

Creating crises

How the university shapes student activism

*Rise, like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you:
Ye are many—they are few!*
—Percy Bysshe Shelley,
“The Masque of Anarchy”

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Abstract

This research investigates how the institutional structure of the university shapes student activism making use of militant ethnography. The main purpose is to provide a deeper and more complex understanding of student activism. The conducted fieldwork focussed on the tactics and strategies used in student activism. This is done via a framework that looks if activists engage in a strategy of *organising*, *mobilising* and *advocacy* and if their tactics are best characterised as *production struggles* or *circulation struggles*. The main findings were the difficulty of employing an organising strategy and how collective actions at the university blurs the lines of production and circulation struggles. The fieldwork has been conducted in Rotterdam, the Netherlands with a focus on a student union opposing education budget cuts and a pro-Palestine student group.

Introduction

In 1919, German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg dedicated her last written words before her execution to how the history of revolutionary social struggle is riddled with defeats (Luxemburg, 1919). She, however, also emphasises that every defeat adds to our understanding of what we can do better.

How does the defeat of “Spartacus week” appear in the light of the above historical question? Was it a case of raging, uncontrollable revolutionary energy colliding with an insufficiently ripe situation, or was it a case of weak and indecisive action?

Both! The crisis had a dual nature. The contradiction between the powerful, decisive, aggressive offensive of the Berlin masses on the one hand and the indecisive, half-hearted vacillation of the Berlin leadership on the other is the mark of this latest episode. The leadership failed. But a new leadership can and must be created by the masses and from the masses. The masses are the crucial factor. They are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the challenge, and out of this “defeat” they have forged a link in the chain of historic defeats, which is the pride and strength of international socialism. That is why future victories will spring from this “defeat.” (Luxemburg, 1919).

A year prior to this, she wrote *we will be victorious if we have not forgotten how to learn*. It is in this spirit that I wish to conduct my research and write my thesis. As a student organiser and activist, I have been part of various movements, but I haven’t seen any of them succeed in what they set out to accomplish.

This thesis focusses on the various ways in which student activists can shape their resistance. Their strategies and tactics, the obstacles and the strengths. The purpose is to give other activists, my comrades, a deeper understanding of how agitating and organising can be done more effectively. I do this from the position of chair of a local student union, an activist and a student. It is also this position that makes me want to focus on the university and the student union as a site of resistance. In my research, I looked at what forms of activism are being done and how the university environment shapes these. In other words: *How does the institutional structure of the university shape student*

activism? Although this question is very broad, my fieldwork is much narrower. It focusses on the very specific case of the Rotterdam student union STUUR and the Rotterdam student encampment.

The subject of this thesis comes from the conviction that as activists, we must become better at having an impact on the world. The goal is then to help student activists gain a better understanding of their (our) work to make more informed decisions. Over the past year, I was involved with the development and revaluation of the strategies that student unions in the Netherlands employ. Although we are actively trying to adapt and grow in how we organize, we have yet to actually grow the movement in such a way to combat what students are up against. Students are still spearheading many social struggles, from fighting against the genocide in Gaza and the Dutch complicity, to the education budget cuts implemented by the far-right Dutch government.

The analytical framework for this research is twofold. The first pillar is Jane McAlevey's (2016) and her work on community organizing. This provides me with a tangible lens through which different strategies of organising can be seen. The second pillar comes from the work of Joshua Clover (2016) and provides the tools needed to analyse the effects and implications of different forms of protest, most importantly: the riot and the strike. This framework is then applied to Bill Readings' (1997) work on the university as an institution.

I conduct my research making use of a method called militant ethnography. This is a method that allowed me to participate personally in the practices of organising and contribute while doing so (Juris, 2007). It is a politicised research approach that is committed to being in solidarity with and entrenched in social movements. My current position as chair of the local student union and activist in my university gave me the opportunity to put these methods into practice. From my role in the student union I focussed on the organizing efforts that happened against the education austerity measures and against the anti-internationalisation, as an activist I participated in pro-Palestine groups. This gave me an insight into a broad spectrum of tactics and strategies as well as different kinds of groups and their internal workings.

After this introduction, I will provide a theoretical framework about forms of collective action, strategies for creating change and the workings of modern university. This is followed with a methods section and an explanation of my research process. After that I will present my fieldwork making use of three passages accompanied by an interpretation. I will end with the conclusions from my framework and my main takeaways.

Theory

In order to analyse the different ways student activists can organise, I will combine two distinct frameworks into one. Firstly, the framework put forward by Jane McAlevey (2016). This framework classifies different methods of organising through their theory of power, strategy and what people they focus on. The second framework is one put forward by Joshua Clover (2016) and analyses different kinds of collective action, most importantly the riot and the strike. When combining the two, this provides a lens to analyse activism through. McAlevey's framework provides a strategic dimension while Clover (2016) provides a tactical dimension. It must be noted however that this distinction is much less stark in reality as there is a quite a lot of overlap. This framework is followed up with an analysis of the modern university and an analysis of how tactics and strategies relate.

McAlevey (2016) distinguishes between three main methods of change: advocacy, mobilising and organising. Advocacy is usually carried out by professionals such as lobbyists, pollsters and lawyers through backroom negotiation. There is a focus on marginal policy changes, that can still be very valuable. Furthermore, advocacy doesn't use a broad mass of people. This makes it largely incapable of challenging power relationships or building power for that matter. Having large numbers is the only advantage that can truly challenge power. McAlevey (2016) sees power in the hands of

people as the ability to create a crisis big enough to gain concessions. The second method is the mobilising method. This method is usually carried out by professional staff of NGO's, unions and activists (McAlevey, 2016). This method does rely on people power as it involves protests, direct action and petitions, although usually managed by professional campaigners or committed activists. With the mobilising approach, there is a large reliance on messaging, frames and (social) media to influence public opinion and the targets of a campaign. Mobilising tactics rely heavily on people that are already deeply committed to a certain issue. This approach also tends not to shift power dynamics. The third and final method is organising. This is an approach that relies on mass and campaigns that build power over time (McAlevey, 2016). This method emphasises the participation of non-professional staff in the organising efforts and strategy. All three methods are legitimate options for change while using different tactics and playing different roles.

