

# TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION

## Chants would be a fine thing

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### **Are today's students and academics too busy to protest or are they just getting angry about different things? Harriet Swain reports**

Universities took to the streets during last month's May Day riots - or so it would seem. Press reports of the rioting picked out university lecturers, philosophy students and "Oxbridge graduates" among the demonstrators. Trevor Bark, lecturer in criminology at [Middlesex University](#), was described as a "Class War" leader; James Matthews, a student at Anglia Polytechnic University, was fingered for defacing Churchill's statue and [John Jordan, a lecturer in fine art at Sheffield Hallam University](#), was quoted as a representative of the anarchist group Reclaim the Streets. Of the attack on Churchill's statue Jordan apparently declared: "Sending millions of men to their deaths in the trenches dwarfs the stupidity of any possible slogan on any possible piece of stone."

This is articulate fighting talk - the kind of stuff that spurred on the student movements and sociology professors of the 1960s and 1970s. Such tales of academic derring-do in last month's protests, and before that in Seattle and the June 18 riots in the City of London last year, appear to contradict complaints that universities have become hotbeds of apathy.

Certainly, a trawl through the websites of organisations such as Class War or Reclaim the Streets reveals writings on the philosophical arguments for protest, the nature of freedom and the history of activism that suggest strong academic credentials.

But things have moved on in the past 30 years, say academics who have been studying protest movements from a more theoretical perspective and who are sceptical of claims that universities are a seedbed of the new wave of protest movements. For a start, they say, students no longer have a distinct identity. Chris Rootes, director of the centre for the study of social and political movements at the [University of Kent](#), says: "What has happened since the late 1960s is that the whole status of students has decomposed. Students work part-time, people are often incidentally students. For that reason I don't think we will see student movements as such again."

His colleague, Diechter Rucht, professor of sociology, agrees. Rucht says the high profile of academics on some campaign websites is misleading because the web is the medium of academics. "People reading and writing what you see on a website isn't indicative of the protesters," he says. "To go on a protest you don't need to be an academic." As a German, he is astonished by the lack of political activity in universities in this country.

The reason always trotted out to explain this phenomenon is that students and academics have to work too hard now. Dave Renton, lecturer in history at Edgehill College of Higher Education, who has been an activist since the 1980s, says lecturers no longer have the space to pursue other interests. Larger classes, bureaucracy and the demands of research have eaten up academic time.

What has also changed, he says, is that people have become angry about different things. Past university protest movements were to do with specific issues. Now, people have become angry about the bigger picture.

This is reflected in one of the leading student-run movements - People and Planet. This grew out of Third World First, set up at the end of the 1960s by students at Oxford, and concentrates on fighting world poverty, human rights abuses and damage to the environment. It now has groups in about 90 universities, three times the number five years ago, with campaigns focusing on Third World debt, ethical investment by the Universities Superannuation Scheme and the impact of the World Trade Organisation.

According to Guy Hughes, head of the People and Planet campaigns team, students are becoming attracted to global matters. "With issues such as climate change we are all in it together," he says. "Political parties in this country do not give enough attention to the international economy and environment. The new generation is very aware of the disparity of wealth within and between nations and the effect of the global environment. We are trying to turn that into action that can put pressure on decision-makers."

But while the focus of People and Planet is on students, a key to its success is its willingness to work with other bodies - from both inside and outside higher education.

By contrast, groups involved in the Student Environment Network, based at [Manchester University](#), tend to be local and specific. The network simply provides a link that allows them to pool ideas. Coordinator Eleanor Mann, general secretary of Manchester Student Union, says concern for the environment remains strong, but takes different forms each year. Last year, it was GM foods, this year it is ethical consuming.

How far academics are involved in some of these movements is harder to quantify. Merl Storr, senior lecturer at the [University of East London](#), who runs the MA in political activism and social movement, says she knows a number who are involved in Reclaim the Streets. "But a lot of academics just think about it and do not do it."

John Whitelegg, professor of environmental studies at [Liverpool John Moores University](#) (see box, right), is scathing about how little his fellow academics participate - "It's as if the advocacy of the way they feel about things is a black mark against their reputation."

What emerges is that while a handful of activists are working from within universities on the kinds of direct action protests that have recently hit the headlines, behind the scenes hundreds are quietly plugging away on a variety of campaigning issues.

Giving shape to this fragmented picture, meanwhile, are the sociologists, geographers and cultural studies researchers, translating the localised victories of ethical investment campaigns, road protests and environmental groups into a genuine social movement.

Reclaim the Streets: [www.gn.apc.org/rts/](http://www.gn.apc.org/rts/); Class War: [www soi.city.ac.uk/louise/classwhat.html](http://www soi.city.ac.uk/louise/classwhat.html);  
People & Planet: [www.peopleandplanet.org/](http://www.peopleandplanet.org/).

## REMONSTRATORS AND DEMONSTRATORS

As a student, David Heller (left) was involved in direct action against nuclear weapons. Now, as a teaching assistant in the geography department at Hull University, he combines his involvement with ethnographic research, observing campaigners in some of the movements he joins.

"There are certain skills and resources that I can bring to campaigns - I have access to the university library and to the internet, and I have research skills that can be useful.

In recent years, he has spent several months at Faslane Peace Camp in Scotland, outside Faslane naval base, which houses nuclear weapons. He helped run the camp, the blockades and the attempts to gain entry. He has also joined the Trident Ploughshares campaign and Reclaim the Streets' actions in Hull.

"I count myself as a non-violent activist. But I have nothing against cutting fences around nuclear bases or actions in which people destroy thousands of millions of pounds worth of military hardware. I don't think there is anything wrong with property damage."

On May Day, he was in Manchester, where action was more sedate than in London, but on June 18 last year, he was in the thick of things, being chased by police along the Strand.

For him, practical involvement is useful. Academics, he says, all "have a political view" and "have to seek funding, which means (academic) objectivity is a myth. I think being an activist produces better academic work."

In the past five years, John Whitelegg, professor of environmental studies at [Liverpool John Moores University](#), has helped with campaigns against Manchester Airport's second runway, the Birmingham Northern Relief Road, Lancaster's western bypass, the M65 motorway and the trans-Israeli highway.

"I don't just mean waving banners and lying down in front of bulldozers, although I do that as well," he says. "I collect evidence on traffic generation, the effects on childhood respiratory diseases, pollution."

He visits areas that will be affected, finds out if there are schools nearby, measures air pollution and writes up his findings in reports that later inform public inquiries into the schemes.

"The work I do would stand scrutiny with any academic work, but it is important to see the process through, which means throwing your lot in with the demonstrations as well."

In Israel, he was part of one of the country's first road protests. "I was sent flying by a police horse because I was blocking contractors' equipment. A lot of heavily armed police turned up because Israel has a culture that is very strongly in support of authority."

But he would not, he says firmly, do anything violent. He refuses to become involved in sabotaging equipment because that could harm contractors. He resists responding to threats of violence from others.

Beyond that, he does not shy away from more active demonstrating, aware that it often guarantees more media attention.

"Breaking the law isn't a problem," he says. "If we didn't break the law we would still be living in medieval villages in service to the lord of the manor. The law is always 20, 30, 40 years behind popular feeling."