is that, for us to split open reified hierarchies of practice that we have come to see as natural in sociology, normative assumptions must be forced into collision with alternatives (through practical experimentation). For instance, the practice of public engagement is not intended to create a new univocality, as the dialectic dismisses this as an ontological possibility. Instead, it is there to break the ready-made oneness on the surface for what a sociologist is expected to *do and be*. As discussed in Chapter Two, the outcome of the dialectic shifts according to the power behind each pole. Therefore, political responses to neoliberalism mean consolidating power behind its opposing trajectory, namely, critical public engagement.

The embodiment of social contradictions is shaped by how they reflect dominant and subordinate normative ideologies. For instance, three varying ideological scenarios give rise to three differing normative approaches to public engagement. Where *neoliberal forces are overwhelmingly dominant and unchallenged*, the 'illusio'—a subconscious alignment with neoliberal values—can reduce critical public engagement to superficial forms, such as using public engagement as a mere marketing tool for the discipline or as a basis for meeting personal promotional criteria. In contexts *where neoliberal forces are strong but not entirely pervasive,* there remains some room for critique. Here, academics may seek out and mobilise critical publics within the university, for instance, by engaging students as a counterpublic, rather than reaching out beyond institutional boundaries. However, in environments where *neoliberal values are much less entrenched and alternative ideals have gained more traction* , there is greater potential for robust forms of public engagement, such as the militant scholarship seen in South Africa during the 1980s, which actively engaged with broader societal issues and resisted dominant power structures.

As the dialectical "other" to professional sociology, critically engaged sociology is undeniably moral in its normative orientation. This has implications for the entire

> Discipline [which] has inherited a professional obligation (or normative question) to concern itself with the relationship between the production of sociological knowledge and its use for generating social change, as exemplified by the public sociology debate (Hanemaayer and Schneider 2014 :8).

This normative orientation to social change in sociology tends to take on a humanist ethos, and shares much in common with Edward Said's (1994) approach to the idealised role of intellectual work, one which takes on an "unbudgeable conviction in a concept of justice and fairness"

(Said 1994:94) by "speaking truth to power" (Said 1994: 85-103). Edward Said (1994: 22) emphatically states

> [T]here is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and underrepresented.

This normative bias of sociology towards a justice-based, change-seeking agenda has faced criticism from both the right and the left for allegedly undermining the scientific basis of sociological inquiry. On one level, this criticism is counterintuitive, as one might assume, as Adesina (2005) does, that part of what motivates sociology is the "optimism that we could make a difference—which, after all, is why we became sociologists in the first place."

Public engagement is commonly challenged for its potential, when positioned as a priority, to erode the scientific basis of inquiry and unleash upon Sociology the perils of normativity. This is based on a particular reading of 'academic freedom' as one which means liberation from prescriptivity, moral or otherwise. These 'dissidents' believe that Sociology has become too reflexive owing to external political pressures to commit itself to social change. Burawoy (2005a) argues that these abstentionist positions are themselves political. As he suggests, a retreat from the public, is less likely to achieve "the traditional emphasis on academic freedom and collegial self-steering" and more likely to enable the project of turning "higher education into a service-company with society as its marketplace" (Maasen and Cloete 2004: 8).

Certain interlocutors on the left criticise public sociology for lacking a material and scientific analysis framework, arguing that it instead employs knowledge production to advance predetermined moral conclusions. Paolucci (2008:362) contends that prioritising morality in this manner is anti-dialectical, as it misleadingly depicts public engagement as a purely virtuous pursuit and incorrectly presumes that direct political involvement is intrinsically radical. For him, predetermined moral conclusions are a sign of liberal reformism, which tends to prioritise moralistic grandstanding over rigorous critique. Edward Said (1983; 1994) forwards a dictum that corroborates this critique, that intellectual practice must always prioritise analysis and critique before solidarity because solidarity before criticism means the end of criticism. Indeed, conceiving critical distance in contexts of engagement is a perennial challenge for engaged scholarship. Habib (2008:391-393) recalls what he regards as the failure to maintain such critical distance by progressive anti-Apartheid sociologists (earlier identified by the tradition of 'critical engagement') where

> Public Sociologists never had any difficulty to speak truth to state power yet often found it difficult to be critical of the subaltern themselves. It emanated from a desire not to offend the subaltern power brokers. As academics you could too easily be labelled and marginalised, and not have access to the power brokers who had increasing influence over their movements and the state institutions.

But critiques like Habib's (2008) detract from an alternative possibility, that is, that political involvement and personal empathy could make for better and not worse sociological analyses, as Cox (1993:3) argues:

> These very values could make us more careful in developing our research designs because we do genuinely want to find intervention strategies that work best in solving basic social problems. We do not assume that Black sociologists could not possibly do research on civil rights because they care and could not therefore be objective. We do not assume that women could not write scientifically about feminism and the feminist movement because they have a stake in the outcome and therefore could not possibly be objective … Having a genuine concern for the subject matter which you are investigating can make you a more dedicated and productive scientist rather than a subjectively biased and unreliable one.

Certainly, partisan work requires a committed consciousness about the continued importance of rigorous analysis. Surely, we can consider this as a parametric caution rather than a debasement of the entire project of public engagement. The detraction from all ideological quarters has cast public engagement as an ill-considered endeavour by those who would view its usefulness cynically and its pursuers naive. According to Hill Collins (2007:111), active, participatory action goes against and beyond what is usually prescribed of sociologists and therefore "the vast majority of people who actually do public sociology receive few perks and even less praise". These detractions intensify the question: how might we harness the call for a morally driven, public-facing Sociology?

One argument is that, while hidden by the emergent and dominant forms of professional sociology, we must remind ourselves that public responsiveness is the true heart of Sociology. To rediscover Sociology is, therefore, to rediscover public sociology. The most influential sociologists of our time, both local and international, were deeply troubled by the issues facing society on the ground and committed sophisticated analysis to a belief in the real possibilities of social revolution. This includes Archie Mafeje, Bernard Magubane, Fatima Meer and Harold

Wolpe locally. The forebears of sociology, such as Karl Marx, C. Wright Mills, and W.E.B. Du Bois, along with leading contemporary feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Oyeronke Oyewumi, all seek to recover a basis for social action aimed at transforming the standing order. Acknowledging the androcentrism in relying solely on canonical figures highlights the need for Sociology to embrace thinkers beyond its discipline, including feminist and decolonial scholars. As Khoo (2021:707) notes, "social theory" is essentially synonymous with "sociological theory," covering diverse perspectives from across the social sciences and humanities.

A duty to our inherent human potential to create emancipatory futures with the collective wellbeing of society in mind, can be read as the heart of Sociology understood as sociological theory[3]. But since the professionalisation of the discipline, the beating of its heart has been constrained ever more tightly by its institutional, and now neoliberal, corpus.

I appreciate that public engagement has recognisably never been a constitutive feature of any mainstream sociology, always deputised as secondary in practice, even predating neoliberalism. In fact, even prior to the recent veneration of academic freedom as a governing tenet which immunises academics from the pressure to respond to external political forces, many scholars already 'openly' avoided speaking on social issues within the public realm and decidedly toed the line within their disciplinary bounds. On the rare occasion that academics sought out general audiences interested in critical analyses of the day's socio-political questions, they claimed to be hard pressed to find such an audience (Rhode 2006: 114). In this context, we recognise that, for 'public engagement', beyond its status as a beloved moral effigy and symbol of intention, it has always been a contentious concept in the realm of actual intellectual work, if not outright marginalised.

A final argument for affirming sociology's necessary normativity is against the tendency to weaponise 'science' to suppress moral and political normativity. When Paoulucci (2008: 365) compares public sociology to Marxist theory and says the latter "was about getting the science right, not the morality right", he is trying to protect the foundations of Marx's methodological ingenuity. However, in doing this, he diminishes activism to being an outcome of the superior domain of analysis, thus overlooking the varieties of socialist theory, which are at once

[3] Public engagement in sociology has sometimesreinforced exclusion andinequality. In South Africa, sociologists used pseudo-scientific eugenics to justify public segregation. Similarly, the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem framed public concerns in a way that prioritised white poverty while ignoring other social oppressions (Azari and Sitas 2017).

interventionist and scientifically astute, including those interpretations that leverage Marx's dictum that: "The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various way…*The point,* however, is to change it". To say 'science before morality' is to shame and silence academics who want to act and speak aloud in the name of humanity in a world which now so desperately needs it.

The claim of scientific superiority has long been wielded to restrict discourse, benefiting those with epistemic authority, whether on the left or right. The positioning of 'science' as unassailable, particularly in producing facts about human subjectivity, has often been misused. This rigid misapplication of science to subjective matters has a long history of justifying social hierarchies as naturally occurring. Pseudo-sciences like scientific sexism, phrenology and eugenics were widely applied across colonised and patriarchal societies, serving as tools to impose processes that denied the possibility of demanding freedom for the oppressed. Soudien (2015:17) also argues that the Europeanisation of education and the epistemicide of indigenous systems of social theory in South Africa are based on an infantilisation of "non-scientifically verifiable" knowledge as inferior.

The argument that morality should be distinguishable from the science of society is spurious. David Theo Goldberg (1993) argues that in forming the modern colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist world, forms of domination rely on rulers manipulating their audiences by projecting their ideal versions of reality as fact. He ultimately posits that those who control the conceptual schema control the world. Long emphasised by feminist philosophy is the acknowledgement that while science advances knowledge through evidence and method, it can, when misused for political ends, become a tool of tyranny, enforcing divisions under the guise of truth. For Anzaldúa (2007) and Collins (2000), the mandate for social scholarship to be objective and emotion-free has predominantly benefited upper-class, white, heterosexual men. The insistence on objectivity is at once these men's self-distanciation from all the violence wrought upon the world in their name, all while claiming an 'overarching' view of that very world. Collins (2000) contends that society, not a narrow expert vanguard, should determine the legitimacy of academics and experts in the arts and humanities.

From a dialectical perspective, practising public sociology—a defiant activation against professionalism—does not suddenly revolutionise the field, but shifts the relation between moral-emancipatory and insular modes. Practices of public engagement do not eviscerate into thin air dominant discourses and practices around professionalism, science and value-

neutrality. The two poles of the contradiction are always interfacing, often vividly adopting characteristics of the other.

For example, traditional academic public engagement can be insular and careerist in focus, as careerism can be rooted in notions borrowed from public engagement (participatory intellectual practices pursued for self-gain). So, it is clear that 'public engagement', as one side of the contradiction, is a complex concept which finds its meaning in the positioning of its opposite, unlikely to settle into a fixed definition. Its activation is therefore a process of 'unlocking' new configurations of the contradiction through eliciting contrasting practices by which to re-evaluate normative academic identity.

Twenty years ago, Burawoy unleashed onto international terrain the debate on the place of normativity in Sociology, an idea which has proven to both inspire and alienate academic audiences. In 2024, the American Sociological Association erupted in post-conference debate around this very issue, exactly twenty years after Burawoy's famous presidential address (Brooks 2024). In the very same year, the theme at the South African Sociological Association conference was "Sociology and its Publics: Institutions, audiences, and vocabularies...". Burawoy's own oscillating views illustrate the ongoing tensions enabling the continued debate, as he shifts between strong affirmations of organic scholar activism followed by unnerved disclaimers of political prescriptivity, sometimes making declarations for normativity and at others disassociating from its implications. On one hand, Burawoy (2005b:323) asserts the political power of normativity, stating that [a]s sociologists we not only invent new categories but also give them normative and political valence. To fail to do so is to give carte blanche to state and market to fill the vacuum with their own needs. At other times, however, he moderates his association with normativity, stating:

> Public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology (2005a: 8).

When considering normativity in the context of public sociology, whether in defence of science or moral action, not only individual consciousness but the effects of institutional conditions must be considered. Academic practices and the obligations on which they are based, rely on specific governance cultures and institutional relations. The substantive transformation of sociology through variations brought about by way of public engagement, therefore, extends to and is implicated in the construction of new types of universities. In contexts of corporate

managerialism and technocracies, the isolated activism of a few sociologists while vital, public-facing and change/space-making, needs to be a component of a broader restatement of public accountability through the challenge to, undoing and remaking of the idea of the university institution as a whole. Open universities, the commons university and the free university for now exist as utopic ideas but, like public sociology, they are humanistic value propositions that act as a 'measure of measure' for assessing the normative criteria of the status quo.

For now, the encroachment of capitalism and the widespread lack of consciousness or active avoidance of this encroachment by academics makes the starting point from within the university community a modest one. From this perspective, the accenting of public engagement as a necessary pursuit is not the unhinged call for Sociologists to rapidly move from a catatonic state of unconsciousness and apathy to rallying publicly as moral soothsayers. No, highlighting critical public engagement suggests, that we suspend business-as-usual to acknowledge the dominating reticence to the social demand for public action and dialogue.

To make work of recognising critical public engagement in the interests of the common good as vital to our purpose is not the same as histrionically assuming, as Said (1994:75) warns us not to do, "that the intellectual ought to have sovereignty or a kind of unrestricted authority over moral and mental life in a society." Nor is it to dismiss and downplay the practical and rhetorical struggles that academics wage against neoliberalism. It is instead to hold up, to the light of critique, the banal and unproblematised way that we as a community at large nurture the conditions which exteriorise us from that which we teach and write on freedom, movement and justice by sustaining a compulsive withdrawal from practical forms of public political connection. It is to begin by asking ourselves whether we accept that a shared lack of an ethos around action is definitive of our realities as sociologists and to what extent we are willing to change this, to sublate neoliberal prescriptions for intellectual life, for instance, through the call to organic public intellectualism in order to overcome this.

The following section discusses the broad tradition of public intellectualism. The call to publicising the critical social thought of the humanities through collaborative action and engagement with counter-publics is not discipline-specific. Public sociology and its local history of critical public engagement resonate in an age-old call for public intellectualism. This call today holds far more than mere rhetorical importance. In a world once again facing despotism and fascism at a scale once thought impossible because of the hard-won gains of democracy over the past century, informed, committed, creative and intelligent interventions

are necessary at every level of public life to save the commons, including the intellectual dimension. However, in a global society where the pushback against gender studies, and critical race theory and history is rendering critical theorists 'an endangered species' as Judith Butler (2022) opines, what then of the even more encompassing and courageous task of making public intellectualism a counter-culture for humanities academics? Public sociology (and critical public engagement) is part of a broader tradition of what is known as public intellectualism.

4.3.2 The Call to Public Intellectualism

As a 'measure of measure' which seeks to realise 'compassionate imaginings' (see below), public intellectualism can take two main forms (borrowing Gramsci's distinction). One is the call to traditional public intellectualism where, "one actively intervenes in the public debates of the day through books, articles, editorials, and speeches that address a larger general audience beyond the confines of the discipline and academia" (Goldberg and van den Berg 2009: 771). The other is organic public intellectual activity that expands the well of knowledge production by lowering barriers to entry into the well-resourced realms of research, writing, and the proliferation of ideas by including community organisers, organic intellectuals, and subaltern voices. Organic public intellectualism not only exposes artificial barriers to knowledge production but also works to undermine them.

Public intellectualism does not take centre stage for academics. In fact, many academics never think of themselves as intellectuals to begin with, nor feel the pressure for an expanded public meaning for their work. Admittedly, no academic can be everything all at once. The problem is that under current neoliberal conditions of work, sustained, practicable and substantive critical public intellectualism does not seem realisable in practice. Therefore, if an academic wanted to pursue a path of public intellectualism, current controls dampen this possibility, not only practically but in terms of academic identity. This aligns with Eyerman's (1994:12) warning that "the more intellectual labour is controlled by external forces [within the university], rules and procedures, supervisors and so on, the less of an intellectual one feels oneself to be".

Thus, the call to public engagement reveals a growing anxiety around the impossibility of public connection as an integrated part of academic identity. This fear is corroborated by a system in which the daily measure of what constitutes good academic work militates against all forms of labour which fall outside the ambit and optics of management. In t his context, considerations of 'different forms of sociology' reveal the true value of the humanities, to act

as a ‘measure of measure’. As Judith Butler (2014:27) highlights, “the humanities offer a critical perspective on values that can actively engage the contemporary metrics of value by which the humanities are weakened, if not destroyed.”

The call to public intellectualism emphasises the rarity of what Nussbaum (2001: 299) describes as ‘compassionate imagining,’ the recognition that human suffering and injustice matter and require democratic action in public life. According to Waghid (2009: 78 -79), compassionate imagining “pushes the boundaries of the self-outward by focusing on others' suffering.” In a university setting, it fosters academic awareness of the connection between academics’ vulnerable roles under capitalism and the suffering and indignity experienced by others in the university, and in the world.

Public intellectualism, despite its varying degrees of intensity and planes of focus from traditional to organic, is inherently a liberatory endeavour. In the original meaning of the intellectual, the epithet of ‘the public’ was inseparable (Misztal 2007). The original intellectual was a public figure, often embodying the total, universal persona who existed to illuminate the broad expanse and profound depths of social reality on behalf of a nation through a myriad of artistic and philosophical interests. Since colonial times, African intellectualism conveyed the perspectives of a people in confrontation with settlerdom, violence and the transition of history, providing public leadership through the conveyance of ideas (Ndletyana 2008). There is also the French iteration in the form of the Dreyfusards, who arose as the moral consciousness of society acting as an oppositional force to the state in its unjust treatment of ordinary citizens. The traditional motif of public obligation, morality and humanity is “constitutive of the definition of the category” (of intellectual) and remains embedded in intuitive perceptions of what an intellectual in society ought to represent (Collini 2006: 49)

The long-standing question of who the public intellectual is and what they do is evidenced by the endurance of multiple, contrasting definitions, together an amalgamation of conservative and radical which have shaped:

> [C]ontroversies over the realities of intellectual’s involvement, the responsibility they have, the forms of their public engagement, their definitions, their views, their class position and their level of integration into society. The description of intellectuals as a result of this confusion, tends to oscillate in its emphasis on the extent to which they should be ‘outsiders’ or ‘integrated’, engaged or detached, conformists or rebels, dissidents or members of elites, prone to hold a critical view

> or not. These frequently employed binary characterisations of the intellectual are responsible for long-standing and widely held contradictory convictions about the fate of and what constitutes the intellectual (Misztal 2007:14).

This kind of vibrant dissensus, captured in the quote above on the meaning of the intellectual, appears to be in decline with the demise of public intellectualism. This decline has led to the conclusion that one form of intellectual life has emerged as a monolithic character—defined by the modern neoliberal university. For Jean Bethke Elshtain (1986:3), "the near-total absorption of intellectual life by the universities marks the decline, if not the obliterations, of the intellectual as a distinctive social type." To this end, Steve Fuller (2009: 84-89) argues that academics' commitment to narrow disciplines engages them in knowledge work rather than intellectual activity. Fuller (1999: 85) further contends that academics are not intellectuals because:

> These people have become civil servants who, in the first instance, address each other in jealously guarded ('peer-reviewed') zones of discourse and only then, after that initial filtering process, the larger society. Consequently, their potential for incendiary speech has been domesticated into reasoned cultural critiques and piecemeal policy advice.

The blunt conclusion by Fuller is shared by others, such as Furedi (2004: 43), who argues that "when intellectual identity is made contingent upon institutional approval, then it clearly ceases to have anything in common with the classical aspiration for intellectual autonomy." In the neoliberal university, the academic is often portrayed as a 'follower,' conforming to structural imperatives to gain recognition through publishing, promotion, and peer approval. As argued in Chapter Three, this has significant implications for the meaning of 'transformation.' Far from constructing independent pathways or pursuing social justice through public engagement and autonomous invention, university academics instead comply with external directives—management bodies requesting blanket curriculum reviews, personal promotion committees demanding evidence of community engagement, or research ratings that set strict parameters for the extent of public intellectualism. But for others, reflections on the meaning of the intellectual reveal that being an academic and a public intellectual are not mutually exclusive, even in today's corporate managerialist universities. For Edward Said (1994), a set of metaphors describes traits characteristic of public intellectuals—qualities he believes

academics can embrace if they consciously resist the enclosures of professionalism to pursue *exilic consciousness*, *amateurism*, and *speaking truth to power*.

Exilic consciousness, in his view, is a metaphorical exile from pre-given norms and allegiances—a chosen state of mind in which one resists the predictability and constraints of specialisation, which often crowd out broader considerations and dull sensitivity to the ever-shifting struggles of ordinary people. For Edward Said (1994:53),

> Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled. You can't go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.

Another crucial orientation he advocates is amateurism, which serves as a counterforce to professionalism in cultivating an exilic consciousness. For Said, amateurism represents the striking courage intellectuals exhibit in asking simple yet profound questions— "Why do we do this?", "For whom?", "What is my role?". These questions, most relevant to society, critically interrogate the site of knowledge production and stand in opposition to expertdom and its dialect of "insidese." Finally, Said's work emphasises the intellectual's ultimate duty: to speak truth to power, an unassailable mark of critical engagement.

Indeed, others too believe that critical public intellectualism and routine professionalism are not incommensurate; however, neoliberal institutionalisation only expects and rewards the latter as indispensable to knowledge production. While the purported diminishment of the intellectual's role through neoliberal academicisation is highlighted here, it behoves us to recognise that South Africa has always relegated public intellectual activity to a reduced role in relation to academic professionalisation. At its inception, the university served the political project of advancing and consolidating supremacy for white men, fulfilling the politics of racial dominance and exclusion rather than fostering broader societal progress. Post-1994 efforts were made to open the university and democratise intellectualism. However, today, academics remain bound by upward accountability – only the nature of this accountability has changed over time.

The difference in the neoliberal period, to that of the early colonial universities, is that universities not only defer to the needs of capitalism as they have done since their inception, but themselves are beginning to act as corporations, as Santos *et al.* (2022: 2) explain:

> [Capitalism today] has turned the university into a capitalist enterprise, one that functions according to criteria proper to capitalism. The university is capitalist not because it is at the service of the reproduction of capitalist society. This has always been the case, at least in the non-communist world. Rather it is capitalist because it has become a business corporation producing a commodity whose market value derives from its capacity to create other market values (e.g. diploma that gives access to highly paid jobs).

In this context, public universities in South Africa are increasingly behaving like 'businesses' though the intensity and speed of this shift vary across institutions. Processes like managerialism, metrification, commodification, and casualisation—driven by austerity capitalism—mean that universities are no longer semi-autonomous institutions with their own logic symbiotically related to capitalism. In the neoliberal era, universities have moved from their position as an instrument for capitalism to being an integral subset of capitalism itself.

This is unfolding differently in each university, with some experiencing these changes more intensely than others. The University of South Africa (UNISA), for instance, is seen as ardently neoliberal, with its intensive performance management and managerial-level control of departmental curricula (Knoetze 2024). While some institutions employ overt neoliberal mechanisms, others adopt more subtle and concealed approaches. Rhodes University, for example, while considered a neoliberalising institution, is the only university in South Africa that has opted out of participating in neoliberal ranking systems. This decision protests the one-size-fits-all criteria that prioritise only the quantifiable and instrumental aspects of education, derived from Western models. The progressive side of the contradiction embodies the role of the public intellectual. Terms like *critical public engagement, public sociology,* and *public intellectualism* all reflect a shared aspiration for a more humanistic and interconnected intellectual discourse.

Post-1994 South Africa has brought opportunities for renewal, yet also dashed some of the democratic dreams of the past. As political fascism receded, market fundamentalism took its place. The enduring influence of capitalism, shaped by its roots in British colonialism, took on new forms with the advent of democracy and continues to define academic identity in South Africa today. To nurture cultures of counter-publics and public intellectualism, we must first grapple with the dominance of capitalism in suppressing public engagement.

4.4. The South African Higher Education Landscape in South Africa

This section situates public engagement within the broader development of South African universities. Public sociology is more than an abstract concept. It embodies a concrete, historical relationship among individuals who believe in the power of ordinary people to build a more thoughtful, courageous, and humane society. Universities played a key role in the anti-apartheid struggle, with sociology academics leading anti-establishment efforts through collective resistance to fragmentation.

If any people have access to recent evidence that the fundamental fabric of society is changeable through collective action, surely it is South Africans. Therefore, instead of seeing the current moment as the end of public consciousness by intellectuals, we can recognise firstly that our emancipatory journey has enabled us to be here today to collectively exchange ideas on purpose, meaning and freedom across class, race and generation. History shows that while brittle and under threat, we have a greater hold on the university as a site for the public good than we ever had. The task is to hold on, to build upon, to save – because we have already recovered so much ground from the destructive forces of capitalism and colonialism, which atomised us at a far more desperate degree than the neoliberal challenges we face now. The long view of history and the place of the university in South African society, which follows below, allows us to see that we are moving; we are not stuck in one place, nor are we damned.

4.4.1 The Universities' Relationship with Capitalism from Colonialism to Postcolonialism

The modern university institution in South Africa has, to some extent, always functioned in response to the needs of capitalism. The first universities, following the construction of 'The Union of South Africa' in 1910, were instrumental in creating a united white identity required by the emergent system of racial capitalism, including that of a segregated and market-focused education system. These initial universities were funded by powerful mining magnates and served in part to create a professional and skilled white labour force for managing these operations as well as the colonial administration of the country. According to Magubane (2005: 46), the social role of the early universities "was almost entirely dictated by the needs of the mining industry." The university structure in South Africa also originated as an outpost for British Higher Education and served as an indispensable tool for the intended anglicisation of the Africans, whom the colonial system was dispossessing of both their land and their consequent right to self-determination (Soudien 2015).

Regrettably, there are not many broad-based historiographies of the South African university system. Many of the available histories are institution-specific and tend to be celebratory biographies rather than critical and political histories (Agbedahin and Agbedahin 2019). The South African university's complex functioning as both an institution of higher learning and a guarantor of exclusion – its "perverse ambivalence "– was unlikely a predetermined master plan come to fruition. Rather, it was a product of the social processes of its time but one which was nonetheless unambiguously racist (Soudien 2015; 2020). South Africa's modern universities emerged under white colonial rule and are among the oldest secular institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. Their origins trace back to 1873 with the establishment of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, which initially served as an examining body rather than a teaching institution. The first full-fledged teaching universities were the University of Cape Town, which gained university status in 1916, and Stellenbosch University, which followed in 1918

This predates the Afrikaner nationalist Apartheid government, contradicting the popular but ahistorical depiction that segregationist education policies in South Africa are unique to the Apartheid period. However, the Apartheid System did hone the segregationist structures which the British colonial administration first put in place, by deepening the centralised legal and juridical framework for racial exclusion. This included the introduction for instance of the 1959 *Extension of Universities Act* which enforced the ethnicisation of institutions, ensuring that one could only attend a university designated for their specific racial group.

After the unification of the Boer republic with British colonies in 1910, three 'autonomous' universities were formed through the financial patronage of colonial leaders – the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University and the University of South Africa. In this period until the 1940s, there existed a single national student association operating in a predominantly or exclusively white and patriarchal university culture (Nash 2006:3).

Ultimately, both the British colonial administration and Apartheid state shared the ambition for white supremacy in the hegemonic guardianship of South Africa's land, mineral resources and its people. In doing so, it imposed on us "the university in Africa", violently stifling the evolution of indigenous African frameworks of theory and philosophy or the development of "the (South) African university", according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017 :55).

The historically distorted relationship of South African universities to 'place' has significantly influenced their role in public life. For over a century before 1994, South Africa's university curricula and campus cultures reinforced the national identity of distant white imperial powers,

whose centres of authority lay thousands of kilometres away. Where white colonists stationed themselves on African soil, they used education to create seemingly insurmountable blockades to any challenge to their economic power. In this regard, Maylam (2017:30) notes that the Students Representative Council (SRC) at Rhodes University recruited students to fight for Great Britain in World War One, referring to it as "their" country. More broadly, European exceptionalism replaced possible localised conceptions of human justice as ideals of the public university in South Africa from early on in its lifespan. White prosperity stood in place of democratic equality, and it was the desubjectification and objectification of black and African people—not humanisation—which became inherent conditions of the universities' existence. From the start, this distorted sense of the public for whom the university functioned, while not part of a simple or premeditated design, was deeply woven into the fabric of the institutions from their beginning.

Magubane (2005) contends that racial ethnocentrism and capitalist commodification shaped the foundational structure of South Africa's universities.

(i) Racial Ethnocentrism: Universities such as Rhodes, the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) were built in the interests of imperial expansion. Powerful statesmen cum randlords such as Cecil John Rhodes, Alfred and Otto Beit and Lord Milner funded the establishment of the first white English-medium universities to improve the status and skill-sets of white men to strengthen the colonial administration of South Africa's resources. When asked where money to fund buildings at UCT would come from, Cecil John Rhodes proclaimed, "out of the Kaffir stomachs" (Magubane 2005: 47). According to Magubane (2005:47), "the founders of these universities had absolute contempt for Africans "… [T]he universities were built on black blood, sweat and tears, but they were not places where Africans would ever be welcomed". Historical revisionism often masks the complicity of English universities in advancing racial ethnocentrism. The English-medium white universities were regarded as liberal 'open universities' compared to their Afrikaner counterparts, as they permitted the enrolment of Black South Africans under exceptional circumstances. However, this openness was largely superficial, as most extracurricular activities, student accommodation, and social life remained segregated by race (Maylam 2015).

(ii) Commodification: In fact, against their claim of liberal exceptionalism, South Africa's liberal English universities were not built to be torchbearers of democracy. The role of the university was not to improve upon all of society or develop critical thought amongst all

citizens but was "almost entirely dictated by the needs of the mining industry" in Johannesburg and the Transvaal (Magubane 2005:46). As Magubane (2005:49) explains, blacks were largely excluded from the university system and instead subjected to a strictly limited formal education, particularly black men, who were destined for manual labour as commodified workers in British mines.

Cecil John Rhodes in an 1894 speech described the impact of high-flying academic ideas on black men as "turning out a dangerous class …. [T]hese Kaffir parsons would develop into agitators against the Government" (Verschoyle 1900: 382; cited in Magubane 2005: 48). In this context, a warped duty to the public good and corporatisation of the university are not merely conditioning factors in and specific to the neoliberal era in South Africa but are in many ways the origin story for South Africa's universities.

Existing outside of the historically white universities (HWUs) were the historically black universities (HBUs). University of Fort Hare, founded in 1916, holds the esteem of being the only university for decades to offer university education to black Africans (broadly defined) from across the continent. Other ethnicised institutions were formed after the passing of the Extension of Universities Act in 1959 such as the University of Durban-Westville exclusively for South African Indians, the University of the Western Cape exclusively for coloureds, as well as the University of Zululand and the University of Transkei amongst others. Nelson Mandela (1957) in a critical essay opposing The Separate University Education Bill prophesied that black, ethnicised institutions

> [W]ill bear no resemblance whatsoever to modern universities. Not free enquiry but indoctrination is their purpose, and the education they will give will not be directed towards the unleashing of the creative potentialities of the people but towards preparing them for perpetual mental and spiritual servitude to the whites.

The South African university, both in its white and black iterations, was never formed to satisfy the intellectual consciousness or pursue justice for of all society, that is, their inaugural logic was not to pursue public equity, redress, social justice and civic responsibility. Specific trajectories of critical education for social justice did crystalise at times at these institutions, but as exceptions to the logic of division and difference that these institutions were intended to foster. In the beginnings of both the black and white universities, the goals of universities as determined by statist authority were about maintaining economic superiority and inferiority, and about racial status-formation and segregation. Our universities from their passage of birth

up until they faced the challenge of democratic massification post-1994, observed not the eternal mission of criticality and humanity as their key calling but rather the production of academic identities and work in such a way that eroded social unity, and the space for emancipatory public intellectualism.

Historically, English-medium white universities have been more liberal and non-racial, often positioned as being 'on the right side of history' compared to their white Afrikaans counterparts. However, the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) and Fees Must Fall (FMF) protests in 2015-2016 first erupted at these very institutions, revealing them to be incubators of racist practices steeped in a history of Anglo-Dutch cooperation and allied goals. According to Pithouse (2015, par.11):

> These campaigns decisively transcended the tendency to reduce colonialism to apartheid, and the figure of the racist to a caricature of the Afrikaner. The confrontation with Rhodes tackles English colonialism, and English liberalism – which is both constitutively racist and the unofficial ideology of both the University of Cape Town and Rhodes University – head on.

The RMF and FMF uprising was the largest in South Africa since the end of Apartheid, manifesting in the heat of the moment as head on battles between young students and state police on campuses. Rhetorical and physical clashes took place between the ruling ANC party and young students who no longer celebrated the ANC's liberation history which had been indelibly marred in their young lifetimes by state corruption under the party's rule. And of course, conflicts arose between students and the 'professional left', many of whom were once themselves student activists but now occupied permanent middle-class employment as academics or management at universities.

At historically white universities, students dissented against the lack of political will by public institutions and the state to address the pervasive and unrelenting Eurocentrism embedded in national educational systems and reflected in their celebrated symbols and curricula. Badat (2015) emphasises that the politics of race, which initially defined the protests, were inextricably linked to the neoliberal-configured ideological and economic dimensions of the crises. These connections ultimately led to class-related struggles becoming the most enduring aspect of the student movements in the form of 'Fees Must Fall' protests, beginning seven months after the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement. The student movements compelled us to confront the fresh wounds that our collective past, alive in the present, is still able to inflict

on our youth. Though their direct action was crushed by state and institutional forces, the ideas they advanced still define the ongoing 'organic crises' in South African higher education.

The student movement was pluralistic and fluid, as "the children of the post -1994 transition" evolved their "own lineages of freedom"; they rejected 'rainbowism', whiteness, patriarchy – and neoliberalism (Booysen 2016:41, 301). Students bandied around directly anti-neoliberal slogans confronting the state which had long tried to seduce society with placebos of radical rhetoric while cutting educational spending. The chronic underfunding of South African higher education by the post-Apartheid government could no longer be ignored. It had forced universities to increase fees thus burdening poor black families with crippling debt; it put universities under severe budgetary pressure, forcing them to rely increasingly on third- stream private funding sources; and it led universities to institute neoliberal labour regimes in line with government's 'fiscal reprioritisation' including the outsourcing of workers, thus disproportionately affecting the economic security of blacks and women and entrenching racial inequalities vis-à-vis the poverty trap in university and society.

Despite the variable intensity across institutions, neoliberalism in South Africa has made academics in relation to the past even more beholden to the logic of capitalism. The historical division between South African society and the university along lines of race, class and gender is reproduced in new ways in the neoliberal period. In the past, South African academics were insulated from the public largely through the colonial-settlers' racist engineering of the education system. Consistent with this history, today's academic community at large has not pursued the path and spirit of a "transformative becoming for both student and university worker" which defined much of the logic of the anti-Apartheid struggles based at universities (Troiani and Dutson 2021:5; see also Vale and Jacklin 2009). Instead, the commodification of knowledge, the fast scholarship that this breeds and the corporatist micro- management of productivity have removed academics from the broad social reality around them and created an absence of deep reflection on what they are doing and for whom. Stewart (2007:141) thus declares that South African academics are "swapping one alienation for another". The following discussion represents a situation as one, contra Stewart (2007), where historical and present forms of alienation are not swapped out for one another but are imbricated.

4.4.2 Dilemmas of The Post-1994 Period

Neoliberalism actively shapes and intertwines with the enduring colonial context that informs academic identity today. This magnifies the transitional moment from Apartheid to democracy and how it has shaped our understanding of the gains and losses of academic democracy in South Africa, particularly as relates to the shifting consciousness of academics understood as the reduced inclination to believe 'another world is possible', and how this impacts Sociology.

4.4.2.1 Illusory academic democracy and the struggle of black academics

Like much of the world, South Africa has seen its universities transition from exclusive, elite institutions to ones characterised by broadened access and democratic massification. The statistics indicate that a remarkable transformation has occurred in education, at a quantitative level. In 1948, when the Apartheid government came into being, there were only 950 black students (broadly defined). In 1994, the higher education institution had approximately 420,000 students, and in 2021 there were over 1 million students of which 947,470 are black students (Soudien 2020:112; Council of Higher Education 2023).

If the transformation of education was solely an issue of quantitative metrics, we can claim to have achieved unprecedented transformational victories. But alas, the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree shift in the mandate of the university from segregationist to inclusive conceals a much messier reality on the ground. State disinvestment in higher education, both politically and economically, has created significant imbalances between societal demands and the ability of institutions to effectively meet them (Maasen and Cloete 2004: 13).

Government austerity maintains conditions of high attrition and low participation particularly amongst black students. In 2020, the overall participation rate at tertiary institutions in South Africa was only 27.2% % compared with 58.4% in China (Khuluvhe and Ganyaupfu 2023). Only 12% of South Africans aged twenty and above were in possession of a university degree in 2022 (Jack 2023). Of those who can access higher education, very few students graduate, with South Africa having one of the lowest graduation rates in the world (Letseka and Maile 2008). The lack of academic readiness, and development and support for students once inside universities, is linked to decreased public investment in education, and state planning for education. Alongside the recalcitrance of universities in changing their curriculum and languages to accommodate an African society, these conditions have hamstrung the hopes of a new generation. The untransformed socio-economic reality of black youth still leaves academic

and intellectual citizenship largely outside of their grasp despite the Africanisation of headcount enrolment. While the constitutive beginnings of the South African university cannot be understood outside of the concept of 'race', today the exclusion of youth from the university, and the production of critical democratic citizenry once inside, are becoming more significantly defined by class, because the university in South Africa has transformed from "the ivory tower to the marketplace" (Soudien 2015, Vally 2007a : 21).

There has been improved diversification of academic staff since 1994, such that South African black academic staff in 2022 constituted 62% of all academic staff (Mouton *et al.* 2024:2). However, like the numerical transformation with regards to students, the influx of Black, Coloured and Indian academics conceals the most recalcitrant aspects of economic and cultural domination in the academic system. In the universities, senior academic and research positions are still overwhelmingly dominated by white academics, outnumbering all other groups at the professorial and associate professorial rungs, and just slightly below half of all senior lecturer positions (Maphalala *et al.* 2022). At the level of executive senior management, black Africans make up only 37% of executive positions (James 2023). According to Hlatswayo (2024), in 2018 a staggering 78% of African academics in higher education were confined to lecturer positions or lower, a situation compounded by institutional alienation, and a sense of non-belonging, all of which are exacerbated by inadequate institutional support. In the important anthology by Khunuo *et al.* (2019), the extent of institutional alienation which black women especially experience in historically white institutions is detailed by personal accounts, involving their constant struggle for legitimacy within a social system which routinely "presumes their incompetence" (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012). As if it is not enough that black women constitute the academic precariat, by virtue of being women they are also constructed as reproductive labourers within the university space. Overburdened with their core duties of teaching and research, simultaneously they perform care work in their support of struggling students and peers. This reproductive labour is invisibilised and unremunerated thus further naturalising the racial-gendered division of labour on which the exploitative modern world system has historically pivoted (Magoqwana *et al.* 2019; Mies 2014). Its entanglement with capitalism continues to impede the university's ability to yield its own ideals of progress.

4.4.2.2 Neoliberalism and neo colonialism in higher education

South Africa's shift to neoliberalism is formally marked in 1996 by the replacement of the state's macro-policy called the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), a redistributive

framework, by neoliberal state policies. In part, this reflects the political compromise of the African National Congress (ANC), which is widely referred to as an 'implicit bargain', 'negotiated settlement' or 'miracle transition.' This so-called peaceful transition was marked by the bargain struck by President De Klerck and Nelson Mandela and set in motion the consequent retreat of the ANC from principles of popular democracy, and the embrace of liberal reformism. As it changed its political profile from one of critical opposition under Apartheid to one of rule, the ANC made compromises with the existing system of white capitalism. The shift from the ANC's critiquing of state power, to its policy rationalisation as the holder of state power, foisted upon South African society a hazy post-independence dawn. The front-stage ululation that rippled across South Africa, as citizens exalted in the hope of impending redress, was muffled by the din behind the scenes, where the ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter was being substituted for compliance with Bretton Woods dictates. Though the ANC state would continue to maintain the liberatory rhetoric that had characterised its ascension through political struggle to victory, the new South Africa would only conceive of development in terms of economic growth and the logic of the market, in order to establish its status as an African leader by the rules of the global game set by former colonial powers (Badat 2009).

This is not a unique phenomenon. Mamdani (1996:21) warns of the postcolonial quicksand where technical reconciliation with intrusive Euro-modernist power structures routinely undermines localised conceptions of political priority for nations in the global South. Thus, neo-colonialism is not only defined by the replacement of economic self-sufficiency and policy self-determination through reassertions of Western control but also by the associated assault on self-valuation and identity formation of societies seeking rebirth: "The adoption of practices and procedures that favour neoliberal governmentality [did so] at the expense of core ethical African values and the development of a strong African identity" (Koopman 2019: 56).

The thwarted formation of Indigenous governance values, critical citizenship and homegrown epistemologies are driven in the neoliberal era, for instance, by the shutting down of entire programmes (usually in the Humanities) and whole departments (typically in historically black institutions) because they are deemed unprofitable within the neoliberal schema (Vally 2007a:20). After 1994, many Sociology departments faced this fate, with institutions completely disbanding them or reassembling them into more market-friendly programmes, and redeploying sociology academics (Adesina 2006: 247; Webster 2017:1). The 'coloniality of

knowledge' at a continental level, including in South Africa, can be further detected through the publish or perish culture which has cemented academic dependency of the global South on the West, resulting for example in:

> [W]eak [local] publishing industries, including a lack of distribution hubs and an intra-Africa book trade, curricula, pedagogy, and learning processes that are still rooted in the colonial situation and the absence of a [local and continental] scholarship culture (Kigotho 2021, par.1).

Tamale (2020:51) and Adomako Ampofo (2010:30), writing from their perspective as African feminist scholars, discuss the pressures that African scholars routinely feel to squeeze their thinking into recognisable Western theoretic frameworks for fear that their work may lose legitimacy and visibility if they were not to meet the formal and informal gatekeepers' rules of publishing houses.

In the pressure keg of capitalism, universities in South Africa have become motivated primarily by their urge to participate in the international market for publications and funding, leaving little room for resources, never mind an ethos, with which to humanise a moral commitment to the concrete contexts of local society – be that the economic (and mental) wellbeing and throughput of students or, more ambitiously, contact with broader counter publics. The allowance of these impositions has taken place via a cautious and quiet surrender by the academic community to new forms of colonial-capitalist deterritorialisation. Andrew Nash thus argues (2006:9) that.

> [i]n a context in which the academic marketplace is dominated by a handful of wealthy countries, the capitalist model of the university is at the same time a model for the colonisation of academic life.

Neoliberalism's impacts on higher education can be divided into those that affect all academics and institutions and those that specifically disadvantage black academics, black women academics, and historically black universities (HBUs). The neo-colonisation of academic life occurs unevenly across institutions, with its effects shaped by the distinct structural legacies of historically black and white institutions. At HBUs, the impacts of neoliberalism are particularly severe, often both exacerbating and being shaped by existing inequalities. In this way, the market-driven logic of neoliberal universities not only reproduces inequality and widens the

gap between the university and society by undermining public engagement, but also reinforces disparities between institutions.

As universities compete for limited resources and their spots on the ranking systems, they are driven to operate like "individual businesses competing for market share" (McKenna 2024:3). In this game, historically black universities do not have the social and financial capital to contend in the market for third stream income. Meanwhile, albeit unevenly, their white counterparts can tap into their expansive and lucrative reserves built up over decades and centuries of donor communities and private partnerships to access such funding (Hlatswayo 2022). In addition, the global ranking systems do not recognise intellectual output in languages that are not English, disadvantaging black universities and the meaningful cultural and epistemic transformation of the colonial South African university system, which is most likely to stem from these institutions. South African universities are further influenced by austerity capitalism and neoliberal rationalisation of budgets which has hampered the development of African education systems. This entails the imposition of unhealthy pedagogic environments through ballooning student-staff ratios, the precarisation of academic workers; and the adherence to Western quantitative metrics for measuring institutions and intellectual work, which crowds out public engagement as a significant activity (McKenna 2024; Watermeyer 2016). These impacts have invaded South African universities and mark their continued subservience to the self-interests of the West.