Another dimension of the way social movements organise is the difference between self-selecting and structure-based organising (McAlevey, 2016). Self-selecting organising is a method where groups that already agree on issues come together to create change. These groups tend to rely on mobilisation strategies and tactics. People have a strong underlying commitment to a certain subject which drives them to become active. Examples are climate or feminist groups. Structure-based organising on the other hand is done by organising majorities within a certain structure, such as a workplace or a church (McAlevey, 2016). A structure-based approach makes use of the organising method to build this majority by methodically expanding the amount of people that fight for an issue. An organising strategy relies on these majorities or even supermajorities within the structure to create a crisis for those in power. This strategy uses different ways to reach as many people as possible. An important one being leadership identification: the process of getting *organic leaders*, people with a following within a certain structure, to help reach as many people as possible. This is combined with many one-on-one conversations to win over more people and the methodical analysis of the structure itself. Solidarity is built over a longer period and constantly tested. The main tactic to gain leverage over the target are majority strikes or sustained and strategic direct-action.

The frameworks of advocacy, mobilising and organising and self-selecting vs structure-based are both tools to analyse the strategy of student activists. The dimension it doesn't cover is the tactical one. The concrete ways in which student activists take action varies widely and is closely related to the issues at hand. There is for instance a stark contrast between the mass strikes of American black students in the 1930's and the pro-Palestine student encampments of 2024 (Kendi, 2012; Research & Destory, 2024). In the next section, I will discuss the tactical dimension of social movements making use of the work *Riot. Strike. Riot.* by Joshua Clover (2016).

When analysing the strike and the riot, Clover (2016) dissects both tactics in various dimensions. Firstly, there is what he calls the *sphere of intervention*. This is the process that a tactic tries to disrupt to gain leverage. The two main options are production and circulation. A riot, blockade or occupation is typically an intervention in the circulation of capital, this makes them so called *circulation struggles*. A strike on the other hand intervenes with the production of capital. This leads to the next dimension: *the exemplary site*. This is the physical location the tactic takes place. A strike happens in the workplace, the place of production while a riot and other circulation struggles take place in the streets or around important infrastructure. The next dimensions are the concrete actions undertaken with a tactic, which Clover (2016) calls *core activities*. A strike typically consists of a work stoppage or another way to curb the production process. During a circulation struggle, people can loot, stop shipments or physically block thoroughfares, this often happens spontaneous. The strike is closely related to an organising strategy while circulation struggles are more associated with mobilising (McAlevey, 2016). The next dimension concerns the public engaging in a collective action: *proper agents*. This can for instance be workers at their workplace in case of a strike or unrelated people in

case of a riot or blockade. The concept *proper agents* has some overlap with self-selecting vs structure based. When making use of structure-based organising, proper agents almost always have leverage over their structure in their role. Examples are workers that can withdraw their labour or renters that can stop paying rent. Proper agents in the case of self-selecting are more arbitrary; the only requirement is agreeing with the cause and participating. At last, there is the *central aim* of the tactic. A strike tries to set the price of labour by withdrawing it and through that showing its necessity while a riot or blockade sets the price of market goods through limiting accessibility. All five of these dimensions can also be used to analyse other tactics and contexts. It is a lens through which social movements can be viewed to gain in insight in what their tactics imply.

Clover (2016) identifies three eras that each were signified by different dominant ways of doing collective action: the age of riot, the age of strike and what he calls the age of riot prime, which is what we are living through today. The first age, riot, took place at the exemplary site of markets and harbours by people, proper agents, that didn't have to have any relation to each other but their dispossession (Clover, 2016). Plundering and looting was their core activity and with that they set price of market goods by limiting access for consumption. With the rise of industrial capitalism, came a new age: the age of strike. This new organisation of the economy gave specifically workers on the factory floor a new way of leverage over the production. They could stop working and with that set the price of labour. With the advent of neoliberal capitalism, this leverage was being eroded. Production chains became more complicated, the west deindustrialised. This decimated labour unions and their power, giving rise to the contemporary age of riot prime. The age of riot prime differs however from the original age of riot. Where in the previous age the economy was near and easy to loot with not much standing in the way (Clover, 2016), now the economy is much farther away, while the state is always near in the form of a massive police force. The age of riot prime has changed the exemplary site to streets and squares and collective action is often much more aimed at the state itself. The proper agents are often racialised peoples, dispossessed by the ever racist capitalist system. Clover (2016) calls these people also "surplus" population, as capital treats them as an unproductive underclass, not needed for capital accumulation while unable to make a decent living.

The age of riot prime also brings to life a new tactic: the commune. Clover (2016) describes this tactic as something that is also a form of life as it tries to create a space that combines the wage and price setting as it produces and offers consumption. It is a space where people attempt new social relations while engaging in collective action.

With a framework for the tactics and the strategy laid out the next step is to explain the institutional structure of the university. This can give insight in how the various tactics and strategies at hand relate to this institutional structure. What does a university produce? What publics are involved with this production? How is a university run? And what role does a university play within modern capitalist society?

To grasp the institutional workings of the university it is easiest to first answer this last question as it has major implications for the other questions. In *the University in Ruins*, Bill Readings (1997) writes about the role institution plays withing society. Up until the revolutionary year of 1968, the university was there to reinforce the nation state. It did this trough the legitimisation of its culture and ideals and by creating a well-educated workforce to compete with other nation states. Readings (1997) calls this the *university of culture*. This institution is publicly funded and run somewhat democratically. This changed drastically in the 1970s, as a consequence of increased globalization and with that a decline of the nation-state it also eroded the very *raison d'être* of the university of culture. This erosion accelerated in the 1990s where the *university of culture* increasingly made place for *the university of excellence* (Readings, 1997). The university became an institution that no longer served the nation state, but instead that of transnational capital. In this process it has become a corporation

that serves itself like any other company (Readings 1997). The role in society today is firstly, a steady supply of skilled labour for transnational capital and secondly the production of knowledge, also for transnational capital. On top of producing this knowledge, the university is a site that aids in the circulation of knowledge through publication, distribution and presenting.

This modern university also changes in the way it is administered. Instead of being run by the academic staff like professors, it is now the administrator or bureaucrat that runs the university (Readings, 1997). In this sense, the university is also very similar to a typical corporation. The goal of this administration is different to that of the professor. The administrator tries to maximise value for money. How this is measured is left ambiguous, but it is usually what is implied with the term *excellence*. They thus view the student not as someone who wants to think, but as a consumer that wants value for money, who wants excellence. In this description, I have already hinted towards the publics involved in production: students and staff. Students and staff are the main coproducers of knowledge. On top of that, students go through the process of developing more skilled labour.

With this analysis of the university, I can take the step of applying both the strategic and the tactical dimension to see how these relate to the university. When thinking of contemporary student protests, the most common tactics consist of circulation struggles. These appear in various forms such as the blockade, occupation and sometimes riot (Chua & Bosworth, 2023; Clover, 2022; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011). I would argue that the circulation struggle in the case of the university is different to that of a road or port. The effect at a university hinders both the circulation and production of knowledge. This mainly has to do with the usual *proper agents* and *exemplary site*: students and the university campus. Although not really workers that can withdraw labour, they are also far from unrelated to the target and they do have some power over their institution (Saunders, 2023). Students are, together with the staff, coproducers of knowledge and of the education itself. The typical *exemplary site* of the university campus is also different from the usual in circulation struggles. The campus is the place of production but also of circulation. Collective action here can hinder production and circulation of knowledge. What it does have in common with the “conventional” blockade is that it is a deeply generative site of refusal (Chua & Bosworth, 2023; Cole & Heinecke, 2018). The blockade becomes a place for experimentation with alternative progressive visions for the university and society at large.

When synthesising the tactical and strategic dimension a central, temporal, throughline can be identified. The advent of neoliberal capitalism gave rise to the university of excellence and the era of riot prime. When capital started relying on circulation instead of production, agency of workers over their institutions was eroded in factories and universities (Clover, 2016; Reading, 1997). This also coincides with the decline of labour militancy as described by McAlevey (2016). This is the era where unions stopped organising workplaces and shifted towards a model of mobilising and advocacy. These new forms of collective action can be seen as a culmination of the shift of capitalism from industrial to neoliberal together with the shortcomings of unions to adapt to these new circumstances. I believe that this decline in union activity is also part of the advent of riot prime.

Methods

The method I used for this thesis is that of ethnography, more specifically militant ethnography. This is a research method that tries to break down the traditional divide between researcher and researched (Juris, 2007). It is a method that engages the researcher as an active participant within grassroots activism and organising. This means helping with the organizing work, participating in protest, direct action or other forms of militancy. Hereby, it also blurs the line between research and activism. It is a method that tries to collaboratively generate reflexive knowledge about the tactics and strategies employed by activists. This is done with the explicit purpose to aid the movement by creating an

output that is relevant and applicable (Apoifis, 2017). This means that on top of participating, they should also be politically informed to make sense of the underlying logic of the movement. And thus, fully capturing the situated knowledge of an activist or organizer. The results of the research are not meant as authoritative directives or solutions but merely as reflections that deepen the understanding of strategies, tactics and internal organising. These insights can help more informed decision making. In practice, these ideals raise serious questions about how the research is written and distributed (Apoifis, 2017; Juris, 2007). While the research process can be done collaboratively and engaged, the presentation and distribution are still a detached and academic exercise. When it comes to presentation and distribution, it is important to do this in a way that's accessible for activists while thinking about making it less accessible for audiences that might use this knowledge maliciously.

This brings me to the major ethical considerations that come with militant ethnography. I would argue that these concerns go even further than more typical forms of qualitative research. Activists and militants actively avoid surveillance and go to great lengths to stay safe from state and private authorities (Papineau, 2024). This means research is always on a narrow boundary of observation and harmful documentation. The results of a study can be nothing short of incriminating for the researcher and the activists involved. On top of this, it can give state and private actors valuable insight into the tactics, strategies and internal workings of groups that are trying to undermine these very institutions (Papineau, 2024). This goes against the very purpose of militant ethnography. Researchers need to navigate and respect the complex ways in which militancy shields itself from prosecution. An activist researcher has access to spheres that are normally protected by a strict security culture. This requires them to continuously reflect on the safety of the research praxis as well as the writing of their findings. This boils down to respecting this security culture by safeguarding anonymity and being utmost careful with what information is documented.

My positionality was very suitable for militant ethnography and for the research case: student activism in the Netherlands. When conducting this research, I was the chair of the Rotterdam student union STUUR and an activist in the Dutch left. I was able to use the activism I was involved with during the research period as a case for militant ethnography.

The concrete practices of data collection consisted mostly of "hanging out" and talking to people. This was alternated with writing fieldnotes and already structuring those fieldnotes into themes. I barely limited the scope of my fieldwork beforehand and only my theoretical framework informed my selection process in writing my fieldnotes. I must admit that because of this, my personal biases played a role selecting what I wrote down. Although my time in the field was quite limited, I don't believe that this has impacted the amount of usable data. I considered complementing my ethnographic findings with interviews. This however turned out to be superfluous as a lot of "interesting stuff" started to happen, to use the scientific term.

My research was conducted over a period of approximately two months. Starting at the end of March up until the end of May. Here I focused on various forms of activism. Most notably my work as chair of STUUR and my participation in the pro-Palestine encampment on campus. The first involved organising students and helping to organise staff, the latter was just participation in the encampment itself as student activists. I had been chairperson of the student union for little over a year, serving a second term. Together with my board we inherited an organisation that was in bad shape with barely any active members. With the new board I started with, we were dedicated to try a new theory of change, based on the literature by Jane McAlevey (2016). About halfway through the year, the then new (extreme) right wing government planning to implement massive budget cuts for education and a long study fine. Most of my work as a board member centred around campaigns aimed at these budget cuts. During this period, we organised various large protests on a national level and tried different ways of organising on a local level. The period in which I did my fieldwork took place at the height of

collective action during the year, for staff and for students. It consisted of countless meetings with my board, staff members, union officials, students and STUURS action and organising working group. The highlights of this work were a strike day in Rotterdam that was part of a relay strike and a mass meeting for people interested in STUUR. It is also these two moments that I chose to use for my ethnographic accounts as they are the most emblematic for student activism with student unions.