4.4.2.3 Neoliberalism distilled at the level of 'being and consciousness' for academics

Khader Asmal, Minister of Higher Education (1999–2004), captures the complexity of identifying higher education challenges in the post-1994 era through the resonant words of poet Bertolt Brecht. Quoted in Sheehan (2009: 11), he reflects: 'When the difficulty of the mountains is once behind, that's when you'll see the difficulty of the plains will start.'

After the dissolution of discriminatory laws, overt and formal institutions of oppression were officially neutralised: that is, the "difficulty of the mountains" was behind us. Enduring continuities with the past, alongside new and evolving systems of hierarchy, constitute "the plains before us" – a daunting topography of near totalising capitalism in the twenty-first century.

On these plains have emerged beacons of evident successes and pronounced failures. Much has been written about the policies and institutions which frame the post-1994 period. However,

neoliberalism is not only a network of policy injunctions between the state and economy. What is of interest to this thesis are not simply the evident beacons jutting out upon the higher education landscape but, rather, those concerns which remain camouflaged within the undulating, and non-descript unfolding of the plains themselves.

There is a social mentality, a sense of relation to self, others and the world, which neoliberal orthodoxy has distilled at the subjective level. These vast and ineffable plains stretch through us and between us as values and rationalities for what it means to 'be' as human in society and 'thinker' within the academy. This manifestation of neoliberalism at the non-discursive level can be understood as a new kind of metanarrative, a way of being and thinking about self and others. According to Kaščák and Pupala (2011:149-150):

> The neoliberal metanarrative thus represents a totality of a variety of discursive and non-discursive practices, which often operate disparately, subliminally and diversely. It is not a homogenous ideology, but rather a number of heterogeneous discourses and measures, which ultimately converge and strengthen one another.

Consideration of neoliberalism's manifestation at the psycho-social level includes wonderment about the nature of consciousness which neoliberalism is nurturing within the collective imaginary of academics as they operate, communicate, and identify within the habitus of the academy. A concern about neoliberal consciousness, subjectivity and the 'mental frame' asks how our subtle, everyday sensibility around what life stands for in capitalism, becomes communicated through our academic identities. Specifically, it reflects on how the logic of neoliberal private interest reshapes the imagination of public intellectualism as a core ideal for academics.

Being and consciousness are fundamental for appreciating the effects of neoliberalism's attrition of the intrinsic value of humanities knowledge (for the public). Lynch (2013) argues that the issue is not just neoliberalism or rankings but also the subjective worldview it promotes. This worldview crowds out other values, suppressing trust, integrity, care, and solidarity, which become merely incidental to human relationships. Meanwhile, regulation, individualism, and competition become the dim lights by which we navigate our relationships as academics and human beings. Without some social consensus on the public value of our actions, we are adrift in finding ourselves as sociologists. This is critical in the arts and humanities, where scholars are uninspired and unincentivised by the prospects of involvement in movement building. In this light, Stewart (2007: 132) regards South African academics in

the current context as "passive and reactive, rather than engaged and creative". Our apathy is hastening the deterioration of the public into a single unitary production-consumption sphere.

For instance, in South Africa, the National Research Foundation (NRF) rates scholars' success entirely in terms of individual output of peer-reviewed publications in the state's predetermined lists of accredited journals. This approach occludes teaching, community outreach, and publication on popular platforms from conventional understandings of what academics should be doing well. Little rationale has been provided for the formal institution of money-bearing variables as the basis for attributing intellectual status (Moosa 2024: 26-31). And yet, the exclusively marketised valuation of intellectual life appears to have gone largely unchallenged and suggests we may have arrived at a moment which Vally (2007a: 18) warned against, where the language of the market becomes so normalised that it "kills off conscience" and "demonises social responsibility."

This entails a consideration of how changes in the broader environment have affected the academic community at the level of being and consciousness. I argue that before 1994, academics were more inclined to actively pursue radical alternatives in the public realm, an orientation which has weakened despite the progress (though slow and limited) in reducing racial, patriarchal, and Western dominance in South African universities after 1994.

The present lack of consciousness amongst academics of the contradictions which undermine their meaning for society, has led to uninterrogated participation in a system which is deteriorating the public sphere with a vengeance. A search for vocabularies by which to pursue and describe the possibilities imminent in public intellectualism is paramount, for creating the changes necessary for the dialectical sublation of neoliberal intellectualism and to let the light of possibility resurface.

In South Africa, the moral pathos of academic public intellectualism is not formless. We have a history to draw from to create vocabularies of changes. Public intellectual engagement emerged as a powerful and disruptive force against Apartheid, particularly through popular education. The politicisation of educational processes directly challenged Apartheid's controls and methodologies, which Motala and Vally (2002:175) describe as "the Achilles heel of the apartheid state," revealing its vulnerability to resistance. While recognising that neoliberalism has fundamentally altered the educational landscape, Cooper *et al.* (2002:129) reflect on the enduring power of memory:

> These traditions have left their own "traces in the sand" which still inspire some of those active in the field of worker education today, and which will continue to present a rich resource with which to build an alternative vision of the role of education and learning in future.

The popular movement of 'People's Education for People's Power' in the 1980s and 1990s represented a manifestation of alternative 'being' and 'consciousness' which privileged 'becoming human' as the mindset which connected radical pedagogists and activists. While concentrated at the level of basic and adult education, universities were also sites of infusion, with the University of the Western Cape aligning itself in this tradition as 'A Peoples University' (Anderson 2002).

The consciousness-raising around People's Education was heavily influenced by Brazilian philosopher Freire's issuance that "the ontological vocation of the human being is to become more human" (2000:55), as contained within the widely circulated but banned text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2000) during Apartheid. For Freire, 'critical consciousness' or "conscientização" (a Portuguese verb) was the fundamental point of public education, that is, to instil in human beings not the acceptance of rules, but the self-determination to know why the rules exist and how to actively change them. The social movements against Apartheid routinely engaged with alternative education and alternative notions of the role of the intellectual in society incorporating amongst others Freirian thought, Black consciousness, neo-Marxist, and indigenous theory in South Africa.

'People's Education' was instrumental in the scholar-activism of the 1980s and 1990s which sought to link education with political struggle predominantly at the levels of basic and adult education as well as people's and workers' education (Vally 2007b). It was the latter domain of people's and workers' education that attracted the greatest involvement and solidarity from sociologists. Workers' education was a participatory process often drawing on collaboration between trade union leaders, community-based organisations, and the university. Academics sought to enable collectivist social arrangements and resources for mass action, alongside history and politics education that focused on the international working class. These initiatives occurred in conjunction with worker self-education. Academics were not the ones to spearhead the labour movement against Apartheid but, as it gained momentum, they joined the popular mobilisation, playing key roles as activists and allies.

According to Motala and Vally (2002: 174), "People's Education was defined variously as an educational movement, a vehicle for political mobilisation, an alternative philosophy of education, or as a combination of all three." In this context, Mathebula (2013: 5) highlights groundswells against the Bantu Education system, which sought to force upon black South Africans an education that would only enable them to do service work for whites. In the 1950s, this elicited a conception of intellectual liberation as the forerunner to People's Education in the 1980s and 1990s. Cloete (2004: 56) adds that the most intensive standoffs between the police and students and staff on university campuses were at historically black universities. However, despite significant institutional differences, the broader narrative of the higher education sector during this period is one of liberatory courage, allied critical scholarship, and public engagement:

> From the middle of the 1980s to 1993, higher education protests and disturbances were virtually a weekly occurrence as campuses became 'sites of struggle' for the various anti-apartheid organisations. In certain cases, the resistance was spontaneous, but mostly it was organised by one of the many anti-apartheid education organisations active on the campuses. The most prominent ones were the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC), the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (Udusa), and the National Union of Health and Allied workers (Nehawu) (Cloete et al. 2004:56).

In the late 1980s with mass action by scholars, students and workers in the education sphere, and workers' and community-based organisations at their historical peak, the ANC was already in negotiation with the Apartheid state. In the end, this led to the historic compromise between democracy and capitalism that would set the stage for ANC's surrender of its pro-poor and radical intellectual factions. The nature of the political and economic transition in South Africa, and the muting impact it had on social movements, alternative conceptions of being and consciousness on the ground, was convergent with the global experience of post-independence African nations, where freedom has been reconfigured as subjection to the planetary expansion of economic globalisation and neoliberalism.

During the Apartheid 'struggle years,' scholar-activists engaged in impassioned public action, posing a significant threat to power, as seen in the severe repression they faced—detention without trial, police violence, and even assassination by security forces. However, the shift to the new democratic regime, driven by an 'implicit bargain', impacted the intensity and nature

of grassroots movements. After 1994, for example, labour leaders increasingly sought partnerships with management and government, gradually adopting the logic of the status quo rather than continuing the fight for alternative systems.

One example set out by Vally (2007b) is that, after 1994, worker education in trade unions was widely reinterpreted as certification processes for career development and not for struggle. The professional institutionalisation of worker leadership doused radical political fire and praxis within the movements, but also granted vocational security, making them less reliant on the representational capacity of academics (Buhlungu 2009:150). This freed workers from reliance on the cohort of mainly white male academics who are believed to have found synchronicity with the workers' movements, in part because it affirmed their Western Marxist ideas, thereby allowing them to participate in meaningful emancipatory praxis without engaging directly with questions of race and power (Helliker and Vale 2012: 338).

The discernible withdrawal of the scholar ally community from political activism following democracy is therefore in part an expression of the demographic make-up of the academic community in that period and the inadaptability of white, male scholars in perceiving new forms of emancipatory theory and politics in ways which did not side-line the organic emergence of the new vocabularies and subjectivities of politics. In other words, they were seemingly unable to re-imagine continuous forms of engagement as the landscape changed, with workers becoming more professionalised and independent.

Nonetheless, assimilation into the new democratic system for many labour activists and academics alike was embraced as an opportunity for individual success, in the new globalising South Africa. Russel Jacoby (1987) reflects on a similar occurrence in the US where utopian activists and counter-culture organisers of the 1960s and 1970s that later became academics, assimilated into a mind-set and way of life against which the counter-public was sacrificed for peer-recognition and disciplinarity specialisation. This disillusioned left-leaning radicals in the US, observed this phenomenon

> …[A]s if, after the great explosion of theoretical creativity of the 1970s and 1980s, we had entered into a zombified landscape of repetition without difference and lingering melancholia (Braidotti 2013:5).

A similar anxiety about the future of radical critique in the new democracy beset intellectuals in South Africa (Sitas 1997). For Mamdani (2016), the shifting and reconsolidation of

boundaries between "public intellectualism" which seeks to disrupt, and the insular aspirations of "the scholar" tends to be particularly jarring for those witnessing the shift in the post-independence contexts of the global South where the very same liberation activists who fought against the old status quo are absorbed into positions of elite bureaucracy in which they defend the new operation of power.

The decline of activism from within academia is arguably a part of a broader demise of social movement activity under neoliberalism which encompasses educational and non-educational spheres of activism. In the 1990s, we witnessed groundswells against power structures through the brief rise of movements like Abahlali base Mjondolo, the Antiprivatisation Forum and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in post-Apartheid South Africa, which are contemporaneous with influential global movements such as the Zapatista autonomous communities in Mexico and the alter-globalisation movements in the United States. But social movement activity has retreated since then.

Presently, it is harder to find evident sites of hopefulness which exemplify the human reach beyond the weight of capitalist enclosure all around us. Spaces of education which focus on the development of critical thinking, social theory, and critical action for social change like Sociology surely bears a particular responsibility in confronting this reality in this age of complexity 'at the end of history', where capitalism's naturalisation as a global system is unprecedented (Fukuyama 2006).

Prew (2012) attributes the post-1994 failure to achieve a progressive new world and dismantle the colonial capitalist education system in South Africa to two conditions. One was the neoliberal hegemony, which made prioritising public engagement nearly impossible; and the other was the ANC's invalidation of alternative ideas once it came into power. Before 1994, there was the widespread belief that education would play an important role in the new democracy. Of course, "higher education cannot transform society but, equally, society cannot be transformed without higher education, which is a critical terrain for struggles related to reproduction, reform and revolution" (Badat 2020:26).

The role of education in reproducing societal structures was reinforced, while its potential as a tool for revolution was sidelined under the growing influence of neoliberalism. Vale and Jacklin (2009: 4) argue that, from its inception as state policy, neoliberalism narrowed the public sphere, marginalising critical thinkers and public intellectuals. At the level of political consciousness, the lived experiences of ordinary people and the collective vision of counter-

publics working toward an emancipated world faded as priorities shifted toward navigating success within the "new" South Africa.

The powerful irony is that radical thinking against the state and capitalism was retreating from the moment the new universities opened the doors of education to all. Higher education almost instantly began imputing the American model, moving away from the established British and German systems and, most notably, even further from the possibility of forming African-centred models of higher education. The American model centred bureaucratisation, standardisation, and marketisation. Academics working in the post-1994 South African tertiary sector navigated the dual process of democratisation and neoliberal assimilation, reflecting the uneasy balance of forces in this tension. The demise of critical consciousness prioritised specialisation and self-advancement as social codes. This has quietly reconfigured the university in the image of the neoliberal public: atomised, self-serving, and acquisition oriented.

Ironically, in the humanities and social sciences, this acquisition of individual academic capital is routinely based in the trade of radical ideas on social change and revolution. Knowledge on 'becoming more human' and revolt against the status quo is peculiarly woven into the current academic system as a commodity. But within this perversity, there remains the intellectuals' authorial power, though it be masked and constrained, as a voice from which utterances can yet be made for giving valence to the idea that radical forms of praxis are needed to make of Sociology something that academics do not gain from alone. After all, as Marx (1998:36) taught us, we are "not combating the real existing world when we are merely combating the phrases of this world".

4.5 Post-1994 And Professionalisation Of the Sociology Discipline

South African sociologists stood on the ledge of the 'real world' in the fight against Apartheid. Ironically, as indicated, it was before 1994 that the promise of an alternative, publicly oriented Sociology was most notably vibrant, particularly in the 1980s when the political demands of the day inspired academic sociologists to organise from below against the State. Scholars from across disciplines participated in insurrections against Apartheid but "it was the discipline of Sociology that left the most indelible mark on how scholars engaged with members of the public and their collective organisations" (Buhlungu 2009:148). According to Burawoy (2005a:11) when he first visited South Africa, "everywhere there were sociologists [and other

academics] acting as organic intellectuals of the home-grown liberation movements". Sociologists were an active part of creating a future pact between education and society, one which never materialised.

Sociology has always encompassed diverse perspectives but, in the 1970s and 1980s, Marxist-inspired sociologists played a key role in shaping a 'hybrid sociology,' which would engage with social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and labour unions through activities such as writing prolifically for the public and engaging in direct action (Adesina 2006:44; Webster 2004: 29-30). This marked a significant shift from Sociology's establishment in the 1950s, when it largely served dominant power structures, particularly during the era of legal segregation in higher education (Buhlungu 2009: 146; Webster 2004). The mainly white, and male public sociology of the 1980s activism, however, was rapidly demobilised in the aftermath of democracy. Helliker (2005) asks, "With the end of apartheid and the intensity of the struggle against it have the sociological imagination and the critical passion also gone?"

It seems that in the years following 1994, the subsequent infusion of black and feminist thought, and the arrival of radical black thinkers in Sociology, has not culminated in a culture of public intellectualism. The demands of self-preservation within the current context of the neoliberal academy may be too consuming for intellectuals to conceive of the space available for public activism. New and old sociologists are now existing so deeply within the illusio of neoliberalism that the boundaries separating its internal logic from that which exists beyond are too far to see, let alone believe exists. New emancipatory theory in the form of decolonial and indigenous critique are unfolding from within these academic communities enraptured by the neoliberal fatalism that enfolds higher education, defined by "the withering presence of academics in public life" replaced by an "obsession with journal publication" (Dallyn *et al.* 2015: 3-4).

Today, Sociology faces the immediate manifestations of neoliberalism and the effects of its legacy which over the last three decades has intensified the professionalisation of intellectual practice. Professionalisation is singled out as a process, which accentuates that while academic restructuring may be informed from above, it is ultimately through subjective peer interaction and collegial culture that role prescriptions are most deeply embedded (Bourdieu 1988; Becher and Trowler 2001). Durkheim (1964) distinguishes professionals as a distinctive social group on the basis that their behaviours are not primarily determined outside the group but are intensively influenced by the norms and rules shared amongst peers. The

practice of peer-policing, for instance, highlights a trait common to all diverse definitions of the intellectual namely, they are self-designated:

> By members of the same rare species, they seek to define. Hence every definition proposed is an attempt to draw a boundary of their own identity. Each boundary splits the territory into two sides: here and there, in and out, us and them. Each self-definition is in the end a pronouncement of an opposition marked by the presence of a distinction on one side of the boundary and its absence on the other (Bauman 1987: 8).

Through peer interactions, policing and culture, academics define intellectual life today by the rules of the game of the university. Edward Said (1994:18-19), in *Representations of the Intellectual*, positions professionalisation as the primary cause of the decline of public intellectualism, arguing that it erodes the qualities highlighted earlier – 'exilic consciousness,' 'amateurism,' and the ability to 'speak truth to power'. In contemporary South Africa, radical intellectuals, in the vein defined by Said, have "grappled to find 'a home' (at least outside the state and academia)" (Helliker and Vale 2012: 340).

Given the widespread assertions in the literature that academics everywhere are being pushed ever further into the "cul-de-sac of peer-induced conformity" (Dallyn *et al.* 2015: 1034; Olivier *et al.* 2005; Stewart 2007; van Vuuren 2024), it is reasonable to conclude that the critical public engagement which South African sociologists displayed in the liberation movement, and what this orientation to sociology promised for the postcolonial future, faces the threat of disappearance.

Across departments of sociology in South Africa, the obsession with "continuously increasing performance – measurable in ultimately economic terms, imposing a new auditable discipline, and quickening pace of learning, thinking and working" (Troiani and Dutson 2021: 5) – has muted not only what the discipline ought to do, but still can do. According to Adesina (2006:241), we as sociologists must "recover our nerve" in taking ourselves and our locales more seriously. Webster (2004:27) suggests one way of doing this is to boldly draw connections with the struggle of the discipline to restore its voice and the "broader offensive against active society" unfolding across the planet. As the Heraclitan phrase '*panta rei*' suggests, everything is in flux, and the evolving technologies of resistance and power offer ever-new possibilities for reviving public intellectualism (Buhlungu 2009: 160). The renewal

of insurrectional praxis is essential not only for the public thriving of the discipline but also for the very citizenship of Sociology (Waghid and Davids 2022: 2).

When we think of moving Sociology into a fuller version of itself in ways that challenge knowledge commercialisation and self-promotion as dominant motives, we are talking about interventions involving extra-academic 'audiences' and 'action'. Some make the mistake of conflating 'critical sociology' with 'public sociology'. For instance, Khoo (2021) loosely refers to decoloniality as public sociology because it speaks to publicly relevant issues. She prematurely claims that decolonial revisions "engage with co-constitutive thinking with publics, not just *about* them" (Khoo 2021: 706). Public sociology, however, goes beyond academics addressing public issues, which is already routine in sociology.

The problem, as discussed earlier, is that decolonial theory has not answered the call to public sociology in South Africa despite its radicalism as a site of epistemological renewal, and it remains confined to high-barrier publication networks, competitive scholarship and institutionalised dialogue. Any public sociology, global or local, especially that which carries messages of anti-colonial reconstruction, will necessarily entail foregoing strict disciplinary thinking, ironically, so that the academic position becomes one that is open and receptive to change as it joins existing cultures of activism with non-academics, where the academic is one amongst many agents involved in public intellectualism, not the crucible for it.

4.6 Conclusion

Chapter Four has dissected the meaning of the progressive arm of the dialectical contradiction by contextualising it historically within the development of the South African university, with a focus on the discipline of Sociology. The chapter begins by defining public engagement through the lens of the subfield of 'public sociology', the critiques it wages, and the critiques waged against it. A defence of the normative call to public intellectualism follows, highlighting the tradition that broadly encompasses public sociology and its prescribed engagement practices.

Finally, the aspiration of public engagement is weighed against a critical view of the development of South Africa's universities from the era of colonisation, Apartheid and then democracy – asking how we can understand the difficulty of bolstering public engagement today by understanding the historical conditions of the university, but also where we can see

elements of hope in our transition from our repressive past for the building of new trajectories of practice today.

The chapter supports a dialectic interpretation of the careerist-insularity and critical public engagement contradiction in three main ways. Firstly, the particular elementary contradiction abstracted in the first journey– individualist careerism-critical public engagement – is shown to be internally interconnected with multiple conditioning phenomena. These include the neoliberal structuring of modern society, how this is reflected in the South African national context and, furthermore, how it plays out at the level of the specific discipline of Sociology.

Secondly, the chapter illustrates the dialectical unity between the primary contradiction and the concrete whole in which it exists and which it animates. Focusing on the 'progressive' aspect of the contradiction illustrates that public engagement and its tension with normative practice is reflective of broader tensions between society and the internalised norms of neoliberalism.

Thirdly, it highlights that the future for public sociology will be a dynamic one. While perceiving contradictions in terms of internally entangled opposites may seem simplistic, dialectical understanding tells us "that the futures imagined in the present are never linear or one directional, instead they are complex, messy and contradictory" (Ahlqvist 2022:1) . Public sociology "negates, makes manifest and completes [the dominant pole of the contradiction], by expressing its one-sidedness" and thus shows us that contradictions are "not a locked situation but rather can be understood as possibility for transformation" (Ahlqvist 2022:3).

In South Africa, whether as an academic or student, we share a collective history in a continuum marked not only by pain and oppression, but also by courage, political creativity, bravery and action. We are bearers of many successes in regaining humane and emancipatory ground from that which would otherwise destroy our humanity. The 2015-2016 student movements indicated that the tendency for academic activism lives on. Africanising, decolonising and democratising are all ways of bringing the university and the academic community closer to South African society. But we must go further than this, to open up these critical discourses on the inside, to society and to action more widely.

Though rare and unlikely under neoliberalism, critical public engagement remains possible. We see its potential as an incendiary force in those instances where Sociology departments are actively targeted and silenced around the globe for what they may offer in terms of critical consciousness, such as the multiple closures of sociology programmes by

Republicans in the United States (Hartocollis 2024), as well as those manifest instances where Sociology inspires social mobilisations such as the anti-state protests in Bangladesh led by a student of Sociology (Paul and Das 2024).

History shows these emancipatory moments last only temporarily, are concentrated locally and produce just piecemeal glimpses of possibility within the imperfect present. So, while universities cannot in and of themselves change society nor can academics transform society alone, the humanist potential of intellectual work is a source by which a complacent citizenry may over time become more active agents of democracy than they would have otherwise been – through the public dissemination of liberatory and emancipatory ideas within classrooms, but also publicly, beyond the university (Nussbaum 2010: 65). This is a critical and humanity affirming characteristic of the university academic's role and is most easily associated with the humanities for which Sociology has a future role to play.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

5.1. Introduction

The methodology chapter elaborates on the research's axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions. It outlines the decision to adopt a reflexive ethnography, where the researcher's experiencing body and reflexive consciousness serve as crucial scientific instruments. As a lecturer immersed daily in the navigational challenges of the university, ethnography captures the reflexive context of my partial perspective on the ambivalent, convoluted "inside" of my research's social setting.

The methodology chapter has two dimensions, a section which outlines the reflexive-ethnographic angle (Sections 5.3 and Sections 5.4) and one which outlines practical methodological considerations (Sections 5.5).

The chapter begins with a discussion of my journey as an academic, reflecting on the influence of my positionality on the research inquiry. 'Situated knowledge' as conceptualised by Donna Haraway (1988) underscores the inevitability of an author's partial self-representation through their scholarship. This chapter, therefore, begins with the "locatability" of my research (Haraway 1988*:*589). My individual experience of agency in the historical continuum of the South African university serves as a point of reference, though the primary aim of the research remains the development and application of an analytical framework through which the contradictory experiences of academics in general may be captured in qualitative inquiry.

The division of the methodology chapter into two sections, one reflexive and the other practical, aligns with Kanoo and Glor's (2006: 106) observation that there are two integrated ways of knowing about meaning: narrative knowing "which occurs through reflection on personal experience through story-telling" and paradigmatic knowing "created through scientific inquiry". This sequence corresponds closely with feminist qualitative research, which foregrounds the lived experience of women as the entry point for scientific inquiry.

5.2 The Constructivist and Feminist Bend of Dialectic Exploration

Below, I outline important intersections between dialectic philosophy and constructivist and feminist principles of qualitative inquiry. Despite their differences, these points of intersection justify using qualitative research by revealing often-overlooked similarities between dialectic theory and qualitative research principles.

Constructivist tenets are commensurable with dialectic ontology in the following ways. First, they both view value laden interaction as the basic building blocks of social reality. In other words, both frameworks maintain a view of reality as constituted by interactions that create multiple, context-dependent versions of reality: for both, "[c]onsciousness and world are not separate entities but a holistic construction of lived experience" (Howell 2013:56). Secondly, open-ended qualitative constructivism is given shape by dialectic conceptions of totality. Marx (1852) famously said, people make the world, "not under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past". Dialectics enhances constructivism by emphasising overarching generative mechanisms that shape interactions. This allows us to consider multiple fluid interactions coming together as a system of dynamic, "variegated", and "multifaceted totality" (Rossi 2012: 351). As Ollman (2003:13) suggests, totality can be understood as the ontological basis for expanding "our notion of anything to include, as aspects of what it is, both the process by which it has become that and the broader interactive context in which it is found". However, for Marx capitalist 'holism' has a life of its own.

This is where dialectics diverts from constructivism. Where constructivism assumes no single existence is independent of human constructions, a dialectical ontology includes foundationalist definitions of capitalism as a self-reproducing hegemony which encompasses all other social relations. For Marx, the whole is not a mechanical whole, but an organic "self-organising, self-maintaining, and self-reproducing" whole (Abazari 2020: 114). The regularities of the whole at play are only "activated through individuals … solely constituted through the action of individuals" (Abazari 2020:114; my emphasis). According to Marx (1973:449):

> [Capitalism] is a general illumination, which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialised within it.

Finally, the constructivist claim that the interrelated activities of ordinary people constitute social reality highlights the reconstructability, changeability, and inherent temporariness of such constructions. This aligns with Marxist thought, where the aim of inquiry is "social transformation and emancipation through critique" (Howell 2016:31). A clear example is found in the work of Marxist thinker John Holloway (2010:25), who argues that the human drive "to

devote their lives to meaningful activity chosen by them" is not a marginal aspect of social life but rather central to what it means to be human.

Apart from constructivism, the attunement of dialectic thought and qualitative feminist epistemology finds a place in the discussions of this research. An epistemological axiom of feminist methodology, for instance, is that all knowledge is socially situated. That is, "the class, race, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed with the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint" (Harding 1987:9). In other words, "the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of the researcher" are contained in the empirical evidence they produce (Ollenburger and Moore 1998:58). Standpoint epistemology famously valorises situated knowledge produced by those on the margins of power about the operation of power – suggesting that those subordinated by the system can draw an unparalleled perspective on the regularities of the system. This intersects with the significance of the perspectival element or vantage point of the inquirer in the process of dialectical abstraction. As Ollman's dialectical philosophy emphasises the partiality of perspective, so feminist situated knowledge frames how subjected groups in their "liminality" occupy a particular "cognitive edge" for perceiving social patterns (Wynter 1987:235).

Kathi Weeks (1998:8) makes the argument that feminist standpoint theory offers qualitative research "an example of a collective subject, a subject that is neither modelled after the individual … nor conceived as spontaneous and natural community". The collective subject under study is the sociology community, which I examine from my personal vantage within this community, and my position as a woman of colour in the modern South African university – that is, the multivalent collective locations from which the research question is formulated. For Collins (1986:151),

> Black feminist scholars may be one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich contemporary sociological discourse. Bringing this group and others who share an outsider within status vis a vis sociology into the centre of analysis may reveal aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches.

The relations that Black women recognise as indicative of the "big picture" of higher education reflect their unique positionality. An embodied awareness of social processes to which outsiders-within may be privy is not synonymous, however, with an absolute clarity of the nature and function of those forces. After all, like any academic, the outsider-within is still

constituted by the forces they are perceiving, and so are less "like a fly on the wall" than "a fly in the soup" (Tomaselli 2015 :62). In the following discussion, I discuss my pathway as a "fly in the soup" to the qualitative research on academic identity.

5.3. The Research Story: A Personal Reflection on My Formative Academic Identity and The Journey to Reflexive Institutional Ethnographies

My interest in academics' positioning vis-à-vis the broad social system as a distinct social group began a decade ago. University students had set the 2015-2016 nation-wide protest movement in motion in South Africa. I was new to the professional world of academia, coming to grips with what it means to be a lecturer and academic. The small university I had joined in my mid-twenties in 2012 as a first-time lecturer alluded on occasion to the existence of a vibrant and intimate community of scholars and, at the same time, felt claustrophobic. In seminar rooms and private gatherings, a petri-dish of individuals fostering ideas of humanity and criticality swirled around in cirrus clouds of rhetoric and self-regard. I was unsure what it all meant for me. I was shy and withdrawn but freedom-seeking in the ideas I cherished, attracted to emancipatory theory and the latest vocabularies on the possibilities of ' another world' while steering clear of the inner academic circles where these ideas circulated.

Before choosing Sociology, I had enrolled in other avenues that were expected of me, including in 2005 chemical engineering, for a brief and decidedly wrong moment. And, then, I undertook a commerce degree in Economics as my safe de facto including a joint honours degree (Economics and Sociology) between 2006 and 2009. Despite the recognised prestige of these other fields, I kept finding my way back to social theory with its poetry of ideas on human connectedness. I was enlivened by the reciprocity of meaning-making on the transcendent question of what it means to be 'human' in sociology's conjuring of truth and action. The words woven in sociological arguments brought me alive as they moved beyond the stasis of certainty into realms of the unknowable, embodying something deeply humane yet elusive.

To me, sociology was a site of wonderment, a place of complex ideas proffered by great thinkers and re-uttered in the hallowed halls of serious scholars from which outsiders coming in may feel permission to think differently too. I recall my appreciation for the possibilities it conjured of imaginative spaces of contact, human encounter, and free thought. This radical potential, which reverberated in the discussion halls of academia, seemed to imply a natural extension to the public arenas with which it might ultimately engage. Sociology scared me and beguiled me for what it implied about the scope of human possibility. Maybe that is

why I ended up here. Sociology always gestured at our place in creating more of humanity's good side, though it does so from behind such exclusive boundary lines.

Once within the employ of the university, a dense culture of insularity, egocentrism, whiteness and patriarchy enveloped and slowly decommissioned my early though deeply-held and heady enthusiasm for the discipline, which I slowly shelved, instead, recloaking myself even deeper in hesitation – hesitation to speak up, take chances, assert myself, to think freely into spaces. The specific above-mentioned constructs of the academic world that influenced this poignant personal withdrawal faded with the passage of familiarity, so that I ultimately blamed myself, as though I had turned away from sociology's invitation before I had even had the chance to truly begin.

I trace this shrinking of self to two main social factors in a reflection that might be overly self-forgiving. Firstly, a culture of guarded self-interest seemed to envelope the Sociology department, characterising the combative nature of collegial interactions – this overwhelmed me. How could a critical, emancipatory ethos thrive in such an environment? Secondly, power and status were sharply delineated along racial and gendered lines, reinforcing rigid hierarchies that further challenged collegial solidarity. I felt disheartened by how a community ostensibly committed to sociological discovery and boundless possibilities 'out there' – immersed in the safety of text – struggled with its moral orientation within the 'here,' the immediate, living human space. It was during this time, in a moment of grappling with academia's cloistered nature, that I wrote a poem about an individual confined within a 'cathedral of hesitation' – an isolated figure drawn to the colours of the world, yet only able to experience their beauty from a distance, apart from the world from which these vibrant spectrums arose:

Younger, I would wonder

And love at the fray of far-fetched colours

Now, in a World of Words,

A door shuts out, the clear sound of slow-stepping, heavy Light

That edges towards, but cannot present itself, aching at the source

Aching at the skin that holds it in.

Watch the watcher who sits in the Cathedral of Hesitation.

Sits I.

Who sits behind the locked door that separates the outside,

For which the mosaic window shines.

The watcher sits alone but still wants to be seen – her tragedy.

She stays to know the Cathedral, its musky geometry.

To stand in the dim-dark wisdom, which from its corners cloak

She does not want to be free

Outside, the Light and dark swells of time's rhythm

Still meadows over eternity.

In the poem, academia takes shape as a grand, cathedral-like structure, imposing and revered. The watcher – the academic – finds sanctuary and significance inside, imagining what the world outside might be, glimpsed through rays of light that pierce through the stained glass. This light hints at an outside world, outstretched and boundless, yet filtered and mediated to the watcher who knows only its 'musky geometry'.

The academic's self-isolation from a world she believes herself to be ancillary to, integrates her into this world as a negated subject, spectral in her participation. According to Garrido (2019: 168), neoliberalism's incorporative strategy is negation so that ultimately, "the end of the totalising process is the absence of desire and the objectification of all its elements". The parts of the system – academic identity in the neoliberalising university for instance – simultaneously determine and negate the totality because of the unique particularity of the parts. The totality negates this negation, by denying agents' full autonomy and freedom, thus leaving them incomplete and open to more intensive integrations into the system. This totalising process of neoliberalism is steadily performed through successive negations of the negation so that, ultimately, "double denial leads to an affirmation" of the system (Garrido 2019*:*168).

Academia, in my transition from student to lecturer, became a site of disidentification through my integration as a negated subjectivity, alienated not only by a culture of guarded and competitive individualism, but also by pervasive racialised and gendered power dynamics. I had completed my undergraduate studies at one historically white institution and my postgraduate studies at another, where I was eventually appointed as a lecturer.

I identify culturally and ethnically as a 'coloured' South African (discussed below). I also consider myself a black South African in the critical political designation of the term [4]. My partial insiders' perspective is refracted by my particular positionality as a coloured woman in the intermediate stages of my academic career in the Eastern Cape. Coloured South Africans are a distinct racial and cultural group, whose legal distinction from 'Black' and 'African' was a deliberate strategy of the Apartheid government aimed to position the minority black community of Coloureds as a "buffer" between white settler communities and what the regime referred to as Black Africans. While Coloured people were afforded relatively better legal, social, and geographical rights than their Black counterparts, they remained a largely oppressed and impoverished community.

The category of 'Coloured' is complex, often reductively mischaracterised as 'mixed race' or an amalgam of 'White' and 'Black' cultures. Yet, coloured people have their own rich and distinctive histories, which have been systematically misrepresented, invisibilised, and stripped of their intricacies in the collective political imaginaries of South Africa (Adhikari 2013; Erasmus 2017; Dooms and Chutel 2023). Efforts to restore dignity and detail to this group's identity continues today, by those who challenge the trivialising and "parenthetical" position it has long occupied in South Africa's collective imaginary. Mellet (2020) for instance in his seminal text *The Lie of 1652* renames 'colouredness' as 'Camissa' after the river to denote the many tributaries of ancestral and cultural heritage of its people, stretching from African indigenous people, enslaved Africans, Asians and Chinese, Europeans, and indentured labourers from around the world.

Despite the black consciousness invitation for coloured South Africans and other oppressed racial groups to engage in mutual recognition, and solidarity, many challenges remain, rooted in colonially enforced hierarchies and cultural differences (such as language) between black groups. Furthermore the white gaze continues to foster damaging stereotypes and pseudoscientific claims, such as the recent 'scientific' claims about the cognitive deficits of Coloured women, wreaking perpetual epistemic violence against this community (Nieuwoudt *et al*. 2020 ; Kenny and Davids 2024).

My appointment to the historically white university at which I work was coterminous with a nationally conceived and monitored transformational programme to employ and retain black

[4] Steve Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy advocated for the inclusion of Coloured and Indian racial categories within a broader 'Black' identity to underscore shared experiences of white colonial oppression.

and female academics, a programme aimed at diversification, which ironically fostered feelings of subjectification. The programme's application tended to reproduce antagonistic power relations by objectifying young scholars who participated, instrumentalising them as inputs for the administration of top-down equity programmes and reconciling pre-existing structures by treating assimilation as the answer to institutional transformation.

For instance, another Black woman and I, appointed as lecturers at the same time, were unilaterally assigned 'mentors' from within the department who were invariably white men, given the seniority structure of the department. With little rapport or relationship between ourselves and these 'mentors', they assumed the authority to pen periodic 'reports' to the Vice-Chancellor detailing their perceptions of our performance and the success of our assimilation into the system, thus hardlining our perceived status as inferior colleagues who required constant surveillance. These poorly thought-out mechanisms evoked the historic infantilisation of black female scholars predicated on presumptions of intellectual incompetency (Khunuo *et al.*, 2019). And so, at the crossroads of our new roles as academics, the university conveyed to us through these mandatory measures that a leering master-apprentice relationship was the presiding condition under which our subjectivities were rendered legible within the prevailing institutional culture we had entered.

There was little recognition in these early transformation programmes of black participants as constructive agents; instead, we were sketched as passive, assimilative recipients of white patronage. The emphasis on 'black integration' and deemphasis on white gatekeeping as the central problem of transformation in these early programmes facilitated unreflective enactments and acceptances of white dominance. Black, female identities were encoded perversely as "sites of deprivation" instead of the sites of refutation and resistance they stood to be (hooks 1990: 149-150). I experienced through initiatives aimed at 'transformation' at the start of my career the entrenchment of:

> [T]he human qua human [as] the ontological domain of Whiteness, [where] there is no need for the White subject to justify its existence, because its humanity is not brought into question. The White gaze with its racist inferences, fantasies, and registers and its verbal economy is the dehumanising project (Sithole 2016:30).

The white gaze underpinned by historical domination entailed the opposite for white male academics who, presumed competent, "enjoy[ed] in a disproportionate way the privilege of knowing (or, rather, of being assumed to know)" and "an unquestioned epistemic reputability"

(Medina 2013 :31-42). Their gaze held the power to subtend for the 'other' an experience which Medina (2013: 42) calls an "ego scepticism", "a scepticism about the self, about its capacities and even about its very existence".

Once, as a new lecturer, I reflected on my academic journey with a colleague sharing with him that I was the first woman in my family to earn a master's degree. He responded by noting that my achievements were particularly impressive given that I had defied many odds in relation to the coloured community, including 'my achievement' of reaching adulthood without falling pregnant. Stunned, I allowed this racial stereotype to go unchallenged. His words slipped away unnoticed for him, the attacking violence they carried rendered invisible through the absence of acknowledgement. I felt my identity caught in degraded ambivalence in the institution and discipline. Like many from marginal social groups, I submitted to the inevitable unlikelihood of seeing myself clearly in the academic world I now inhabited.

Feminist theorists would argue that I was at this point in my career subject to an 'embodied knowledge' about the university system rooted in my collective 'standpoint' that, while not identical to others in similar positions of power, offered to me a unique view of the operation of academia (from the margins). Words like 'advantage', 'virtue', 'privilege', 'double consciousness' 'or 'vision' are used to describe the epistemic advantage of straddling both the position of institutional insider and inhabiting a marginalised social identity. But it is important to note that the lived experience of this 'epistemic advantage' is generally not one of pleasure or prestige for women as outsiders, who navigate contexts in which they are constituted as partial inhabitants constantly aware of the various requirements of performativity necessary for their integration. Any course by which the painful actuality of systemic oppression might be acknowledged, would invariably rely on the subjugated's active resistance to performativity and their enunciation of the mechanisms of violence, rather than being a recognition enabled by institutional culture. In other words, authentic visibility would necessitate pushing back.

Lorde (2007) argues there exists the tendency to expect the outsider to bridge the gap between their consciousness of the world, and those in power. The oppressed are often left with the task of educating the oppressor about their actualities, the value of their culture, being and difference. In spaces where (white) supremacy lives, for instance, marginal groups such as black women are expected to serve as spokespersons, even when they have no desire for centrality within such settings. It usually is the way of power to ignore differences or downplay its significance. The oppressed have historically educated the oppressor about the existence

and meaning of identitarian differences. W.E.B. Du Bois, who conceptualised the black condition of 'double consciousness' which he introduces in *The Souls of Black Folk*, says of this toil,

> Born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this world – a world which yields [her] no true self-consciousness but only lets [her] see [herself] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels [her] two-ness – two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (Du Bois 1903: 2)

bell hooks (1991:52) quips that black, female intellectuality in the white university is a "suspect intellectuality". In the global social division of labour under capitalism, including in South Africa, it is black womanhood which has been more than any other collective identity constructed throughout history as the embodiment of servitude – the direct opposite of agentic intellectualism. The impression which material history has left of the 'place' of women of colour in the world of work extends into the educational domain where black women are routinely perceived as resources for others, and carers and sources of support, but also targets of constant criticism: at the beck and call of students and colleagues, answering to constant critique to prove that we belong, or absorbing the plangent echo that we do not.

I internalised the perception that I was an outsider looking in, but instead of using the outsider-within status as a platform for affirmative self-valuation and self-definition as Collins (1986; 1999) urges female academics to do, I used it as a site of hesitation and self-diminishment. This is not uncommon when an acceptance of "a sense of one's place leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded" (Bourdieu 1984: 471). Bourdieu and Passeron (1979: 42) suggest that "the major thrust of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture comes from exclusion, which perhaps has the most force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion."

Institutionalised sexism and racism add layers of desubjectification in a capitalist system which aims for the "homogenisation" of subjectivity (Garrido 2019: 160). I was complicit in the process of homogenisation through my self-exclusion, which I ultimately came to learn was based on an undialectical, external-relations grasp which I held about the form of my alienation within the university. My defeatism as an agent in the university was informed by a misguided,

undialectical interpretation of my outsider-within designation, which I viewed as the obliteration of agential potential. I unconsciously saw my agency as one side of a dichotomy existing separately from and incongruous with the forces of negation I was experiencing: the guarded individualism that reverberated throughout the Sociology department and the sense of non-belonging informed by racial and gender inequalities. My research question emerged in part through the process of reconsidering my undialectical views and subsequently contrasting dialectical insights with the phenomenological world of the neoliberal university, which included a reassessment of my interpretation of both institutional culture and identitarian alienation. Both aspects are briefly detailed in Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2.

Feminist theory justifies the role that my intersecting membership to different social groups played in my identification of dialectical conceptions as sociologically interesting. Alcoff (2006: 126) defends the claim that one's identity and epistemic orientation are connected (against charges of objectivism in, for instance, Conway 1997) when she says:

> Race and gendered identities operate as epistemological perspectives or horizons from which certain aspects or layers of reality are visible. In stratified societies, differently identified individuals do not have the same access to points of view or perceptual planes of observation or the same embodied knowledge. This argument does not rely on a uniformity of opinion within an identity group but on a claim about what aspects of reality are more or less easily accessible to an identity group (Alcoff 2006: 126).

My identity as a coloured woman in a historically white university influenced what I knew and felt about the meaning of higher education, and therefore the analytic judgments and conclusions I made. The perceptual plane that collective identity made available to me brought me to the point of questioning the undialectical interpretations of academic culture and identity. Grappling with dialectic epistemology in an inquiry that presupposes the significance of my identity engages with the production of alternative epistemological interventions, which Collins (1995: 352) identifies as the true value of standpoint perspectives. Collins (1995: 352) eloquently puts it that offerings of alternative epistemology shake the foundation of the status quo where alternative knowledge claims,

> [A]re rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalised in existing paradigms.

> Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge.

The vantage that my specific subject position afforded me influenced the path, process, and conclusions reached regarding the importance of dialectical epistemology. Feminist theory provides a thorough broadside against the tendency for scholarship to perform the "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988: 189). Instead, feminist epistemology alights the welcomed invitation to consider that, "the knower cannot be collapsed into the known, cannot be eliminated, the knower's presence is presupposed" (Smith 1990:33). This research embraces that it is from a particular and partial subject position and social location as an 'outsider-within' that my question is asked and explored.

5.3.1 Reconsidering Undialectical Views on Careerist Insularity

The chasm observed between the idea of becoming an intellectual in the humanities which I had treasured, contrasted with the eventual reality of insulated, bureaucratic, and routine professional conformity, seemed a death knell to a personal ideal and the vaunted motif of the autonomous, creative, spirited, and alternative world of the humanities, illuminating human life from within an otherwise dim capitalist society.

Initially, I saw the gaps between what academics were doing and what they believed their purpose to be as an irresolvable dilemma. I thought academic work was fated to the endemic crisis of the waning of liberatory space, paralleled with a persistent but sadly diminished sense of emancipatory duty to a vaguely defined public at large.

But I was not looking at a big enough context, I was focused on phenomenal forms of appearance as opposed to interconnected inner-actions at play. The dialectic introduced to me the beauty and relief of Marxist theory as a way of beginning the journey of making sense of the paradoxes of the university, that is, considering the movements and confrontations embedded within contradictory pairs not as purely destructive of, but also constitutive of, the university's very existence from the start.

The dialectic has forced me to reconsider my initial reaction of dismay at recognising contradictions at the heart of academic practice. Dialectical thinking urges us not to treat each side of a contradiction as separate from the other (that is, as externally contraposed in the university contexts in which they appear) but rather to treat opposing academic practices as intervolved. In other words, from the suppositions of dialectic theory, we can anticipate that

the desiccated, vocational work of the individualist academic is not simply a crude negation and betrayal of the creative and courageous publicly engaged intellectual. Instead, they are interlocking sides of the same ontological reality within the neoliberal capitalist university. This entanglement is something which subjective perceptions may not always grasp.

Clearly, the university has humanistic and non-humanistic (contradictory) tendencies built into it by virtue of its very existence (irrespective of individual perceptions). Individuals' perceptions of how these trajectories come together however matter because these perceptions are pivotal to determining academic identity. Academics working in Sociology, when interviewed, expressed that the humanistic higher ground, while often the motivation for finding themselves in an academic job in the first place, had over time become a fading image if not an altogether unrealised one. This resonated with me, reflecting the same binary polarisations through which I had first understood the problem of academic identity and for which I sought an alternative framework of conceptualisation.

5.3.2 Reconsidering Undialectical Views on An Outsider-Within Status

In terms of historical ascriptions of race and gender power, certainly I was on the margins, but I was also a middle-class and privileged participant within the academic system. My identity was a complex, dialectical combination of my marginalisation and privilege—an outsider to white and male dominance, yet also occupying a protected position in society as an academic professional, a role problematically defined by separation from society rather than integration. I existed as a "dominated dominant" which is what Bourdieu *et al.* (1991:655) call those who are subordinates in a dominant class. I was not an outsider as the truly dispossessed are. I was not a *total* outsider to the social hierarchy and norms in which I operated.

I had to recognise the dialectical intersection of my elite positionality born of access to cultural and economic capital, coexisting intricately and entangled with my subordinated racial and gender status. Failure to recognise both my simultaneous placement within and displacement from power, risked false self-stylisation as a completely disembedded subject, which Pels (2000:177) argues academics are inclined to do and is merely "a cognitive plaything of the educated elite".

Cynical arguments like Pels' – expressing intolerance for standpoint perspectives – are often directed against feminist identitarian thinking. Ironically, such dismissive criticisms are sometimes reinforced by marginalised academics who lack reflexive recognition of their own

class interests and cultural prerogatives. As 'outsiders-within,' they often amplify their outsider status while overlooking their professional privilege, class power, and potential for representational vanguardism in relation to the subordinated groups they claim to speak for.

Recognising this truth about the dialectical constitution of my own position, added another dimension to questioning the taken-for-granted powers and positionality of 'the academic' as a collective identity in relation to society. The iterative process by which an outsider-within makes sense of their marginality through making sense of the group is a part of its sociological power. According to Marxist feminist Nancy Hartsock (1989:26-27), outsiders-within fulfil the task of:

> [E]xplaining a group to itself, in articulating taken-for-granted understandings. As one author put it, intellectuals can be historically useful if they can help others become aware of who they are and can help to reveal collective identity

Alcoff's (2006:26) point that social identity is "a rough and fallible but useful indicator of differences" is as valid for conceptions of the position of academics in society as it is, in the context in which she uses it, for black women concerning patriarchy and racism.

5.3.3 The Decolonial Moment

This interest in the social positions of humanities and arts academics peaked for me with the eruption of the student movement in 2015-2016, the first time I truly perceived the Sociology department – its structures and agents – as an undeniable site of sociological inquiry begging for self-examination. During the student movements, the varying responses from social scientists indicated the presence of deep underlying tensions in academic culture worthy of deeper engagement. As students called on academics, management, and the state to fulfil their duty to the public through commitments to, inter alia, financial and cultural inclusivity, the academic community reacted in diverse ways. Across South Africa, there were those academics who jumped at the chance to research the new mobilisations, while others pledged political allyship. Many veteran scholar-activists critiqued the protesting students' methods as lacking the rigour of past movements. But mostly, what I witnessed, was academics in the humanities and arts withdrawing from direct involvement, either overwhelmed or indifferent, overlaying an atmosphere of apathy.

The responses in Sociology were particularly striking. As the student movements gained momentum, lecturers who typically taught on equality, criticality of power and freedom started

to show a surprising defensiveness to the uprising. As business as usual was impeded, lecturers retreated, voicing a palpable sense of threat as targets of the movement for change. While support for students did exist and was powerful, it remained the exception among academics. I recall academic bewilderment, vulnerability, and dissent echoing more prominently than support as the rising swell against the university status quo took firm hold. According to Gibson (2017:593), "[t]he liberal intelligentsia, including university administrators and academic staff as well as the media, could not make sense of the student movements and thus were quick to label them violent and unreasonable ".

Once student movements were demobilised, academics at the university quickly resumed business as usual, with discussions, committees and seminars, including on justice in education – discourses which had become intrinsically modified and radicalised by the movements now proceeded without the public engagement and collectivity which the student activists had brought to the fore. Today, one would hardly suspect the apprehension that once prevailed, as academics publish prolifically on the need for epistemic decolonisation. The image of humanities scholars as radical mavericks appeared like the emperor's new clothes. When the moment called on them, they widely opted out of public intellectualism and engagement, only to vulturise ideas the student movements had reinvigorated once those movements had died down.

Today it is this elite and educated professional class which assumes the helm for operationalising the problems of epistemic violence and erasure. The vantage once dominated by students to articulate the meanings of contemporary decolonisation in the university context is now almost exclusively monopolised by academics. As an outcome of the first major post-Apartheid student movements and the first wave of on-the-ground decolonial mobilisations, this indubitably raises the question of the role of the professional intellectual in society and, in particular, their capacity to act as trustworthy agents of social change.

Generally, in its current forms, it is arguably a collapse of radical voices as opposed to their authorisation. The period of decolonialism (so far) leaves the fundamental structures of the university and the fundamental contradictions animating the university largely untouched. The push for decolonisation of culture and curricula has not necessarily been inconsistent with the insular/careerist tendency in that the latter seems to have becoming emboldened by the opportunities presented by the former.

The overtly cooptive and apolitical relationship that the social science community seemed to maintain with decolonial grassroots voices reached a crescendo in my own realisation when I attended a Decolonial Summer School in Barcelona in 2017. The event, which cost about R30,000[5] for attendance and accommodation alone, catered to an elite cohort of students (mainly American) and academics who spent a publicly funded week discussing epistemic revolution without any engagement with activists – right in the heart of a city emblematic of Europe's colonial legacy.

In fairness to academics, the tendency to ventriloquise protest ideas in the absence of parallel action and organisation by intellectuals themselves is not some fiendish premeditation, a calculated scheme that all academics are in on. On the contrary, what makes the retreat into academic silos in response to revolutionary moments so intriguing is in fact that it is not predetermined. Instead, it is a dominant inclination, revealing a difficulty which academics have in finding their place in society, thus gesturing at the unconscious and implicit beliefs among the academic community about what constitutes the 'realistic' limits and reach of their agency in making the world a better place. When academics can imagine only one another as interlocutors, it reveals what they are socialised into perceiving as the nature and scope of the societies to whom their accountability can reasonably be delimited. Edward Said (1994: xiii) suggests that an academic's choice of representation reveals their self-perception, noting that "all intellectuals represent something to their audiences, and in so doing represent themselves to themselves". It is therefore not absurd, given dominant practice, to suggest that academics see themselves as beholden only to other scholars; but, it is unreasonable to accept this reality, given the public and transformative mandate academics claim to serve. It is the vexedness of academic identity which I witnessed unfold around me, and which I recognised in myself, which opened my path to reflexive sociology.

The lack of self-scrutiny amongst academics on the tensions underpinning their positionality and place as a group within the totality of history and power increasingly stood out for me. For instance, they appeared not to problematise their specific complicity with the systems of power in which they operated. I found myself taken aback by how often scholarly literature on the future, transformed, decolonial and African universities seemed to overlook the nuanced role of academics themselves in reflecting society's contradictions. Rather, it often portrayed academics as inhabiting a gifted position as societal problem-solvers. I considered the

[5] Approximately 1,600 United States dollars.

uneasiness and convolution within myself and seemingly shared by the peers I interviewed, as the beginnings of a process towards self-revelation and definition. I was observing and listening to the conflicted interiority of the South African sociologist, positioned as one myself. For Pels (2003: 109):

> All defining portraits of intellectuals, professionals, experts, and scientists are simultaneously self-portraits, often attempts to delineate a cherished identity, and hence liable to entail claims that are essentially knowledge-political in nature.

The expressed chasm between ideal and practice for Sociologists was an opportunity for me both to reflect on the academic universe I inhabited and to gesture at the boundaries which separate it from society, boundaries whose current translucency obscures the gulf between the academic world and the public it claims to serve. It was at this stage, following the student movements in 2017, that I decided to research academics' perceptions of their role and status as agents of social change particularly regarding the call to decolonise education, which was a cause célèbre at the time.

My interest in isolating and abstracting out academic self-perception was clear, but the finer details of what I would be honing in on, would only ferment later. Through reflexive engagement with academic participants, what emerged as fascinating was not the original focus on decolonising curricula. Instead, it was the subliminal recognition which emerged across the research participants that a critical disparity existed between their meta-conceptions of work and actual practices. The practice of reflexivity in the research design and data collection brought this realisation into sharp focus as the ultimate topic of study. In the following section, I will discuss what reflexive ethnography is and aims to do, how 'reflexivity' functioned in the context of my research, and how it shapes the overall research process.

5.4. Unpacking the Significance of Reflexive Ethnographies in The Academy

The approach to data collection for this study is the ethnographic method. Ethnography as a form of qualitative inquiry includes multiple methods such as interviews, life histories, biographies, poems, and images. The nebulous notion of ethnography is often attributed to its complex history, its broad re-interpretation across the social sciences and arts, and the many forms it now assumes as a result (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). Institutional ethnographies attempt to understand the everyday relations which are constructed as people go about their work as they are influenced consciously or unconsciously by institutional directives and

policies (Campbell and Gregor 2002). Institutional ethnography as a field is notably shaped by the contributions of feminist scholarship. According to Smith (2005:29, original emphasis):

> The aim of the sociology we call "institutional ethnography" is to re-organise the social relations of knowledge of the social so that people can take that knowledge up as an extension of our ordinary knowledge of the local actualities of our lives. It is a method of inquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible from that site, map-ping the relations that connect one local site to others.

In an institutional ethnography, the researcher in dialogue with participants constructs "work knowledges" as the primary ethnographic data. This co-construction of knowledge happens reflexively as both parties build on the two main elements of work knowledges, "a person's experience of and in their work" and "the implicit or explicit coordination of his or her work with the work of others" (Smith 2005:151). Institutional ethnographies tend to adopt a generous conception of 'work', encouraging the researcher to observe 'doing' in an expanded sense (drawing from socialist feminist scholarship) so that paid work but also the emotional, cultural and psychological aspects of work which are not ordinarily acknowledged are included.

According to Howell (2013: 187), "reflexivity incorporates an iterative, interactive dialogue about past experience in relation to present perspective and future possibilities" – where researcher and researched ponder on the contextualities of (in my case) the shared field of work, bringing into view convergent perceptions and disparate viewpoints on life in the university to sketch the field from fragments of perception which academics shared of their experiences in and of work. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (introduced in Section 2.8) tells us that, day-to-day, academics tend not to be consciously aware of the dynamic tensions shaping their practice; nor, I imagine, are they frequently asked to conceptualise the broad meaning of their roles and experiences as academics.

In the ethnographic moment, academics shed light on their viewpoints of their work, enabling a rare space for self-interrogation and deconstruction. This elicited, through its immediacy and their unpreparedness, a revealing exchange of what was most apparent to them within that very moment about the academic system. As such, the reflexive accounts emerging from interviews produced information on the neoliberal university, but the interviewees themselves are social products of the processes of this very institution, highlighting their unique positions as

constructors and subjects of the institution upon which they reflect (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007:97).

The reflexive ethnography examines the extent to which academics can perceive of their collusion with the prevailing system, and what they consider to be their relation to other parts in 'the game' of academic life. Sociologists are bound through their common-sense assumptions to the *illusio* induced by power relations (also introduced in Section 2.8), which hinder the sociologist's ability to critically unpack systems of domination from where they stand (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The concept of *illusio* incorporates the unconscious desire to succeed within a system by virtue of our participation within it. The process of reflexive ethnography attempts to uncover the dynamics informing the *illusio* guiding the work of academic sociologists in the neoliberal university. The researcher conducts this examination while themselves subject to the very structuring and conditioning forces to which academic participants are subjected. As an academic sociologist, I share a collective field with my interview subjects, occupying as do they a partial view of the whole embedded within the totalising structures of neoliberal capitalism, which I, too, have internalised.

The deep embeddedness of the researcher in institutional ethnographies means that 'reflexivity' here extends beyond the individualising autobiographies of the researcher as a separate self, to more profound forms of reflexivity. This includes introspection on the multivalency of the researcher's identity and, more significantly, uncovering the disciplinary unconscious or the hidden assumptions of the scholastic point of view within a given field which the researcher's self-reflections reveal (Kenway and Mcleod 2004: 528). As such, while this ethnography acknowledges the influence of my subjectivity on the research, the focus remains on the research feedback from academics as the primary basis for demystifying the hidden perceptions and perspectives of the academic's role and purpose in society.

My lived experience provides context to the study by situating and historicising my point of view. My positionality, however, is not the primary subject of my research. For instance, I do not provide direct reflections on the interview questions in terms of my own personal experience. I assume the role of 'researcher' more than I do 'researched' in the context of data collection and analysis. Therefore, this research is framed as a reflexive ethnography instead of a pure auto-ethnography. For Howell (2016:34), in qualitative research it is typical for the voices of participants to predominate and researcher reflexivity to be employed as an accompanying device. This is continuous with institutional ethnography where:

> In recognising the essentially dialogic character of experience, we are always exploring from the standpoint of those we talk to or observe. Our interest enters and organises what they bring into focus, but always develops from their standpoint. In learning from their experiences, we look for clues as to how they are entered into the relations beyond those known directly (Smith and Griffith 2022:40).

My insider positionality fostered a unique connection between researcher and researched, entailing a more ambiguous relationality between 'scientific authority' and 'research subjects' perceived to exist in traditional ethnographic studies, where researchers typically enter as experts into 'lay' fields. Instead, I conducted my research as an existing albeit junior member and historically marginalised member in the community under study. For the most part, as a coloured female, I arrived at the interviews as an unconventional figure in the sociological community, an outsider to institutional status and power, a newcomer. Particularly in the interviews with senior academics, the intriguing dynamic of conducting interviews in a dialogic context where I was "studying up" presented an exception to the standard predilection of sociologists to study marginalised groups from the position of expertdom (Aguiar and Schneider 2012). In my interviews, the power asymmetry between researcher and researched is inverted. My experience coincides with findings from emerging feminist insights on 'elite interviewing' which conclude that, "a perceived lack of power but also heightened trustworthiness held by female interviewers, particularly young interviewers, may in fact act to [the interviewer's] advantage" (Boucher 2017:100).

The power differentials between myself as a researcher and my informants, mostly of higher positions, often drew stentorian responses from interviewees eager to "teach" me, thus exhibiting a certain bravado from some interviewees, which added a candid and disclosive layer to their narratives. Boucher (2017:102) states, "[d]ominating conversation through lengthy monologues can be seen as an indicator of power". Other interviewees, senior to me in academic rank or experience, generously offered cautionary tales about success in the academy and the pitfalls of collegialism. In contrast, others casually shifted into confessional narratives as the discussion proceeded, secure in the presence of someone non-threatening with relatively minor institutional power.

It is possible that each participant would have responded differently – less confessionally and more cautiously – had I embodied a different identity, such as a senior, male, or white academic. For myself, as the junior interviewing more senior colleagues, "the immediacy of the methodology often gave rise to trepidation and anxieties, but satisfaction and a sense of

accomplishment as well" (Aguiar and Schneider 2007: 7). All the interviewees, young and old, male and female, junior and senior, easily shared their personal views on sensitive issues like identity, professional life, and societal duty with me, with an ease undeniably influenced, in part, by my own identity – a blend of nearness to the field and remoteness as a figure within that world. They seemed to view our conversations as informal exchanges rather than instances of peer scrutiny, revealing more than they may have to someone perceived as a conventional figure of authority.

The revelatory nature of these reflexive confessions about professional identities can be viewed as a transgressive act against business-as-usual. By indirectly exposing internal relations, such confessions command a certain self-honesty and accountability from the academic community. As Park-Fuller (2000:26) notes, "the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act – a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced – an act of reverse discourse." As a transgressive act, it shakes the facade of academia, revealing through intimate narratives an underlying reality of academics' struggle for meaning. Fraser and Puwar (2008) indicate that a unique scholarly good is derived from the revelation of underreported private stories in the public realm, but they caution researchers not to write according to the voyeuristic gaze of the reader. At the same time, we should not exaggerate the private nature of the affective relations defining academic life, given that these relations are a part of an institution designed explicitly to reflect and serve the public in which it exists, who have a stake in understanding the actual functioning of the system and its relations as they exist.

My outsider-within status demonstrates the epistemic advantage, which feminist philosophers have suggested is the benefit of being able to "theorise from margin to centre" (hooks 1984: n.p.). Feminist standpoint theorists have long articulated this phenomenon, that people tend to confide in and reveal themselves differently to those they perceive as socially subordinate, granting those who are positioned in this way, access to patterns and preferences not readily admitted to those with assumed superiority and power (Hill-Collins 1986: 151).

Like feminist epistemology, dialectics has many varieties and there is no consensus on what it is outside of it being a worldview or way of thinking. It is however clear that both feminist and dialectic philosophy have close ties with reflexivity. Dialectical thought like feminist thought is not able in one foul blow to explain capitalism or patriarchy. However, they are each designed to help us to see what we are a part of, to look around and be able to decipher our spot in the motion of a broader system of power and control and, from where we stand, to name

what it looks like and feels like, and where it looks like it's headed, and where we might intervene to shift its course. For instance, Ollman and Smith's (1998) suggestion is for us to immerse ourselves within the dance of the dialectic as opposed to admiring its expanse from the outside:

> Dialectics is a way of thinking and a set of related categories that captures, neither misses nor distorts, the real changes and interaction that go on in the world. It also offers a method for investigating a reality so conceived, and of presenting our findings to others, most of whom do not think dialectically. Dialectics, therefore, doesn't itself explain capitalism. Rather, it helps us see and investigate the capitalist relations and processes, of which we ourselves are part, as they have unfolded, are now unfolding, and have yet to unfold. Using dialectics – and with a lot of hard empirical research – we can develop a theory that can *explain capitalism in its becoming* (Ollman and Smith 1998:334, my emphasis).

Ethnography overlaps in interesting and under-researched ways with the dialectical process of abstraction and its interest in the processes of 'becoming'.

For one, the critical importance of recognising the positionality of the researcher in relation to the social setting under study in ethnography interlinks with Marxist dialectics. For Ollman (2003:29), central to the 'dancing' process of abstraction by which concepts are ringfenced is acknowledging that our vantage points, what he calls 'the perspectival element', provides the unavoidable basis from which we "mentally carve up the whole in a different manner for a particular purpose". Whichever parts of society we render into view through the journey of abstraction is always a partial product of our individual inclinations and positionality, as is the later journey by which we add complexity back to the parts via the reconstructed concrete-in-thought. Ollman (2003) hence argues that "capitalism is contained relationally in each of its parts".

Secondly, reflexive ethnographies implicate the researcher as an implicit subject of study. This is distinct from more basic procedural applications of 'reflexivity' as an obligatory tick-box for securing validity and ethical compliance, manifesting as declarative rather than elective and deep-seated. Reflexive ethnography challenges the narrative authority of the scholar by raising the impossibility of their ontological dislocation from that which they study, where the self (researcher) is inextricable from others in history and society, highlighting that they too are reproducers and constructors of the very relations under study. This implication of the

researcher – pivoted by ethnographic and dialectical frameworks – raises the question which haunts the whole of the humanities: that is, if we are so embedded within the social system, what gives us the authority to speak for others?

In the poem outlined earlier, the folly of the watcher lies in believing that the cathedral stands completely apart, an "inside" separate from the world beyond. In truth, this cathedral is woven into the fabric of the "outside," part of a more significant flow through time. The watcher, caught within, sees not the outside world itself, but a reflection of their own position as a fragment within it. How difficult it is, then, to cut up the world and see it clearly when we are embedded in all its motion and diversity. Reflexive ethnography captures the peculiarity of studying the world while embedded within it. Scientific self-understanding as individuals and as members of social groups is therefore particularly difficult given the nature of our integration in the world we study. It is complicated further under capitalism as "negated subjects" largely unrecognisable to one another except "through the characteristics of the external performance imposed by the neoliberal order onto individuals" (Garrido 2019: 159-160).

Often, we respond to this clouded vision by drawing stark lines between researcher and researched, or between academic and public, such that we "separate ourselves from the outside for which the mosaic window shines." At times, this separation has gifted us with profound clarity, exposing to us singular, perceptible beams of truth, allowing us to examine each distinct spectrum. Yet, our internalisation of a concrete separation obscures from view the reality that, in studying the outside, we are also always remarking on our own presence as the authorial power.

Ultimately, my reflections on the neoliberal academy reflect my limited angle of vision as "the watcher" trapped in the cathedral. I comment on the totality outside, but the window through which I gaze constrains my view. In the end, the appearance of separation is an illusion. The "cathedral" shapes and is shaped by the world beyond its walls; the watcher studies the patterns cast inside the building. Their interpretation reveals as much about their perspective as it does about the light they observe. This scenario sketches the potential and relevance of identity studies as a basis for grasping the unfolding contradictions animating human society. Ultimately, understanding the relational properties within the broader system, such as the specific relations between the identity of the watcher, the form of the cathedral and the perception of the outside, is much harder to approximate than to aggregate the whole (Marx 1976:90). In Marxism, the answer to the difficulty of capturing internal relations lies in the

power of abstraction to define the relationships between "the body as an organic whole" (the neoliberal university) and "the cells" (in this case, academic identity).

5.5. The Research Design and Process

This section reflects on the fieldwork process by outlining design considerations such as sampling, the pursuit of thick descriptions, collecting evidence through in-depth interviews and research ethics. It also describes the unique process by which unexpected revelations emerging from the interviews are then deciphered using retroductive inferencing, which gives rise to a provisional 'hypothesis in the form of a posited contradiction. Retroductive logic, as will be explained, leads to the formulation of a 'hypothesis of a different kind'—one that is provisional and developed not at the outset but at the conclusion of data collection. The validity of this provisional hypothesis is then rigorously tested during the analytical process.

5.5.1. Sampling and Recruitment

A targeted convenience sampling method was employed to select sociologists from three universities in the Eastern Cape Province. 'Targeted' convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are recruited based on ease of availability and presence, provided that specific purposive requirements are met, such as in my case that they were professional academic Sociologists (Meyer and Mayrhofer 2022). In the case of institutional ethnographies, a convenience sampling strategy implies that one is likely to interview colleagues with whom one works directly, as well as peers in the proximal disciplinary community. This proximity has potential ethical implications, as discussed later.

For this study, the first interviews involved colleagues at Rhodes University, who made recommendations for interviewees at Fort Hare and Nelson Mandela University. Snowball or chain sampling was therefore employed as a secondary sampling technique, where "new participants to the study are recruited when current participants refer other, potential participants to the researcher (e.g., as they are members of the same group)" (Givens 2008:562). Below, I provide brief overviews of the three universities.

Rhodes University: Rhodes University, located in Makhanda (previously Grahamstown), has a long and storied history dating back to its establishment in 1904. The university has played a significant role in South Africa's higher education system, particularly in the Eastern Cape region. Founded initially as the Rhodes University College, the institution was named after Cecil John Rhodes, a controversial figure who played a significant role in colonising southern Africa (Schmahmann 2011). In recent years, the university has grappled with its namesake's

legacy and its history as a whites-only university, engaging in critical discussions about the institution's transformation and the need to address its imperialist past. Rhodes University is the smallest university in South Africa (Maylam 2016). It has established itself as a leading research-intensive institution known for its excellence, notably in pharmacy, biotechnology, journalism, and the humanities. Its humanities faculty is the largest of its faculties, with eleven academic departments (including Sociology) and two schools.

University of Fort Hare: The University of Fort Hare, located in Alice, has a rich history as one of the oldest universities in South Africa. First formed in 1916 as the South African Native College, it is today the oldest historically black university in the country. It is the alma mater of many of South Africa's most prominent leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo and Mangosuthu Buthelezi. African leaders from other countries, such as Robert Mugabe, Kenneth Kaunda, and Seretse Khama, were also present. In 2005, it became the only South African university awarded the Order of the Baobab – the highest civilian honour for contributing to the country's leadership (Ciulla *et al*. 2012). Fort Hare has three Eastern Cape campuses, in Alice, Bisho and East London. It is considered a historically disadvantaged institution but has made great strides to transform and enhance its academic offerings in recent years.

Nelson Mandela University: The merger of the University of Port Elizabeth (established in 1964), the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University and Port Elizabeth Technikon formed Nelson Mandela University in 2005. It is part of the watershed countrywide process of institutional 'mergers', which marked the articulation of the higher education landscape following the end of apartheid. Like all post-apartheid universities, this institution's history and transformational shift away from its apartheid-era identity remain subjects of debate. The university has campuses in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), George, and Missionvale and is recognised as a leading institution in engineering, science, and maritime studies. The university has eight campuses in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape and George in the Western Cape (Bitzer 2009: 404).

Nine in-depth interviews were conducted. Determining a sufficient sample size for qualitative research is a subjective process, reliant on the researcher's judgment and the specific context. The sample size was guided by the saturation of categories and themes identified during and after the interviews, while also considering resource and time constraints. The interviews took place within the Sociology Departments of three universities, with conversations conducted in

English, recorded, and subsequently transcribed. This research, grounded in the assumption that all higher education institutions in South Africa face governance shifts influenced by neoliberalism, sought to examine the personal lived experiences of academics, separate from the specific dynamics of their respective institutions. Therefore, it is not a comparative study of institutions.

The difficulty of recruiting academics as research subjects is well-documented, and this phenomenon was evident in the significant challenges encountered when attempting to secure participants for interviews via telephone and email (Mikecz 2012). The problem of compliance by academic participants after recruitment, a challenge I faced, are less well-researched. For one participant, I had to station in the university town to which I had travelled for the interview for four days due to rescheduling, purportedly due to work schedules. Most interviews lasted approximately three hours. However, one interview extended to six hours due to two breaks, allowing the participant to attend other meetings. Another interview, for the same reason, took place over two days.

The sample included academics across races, genders, and seniority in academic position: two senior white males; two senior black males; two junior black males; one junior white woman; and two junior black women. The results of this study are based on the conceptualisations shared by these academic Sociologists as they made sense of the effects of contemporary university governance and culture on their practice and self-concepts. While small in sample size, the study's results are not necessarily limited in relevance to the sample demographic.

In this respect, qualitative research aims for 'transferability' instead of statistical generalisability. Transferability is considered and applied by the readers of qualitative scholarship who may consider the local conditions of a study, and the researcher's claims about it, as transferable to "other person's, settings and eras that have not been directly studied" (Drisko 2024:2). Dialectical ontology suggests that the individual parts of a system, and their relation to other parts, partially reflects the whole system, thus supporting the possibility for "inferential generalisation" (Lewis *et al.* 2014) or "case-to-case generalisation" which stem from small-scale studies (Chenail 2010) such as this one.

5.5.2 Respondent Biographies

Below I provide brief biographies of each of the sociologists interviewed. Marcus has been an academic in Sociology since the mid-1980s, currently serving as a Professor. A white male, he

has dedicated his entire professional journey to one university. His entry into Sociology was serendipitous, having initially prepared himself for a different professional path.

In the 1980s, his involvement in anti-Apartheid and trade union politics and his education in the social sciences ignited his professional connection with Industrial Sociology, eventually leading to his permanent employment as an academic. For the Sociology community, which Marcus joined, it was commonplace for academic identities to be forged in the crucible of political involvement. At the start of his journey, politics and scholarship were deeply intertwined. He recalls the political fervour that connected South African sociologists to society during mass unrest, as bottom-up rebellions against a colonial state reached a crescendo, drawing global attention. This was the tumultuous, politically charged, and hopeful environment in which Marcus' academic role was deposited in the form of a lasting disposition towards thinking of sociology as the propensity to guide social change.

Today, he reflects on Sociology's shrinking public reach and limited social purpose beyond the university. With a tone of acceptance, he acknowledges that his common sense understanding of an academic's place has fundamentally changed.

Zane has been employed as an academic for the past twenty years. He is a black, middle-aged man. He regards Sociology and public sociology as inseparable sides of the same identity. He outright describes the core role of academics idealistically as public intellectuals, and he sees public intellectualism as *the* identity of the discipline. He does not believe that the university's interpretation of community engagement is a true component of public intellectualism. He says it stands contrary to public engagement proper.

In particular, he points to the resource deficits in historically black universities, which result in crippling staff-to-student ratios, growing postgraduate cohorts that require teaching and supervision, the increasing pressure for research output, and the steady decline in higher education funding. He compares this with his employment at a historically white university where his main contractual obligation was to publish and raise publishing funds. He suggests that public engagement is more likely in research universities than in teaching universities.

Zane reflects on the aspiration of public intellectualism in the context of institutional inequality in South Africa. He ultimately believes that it is an unfair generalisation to say all academics are involved in activism for personal gain, though he does concede that this is "a strong element that there is truth to".

Nokuthula has worked at her university for just over twenty years. She is a black, middle-aged woman. Nokuthula believes that a particular underlying "conservatism" and "brutality" marks the relation of the South African university to dissenting and alternate voices from within its ranks. She believes that the relationship between university management and agents of change has not fundamentally changed since the Apartheid era. She shares her frustration at the observation that incoming young scholars are tamed by the system, seldom challenging its structures, instead eager to assimilate into the careerist status quo.

Regarding Sociology, Nokuthula points out that the discipline has a particular and problematic preoccupation with fetishising the poor as a gainful subject of research, which she highlights as problematic given its general apathy to any form of public engagement on the ground.

Norah is a white female academic in her 50's. Today, she holds the position of lecturer in her department, previously serving as Head of Department. She observes a general indifference amongst sociologists to public matters in her department. For her, this indifference is detectable in the consistent reproduction of traditional power structures within the department itself, particularly as it pertains to gender inequalities.

From many respondents, one can sense exhaustion when, at the individual level, they try to piece together where the institution meets society, where deception meets truth, and what this might mean for them. This is particularly evident for Norah, who sees the absence of public engagement in her academic environment as a situation indicative of defeat, where careerist tendencies have crushed and subjugated public engagement entirely.

Her portrayal of Sociology's relationship with society, both in its idealised and actual forms, carried a desultory tone, suggesting that her faith in the discipline as a public good had been thoroughly undermined. Norah conveys a palpable sense of low expectations for academics as a community.

Benny is a foreign national, black male academic who occupies a professorial post in Sociology. He has worked in South African higher education since 2005. He is unique as a respondent because he chose not to express grievances during the interview, but a deep reverence for the university as a bastion of near unquestionable virtue within society. Benny regularly deflects any criticism of the university and insists that its main flaws can be attributed to and found in the actions and personalities of individuals rather than inherent shortcomings in the ideas and practices of the social institution itself. However, this reverence for the university is initially coupled with a rather desiccated and economistic description, referring to

academics themselves as being "serial numbers and products" when discussing the nature of the output academics create. He says, "so the knowledge takes the form of scientific publications, patents and people, the graduates we produce. If we were to put serial numbers on the things we produce, you are just one of them; put a serial number on it and that is the product." Though, he uses these descriptors in a wholly positive light!

Benny is the only academic interviewed whose perception of university life is foregrounded by the metaconception of the university as a progressive, enabling, and majestic force which stands ultimately outside the whims of the infallible individuals he perceives as invariably contradicting this overarching goodness. In other words, for Benny, the university is reduced to the romanticised functions of the institution. He is also the only one of the academics who does not refer to management at all during the interviews. His recognition of academic praxis and its trajectories is subordinated to an overall conceptual flattening of the university on his part. In the final instance, he portrays the university as an undeniable nostrum for society's well-being despite, for him, the unfortunate existence of the unavoidable imperfections of its myriad occupants.

Baloyi is a young Black South African male lecturer. Unlike the older academics interviewed, he lacks a romanticised view of Sociology and academia as derived from historical contexts or his own career experiences. In the interview, he explores the correlation between demoralisation and young academics working in South African universities. Baloyi is openly disgruntled by management and what he sees as a system of favouritism and patronage which has taken over the university.

He proudly attests to his active involvement in the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements. This is contrasted with Norah's observation that no real academic activity or political participation within the decolonial movement took place at the university they both work at. Her positionality as an older white woman and his as a young black man have entailed very different interpretations and experiences of what transpired during the 2015-2016 period. But despite the significant differences in standpoint and subject position, each of these academics expresses sheer disenchantment with what they see as the hypocrisy of the Sociology fraternity at their university, which is inward-looking and disconnected from the society it is in.

Baloyi appears disheartened by the disconnection between Sociology and society; a fundamental expectation of what academic life in South Africa should mean has been

profoundly undermined for him. He wants public engagement but cannot see any room for it in the current ideological environment. He says that "higher thinking is purpose-driven. Higher thinking makes sense when it links itself to concrete situations and when it can solve concrete problems, this is not my reality".

For Baloyi, there is a strong sense that Sociology does not possess a living political and critical presence in the public domain of South Africa. He recognises academics who have helped maintain the space of public intellectualism, but for the most part, believes that sociological discourse is locked in ivory towers with little incentive for wider inclusion.

Uche started working as an academic in 2007. He is a foreign national, middle-aged black male. Unlike the other interviewees, he worked in the corporate sector before joining academia as a sociologist. His career shift from the private sector to Sociology was informed by the urge to make a more significant difference in society. Since joining Sociology, he believes that his work now has a social impact.

Uche is less critical and dismayed by the inconsistencies between public engagement and academic work than the other academics. Like the others, Uche meanders inconsistently between describing what he does in terms of shaping and building society and describing work in Sociology as self-promotion at conferences. He refers to public engagement in Sociology as "corporate social responsibility". Even more so, like Zane, he deliberates on whether public engagement should be an expectation of sociologists. He refers explicitly to Community Engagement as a mere tool and tick box for self-promotion.

Uche begins the interview by comfortably speaking of academic work in corporatist terms, describing conferences as places where he "markets himself and his work" to enable networks for peer recognition and entry into high-impact journal publishing to pedestal research as the core function of his work. While he refers to the absence of public engagement, he does not seem to decry it, unlike other academics. Instead, he blankly speaks of the university in careerist terms without referring to the desire for more progressive tendencies.

David has been employed as a sociologist since the 1960s. He is a white male who was one year away from retirement at the time of the interview. In his early career as an academic, he was an active member of the United Democratic Front. He taught a radical political economy course in present-day Botswana, which garnered the attention of the state and ultimately led to his deportation. Like Marcus, an older white male academic, his Sociology career in the 1970s and 1980s was marked by serious public political engagement.

David notes that for as long as Sociology has existed as a discipline in South Africa, there has been two main ideological camps regarding the role of the academic in society. One group believes that "knowledge and academia are objective, neutral spaces, and politics should be kept out of them. This was the approach amongst conservative academics. Whereas on the left, which I was broadly a part of, the Marxist practice was our approach. I have always been a strong adherent of the idea that the academic had to be involved politically and with the community, that you could never exist in isolation."

For David, public engagement pre-1994 exceeded minimalist conceptions of the public (for example, defined as 'students' alone). He indicates that in the days of Apartheid, the forces of emancipatory radial public engagement were not subdued and overshadowed in working out the contradictions of academic life as it so patently appears today.

Evelyn has been an academic since 2013. As a young black female academic, she sees being intimately connected with communities, while avoiding speaking on behalf of them, as a compromise essential to being a social science and humanities academic.

Evelyn introduces a perspective not brought to the fore by any other respondent. All other respondents answered the question about the ideal social function of the academic by presuming an a priori starting point of an academic position outside of society, needing to build connection and public engagement. For Evelyn, the question itself contains the problematique, the starting distinction itself implies ontologically separate spaces between 'the academy' and 'society'. Her ideal of academic work begins with a more embedded perception of the two as existing within one another as a basis for orienting our praxes. The mental distinction between the university and society, for her, feeds into the practical separation and lack of self - interrogation at the level of academic work.

Hints of relational and dialectical thinking appear in her challenge of the boundary between university and society. One can read from Evelyn the suggestion that the fundamental tension is in the categories by which we define the problem of academic withdrawal from public engagement: it is in how it is rendered as academic *versus* engagement. Her suggestion that the community already exists in the university, and the university already in the community, albeit in uneven, sometimes absent, ways, is more of a relational perspective than that articulated by other respondents. Evelyn challenges the binary depiction between university and society but, in the end, retreats. While recognising that society and the university are intermeshed, she does

not go beyond what she criticises and, soon after the critique, returns to referring to the sociologist as existing outside of society.

5.5.3 Thick Descriptions

The main benefit of qualitative research is not statistical aggregation but its ability to produce thick descriptions, where small sample sizes may suggest a holistic view of relationality by "drilling deeper at fewer places" (Latzko-Toth *et al.,* 2017: 201). For the originator of the research concept of 'thick description', "ethnography *is* thick description" (Geertz, 1973: 314; my emphasis). Thick descriptions arise from immersive observations, made to capture elements immanent to a given social setting, institution, or organisation. Geertz's (1973) seminal work, inspired by Kluckhohn (1959; cited in Geertz, 1973: 311), defines the aim of thick descriptions as grasping culture, where his specific definition of culture aligns directly with the focus of this study. He defines culture as an acquired "way of being" through the legacy of one's membership to a group, manifest as "a way of thinking, feeling and believing, a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour". This echoes academic identity as an acquired way of being through historical, institutional and disciplinary culture.

Thick descriptions are not merely anecdotal. Rather, they involve careful observations of a social environment, corroborated by theoretical frameworks and scholarship, to achieve a heightened level of interpretation of the inexplicit elements that define the relationships individuals have with themselves and others within the processes constituting a particular context. In the interviews, when the academics curated various representations of themselves, a dense site of dialogue emerged where intentional reflections intersected with unconscious revelations. This complexity demanded a heightened level of examination that disentangled aspects of academic identity which were being explicitly negotiated from those internalised beneath the surface. According to Geertz (1973:10), what the qualitative researcher is faced with is, "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knitted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [s]he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render".

The interview data forms the basis from which I both identify and create the explanatory categories for the perceptions and perspectives of the academics under study. Geertz (1973: 314) notes that, in producing thick descriptions, "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to." He adds that the full elements for what is needed to comprehend a specific environment is

unavoidably obscured at the very start of the ethnographic process through the researcher's choice to focus on individual aspects of that culture, thus de-emphasising other elements. This suspension of reality in order to foreground defined elements reflects the dialectical process of abstraction central to ethnography, even if it is framed by different terminologies.

Theories on abstraction and thick description both acknowledge the necessary suspension of focal points through which we hope to expose the broader contradictions and movement inherent in the social environment. As a result, for individual studies, achieving an exhaustive thick descriptions, as defined by Denzin (2001) as encompassing "biographical, historical, situational, relational and interactional" components, may be exceedingly challenging given the practical constraints of time and resources – but, also given the epistemological constraints posed by the perspectival element.

The depth but also partiality of thick descriptions makes determining the 'saturation' point of a study, and therefore the sufficient sample size, difficult in qualitative research. Traditionally, 'saturation' refers to when enough data has been collected so that "nothing new is added" by further research (Marshall et al. 2013). In ethnographic studies where partiality and the imaginative interpretation of reality is foregrounded, saturation is unlikely to mean simple 'data saturation' (i.e., numerical determination of 'enough information' or when information is replicated by respondents) but rather "thematic saturation" (i.e., where repetitive themes or categories are identified) and "meaning saturation" (i.e., where issues are fully understood) (Rahimi and Khatooni 2024).

5.5.4. In-Depth Interviews

Face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews are employed as the data gathering technique for this study. Qualitative interviews enable the collection of primary data at the level of subjective meaning aimed at capturing experiences instead of precise facts and they have served an important role in educational research (Brenner 2006). According to Kvale (2007: xvii):

> A qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations.

The interview schedule (see Appendix One) was formulated around five thematic clusters: (1) perceptions of the ideal role of the academic in relation to society at large; (2) their views on

university insularity; (3) their reflections on how the social identity of academics influences their potential as agents of change; (4) the role of sociology in the public sphere; (5) and their reflection on the nature of academic's public engagement. These themes were primarily concerned with sociologists' self-construction as agents of social change (the initial frame of inquiry).

At the time of the interviews in 2018, the nation-wide student movements had taken place and the call for transformation, which still reverberated as a result, served as a natural centre point for interview dialogue and reflections on sociologists' social change agency. All respondents were asked the same questions, thereby providing thematic structure to an otherwise open dialogue, aimed "to engage the interviewee in conversation to elicit their understandings and interpretations" (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005 :332). The semi-structured nature of in-depth interviews allowed for more than the capturing of individual experience, extending to a comparative detection of patterns of variation and commonality. As such, semi-structured interviews "are utilised to look for themes and higher order patterns (i.e., relationships among themes)" (Givens 2008:524).A double hermeneutic was at work during the in-depth interviews: as the participating academics made sense of their experiences, I analysed and reflected on their accounts, leading to further development of the conversations. A double hermeneutic entails "interpreting a reality that has already been interpreted" by others (Bruhn Jensen 2018:177) so that experience is understood through "a process of intersubjective meaning- making" (Larkin and Thompson 2012). The practical sequence of this double hermeneutic during my interviews aligns with Brinkmann's steps (2022:65; original emphasis) in the interview exchange:

> (1) question; (2) negotiation of meaning concerning questions and themes, including clarification; (3) concrete description from the interviewee; (4) the interviewer's interpretation of the description; and (5) coda.

'Coda' refers to the concluding phase of a question or theme's engagement, where uncertainty about the overall meaning is raised, effectively placing the responsibility on the respondent to clarify their experiences as the final prompt. This acts as a segue into the next set of questions, allowing for deeper exploration, the centring of informant's voices, and continuity in the interview.

An idiographic approach meant that I moved iteratively between the structure of the interview schedule and unforeseen revelations that, from my perspective, emerged during the interviews.

The interactive context of interviews involves a particular positioning of "the relationship between researcher and participants as two points on a circle around which the analyst continuously moves" (Montague *et al.* 2020: 2). Therefore, data analysis in ethnographic studies, discussed in Section 5.5.8, is not strictly a stage after fieldwork but starts within the fieldwork process. Conducting the interviews themselves can be considered the initial stage in the analytic and representational work performed by the researcher in producing primary qualitative data.