The Palestine activism in this period happened in parallel to my involvement with the union. I had less of an organisational role and more so participatory. The encampment was a reaction to the ongoing genocide happening in Gaza by Israel and the Erasmus Universities complicity. It was the second encampment happening on the Erasmus university, with the first happening one year prior. It lasted for five days, from May 13th until May 17th. This encampment was part of a wave of encampments throughout the Netherlands around the same time as a year prior during the global *student intifada*, a global wave of student protests in the form of encampments. The encampment in Rotterdam was organised by action group OccupyEUR, an action group focussing on social and climate justice and the Rotterdam encampment group, a pro-Palestine group. I have been involved extensively with both groups prior to my fieldwork. I have been an activist in various social and climate justice movement for over 4 years, making me a known person in leftist circles. During my fieldwork I was at the encampment from time to time, mainly just hanging out and chatting to people. I chose to include an ethnographic account of the encampment because of a massive contrast with union activism across different dimensions.

My prior experience and involvements with both of these movements made it possible to conduct this fieldwork. I was able to bypass the normal period of gaining familiarity with the field and building rapport. My views on the results also stem from my prior experience as an activist and can't be strictly separated from my time doing the actual fieldwork. Another element that plays an important role in my analysis and fieldwork, is that my own activism is largely informed by the same theory as what informs my analysis, especially the work by McAlevey (2016). The subject of research has also been at the centre of my personal work in social movements over the past year.

While it allowed me to conduct this fieldwork in the first place, my presence was also very influential for what was happening in the field. I was closer to an elephant in the room, than a fly on the wall. This is not a bad thing, it is even required for militant ethnography. It is however important to acknowledge what my positionality was in my fieldwork and how this effected my field. Especially as chair of a student union, I had quite significant influence on the decision-making processes and day to day tasks. I usually had input during meetings and a lot of processes and communication with other parties involved went via me. This didn't mean I was the deciding factor in any of this. Everything that happened were part group efforts and part of bigger campaigns in which I played just a small role. During my fieldwork in the encampment, I had very little influence as I was merely present. I contributed a little to the preparation but this preceded my fieldwork. Because I have been so deep into this world for a long time, it has undoubtedly caused me to miss a lot of interesting things. Aspects in the life of an activist might feel utterly alien to others while being an integral part of my identity to me. Even my own positionality within the activist and radical left world is quite unusual. I'm barely impacted by most of the oppressive systems I claim to oppose as white Dutch man raised in an upper middle-class family. This doesn't impact my care for causes, but it does make it so that there is little at stake for myself. This might give me a more "detached" view of things as it isn't about me, I'm a stranger to militant spaces were it not for my political ideology.

One aspect that differs from most militant ethnographic studies, is that it was conducted in a student union context. This is a much less criminalized and vulnerable setting than the usual action groups. This means the risks for me as a researcher and for the participants aren't as severe as in most other cases. Most militant ethnographies are done in self-selecting, quite radical groups that have a

mobilising strategy and use more intense forms of direct action (Apoifis, 2017; Panineau, 2024). I have yet to come across a study that employs these research methods in a setting that uses an organizing strategy like in my case. Even though an organizing strategy usually faces less immediate violent suppression, people engaging in structure-based organising or participate in militancy later on, can still expect suppression. This is why I think it is still important to be extremely cautious with the research process and the results and adhere to the same ethical standards as a “conventional” militant ethnographic study.

Data and analysis

It was at three distinct moments that the different intricacies of student activism came to fruition. They all were emblematic of different aspects of activism as they represented a wide array of tactics and strategies. It was surprising how well the theory above applied to the concrete reality of student activism. In each of the three passages I will go over the tactics by going over different dimensions: Sphere of intervention, exemplary site, core activities, proper agents. On top of that I will go over the underlying strategy. Mobilising organising or advocacy and structure-based or self-selecting.

In the first passage, I’m describing a strike day with staff and students against budget-cuts. Here I will focus on some of the tensions around organising vs mobilising, how collective action relates to their institutions and the tensions around different publics involved. The second passage is that the pro-Palestine encampment. The main subjects here are the effect of collective action at universities, tensions around mobilising and the link between demands and permissible forms of collective action according to institutions. The last passage is about a union meeting. This part goes into the concrete problems that come with organising at a university with some key take-aways for an organising strategy.

The strike day: what are we doing?!

It is 09:00 in the morning, the campus is almost empty. A small group of staff members is walking past the meeting place but they seem quite lost, after which they proceed to go inside to buy a coffee. I put down the flyers and other materials at the tables and wait patiently. Quickly one staff member arrives and asks if I’m there for the banner making. “yes”, is my answer, “more so for the picket lines but nobody is here yet”. It doesn’t take long for a few staff members to slowly start trickling in. Nobody that signed up for the picket lines is there though. Another thirty minutes pass and the group has grown to a size that would allow for doing some activities, so people commence the banner and sign making. We conclude that we won’t have more than 5 people showing up for the picket lines, among which just a single staff member, so we decide to just stick to handing out our flyers. What is interesting about the people present for the banner making and the picket lines is that it is mostly “the usual subjects”, there are very few new faces. The staff present is the more activist focussed and the students are all the leftists / activists that are also involved in organizing the strike day. Understandably there are very few

people on campus and the response to our flyering is very mixed. Some people are annoyed and just want to get on with their day, some interactions are negative. The most common reaction is “oh yes this is great! I have a bunch of those flyers around my office already though.” Indicating support but lacking any sort of active participation.

The situation this morning is indicative of the process that led up to this day. The composition of the people present is clearly the result of a self-selecting mobilisation moment, and not of structure-based organizing (McAlevey, 2016). The people that showed up were the people that already agreed on the problems and were intrinsically motivated to participate. A lot of these people were the activists and leftists that always show up to mobilisations. The proper agents in this case were students and staff playing their role as workers at the university, there were just very few of them. This hindered some of the intended core activities, the picket lines and the banner making. Of course, the work stoppage went on, mainly thanks to the cancelation of most regular activities on campus by the administration. When planning this morning, staff repeatedly noted “media attention” and “good photos” as one of the core objectives, especially for when the executive board was planning to stop by. This reliance on media is exemplary of a mobilizing strategy. The intention wasn’t to create a crisis for those in power and force concessions, but to put something on the public agenda and rely on media attention to shift public narrative. This isn’t a strange decision as there had been barely any structure-based organising and movement building prior to the strike. The other purpose of the morning program was community building by giving people the chance to talk to each other. At last, the exemplary site of this protest was the workplace, the campus in this case.

It is around 12:00 when the staff and students on campus head to the location of the protest. Upon arrival, I’m quite impressed with the turnout. There are over 2000 people, a very good number for a protest in Rotterdam and especially for the Erasmus University and Hogeschool Rotterdam. The location is on a square next to the Erasmus bridge. This location is quite a remote and invisible, with few people in hearing distance or even passing by. I’m standing on the side of the stage with some people, so it is quite difficult to hear the speeches. What I do hear is that most speakers mention the importance of education and what the impact of the budget cuts will be. One of the speakers is the chair of the executive board who has endorsed the strike. Another student and I give a speech where we try to contextualise the budget cuts politically, making a link to the genocide in Gaza, military spending and tax cuts for the rich. This is followed up with another fierce political speech from a support staffer who has also been active in the preparation of the strike. After the stage program, a march is planned through the city. It is noteworthy how few students there are at the protest, most people are staff members. One of the union officials tells me that certain faculties are vastly

overrepresented. I later hear from a staff member that a large part only came because of the endorsement of executive board. Another good chunk of the people that showed up were, like usually, the socialists, the communists and the anarchists. Although they are mostly in their own block, they make up a significant portion of the march. Most of these people are students, or at least young. There is some visible discomfort with some staff members around the group of leftists as their slogans were very explicit. pro-Palestine and anti-capitalist chants can be heard frequently. Staff on the other hand was quite tame in comparison. Most of their chants boiled down to “stop the budget cuts” and the ever popular but very uninspiring “doe het niet” (don’t do it). When marching through the Witte de Withstraat, we draw a lot of attention from the general public, with many people cheering us on and clapping when we pass by.

This strike day was a significant moment in the fight against the budget cuts as we had worked towards it for many weeks. The execution and the goal of the strike were however very different from typical strikes. Whereas they are usually a method of creating a crisis for those in power by setting the price of labour (Clover, 2016), this strike was more so an ordinary mobilisation moment (McAlevey, 2016). The numbers mounted to approximately 2000 present at the demonstration, including students and unaffiliated people. Although that turnout is high for a Rotterdam based protest, it is a small percentage of total staff and students, making this a minority strike. The only reason it was able to halt production for a day, was because of the support from the board of directors. The sphere of intervention was clearly production, but only to serve a different purpose: to aid to the mobilisation efforts (McAlevey, 2016). The goal of this day wasn’t to create a crisis for power by setting the price of labour, but more so to draw attention to a subject and have a media moment, as is typical for a mobilising strategy. And although this was a strike and it did shut down the workplace, the exemplary site was also that of the streets like one sees in circulation struggles. Core activities were work stoppages combined with a march through the city.

At last, the proper agents were a mix of staff and students, both are here present in their role as worker and coproducer of knowledge. Students however, don’t have the same leverage over the institution as staff do as they are to a lesser extent part of the production process. If students withdraw their labour, most of the production processes in universities can go on. Maybe more importantly though, students have the idea that striking will only harm themselves as they are at university for themselves. A common attitude is going through the education system as fast as possible without delay. The neoliberalisation of academia has intensified this attitude by treating students as individual consumers of a commodity, masquerading their role as co-producers (Readings, 1997). There is however also a large segment of the student population that is openly antagonistic to the strikes as it hinders them in their studies, or because they have a different class allegiance. The Erasmus university is a notoriously right-wing university with a large amount of business students. They are either not working class themselves or aspire to be a capitalist. They are more likely to have a favourable outlook on “the university of excellence”. This hostile attitude became quite evident during conversations I had while flyer-ing and around the strike day. Even if someone isn’t hostile, there is an almost visceral reaction of staying “politically neutral” and avoiding this subject. The effect of the student’s presence at the

protest was mainly to improve the media moment, bolster solidarity with staff and, to an extent, act as a different voice to be heard during the protest. Their role had little to do with actual effect of a classic strike: setting the price of labour.

It is important to highlight again within this passage that actual effect and intent of this strike was not creating a crisis in the moment, but to affect public opinion. It can be seen as a structure test to bolster solidarity and aid organising efforts later on or as a media moment (McAlevey, 2016). The target of this strike the current coalition in the government. It however never became really clear to me how this strike and mobilisation movement was supposed to change policy as this was quite a distant and even detached action for its target.

The endorsement of the administration was the reason for the relative success of this strike day while also exposing serious tensions for activists at a university. In the weeks after the strike day, many staff members expressed that the endorsement was what made them show up to the protest and participate in the strike. Staff only wants to take action when it is allowed, when it doesn't disrupt business as usual. Even though they show overwhelmingly support, there is very little awareness of their own "collective power". In many conversations, it wasn't a lack of support or even unwillingness to take actions, but total ignorance of what collective action or a union is, let alone that they can play a role. For activists and unions, this poses a dilemma. To what extent can be cooperated with university administration given that they typically are antagonistic to any sort of collective action. Unions and (student) activists often target the university administration in their struggles for better labour conditions or for social justice. Their alignment with us against the government was highly unusual, conditional and could be withdrawn at any moment. This time, the student union and staff union chose cooperation, partially because of the lack of organisation. It gave the activists and organisers access to official communication channels while giving them the freedom to openly mobilise via posters and flyers.