A criticism of ethnographies that rely solely on single data collection methods like interviews, such as mine, is that this may diminish the value of thick descriptions by forgoing the advantages of triangulation. This study could have been enhanced by incorporating additional methods, such as meta-interviews or expert interviews, to evaluate the data and provide greater context (Delamont 2012: 186).

5.5.5 Academic's Revelations of Contradictory Practices

During the interviews, as sociologists gathered their thoughts on the prompts of the interview schedule, an interesting tension emerged. Across the academics from different racial, age and gender identities, a dissonance emerged between a celebrated representation of the 'radical' activist-inclined sociologist and, simultaneously, self-representation as an embattled underdog controlled by profession and management, hamstrung to act critically upon society at all. They moved seamlessly between these two projections in their narrations – one progressive, one regressive – as two polar self-images that were readily evoked and substituted for one another without hesitation. Two trajectories of sociological practice were simultaneously claimed by sociologists, one a force of counterpower and one a functionary of power – read by the researcher as a striking and unresolved contradiction. Academics harnessed both in their self-descriptions but, when probed, presented them as two distinct experiences. I wanted to get a clearer idea of how sociologists perceived the relation between these opposing conceptions of self: identities seemingly defined by careerist insularity and by emancipatory public engagement. I wanted to understand why they seemed to understand these as bifurcated and dissonant instead of as inter-related and interacting.

Seemingly uninterrogated, the cleaving of sociologist's self-images into public revolutionary at times, and embattled functionary at others, emerged across all the interviewees in different ways. This was not the direct focus of the initial interview questions but was revealed in the course of data collection. While an uncomfortable distinction between progressive and

regressive aspects of academic identity emerged, the relation of these two trajectories was less clear. Despite the implicit presence of this dissonance in their answers, none of the interviewees without being prompted to do so by the researcher overtly acknowledged or wagered an explanation of the relations informing the existence of such tensions in academic identity. Therefore, it was unclear to what extent these polarities were understood to be antinomic, complementary or something in between with regards to academics' functioning. This was exciting to me, because instead of focusing on general perceptions of change agency, I now wanted to analyse the interviews through the lens of the timeless question of the role of the intellectual in society. The sociologists' self-reflections indirectly revealed to me a lack of an explanatory framework for conceptualising and expressing tensions underpinning who humanities academics are, either as individual practitioners or as a social group. I could relate to this. The subjective perceptions held by the sociologists I interviewed guided me towards a deeper confrontation with the tensions in purpose with which I was grappling.

According to Delamont (2012:490), field notes during reflexive interviews are crucial to the detection and later analysis of indirect revelations:

> As a researcher observes a social phenomenon or location, she determines what to include in the fieldnotes; this process affects how she constructs and describes the social world. Stated in another way, fieldnotes are authored representations of ongoing social life.

The ongoing interpretation throughout the interviews, captured in notes, became the data's first "authored representation". By selectively engaging with responses, I uncovered something that lay "beyond" the empirical – beyond the observable – delving into underlying relational forces. As my awareness of an animating tension grew, I became increasingly attuned to the potential of its presence in the respondents' answers. Yet, I never explicitly introduced the notion of neoliberalism, nor did I highlight the apparent tensions informed by this system. Instead, responses were allowed to unfold naturally, with field notes used to follow up where necessary to understand the informant's meaning-making while consciously avoiding leading them with emergent awareness of these deeper tensions.

Section 5.5.1 to 5.5.5 discusses the practical and paradigmatic steps I took to partake in insider research. The unique qualitative environment of 'studying up' in a collegial and institutional ethnographic setting elicited various indirect revelations, the most striking being the bifurcated and dichotomised expressions of academic identity. A potential real (not purely conceptual)

underlying relation was congealing as a contradiction between careerist insularity and critical public engagement. The provisional postulation of this contradiction, to be tested through analysis of the respondent's feedback, is captured by the exciting backward-looking mode of inferencing known as retroductive reasoning, to be discussed in 5.5.6.

5.5.6. Retroductive Reasoning

The research employed a retroductive strategy, developed in critical realism and Pierce's pragmatism, but well-illustrated by dialectical social theory (Pietarinen and Bellucci 2015; Belfrage and Hauf 2017). Deceptively simple in definition, retroductive logic encompasses the researchers inferencing of the underlying relations that explain reality, with the validity of the proposed explanation depending on its ability to account for phenomenal forms.

Classical sociological theory is no stranger to retroductive reasoning, exemplified by Marx's theories of class conflict and Durkheim's theories of social regulation; and some argue it is embodied even in the very concept of the 'sociological imagination' itself (Frauley and Pearce 2007:20; McEwan *et al.* 2024: 424). Retroductive reasoning attempts to "identify real phenomena beneath the surface. Reality in this sense is more than mere appearances may suggest" (Brown *et al.* 2002: 773). This amplifies the distinction between underlying relations and phenomenal forms central to sociological thought. In this section, I discuss how I applied retroduction, "a backward-looking mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating and identifying mechanisms which are capable of producing them" (Sayer 1992:107). In the following discussion, retroductive reasoning is defined in terms of its interest in uncovering the relations underpinning phenomenal forms, its concern with the construction of novel hypotheses and its identifiability as a process.

5.5.7 Uncovering underlying relations

Key to understanding the significance of retroductive reasoning lies in appreciating its distinction from the traditional logical strategies of induction and deduction. For inductive thinking, theories are inferred from specific observations which capture "what is actually operative", that is, the absence of preconceived concepts in this process produces explanations which reflect real-world events at play. For deductive research, fixed conclusions are deduced from testing preconceived theories or hypotheses to elicit factual proof "that something must be" (Cabrera 2023:1872). Inductive and deductive research processes move linearly between the 'positing of theory' and 'data collection' (albeit in a different direction for each). Both

inductive and deductive modes of inferencing serve a confirmatory role in observing or proving what *is.*

Retroduction is not linear, nor is it confirmatory; instead, its main concern is "the construction or generation of truly novel explanations" by "merely suggesting that something *may be*" (Hanson 1981:86, my emphasis*;* Ritz 2020). Retroduction moves beyond inductive and deductive thought by rooting inquiry in the identification of that which *might* exist, a domain of research defined by a peculiar mix of intangibility, possibility, and actuality. According to Blaikie (1993:165; my emphasis), retroduction "proposes *something* that may not have been observed or could not be observed directly". For Frauley and Pearce (2007:19), "this 'something' (whether actual or potential) that, if it were true (as knowledge is always fallible), would explain the existence of the social objects" under study. This 'something' can be equated with what I have hitherto referred to as 'internal relations', that is, the "obfuscated constitutive and sustaining processes" which give rise to and are related within "empirically apprehendable phenomena" (Frauley and Pearce 2007:20).

5.5.7.1 A mechanism for forming a provisional hypothesis

Retroduction is interested in the processes and patterns by which new hypotheses are conceived (Venukapalli 2013). It emphasises that hypotheses emerge from within the object environment under study and, as such, is distinct from induction and deduction where a sharp delineation between the moment of discovery and confirmation is sustained. With inductive and deductive thinking, social explanations are constituted at a critical distance from the social contexts studied. According to Glynos (2018:5-6), retroduction thus contests the separation of discovery and justification where the meaning of a process becomes a key part of how it functions: "A social process and its context should be seen (presumptively) as co-constitutive and, in this sense, 'internal'".

In other words, for retroduction (unlike induction or deduction), the formulation of contextual explanations are not to be found through a separate process of 'inducing' or 'deducing' a theory, as potential explanations of a social context are contained within the setting itself. Put differently, what distinguishes the explanatory aspect of retroduction from induction and deduction is that the latter two ignore "what [Isaac] Newton never ignored: the inference is also from explicanda to explicans" (Hanson (1958:71), thereby demonstrating an internal relational understanding between that which needs to be explained and the explanation provided. Glynos (2018:5-6) in fact suggests that retroductive logic implies that external causality is elusive in a

society where the meaning attributed to a process becomes integral to its functioning and vice versa.

Retroduction is a type of reasoning where the inquirer infers a new hypothesis as a result of observations of patterns. This imaginative and provisional decision is essential to the researcher's perspective, as it shapes and is shaped by what they "see", placing their vantage at the centre of what guides the iterative discovery process. As Hanson (1958:86) explains, "[t]he dawning of an aspect and the dawning of an explanation both suggest what to look for next." This means retroduction involves tentatively adopting a plausible hypothesis from within an environment of incomplete and emerging evidence.

The researcher's recognition of a 'dawning aspect' and what that indicates they look towards next (as part of an iterative process) is informed by their biases and idiosyncrasies. However, the dawning of an explanation is not purely a matter of personal judgment or intuition, as this is where the process of inferencing plays a critical role. While recognising the considerable debates surrounding whether retroduction is a process of pure "musement" or simply "a hunch" (Chiasson 2005:224), I interpret it instead as a definitive system of reasoning.

5.5.7.2. A system of inferential reasoning

Retroduction works 'backwards' and is namely "the inference from effects to explanatory structures" (Hartwig 2007: 257). There is a perceivable logic to how a new hypothesis is formed in retroductive inferencing (Hanson 1958). For Forstater (1999:10), retroduction is "reasoning from consequent to antecedent". With retroductive processes, the researcher works backwards. From observable regularities or patterns which 'dawn' in the fieldwork and gesture at an unobservable, underlying entity, we postulate a mechanism to account for what we do observe.

For my study, the tendency across interviewees to adopt self-conflicting descriptors of academic identity was the observable regularities, which gestured at a systemic battle between neoliberal practice and sociological ideas. We cannot explain (or even observe) this battle directly and so, retroductively, we infer an explanation from that which we can observe, namely, the self-descriptions of sociologists. My initial assumption here is that the battle is reflective of a dialectic contradiction between careerism and public engagement.

We can break down the cycle of retroduction into two distinctive and complementary modes of inference: abductive and retroductive. Abduction is the identification of an anomaly, or 'surprising data', which falls outside of the initial premise of the study; in other words,

abductive inferencing indicates "a side movement" – which allows one to pose a problem (Danemark et al. 1997). The side movement in my case was the surprising observation that sociologists wielded strongly dualistic self-images which they appeared to be largely unconscious of enacting. Abduction forms the basis for retroduction: "Abductive conclusions provide the starting point for retroductive inferences. The latter informs the tenability of the former" (Ritz 2020:456).

Retroduction, which follows in the cycle from abduction, is the process by which the researcher identifies the likely conditions without which the perceived situation cannot exist. This involves the development of a theory or idea which best explains or predicts the surprising observation. According to Frauley and Pearce (2007:19): "A retroductive analytic is used to create a theoretical model of what might exist and what, if true, could explain the existence of that which is observed".

The observable emergence of tensions in academics' revelations suggested a fraught sense of academic identity. I postulated and identified a primary contradiction as a hypothesis – namely, careerist insularity in relation to critical public engagement – contextualised by neoliberal rationalisation and operating 'below the level of consciousness' as "the mechanism which, if it existed and acted in the postulated manner, could account for the phenomenon singled out for investigation" (Lawson, 1998:156). In essence, I was inferring an underlying contradiction – something not directly visible – which I surmise as the best explanation for the respondents' talk of contradictory tendencies but an unawareness that these tendencies are connected and mutually-constituted.

To break this down, in the abductive phase, I proposed an observed divergence from expectation: in practice, academics experience identity in systemically fraught ways. In the retroductive phase, I postulate a premise to explain this divergence. I retroductively infer that the neoliberalising academy inherently contains a primary contradiction, where it prioritises careerist insularity over critical public engagement.

The true explanatory weight of the contradiction becomes clear in participants' specific feedback. It shows that where the researcher perceived its existence, the relationship between insular careerism and critical public engagement indeed has a generative influence on academic identity. Because the researcher is so intrinsically embedded in the social context under research, the conclusions drawn happen in 'the moment', subject to folding back into the process of reproblematisation because "[e]lements of justification are formulated and

rearticulated in each 'moment' of the retroductive cycle in a way that demonstrates how they are over-determined by aspects of the discovery process"(Glynos and Howarth 2018: 4).

The interviewed sociologists revealed a striking polarity – an 'unseeable phenomenon' – evident in their responses, where a messianic ideal coexisted with a jaded reality of conformity. This pervasive, binarised self-conception emerged consistently across interviews, though expressed in distinct ways by different academics. Oppositions in self-understanding were prickling to the surface, as starkly divergent, and there was a recurring depiction of an idea of what an authentic existence as a sociologist entailed versus a commodified façade of imposture. This unexpected finding prompted a reflective process to interpret its meaning, leading to an extended period of discovery, literature review, and introspection. Unaware at the time, I was engaging in retroduction. Though not intentionally or clinically pursued, it was through retroductive inference that I ultimately conceptually framed the tensions I had detected.

Retroduction as an inferential reasoning process is not immediate. It required revisiting interview data, abstracting key concepts, and postulating explanations. Through an intensive interrogation of the fieldwork data, I retroductively hypothesised that a dialectical contradiction (careerist insularity in tension with critical public engagement) is what constitutes the internal relation characterising the neoliberal university, a contradiction which animated interviewed sociologists' perspectives.

Retroduction unfolded in concert with the process of abstraction. Sparked by my increasing interest in Marxist dialectic philosophy, and in a process of discovery, I embarked on the " first journey" of abstracting out of complex reality a clear view of the neoliberal university's influence on sociologists' identities and practices which in hindsight via abstraction (vantage, extension, generality) clarified for me the validity of the hypothesised contradiction.

5.5.8. Thematic Analysis

The mode of reporting for the research findings was thematic analysis. Repeated and recursive readings of the transcriptions enabled the pinpointing, re-examination, and corroboration of increasingly distilled and refined categories and codes. Thematic analysis involves:

> [A] selection of the unit of analysis, subjective observation of the realities of the phenomenon, becoming an instrument for data analysis, looking for multiple realities behind the data, categorising and finding themes from categories and through analytical insights to present an overall story line of data (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove 2019:2).

Thematic analysis is consistent with retroductive reasoning, in part, because it obtains abstract themes not only from manifest, but also, latent content in the qualitative data (Mukumbang *et al.* 2021; Mukumbang 2023). The retroductive strategy meant that I observed and assessed responses against the backdrop of a hypothesised primary contradiction, but also allowed the 'data to breathe' to incorporate unexpected revelations coming from academics. The thematic analysis and the themes which arise from it are meant to provide details on the conditions of existence of the contradiction. For Braun and Clarke (2006), this 'mode of reporting' entails a flexible process by which the researcher identifies patterns in the research data, signified by those responses which are prevalent across respondents or that capture something 'key' in relation to the research question.

This research, because of its qualitative nature, allows insight into some of the important perceptions which sustain the current configuration of the contradiction. Therefore, the conditions of existence unpacked in the following chapters are perceptual in nature. There are of course material conditions which sustain the existence of the contradiction. However, the focus of this study is on how academic perceptions about the world they are in sustains the dominating influence of neoliberalism over public engagement in practice. The study gave me the opportunity to bear witness to sociologists' immediate reflections on their perceived place in relation to society/social change. This entailed bringing to light tensions which go undisclosed in the daily work of academics. The in-depth interviews evoked two broad categories of perception: 1. Academic sociologists perceived the ideal of progressive, public intellectualism to exist on an ontologically distinct plane to everyday academic practices (Chapter Six): 2. Academic sociologists perceived themselves as existing externally to both the university (largely understood as management) and society (Chapter Seven).

These two broad categories are considered "as the first stage of reducing qualitative data" or the "the coding process" (Mukumbang 2023:104), later to be further broken down into sub-themes. Theming included "organising codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the research question" (Naeem *et al.* 2023: 4). Theming is followed by conceptualisation and interpretation of the content which interviews produced and that spoke to the research question.

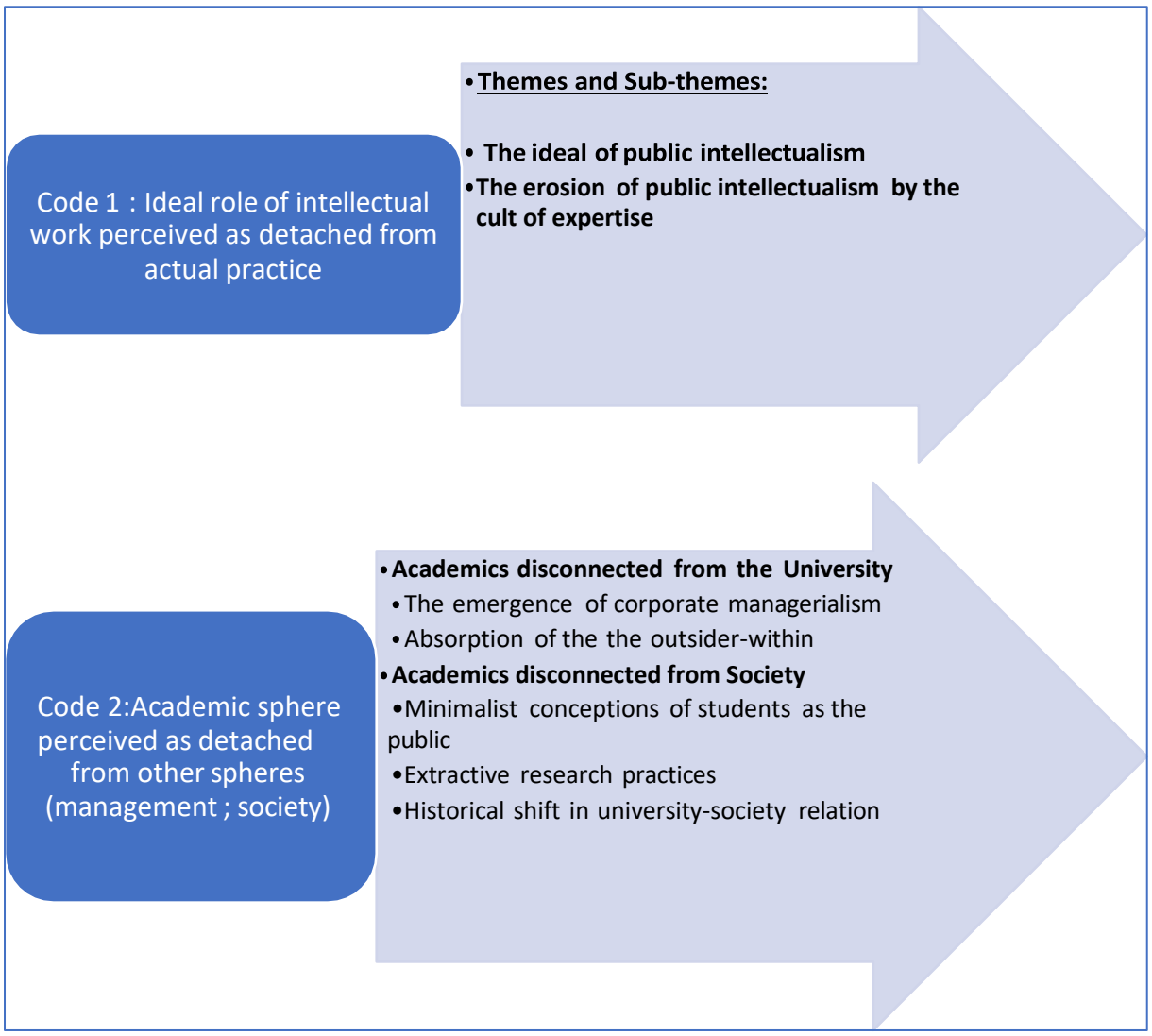

Figure 1: Codes and Themes

The data was broken down into two main codes which captured the essence of what was fascinating about the interview content and detailed in the analysis in Chapters Six and Seven. Code 1 presented in Figure 1, is dealt with in Chapter Six where the enduring fidelity to a utopian ideal which sociologist hold of the disciplinary community is discussed. Deeply interwoven with this ideal are sociologists' descriptions of a dystopic academic world in which they currently exist, producing a fascinating contrast. Chapter Seven, deals with Code 2 presented in Figure 1. Whereas Code 1 labels sociologists' distant relation to their ideal of public intellectualism, Code 2 labels their descriptions of the real world which support this dissonance. Code 2 is based on academics' descriptions of university management and society, which gives a sense of how they locate their proximal position in society.

The codes represent the segmentation of the data as it is given to the researcher. Based on my reading of the data, I then attach themes to these codes. The themes which are generated for Code 1 relates to public intellectualism in contrast to the cult of expertise. The themes and sub-themes which are created for Code 2 relate to the rise of the managerial class, and academics' cynical view of their place in society, which together reflect an 'us and them' social context for academic work indicative of academic agency under neoliberalism.

5.5.9. Ethical Issues

In peer-based institutional ethnographies, ethical issues may arise from participants' fears that personal information could be misused by the researcher. Currently, there are few fixed guidelines, either internationally or in South Africa, addressing the specific ethical implications of role fluidity in institutional ethnographies conducted within one's own discipline or organisation (Floyd et al., 2012; Buys et al., 2022). Contrary to the negative assumption that interviewing colleagues would foster insecurity, my research revealed a different outcome. Like Aase (2006), I found that interviewees appeared relieved to have the opportunity to discuss the meaning of their professional lives and seemed to embrace the therapeutic aspect of sharing with a peer (while keeping in mind the identitarian dynamics outlined earlier). Aburn et al. (2021) affirm that, in collegial research, faster and deeper rapport tends to be established than in other contexts.

Nonetheless, ethical issues were still mitigated through stage-setting conversations before the interviews, during which the underlying conceptual interest was explained at length to clarify the research aims and reassure participants that eliciting sensitive disclosures from individual sociologists was not the focus of the research. Furthermore, as Brinkmann (2022:63) encourages researchers to do, respondents were assured that "he or she is the expert on that person's own life and experiences, which means that there are normally no right or wrong answers." The initial introductory stage of the interviews appeared to allay any concerns participants may have had about the risks of participation.

Research participants were given the assurance that anonymity would be guaranteed using pseudonyms, including the concealment of institutional affiliation in the final ethnography. They were notified of their right to withdraw any information they volunteered at any point of the project. The interview audio and transcriptions were securely stored with access only available to the researcher.

Fully informed consent was not feasible. This is because of gradual shifts in the focus of inquiry as a result of the indirect revelations during the interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018:30) recognise the common tendency in qualitative interviews for "unanticipated leads" to refocus research, so that initial research questions do not necessarily predetermine the final goals of the research. Based on the high likelihood of unexpected revelations and the subsequent reformulation of the goals of qualitative research, it is not always possible to obtain fully informed consent at the start of the process:

> While fully informed consent is highly pertinent in high-risk medical experiments, it is less relevant and feasible in low-risk field studies and interviews. With the reconfigured relationships of qualitative research as cooperative, mutual, democratic and open-ended, key issues of common ethical guidelines become non- issues (Brinkman and Kvale 2018:30).

The non-applicability of traditional ethical guidelines to this study includes "gatekeepers' permission". Gatekeepers' permission is a standard consideration in assessing the risk profile of a study, and includes weighing the need for formal permission from an organisational 'guardian' who is given the opportunity to determine whether the research will benefit the organisation or the extent to which it will be disruptive to its activities (Homan 2001). Gatekeepers' permission can be a tricky principle to apply as it entails balancing an individual's right to make autonomous decisions (to participate) and the integrity and legal rights of the organisation with which they are aligned. Many in the social sciences are cautious about applying the gatekeeper principle. Gatekeepers' permission is questioned because it can create hindrances to free and voluntary participation when the caveat for permission from an authoritative institutional figure is introduced in the process, particularly in institutional contexts defined by power imbalances (Campbell *et* al. 2006).

Qualitative researchers, for instance, have raised concerns about how the quality of participant feedback may be diminished by actual or implied institutional paternalism, such as the threat of intimidation or exposure to surveillance from those in gatekeeper positions, for example a line manager (Kalina and Scott 2019). In this study, I opted to waive gatekeeper permission, as it was considered an infringement on the right to self-expression of those invited to participate. Academics were reflecting on their individual experiences, not acting as representatives of their specific universities.

Qualitative social research is inherently complex, and thus, “ethical universalism” was circumvented (Miller and Boulton, 2007: 2199). Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the Human Research Ethics Committee at Rhodes University in conjunction with the Faculty of Humanities Higher Degrees Committee, with no perceivable harm caused to participants during data collection.

5.6. Conclusion

Chapter Five traces some of the remembered lines that have shaped my journey in academia, beginning with a strong disciplinary identification as a student, later fractured by the social context in which I encountered the discipline as a new lecturer—a context siloed from society and rooted in the default positioning of white masculinity as the normative subjectivity. My journey from the defeat of alienation to awakening through the revelations of dialectical thought forms the individual context from which this research inquiry, the context of data collection, and the methodological considerations emerge. This chapter outlines the thought processes that sparked my interest in a renewed recognition of contradiction as the lynchpin of social change and possibility, particularly in considering the role of the humanities.

Reflexive ethnography, in concert with dialectical, relational, and feminist philosophic influences, buffers the study from largesse by highlighting the situatedness and embeddedness of the researcher as an implicit subject of the study, thus precluding grandiose ambitions such as seeing beyond the self-enclosed discipline or seeking to burst wide open the enclave of the university. The methodological section clarifies my multivalent and embedded position as an academic and researcher, thus assigning me the modest task of refining, through conceptualisation and critique, the boundary lines between the neoliberal academy and the society we navigate as sociologists.

Through turning the tools of objectivation on academics, ethnography highlights that through our inevitable entanglement with the public, we may strive towards (at least in ideal) new self-understandings that capture contradictory relationality (e.g., between intellectual ideals and systemic constraints), thus moving beyond the feckless fatalism wrought by ever-evolving systems of oppression and alienation.

The methodological approach draws from a dialectical and reflexive orientation, to gain nuanced insights into the tensions and antinomies that academics grapple with as they navigate the contradictory terrain of the neoliberal university.

CHAPTER SIX: CONTEXTUALISING PARADOXES AND PARADOX ONE

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, we will see how sociologists unconsciously privilege external relations philosophy in their framing of reality. Their views of absolute separations between 'things' are defined as 'paradoxes': in Chapter Six, as the detachment of ideals from actuality, and in Chapter Seven (as the detachment of the academic sphere from other social spheres). Dichotomous understandings in educational environments pose a significant barrier to overcoming the *illusio* through which neoliberal hegemony is reproduced. Sociologists' chartings of both paradoxes reveal the pervasiveness of this misrepresentation of reality.

Sections 6.2 and 6.3 position the subsequent analysis within the broad conceptual framework of relational-dialectical theory. These sections highlight the second journey of abstraction, capitalism's obscuration of reality, and the concept of *illusio* as the conceptual scaffolding from which the analysis derives its context. Section 6.4 unpacks the distinctive accounts of sociologists that inform Paradox One. Their conception of reality—where the ideal is bifurcated from possibility—captures the advance of neoliberalism within the South African academy.

6.2. Sociologists Privileging of Undialectical Paradoxes

The first paradox is dealt with in Chapter Six: academics perceive and experience the ideal of public intellectualism as existing on an ontologically separate plane from everyday work (i.e., practice). For them, the ideal of progressive academic life is being undercut by separate regressive forces acting upon the academic community.

Chapter Seven explores the second paradox perceived and experienced by academics, that is, academics seeing themselves as a group existing and acting externally to other spheres but all on the same ontological plane, notably the university sphere (viewed as management structures) and the sphere of wider society. The perceived alienation of academics from their core emancipating possibilities and from other social spheres to which they are purportedly beholden, reflects the profound psychosocial impacts of internalised neoliberalism.

Based on interview data, a particular tension (animated by internal relations) has been deciphered for investigation, between insular careerism and critical public engagement. I argue that this tension exists and animates everyday academic relations, that it is dialectical in nature,

and that it defines the mutually constitutive relation between academic identity and the university. My argument is that academics struggle to articulate the world in a way consistent with this tension, as they see the world in the form of paradoxes, thereby reinforcing a hopelessness about their capacity to fulfil the ideals of the public good contained within the discipline. My claim is rooted in an internal relations perspective. It appears then that the interviewed sociologists do not see the internal ties, the necessary contact, between elements of reality and the possibilities these intersections pose. Across Chapters Six and Seven, I present respondents' feedback which demonstrate this.

To reiterate, the analyses show that sociologists experience the posited tension as an external paradox, and not a dialectical contradiction. Sociologists see in academic society an irreconcilable split between a dominant practice (defined by neoliberal characteristics) from its progressive 'other' (defined in terms of critical public engagement), which are perceived as pulling in opposite directions without being mutually constituted and intertwined. Across all the interviews, academics did not show an appreciation for defining critical public engagement and insular careerism as internally counteracted. Instead, they tended to view these realms of practice as constituted in-and-of-themselves, leading to the belief that pursuing one requires abandoning the other.

Their external relations expressions are summed up in the paradoxes: between the ideal of intellectual work and daily academic practice (Chapter Six) and between the academic sphere and other spheres, namely, the university-management and wider society (Chapter Seven).

While not denying the reality of the understanding and experiences of academics, I argue that this tendency to perceive reality as external relations reflects the inversion of reality by capitalism, as well as the suppression of introspective scrutiny which this obscuration encourages in bearers of the system.

The case I am making for internal relations, therefore, acts as a counterpoint to the interpretive frameworks of the interviewees. They do not explicitly defend external relations thinking, yet it proliferates through their common-sense understandings, which deny, mask, or otherwise distort contradictions – just as Ollman predicts will be the tendency of non-dialectical thinkers:

> For non-dialectical thinkers, operating out of a common-sense view, real contradictions can be understood only as differences, paradox, opposition, strain, tension, dislocation, imbalance, or, if accompanied by open strife, conflict. But without the dialectical notion of contradiction, they seldom see and can never

> adequately grasp the underlying forces responsible for these appearances. And, of course, they can never grasp the development or gauge the force of these tendencies before they have made their way to the surface of events (Ollman 1993:17).

The sociologists present sense-making mechanisms that facilitates binarist formulations which untenably alienate them from the true possibilities contained in dialectical constitutions. Instead, the superiority of external relations as a frame of understanding in the interviews pitches oppositions as parallel dualisms, denying the existence of parts and wholes as inter-related co-elements of the same antagonistic unity.

How we see the world matters! Because it reflects the imputation of parts onto the whole – and vice versa – and our perspectives themselves, which are shaped by the functioning of totality. For Ollman (2015:14), "the forms and patterns in which we think about reality acquire a shape and organisation that come as much from us as from the world we inhabit". In other words, without knowing it, these sociologists are reifying the inverted phenomenal forms by which capitalism obscures reality. Despite the interviewees' differences, there is a remarkable similarity in the distinctions made of academic experience. The concordance in the feedback of what academe means for them is explained by Bourdieu (1988:143), who suggests that the internalisation of dominant structures in a shared field engenders "a fairly stable and homogeneous set of social and academic characteristics".

Ultimately, the contradictions' true nature is hidden from academics. Therefore, this and the following analysis chapter deal with how academic identity is impacted by the tension between careerism and public engagement, as well as its concealment and misrecognition.

This tendency to falsely identify reality as external relations, which Ollman (2015: 8) attests is a common occurrence, constrains the imagination of alternatives to the neoliberal academy that sociologists might otherwise access. Existing outside the grasp of their immediate articulations are internal relations, depicting social relations as subtly and internally inter-connected, pulling simultaneously in multiple directions, including interfering with and struggling against the other in a perpetual process of mutual constitution. These internal relations mediate and refract experiences in an ongoing process of internal redefinition. Dynamic re-composition entails multiple interstitial opportunities for staking out agency and movement, currently obscured by academic external-relations conceptualisations.

Internal relations philosophy enables the realisation that, rather than being completely absent, alternatives to dominant practices exist within the very constitution of dominant practices. The

university is not a static entity or fixed endpoint but a dynamic collection of contradictory practices – something academic sociologists' articulations fail to reflect as central to their self-understanding.

6.3. Using the Dialectical-Relational Conceptual Framework

The analysis is guided by a dialectical-relational framework. In this section, links are established between the framework, and the findings. Specifically, Section 6.3 outlines the place of empirical work in the method of abstraction, establishing its importance as a part of the second journey. In the second journey, the findings overlay the initial abstractions—integrating the perspectives of sociologists captured at a specific moment in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.Through the prism of their academic identities, we can glimpse a partial reflection of the neoliberal university or totality. What we see, is a world that coincides with external relations philosophy. The tendency for academics to see tensions as externally related is constitutive of neoliberal capitalism and its tendency to invert the true nature of reality. By obscuring the antagonistic underlying relations, a 'smooth' system is presented on the surface which individuals misconstrue as an either/or reality, resulting in a sense of inevitability (illusio) to which they conform.

6.3.1. The Second Journey of Abstraction

Chapter Six and Chapter Seven imbricate the unique inflexions of participants s to re-complexify the simple contradiction, albeit in a more organised manner than we began, that is moving from abstraction to 'the concrete in thought'.

The self-contained abstractions that we arrive at after the first journey do not reflect the dynamism inherent in the totality. Therefore, the 'storylines' of individual sociologists gives meaning to the conditions of existence for the primary contradiction as it manifests in real experience. The conditions of existence clarified by empirical nuance include a picture of the moving whole in a given moment as it is reflected in the parts, and provides contextual specificity for the parts.

According to Jossa (2017:6), "for a contradiction to qualify as dialectical, it must express the essence of movement". Empirical detail provides 'the movement' that allows us insights into what Althusser (2005: 206; original emphasis) refers to as "*the unity of the complex whole within each contradiction,* the most profound characteristic of the Marxist dialectic". The second journey connects the parts with the whole, showing that something seemingly as

mundane as how academics go about their work is actually reflective of the movement, that is, the clash and divisions between worldwide experiments that seek to equate education with the market economy, and human resistance against that.

In addition, the qualitative findings in the second journey reintroduces the complexity of individual context to the primary contradiction. Contextual specificity is important for understanding contradictions, according to Marx (1993:105), because,

> Even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historical relations and possess their full validity only for and within them.

This quote highlights that even though the thesis deals with the timeless question of capitalism's assault on collectivity and freedom, the question is asked and answered within a specific environment. The history of racial capitalism in South Africa and the local shaping of sociology's trajectory – how each interviewee's story intersects with it, culminating in the interviewee's opportunity to speak about it in a very particular moment – creates a distinct lens through which even the simplest, decontextual abstractions in higher education, such as the 'neoliberal university' or 'academic identity,' are understood. The intuitive appeal of these universal categories, after all, is because they are rooted in each individual's practical and historical experience of them.

6.3.2 The Obscured Contradictions of Academic Life Under Capitalism

The 'inversion thesis' of capitalism, as explained by Best (2010:35), suggests that "capitalist society generates mystifying and obfuscatory appearances of itself as [a part of the] necessary condition of its own reproduction [;] … one way is as the repression of a historical sensibility and of the self-reflexivity of collective subjectivity in capitalist society". Similarly, Marxist theorist Stuart Hall (2003:140) argues that capitalism's "antagonistic real relations" are made to appear flattened on the surface, shaping the "consciousness of the bearers of the system". In this inverted picture of reality, the humanities' intellectuals distanciation from society seems appropriate, management's power in relation to academics seems normal, and everything appears to be working as it should. For subjects of this system, "the sense of capitalism's movement as socially-created or historically produced" is obscured, thus institutionalising inverted reality as truth (Hall 2003:140). Neoliberalism capitalism relates to academic labour according to the same principle, so that "capital's drive to self-valorisation depends on

overriding itself on labour's creative potential and making it subservient to its ends" (Szadkowski and Krzeski 2022: 196).

Several academics admitted during interviews that they had never contemplated the explicit meaning of their intellectual practices in relation to society until the moment of the interview. This lack of reflection is compounded by an acceptance of what the neoliberal system propagates as "the socially valid and therefore objective thought forms" (Hall 2003:140). The prevailing scholarly view reflects the neoliberal depiction of academic reality as stable and balanced, portraying opposing trajectories of practice as externally related and ultimately cancelling each other out, producing an equilibrium. The impressions shared by the academics capture to some extent the mystifying and obfuscatory appearance of higher education under capitalism. The concealment of internal relations results in the false presentation of a single pathway, a sole available intellectual pursuit: the commodification of work and the cult of expertise in the pursuit of individual prestige and careerism. Neoliberal capitalism frames self-actualisation in terms of *homo economicus* – a figure Foucault (2008: 226; 270) describes as "an entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, and who responds systematically to systemic modifications artificially introduced into the environment." This logic extends to the concept of *illusio*, which captures the tendency for affirmative responsiveness from sociologists to the neoliberal reshaping of their profession.

6.3.3. The "illusio" of South African sociologists

The inversion thesis, discussed in Section 6.3.2, explains how neoliberalism as a system distorts the true nature of higher education, concealing the 'real antagonistic relations' from view, thereby disconnecting academics from self-awareness and placing them in a liminal state of existence. In contrast, external relations describe how academics perceive this distorted reality, as paradoxes. Going deeper, Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* (introduced in Section 2.8) captures individuals' inclinations as they face this inverted, and dissected reality. Illusio gives a language to the tendency for sociologists, who face this compartmentalised reality in which internal relations are masked, to practically respond, by attempting to master life within it.

Bourdieu's widely neglected concept of 'illusio' brilliantly captures the observations in Chapters Six and Seven of sociologists who reproduce the system without being fully aware of the underlying rules they have internalised to do so. To build on earlier definitions, Bourdieu (1980) defines 'illusio' as a self-entanglement in a dominant logic, where,

> [T]he more they are caught up in the game, the more they find it meaningful and, in this sense, the more they are interested in it. This self-confirmation, or rather this self-involvement, which creates and reveals interest in the game and the prize of the game, I shall call illusio (Bourdieu, 1980: 66).

Illusio in part addresses why the sociologists admitted to adhering to the predetermined, tacitly agreed upon rules of a doxa[6] which they ostensibly critique. Respondents described sociology in crisis terms, highlighting their perpetual struggle against managerial enclosures of intellectual and political creativity, yet they still actively hankered after patronage, status, and specialisation within this very neoliberal context. The concept of illusio captures the complicity of academic sociologists who are in a race to win at what they purportedly hate.

Like all bearers of capitalism, sociologists see the world in a particular inverted way. While authentic and valid as their phenomenological experiences, it is based on an unconsciousness of underlying relations, leading to the internalisation of the neoliberal game as a stable and singular reality. This impels a desire, even pleasure, in sociologists to do well in the neoliberal game. Illusio describes the desire to win at a game for which one may feel even visceral disdain, which is the experiential trap that could be inferred from sociologists' answers.

Particular dimensions of illusio garnered from the interviews are conceptualised in 6.3.4 and this sets an analytic background for the first-hand narratives in the upcoming empirical discussions. These dimensions of illusio scaffold the results that show academics perpetuate neoliberal life even when notice of its perversion are highly pronounced within the discourses of the discipline. The interviews describe a disciplinary community which reluctantly conforms with bureaucratic administration and its output-metrics frenzy, conflicted by discomfort (not quite guilt) at the abandonment of public engagement. Instead of the appearance of neoliberal instruments provoking disquiet and contention, academics describe a world instead where a particular pleasure and pride of place in the pursuit of the unquestioned game prevails. The drive to excel and root one's self-realisation in the academic 'habitus'(introduced in Section 2.8) as it stands, proves to be overwhelming but 'automatic', manifesting as a compulsion "function[ing] below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will" (Bourdieu 1979:466). Relational, and specifically, dialectical perspectives account profoundly for the subconscious elements of identity

[6] Doxa – Introduced in Section 2.8, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of doxa aligns with Gramsci's hegemony, describing how the dominant system is made to appear as common sense or anti-ideological. In academia, doxa frames the neoliberal world as self-evident and inescapable.

construction, where interviewees develop self-images guided by the dynamic interplay between (un)awareness and (un)reflexiveness of motivations typically beyond their own conscious consideration.

While illusio speaks to the preconscious affirmation of a system, academics of course are not entirely unconscious of their roles in reproducing the status quo either. Krinsky (2021: 184) suggests that practice mediates awareness. This awareness is what Farrugia (2013: 294) calls "practical intelligibility", which describes the way the world is made apparent in the process of acting within it: "The world is made intelligible through practical engagement, and knowledge of it is constituted by embodied capacities, to act within it".

A Bourdieusian understanding (1988:783) is one where academics in the main function based on an internalised sense of "the only things to do" in a given situation because "they anticipate the necessity immanent in the way of their world". This is perhaps to be understood as a kind of preconsciousness defined by the perceived inevitability of the processes underpinning practice. This means that participation most likely takes place somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness of the system. Margaret Archer (2003), a favourite for higher education researchers, denies the existence of pre-reflexive dispositions such as 'illusio'; instead, she insists that 'thinking subjects' can reflexively and cognitively perceive their positionality in relation to structures through self-talk or 'internal conversations'.

An internal relations perspective would disagree with Archer and align with Bourdieu. Outside of the practical intelligibility in which academics may occasionally sense disconnection from self, and isolation from society, individual collusion with the system largely falls outside of their consciousness. The academics' responses confirmed this. They revealed an unawareness of their daily and individual complicity in reproducing attitudes, and routines which enforce neoliberal business as usual, instead externalising the blame for neoliberalism's reproduction. It appears neoliberal rationality is so infused in their academic identities that they can mainly recognise external forms of the system without seeing their own internal, complicity in its reproduction. According to Bourdieu (2000:102), "participants have ultimately no answer to questions about reasons for their membership in the game, their visceral commitment to it".

The adherence to neoliberal rules is seen by some respondents as an active compliance by academics who are self-interested; others see it as the passive compliance of academics who are resistant to but powerless in the determination of the conditions of their work. Both those who see active complicity and those who see passive acceptance as the mode of functioning

within neoliberal universities, tend to see the conditions of neoliberal work as imposed on them from outside and which they are hapless to accept. The imposition of rules and compliance (actively or passively) is perceived within the phenomenal realm of practice. Generally hidden from view, just below the level of consciousness, is the overarching function of their adherence to the reproduction of capitalist totality. Therefore, interviewees tend to be conscious of tensions at the phenomenal level of practice but not of the underlying internal contradictions related to capitalism.

Of course, this depends on the academic interviewed. Awareness of contradictions emerges through practice, yet not everyone recognises them at the same rate or in the same ways. Some, like Marcus, lucidly refer to neoliberalism, while others, like Nokuthula, speak passionately of academic individualism without linking it to broader systems and contradictions. As Scott (2023: 5) argues, the price to be paid for compliance is "the misrecognition of the reproductive nature of field structures".

6.3.4. The Path of Least Resistance: Illusio and Academic Culture

Respondents' answers reveal illusio manifesting in three interconnected forms: first, in the repetition-compulsion of sociologists upholding the status quo; second, in resignation to a perceived absence of alternatives; and third, in the propagation of neoliberal processes through the avoidance of self-criticism.

6.3.4.1 'Repetition Compulsion' – Just going with the way things are

Di Leo (2016:159), drawing on Freud, likens collusion with a system perceived as undesirable to a neurotic "repetition compulsion". Tomaselli (2015), also relying on notions of psychological impairment, calls the collective concession to the current neoliberal order within the university "academentia". In the interviews, Norah describes academics' repetitive choices to bypass the public, opting instead for compulsive individualism as a standard rather than a major source of disciplinary conflict. Norah observes,

> I think to a large extent if I were to look at what happens around me, people are in it for themselves. It is about careers and it is about getting as far ahead in as quick a period as possible and whatever it takes. I am not sure what the emphasis is at other universities, but certainly here, we have got the research and the teaching and equally the community engagement, where we are encouraged a lot to engage with the community and to kind of break down the idea that we are the ivory tower, [to

> show] that we connect. To show that we are part of the community and that whatever we are doing here is in one way or another going to have feedback. [;] ... this part of the deal is not practised at all from what I see.

This 'repetition compulsion' is so strong that interviewees admit they often require external pressure, such as a push from students or management. to catalyse any significant shifts in the direction of their practice. For instance, when it comes to curriculum transformation, according to Nokuthula, the typical academic is largely compelled by institutional directives which they comply with for self-preservation, as opposed to being fuelled by genuine interest in social change

> We are reactive in our responses to transformation. I do not think there is genuine intent in terms of institutional transformation, policies on gender, on this and that. Academics have complied because we have been forced to comply.