Table 1.

Strike day

Dimensions	Tactic or strategy
Sphere of intervention	Production, circulation secondary
Exemplary site	University campus, city centre
Core activities	Strike (withdrawal of labour), march through the city
Proper agents	Staff, students
Mode of change	Mobilising, low degree of organising
Peoples involvement	Self-selecting, attempt at structure based

Rotterdam student encampment for Palestine

On Tuesday the 13th of May, the encampment on Shireen Abu Akleh square, also known as Erasmus plaza, has returned. About ten tents have been erected across the square and the surrounding area has been decorated with posters, flags and crayon drawings. There is an extensive program for the day with a teach-in and a protest. This educational element can be seen throughout the camp and the days. There is a for instance a tent with a small library. I arrive somewhere in the afternoon to come say hi, see how things are going and of course show my support.

I have a chat with some friends and then leave for my meeting to come back the next day.

The atmosphere is very relaxed when I arrive. There are people hanging around throughout the camp, having food, reading or working. I guess there are about twenty people present when I'm there, most of them activists I know. People that pass by the encampment react in a lot of different way. Most people have little more reaction than a sideways glance, some pass by filming. Others stand around for some time, chat with their friends and move on. While I was there, I didn't see anyone that wasn't already part of the group join the camp. The encampment itself is kind of left to its own devices. Security is patrolling around the encampment, but they mostly leave the camp alone. Except for complaining about banners or flyers from time to time. The administration also didn't interact with the encampment at all; there were no attempts to talk or even listen to the demands. The only form of communication was security personal handing out house rules at the start of the encampment. The encampment was mostly ignored during the days it was there.

To grasp the context of this encampment it is important to know the demands as they were published on Instagram: Those were the following:

- The college van bestuur (CvB) distributes their budget across its departments and other affiliated institutions fairly.
- the CvB ends precarization for (international) staff and students and advocate for the cancelation and full compensation of student debt, the CvB ends inaccessibility on campus.
- The CvB cuts all ties with zionst institutions and businesses
- the CvB cuts ties with all other imperial and (neo)colonial institutions and businesses
- the CvB cuts ties with all institutions and businesses that profit from the destruction of the planet.
- The CvB calls upon their academic partners to do the same.

Although worded differently, these demands are not radically different from what other groups, or even the CvB itself, was concerned with. The CvB was present at the strike that addressed the budget cuts a week earlier. It would only be a few weeks until the university would cut the ties with three Israeli universities. Still, the encampment and their demands were not even engaged with at any moment at any point. This says something about the subjects and forms of protest that are permissible for institutions to engage with. A strike with a march against budget cuts can be endorsed but an encampment against the complicity in an ongoing genocide is to be ignored or even combatted.

This university encampment was a very clear example of a self-selecting mobilizing strategy (McAlevey, 2016). The people active in the encampment were there because they deeply cared about Palestinian liberation. The encampment also enforced this self-selecting nature through an action consensus and so called "red lines". An action consensus is a set of rules that everybody that

participates in the camp must abide by. The red lines were a political minimum that everyone participating should agree with. It is important to note that there was an extensive effort to educate people about these by means of the teach-ins and literature. I would however argue that the subject of Palestinian liberation is more likely to go with a mobilising strategy and self-selecting. Organising usually happens in structures where people are shaped by a shared experience in their life, requiring no prior knowledge of a subject. Although extremely pressing, wanting to fight for Palestinian liberation does unfortunately not come without prior education. This alters the possible strategies for activists. They can either choose to do more informing and agitating before organising or sticking to a self-selecting strategy.

The proper agents in this case were mostly students and staff, but the encampment was also accessible for people that weren't affiliated to the university. The core activity for these activists was having the encampment, our physical presence was the protest. Besides this, there was a daily program for education, there was outreach through food and flyers and there were small protests. The exemplary site was the outdoors, a square, on the university campus. All of these characteristics are evident of a circulation struggle as one sees in *Riot Prime*. I would however argue that because of the nature of the university and how this encampment played out, this is more complicated in this instance.

The neoliberal university is a sight of production and of circulation (Readings, 1997). It produces knowledge and labour power for capital while also enabling the circulation of this knowledge through the publication and distribution of research. If proper agents use forms of collective action normally associated with circulation struggles such as rioting, occupations or encampments, it can also have the effect of a production struggle. Whereas in a normal *riot prime* situation the state is near and capital is far away, this is not necessarily the case for the university (Clover, 2016). The exemplary site of the campus acts as a factory and a market at once and a riot will shut down both of these roles. The intended sphere of intervention for the encampment was however the denial of the circulation of knowledge to various bad actors. The cutting of ties with fossil fuel companies and Zionist institutions is the negation of that circulation of knowledge. It strikes at the heart of the *raison d'être* of both the old *university of culture* and the new neoliberal *university of excellence*. As the nation state of Israel still relies on the legitimisation from the academic world and with that western universities, cutting ties denies this. Cutting ties with fossil fuel companies denies them the supply of knowledge that would normally come from academia.

Ultimately, the encampment didn't succeed in disrupting these knowledge circulations, despite the core activities of a circulation struggle. It was mostly ignored by those in power. Of course, this can be blamed on many things, the scale and sustainment of the collective action being the most obvious. That is however beyond the scope of this segment. As capital is too far away to disrupt, and people find themselves occupying, camping and blocking streets and squares, a new tactic comes to life. Clovers (2016) calls this *the commune*. The commune breaks form a mere strike or riot by becoming a place for social reproduction in and of itself. The commune is a complete negation of the status quo it finds itself in by trying something new and different. The encampment itself becomes the protest, not the demands. It can be seen as a microcosm of what a commune can mean. The specific characteristics of this commune was very suitable for a university encampment: education. There was an attempt to "do the university differently", it questioned and tried to reinvent the social reproduction around education.

The scale and the rate of participation that is the main difference between the two strategies. In this case, a very small commune was established on campus with purely a mobilising strategy. The commune is a tactic that isn't exemplary of any broader strategy. It can be used in a mobilising and an organising strategy. It can be established by a self-selecting group as part of a mobilising strategy or

by a well organised group of people within their structure. It is also a way for a structure-based organising strategy to open up a tactic to unaffiliated people.