Uche agrees that, without the student movements, academics may have never confronted their responsibility to address coloniality based on a disinclination to critique that which might rupture their own comfort. He affirms this when he says,

> Look, self-evaluation and self-critique are one of the difficult things to do. If you are sitting in a very comfortable zone you do not want change specially if there is no threat to your comfort … So perhaps if students were not there, [and] they never raised their voices, we would still go on as we were.

Uche explains that the academic's unwillingness to digress from the path of careerism is informed by a professional reality where there is a greater vested interest in avoiding change than in pursuing it:

> [S]o everybody now wants decolonisation and seem to be keenly interlinked with this discourse. Mind you, most of us, by us I mean the academic community, did not want to execute that kind of transformation. Why is it that way? It is either that the people are lazy to start the change within their own offices, they don't want their lives disrupted unnecessarily, within their own portfolios, or their own personal orientations as individuals… [Their practice] does not really agree with what they are researching on or what they speak about in lectures

Steve Fuller critically observes that academic culture often encourages what he terms "the path of least intellectual resistance" (2006: 152) or, as he later describes it, "institutionalised

cowardice" (2009: 86). This tendency toward 'repetition compulsion' reflects the deep entrenchment of prevailing values. Such dynamics resonate with Bourdieu's (1977) insight that regularity often serves as an indicator of effective control. As he notes, the most powerful ideological influences are those that operate silently, requiring nothing more than tacit compliance: "The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words and ask no more than complicitous silence" (Bourdieu 1977:188).

'Repetition compulsion' is the high watermark of contemporary academic capitalism, where control need not be enforced because subjects' police themselves into the routine of submission and complicity. According to Page (2020: 593), "going with the way things are" and choosing the path of least resistance is not as effortless as it sounds, for academics need to constantly "horizon scan" to make the adjustments that keep their position secure:

> "[A]cademics read the signs, they horizon-scan and adjust their work to fit the changing landscape, attempting all the time to achieve a consistency, a unity within an ever-shifting environment".

This inevitably leads to "[t]he DIY job of constant recasting of the commodified self – to remain employable, to achieve recognition, to avoid being invisible" (Page 2020: 592).

6.3.4.2 Resignation to the absence of alternatives

This tacit acceptance of the disappearance of activism and public engagement as worthwhile pursuits in the social sciences is complicitous with neoliberal principles. To use another of Bourdieu's (1979) concepts, this is a form of self-imposed symbolic violence which academics enable at their own peril. Bourdieu's (1979) notion of 'symbolic violence' is well paired with 'illusio' as a way of explaining the quiet academic resignation to capitalist enclosures. Symbolic violence, as introduced by Bourdieu, refers to the imposition of dominant cultural values, norms, and ideologies on social groups, often leading them to accept and internalise these values as natural and legitimate. For Roumbanis (2019:202), complicity, arbitrariness, and misrecognition are the most important aspects of this form of power. When we accept that 'there is no alternative' (T.I.N.A), as Margaret Thatcher once famously declared in defence of neoliberalism, we inadvertently participate in the symbolic violence perpetuated by capitalism. This form of violence, or power, subtly infiltrates daily life in ways that often remain invisible, even to academics, who may unknowingly enable it. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 167)

succinctly explain: “Symbolic violence, to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.”

The tendency of academics to see themselves as resigned and marginalised underdogs, for whom no alternatives seem to exist, rather than as powerful, agentic actors, is rooted in longstanding perceptions of academics as existing ‘outside’ of power. Theses such as Gouldner’s in *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979) portray academics as fundamentally critical of, yet indispensable to, the state. Positioned as producers of culture rather than goods, academics are depicted as autonomous but simultaneously subordinate to political power. This inclination to view themselves as marginal to power often skews their ability to accurately confront and acknowledge their own privileges and positions of power. This mystification of academics as marginalised and potentially revolutionary conceals their vested interest in dominant exclusionary and insular intellectual systems. Part of the concealment of their complicity with power serves the positioning of some academics as interlocutors and spokespeople for those on the margin. Academic’s hapless resignation to the absence of alternatives as though they were purely under the boot of elitism, instead of often being its wearer, enables insularity without the guilt.

Nokuthula speaks of the maintenance of this dynamic as intentional on the part of academics:

> How often do the debates that happen within this campus go out and spill over onto the community? We hardly find the debates we produce here, with a place over there …Us as academics, we lie in the way we do things, we lie! We are talking for society, but never invite them here … We are making debates about society yet detached from most of the people we talk about … It ends up being desktop studies, cheap lecturing, cheap academia, glorifying our desks, glorifying the libraries without actually making any difference to communities.

Sociologists’ internalisation and pursuit of neoliberal values, as conceptualised through the notion of *illusio*, is evidenced by patterns of ‘repetition compulsion’, a resigned acceptance of the absence of alternatives, and, ultimately, a sustained avoidance of self-critique regarding these very tendencies.

6.3.4.3 Avoidance of self-critique

According to Robbins (1993:x), academics as a group exhibit the tendency to “exempt itself from its own analyses, claiming an inexplicable immunity to the determinations it finds

analytically everywhere else, and is unwilling to account for the fact of its own existence". Norah perceives material gain and survival as the primary reason that sociologists so infrequently engage in self-reflection and critique because, as she puts it:

> There are lots of vested interests in [continuing] the way things are and the way things work… They have got lots to protect. They have got careers, they have got pensions, they have got all sorts of things. There is lots of personal interest, based on what they are doing and how they are doing which make it difficult actually to say that, you know, "I might be part of the problem".

Nokuthula echoes this sentiment, affirming,

> It is very clear they know where their bread is buttered is it not? It is abundantly clear where academics stand. They are aware of where their allegiances lie. So, as it stands, they say, let me protect my buttered bread as my priority… l will make [radical critiques] here and there, but I must not be seen as that kind of lone academic… Those lone academics become the victims themselves, threatened with contracts and expulsion.

It is interesting to note that, while academics at times did reflect on academic complicity, they often did it by placing themselves outside of the reward-focused individualism they described as the problem. Nokuthula and Zane, for instance, do not always say "I", "our", or "we" but more often "they" or "the professor".

Most of the academics, contra Benny, tend to view universities as regressive entities. Within this narrative, blame is not placed on the subject positions or belief systems of academics or the inward-looking orientation of academic departments, but rather on the firm control exerted by management which elicits acquiescence and conformity from academics. Their own complicity is denied largely through omission.

The avoidance of self-critique could be a result of what some of the academics described as the automatic legitimacy which they feel society bestows on them because of their professions. For Marcus, academics are inclined not to interrogate their complicity in systems of inequality and power because the veneer of all-knowing prestige which society reflects on to them, and which they internalise (note, in the quotation, the depersonalisation in his use of pronouns):

> I suppose there is this thing in society that you look up to academics, "they the ones with the answers," I suppose it is how society treats *them*. You see it on television,

> all you need to do is slap a white overall on a person or a white jacket and give *them* a clipboard and they know this must be a person of authority they must know what they are talking about (own emphasis).

Norah suggests that society's tendency to automatically attribute legitimacy to academics is heightened in disciplines less familiar to the public, such as Sociology. Paradoxically, Sociology's limited presence in everyday societal discourse grants it legitimacy, as its unfamiliarity shields it from public critique and, consequently, from self-critique.

> It is highly regarded if you are an academic at a university. It says that, correctly or incorrectly, that you must be doing something. Especially with being a Sociologist, because people do not know what Sociologists are. … People do not really know how to engage with a Sociologist.

One wonders how a public, state-funded institution like the university manages to evade the scrutiny and demand for accountability that other public institutions routinely face.

David also talks to the legitimacy which society uncritically affords academics by assuming scholars at a public university have a natural value to the society in which they exist simply by working within the university space, an assumption which goes largely uninterrogated by society itself (which is very interesting given the large sums of public funds which universities use):

> It's interesting that even in a grossly unequal society like South Africa, where you have large scale unemployment and poverty, there is this feeling that it is okay to have these elitist institutions. Like these beautiful gardens; and trees; and the buildings and the fact that everybody here is well fed and well dressed. It is fine; the whole of society supports the fact that we have universities… nobody is going like, "You know elitist bastard, here we are starving and there you are…" People are instead going, "You're a university professor that is really cool. Thank you for coming to see us in this little rural village where we all are starving".

The 'cult of expertise,' which shields sociologists from (self-) critique, echoes Paolucci's (2008: 360–361) description of United States Sociology, where the discipline's historical collaboration with the state in social engineering and policy cemented its status as an authoritative political force acting through "the cloak of science … located at an intersection in the 'ideological state apparatus'".

The sanctified image of academics upheld by the public through both reverence and its opposite, indifference, grants sociologist's immunity from justifying their contributions to society. Immunity from critique gives sociologists access to a certain social power. According to Bartel (2021:25), "power derives from our inscrutability", such that "to demystify our work, to articulate it clearly, is to hand over the reins of power". Sociologists, in turn, reinforce their position on this distant perch by indulging in navel-gazing and inaccessible jargon-laden social critique that only their peers can make sense of well enough to challenge. According to Burawoy (2005a:17):

> [P]rofessional sociology can easily become focused on the seemingly irrelevant. In our attempt to defend our place in the world of science, we do have an interest in monopolising inaccessible knowledge, which can lead to incomprehensible grandiosity or narrow "methodism." …[P]athological tendencies toward ingrown sectarianism – communities of dogma that no longer offer any serious engagement with the infusion of values into public sociology.

Richard Rorty (1991:176) once set out that intellectuals are defined by the special individual need to dance with the ineffable, to coax it to reason, to pin down the sublime with words that are "not part of anyone's language game" but theirs. But he says that a public purpose is not fulfilled in meeting these idiosyncratic and individualistic needs. Rather, "social purposes are served by finding beautiful ways of harmonising interests, rather than sublime ways of detaching oneself from others interests" (Rorty 1991). The devices which sociologists use to avert this opportunity to humanise their interests are evident and interesting. There remains unexplored room to confront as a community as Gill (2011) urges – to turn our lens on our own labour, governance, and production. What might we find?

Jameson (2009) proposes, in his endorsement of Marx's method, that actively transcending the day-to-day constraints of capitalism on our human potential requires actively paying attention to the dialectical nature of reality's intertwined components. By br inging to the fore the concealed dialectical interplay between self-interested modes of work in contradiction with emancipatory modes of public intellectualism, we can begin to develop more advanced relational frameworks for understanding the increasingly complex university.

However, the interviews suggest we are far from this level of dialectical awareness, as the respondents tend to perceive the world primarily through external relations. Academics' framing of the academe in terms of external relations takes two key forms (or paradoxes) across

the nine interviews. The following section examines the first paradox, expanding on Section 6.3, by showing some of the detail for how academics internalise capitalism's distortions of their reality as 'external relations', reinforcing its obscuration through their immersion in the illusio.

6.4. Paradox One: The Ideal of Public Intellectualism as external to daily practise

In this section, the first key finding is discussed, that is, respondents see an external 'paradox' between the ideal and reality of academic practice. On one side of the first paradox is what the sociologists described, each of them in their own way, as an aspirational image of the discipline. This image described in distant and fantastical terms evokes a transcendent depiction of public intellectualism and influence. It is remarkable to find that all the sociologists (except Benny) described the ideal role of sociologists as existing outside of normative practice. In their own unique ways, each expressed that what it ought to mean to be a sociologist exists at an unreachable distance from banal everyday reality, which they pitch as the other pole of the binary.

In their dismayed observations that critical public engagement as a realisable practice had waned from the scene, they also affirmed it as a desired lodestone for South African Sociology. The academics' representation of public engagement as positioned as exterior to dominant principles of practice is not spelt out explicitly or intentionally in the interviews. Instead, they erratically shift between two stances. On the one hand, they refer to their roles as inherently progressive and emancipatory, particularly at the start of interviews, where they refer to their social purpose as elevated, revolutionary, and one of shaping society. And then, on the other hand, and dramatically and abruptly, usually later in the interview, they peripheralise sociology in practice as irrefutably restrained, routinised, mundane, professional, and clannish without consciously acknowledging the dramatic spiralling and splitting in their self-concepts.

The unconscious nature of these inconsistent expressions can be attributed to the admission by many of the interviewees that they hardly ever consciously consider questions of purpose directly. Their admitted lack of in-depth and broad consideration meant that few offered substantive analyses that extended beyond impromptu ruminations, which commonly resulted in binarist depictions of ideal versus practice, utopia versus dystopia. They did not generally offer granular details as to the nature and reasons for their paradoxical framing of academic identity or practice. Marcus admits, for instance,

> We do not really have time to reflect on these things. Many of the things you are asking me now, for the first time I am verbalising things on intellectual purpose. I have never really had time to sit down, other than in very general terms, I have never had time to or felt that I had to really think these things through.

The problem of 'time' is a problem central to academic labour and its conception under capitalism. In a communist or post-capitalist society, Marx and Engels (1975:299) theorised that the priority of labour time would be human development instead of commodity production, so that a new society would be defined by practices committed to developing the means for "a totality of human manifestations of life". Marx conceived of alternative conceptions of time that would "produce man in this entire richness of his being – produce the rich man profoundly". Hudis (2011: 290) highlights the central role of time in Marx's conception of labour's freedom, asserting that, for Marx, "the realisation of freedom involves the problem of time. Marx repeatedly emphasises throughout his work that in a new society time will become the space for human development."

Neoliberal capitalism places the direct and practical pursuit of humanist reflections, and organisation which this would inculcate, on a distant horizon by "refusing and alienating the humanity of intellectual work" and fostering instead "the desire for academic commodities as private property" (Hall 2020: 831-832). The routine pressures of academic work and the social malaise of life under capitalism make reflections on deeper purposes of higher education rare, as Long. (1992:2) explains:

> The percentage of those in the academy who think and write about the meaning and purpose of higher education is small in comparison with the total number of those who engage in pedagogical and governance roles. Many academicians tend to work without giving considered attention to the underlying premises that give their efforts legitimacy and meaning. Others, worn down by the pressures of daily responsibility, economic stringency, public suspicion, and cultural anti-intellectualism, lose interest in foundational questions.

For Dallyn *et al.* (2015:1033), "only one" labour-intensive activity is deemed truly worthy of time in the neoliberal university: the peer-reviewed journal publication. Yet, remarkably, this research finds that, for sociologists, despite the drastically shrinking time and space for engaging in work that escapes commodification, they maintain an internalised self-image as activists – though often without the corresponding active practice. This indicates to me that

internalised neoliberalism is entangled with internalised utopian desire. However, sociologists do not always see it in this way. Instead, the evidence points to the overarching view that utopian notions of public sociology exist compartmentalised on a mythical and elevated plane from everyday life. This is unpacked below.

6.4.1. Sociologists Between Utopian and Dystopian Self-Images

Arguably, few professions have access to a self-image quite as utopian as that of a left-leaning humanities and arts academic. Benny's views represent an intensive form of this utopian temperament. Unlike the other interviewees, who temper their romantic notions of sociology with some form of critique of the discipline or the university, he does not qualify his flowery descriptions of academic culture, which he sees as inherently, if not purely, progressive. Benny views academic life as buoyed by the sheer righteousness and immutability of university institutions, which he regards with a sense of moralistic universalism, describing them, for instance:

> [Universities] are probably the only real institutions in society with this level of egalitarianism.

His views occupy an extreme position on the spectrum of utopianism, a spectrum on which all of the other academics are situated, albeit in more modest ways. It is striking to see a senior academic like Benny embrace such romantic, even borderline naïve, notions of a complex institution like the university:

> All I know is that I work in a knowledge machine whose sole purpose it is to liberate society, and to a very large extent it is doing it.

A sense of hubris permeates the interviews, reflecting a widespread enthusiasm for the utopian ideal among sociologists. Many are drawn to the belief that academics are uniquely gifted – or burdened – with the responsibility to contribute to society in transformative ways. This interpretation of their role echoes classical depictions of the academic intellectual's "calling," portraying them as radical generalists: "[T]he philosophical gadfly, the public conscience, the outsider urging the crowd to wake up or die, and the professional irritant challenging entrenched interests" (Dallyn *et al.* 2015: 5-6).

Interviewees express this ardour with varying degrees of modesty – some only subtly hint at the magnitude of the ideal duty to society which they see for themselves, while others, like

Benny, exhibit zealotry in his descriptions of academics as unimpeachable figures of compelling social significance. The others, while not as intense, continue with the through line of visionary social purpose. For Uche, the breadth and elevation of sociology's purpose is represented by nothing less than the duty of "shaping and building society":

> *We shape society*. The social sciences and the humanities we shape society, *we orientate people and that is why the onus lies on us to ensure that we communicate the right lessons,* the right message, the right research because we are not going to be at the point where we are, where we want to be, if we do not inculcate the right knowledge. This era has to be shaped and in shaping this era we have to be sure that we communicate in a way that will actually build this society.

This grandiose self-assignment to shape and build society in the 'right' direction is reiterated by Zane who also sees the role of the sociologist as that of casting light on an unmoored society:

> I think primarily one would say we are public intellectuals who engage critically in debates, sharing ideas publicly, fearlessly and influencing decisions… We should be in a position to give guidance, or to at least give a strong opinion to policymakers on which direction policies could go.

Nokuthula, while maintaining a conception of sociology which is steadfastly romantic, also highlights practical participation in other spheres in fulfilling this perceived emancipatory mission of sociologists. For instance, for Nokuthula:

> In the end our mission is to challenge social oppression and foster learning.

Each interviewee described the sociologist's function as not only outward looking and public in nature, but also as one compelled by a revolutionary and emancipatory agenda. While clearly well-intentioned, the confident self-placement of academics as part of a progressive wave of humanity opposing the status quo can appear, at best, bold and pioneering in intention and, at worst, delusional, given their evident detachment from the transformational role they so passionately claim as their own.

So, why would sociologists claim so confidently for themselves a function which reads as utopian in the contemporary context of its relative absence? Sociology, as a modernist discipline, carries with it the residue of modernist, transcendent thinking, and its associated traditions. These traditions often regard the intellectual as a free-floating entity whose purported detachment grants them the stewardship of being "carriers of synthesis" – enabling

them to think and act universally on behalf of all society (Lavine 2017: 66). Notions such as Bourdieu's (2002) 'total intellectual' (inspired by Sartre), Benda's 'eternal intellectual' (Bauman 1987), or Foucault's (1980) 'universal intellectual' (inspired by figures like Marx) represent dominant and referent images of grandiosity. These ideas reflect the lofty responsibilities of knowledge workers as universal figures operating distinctly 'off-campus' – a concept that continues to hold traction in the minds and aspirations of sociologists.

However, post-modern revisions of the definition of the intellectual also carry influence, particularly in the sense that situational, fragmentary and fluid understandings of the meaning of the intellectual captures the pragmatic reality where "in class, status, and self-image the intellectual has become more solidly middle class, a [wo]man at a desk, married with children, living in a respectable suburb" (Jacoby 1987:117). Modernist ideas endure but do so alongside postmodern thinking which reflects general shifts in understanding of the role of the intellectual from a once authoritative modern position as 'legislator' of truths to being a more passive 'interpreter' or 'translator' of multiple social truths (Bauman 1987). Postmodernism has influenced a retreat from overarching enlightenment claims, pursuing instead the deconstruction of grand narratives and the promotion of knowledge as constellate and relativist over hierarchical. However, despite the significant epistemological influence of the "posts," which prompted a massive retreat from the grand theories of the Enlightenment, this shift appears, based on the interview data, to have had less impact on the acceptance of a subdued ideal role for the intellectual than posited. For instance, Pels (1995:79) predicts:

> While intellectuals have for centuries stood rather close to God, they have lately come down in the world in the footsteps of their former employer. Intellectuals have massively renounced their exalted position as guardians of universally grounded values and truths. They no longer claim an exquisite calling, an obligatory normative identity, or a special accountability for the whole.

Pels' prediction is certainly not true for this research where sociologists certainly put forward 'exalted' and 'exquisite' aspirations of an intellectual purpose defined by participation in social justice and public conscientisation. The sociologists' responses embody the radical thrust of the Saidian motif of the ideal intellectual as disseminator of justice and truth. For Said (1994:9), intellectuals are

> [E]ndowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role

> has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d'etre is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.

The noble 'will' to embody public intellectualism is undeniably present among sociologists. However, as Fuller (1999:85) argues, it is the structural and ideological circumstances of the academic profession that bear negatively on the actualisation of these justice-seeking desires. In the neoliberal university, sociologists become "conformist only in effect, not in intention" due to the constraints of their professional environment. For Burawoy (2007a:24), the big intellectual goals of sociology, in the form of the "original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom, or simply a better world that drew so many of us to sociology", is the "originating moral impetus" which persists latently in sociologists' self-concepts – because "the sociological spirit cannot be extinguished so easily".

6.4.1.1 The formation of a utopian disciplinary identity in studenthood

For a few of those interviewed, their initial romance with the discipline's subject matter as students defined Sociology as liberatory, a sentiment that sustains them more than the present-day distinction between themselves and society manages to degrade their thinking on the matter. Norah, for instance, begins her interview by recalling her first impressions of Sociology as a student, describing her immediate attraction to what she remembers as "a moment of awakening," encountering a liberatory realm that, even as a young scholar, she believed would fulfil a duty in "steering society":

> The experience of having my mind blown by ideas. It was just amazing. It was one of the best experiences I had ever had. In fact, sitting in a Sociology lecture, where all of a sudden, the world just fell into place and I felt my eyes had been opened. I really felt like I had been walking around in the dark and suddenly things opened up for me. So, it was just a liberating experience.

The student years are critical to disciplinary identification, an ongoing process by which one integrates the values of a discipline into one's self concept from the time of first exposure as a student to the lifelong internalisation of disciplinary values if one chooses the path of academia (Mclean *et al*. 2013; Weidman *et al.* 2001). Disciplinary identification refers to the extent to

which a scholar's field of study and the values it eschews becomes integrated into their self-concept (Grozev *et al.* 2024). It is key to academic identity formation and, in Sociology, often involves a personal awakening to the hidden workings of social systems. For sociology students, the first radicalisation and conscientisation happens in the realm of critical and professional sociology, not in the terrain of public action. According to Courtney (2012:55):

> In this way, professional sociology provides detailed and analytical information that describes an overview of societal systems often obscured or invisible at the individual level. It is in this sense emancipatory because it liberates people from the constraints of their social location; allowing people to view society from an impersonal perspective that identifies their location and relationships to others directly.

The birthmark of euphoria from encountering critical social theory and the self-understanding it enabled signposted many academics' initiation into the discipline as students. This zeal was especially evident in the accounts of those who had participated in or witnessed the scholar-activism of the 1980s and early 1990s in South Africa. As Metcalfe and Cock (2010: 72-73) note, the good lecturers of that era not only encouraged students to theorize about social movements but to create them actively, underscoring teaching itself as a potentially emancipatory act within sociology:

> [T]eaching is about the transformation of the social relations that shape our society, challenging the forms of domination and social injustice, uncovering the ideologies that conceal power relations and identifying the sources of power that could lead to a more egalitarian world (Mosoetsa 2009: 8; cited in Metcalfe and Cock 2010).

For Marcus, the political legacy of South African Sociology shapes his enduring belief that the discipline is inherently socially progressive and publicly oriented in its purpose. During his early identification with the discipline as a student, he witnessed the scholar-activism of the Apartheid era. This experience ingrained in him the expectation that Sociology should serve as a sphere of public thought and engagement—a view rooted in observing lecturers, peers, and even his own involvement in complex political settings where strategising, meeting with activists beyond the university, and mobilising from within were commonplace. Consequently, Marcus ambitiously articulates the role of Sociology in the terms of "creating professional revolutionaries."

He recalls summoning a favourite lecturer in the 1980s to raise a personal concern about the lack of "marketable skills" transferred to him and his peers in their postgraduate education in Sociology; he said to the lecturer:

> Just tell me, what are we being trained to do in the labour market?" I cannot have an Honours Degree where literally we did Marx, Luxembourg, Lenin, Trotsky, Poulantzas, Gramsci and he [the lecturer] sat quietly for a while then he said, "Well I suppose, professional revolutionaries" and that was all that we were trained to do. We were basically taught how to start and be part of a revolution.

Marcus shares that his foundational understanding of Sociology's purpose was deeply ingrained by his most impactful educators, who instilled in him Marx's dictum:

> "Philosophers will only interpret the world differently; the point is to change it" …That was very much the ethos. The [Sociology lecturers] wanted us to go out there and change the world.

How amazing it must have been to be a part of a period where academic ideas, and the relationships which were forged in Sociology, arose against the backdrop of an expectation that, realistically together, academics and activists could create incisions in the operat ion of power to set in motion the superior potential of collectivity, egalitarianism and togetherness. Like Marcus, David observed the realisation of the ideal of the Sociologist as a public intellectual up close in the 1980s. Widespread activism across South Africa and internationally against Apartheid created the context for the emergence and development of scholar-activism. For David, the past informs the persistence of the ideal for South African Sociology pictured as a disciplinary field which for him:

> Moves beyond the ivory tower and engages in consultation with communities and political groups, community organisations, NGOs, and trade unions, depending on your area.

The memory of Sociology as a site of public intellectualism in South Africa is carried not only in the memories of those who participated in the struggles against Apartheid, as it exists as well as a disciplinary legacy carried to some extent by those South African sociologists born generations after. Evelyn, a young, black academic in the first decade of her career, refers to that period of public sociology in South Africa as "a time of the citizen academic in public affairs". She draws on the history of the discipline to conclude that:

> The Marxists will always say the 1970s and 1980s, "those were the great years. We were so involved". I have not seen that kind of genuine teamwork between academics and communities that brings about social change in present-day South Africa.

A longing for public intellectualism often features prominently in the thinking of young and old sociologists as a persistent calling to contribute to something more extraordinary by actively serving social change. All the interviewed academics agreed that galvanising counterpower in thought and action defines the sine qua non of Sociology. Yet, for them, this core aspiration exists now only as an ideal, ontologically distinct and separated from disciplinary practice, placing it on a separate, incommensurable, and inaccessibly transcendent plane relative to professional practice. Sociologists perceive the kind of sociology with critical public engagement at its core, where intellectuals strive to change the world, as belonging to a different realm, not only temporally but structurally, far removed from the current reality which respondents evoke as one where academics are even afraid to speak up in university Senate meetings. According to Baloyi:

> We are scared. Why? Because you just want your licence to practice. You do not want to ruffle feathers. So, you know that as a change agent you are capable of many subversive ideas, but you don't pursue that position because you tell yourself: "I have to pay for a car. I have to make that bond work".

A strong agreement emerged that anxiety about job security permeates life in Sociology, fostering a despondency about academics' perceived status as change agents within the institution, and beyond. The fear and anxiety that sociologists feel which inhibits considerations outside of careerism appear to stem from management's auditing of productivity and collegial pressure for increased output production.

This corroborates the arguments of Section 3.2.2, which used Ranciere's terms to argue that research is employed as a function of neoliberal policing, including, as Dallyn *et al.* (2015: 1039) outlines, the use of "metrics as an enforced measure of academic capital, which clearly limits possibilities for broader intellectual engagement". In effect, sociologists who otherwise might be concerned with public engagement and justice-oriented work are pressured and policed into observing obscure imperatives for 'winning' through ranks and ratings. According to Fonn (2024), public universities in South Africa are peddling rankings systems run by profit-

maximising companies that are known to use unscientific and methodologically flawed proxies for measuring academic importance.

The perceived ontological split between actual institutional experience, and the ideal of sociological work, is exemplified by Zane, who explicitly defines the function of sociologists as equivalent to that of a public intellectual at the start of the interview:

> I think primarily one would say we are public intellectuals … who engage on the issues in society critically and in fact, cast light, publicly.

Yet, when referring to the reality of daily practice, he miraculously says the opposite:

> If social change is seen as mainly entrusted to universities, a project of intellectuals mainly, you will find serious problems. Because the university is driven by rules about promotion, the stature that people get and the individual recognition people seek

Most respondents illustrate a stark shift from public intellectualism as definitive of aspirational conceptions to the reality of academic labour which they describe in terms entirely antithetical to their definition of the ideal. For Marcus and Evelyn, the ideal lives only in its mythical form as a disciplinary memory. Thinking about the status of scholar activism as a norm in Sociology, Evelyn says:

> In South Africa we have not seen society-wide and visible activism in a very long time by academics who are genuinely interested in social change.

Marcus, after impassioned claims about the intrinsically radical nature of Sociology where "professional revolutionaries" are trained, remarkably moves on to claim that academics are powerless, just doing 'a job' in the face of the path-defining power of the university and its management:

> Being an academic is just a job. When you sit in bodies like the Senate where you are surrounded by HoDs, deans and vice-chancellery and so forth, people do not speak up. They are afraid of losing their jobs Universities like all other capitalist institutions are profoundly hierarchical and that authority does reside at the top and that academics actually really do not have that much authority and power. We can do it in our own courses and maybe if we got a receptive department, we can do it in our department, but as individual academics we really have no power to change the way things happen.

The disconnect between the metrics for valuing "the job" and the aspiration for public political impact creates a divergence in the minds of sociologists, one for which they lack clear solutions. For sociologists, the university's community engagement projects are the most visible outlet for public practice. However, they see these projects as falling short of recovering the criticality and resistance that define their ideal, becoming merely an extension of market logic in the most extreme cases. This discourse by sociologists – of the overwhelmingness of the dominant order, unpacked below – renders a view of their world as one where the sociological spirit is ever more elusive and the present is ever more fatalistic.

6.4.1.2 The distinction between public and community engagement

Zane distinguishes between public and community engagement, with the former as a space of open, collective engagement and the latter as its university institutionalisation. He sees the latter, community engagement programmes run by the university, as condescending to communities which are to him regarded as "lesser spaces" to whom academics need to "go down" to perform patronising acts of philanthropy in order to score professional points. He makes the interesting point that university-sanctioned community engagement projects are not only the outcome of competition for institutional resources but often lead to the individual advancement of academics. For Zane, market interests thoroughly mediate the nature and outcomes of community engagement. This includes incentive systems which encourage institutions and academics with access to resources to "fake" engagement, such as through the use of junior academics, postdocs or postgraduates to conduct fieldwork on behalf of professors who claim to be involved in community development.

From Zane's perspective, neoliberal regulation renders engagement a vacuous activity rationalised primarily by market principles rather than social activism aimed at unsettling and improving the status quo. He regards the market logic of competition and the rivalry for academic capital as the key determinants for a pageantry to be audited by the university and cashed in on by academics when applying for personal promotion. Academics' responses often depict *illusio*, revealing their reluctance to challenge norms and their tendency to cast community engagement as a 'negative responsibility,' which Fuller (2006:149) defines as symbolic actions for the public good that minimise risk while maximising personal gain.

Zane observes that 'public intellectualism' in its institutionalised and depoliticised form (as community engagement) is more prevalent at well-resourced historically white universities than at historically black teaching universities where resources and capital are scarcer.

Zane's initial testimony, which confidently declares that public intellectualism is the essence of what it means to be a sociology academic, reaches an extraordinarily contrary conclusion upon his reflection on the practical challenges facing the achievement of this mantle, leading to his final declaration that maybe university academics are not meant to cater to broader society after all:

> Universities are very elite institutions that arguably cannot make a significant social impact in and of themselves.

Zane's observation, shared with other respondents, is that public intellectualism coordinated by the university institution through its in-house community engagement divisions underlines the university's separation from society (further elaborated on in Chapter Seven). Chapter Six reveals that perceptions of community engagement are foundational in understanding how academics view their professional practice as ontologically distinct from the ideal of critical public engagement.

The general view of sociologists is that, instead of community engagement representing a new frontier for emancipatory scholar activism against hegemony, it poses no real threat to the dominant neoliberal academy. The fact that respondents perceive attempts to foster counter-publics beyond the university as inevitably folding back into marketisation says something about the operation of neoliberalism. Respondents are aware at a phenomenal level of the overwhelming tendency for capitalism to regulate the visibility of alternatives to itself through mimicry and incorporation. By doing this, it is able to render alternative trajectories as 'fringe activity', while posing itself as the invisible context that 'counter-hegemonic' orientations must rely on for continuity. University-crafted community engagement programmes exemplify this, made visible as an 'exception' or 'addition' to 'ordinary' professional activity. The constitution of engagement activities as elective, reinforces the perception that insular academic work is not a choice to be made or refused but, simply is, given and natural, to the point of being invisible. For Cammaerts (2015), this is how capitalism outfoxes alternatives. Incorporation ensures that alternatives, as a complete programme of praxis, are perceived as unrealistic compared to hegemonic practice. The "constitutive outside" where alternatives are placed, is framed as unattainable, while the hegemonic order thrives "and feeds off its antagonisms" (Cammaerts 2015:527).

Similarly, for Gramsci, hegemony is sustained exactly by repurposing "the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony will be exercised" (Gramsci 1971:161).

Counter-hegemonic mobilisation and alter-realities aspiring to dissensus tend to operate from within the hegemony of neoliberalism and capitalism and, as such, always risk aiding hegemony in reaching its ultimate aim of post-hegemonic status (Cammaert 2015:523). Post-hegemony is where the war of position[7] falls away, and neoliberalism appears eternal and without alternative. This is not yet our reality and room exists for mobilisation.

In fact, community engagement, despite its purported 'capture,' should not be written off. It represents the tension between domination and the underlying desire for alternatives. In other words, its existence is the product of neoliberal domination *and* the academic community's latent desire to connect with broader communities. A dialectic interpretation of community engagement is bypassed by interviewees repelled by how crudely market incentivisation overrides the logic that public sociology should not come from above. Institutional incentive systems negate what Burawoy (2005a: 25) makes clear: that public sociology will emerge when practice "captures the imagination of sociologists, when sociologists recognise public sociology as important in its own right with its own rewards."

However, instead of recognising this, academics are reinforcing the capitalist inversion of reality by treating the constitutive 'outsideness' of public engagement as fact and finality, without considering the underlying dialectic possibilities. By accepting the incorporation and marginalisation of engagement, they are resigning to the absence of possibility for the future development of genuine scholar activism, and thereby exporting public intellectualism to the realm of nostalgic fantasy. The convergence of academics' views that public ideals are divorced from practice is itself indicative of the approaching post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism in the academy, catalysed by the absorption of community engagement in market principles. The split in aspirations and practice exemplified by community engagement is expressed in the dystopic reflections of all interviewees, touched on immediately below.

6.4.1.3 The dystopic pantomime of progressivism

Uche reflects the resignation to a world of no alternatives, stating clearly that self-promotion through research defines the actual work of sociologists. Yet, at the beginning of the interview,

[7] War of position: Using military metaphors, Gramsci distinguished between a 'war of position' and a 'war of manoeuvre'. The latter entailed a frontal attack on the state's coercive machinery in a classic insurrection. For Gramsci (1971), the conditions of late capitalism necessitated pre-revolutionary strategies over a longer duration in 'a war of position' where the oppressed wrested power from the hegemonic class for the control of education, ideology and culture, which included public institutions where hegemonic arrangements were consolidated but where moral and intellectual contestation also weakened it.

Uche describes the ideal social function of the sociologist with elevating breadth as nothing less than "shaping and building society." Like the other respondents, he then takes a phenomenal backward leap when expressing his answer to what it is that Sociologists do every day. When Uche is asked to relate what the "shaping of society" entails in practice, his answer dramatically shrinks to a description of bureaucratic conformity and corporatist achievement (not involving society beyond the university *at all*). He says,

> Public engagement is very tricky… It takes the form of lectures, it takes the form of individual committee engagements, it takes the form sometimes of student interaction and all of that. So, it is part of our social corporate responsibility here to inform the public.

He primarily views his work in Sociology through the lens of peer recognition within the research community, considering policy influence and consultancy as public engagement:

> We just bury our research findings in the libraries, there is no real effort to propel them out there to change society. If there was an interface between what we do here and society, it would be taken into the policy space that might be able to influence society. When you leave it to an individual lecturer to engage with the community it does not really work because he does not have the political urgency to influence real people out there.

Uche's definition of public engagement reveals the disjunction displayed across interviews between the ambition for Sociology to "shape society" with the dystopic 'real' context of "social corporate responsibility". His view is reflective of the malaise of academic identity under neoliberalism. Sadly, it is not uncommon, as the interviews show, for intellectuals at public universities to entirely exclude the public from their conceptions of practice. A qualitative study of university leaders in South Africa by Swartz *et al.* (2019) shows how discourses on value and purpose at the public university is locked into the language of corporate governance, where those at the helm refer to the "core business" of universities in terms of a closed trifactor between research, teaching and the generation of third-stream income, underlined by financial concerns, auditing and institutional competition. – not public accountability or activism.

In various ways, all interviewees touched on the dilemma that for teaching, research, and community engagement to survive, more income needs to be generated; yet, to generate more

income, the university needs to shift its focus –from teaching, research, and community engagement towards income generation.

For Norah, Nokuthula, and Baloyi, the emancipatory objective is frankly unattainable. Believing it cannot be achieved, they view the continued promotion of the ideal as self-deception. Norah starts the interview by nostalgically describing the awakening she felt by sociology as a student but takes a wholly nihilistic turn when thinking about actual academic life, proclaiming that Sociology could never be liberatory and was "not the real world". Norah's initial hope in Sociology's promise has transformed into fatigue:

> I don't believe universities are deeply integrated into society. The notion of a university as an ivory tower is ingrained in university culture. There should be a connection with society which I don't feel exists. The real world, we do not live in the real world … I don't think any discipline can be emancipatory.

For Nokuthula, it is "an open secret" in that self-promotion, not social justice, is the order of the day. Throughout the interview, Nokuthula describes the perceived split between ideal and actuality in terms of the pretensions of sociologists who, for her, deliberately nurture a progressive facade for the sake of self-gain:

> For our own selfish personal development, we could care less about public engagement. Look at how academics for instance, recycle one trivial idea to produce twenty papers, you read it, and say this is the same thing I have read before. No creativity, nothing. I have heard academics who call themselves progressives, who claim to challenge power, and the university, but who want this to be sent [only to] the publishers…. It is money [that motivates] and nobody is saying anything about [even] the quality of research.

More generally, the interviewees typically opened the discussion up to the existence of a pantomime at play, where arts and humanities academics were pretending at radicalism, a ruse which secured their legitimacy as public professionals. The shared performance is underscored by the uncomfortable absence of a credible culture of public practice to sustain the mask of progressivism. Interviewees highlight a tendency toward the manipulation of self and others as the foundation for claims to scholar-activism. Baloyi echoes that for him, many sociologists' involvement with matters of justice resembles capitalism's performative incorporation of human rights issues to secure markets for profit-making,

> The [academic] system is so self-serving, because it is part of the [larger] power system, of how to get ahead. You use morality if you have to [to get ahead]. Have you seen how capitalists, to sell a chocolate they have to use human connection? I am saying the [academics] hijacking of morality is at the heart of [what] is an industry. It is a hotbed for publications, it is a hotbed for performance.

Evelyn in fact sees sociology as being preoccupied with developing and commanding a language on social change on behalf of a society about which it seemingly wants very lit tle to do. Social change is the topic we professionally gather around, and which we commodify, but not the agenda which shapes our political practice as sociologists. As she says:

> Social change is not the actual goal from what I see. It has been co-opted and corporatised. Who reads the words that we publish? Who reads it? That is the saddest thing, we are having a conversation amongst ourselves. The communities we study have no idea what we've written in that South African Journal of Sociology.

The conscious command of the social change and justice, as we engage with it in academic writing and presentation, is largely disconnected from practical application. It is perceived as a tool used by sociologists to gain and maintain status – an 'open secret,' as Nokuthula describes it, for upholding privilege, ironically, through notions of counter-power and counter- privilege:

> There is a disconnect in the way academics want to be perceived and how they live their practice.

Nokuthula continues:

> Look at academics in their spaces, one of them being conferences. We want to appear progressive. There is a disconnect in the way academics want to be perceived and how they live their lives. I remember voicing this, it was at Wits[University], I stood up and said "it is fine for us to say all of these things if in the confines of these walls. Are you prepared to speak in public to the rest of the world and society?" No, there was a huge silence. Nobody answered that question.

David too criticises the belief that publishing on social change is analogous to getting involved in social change. For him,

> Personally, I think it is a delusion. I think most journal articles get read by about five people. If they happened to be sort of very ground-breaking you might get 20 citations or 30. In the end, you know, it ends up on some dusty library shelf where hardly anyone reads them.

Critics like Fuller (2009:22) demand a curtain-call on the pantomime, and for sober recognition that humanities' academics prioritise "each other in jealously guarded ('peer reviewed') zones of discourse … their potential for incendiary speech has been domesticated into reasoned cultural critiques and piecemeal policy advice". Tuchman (2009:157) likewise urges academics to get honest:

> Today, universities are sinking into the corporate culture; many professors do not say what they think. When professors speak their mind, especially when they "speak truth to power," they are making news.

But Baloyi says academics avoid speaking up or speaking back because critiquing the institution is akin to "economic and emotional suicide" for academics who prefer to "play it safe". Similar to the others, he argues that the notion that academic activity is driven by anything other than self-preservation is nothing more than a ruse. Baloyi, like Nokuthula, describes careerist self-absorption intertwined with professional anxiety as the unspoken rationale behind academics' choices about their work, including the decision to avoid public engagement. Suffice to note that careerist selfishness and anxiety evoke opposing attitudes, one self-centred and the other avoidant; however, both ultimately result in individualist withdrawals from the collective for the sake of professional security.

In the context of this subsection on *The Dystopian Pantomime of Progressivism*, Benny stands out as a prime example of the self-deception that informants like Norah, David. Baloyi, and Nokuthula describe. He passionately defends the noble morality of academic life, much like a method actor fully immersed in the pantomimic role, unable to step out of character. Unlike other interviewees who question or critique the system, Benny remains steadfast, even defensive, when the institution of higher education is scrutinised: "Nobody should dare diminish the remarkable work that universities do!", he insists. For Benny, the ideal of public relevance is not just a belief but a shield that deflects any challenge to its perceived infallibility, making him a poignant symbol of the tension between academia's ideals and its realities.

For the most part, Benny's rendition of who the intellectual is carries with it the sanguine projection of the university, which he poses throughout. A romantic and revolutionary

depiction of the humanities intellectual pervades his interview, unaffected by reflections on the systemic entrenchment of bourgeois individualism:

> It took the humanities, is it not, to begin to think of things like justice?

Benny denies that self-interest is a motivating force for academic life at all:

> As academics, we are doing a marvellous job, having that collective identity as people who seek to bring enlightenment and liberation to society. That is the picture of the whole. Universities are very egalitarian. Universities do not do things for their benefits. To be a university professor is the one profession where you are without thinking of private benefits. You just produce knowledge.

Benny articulates further:

> The knowledge we generate in academia isn't definitive; that's the beauty of our work as academics *in this hallowed world*. Academics possess the decency and humility to avoid charlatanism. Academics are not in the business of grandstanding or soapboxing.

He claims that what makes universities exceptional to other institutions is their autonomy and, consequently, their liberatory outlook. While he claims an exceptionalism for universities in terms of what he sees as its noble purpose, he shrugs off its contradictions as typical and convergent with other realities. He says that while the tendency towards elitism puts the university at odds with itself, this is true of all institutions:

> [C]ontradictions define society, but that is how it is. So, we live in these contradictions, for as long as you have institutions, that is what you have to grapple with. The most critical of scientists around the world still had to produce that wonderful knowledge in those seabeds of contradiction, I do not know where else anybody can go.

The interviews reveal that the inner conflicts around sociologists' academic identity is defined by a paradox which ontologically separates public intellectualism from practice. This fosters the belief that regressive and progressive practices pull in opposite directions but not in a mutually constitutive way. Most academics perceive the former as eviscerating the latter, leaving them paralysed and hopeless.

Section 6.4.1 examines interviewee feedback, which supports the conclusion about Paradox One. It shows the endurance of an ideal rooted in activist research, public justice, and a desire to 'change the world', attributed to falling in love with the discipline as a student. These liberatory and humanist ambitions are perforated as they go on to describe what 'public engagement' means in practice. They draw on the university's community engagement programmes to announce that all criteria for public connection are inescapably careerist. They call out peers who, in their written work and speech, perform a radicalism which masks an apolitical reality, their complaints exemplifying an "us" and "them" or "inside" and "outside" designation for the world they inhabit.

6.4.2. The Divergence of The Ideal From The Everyday: Implications For Practice

The interview data shows a world where sociologists have internalised the distortion of reality under capitalism, as a fact of existence, in which they have no choice but to excel. They have succumbed to an external relations view of the world which sees the divergence of the ideal from everyday practice. In this respect, this chapter deals with the first of two external relations paradoxes which form the crux of sociologists' academic identities under neoliberalism. The second is dealt with in Chapter Seven.

Instead of mutually constitutive, or necessarily internally related, the external relations paradoxes presented in the analyses (chapters 6 and 7) depict the world of work in very restricted terms where trajectories of practice pull in either/or directions. The academics share this perception (across both Paradox One and Two) involving the external divergence of opposing trajectories. This is a reductionist and paralysing distinction seemingly internalised by academics.

However, Benny interprets the nature of this inversely to the others. The other academics see the regressive university as limiting otherwise progressive academics. Benny sees the vexed nature of individual academic as a cause for the university's deviation from its noble ideals. From Benny's vantage, the university is the ideal and is separate from its less virtuous and contradictory human agents. Nevertheless, though perhaps different in characterisation of the divergence, every interviewed academic sees progressive academic intent and regressive practice as externally and dualistically related as trajectories.

If progressive and regressive trajectories could be more meaningfully consolidated, according to an internal relations conception of dialectical contradiction, sociologists might begin to

bridge the gulf between their deeply held aspiration for public engagement and the context of the neoliberal academy. This may allow them not only to see new opportunities for redefining their positionality in society but enable them to witness and corroborate the actually existing activism (see Section 7.4).

Academics perceived two balkanised pathways: 'winning' and 'losing,' with the ideal of public engagement tethered to the latter. As a trajectory, it was perceived to be either entirely vanquished by the current context or surreptitiously reconfigured into a hollow imitation of itself through total subsumption by the system. This 'either/or' sentiment is echoed in the following reflections. For Nokuthula,

> Academics are *only* interested in self-glorification, aren't they? There is such a disconnect in the way we do things. Public engagement is such a rare occurrence in Sociology.

Similarly, Norah holds the belief that individualism has become so sutured that no genuine ethos of activism, and no real space for progressive academic work, can be supported any longer:

> I do not see there being a kind of ethos, a culture that really, particularly wants to connect, or bring about any social change. Sad as that is, that is what I see: "It is all about me, me, me" you know? And if my name comes out in lights as part of some kind of social change, well, it is about me it is not about the social change. I just see that more and more.

Marcus himself creates an absolutist and binarist picture of the victory of neoliberalism:

> [The current environment] … forces us to dumb things down and cheapen our purpose because we are concerned purely with quantitative output. How many people have you passed? How many have you let in? How many publications have you done? There is a concerted effort by management to incorporate us into this corporate vision of the university. There is an attempt to marketise the whole way in which the university and the intellectuals within it work.

As a result of the perception that progressive tendencies have been entirely bypassed or replaced, sociologists often hold very cynical views of actions and projects that appear progressive but whose purpose and value is mediated by the university. They tend to regard institutionalised acts of community engagement as 'fake' or 'performative,' viewing them as

instances where the dominant system has repurposed public engagement, reshaping it in its image.

The view amongst interviewees that ideal and actual practice are incommensurably divergent has serious implications for practice. It fails to align with Ollman's (2004: 25) assertion that we should consider the world as one where "the relational is the irreducible minimum for all units in [the] conception of social reality". In fact, it appeared easier for academics to apply an internal relations analysis to memories of South African sociology's past, which David describes as a domain of deeply interconnected practices.

> The lines between the university and public political engagement were very blurred. A whole range of academics were involved very directly in political activity and in community-based organisations. We did not see a separation between what we taught and what we were doing politically. In fact, one fed the other.

Overall, this section has explored the paradoxical way academics cling to the belief in public intellectualism as the cornerstone of their societal value yet struggle to articulate what this means in practice within the university. The disorienting effects of trying to embody a progressive academic identity while conforming to the demands of the system have led to a pervasive sense of defeatism. For the interviewees, faith in an alternative academic reality – one not given in to neoliberal performativity – fades with the fantasies of a radically different world. They feel trapped, checkmated by a system that obscures the 'real relations' of public engagement, which dialectically intertwines with the competing pull of individualism. As a result, the self-image of academics as Freirean, revolutionary public intellectuals remains suspended, almost extra terrestrially, on a separate ontological plane, disconnected from the praxis of their daily lives.

6.5. Conclusion

The first part of Chapter Six set the stage for the empirical discussions in this and the following chapter. Swept up in the illusio of the status quo, sociologists internalise reality obscured as external relations. Their real-world experiences embody illusio in three ways, which were set out.

Chapter Six then examined Paradox One's content, drawing on fieldwork insights to illustrate sociologists' immersion in and confusion about their environments. The changing character of the South African university towards post-hegemonic neoliberalism is captured in a moment by the uneasy self-perceptions of academic sociologists who, despite their own persistence on

ethereal motifs of freedom as definitive of their calling, are recognisably in a state of identity crisis.

There is nothing new or undesirable about the juxtaposition of different expected roles for academia. The problem is not a competition of purposes or a dissensus on the function of the sociologist – this is the basis for healthy debate and diversity in practice. Academics have multiple aspirations, which in and of itself is not necessarily explained by neoliberalism alone. Jacoby (1987:109-110) for instance jokingly reminds us of how in the 1950s the iconography of the professor was that of a dishevelled misfit whereas, in the 1980s, the image changed in novels like Don Delillo's *White Noise* to that of the slick, ambitious and premeditating scholar.

The problem is not role ambiguity but that the singular dominance of one purpose specifically defines the conflicting narratives today, that is, individual prestige and professional security are defined by market interests. Consequently, the aspiration of sociologists to pursue a public role is relegated to myth, confined to history and reverie. According to Donoghue (2008: xviii), "[i]n the context of the prestige-hungry universities, the humanities now lacks a pervasive mission". The interviewees in this chapter capture the internal conflict between the desire to engage with real-world issues of social change and the insular grind of publishing for prestige. Fatalistic accounts of an unwinnable paradox have led them to unconsciously enact neoliberalism through repetition compulsion, resigning themselves to the absence of alternatives and avoiding self-critique.

The opinions expressed in the interviews reflect an ideological battleground between neoliberalism and its alternatives. As if arguing with themselves, academics oscillate between idealistic enthusiasm and speaking back against their aspirations with sober, even cynical, critiques of the possibility for escape from neoliberalisation. This internal dialogue highlights the cleft between hope and scepticism defining academic identity in South African sociology.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PARADOX TWO AND REFLECTIONS ON ALTERNATIVE PRAXIS

7.1 Introduction

Paradoxes one and two represent two versions of how interviewees perceive academic identities in external relations terms. Each of the two paradoxes result from capitalism's tendency to present a corrupted, inverted version of reality defined by static opposites (paradoxes) instead of intertwined antagonisms (internal contradiction), as discussed in Chapter Six in relation to the first paradox, that is, the ontological splitting of ideal fr om practice.

The propensity to see internal contradictions as external paradoxes is marked in this chapter by Paradox Two. Paradox Two entails the mental framing by sociologists that they occupy a self-contained academic sphere that is fundamentally disconnected from other spheres on the same ontological plane of practice. As in the case of paradox one, paradox two (a view of the world where academics are severed from adjacent spheres) leads academics to conclude that genuinely progressive practice is unattainable within the contemporary academy. And, therefore, all that is left for them to do is to comply with the status quo – a strong reflection of 'illusio' in operation.

Paradox two deals with 'sphere separations. It is apparent that interviewed sociologists separate themselves as a distinct academic sphere from 'university management' *and* 'society-at-large/the public'. Each of these separations is dealt with individually in this chapter. The sense-making mechanisms by which interviewees externalise and binarise the spheres of practice of academics from management and academics from society are realised in a number of ways, as discussed.

Section 7.2 examines patterns pertaining to the institutional context (i.e., university management). Academics see themselves as imprisoned by managerialism unable to free themselves from its culture and rules. The tendency to present themselves as within, but not of the university, stems from the viewpoint that the institutional logic of the university i s one of corporate managerialism imposed on them. Under the thumb of stifling managerial bureaucracy, the toil of conformity is seen as inescapable, a force and logic so omnipotent that even subversive agency is seen to yield to its rationale. They see their inability to activate an inherent desire for public engagement as the fault of management and its suppression of any

alternatives to its preferred mantra of self-pursuit. The common beliefs which sustain the binarisation of management from academics are illustrated in answers from interviewees about the force by which management co-opts potentially subversive agency.

Section 7.3 examines academics' perceived detachment from society-at-large/the public. The fieldwork results show this perspective to be based on two recurring explanations. One is that sociologists see no progressive role of value for themselves in greater society whose interests they see as misaligned with their own. Secondly, their detachment from society is justified by changing social conditions which they see as inhospitable to the kind of public engagement that they imagine nostalgically was possible in the past. Interviewees' negative framings of their relation to society-at-large are illustrated in answers pertaining to the reduced domain of scholar activism witnessed during the Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall Student movements.

Therefore Sections 7.2 and 7.3 describe the intuitive constructions of "us and them" (academics versus management and society) by which respondents make sense of the academic-university-society environment, culminating in an overarching conclusion that they have no role to play in society, outside of their responsiveness to institutional pressures from management. The interview findings echo a sense of resignation, sustained by external-paradox framings of their realities.

Like the first paradox, paradox two thus sustains the illusio rooted in their assumption that no viable alternative to the status quo exists. Respondents' acceptance of externalising forms as true creates conditions that enable the three selected features of illusio (outlined in Section 6.3.4): claims of powerlessness that allow them to simply go with the flow of everyday norms; resignation to the belief that no alternatives exist; and a subsequent bypassing of serious, collective self-reflection on the possibilities of a broader social role for the disciplinary community. It is as if their responses echo a peevish and dispirited cry: "Management and society are irrevocably separated from our influence as humanities academics! Alas! The ideal of critical public engagement is unachievable, so let me get on with the business of pursuing my self-interest."

Through first-hand evidence, these sections demonstrate how phenomenal reality presents an inversion—a surface-level appearance that obscures the underlying dialectical entanglement. For instance, we will see in respondents' answers an affinity for drawing stark binary lines between management and themselves, and between society and themselves, and even delinking the past and the present as if two discrete periods – all of these separations come together to

establish a picture of the generative processes of understanding by which academic identities and practices are shaped. For Ollman (2003 cited in Hart 2018:380), it is crucial in dialectical analysis to pay close attention to "spatio-historical/empirical specificity and complexity" to avoid reductionism. Therefore, the mediations of the external relations paradox through the context of South African sociology specifically, in the historical discussion of Section 7.3.2, offer a compelling and insightful perspective.

In the remainder of Chapter Seven, after setting out paradox two, I propose that the defeat expressed by respondents entails a premature reaction to a bad, but not desperate (yet) neoliberal situation. Neoliberal mechanisms are powerful, but they do not overwhelm every sensibility of what intellectual life means, as they might one day in a post-hegemonic reality if we do not act now. Possibilities for alter-realities exist, through anti-hegemonic interventions developed from within the neoliberalising but not fully neoliberalised university. Therefore, Section 7.4 pushes back against the interviewees' resignation to the capitalist subsumpti on of all social life by discussing antidotes to enclosures infused by external relations thinking. Alter-realities for sociology lie in rekindling the sociological imagination. This involves envisioning new pathways for an imaginative, active, and locally-responsive Sociology – one that not only meets society where it is but also actively engages with it through political action, organisation, and the public sharing of ideas. I discuss specific transformative practices, highlighting the potential for academic emergence from the obfuscation of neoliberalism, clearing away the mud from our eyes, and striving for moments of incremental but radical difference against the present.

Reconfiguring our analytical lenses can be achieved by engaging with internal relations ontology as a foundation for critique. The contribution of this ontology lies in the argument that binary categories – such as Thinking/Doing, Isolated Individual/Collective Cooperation, Autonomous Intellectual/Institutional Management, and Careerism/Public Engagement – should not be understood as separate poles dividing us, but as mutually sustaining and, crucially for transformation, mutually undermining. By examining these tensions, we see that the latent poles of a contradiction reveal the one-sidedness of dominant relations, offering a subversive absence – a potential trajectory for penetrating and challenging their ubiquity. The sublated trajectory, though often overlooked, remains a critical launching point for transformative critique.

7.2 External to Management

By adopting external relations viewpoints, academics profoundly misinterpret the nature of internal conflict and interpenetration between the management and academics spheres, thereby concealing possibilities for transcendence. Their assertion of polarities and subsequent exclusion of middle-states between academics and management comes to the fore in their depiction of a distant, untouchable and foreboding executive administration (Section 7.2.1.1), enforcing on them values such as quantity over quality (Section 7.2.1.2) and alienating work conditions (Section 7.2.1.3) which in general they believe they are powerless to resist (Section 7.2.1.4). The implications of this thought-form for revolutionary praxis is exemplified by their overwhelming agreement that young, black and particularly female academics, while theoretically possessing subversive standpoints, are generally siphoned into the black hole of the system.

7.2.1 Corporate Managerialism

Sociologists interviewed commonly portray academics as existing in a sphere distinct, isolated, and detached from a management whom they characterise as comprising regressive orientations which stifle, bureaucratise and commodify all intellectual production, an orientation which they claim to widely oppose. Academics as such present themselves as external to management albeit on the same ontological plane of university practices. Throughout the interviews, this dichotomisation happens recurrently. For instance, there is the tendency for academics to portray themselves as victims of management's power. The management class is described as rigid, controlling, and corporatist while they depict themselves as academics quietly resistant but mostly powerless, a far cry from the ideal of vanguard, leader and spokesperson which foregrounded academic's meta conceptions of their academic identities at the start of the interviews and which appear in paradox one. Their ultimate claim that progressive tendencies in academic work have been almost completely subordinated to regressive tendencies leaves little room for investigating how the two trajectories are internally related instead of mutually exclusive. Marcus delivers some of the more direct and lucid summaries of managements influence and therefore his views feature more prominently than others in Section 7.2.1

7.2.1.1 The executive administrative class

The rise of the corporate model is associated with the demise of the collegial model at South African universities (Johnson 2006; Ram 2015). There is a trade-off for Havergal (2015) in

neoliberal regimes between collaborative collegial values and competition. Instead of collaborative cultures which are spontaneous, longstanding, and voluntary in nature, managerialism fosters environments of compulsion, where top-down directives from management bring academic colleagues together synthetically in the fulfilment of duties fixed in time and space. According to Smyth (2017:67), the demise of collegialism is central to the psychosocial "emptiness" that academics feel.

Notably, van Vuuren (2024) argues that the corporate model is enforced through managerialism. Managerialism constructed as ineluctable for the functioning of universities has resulted in the rapid rise of an executive administrative class in South African academia, thus dramatically shifting the traditional dominance of academics in defining the path of the university. McKenna (2020) notes that most universities in South Africa now elect executive deans through a special selection committee purportedly to mediate the interests of top management, instead of the traditional system of deans elected democratically by faculty.

In the past, where universities were understood as the occupational domain for academics as the core profession, today administrative elites are competing for dominance within that space. Maassen and Cloete (2004:16) thus argue that "this development might actually lead to the university becoming a bi-professional instead of mono-professional organisation", going on to say that the expansion of managerial-administrative personnel and prerogatives will have knock-on effects on how the public is defined by the university, so that:

> [T]hese institutions will have to be managed more and more as hybrid organisations, i.e. organisations containing public and private elements. The society/institution dimension will become the private dimension in universities and colleges, while the state/institution dimension will remain in the public domain.

This means that the institution becomes reconstructed as a private entity, and the state its public counterpart, sketching a post-hegemonic future wherein public engagement is conceived in purely bourgeois terms, as market – state relations. Maassen and Cloete (2004) interpret the rise of the managerial class as marking a trajectory in which private corporatist thinking from within the university gradually obliterates expansive conceptions of the 'public' (which might include community and counterpublics) by centring bourgeois market-state relations as the full expanse of what universities entail.

The rising autocracy of the managerial class is not only usurping academics as the defining profession within the university but are instituting values which academics are finding

increasingly hard to escape. This includes the obsession with peer-recognition in the competition for professional rewards based on academics quantitative "output rather than their contribution" (McKenna 2020: 79). This boxes academics into predetermined forms of doing to gain recognition and rewards, resulting in South African universities turning towards "corporate analogs" (Gordon 2006:9-11).

7.2.1.2 Quantity versus quality

The impact of corporate managerialism on the mental universe shared by professional academics is encapsulated by the quality-quantity aphorism. Every academic interviewed agreed that sociologists' priorities were set externally, driven by management's relentless push for quantifiable output as the primary measure of one's intellectual standing. Quality assurance and ranking measures rely on market-driven mechanisms, ratings based on the economic value of work, compliance with output targets, and the ability to generate funding. Pedagogical standards, along with scholar-activism, fall outside these imperatives (Winter 2009).

Zane explains how adherence to the push for quantitative accumulation secures certain professional privileges for individual academics, leading them to put on blinkers and focus narrowly on achieving these metrics:

> Look at the neo-liberalisation of the modern academy [everywhere]. The publish-or-perish [discourse] is everywhere. Management counts only quantity. Quality versus quantity, because if you want promotion, you can look for all the predator journals that will publish your work next week… people find ways of surviving in the academy… you do well, means you become a professor just writing books, sitting in an ivory tower, sending students to do fieldwork, so that you can raise money. The university recognises you for this.

Moosa (2024) perfectly crystallises the meaning conveyed by Zane, when he argues that the neoliberal mentality of publish or perish not only stands to render the public, direct involvement in societal issues, and public policy as irrelevant – thinking of Zane's example of predatory journals, it also undermines scientific integrity.:

> The publish-or-perish [POP] culture has undermined the integrity of science as indicated by the growing number of retracted papers based on fake data or cooked results. The POP culture is incompatible with the objective of fostering education

> for everyone because the vital function of teaching and knowledge transfer is subverted and relegated to a secondary function (Moosa 2024: 34).

Marcus claims that academics in general "do not buy into this corporate model of the university." However, he does acknowledge that academics have also largely acquiesced to the frenzy for quantitative accumulation, even though they may not ideologically agree with it. Marcus highlights:

> [T]he corporatisation of the whole academic process. The whole academy is structured around getting publications and qualifications. An individualistic orientation versus a pro-social one ... There is no way in which quality gets figured into the equation, it is all about quantity.

From the perspective of Marcus, management exemplifies to academics how to 'fake' an interest in the public good, through official institutional by-lines and scripts about the importance of the various 'legs' of academic work – teaching, community engagement and research. The public relations governing university marketing tends to emphasise public outreach and the development of local communities, but insiders claim to know that only one thing truly matters – namely, the quantification and commercialisation of knowledge production. Marcus says that behind the scenes:

> [T]he social service ethic has really been pushed into the background. In terms of promotion, management emphasise all the four legs of teaching, research, supervision, and community engagement. Frankly they do not give a rat's ass about any of that except publications and individual output. That is the one that sways.

7.2.1.3 Cost-rationalising and overwork

Another element of corporate managerialism in the neoliberal university that recurred in interviewees' definitions of management is the overloading of academics in under-staffed institutions due to state cuts in higher education subsidies, par for the course with neoliberal austerity policies (See Section 3.2.2). Marcus thus claims:

> We are stretched in terms of resources. We are so sucked into the work that we are doing that we do not have time to prioritise public engagement, we are in lectures all day. … What I am seeing happening, and it is a classic neoliberal process, at senior levels all authority no responsibility, at lower levels all responsibility no authority.

Apart from mention of heightened workload for academics under the neoliberal system, Marcus in his statement highlights a prominent observation that management 'has all the authority and no responsibility'. His experience highlights the pervasive mechanisation of the notion of 'accountability' in neoliberal universities. Lorenz (2012: 618) points out that the constant messaging to academics that they need to step up their game in terms of 'accountability' and 'transparency' vis-à-vis the universities administration subtly renders professional autonomy as undesirable, and places power in the hands of management.

In a recent study of South African academics and the neoliberal work environment, van Vuuren (2024) found that the alienation academics felt due to the deterioration of collegial structures and increasing workloads was severely exacerbated by the acknowledgment that these conditions were symptomatic of management decision-making, which not only excluded them but also failed to incorporate meaningful consultation. An earlier study of South African academics by Olivier et al. (2005) reported that an escalating detachment from management structures led to demoralisation and demotivation so deep that the use of tranquilisers by academics were mentioned as coping strategies.

In the interviews for this study, academics alluded to sociology departments where flying solo was the norm, with individuals passing each other by, hyper-focused not on making a difference for human society or the ecological wellbeing of all, but on concerns about compliance with performance indicators, quality assurance measures, and output targets.

Academics perceive the new administrative class as all-powerful and devoid of moral responsibility – both toward them, as they endure overwork and the burden of top-down directives, and toward society, which is wholly disregarded in favour of a laser focus on quantitative measurements. Management is thus represented as a controlling, vague, and unpeopled space.

This external relations depiction leads to academics unknowingly extracting themselves from confrontation with the inherent relations underpinning their co-production of the mutual interests which characterise overlaps between the academic and managerial spheres. Instead, they perceive progressive agency as decentralised, purely the dominion of academics. On the one hand, the tendency to view management as distinctly separate and opposite in orientation to themselves points to their disapproval of the heavy-handed bureaucratism of corporate managerialism on the one hand. On the other hand, the exteriorisation of management as purely

regressive also reflects an unwillingness on their part to grapple more deeply with their complicity in the reproduction of individualistic and careerist trajectories.

7.2.1.4 Academics as passive agents in relation to management

A sense of powerlessness is indeed patent in most of the interview dialogues. This is captured most succinctly by Marcus who says of management:

> Universities like all other capitalist institutions are profoundly hierarchical and that authority does reside at the top and that academics actually really do not have that much authority and power in terms of restructuring the organisation. We can do it in our own courses and maybe if we got a receptive department, we could do it in our department, but as individual academics we really have no power to change the way things happen in the university … Senior management has path defining power.

The sense of powerless which interviewees feel is highlighted by Chetty and Merrett (2014) who observe that, in the South African academy, the university management may permit academics to be critical and freedom-seeking in the subjects of their research and curricula but, once this extends into critique of management and administration, they are openly singled out and sanctioned.

Academics enunciate a strong recognition of management as authoritarian. They appear to be convinced of their powerlessness as a group in the face of managerial repression, rooted in the belief that the pursuit of individualism is something they are forced into rather than something they willingly embrace. While the steady slide of South Africa's universities into managerialism may indeed be alarmingly underway, it is misleading to portray academics merely as hostages to institutional capture without addressing their wilful refusal of public engagement and their wilful engagement with neoliberal business as usual. Corporate managerialism is undoubtedly a significant factor in how academics perceive their positions within the university as displaced, but it would be disingenuous to overlook the intersections where academic complicity and self-interest contribute to sustaining corporate managerialism.

7.2.2. Co-optation of the outsider into the university system

In the otherwise glum and gutless academic world painted by the interviewees, some hope is detected in the overarching view of academics that incoming young scholars, the outsider-within to be exact, hold promise for lighting a torch against the disruptive effects of the

emergent neoliberal status quo. The epistemic advantage of the outsider-within was discussed theoretically and in terms of my journey in Section 5.3.

Interviewees express a cautious faith in the outsider-within. For most, the entry of young black and particularly female academics as the constitutive outsiders of the university system is key to changing hackneyed borderlines, not only of race and gender relations but between the academy and society in general. Their hope in the power of the outsider within evokes a Turkish proverb, "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said: the handle is one of us". When asked if they believed black women, positioned as "outsiders-within", held the most promising position for challenging the status quo, all agreed that in theory they did. However, they also expressed concerns about the actualisation of this subversive potential in practice, based on the inhibiting influence of university management on young black academics.

Chapter Five, using feminist standpoint theory, argued that the Other in enclaves of white, western, neoliberal education holds a special potential for making permeable the intrinsically elite walls which separates the intellectual from 'the rest'. In sync with the predictions of standpoint theory, academics tether, at least theoretically, their hope for internal change to historically subordinated groups to significantly narrow the gap between the university and society.

For Bourdieu (1984), society is structured into three hierarchical fields, from top to bottom: the political, the academic, and the social. Academics are positioned closer to the top of this hierarchy or nearer to the 'social' field, depending on their institutional standing. Generally, "the higher one's position in the field of academic power, the greater the conformity [to the status quo] required." The assumption amongst the academic interviewees is that differential power among academics means those at the lower end of the hierarchy are more likely to rebel against the system. They agreed that, hypothetically, the stronger the presence of the 'other' within the institution, the greater the momentum for anti-institutional critique, fostering a more dynamic and fertile environment for challenging barriers to collegial and self-determining academic culture. Valenzuela (2016: 672) explains that through epistemic friction within academic boundaries, "open zones" can be created, extending into areas of pluralised engagement beyond the institution. While this prediction – that those positioned as outsiders-within hold unique transformative potential for mobilising change – aligns with standpoint theory and is widely shared by respondents, they also noted that such dynamics are rarely observed in practice.

However, the neoliberal university does not welcome challenge or friction and is likely to stop epistemic friction, which might lead to regime change, in its tracks. It is the logic of capitalism to counteract by absorbing and repurposing alternatives to itself. Neoliberalism co-opts radical elements of society, reshaping them to fit its agenda (See Section 6.4.1.2). According to Asen (2017:329):

> Flattening difference and obscuring inequality, a neoliberal public presumes a universal subject that obscures its own particularity and discounts the uneven burdens faced by those who cannot seamlessly identify with its mode of subjectivity.

While universities claim as knowledge-institutions to thrive on dissensus, debate and difference, it is instead the flattening of subjectivity and the enforcement of consensus which interviewees have observed as the outcome of the confrontation between outsider-within and neoliberal conditions of work. They see the potential of outsiders-within snuffed and absorbed by the power of hegemony. As Moten and Harvey (2004:102) put it:

> The subversive intellectual, came under false pretences, with bad documents, out of love. Her labour is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.

For respondents, young academics are often broken and re-moulded as subservient to the old guard which ties them into a path-dependency along the status quo. Nokuthula voices this sentiment, by stating,

> There must be creative, original people who are not scared of [changing] the status quo. A part of me feels that we are reproducing the status quo, you know, old wine in new bottles. I am very worried about some of these things, we want diversity of opinion, we do not want parrots who are regurgitating 'yes boss, yes boss, yes boss'…. There is subversive potential in marginalised identities, but one of the dangers is that the university has the power to swallow them … The university captures [subversive activity] because you have to work within the confines [of it]. *They* define the rules of engagement.… [Subversive intellectuals] need the university's support to be heard.

This tendency to subvert the transformative potential of young academics is tied to the pervasive precarisation of early career academics as a significant feature of the neoliberal

academy (Burton and Bowman 2022; Hlatshwayo and Majozi 2024). Norah observes that young sociologists are so overburdened with teaching that they are unlikely to be more energetic or more inspired to take on the massive transformation tasks of the university than any other academic to. She says:

> Not here! Incoming, young academics will not be the inventive leaders. I mean, young academics are really the dogs. They carry the hard work. And the pressure to research and to publish and do all that. So, when I see young academics coming in, I mean, my first feeling really is that I am very sorry for them, because I know they are going to be abused and exploited. While the intention might be there and the enthusiasm, it is soon knocked out of them.

She continues by arguing that if a particular group had the inclination and need to change the system in theory, it would absolutely be black women, but that this group of academics faces a dense intersectionality of oppressions:

> If any group did have the kind of position and interest to do so, they would be it. However, I do not think that young black women academics will ever do that in our colonial institutions. … More young Black academics are getting positions for no other reason than they are forced to be sexually available and that the power dynamics that operate in this institution will never allow young Black academics to challenge anything… I cannot tell you of any young Black academic in this institution that I know that in one way or another is not locked into some kind of power relation … It is an open secret it is very much part of the culture.

Interviewees recognise the transformative promise of black women in historically male-dominated institutions as significantly hindered by entrenched power structures dictating individualist, Eurocentric and patriarchal university culture from above. These systems perpetuate exploitation of young women of colour emotionally, mentally, and physically. Like my own experience detailed in Chapter Five, Malaika Mahlatsi (2020) writes of the struggles faced by young, black women in historically white universities. In these educational spaces, which she calls “corridors of death”, black women grapple with internal battles so profound that they often struggle to find the language to express them. Even if an institutional audience existed to listen to them, articulating the mental trauma and agony caused by the accumulation of countless micro-racisms and micro-sexisms remains a challenge, leaving them emotionally and mentally exhausted.

You can read in the responses to the outsider-within question, an iteration of ideal divorced from practice (paradox one) where the notion of subversive young intellectuals exists hypothetically and externally to the actual conditions of practice. This coincides with paradox two which shows a perception of the outsider-within, locked in, unable to escape the weight of managerialism or reach the public sphere.

Since the end of Apartheid, albeit at a glacial pace, women and black, coloured, and Indian South Africans have broadened the intellectual project by introducing unique and often dissident positionalities to the white male status quo. However, respondents tend to perceive the most significant effects of diversification of the staff body as remaining confined intramurally, to the university. They contend that the demographic transformation of academics, while theoretically capable of bridging the gap, has not meaningfully brought the university or its academics closer to broader society, discussed further in 7.3.

Instead of disrupting the insularity of the academic elite, they claim the assimilation of the outsider-within has further consolidated the separation of intellectuals from the 'outside world'. It is important to stress that black women have led significant internal transformations regarding representation in pedagogy and knowledge production. They have defined the historical confrontation with South African universities' white male status quo. However, their outsider-within potential is blocked from more deeply altering the university's orientation due to managerial structuring.

By and large the dominant descriptions in the interviews related to this topic were that of the absorption of the outsider-within. This narrative relies on a binary, pitting an inherently progressive outsider against an inherently regressive centre, where the latter 'cannibalises' the former. This framing reinforces a reductive view of universities-as-management and academics as progressive but powerless bystanders. Marcus is the only academic who suggests an internal relations critique of the outsider-within/university relation when he says:

> So called subversive intellectuals are located within the dominant ideology and struggle to escape it. Younger academics and younger black and female academics clearly can bring a voice to this debate that older and white and especially male academic cannot, generally speaking. The idea however that anyone can escape the dominant ideology entirely and be immune to it and be an antidote to it, I have a bit of difficulty swallowing that. Because I think we are all a bunch of contradictions. We all have certain interests that conflict with each other and that we may espouse

> one thing and think and do something else. We see a lot of that, people who talk left and walk right.

His view entails an internal relations critique in that he does not treat black women or the outsider-within as occupying an essentialist position in which they exist outside of management, with the latter drawing them into its orbit through causal relations of power and obedience. He avoids the insinuation that others make, of the outsider-within being 'absorbed' into the system (which implies an external relation). Marcus does not refer to 'relations' but does raise an explicit concern about the tendency to overlook mutual dependence and reciprocity between all academics, including outsiders-within and the logic of managerialism. Young, black women in the academy, he implies, do not exist outside of management. They exist in entanglement with it, through which they face the simultaneity of capacity and incapacity within the rapacious self-centred neoliberal system. They are empowered to pursue professional standing and recognition through their epistemological products but are incapacitated to speak against the insular structures on which their professional survival depends.

Section 7.2 has discussed revelations by the interviewees that point to an external relations paradox, as they perceive such relations existing between academics and management. This 'external relations' division in the mind of interviewees is debilitating but rooted in their daily experience of managerial corporatist logics (7.2.1) and the resultant pacification of the academic community (7.2.2). The rise of the administrative class and the aphorism of quantity over quality drives many sociologists to see the realm of management as radically separate from their own, existing beyond their reach or influence. The power of management to encircle academic life from above is rendered by their shared belief that outsiders-within with subversive potential are destined to be captured by corporate managerialism and its dictates.

Section 7.4 examines ways academics can regain a sense of power in the academy by understanding internal entanglements with management's priorities and thereby reconsidering the ennui often described as fated. Before this, Section 7.3 explores how the tendency to ignore entanglement and complicity with managerialism creates a feedback loop on how attachment to society is interpreted. Caught between identifying as universal intellectuals and hapless functionaries, sociologists find themselves disoriented, limply swatting away management's encroachments on their social purpose, all while reaping professional benefits and career advancements that come from aligning with the prevailing ideological regime. This self-

interest, however, occurs at the expense of cultivating alternative education systems that prioritise critical public engagement as a defining element of disciplinary culture.

7.3 External to Society

The previous section examines the perceived separation between management and academics. Here, I explore how interviewees envisioned the academic sphere as self-contained and distinct from society. Chapter Seven more broadly deals with the externalities of spheres as academics see them – management detached from academics and society detached from academics. The alienation academics purportedly experience from these two spheres within the neoliberal institution is connected. Neoliberal managerialism constrains their capacity to envision multiple purposes and modalities for sociological work, eroding their sense of empowerment to engage beyond its walls as scholars and public intellectuals.

The perceived academic-society rift or externality comes out in the interviews through two main explanations. The first explanation is that academics believe they have no meaningful practice in society. This explanation draws on the convergence of answers describing sociological research as inherently exploitative to communities (Section 7.3.1). For some interviewees, their relationship with society feels overwhelmingly distorted and best avoided. By way of illustrating this perversity, they hone in on the opportunistic motives which, for them, drive the practice of community engagement programmes. Ultimately, they seal their separation from society by remarkably settling on a description of students registered within the university as their public.

The second explanation they reveal for their inclination to see the academic sphere as non-aligned with a greater public (than students) is specific to South African Sociology (Section 7.3.2). On the issue of scholar activism and critical public engagement, interviewees recall fondly an impressive disciplinary legacy of activism they hold in such mythologised and romantic terms as to render the adoption of on-the-ground practice outside of the university today as ‘fake’, ‘opportunistic’ and ‘superficial’ in comparison. Academics draw a stark separation between two time periods, which they externalise, a past in which genuine scholar-activism was possible and a present in which they claim to exist wholly stripped of the same potential for action.

On one count, their answers reveal self-flagellating opinions about the inevitability of self-serving extractivism, leading sociologists to focus on students ‘inside’ as a less problematic

relation than the public they imagine 'outside.' In addition, their inclination toward historical revisionism constrains the models through which they conceive of their present interconnectedness with society. Overall, Section 7.3 interprets the tendencies in sociologists' responses where they maintain the external paradox between society 'out there' and sociological work stuck 'in here' – a dualism critical to their inability to perceive dialectical contradiction and the flexible boundaries between academic practice and society that beckon for critical public engagement in the present.

7.3.1. "We have no progressive role to play out there"

The debilitation of external relations thinking is illustrated by academics' general vision of being stuck or locked outside of the public with whom they would like the option to engage more meaningfully. This belief is authenticated and promulgated in the interviews by a few recurring sentiments. There is the generalisation of sociology as inherently extractive in practice despite its theoretic ambitions toward more horizontal engagements with the public (Section 7.3.1.1). The interviewees make observations of researchers as driven by an insatiable 'epistemic greed' (concept defined on page 243), ignoring communities and producing departmental cultures which entrench marginalised people as objectifiable data sources.

So, externalising thought forms are fortified by experience, which conceals the true expanse of internal relations. For instance, another basis on which they regard themselves as existing 'outside' of society is by featuring community engagement as university promotional programmes divorced from society's influence and interest (Section 7.3.1.2). These separations are informed by experience and exaggerated in the conclusions drawn by sociologists. For instance, students are presented as the only public to whom they can account (Section 7.3.1.3).

7.3.1.1 Interviewees talk about sociological work as extractive

Academics often describe the culture of sociology as one where the public is most commonly engaged in its capacity to serve as a data pool – a resource that can be objectified and leveraged for professional gain. While they critique this dynamic, there is a sense of resignation in their portrayal, as if this instrumental approach inevitably shapes the discipline's relationship with society. This perspective obstructs the possibility of forging meaningful connections between the public and the academic sphere, leaving little room for planning towards more reciprocal or collaborative engagement.

Academics express a cautiousness about perpetuating an extractive relationship. This hesitation ironically preserves the notion of the public as an outside sphere from which academics either draw from or avoid drawing from. Either way, framing the primary relationship with society at large as extractive implies that academics are not a part of society; instead, they are disembedded and standing at a distance, from which they strategically negotiate their proximity or closeness. The tendency among academics to conclude that the academic-society relationship is inherently extractive, even when framed as a defence of society, ultimately ingrains a model of society not as natural stakeholders or partners but as mere effigies for sociological research and practice.

Many of the sociologists interviewed expressed reluctance to engage publicly, given what they perceive as Sociology's chequered tradition of 'parachute research'. Today, academics contend not only with the inertia imposed by neoliberal managerialism but also with the restraining effects of heightened self-scrutiny around issues of spokespersonship, which complicate the execution of public engagement. Widespread discourses on the risks of speaking on behalf of the other or epistemic silencing as a mode of domination may also contribute to sociologists' hesitation in pursuing extra-institutional politics and intellectual partnerships.

According to Uche's observations, sociologists routinely overlook the expectation that local communities have for deeper and sustained engagement, expressive of an inherent disregard for those they research:

> [The expectation normally is] it has to be taken back to the community where you studied and then there must be a serious impact. All we do is go there, extract data and then we leave. We do not regard these people as sacred as we regard ourselves. They believe that you are coming back to influence their lives. They do not even know that you are purely an academic, you are a researcher. It is not your duty to change them, but the fact of the matter is that they are expecting that change to come from you.

Uche calmly speaks of the disjuncture between academic self-perception and societal expectation. He expresses little remorse in his acceptance that it is impossible for academics, who are passively situated in society as analysts, to change communities who may see in sociologists a transformative potential. This kind of self-positioning of a sociologist relative to the public marks not simply the observation of two distinct and incompatible spheres with their own interests but serves to denote a hierarchy of social status. To reiterate the point made,

sociologists' isolation – whether rooted in an avoidance of uncomfortable power relations with communities or a disinterest in communities beyond their value for academic research – shapes the terms of engagement regardless of societal demands for the public good.

For Mara Priest (2016:63-64), this epistemic greed[8] enacted by academics upon the societies around them is not declared outright as a moral failing and therefore academics at large may be disinclined to admit such a vice at all:

> I fear that we (as a society, especially as a society of academics) have accepted the vice of epistemic greed for so long that we have become the intemperate person. Not only is it uncommon for the intellectually wealthy to make a conscious effort to share in their epistemic riches, there is no social stigma nor personal regret for failing to do so.

The fatalistic assumption that society exists separately from academia – and academia from society – is prevalent in the interviews. Sociologists paint a picture of life in their departments where peers regard interaction with the public beyond the instrumental requirements of research as an inconvenience. The avoidant stance observed towards local communities puts sociologists in an odd position, in contrast with their rhetorical championing of anti-systemic critique and social change to students and in their writing.

Norah describes extractive parachute research as the norm including by armchair activists and researchers who use young students to do their fieldwork and teaching. According to Norah:

> We go into communities. We do our research and we take from communities and we publish, we get on with our careers, we exploit all the time and we get the kudos and the fame and the fortune and to me there is a problem there, okay? It is all in the name of producing knowledge but one also has to see the kind of legacy that this leads to. Especially over generations where we have researchers going into the same communities year after year, their students are there doing the research.

Evelyn sees sociologists as blatantly bypassing communities' expectation for intervention and also co-production of knowledge, merely taking whatever they could gain from communities straight to journals for publishing:

[8] Mara Priest (2016) describes 'epistemic greed' as a moral and epistemic vice where elites take, keep or acquire knowledge which they preserveas exclusive, instead of sharingit with the epistemically less privileged. Epistemic greed can be manifest in institutions and individuals.

> What I am saying is that if you start working honestly with and representing the community in an engaged manner then you must tell the story with them, but what has happened is that the academics they do not tell the story with the people, they go on to the journals.

Bernard Magubane (1987) referred to the assumption of the right to speak on behalf of 'the other' as likened to ventriloquism where spokespersons turn real people into dummies for their headline show. This echoes the Freirean (2000:126) critique against the academics' domination of communities' voices through acts of top down "sloganising, 'depositing', regimentation and prescription". This tendency to turn real people into commodifiable objects of knowledge is amplified in the neoliberalising academy (Kato et al. 2023). But far from being inseverable from academic practice, parachute research can be tackled and resolved in different ways. First though academics must confront the ingrained mental constructs they hold of society which enable the peripheralisation of the broader public from themselves.

In this light, Section 7.4 explores pathways for modifying existing approaches to community-based research. Alternative practices that explore the interrelation between academia and activism are not final or perfect resolutions; however, they do open processes for transformation from within neoliberal society. As Uche exasperatedly proclaims, it is not necessarily "academics' duty to change [society]," but academics do wield immense authorial power. This power lies in their capacity to name and outline systems of power, to contemplate what it means to bring dignity to those living the social realities we study, and to make the parameters of experiences visible, not only for publication, but for the sake of public dialogue and collective action.

7.3.1.2 Interviewees talk about community engagement as superficial

The views detailed in the preceding section argue that sociology departments, in their current form, can only relate to society in an inherently exploitative way. Community engagement is raised in Chapter Six, as it incorporates neoliberal business-as-usual and sustains academics' viewpoints that the ideal of public intellectualism is unachievable in daily practice, thus characterising Paradox One. In this chapter, community engagement illustrates Paradox Two in how interviewees see the academic sphere of practice as fundamentally detached from the societal sphere.

Marcus predicts that the only relation between social engagement and academics in the future will be a parasitic one:

> There is still a kind of social service ethic that exists like the community engagement ethic, but I think we are going to reach a point where the neoliberalism business model becomes the dominant framework and all these other things become only flanking mechanisms. In other words, they are not contrary to that main neoliberal project, they are actually there to bolster and to support that neoliberal project.

For Norah, the dystopia Marcus describes above is not a distant possibility but a present reality, where community engagement programmes confirm a relationship between sociologists and society built on external relations:

> We are part of the community and what we do should feed back to the communities. There has got to be a flow of community into the university and vice versa. I see value in that. But it is not practised in that way *at all.* It is simply for academic CVs and it is for promotion, so people do whatever they can get away with in terms of community engagement. I mean, forget social change or anything like that. It is just, "I am going to do this so that I can put it on my CV, because I have to do that for the promotion." I mean, that is what I see.

Baloyi similarly argues that the agentic potential of university intellectuals has been redeployed to reproduce institutional values:

> There is very little space [for alternative practice]. Other areas of academic life are part and parcel of management practices, like community engagement, which now has also been commodified, because it is also now part of promotions and measurement . It was one space where we thought that the agency of intellectuals may actually start to pour out into something concrete. But nothing much has come of this agentic space.

Evelyn agrees that academics find it near impossible to think of public engagement outside of its potential impact on their professional advancement:

> Public engagement has become so careerist, it is about fame, it is about followers. It is not about the actual conditions of the people or structural collective conversations about what we can do to change things. It is so clearly about "me, me, myself….It is so self-centred.

Baatjes et al. (2012:151-152) share the cynical view of the respondents that, in South African universities, community engagement is "largely a public relations exercise by [Higher Education Institutions] HEIs struggling to protect their roles as key institutions responsible for nurturing caring and critical citizenship and substantive democracy", which tends to be ill-defined and "include almost any kind of work that is done by academics or departments with 'the community'. This is the case even if the research does not benefit the community".

Uche reiterates that community engagement is mere afterthought and that there is very little pressure for academics to make an actual difference when they embark on these service initiatives. Uche draws a parallel view with Baatjes *et al.* (2012) about community engagement departments fulfilling a window dressing, public relations function to mitigate against critiques of the university's role as a public institution:

> The community outside of the university does not really feel the presence of the university … When academics do engage communities, it is about fulfilling a sense of individual righteousness. Really, they are just ticking boxes. Because for you to be promoted as an academic it must be seen that you are teaching, researching and you are engaging the community. The engagement part is often compromised. Even though we all might claim that we are doing it. It is compromised in the sense that the community engagement I was told it's underfunded and there is no defined expectation so lecturers just pick up anything they want to do in order to tick that box to fulfil that righteousness that they are doing something for the public when in fact they are not really doing much at all.