Table 2.

Pro Palestine encampment

Dimensions	Tactic or strategy
Sphere of intervention	Circulation or Production
Exemplary site	University campus, outside
Core activities	Encampment, disruption, presence
Proper agents	Students, staff, unaffiliated activists
Mode of change	Mobilising
Peoples involvement	Self-selecting

Meeting student union

It has taken a few weeks to plan this gathering on the 28th of May. I hastily park my bike next to the location for our large action meeting. I'm running late due to my own poor planning while we have worked towards today for weeks. It doesn't really matter as the first part of the gathering was having dinner together and I'm just a bit late for that. I'm greeted by some friends and comrades who have been working over the past weeks to make this happen. I'm surprised by the turnout, the student union has been struggling in the past few years to get anyone that isn't a former board member or founding member to events and here I see at least six new faces. People don't seem to be in a hurry to start the meeting as they are chatting and finishing their falafel. After a few minutes, me and a co-organizer decide to slowly start the meeting. We start with a round of introductions. The group consists of a mix of people from a bunch of different studies, mostly from the Erasmus University though. What stands out however, is how most of the attendees are not already politically active. They certainly are left leaning politically but not activists. We start the meeting with a brief introduction of the student union. "The union is nothing but all of you coming together and standing up for your rights, but for that we mainly need to hear from you all what are the things that are on your mind". This message caught on surprisingly well and what followed was people sharing concerns and fears about how the budget cuts would impact their studies, careers and those of the ones that will follow. One person asks the very simple question: "why does this government do these budget cuts? It doesn't seem to make sense". I find myself being caught off guard by a question that seems so obvious to me. Luckily one of the co-organizers jumps in and explains how this is just part of austerity politics of right-wing parties, how this can make space for tax cuts for the rich and increased

spending on the military. These statements get support from some of the participants while rest of the groups reacts frustrated at this perceived injustice.

What this process meant, was a shift of agency from just me and the organizers to the group at large. Listening to each other after having dinner together, created a sense of common ownership over the process. The anger and resentment about this injustice went from the individual to collective, making the step to collective action much smaller.

This signals a good moment to proceed to the next step of this meeting: what can be done against it. Me and the rest of the organizing and action working group have already come up with a rough outline for a plan to give some structure to the organizing work. I explain how we can build power within their faculty, program or association but that they would have to do most of that work, me and the others in the organizing workgroup can just facilitate it. Through discussion and a constructive back and forth of ideas came a workable structure for fighting back against these budget cuts. The plan is to have a group of people in each faculty or program to coordinate organising within that structure. That way, we decentralise the work while still being able to each other help each other while the board can facilitate things when needed. One person voices however how they have no idea of how they to go about organizing within their faculty. I offer to give a workshop that introduces people to these practices which is met with great enthusiasm.

The meeting was an early attempt at using an organizing strategy (McAlevey, 2016). There was an explicit intend to build power within existing structures by organising a majority of people. What me and the other organisers tried to do was involve the people of a structure in the organising structure, taking away a lot of work from the “official” organizers. In this case we used a self-selecting group of people committed to challenging these budget cuts. It didn’t include any of the common practices found in an organizing strategy such as one-on-one conversations or leadership identification, but this meeting was there to find out how we could start doing that. It was a step towards coming up with plan a strategy collectively that students wanted to be part of. What resulted from this meeting turned out to be a good example of how activists and self-selecting groups can be the first step towards structure-based organising. What wasn’t clear yet at all, were what the central aim of the core activities or the sphere of intervention would be. It didn’t even come up during the meeting because we weren’t at that stage yet. This meeting was there to build a rate of organisation that allows for an intervention in the first place. This also means that an exemplary site was not yet relevant. However, when employing an organising strategy, the structure of the university does lend itself for becoming an exemplary site at a later stage. At last, the proper agents were clear: being students. This however doesn’t necessarily mean they would take on the role of students during collective action, it is merely their role when being organised. The students attending the strike being students didn’t matter much for the impact of the strike

What led up to this meeting was the board of my student union working towards an organizing strategy for almost a year now. We had tried a lot of different things but were struggling with finding ways in which we could implement structure-based organizing. The way a university is structured is vastly different from what most theory on organising is based on (McAlevy, 2016). This theory focusses mostly on workplaces like hospitals, warehouses, stores or factories. This varies drastically from the institutional structure of a university, especially for students. Students are part of programs, associations and classes but often don't have a lot of contact hours. Especially in the neoliberal university are students forced to go through the structure as fast as possible (Readings, 1997). How we could organize these structures was a process of trial and error for me and the board as there is barely any knowledge of how structure-based organising can be done within the university context. The effect this meeting had, was people taking the first step of self-organising a structure. In this case being their program or their faculty. I have no way of telling if this is going to be successful, but it is indicative of how structure-based organising for student activists is a constant process of trial and error. The lack of institutional memory when it comes to structure-based organising at university makes it so that activists are constantly plodding how people can be reached, what messaging catches on, what is relevant and what plans work. This requires constant deliberation and reflection on the strategies employed. Tactics for exercising that power over a neoliberal university isn't even part of this yet. My fieldwork has not given me much insight in the central aims, core activities, spheres of intervention or exemplary sights of a well organised university structure.

One thing we constantly ran into when trying an organising strategy, was that we couldn't effectively organise because of a mobilising strategy. Every time we tried to organise, there would be another mobilisation moment that required all our energy. This prevented us from engaging in the long-term work needed to organise structurally. Student activists, staff and even unions sometimes have a very hard time experimenting with different kinds of strategies and constantly revert back to mobilising. The effect is that is really drains activists and staff members involved with union work as all you do is work from protest to protest, with a good chance that energy will fizzle out after some time. I can conclude that while an organising strategy can utilise mobilising as a tactic, a mobilising strategy has the ability to undermine and even prevent a successful organising strategy.