The prevailing theme is that interviewees see the public as external to academic practice, reinforcing the perception that sociology has "no role out there." Discussed next, the final factor shaping this academic-society rift is the associated portrayal of students as the primary public that sociology engages with – an interpretation of the public common amongst interviewees that contrasts with earlier descriptions of sociology's ideal role in shaping society- at-large.

7.3.1.3 Interviewees talk about students as the key public

Academics labelled students as the core, if not sole, public through which their contribution to the public good is enacted. The conclusion that students are a primary public is understandable from the perspective that, as graduates, the training, education and conscientisation of students are the university's most 'obvious' contribution to society. However, academics tend not to

portray students as the public in a positive or productive light. Despite interviewees giving students the mantle of 'the public', their relationship with students is described in quite caustic terms. There is no impression that students are considered substantive agents. Not only is the public narrowly framed as the student public *within* the university, but in the interviewees' responses, students appear emptied of social consciousness and agency. On occasion, interviewees depict students as self-serving individualists or empty vessels. These negative images do not bode well for the academic's designation of their public.

When asked to describe the form which public engagement takes in practice, Uche answered:

> [Public engagement] takes the form of lectures, it takes the form of committee engagements, it takes the form sometimes of student interaction and all of that. So it is part of our corporate social responsibility.

When requested to define the public to whom academics are accountable, Norah's tone shifts from the enthusiasm and passion she used to describe the discipline's impact on her as a student:

> I have never really thought about that. Students are the main people I interact with… I suppose with the hope of some infiltration to broader society. To be honest, I think my main audience would be students.

Marcus reiterates that the progressive potential of Sociology is manifested today in the primary form of lectures:

> What we [as Sociologists] do is pierce that veil of ideology and show students and show people this is what the world is really like. We teach students how the world fits together. …[B]eing radical means going to the runt of something, going to the underlying causes of something, that is the essence of being radical. For me sociology is intrinsically radical in that sense

> The students I got, I do not want them to fit into the organisations they going to, I want them to be rebels in those organisations, to push against boundaries, to challenge the norm.

Students are sometimes seen as proxies for 'the masses', serving as a canvas for the idealised public intellectual who imparts revolutionary wisdom to society. Benny, for instance, likens the role of the humanities and social science professor to that of proselytising for students:

> The fact that I personally did not go on the streets with a placard to start burning things with the students does not mean that the ones who come to this office, like we are sitting together here, do not catch the fire or do not catch it in my lectures. Our university students took what we taught them, in fact that is really what they did and transformed it into a movement. In fact, most revolutions happen like that.

Benny likens the academic sphere as life-giving to their student public who relies on them for political tutelage: “They are the people we train. We train them and give them a particular way of looking at society”. He warns, “Manage your perspective” when I question academics’ involvement in activism and rebuts my concerns by saying:

> [T]he university became an atmosphere. We gave them [students] a certain air to breathe, that air helped them to do certain things. So, you could say, universities probably should take credit for this change that happened.

This sentiment of being a god-like entity who has the power to give or deny students room to breathe politically is strikingly echoed by Adam Habib, who, as Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, claimed of the 2015–2016 student movement, "I breathed life into the movement," even as he was widely criticised for criminalising protesting students by inviting private security onto campus (Desai 2018).Nonetheless, Habib goes on to appropriate the student narrative, reinterpreting it for an international audience through presentations such as *#FeesMustFall and the Advancement of Social Justice* and *Student Protests in South Africa* at Harvard University in 2018.

Benny and Habib seem to share the conjecture that inherent aspects of the humanities academic’s social value are detectable in the actions of student activists; in other words, they see the true extent of the public value of their work proxied by the intellectual surrogacy of students. They, the academics, can become public figures through the radical acts of those whom they have taught. They do not see themselves as mediators of top-down power who sublate radical, revolutionary action. Instead, they see themselves as conscientisers who plant the seeds of anti-systemic action.

Benny, frustrated by my critique of the multiple roles intellectuals occupy as both defenders of the status quo and its critics, responds with a nostalgic reflection, imagining a romanticised past where lecturers were seen as invariably responsible for shaping the politics of their students:

> When I was at the university when I was an undergrad, we had quite a few, about three of these firebrand professors who were like prophets They were Marxists. When it is evening, academics would not go to the staff centre, they would come to the student village to speak, they were just like prophets of Marxism and we would gather around them and they would criticise the VC [Vice-Chancellor] and criticise the state and criticise the system. What I am trying to say is quite a few academics play such an overtly, social justice crusading role. The others play the same role, sometimes even unknowingly, just your course content can radicalise students. I want you to understand that we are talking about the university and not breaking it into its parts too much.

Baloyi sees students as the public, not in the sense that they are produced from the work of academics as Benny and Marcus imply; but, rather, in the sense that students represent the perspectives existent in the public realm, which are possibly perspectives thwarted by the university. According to Baloyi:

> Students can still represent the public in that sense that they carry those sentiments of this nationalistic mass inside them, you know, that their ideas of African nationalism still carry some weight at different times and different reasons and different struggles, but certainly still there. It still merges very strongly.

Another issue with the notion that students constitute 'the public' with whom intellectuals engage, as raised by several academics, is that students are increasingly influenced by the neoliberal environment themselves. This is to the extent that careerism is recognised as the goal of education, instead of conscientisation or garnering the power towards creating a better world. Evelyn's views coincide with this notion that students embark on higher education primarily in their capacity as consumers, with the ultimate aim to gain the credentials which allow them to serve as wage-earners and functionaries within society and its economy:

> With the capitalist system and the current form of the universities, you cannot claim the status as 'leaders of social change'. In this current exclusionary form that you have, the university accounts for the elite and so we cannot claim to be an agent of change when it produces students who are so elitist themselves, when it produces class relations in society that are exclusionary

In this context, Vally (2007b: 49) argues that in South Africa's neoliberalising university, "[e]ducation is seen as an economic investment in which students and workers are value added

products and a means by which the economy is to be improved. Education and training are transformed into a panacea for economic performance". Badat (2009: 458) reiterates this point by underscoring that many academics see enrolment purely in terms of "preparing students for the labour market", with university education transformed into "simply another tradeable service, and private good".

If one should regard students as the critical public of the contemporary academic sociologist, then there is much to be concerned about in terms of our democratic mandate, the extent to which we mutually engage with students, and whether or not we engage with a public beyond these students – particularly given the depoliticisation of students on campuses across South Africa, and the consumerisation of students under neoliberalism.

As Nokuthula points out, the depoliticisation of student mobilisation and the securitisation of campuses bodes darkly for the minimalist conception of university students as the academics' key public. She remembers the forceful assault by state and universities on student mobilisations in the 2015-2016 Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) and Fees Must Fall (FMF) movements. For her, this moment in the history of higher education marks the diminution of students as a social group and as political stakeholders within the institution of higher education. The depoliticisation of students as agents of change occurred by what Nokuthula refers to as the "sheer brutality" resulting from the securitisation of campuses by management:

> I think we are in a very dangerous position as it is right now because we have silenced the youth, we have silenced the students through various measures. If students speak to you they will tell you, "We cannot protest because we signed an agreement with the university at registration". They are afraid to speak in lectures because of the cameras in the room … The securitisation of the whole university space itself. Students are scared of saying things.

In Section 7.4.3, I discuss how the vagueness and tenuousness of students' position as a public can serve as a catalyst for innovation rather than a reason for retreat. It need not be interpreted so negatively. Minimalist conception of students as the key public need not be evidence of academic's absence from society. It can veritably be a positive starting point from which a wider conception of critical public engagement can emerge, if we are to view students as dialogical agents whom we are mutually constituted by as academics, as opposed to mere objects of lecturers' proselytising.

To recap, three beliefs about the absence of progress possibilities sustain the view that academics are fundamentally separate to society. Firstly, interviewees describe only the possibility for an instrumentalist relation between the discipline of Sociology and society. Secondly, they discuss the 'community engagement' conduit as nothing more than a self-referential exercise more inclined to fold back into academic self-interest than to foster social change. Ultimately, this undialectical belief system culminates in, thirdly, the conclusion by interviewees that students represent the sociologists' prime public.

The other route to their self-separation is through historical revisionism: that is, to recognise progressive possibility as a thing of the past, thus cordoning off progressive practice not only in terms of sphere or spatial separation, but also temporally.

7.3.2 "Demobilised in the shadows of an irreplicable activist legacy"

The narrative that social embeddedness was possible during the anti-Apartheid struggle but is impossible now shapes the temporal dimension, but changed conditions now make public engagement impossible. Interviewees' reflections on the recent Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall nationwide student movements (7.3.3) also capture these shifting institutional dynamics, which are limiting pathways for academic activism.

A simultaneous shift towards neoliberal policies accompanied South Africa's legal and political democratisation, which started in 1994. This shift is reflected in higher education by a retreat from scholar-activism. Interviewees frequently distinguish between pre- and post- Apartheid academia when discussing what they perceive as sociology's predilection for public engagement – once vibrant but now in retreat. This retreat provides the context for a generation of contemporary academics navigating the mundane practicalities and limitations of narrow professional sociology. Respondents' tendency to split the present against the past foregrounds the perceived boundary between academics and society and is rooted in two intertwined tendencies toward historical revisionism in their answers:

Mythologising the Past 1 – The assertion that mobilising was easier back then.

Mythologising the Past 2 – The 'right side of history' narrative for institutions and academics allows identification with radicalism without requiring action, fostering complacency through legacy thinking.

Together these mythologies condition present-day apathy by mystifying contemporary academic responsibilities and possibilities for action, by obscuring the complexities of the past to which it is compared.

7.3.2.1 Mythologising the Past 1 – The assertion that it was easier to mobilise back then

Marcus, Evelyn, and David refer to the imprint of sociology left by past scholar activists, highlighting their subversive and courageous political involvement that pushed against and beyond the confines of the university.

Marcus' narrative captures the perspective that the ability to mobilise politically was somewhat simpler in the past where systems of power were less diffuse and therefore more recognisable. He explains:

> I was lucky to teach in the late 1980s. Students then were keen to get knowledge to change the world, because Apartheid was such a clear and easily identifiable enemy. Whereas the enemy now is a lot more diverse, a lot more diffuse. It is hard, globalisation, neoliberalism, they are not easy to pinpoint anymore.

Evelyn's views align with his, noting that today's systems of repression are more elusive than those of the Apartheid state. But Evelyn disagrees with the implication, that the decision to undertake academic activism in the past was somehow easier than it is today. Given the constant threat of state violence faced by academics for their activism, she disagrees with the notion that activism was more prevalent because mobilisation was inherently more doable. She remarks that academics in the 1980s were up against:

> [A] White supremacist Apartheid society that opposed everything that you did and silenced dissent. [If you spoke up] there was inevitably going to be violence inflicted on you. But I feel like the conditions necessitated speaking up, and by virtue of you speaking up, you became a public intellectual when it mattered. That is how I feel.

David's recollection supports Evelyn's account that, while the political targets of resistance may have been clearer, the act of mobilisation itself was neither simpler nor more convenient than it is today:

> In those days the lines were very clear, we were basically engaged in the struggle against Apartheid and the security police. Many students and lecturers were

> detained. The security police were present, there were spies on campus. We were quite seriously threatened by the military and the right wing. They targeted us.

Despite the real repercussions faced by scholar activists, the political milieu of the Apartheid era seemingly gave rise to a university life that was electrified by the political questions of the day, making the chasm between intellectual work and public engagement (which is so starkly visible today) seem almost non-existent in comparison (Eze *et al.* 2024). David's early scholar-activism was integrated into his teaching, like many of the activists at the time who hailed from schools of Industrial Sociology and Labour Studies:

> Some of the most important activism from universities, especially in the 1970s and 80s were from Industrial Sociologists who were involved with the Trade Union Movement for example, running education programmes, generally trying to unionise university workers, because universities were notorious for producing this critical body of thought, but at the same time branding themselves as very conservative reactionary institutions. … I felt that as an academic my contribution had to be more than just teaching the students that I had.

After 1994, public political engagement in the radical form of scholar-activism retreated into absence as a defining tendency in Sociology. With a critique against the capitalist system never quite being the main target of anti-Apartheid resistance, the new democratic freedoms gained and new positions attained assimilated into capitalist structures. The reconfiguration of a new 'legitimate' government doused the energy and appetite from academics for continued activism, while neoliberal policies were being adopted.

7.3.2.2 Mythologising the Past 2– The 'right side of history' narrative

The 'right side of history' narrative for institutions and academics allows for contemporary, theoretical identification with grassroots radicalism without requiring action, fostering complacency through legacy thinking, further securing the bounded separation of academic practice from society in an immediate sense today. This liberatory role of institutions is something academics recall with pride and nostalgia. This is significant as these historical accounts deflect the complexity of the time being remembered, rendering opaque contradictions of the time and depicting linear and pure scholar-activism. Historical revisionism, therefore, obscures the intricate race, class, and power dynamics that shaped

scholar activism during the 1980s, further placing a wedge between the past and the present and the perception of engaged possibility between academics and society today.

Revisionist accounts of an institution or discipline as inherently liberatory can influence academics to cultivate an internalised self-image as a change-seeking radical, often without public political engagement. An established tradition of activism, actual or implied, may lead academics to become complacent and resistant to further activism in the present, turning off contemporary forays into public political engagement. Revisionist accounts obscure dialectical contradiction and the necessary contact between the past and present by creating a fabled chasm between yesteryear's heroism and today's apathy. This revisionism locks contemporary sociologists into predetermination as functionaries, overshadowed by the defiant activists idealised in retrospect.

Romanticisation of sociology's legacy, left uninterrogated, may inadvertently sketch public sociologists of the 1980s as disembedded from internal contradictions, by pedestalling their intellectual and political work as pure in intention, untroubled by individualism or professional careerism. For instance, by masking the social contradictions of the period, the institutions and the social relations faced by academics in the past are whitewashed. The whitewashing of disciplines is accompanied by a broader whitewashing of university histories in South Africa, arguably facilitated by a noticeable absence of critical historical narratives within institutional accounts (Agbedahin and Agbedahin 2019). Existing institutional histories, such as *A Story of Rhodes* by Buckland and Neville (2004), often lean towards celebratory biographies of universities, lacking the critical, nuanced contextualisation needed to enrich our collective understanding. This void in historical context allows selective memory to shape academic identities. In this respect, university-based intellectuals hold a unique position in defining themselves, wielding significant power in giving official histories of their own institutional and disciplinary affiliations. Marcus refers to this as "a certain arrogance" in the way institutions depict their role in South African history, particularly prevalent in historically white universities (See Section 4.4.1).

Historical revisionism reinforces the false notion that academic identity is something one arrives at with a final quality, so that achieving a radical positioning in one historical moment stalls the need for further political mobilisation to retain a liberatory status. In other words, if embraced sufficiently, a single moment of activism essentialises activism as part of disciplinary identity. This undermines the nature of academic identity, which is practice-based and

continuous. Marcus speaks to how the student movements reckoned with the historical revisionism of historically white universities, but he commits the same self-sanitising revisionism even as he shares this critique. It is also important to note that he refers to the university as "they" when critiquing it and not "us":

> I think English speaking universities were at the forefront, key players in the anti-Apartheid struggle. There was this sense that we have always been on the right side of this whole thing so we simply need to continue with what we have always done. There was not ever a need for them to do introspection. We were always, as I said, opposed to Apartheid, always had these left-wing intellectuals and we have always spoken out against oppression. We have allowed Black students even against Apartheid policies to come to our universities. We defied Apartheid segregationists' laws by letting Black and White students share the same residences and things like that. So there is a moral high ground. But I think it is a good thing that the [Rhodes Must Fall] students' shook that platform that they were standing on, the English- speaking universities, and told *them* that what *they* were doing was not okay. You need to change; you cannot ride on the glory that you played in the struggle against Apartheid.

Outside of the revisionist accounts of academics from historically white universities, black academics interviewed also noted that historically black universities in South Africa take on modes of exoneration from responsibility to public engagement and scholar activism based on an idealisation of their historical positionality as they see it. An academic from the university of Fort Hare shares the following reflection on dissonance and institutional memory

> Let me tell you about the history, the issue of agency and historical memory. There are many gaps in history, but Fort Hare has always been the leader in terms of activism and the liberatory politics. None have forgotten, foreign staff or not, the role Fort Hare played in the liberation struggle movement of the African continent, not only the African continent, but also Southern Africa in particular…. But legacies do not last forever.
>
> [For instance], Fort Hare after Fees Must Fall hosted a full-on conference on decolonisation of the curriculum in higher learning, [and] the Vice Chancellors issued a statement supporting students. Today the same Council is quiet when these students are being marshalled into the courts. Let me tell you what is getting to some of these Fees Must Fall students today. They are seen as outcasts within their own

> campuses, but these guys are still facing court orders and attending courts. The University has not even allowed for them to be readmitted.

Revisionist historical accounts create blind spots. In recollection of the past, a few of the interviewed academics revealed a tendency towards "vanguardist" framings of institutional connections with the public. The past is remembered by interviewees from both historically white and black institutions as one where academics met the demands of civic participation in the anti-Apartheid struggle as leaders, and innovators in mass mobilisation. Today, they are buoyed by a sanctity of place afforded to the institutions by the historical processes and actions of their forebears, making them less inclined to critique the current state of their actual public engagement.

Marcus describes the past as one where academics "gave voice to the voiceless". Reflecting on past practices of representation in social movement spaces, he emphasises the legitimacy of academic voices in bottom-up social revolution. He suggests that one need not have been part of the working class to advocate for radical ideas or inspire grassroots action, citing figures like Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Marx, Lenin, and Frantz Fanon to illustrate that profoundly subversive intellectual contributions for social emancipation could come from "a quintessentially middle-class person":

> I do not think your class position is so deterministic that it rules out you speaking on behalf of another class, but one has to be very careful here, because you have all of these false prophets who would go and pretend to speak on behalf of a particular class. But actually, they simply speaking on behalf of their own class interests. … Can any of us really escape bourgeois ideology?

Marcus does not address his position as a white man, in relation to his claim to 'give voice' to the black working class. In South African Sociology, historically dominated by white male academics, the question of whiteness as a subject of inquiry has largely been neglected. Mahadeo (2024) argues that the resultant ubiquity of white dominance in sociology is furtively addressed by the white sociologist who takes on the role of saviour of the poor and downtrodden to compensate for any lack of social identification with those whom they may study. For Shannon Walsh (2015), social scientists constitute themselves through the objects of their work who represent what they are not – in this sense, the poor black is the social scientist's object of political desire in South Africa.

7.3.3. Changing Institutional Dynamics and The Reshaping of Academic Activism

When we take both justifications for paradox two into account, a picture emerges of an academic community removed from an organic affinity to social mobilisation. This perception that meaningful mobilisation today is "impossible" compared with the apparent organic fluidity of past movements is highlighted by the interviewees' anecdotes about the student movements of 2015-2016. The stark extraction of old sociology from the present (Section 7.3.2.1) and the sense that sociology is inherently radical because of its legacy (Section 7.3.2.2) proves harmful to the discipline's capacity to innovate contemporary modes of scholar-activism. These perceptions damn present-day departments to being shadow versions of a hallowed former self. The impact of paradox two's internalisation is evident in sociologists' reluctance to ally with students during the 2015-2016 movement and in the apolitical framing of decoloniality as curriculum and policy development.

The history of activism indicates that the sociologists of the past believed in the changeability of society. It is the belief, as Arundhati Roy (2003:86) says, that "another world is possible" and that one "can, on a quiet day, hear it breathing". Decoloniality has sparked a new emancipatory ascendancy in Sociology at the level of epistemological innovation, leading to a proliferation of the field in many exciting directions. But arguably decolonial work is happening within, not against or beyond the boundary separation between academics and society. The anecdotes by academics about activism and apathy in the 2015-2016 student movements highlight the absorption of radical voices through university governance structures, and the tendency of academics to value the movement through the professional prisms of insularity, distanciation and expertise.

Decolonisation at universities (so far) has not reconfigured the academic/society rift and, alone, cannot. On the contrary, one could argue that the university broadly has reconstituted the movement and its messages in ways that have placed neoliberal governance and academics back in positions of unquestioned insularity, as discussed below. It thus appears from interview reflections that illusio is maintained even in times of uprising, where contradictions do come to the fore. As Evelyn puts it,

> The decolonial moment, unfortunately in South Africa, [was one where] most people missed the opportunity as we are saying, to ground the university back to the people. We are in a way now contributing to something that is now feeling even further…The university is still escaping its people.

Evelyn reflects on the tendency of institutional decolonisation to focus on the objects and symptoms of coloniality (such as curricula and policy) as opposed to the academic communities themselves, from whose culture and processes these objective artifacts of exclusion have historically emerged:

> Obviously the decolonial curriculum cannot be the only thing that we focus on. The social character of the university has to be addressed….Without this broader focus, decoloniality is corrupted.

But the tendency to bypass the character of the academic community as a complicit process in the production of coloniality is par for the course, as described by the pillars of illusio discussed in the previous chapter. We rest the decolonial discourse on charges of epistemicide and Eurocentrism but do not sufficiently interrogate our own absorption as academics into capitalist ideologies, and away from public engagement. For instance, Norah observes that during the mobilisations, academics overtly avoided introspection. Instead, she witnessed many of her colleagues in Sociology vividly advocating for "business as usual" as students cried for change, which she attributes to a culture where an interest in activism is almost nil. Rather,

> Everything is about becoming a professor, whether you have anything to profess or not. It's just the status that counts. Once you have reached that, you are almost a godlike figure, and that's the way the institution runs.

Norah further asserts that the institution is deeply colonial, but she doubts there will be any institutional-level critical reflection on that matter. Most academics interviewed hold the view that decolonial critiques remained largely trapped in superficial discussions around curricula and institutional symbolism (if that at all), and never extend to questions of the epistemic and ontological status of the academic community itself as potential agents of transformation in society and as public interlocutors. For Zane, the academic preponderance for deflection is mirrored in their framing of what the pertinent social issues are:

> Decolonisation of epistemology is a middle-class issue … I bet you students from a poor background are not as frightened, as concerned about decolonisation. They are concerned about where their future in terms of employment will be.

Zane specifically argues that FMF and RMF have been "a project of the elite ". For him, while the issue of dealing with decolonisation is long overdue in society and is fundamentally important to pursue, the political messaging of the decolonial 'epistemic turn' in the university

is incongruent with the on-the-ground vocabulary and needs of South Africans, and slightly out of touch with the material struggles and movements of students from historically black universities.

He attributes the elitism in the decolonial project to the predominance of white institutional spaces, where the project gained prominence. As Zane put it:

> It is elitist. Even the language used to convey decolonisation ideas often becomes a platform for academics to convey how much they can read, that they have read Fanon.
>
> There are racial issues at play; former white spaces tend to receive more attention and sympathy, both from the media and funders.

The inability to address how emancipatory thought such as that produced through the student movements tends to get stuck within the echo chambers of professional academia, seldom finds the light of public aeration. Ultimately this means to Zane that,

> We are chasing frogs out [curriculum change] while there are crocodiles lying about [academic elitism].

In other words, he suggests that we are critiquing ‘’ways of knowing’’ in a very limited sense. This means that, through the illusio of academic work (going with the flow of the status quo, disbelieving in alternatives and avoiding self-critique), the daily motivations of academic work appear to maroon emancipatory messaging in journals and boardrooms.

A decade ago, Tuck and Yang (2012) warned against a situation where decolonisation eventually will mean simply a metaphor, an abstract concept loosely referring to transformation. More specifically, decolonisation becomes locked into the ‘island’ of academia separated from society, as a consequence of the normalisation of paradox two. Tuck and Yang (2012) go on to argue that this will occur if we do not reflect on the uncomfortable realities of our professional positions as scholars. Prinsloo (2016:166) says that we as academics can combat self-sanitising “moves to innocence” to dismantle the external paradox between society and the academy by acknowledging:

> While curricula and pedagogical practices that critique European epistemologies and the search for new ethics that reject domination and exploitation are necessary,

> one should ask who these initiatives serve, if critical consciousness does not translate into [broader social] change.

Academics are widely seen to have played a role in the co-optation and depoliticisation of students' narratives, essentially helping to close academia down from public engagement on the question of decolonisation, with some interviewees predicting that students will reopen a period of social movement in future. According to Nokuthula,

> We are undermining the student voices. We have been very successful at capturing for our benefit the decolonisation project which the students have revived, remember it is not a new project, it has always been there, but it has always been in obscurity. If we are going to have a proper discussion on decolonisation, the students have to become part of the solution as well. We cannot come up with principles and the charter on decolonisation without involving the public, the students, and a whole range of other stakeholders.

Others argue that the blame for the co-optation of students' narratives lies with university management while describing a form of co-optation that could just as easily be levelled at academics. Marcus emphasised this one-sided perspective, stating:

> A fundamental aspect of neoliberalism is the absorption of marginalised groups by dominant ones. If you listen to some senior managers, you'd think they were advocates of this movement, as they have now fully embraced the discourse around decolonisation, despite not uttering a peep about it before.

David Everatt (2016: 128), discussing the Fallist movement, notes what Marcus does not, and that is that many academics along with management played a role in the silencing of decolonial student voices on campus:

> One fact holds true across different countries, context and time periods – that very few, if any, youth-led struggles for youth-defined goals are ever successful. This is true even when youth fight for their own goals nestled with broader struggle … [W]hen the struggle moves out of the trenches and into the boardrooms young people are reminded that they are meant to be seen but not heard and are shifted (more or less politely) aside for adults … to take over.

Baloyi emphasises Everatt's point by recalling how student voices were first marginalised by management before being co-opted by academics. During the student movement, this included management referring to student activists as children:

> Can I tell you what our Vice Chancellor said? He said to us, when the students were busy and at the height of their protests, our Vice Chancellor said, "Aba bantwana" in Xhosa that means "these children". He wanted to bring these activists into smaller positions, to infantilise them and turn them into children. Those are not children; these are future leaders!

The student movements are a fine reflection of the fact that "intellectuals exhibit a tension between elitism and egalitarianism" (Kurzman and Owen 2002:81). In the colonial and capitalist reality of higher education, egalitarianism often yields to elitism, as Freire (1968) predicted, with self-promoting monologues replacing genuine dialogues on social transformation. Bourdieu (1990 cited in Pels 2000:2) expressed that, "spokespersons by definition speak in the name of, and hence in the place of others, who must first be reduced to (or seduced into) silence before they can effectively be spoken for". Our inability to see our own various roles in the perpetuation of epistemic and social inequality is what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) would call one of the "factory faults" born of education and employment in the university systems we now seek to change. This is a remarkable moment as the academic constructs herself simultaneously as problem and as solution to the question of top-down epistemic representation.

Zane and Benny caution against generalising the link between silencing student voices and the insular decolonisation publishing market. The other seven interviewees, however, emphasise that careerism was deeply embedded in both the trajectory and shortcomings of the decolonial academic turn, particularly in how it fosters private academic networks at the expense of public visibility and meaningful engagement.

The elusiveness of the far-off counter-public is secured by the belief that an irreplicable legacy of activism shades over (something more positive than overshadows) the contemporary period. The claim that academics have no role to play in the 'outside world' and their embrace of an irreplicable legacy of activism secures the disjuncture between sociological practice 'here' and public engagement 'way out there'.

Their sense-making mechanisms erode the expectation that they may have a different role to play outside of keeping their heads down in the professional game. The binarised worldview described in this chapter blocks out 'society at large' from the sphere of academic practice.

7.4. Alternative Praxis – What is possible from an internal relations perspective?

Section 7.4 concludes the analysis (Chapters Six and Seven) by proposing that there are ways to resist the expansion of neoliberalism through experimental activism. I suggest four ways of tackling ingrained external relations-based defeatism.

One is to radicalise 'Community Engagement' by infusing more radical forms of scholarship and research into its existing modes. Contrary to the interviewees' perception of community engagement as doomed to co-optation, it may present fertile ground, awaiting radical amplification through dialogue and practice. Second, the potential of collegial movements against corporate managerialism is introduced. Management is not external and separate from academics; we are constituted by corporate managerialism as we comply with, are alienated by, and benefit from it. We need to interrogate our entanglement with its reproductive logic through recognition of our complicity – a self-honesty that is fundamental to academic self-organisation, through for instance, collegial movements. Third, rather than viewing students as sociology's public and seeing this as confining our role to the university, we should consider the promise and pursuit of radical pedagogy where academics and students engage in mutual conscientisation to reformulate sociology as people's education from inside out. My final suggestion is that within the morose conclusion that a progressive university-society relationship, which once existed in South African sociology, is gone, there exists a legacy of scholar activism which can be resuscitated and foregrounded as a way of rehumanising sociology amongst staff, students, and the public.

Piccone (1987) points out that it is naïve to want, as I do, that the university act according to what it says it will do rather than what it is, that is, a mechanism for reproducing capitalist relations. It is foolish:

> [N]aively expecting universities to develop according to their [stated ideals] rather than in terms of their de facto social mandate to produce a new type of workforce and citizenry: technically competent specialists whose general ignorance makes them politically passive (Piccone 1987:7).

The question, then, is why adhere to the dominant trajectory of capitalist reproduction when internal relations reveal glimpses of alternatives, collective memory reminds us of sublated possibilities, and academia itself reflects a yearning for critically engaged, alternative sociologies.

Academic culture in Sociology has been on the ascendancy from the perspective of a vibrant turn via decolonial critique and Africanisation of sociological theory. Addressing colonialism necessitates an address of neoliberalism which ties us into a system of convergence with West-centric market rationality dating back to the origins of the university in the system of racial capitalism (as discussed in Section 4.4).

We cannot only claim to be a discipline epistemically poised against Western enclosure today, as there is an additional response which is amiss at the level of practice about how sociological thought today relates to public and emancipatory practice. Currently it appears we are stopping short of the full opportunities offered to us by the university as a "protected space – intellectual, temporal, physical and political – that allows people, individually and collectively, to think the unthinkable, to push the limits of the possible, to reflect and re-assess" (Brennan et al. 2004:18).

To resuscitate principles of public engagement, emancipatory action and activism in Sociology will happen not from the pure position of academics as self-righteous underdogs but as guilty propagators of the very system we seek to change. Self-sanitising views such as Burawoy's below, though well meaning, stands to inhibit the mobilisation of new experimental practice in Sociology, because it constructs progressive practice as an ideal, a conscience, an imagination moving in an opposite, external direction from where we actually stand:

> The political context and the sociological conscience have moved in opposite directions, so that the world we inhabit is increasingly in conflict with the ethos and principles that animate sociologists – an ethos opposed to inequality, to the erosion of civil liberties, to the destruction of public life, and to discrimination and exclusion (Burawoy 2004a: 1604).

Burawoy aims to inspire by suggesting we are better than capitalism, but in reality, we *are* reflection of capitalism, of its dialectical contradictions. Our academic identities are reflective of the entanglement between capitalism's aspirations and the struggle to defend humanity and the beauty of the commons. Capitalism is not outside of the sociological conscience, escaping the purity of its critical eye. Sociology and sociologists, like other humanities academics, are complicit in the erosion of public life through apathy, and social

exclusion through epistemic greed and hyper individualism. Sociology is not defined by an unfettered opposition to inequality in practice, however, nor is sociology damned to inevitable, vulgar professionalism brought about by *total* absorption into the system. Neither of these paralysing starting points work for building a publicly engaged Sociology because they overlook the ongoing preservation, negation, and containment of critical and emancipatory public sociology within the constitution of community engagement and other ordinary platforms already existent in the neoliberal university. They also ignore the intertwinement of neoliberal subjectivity with the sociological ethos of emancipatory thought.

Therefore to 'fix our lenses' to see solutions, the sociological conscience must be seen as developing from within the neoliberal system where it possesses the characteristics of both an alternative to it as well as a guise for the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivity. It is understanding Sociology through the lens of acceptance of a mutual constitution by both transgressive and regressive practice that offers the most realistic starting point for a re-embrace of sociology's humanism.

The vocabulary of humanism must be redeveloped from within sociology. The humanising potential of sociology is not cultivated in practice to the same extent as the ready acumen, expressibility and actioning of self-interest. This is clear. The history of modern social life has indeed been one of nurturing the latter at the expense of the former. As a result, the desire for collective cooperation towards greater and more humanity always resides below the exterior, out of reach, as a nudge and yearning to grasp at something which is existent, largely in absence. We call it 'emancipation', 'freedom', 'human connection', 'transformative engagement', 're-humanisation' and the 'public good'. A discourse of possibility is ultimately a reach towards a tendency, intellectual or political – but always collective - which defines an alternative path to the capitalist present. Public engagement as an underlying element of academic life is profoundly worth examining in its seeming absence – if only because the desire for humanist engagement is evidence enough that its possibility continues to exist entangled beneath the surface of the academic identities of sociologists.

To answer Piccone's (1987) question: we worry about what the university can be, but never has been, because we dream of a better imperfect world from the current imperfect one where humanism is *not as* thwarted, and individualism *not as* naturalised. To shift the internal dynamics of an academic system toward collectivity and public activism – despite their tendency, when fully in motion, to align with neoliberal principles – is a transformative

endeavour. To yearn for a more connected sociology, is to adventure as though "like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components" (Neurath cited in Cartwright et al. 1996:89).

The real question is not why we should worry about a form of sociology which has never been sustained. Instead, it is whether something is happening within the entanglements of the two aspects of this contradiction amidst the murky and thrashing seas of academic life that enables us to challenge the neoliberal status quo from beneath the surface. If a collective curiosity to do so exists, how might we, as academics, conceptualise what such a demonstration against capitalism could mean in practical terms?

A case is made throughout the thesis to fix our lenses towards internal. This chapter ends by discussing how we might do this by proposing practical solutions. This means guiding the sociological community from unconscious complicity with neoliberalism to conscious awareness. This leads to a critical turning point where alternatives are possible, and the unthinking reproduction of neoliberal subjectivity in education is constrained. For Henry Giroux (2020), discourses of anxiety (around sociological purpose, for instance) lead to discourses of critique (such as the critique of internal relation philosophy), and ultimately lead to discourses of possibility from which a new world different to this one may arise. This section, then, is a discourse of possibility. Below, I present four suggestions for those entering Sociology who may feel the impulse to cultivate an awareness of counterpower and transformative practices against neoliberalisation.

The four suggestions to follow are contextualised by the theoretical descriptors of dialectical change put forward in Chapter Three , that is: 1. Academic practice reflects larger system-wide contradictions; 2. Change in academic practice occurs interstitially rather than cataclysmically, given the complex interplay of multiple contradictions; and 3. Change takes place as we transition from one system of contradictions to another.

These characteristics of dialectical change established in this thesis are illustrated in the suggested practices. Characteristic 1 is contained within the suggestion that to change academic identity through alternative forms of practice, there is an impact on the neoliberal system. This carries throughout the discussion of alter-realities in Section 7.4 where each suggestion holds true to Marx's (1845; cited in Balibar, 2017: 16) edict that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."

And therefore, to change the ensemble of social relations means fostering hope for change in the human essence. Characteristics 2 and 3 above inform the nature of dialectical change contained in the suggestions to follow, including the inevitability of entanglement, which ensures that solutions are not extravagant but interstitial, thereby working within the contradictory entanglements to produce not an epiphanic escape from neoliberalism but a sublation of its power.

As a result, the following four suggestions do not mark endpoints, but ways of opening interstices for the development of a stronger and more self-conscious commitment to a culture of public engagement in sociology. The suggestions are not rooted in the belief that the university can ever be a completely egalitarian space, as there are far too many internal relations involved in academic life for this to be possible. But, they seek to reformulate the internal contradiction towards rehumanisation away from the unprecedented privatised and individualised form it has assumed. The constant recognition of dialectical thinking at the heart of the analysis speaks to Szadowski and Krzeski's (2022) emphasis of renewing critique in higher education studies by renewing the relation of ontology to critique.

Each of the following suggestions reveals the commons[9] underneath the corrupted phenomenal forms and asks us to reflect on what we consider not only the possibility but the necessity of acting upon subsumed forms of humanity in the current social milieu. Each represents a process of 'becoming other' through which revelation (of presently sublated forms) and transformation (of principle contradictions) show their eternal interdependence. Fixing our lenses as sociologists in order to become 'more' is a personal and group challenge, not to jettison our identities to some imagined ideal or fabled past but to graft onto the concept of identity, a culture of actual public practice.

7.4.1. Infusing More Radical Forms into Existing Modes of Community Engagement

Community engagement departments and divisions are institutionalised sites devoted to development practices. They reflect the desire for off campus connection by intellectuals and serve as a basis for projects with tangible developmental results in the local societies of South African universities.

[9] The 'commons' are not things, as they are forms of horizontal cooperation which act as alternatives to statism and privatisation, often referred to by the verb 'commoning'. The notion gained popularity with the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and is used widely across social movement theory to reflect radical alternatives to an authoritarian status quo (Federici 2012).

Despite the diverse inroads and innovations between local communities and academics launched because of these divisions, most respondents viewed community engagement departments stationed at the university cynically. They are dismissed almost wholly for their inclination to affirm as opposed to challenge corporate managerialism and the ancillary values of self-interested careerism. The interviewees reporting on what community engagement means to them reflect a pessimistic and deterministic view of these institutional platforms as little more than window dressing for the fulfilment of promotional. They seem to believe that, structurally, the university does not provide any progressive potential in the form of in-house programmes.

The interviewees fail to appreciate that community engagement offers a lens into the dynamic relationship between public intellectualism and careerism, where although public engagement may sometimes yield to careerist incentives, the two remain interconnected, influencing one another. In other words, community engagement divisions are not evidence of the disappearance of organic and activist forms of public engagement, but instead show how the contradictions are resolved today in favour of a neoliberal capitalism form of engagement. Community engagement divisions reflect that an extra-academic social interface is not vanquished in the public university in South Africa but transformed in the significantly more subdued and compliant form of public engagement. Radical emancipatory and activist forms public intellectualism, though present, are not fully activated in its current juxtaposition against overwhelmingly powerful individualistic tendencies, thus manifesting as 'present in its absence'.

Viewing available community engagement programmes only as products of the status quo traps academics in a limiting mindset where they pitch their intent for more deeply political and anti - systemic action against totalising neoliberal practice sometime/somehow in the future, and so inhibit the imagination of transgressive action in the present.

Evelyn offers a corrective to this binary thinking in the interviews, a glimmer of dialectical analysis, but then falls into a despaired view of the absolutism of neoliberalism's victory as her peers do. Evelyn is the only respondent to venture a critique of the preconceived separations, in particular the distinction between the university and society. The fleeting relational observations she makes is encapsulated by the following statement:

> The problem is the fact that we have got a distinction is a problem on its own. If humanities were to bring the voice of what is happening in communities then we

> would not have to distinguish between the two spaces. I think it is a matter of being in sync with the community. It is not a matter of speaking for, it is a matter of reflecting with integrity and honesty what the community is going through. …but we tend to be as exploitative as social scientists, in the sense that we go to communities to do fieldwork for three months then we come back, we write, *it is about our careers*.

She continues, reflecting that being a progressive activist means that one is a part of the community and foregoes elitist claims to being the voice, or raising the voice, of the community, instead becoming a part of the counter-public in which work against domination is performed on the ground:

> So for me to all of a sudden be a scholar activist, it means I am now meant to be an outsider of that community, but if I am part of the community, I speak the language of the community, I know what is happening in the community, I simply represent what the community is about, but I do not all of a sudden become the voice, the authority for the communities, …. but this thing about being a scholar activist is rare. We do not even know what the community is about, we are not connected to the community.

So, for Evelyn, the ideal is not for the academic to connect with society but to acknowledge the academy's existence already within society. This is profound as a starting gambit for rethinking what public sociology means conceptually. She challenges the boundary separation between the academy and society, different from the other respondents who commonly highlighted engagement as crossing the imagined void between professionalism and the public.

She reaches for a better way of conceptualising the problem. However, in the end, she retreats to a similar framing to the others where society and the university are seen as distinct and externally related spheres. Ultimately collapsing into the more traditional understanding of society and the university as two enclosed spheres with 'gaps' which separate them, Evelyn at the tail end gives way to an external relations framing which disables any further understanding of academic work as one of entangled but unequal practices. She thus concludes:

> So, there is a disconnection, basically what I am saying is that there is a disconnection between the community and the academy especially for social sciences.

This illustrates how tenacious the grip of binary thinking can be: Evelyn, though prompted to

critique external relations, ultimately frames her observations of the academic world within the same terms. Her reversion to conventional patterns of thought shows that questioning our external relations framings may be the course that in the end compels us to validate the duty to progressive public engagement differently when we finally see ourselves as mutually constituted by it.

Overall, the interviewed sociologists pose the problem of engagement as one of closing an oceanic gap between the academic and social sphere, rather than understanding the problem of engagement, dialectically and through contradiction, as one of recognising and negotiating existing and necessary internal relations between academics and the sublated emancipatory counter-public.

This vision of academics as a satellite to society elicits under-recognition and under-reaction to emplaced community engagement opportunities because it frames aspirations at a fantastical level of public, emancipatory, and universal intellectualism, bypassing more ordinary and contradictory opportunities. If sociologists honestly saw themselves as embedded rather than outside of society, their criticism of community engagement might involve dialogue with the university's in situ programmes and alternative activist approaches. Instead, their unconsciousness of their embeddedness and complicity in both progressive and regressive entanglements reduces their sage criticisms of the university's system -reproductive tendencies to a rhetorical exercise alone.

Sociologists, with their fantastic archive of social movement theory, are well-positioned to bring more radical theoretical and political considerations into community development programmes, challenging the normalisation of neoliberal logic in ways their training uniquely suits them. This remains an overlooked opportunity for the evolution of the discipline.

Sociologists can actively challenge the status quo by taking the initiative to reconfigure the university's community engagement platforms instead of sitting back and allowing neoliberal corporatist logic to dictate the rationale for intellectual engagement with society. Sociologists can infuse into conventional university programmes the lessons from "participatory action research" (Somekh and Noffke 2009) and "militant research" (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007) as ways of troubling and radicalising public engagement as they confront and transform their internal connection with managerialism. Social media and digital technology enable new ways of engaging publics beyond corporate managerialism (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021).

The infusion of critical and radical political thought, through debate and engagement with

existing platforms, is a way of reframing the inequalities inherent in academic-society praxis from being understood as methodological – a problem of disposition or style of research, to being understood as ontological and epistemological too. Sociologists entering the fray of public engagement should prioritise fixing the lenses by which they see themselves as a part of the internal relations under study to dismantle the ethnocentrism and savantism that lock them into modes of thinking which put them on a perch from which, as Sowell (2010:215) claims, leftist intellectuals "judge, pontificate to, and direct a whole society", leading to idleness and epistemic greed.

The future ventures of sociologists into community engagement, which they have for so long avoided for being purportedly too square and conservative for their liking, will be an exercise in challenging the hitherto translucency of sociologists' complicity in the very system they accuse community engagement of forwarding. Sociological involvement through action will build toward building a university community that sees beyond ourselves and the institutional wall. Public engagement needs not to be performative or vanguard in posture. It is not inherently arrogant to want to influence lives, at least if one is prepared to be influenced, one's theoretical fidelities broaden, and one's academic identity questioned and remoulded by interactions with multiple audiences.

7.4.2. Collegial Movements Against Corporate Managerialism

A clear starting point for resistance to neoliberalism is for academics to self -organise. To amplify the absence and necessity of the public good as a priority, academics will have to intercept the logic and functioning of the neoliberal university, as a collective, from within. Burawoy (2005a:8) makes the point that alongside "creating other publics", sociologists should politically organise themselves .