Another element that kept coming back in my fieldwork and became explicit during this meeting, is the importance of helping activists, leftists and other committed people to become organisers. There is a lot of willingness from them people to put in the energy to create change or do activism, there is however very little knowledge of how this can be done. During all my fieldwork, it was always a self-selecting group of people, usually people that are in some way politically motivated, that want to put in the work needed for organising. What an organising training can do is give someone a basic understanding of what structure based organising entails, helping them come up with a strategy that could work for their context and structure. The last element that came up during this meeting, was the importance of listening to people and letting them voice their concerns. It was instructive for us, the board to know what is on peoples' mind but it also really helped people feel engaged and heard. In combination with an introduction to a plan that could change things, made it possible for the attendees to see how they themselves can be part of a solution trough collective action and organising.

Table 3.*Action meeting*

Dimensions	Tactic or strategy
Sphere of intervention	Unknown
Exemplary site	Not applicable, opportunity for university campus
Core activities	Not applicable
Proper agents	Students, as students
Mode of change	Organising
Peoples involvement	Structure based, using self-selecting

Conclusion

We will be victorious if we have not forgotten how to learn. How has this rather small and specific period of field work in a university in the Netherlands contributed to a deeper understanding of how the institutional structure of the university shapes activism. The fieldwork for this research resulted in a few things. Firstly, a few tactical and strategic challenges and take aways. Secondly a deeper understanding of what activism and collective action itself means in a university context and lastly some general reflections on activism.

The frameworks put forward in this thesis proved to be useful for analysing different kinds of activism in different contexts. It allowed me to easily identify important elements when it comes to the underlying strategies, tactics or forms of collective action. Clovers (2016) dimensions of sphere of intervention, exemplary site, core activities and proper agents were a relevant way to look at the different types of collective action, locations and publics involved. McAlevey's (2016) framework on organising, mobilising, advocacy and structure-based vs self-selecting was highly applicable when thinking of the overarching strategy. They truly shine however, when brought together. When coming up with a strategy, it can help answer the questions of how this change is exactly going to happen, who is going to have leverage and where this leverage can be exercised. On the other hand, when in the middle of activism, it can help connect smaller elements of activism to the broader strategy. It gave me a deeper understanding of my activism, and I believe it could do the same for people around me.

An organising strategy (McAlevey, 2016) is incredibly difficult, especially at a university and especially with students. Among student activists, there is very little institutional memory of what works and what doesn't. The process of finding this out is a one of constat plotting and plodding. We often fell back into a mobilising strategy because this comes quite naturally to activists. Mobilising strategies even turned out to be an obstacle to organising as it takes a lot of energy. It diverts a lot of energy from the already limited capacity of student activists. Furthermore, there is a lot of disinterest among students to get organised in the first place. The self-selecting nature of student organising does however also give rise to an opportunity. The people that are dedicated to changing things for the better, usually the activists and the leftists, can become very effective organisers. There is just very little knowhow of how this can be done. Organising trainings and proper education on an organising strategy can help someone think differently about their activism and contribute to the search for more ways to employ this strategy. It is through a self-selecting group of people trained and dedicated to an organising strategy, that structure-based organising can be done.

When it comes to activism at a university, this is quite different from that in a normal workplace. The university is a place of (knowledge) circulation and production (Readers, 1997). It is a factory and a marketplace for knowledge. This blurs the lines of the sphere of intervention in different forms of collective action (Clover, 2016). An encampment is inherently a circulation struggle but also curbs production when done at a university, while a strike limits the circulation of knowledge. It

appears however that students as proper agents have a limited capacity to create crisis in a university. It has thus far been very difficult to employ an effective organising strategy. Even when done so, students don't have the same power of withdrawing their labour as normal workers do. I would argue that it is because of this that circulation struggles such as encampments or occupations are much more common. I would even go so far to say that it is only when students exercise their collective power outside of the university that they start to become a threat. Acting as a stand in but organised "surplus population" commonly found in riots and other circulation struggles. It is during their encampments, blockades, occupations, riots, marches and other shows of mass force that students exercise their leverage. Students are proper agents that engage in the establishments of *communes* on a regular basis in their protest, completely in line with the age of riot prime (Clover, 2016).

This thesis is a very limited ethnographic account, in terms of time and scope. I just focussed on two highly specific groups with quite unique circumstances. Vital elements such as internal politics and underlying racial and gender dynamics have been left out of this thesis while very much present during my fieldwork. Partially for security reasons, partially to not further complicate an already overambitious project. I think this research has succeeded in complicating the different forms of activism at student's disposal, while maybe even giving some suggestions for how we (activists) can build stronger movements. Nothing should however be read as a manual, but as mere reflections on our practice. To be victorious, activists have to keep learning, have to keep doing more militant ethnography, to get a deeper understanding of how our world shapes the work we do.

I want to end this thesis with a passage from Riot. Strike. Riot. (Clover, 2016) in which he reinterprets the work of Rosa Luxemburg.

When material conditions change, when the political-economic structure changes, the political import of practical possibilities of a tactic of collective actions might change as well. The frozen tactics of collective action might change as well. (...) We must be open to "a fundamental revision of the old standpoint of Marxism", one based in the transformations of social reality. One does not declare that a communist does this or an anarchist does that. One goes to "the standpoint of what is historically inevitable" –from that standpoint alone "the problem can be grasped or even discussed". (Clover, 2016, p. 101)

He wrote this book in 2016, and history would prove his theory of living in an age of riot prime right. The 2020s would bring us a massive new wave of popular uprisings, most of which circulation struggles, most of which having a mobilising strategy. The activism studied in this thesis also fitted perfectly in this trend of ambitious movements over relying on mobilising, trying to take shortcuts in building power. I would argue that just the current form of collective action is not equipped with the strength to overcome the sheer force of the state in riot prime. Here I would like to take Clovers (2016) words and apply them to what strategies we as activists can employ. We must unfreeze the tactics and the strategies we are using now if we want to stop our fast descend into barbarism. Activists must broaden their scope to also experiment with an organising strategy to build a movement that has the endurance and sustainability to maintain our current circulation struggles and engage in production struggles.

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