Academics were unanimous in their silence on solutions to the problem of neoliberalism and its managerialist configurations. They were able to articulate the collective complicity of academics in neoliberal reproduction but failed entirely to mention the potential of academics to rival that very system. The unprecedented privatisation and individualisation of academic practice has affected the consciousness of sociologists to the extent that they make no mention of protest activity, or movement organisation as a viable option in the face of neoliberalisation and its impacts. And yet, South African higher education scholars who critique neoliberalism consistently arrive at the conclusion that change needs to start with academic activism. According to Vally (2007a), it is academics who must lead the defence of higher education as

a public good. Sioux McKenna (2024:6) shares the sentiment that student protests are not enough, but activism internally is needed for the most sustained movement by "[a] cademics who take the potential for the university to be a common good in service of people and the planet seriously… It is only through collective action that these perverse systems can be toppled."

However, the widespread acceptance of external relations, as reflected in the data, may sustain the gap between the theory of neoliberal perversity and academic action against it. For example, the passivity created by neoliberal *illusio* and external relations fatalism meant that academics, by their own admission (see Section 6.3.4.1), needed to be pushed by students or management to participate in even basic transformational efforts, such as curriculum decolonisation and review.

There is a disconnect between academics' transformational agency and their willingness to enact it. A recurring theme in the interviews was a narrative of both collective and individual reluctance to engage in transformational and resistance activities. While most academics viewed management as the main obstacle to realising the public university, they often overlooked their individual and collective hesitancy to challenge the status quo actively.

The neoliberal cadence is singular and shrill, covering the inter-relationships in academic culture in a monochromatic haze. Disruption happens through entering into new relations with one another to produce new compositions and aesthetics of being. Collins (1986) reminds us that subversive agency in academia must be activated, it is not automatic. For example, she outlines that resistance requires practices of self-definition through the hard work of prefiguring new academic culture within the present. Stewart (2007:131; 143) calls this 'a critical collegial movement', "which will explore what new academic role is appropriate to the new situation, and which will take action to empower academics through increased collegiality."

If the problem of apathy to public engagement begins, as I suggest, with how sociologists interpret tensions as external and not internal, then a collective coming together is required. Collective activity is the product of and produces new thought collectives, as Fleck (1935; cited in Sady 2021: Section 3) so eloquently says:

> A truly isolated investigator is impossible ... An isolated investigator without bias and tradition, without forces of mental society acting upon him, and without the effect of the evolution of that society, would be blind and thoughtless. Thinking is

> a collective activity … Its product is a certain picture, which is visible only to anybody who takes part in this social activity, or a thought which is also clear to the members of the collective only. What we do think and how we do see depends on the thought-collective to which we belong.

Therefore, the neoliberal university cannot be fully understood within its individual contexts nor critically acted upon or resisted in isolation. As Fleck (1935) contends, collective intellectual organisation is vital. In this light, self-study research groups emerge as a novel expression of collegial movement. Academics openly acknowledged an uncomfortable reality where issues such as the ambiguous nature of public roles, the rise of careerism, and power-seeking behaviour rarely became topics of research or even informal conversation.

A culture of reflexive group self-research could form a critical component of collegial movements in the future for creatively constituting "the thought collective to which we belong". Research projects which explore the humanising potential of collective self-portraits of academic life in South Africa are on the rise (Pithouse-Morgan and Samaras 2015; 2022). The activity of collective self-study as a basis for building community and cohesion is woefully underexplored in Sociology. As Pillay (2021:7; my emphasis) outlines, collegial self-organisation and research are indispensable to "contesting, reconsidering, dialoguing, and playing with notions of academic identities and social cohesion *for the greater public good*". Davis (2023:5) underlines "new modes of academic storytelling that are creative and constitutive as well as critical" as an urgent task for resisting academic neoliberalism.

The neoliberal academy is not an objectivist structure existing outside of academic subjectivity; its totalising nature, shaped by an overwhelming heterarchy of relations, creates the illusion of it being 'complete,' though it is not. Scholar activism from within, aimed at privileging the public good, represents a most potent force for disrupting the self-sustaining regularities of neoliberalism. After all, the constructivist, and dialectical claims of this thesis rest on the assertion that the whole is defined by the choices made daily by individuals, each with varying levels of consciousness and awareness of their exploitation and power under this system.

7.4.3. Students as Sociologist's Primary Counter-Public

One of the important insights emerging from the interview data is that sociologists strongly indicated that, in lieu of connection with local society in any off-campus capacity, it was students for all intents and purposes who represented to them in any practicable sense, the

public. At first read, the prevalence of answers indicating students as the primary public come across as a sad and dramatic reduction from the grand aspirations of being a sociologist who changes the world, described predominantly at the start of interviews. One could see these 'minimalist' interpretations of the public as evidence that sociologists are indeed divorced in practice, and mind, from a greater public good.

From an internal relations perspective, the fact that sociologists in the subconscious war of position with neoliberalism have a realisable public, through whom they can recognise opportunities for enhancing intellectual sociability, can be viewed as an opportunity. Although my focus here is not on pedagogical practice, through radical pedagogy a commitment to framing students and academics as an integrated counter-public in concert with collegial movements against neoliberalism could go a long way to shifting the balance of forces in the primary contradiction.

A restored commitment to shifting insular careerism by strengthening radical pedagogic practice addresses: the transformation of student from scholar to consumer; and the relegation of teaching as subordinate to research. Below, I focus on the question of teaching.

Teaching is a site of struggle against hegemony. Academics do not revolutionise students as self-anointed philosopher kings to 'the masses', as some interviewees fantasised, but they can help create the spaces of conscientisation which enable students to formulate their own critical voices in the mobilisation for a more humane world. For Cloete (2004:56), student organisations were at the heart of the anti-apartheid struggle waged within the academic arena:

> Most of the opposition was initiated by the national student organisations such as the National Union of South African Students (Nusas – the second oldest student body in the world), the South African Student Organisation (Saso), the South African National Student Congress (Sansco) and the South African Students Congress (Sasco).

In the struggle against apartheid, academics collaborated with students in dialogical exchange on movement strategies, and they regularly took second fiddle to student visions for anti-systemic thought and action. Radical pedagogy expects educators to learn at the same rate as students about the world. This represents an 'organic' relation to teaching as outlined by Burawoy (2004a: 1608):

> Students are our first public. In the traditional approach we treat them as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. The lecturer stands above the lectured in a position of unquestioned authority – the possessor and disseminator of truth. Dialogue, if it takes place at all, does so behind the back of the lecturer. In the organic approach to teaching, students are treated not as tabula rasa but as carriers of accumulated experience, brought to the surface and turned into knowledge through dialogue. That experience may be cultivated from a student's own biography and augmented through specific engagements – the underlying presumption is that the teacher and taught have an organic relation, that the educator too must be educated.

The organic approach to teaching aims to creatively and subversively bring to the surface that which the regularisation of hegemony conceals and, according to Janz (2001:402), it has been a predilection of marginalised intellectuals by "allowing those who are deterritorialised to reterritorialise". Speaking in the context of the philosophy education in Africa, Janz (2015) makes the point that conceptualising "new refrains", new characters and new languages by which we map history is something that has long been the powers of reclamation offered by teaching and learning.

In South Africa, pedagogic praxis by black intellectuals has been at the forefront of 'epistemic disobedience' in the struggle for the soul of the university. Consider the hidden individual efforts over time of side-lined black intellectuals who spoke up against whiteness when no one was listening, who create subversive epistemic openings without sanction to do so, and who bravely put forward ideas of decolonised and Africanised curricula long before it was seen as a valid and fashionable cause to do so. Radical pedagogy exists outside of the motive forces of cashing in on decolonial and radical turns in theory and is driven by the impetus to recover the value of conscientisation at the dialogical level where those in power cannot easily see, sanction nor reward it. Teaching is a cornerstone of social change occupying a domain and level of human exchange that is not as quantifiable nor controllable as other educational activities. The lecturer is therefore able to "accomplish the idea of public sociology" uniquely (Pathak 2022:560). Invoking the beauty and power of ideas of justice, equality, resistance and creation through teacher-learner dialogue is a practice of freedom, as bell hooks (1994:207) inimitably captures:

> [L]earning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the

> opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.

Evelyn agrees, emphasising the relationship between subversive intellectualism, race and gender identity. She asserts her belief that black women resist power structures as a matter of survival, particularly in historically white universities. However, this resistance often leads to push-back in the form of institutional action and psychological exhaustion:

> It is for [Black women academics'] own survival. If they do not become part of transformation they are going to die literally. It is a matter of life and death for them. It is not just an intellectual exercise. If Black women are not part of pushing for social change, unfortunately they are going to get sick, because remember all these different forms of oppression, they are thoroughly exhausting. People get sick. So, for Black women to be at the forefront and writing and teaching about these kinds of issues, it is a matter of life and death.

Evelyn is the only academic who speaks of the oxygenating and life-giving potential of radical pedagogy. Unfortunately, we see in Section 7.3.1.3 that interviewees are not conceiving of students in positive agential terms, instead ascribing to flattened and negative notions of student subjectivity as either empty vessels or self-serving individualists.

Given the expansive democratic mandate of public universities, students are perhaps insufficient to consider as the sole counter-public, but they can be considered the primary one. Dallyn et al. (2015:1042) suggest that, to recast the public intellectual as a temperament, we must start off by fashioning spaces of public engagement inside the institution, recommending that, "one such space is pedagogical – through our teaching". Teaching as a site of dissent in the name of a broader emancipatory purpose for sociological practice is critical given that the two main developments of the university since 1994 have directly impacted constructions of the place of the learner – on one hand, students are aggregated and lost in massification and, on the other, they have been constructed as fee-paying consumers. This is linked with the demotion of teaching under neoliberalism where, through the prism of quantification, its value has diminished to the forte of junior and contract academics who are not key figures in the publishing market. Critical pedagogy in neoliberal times can act as a site of resistance against pernicious neoliberal enclosures of sociological ideals (Helmes 2022, Kumar 2015)

7.4.4. Reinscribing A Celebration of Sociology's Activist Legacy

Currently the disciplinary legacy of scholar-activism against Apartheid manifests as faded and fabled, in the personal stories told by senior academics, or as a faded truth for younger academics who encountered nostalgic renditions of the discipline's leftward development and heyday. For those aware of its history, the romanticisation and mythologisation of the brief period of scholar activism against Apartheid reinforces apathy by elevating "the possible" of the past as a unique and unrepeatable moment, unattainable in the present.

For those who are unaware of the history, silence on its real gains and losses, internal tensions and dynamics, and the clashes between naysayers and yea-sayers, robs them of the knowledge that, even in the most oppressive and uncertain of fascist social conditions, courage is possible and imperfect, and that sociology has a story to tell.

A commitment to resuscitating legacies of activism against apartheid through history teach-ins, student-based workshops, public lectures, publications and encounters which links the history of academic activism to the present is important because, as Sitas (2024: 16) notes, in spite of the many evolving struggles in democratic South Africa, still our "past facilitate[s] dreaming and possibility… nostalgia is a kind of weapon".

Bringing sociology's legacy into vibrant dialogue with present-day conditions through pedagogy and public interventions is a transformative practice which will bring the history of the discipline to life, but also as a pathway for sparking present-day reflections on academic identity. Academic identity must be seen explicitly as a work in progress, tied to the complex unfurling of history. There can be no return to past practices in Sociology. However, the history of the discipline can be reclaimed and renewed to illustrate in these insular times that germs of counter-public action are possible within complex systems of power.

The foregrounding of history as a basis for engaging the moral dimension of sociology along with the other alter-realities posited for sociology's self-transformation (initiating radicalised community engagement, the formation of collegial movements and implanting conditions for cultures of radical pedagogy) are all frameworks which recognise the relational nature of freedom against neoliberalisation. The activities suggested exist simultaneously in reciprocal and interdependent relation with neoliberal forces, and as such take the form of dialectical change introduced in Chapters Two and Three and restated in Section 7.4. Sublation, described in Chapter Two as an exceptionally profound notion, captures what transcendence means in relational paradigms. When social change occurs in a negative relation of otherness – such as

the contradiction between public engagement and careerism – the subjected form is affirmed anew and reconfigured within the contradictory union. From this, new relations emerge, reflecting preservation, negation, and the 'coming to be' of something new.

While this thesis starts with relational framings of identity and practice, it at no point loses sight of the importance of moving beyond the present and the possibilities for doing this embedded in dialectic thought. Dialectics provide notions of totality – the social whole and its relational parts – thus enabling understanding of the inherency of contradictions, and the intersectionality of processes of human alienation and emancipation; but, more significantly, it facilitates the detection of moments where and when capitalism is unable to enclose humanist desire. Understanding social reality dialectically allows for situations in which we may recognise "that [capitalism and the reality it projects] is the untruth; that the apparent seamless unity of capitalism contains contradictions that enable critique and can ultimately make different kinds of social relations possible" (Dubbeld 2009: 225).

7.5 Conclusion

Throughout the interviews and across participants, a remarkably prevalent and pronounced desultory zigzagging emerged between initial descriptions of the role of sociologists as society-shapers and revolutionary thinkers, and then moments later as repressed and conformist victims of corporate managerialist "academentia" (Tomaselli 2015). Chapter Six describes this pattern in terms of the tension between intellectual ideal and actual practice. In Chapter Seven, this conflicting self-narration is described by the tensions between the academic, management and societal spheres.

Chapter Seven claims that sociologists imagine themselves as a secluded zone from university structures stemming from their portrayal of top-down management as a separate territory, constraining and limiting academic capacity from the top down. Rather than discussing management as a broad, neutral organisational category, they describe the intense and corporatist form it takes in the academy. In doing so, they allude to the existence of 'new public management,' a concept used to characterise public sector trends marked by "free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices" (Lorenz 2012: 600). Respondents describe the management class as one which overlords with a power so immense, they are deemed capable of absorbing and co-opting the subversive and transformative potential of outsiders, such as Black academics entering the academy. Respondents characterise management's power and reach as so pervasive they effectively render management faceless and synonymous with

the university itself. Ultimately, their portrayal of management as omnipotent suggests that their solipsistic resistance to calls for public sociology stems more from acquiescence than choice. This depiction has implications for how starting points toward alternative relations are envisioned.

Furthermore, another compelling aspect of paradox two, and central to the thesis, is how the interviewed sociologists projected an academic sphere imagined as separate from and distant to what they conceive of as 'society' or the 'public'. Across all interviews, a shared collective imaginary emerged of an extraordinary gulf separating sociologists – embattled by management within the academy – from a distant world they acknowledge they are mandated to engage with but cannot reach. This mandate, rooted in the discipline's identity and reinforced by the branding of public universities, exists more as an abstract obligation than a concrete reality. It is not seen as a practical priority within the neoliberal regime but, even more so than this, sociologists do not see it as a possibility. For them, the public occupies a vague, esoteric and fantastical space where nostalgic dreams of activism and public intellectualism reside.

The public is perceived as a dot on the map, an unreachable island offshore with no coordinates or pathways for sociologists to reach it. Sociologists see themselves as stranded on the academic island, resigned to its confines, and seemingly convinced that no grander purpose awaits them beyond its shores. Their resistance to venture beyond management's academy in search of this elusive public rests on shared narratives: first, that they have little of value to offer society with whom they have an inherently extractive relationship as members of the discipline and, second, that institutional vessels such as 'community engagement' immediately available for the journey away from shore are dangerously impaired and unlikely to get very far, leaving them stuck in the territorial waters comfortably within view of management's neoliberal lighthouses. Ultimately, sociologists seem to view the students who briefly dock on their island, only to return to the public upon leaving, as the version of the 'outside world' with which they are most willing and likely to engage.

The shared system of assumptions by interviewed sociologists is fascinating because, instead of eradicating notions of public engagement, it makes room for its imagination, but as an impossible feat, thereby dispelling the immediate pressure to raft up and get there.

Sociologists tell themselves a storyline to justify their preoccupation with excelling where they are stuck, rather than restoring practice to reach their desired goals. They claim that during the struggle against Apartheid, sociologists not only made the journey but did so pioneeringly. This

warm and fading memory is enough to justify the blind eye they turn today to the widening of the gulf. They treasure this disciplinary legacy and its whispers of radicalism but convince themselves that it is much harder now to make the journey to the public than it was in the past.

Marx spoke about the "metabolic rift" that separates people from nature under capitalism (Foster 2000). This idea can be applied to the academic-public relation. Respondents' common impression of a fixed boundary between the two seems to mean that the relationship between society and university takes on a particular form, a rift. There is an estrangement between academics and society. Claiming this estrangement exists is not a denial that relations exist between the university and society. Instead, it is a claim that the relationship between the university and society takes on a particular form, perhaps a relationship marked by absence.

Capitalism transforms the university's value to society, equating it with its production of economic benefits – preparing individuals for the labour market, generating financial gains through academic publications, and securing financial grants for academic output – while overshadowing other aspects of its potential social value. We face the task of revisiting what is possible in this challenging environment to restore the dream of a better world, including the transformation of the world through the transformation of the conditions of its agents. In this context, this chapter ended by using an internal relations lens to make sense of practical pathways for resetting sail.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

Neoliberal processes connected to global capitalism, state policies and shifting social consciousness are reshaping the landscapes in which humanities' academics exist. Many academics do not fully grasp the dimensions of the neoliberal changes to which they are witness, or struggle to articulate the true nature of their experiences of practice within it. In recognition of the processual nature of the changing environment under study, the thesis engages not "the neoliberal" university as an end-state of capitalist subsumption but, instead, explores the ongoing processes by which neoliberalism is currently in motion at South African universities. For this reason, the designation of "the neoliberalising" university is highlighted throughout.

While the natural world can thrive without conscious self-awareness of its purpose, humans depend on a critical consciousness of their relationships to act meaningfully. According to Gramsci (1971: 351-352; cited in Allman 2007:267):

> Human beings are 'a process' or more precisely 'a process of their active relationships'…[H]uman beings should be conceived of as an 'ensemble of these relations' – the individuality of each and every human being is an 'ensemble of these relations'.

The thesis argues that the blinding thrum of routinised performance counteracts academics' critical consciousness of the relations that have shaped and formed them. The constant demand for professional output distances them from deeper reflections on how neoliberal conformity encroaches on various aspects of their work, including its public value. The conclusion about diminished awareness is garnered from South African sociologists' perspectives.

The sociologists studied shared an overall impression of an institutional reality expunged of alternatives, where the status quo is sutured, and impervious to new direction. The externalisation of emancipating promise to one side of the binary chart, and actual practice to the other, reflects a stark moment for the humanities. I argue that the nature of the meaning-making mechanisms which sustains this situation is defined by external relations philosophy, a viewpoint obscuring academics' true relation to possibility.

Within the dramatic and hegemonic enclosure in which academics picture themselves, are sporadic evocations: idyllic descriptions of the discipline as left-leaning, suggested through

intermittent mention of social justice and activism that imply retained significance. They clutch tightly to ideals *but* accept them only as underlying desires – understood, in the final instance, as improbability.

Ultimately, the thesis suggests that by "fixing their lenses" to perceive the character of reality as dialectical, academics may galvanise new pathways for reflexive self-understanding. Dialectical thinking immediately underlines the importance of extending reflexive discourses on the university beyond concerns of cognitive captivity as it relates solely to Eurocentrism alone, to also include the psychosocial and imperialist influence of capitalism. Dialectics highlights the dynamic interplay between contemporary forms of colonialism and capitalism. Therefore, a critique of the entanglements of modernity with coloniality in the complex matrix of the South African university must entail a critique of the role of the intellectual in society.

One important entry point for understanding how the intellectual community is constituted through processes of neoliberalism is by examining academics' assumptions and conceptions about their roles and the structures that inform them. This thesis leverages that entry point to provide an account of sociologists' perspectives through a dialectical-relational analysis of academic identities in contemporary South Africa.

8.2 A dialectical-relational analysis of academic identities

The main objective of this thesis is a dialectical-relational analysis of sociologists' academic identities in neoliberalising universities in contemporary South Africa. Below I outline the realisation of the thesis' secondary objectives. Combined, the realisation of the secondary objectives allows me to address the main objective which I highlight in Section 8.3. The secondary objectives are:

a) To determine the significance of a philosophy of internal relations for understanding the character of universities within neoliberal capitalism.
b) To uncover the key contradiction, understood as an internal relation, that structures the character of neo-liberalising universities in South Africa.
c) To explain how this key contradiction manifests in the tensions marking the academic identities of sociologists at neo-liberalising universities in South Africa.
d) To explore the significance of reflexive ethnographies for analysing academic identities at universities.

I discuss these in turn.

8.2.1 The significance of a philosophy of internal relations for critical university studies

The philosophy of internal relations allows us to appreciate that philosophical frameworks which are attuned to accommodating "messiness", interconnection, entanglement and contradiction are not necessarily disabling of analysis. Internal relations ontology allows us to understand that the world is composed not only of the interactions we see, but by real, enduring, underlying relations which appear invisible at the phenomenal level. For Szadkowski (2023), in his Marxist analysis of the political economy of higher education, in a world as fraught as our, where human beings are not fully realised, ontological considerations become sites of critical and demonstrative opposition.

Ollman's particularly colourful rendition of the ontology and epistemology of internal relations, understood from the perspective of a world constituted relationally, electrifies stulted conceptions of society which we have normalised. His argument stands to enrich critical university studies and how we understand the character of universities. It troubles our common-sense view of the university as made up of discrete units of things, events, and moments for which we need to find connections between. Ollman invites us to see the world, and by extension the university, as it is, as a system of parts moving through one another, constantly and necessarily in contact with all other relations and with the whole (a moving and open totality). The messy ontological world of internal relations depends on the process of abstraction for making sense of specific connections.

Abstraction is vital to any truly relational sociology of higher education. The process of abstraction provides a platform for overcoming the epistemological tendency to represent the social knots which trouble the university as linked to the simple solutions of disentangling conflictive oppositions. In other words, it demotes the external relations lens in university studies which portrays problems as a linear journey "in which one side invariably wins over the other", as articulated by Ollman (2003: 27). The nucleus of dialectic thought would require that we suspend and focus on the oppositional unities and the interplay of opposites as a necessary and ineluctable task of higher education analysis.

This thesis unpacks internal relations thinking and takes on the unorthodox task of applying it to a relational sociology of higher education. In doing this, it illustrates key points of overlap with the dialectic tradition and sociological critique, illustrating specifically the importance of relational-dialectic paradigms for enriching a sociology and philosophy of higher education, especially insofar as it offers something new in contrast with the prevalent critical realist

framework in South African higher education research which has an 'external relations' bend. Dialectical-relational theory is not only useful as a point of contrast in higher education studies, but also as a point of consistency. In this regard, the pairing of Bourdieu's contributions to education with internal relations philosophy is demonstrated as a powerful combination.

The ontological and epistemological definition of internal relations and its comparison with external relations philosophy and other prominent frameworks in higher education studies (such as critical realism and Bourdieu's sociology) provides a context for applying the distinctive approach of internal relations to understandings of contradictions and social change in the neoliberalising university.

8.2.2. The key contradiction, understood as an internal relation, within neoliberalising universities in South Africa

The general mechanism of 'abstraction', understood as the process of isolating a defined part from a complex assemblage, is applied systematically using Marx's method. This method involves two journeys. In the process of the first journey, two kinds of abstractions are made, one at the level of phenomenal parts, where academic identity is defined. And two, underlying internal relations are abstracted, in the form of a primary contradiction, which I posit animates and shapes the neoliberal academy. This posited contradiction is careerist insularity in oppositional unity with critical public engagement.

This contradiction is posited as having real ontological status and is not simply a theoretic supposition. In other words, the contradiction is explored for its primary status in shaping real relations between academic identity and the neoliberal university. The research finds that sociologists examined in this study indeed have been shaped and propelled by this contradiction in their professional lives, affirming its significance and status. However, it was also discovered that they misrecognise the nature of the tension between the poles as external instead of dialectical.

This misrecognition of internal relations has a degenerative impact on the imagination and mobilisation of social change from within the university. Contra to the perspective of interviewees, I contend that the contradiction is dialectical, and is shaped by the interplay of careerist insularity (regressive but dominant) and critical public engagement (progressive but sublated). This case is made by unpacking the dialectical nature of academic identity and practice as it manifests in the neoliberal university, as well as by showing the contentiousness of suggesting that public engagement is 'purely' the opposite pole of neoliberalism through an

exploration of its uneven institutional existence in the university, and in the discipline of sociology.

8.2.3 Manifestation of the key contradiction in the tensions marking the academic identities of sociologists at neo-liberalising universities in South Africa

The study explores the psychosocial impacts of neoliberalism by researching the extent to which the contradiction conditions academic dispositions to practice. An increasingly significant body of scholarship points to the importance of confronting as a matter of urgency the social, emotional, and mental challenges that arise with the neoliberal rest ructuring of intellectual labour in South Africa (Olivier *et al.* 2005; Stewart 2007; van Vuuren 2024). But to date, many of the crucial debates on the shape and function of higher education in South African society post-1994 have "tended to side-line and objectify the role of academics" (Stewart 2007: 132).

The day-to-day experiences of practice by academics are found to be fractious and alienating. The academics tended to see neoliberalism as the only option and so externalised alternative aspirations. It is fascinating that their cynical understandings of available possibilities are intimately conjoined with romantic depictions which they maintain of (public) sociology. An experience akin to whiplash in listening to the informants as they shifted from revolutionary notions of academic identity towards cataclysm and back – as they moved from describing what the value of sociology ought to be to what academic life really entails. The dead drop from descriptions of ideal to actuality is made possible by an external relations logic. This logic results in stark and fascinating bifurcations, between which academics jounce in their expressions of academic identity.

This empirical reality illustrates Ollman's (2015:9) theory that "capital's most effective strategy is to promote a way of thinking that separates two halves of a paradox from one another and both halves from the larger social and historical context in which they appear". The conceptual mode at the heart of this reproductive strategy by capitalism has created an unresolvable rift in the minds of academics between profession and moral obligation to the public good. This rift is reflected in prevalent zero-sum, binary explanations of reality, which appear to be supported by academics' practical (though preconscious) investment in doing well in the existing system, explained by the concept of 'illusio' in the thesis. The extraordinary power of path-dependency exhibited by the phenomena of 'illusio' drives academics to internalise the status quo as inevitable, to forego their beliefs in the real possibility of

alternatives and to opt out of rigorous self-critique. Undialectical conceptions of academic identity have fostered amongst sociologists a general submission to a culture of disciplinary isolation.

The results highlight the need to recognise the mental universe of academics as both a site of oppression and a space for institutional reconstitution. Sociologists experience the inversion of reality under capitalism as a disjuncture in their self-image – which splits academic identity across ontological levels, one real and one imagined (paradox one). The insistence by academics that real organic public engagement no longer exists because of the paradox between practice and ideal is made by way of anecdotes about the pantomime of progressive performativity, which they claim to observe in, amongst other things, the university's community engagement pageantry.

Academics also experience the inversion of reality under capitalism as a splitting of 'spheres' (paradox two). This splintering of the academic self through a second paradox occurs as sociologists detach themselves (as a sphere) from the university (understood as management structures), which they see as hostage to a new and rising culture in education defined by corporate administration replete with shared language, norms, and symbols which naturalise an institutional appreciation of quantity over quality.

The second paradox also highlights academics' detachment from the sphere of society, as they believe the discipline has no progressive role due to a perceived entrenched culture of extractivism (exemplified by 'community engagement'), leading them to consider students the only authentic public to whom they account. The local history of anti-apartheid scholar activism casts a shadow over sociologists' current detachment from the social sphere, which they justify by leaning on the prestige of that past activism. The story does not end at academics' defeatism because we are suggesting a more appropriate way of seeing the world. The paradoxes defining their viewpoints are outlined in order to tackle the crises from a point of specificity. As Taves (1987:6) contends, "the crisis of academia has to be tackled not in terms of vacuous normative ideals, but in terms of recent social developments and pressures".

8.2.4 Significance of reflexive ethnographies for analysing academic identities at universities

A significant component of the second journey in Marx's method of abstraction is that contradictions need to be understood from specific historical and social vantages. The overlapping standpoints from which I explore the research fundamentally influences my

findings. I am a woman of colour, in an intermediate stage of my academic career, stationed at an historically white university in the post-Apartheid milieu of South Africa where the consolidation of formal democracy has coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and the waning of civil society and social movement activity. Reflexive ethnography is particularly interesting, from the vantage of South African Sociology, where insider views often reveal unexpected perspectives which are largely blanketed from day-to-day view.

The sociology community presents an especially dynamic site for research on neoliberalism's influence because sociologists are widely considered to have a special normative obligation to animating humanistic and radically progressive ideas, without necessarily having a shared interpretation of how this manifests itself in practice.

Reflexive ethnographies show the importance of collectivising and publicising dialogue on internal conflict. At the level of scholarship, it is transformative in its capacity to unsettle expert knowledge and its expected function. At a collegial level, aerating and collectively confronting questions of purpose is humanising. Reflexivity is a holistic orientation to intellectual life which embeds in teaching, where intellectual exchange for human elevation instead of commodification creates community. Reflexivity is important because it produces knowledge for people about how to live in the world, how to nurture community: it is education and creation outside of the canon of publish and perish. Reflexivity as method but also as aim of knowledge production, long held by feminism and preserved by constructivist traditions, finds a new intensity with the dialectic method.

8.3 The Main Objective

Realising the main objective of providing an analysis of sociologists' academic identities using a dialectical-relational framework has taken place through addressing the four subsidiary objectives. The first sub-objective allows us to anticipate that there are two primary ways in which social tensions are interpreted – either as internal and dialectical contradiction, or as externally related paradox. The long tradition of dialectic thought, which finds a particular elegance in Marxist thought, forms the basis for understanding that academics do not see oppositional unity between tangentially different trajectories of practice, but as external.

The second sub-objective locates the tensions of higher education squarely within the reproduction of the capitalist world system and its distillation to the level of academic identity (understood as practice) so that a specific contradiction is retroductively hypothesised based

on the interview results and named as ‘careerist insularity’ in contradiction with ‘critical public engagement’.

The third sub-objective elicits examples of actual experience so that we can understand the conditions of existence of the contradiction as it manifests in reality at the level of sociologists’ perspectives and practices. For this purpose, two main paradoxes are used to represent how academics experience the contradiction as external within the unique processes to which they are subject in the neoliberalising university.

The fourth sub-objective underlines how the vantage points from which we understand internal relations, as they manifest at the level of perception and experience, are most accurately captured by reflexive forms of research. The terrain of reflexivity enables an engagement with dialectic philosophy in contemporary constellational and emergent ways that untie it from the rock-ribbed triad of old.

8.4 Thesis Contributions

The thesis made three types of contributions: methodological, theoretical, and empirical

Methodological Contribution: The study is unconventional in that it inverted traditional research roles, placing sociologists in the subject seat. This time it was professional academics who were the respondents to qualitative interviews, where it is their unprepared and immediately provoked answers which were exposed for the insights it might wittingly and unwittingly reveal. This unique research context elicited offerings of a very personal nature, including anecdotes from their lives, professional fears, venting about collegial dynamics and getting honest about their search for passion and meaning in academia. All the interviewees agreed to put themselves in a position where they would grapple openly with the meaning and value of their chosen paths.

The anticipated strangeness of being subjected to the researcher gaze is arguably the reason why it was so difficult to secure interviews with sociologists. Many sociologists I approached were acutely aware of how personal in-depth interviews could become. On top of that, their views were not only being recorded and noted, but done so by a colleague. As a result, most declined to participate. The opportunity to interview the sociologists who agreed about subject-matter as personal as their academic identities and practices was a rare one, for which I am exceedingly grateful. This was especially meaningful because I conducted these interviews as an outsider-within: a junior academic, eliciting the self-conceptions of more senior colleagues in rank and experience. The interviews were long. The nearly thirty hours of interviews gave

me extraordinary insight into dominant tendencies marking academics' framing of their realities.

Theoretical Contribution: Dialectical-relational thought suggests in that what may appear as dualistic opposites (in their phenomenal form) are inherently and internally connected. In contrast, traditional sociological studies in higher education often isolate phenomenal forms as externally related, treating social problems as the result of separate, contingent forces colliding into each other, so that researchers pursue causal explanations to connect two sides of a dualism. This thesis employs a dialectical-relational framework to challenge such conceptual separatism.

Revisiting Bertell Ollman's philosophy of internal relations highlighted the continuing importance of Marxist-inspired dialectic theory for the sociology of higher education, even though Marxism, in general, has lost favour amongst social scientists in the 21st century. In line with this, I showed that Ollman's dialectic philosophy is continuous with an emergent and contemporary field known as relational sociology. The philosophy of internal relations is also shown to hold critical points of complementarity with Bourdieu's 'logic of practice'. All three together are demonstrated as planks of a new philosophic framing for studying social relations in the sociology of higher education in South Africa and beyond.

Empirical Contribution: While a substantial body of literature exists, which focuses on how neoliberalism influences educational policy, there is less exploration of its impact on agency and subjectivity, particularly from the lens of reflexive, disciplinary self-study. Reflexive approaches highlighted how neoliberal ideology is distilled often at a subconscious level – at the level of being, consciousness and identity for academics. Van Vuuren (2024:1) notes that "the voices of South African academics and their experiences within the neoliberal university governance remain underexplored in the current literature". This study addresses this gap by examining how the tensions in academic identity are refracted through varying vantage points and subject positions. Although factors such as age, race, and gender contributed subtle variations to participant sociologists' experiences, their conclusions showed striking commonalities.

While the contributions of the thesis relate to ontological, epistemological, methodological and empirical themes pertinent to developing a new relational sociology of higher education, they also include how these considerations enrich the normative questions on sociologists' common purpose. Thinking through 'possibility' is central to the concerns of this thesis.

In this regard, a further contribution of the research is the finding that the latent pole of the contradiction, that of 'public engagement', still deeply influences sociologists' self-conception, thus remaining a core identifier. Though subdued and immobilised in practice, a pushback against neoliberal enclosures exists in the form of a progressive self-concept. This is a creative act, more than one of delusion. It presents to us the implacability of the desire for possibility which, despite the fears and hesitation academics carry, still exists. Though more unclear, the mesmeric quality and power of sociology though quiet, glows still bright, entangled in the present. Academics in their dialectical constitution hold all its promise.

Badat (2020:25-26) quoting Dickens (159:4) reflects on possibility in the neoliberal world when he asks:

> Can the current 'worst of times', 'winter of despair', 'season of Darkness', with dominated social classes and groups feeling that there is 'nothing before us', give way to an 'age of wisdom', 'spring of hope', and 'season of light' when we have 'everything before us'? (Dickens 1859:4). Or are we condemned to remain the 'age of foolishness' in which avarice and capital accumulation trump human development and a just future, [and] the pernicious ideologies of capital remain the ruling ideologies.

The conclusion of the thesis is vested in the belief that 'a season of light' exists, awaiting activation. In the thesis, I critique Burawoy's indexing of professional experience as the basis of public sociology. And yet, despite my criticism, my four suggestions, in the final analysis, are all rooted as institutional starting points. This emphasises that entanglement with professional dictates is undeniable, but our attempts at fostering counterpublics need not – as a measure of their value – turn inwards and end there. As inevitable as institutional entanglement may be it is not analogous to being stuck. Entanglement requires us to start from where we are—in the imperfect present, where we are inevitably complicit. And in our desire for more, we must pitch our goals from our messy starting points and aim for experimental, expansive, imaginative change through ordinary, counter publics, movement and organisation.

We are not attempting to cross a yawning void for which authority controls the thoroughfare because we are already 'inside' of that with which we seek connection, already constituted by the public. This is a dialectical starting gambit for rethinking critical intervention. This suggestion presumes that an inherent relation between thought and action exists. A key aspect of Adorno's work was his belief that thinking could often be a more potent form of resistance

than action alone, though he approached such ideas with characteristic nuance (Adorno 2014). Dialectic thinking maintains that the framework of our consciousness is reciprocal with the defining conditions of our realities. Therefore, "not thought alone but transforming our thought within transformed social relations" can act as "an abbreviated experience of transformation" (Allman 2007:272). As a result, suggestions are made to carve out interstitial and even temporary change within the neoliberalising institution. These moments of cracking open the system, even temporarily, are moments in which academics may be reawakened from undialectical thinking about the world in a way which currently justifies their withdrawal and externalises society. The thesis forwards a moral obligation to see the world differently and less defeatedly – more dialectically.

8.5 Limitations

Admittedly ambitious in scope, there is a risk that conceptual rigor occasionally gives way to the breadth of theoretical and thematic coverage. However, the study, its important subject matter, and the expansive concepts I try to animate it with, felt necessary, and the complexity unavoidable. The breadth of the research has, in turn, sparked a cascade of ideas for future exploration. I hope that some justice is done to the resonant, dancing, and intertwining concepts of dialectical thought, as it seeks to capture our human movement while we, in turn, reach to grasp at its explanation.

While the research has elicited interesting findings with remarkable convergences across sociologists of different ages, races, and genders, room remains for diversity in the sample. In contrast with the thematic scope, the sample size is relatively small. While the length and depth of each of the nine interviews (approximately three hours each) produced rich dialogue, the study could be improved given the time and resources to do so by an expanded sample, including sociologists from other provinces, interviews with higher education experts, sociology students, and scholar-activists. An expanded sample would add to empirical gaps by providing evidence of engaged sociology, and insight into the dynamics of organisation and involvement.

Furthermore, a methodological constraint may arise from the indistinguishability of my voice as a sociologist in the neoliberalising university from that of the interviewees who occupy the same occupational position. To consciously mitigate this, I clearly distinguish direct interview quotes from my analysis of them. While the interview process and the insights shared by

participant sociologists shaped this research, the conceptualisation is ultimately my own. In the end, as a dialogic study, my views inevitably intertwine with theirs, just as theirs shape mine.

And finally, though the thesis is reflecting on the possibilities for the future of the public university, sociology and critical public engagement, my discussions of the future omits reflections on artificial intelligence and technology which are destined to have epochal and revolutionary influences on not only teaching, and learning, but the idea of the university itself. The problems outlined in the thesis, as well as the reflections on alternative praxis omit technological considerations but this presents opportunities for more integrative future research.

8.6 Conclusion

The motif of the academic as an individual standing in a lonely crowd is no longer a romantic one in a world that desperately needs an alternative scenario. The public potential of arts, humanities and social science academics may not be there forever, given the increasingly crude assaults on public education around the world. For now, a scholarly community does exist with the knowledge and tools of critique to draw from, to build new and brave connections with the world beyond. Brave connections are also sometimes very small connections: writing on popular platforms, speaking truth to power as collegial movements, meeting students as equal agents in a quest to reconsider the world whole. There is so much to explore with regards to the unique structural positions of the humanities, in a world where the disappearance of criticality is placing a new premium on its worth and its existence in the places where it continues to thrive. Once better understood, the alienation of humanities and arts academics might constitute just one spark that lights a way, amongst a multitude of other sparks. What would an ordinary radical public engagement look like by a sociologist today, and what would that action be understood as, dialectically? The possibilities are not endless and they are not existing on a dream horizon. They are imperfect, entangled, and most importantly, present.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Schedule

Thank you very agreeing to be interviewed.

You will find that the questions are quite open and broad. Basically, the research I'm doing is about getting a sense of what this moment in higher education means, after the student's movement, but doing so from the perspective of professional academics.

The research is not only about the Fees Must Fall moment. There are two major aspects that I'm trying to capture. The first is to get a sense of academic perceptions of the place of academic work and academic life in society at large. And the second part is the reflections of academics on themselves as agents of change in the transformation context. So, there are two parts. One how academics perceive themselves in relation to society and two, how they perceive themselves as change agents in higher education.

The concepts seem really big, but the questions will be simple. My intention is not that participants answer as experts or give politically correct answers, I just want to have a conversation about everyday perceptions as insiders familiar at an experiential level with higher education.

The way the interview is going to work, is that I'm going to move from broad questions about being an academic to more specific questions about decolonial transformation. I'm interested just your general and basic perceptions of these things. There will be 13 questions.

And so, to begin….

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

HOW YOU UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT PLACE OF ACADEMIC LIFE AND ACADEMIC WORK IN RELATION TO SOCIETY AT LARGE

When did you start lecturing and working as an academic? And why?

Theme 1: How do academics see their role and function in relation to society?

1. In your understanding of it, how would you describe the major role of the humanities academic in society?

   Social value?

Points of connections with society?

Does it exist inside or outside?

Perceive the academic community as a powerful elite group or a marginalised disempowered group?

2. In everyday practice, to what extent is public engagement promoted (either writing on public platforms or organising at a community level)?

   Why?

   What are the ways that humanities academics influence social change?

Theme 2: Do academics see careerist pressures as negatively affecting their capacity to engage with society

3. How do you think peer recognition and publishability compare with social change as two separate motivations for academic work?

4. Do you think it's a fair expectation that academics' intellectual work performed in the university has an impact outside of the university?

5. Do you think that curriculum change can be a tool for social change?

6. Prior to the national student movements, had you seriously thought about eurocentrism and epistemological ethnocentrism as problems for Sociology?

HOW DO YOU SEE ACADEMICS AS CHANGE AGENTS IN THE DECOLONISING EDUCATION PROJECT

Theme 3: How do academics link Social identity and academic positions with epistemic transformation

7. It has been argued that the academic experience is very different for individuals with different and unequal social identities. For instance, it's been argued that because black academics and women academics within the university are 'outsiders within' in historically white universities, they therefore hold special potential for leading the transformation of the university.

Do you think black and female academics have a better willingness and capacity to bring about epistemic change in universities?

Do you think white, male academics can be at the forefront of epistemic change?

Or is this essentialising and exceptionalising blackness? Or is there truth to this?

8. Do you think that all intellectuals *should* share the same responsibility in solving this problem? Do you think that all intellectuals *do* share the same responsibility in solving this problem?

Theme 4: What is the meaning of decolonising sociology to different academics?

9. . What will be the major legacy of the 2015-2016 student movement?

10. How do you interpret the meaning of decolonising education in general and Sociology in particular?

    What is your role in this?

11. Consider the suggestion that academics as a collective did not detect, lead or place the issue of decolonising education on the agenda themselves; they were by and large instructed from the bottom up by the leadership of students first and then top-down by management responses.
    Can you comment on academics as a group being 'followers' or 'leaders' on the issue of decolonising education?

12. What, to your mind are the major challenges in implementing curriculum transformation in Sociology?

Is it a priority for the survival of the discipline?

Do you see it as unified thing happening in future? Or a fragmented thing taking place more organically? What is the best way?

What is the role of external intervention? Necessary?

Theme5: How do individual academics personally interpret academic/ institutional response to the decolonisation of higher education?

13. I'm going to share with my interpretation of an opinion expressed by a South African academic, Keet, and would like to ask you two questions about how you perceive his thoughts about the decolonisation project

He calls the decolonisation project as it takes place in higher education an "an uneasy and awkward decoloniality" because it is taking place through the same regime which either ignored it, denied it existed as a problem, or downplayed it in the past – and that the project is in many ways a superficial one that does not question the power relations of the university or its relationship with social justice. He says decolonisation is part of an "academic innocence-making and redemption project".

So,

(a) my first question is, to what extent do you feel that the decolonisation project is just the latest transformation trend, a new market for academic publishing?
(b) my second question is, Why do you think that academics and the complicated nature of their motivations are not called out as part of the problem as much as 'eurocentrism' , 'the management' and 'the curricula' are?

Theme 6: Closing

14.. If I have any follow up questions can I contact you

Appendix B: Rhodes University Ethics Clearance Letter

Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Makhanda, 6139, South Africa
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t: +27 (0) 46 603 7314
e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za
https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/
NHREC Registration number: RC-241114-045

27 February 2025

Ms Tarryn

Alexander
Department of
Sociology Rhodes
University

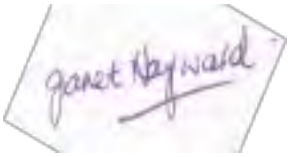
Review Reference: SOC2016/13

Dear Ms Alexander,

Re: The oppositional unity between careerism and critical public engagement: A reflexive ethnography of sociologists in neoliberalising universitiesin the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

This letter confirms that the above research project was reviewed and approved by the Department of Sociology Ethics Committee in 2016, prior to implementation of the online Ethical Research Application System (ERAS).

Sincerely,



Dr Janet Hayward
Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee