Over the last few years, there has been a heated debate over higher education governance, funding and organisation in England, resulting in recently approved Higher Education and Research Act 2017. While scholarly debate has mostly focused on the perspectives of academic communities, senior managers and policy makers, this symposium aims to shift the focus to student unions and their role in higher education politics and the sector more widely. The symposium explores the ways in which student unions have engaged with higher education politics and policies over the recent years and the contradictory space they occupy. Taking a sociological perspective, the symposium also discusses the importance of social theory in exploring politics of higher education.

Venue: Collier Room, College of St. Hild & St. Bede, Durham University, Durham, DH1 1SZ

Contact and registration: Dr Rille Raaper, rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk

Space is limited, please register early. If you wish to book a place at this free event, please contact: rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk

10.15-11.00 Arrival, coffee and refreshments
11.00-11.15 Welcome
11.15-12.15 Social Theory and the Politics of Higher Education
Dr Mark Murphy, Reader in Education & Public Policy, University of Glasgow

Social theory has a complex relationship with student politics and student protest. The events of 1968 are a case in point: while Jean-Paul Sartre supported the students at the barricades in Paris, over in Germany Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas were critical of the revolts sweeping across universities, suggesting that radical student politics had elements of ‘left fascism’ that helped to undermine democratic institutions.

1968 is also the year often regarded as a turning point in continental social theory – a year in which the dogma of Marxist theory, especially in France, yielded intellectual territory to the postmodern turn and paved the way for
the likes of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. This shift introduced among other things a more dispersed analysis of power and its production through various social practices — of knowledge, culture, language, the body. The certainties of the revolutionary struggle for socialism became much less certain when the institutions of the state themselves (such as universities and schools) were seen as forces of domination in their own right.

This intellectual schism is still with us today in various forms, and both of these strands of social thought still vie for space when it comes to the politics of higher education — their diagnostic power can be seen for example in critiques of marketisation and consumerism that have fuelled recent student protest across the UK. This paper will take a closer look at this theoretical debate, in particular by focusing on two key issues: the accountability of universities in a context of fiscal and political constraint; and the legitimacy of academic knowledge in a world of contested epistemologies.

12.15-13.15 Lunch

13.15-14.15 The Changing Role of Students’ Unions within Contemporary Higher Education
Prof Rachel Brooks, Professor of Sociology, University of Surrey

Despite profound changes to the higher education sector in the UK over recent years, which have tended to emphasise the role of prospective students as active choosers within a marketplace and encourage higher education institutions to place more emphasis on student engagement and representation as a means of improving the quality of the learning experience, the role of students’ unions has remained largely unexplored. To start to redress this gap, this paper draws on a UK-wide survey of students’ union officers and a series of focus groups with 86 students and higher education staff in ten case study institutions. It outlines the ways in which students’ unions are believed, by those closely involved with them, to have changed over recent years, focussing on: the shift towards a much greater focus on representation in the role and function of the students’ union; the increasing importance of non-elected officers; and the emergence of more co-operative relationships between the students’ union and senior institutional management. The paper then discusses the implications of these findings for both our understanding of the political engagement of students, and theorising student involvement in the governance of higher education institutions.

14.15-14.30 Coffee break

14.30-15.30 Students’ Unions and Consumerist Policy Discourses in English Higher Education: An Exploration of Contradictions
Dr Rille Raaper, Assistant Professor in Education, Durham University

This paper focuses on the recent Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and the consultation processes leading to the legislation. The document proposes
a Teaching Excellence Framework that aims to differentiate and reward English universities according to their teaching quality, potentially categorising universities as Gold, Silver and Bronze and adjusting tuition fee levels accordingly. While recent scholarly discussions have addressed the structural reforms, particularly the flawed metrics of measuring institutional performance, there has been less analysis of the policy in terms of its underpinning consumerist discourse. This paper will start by arguing that the reform promotes consumerist understanding of higher education, universities and students. By drawing on a small-scale project funded by the British Academy and guided by a Faircloughian discourse analysis, I will explore the ways in which five students’ unions from England and a representative of the National Union of Students understand and respond to the consumerist policy discourses. While the unions interviewed demonstrated significant opposition to the policy and consumerist positioning of students, their critique was fragmented and often accompanied by consumerist counter arguments. The unions emphasised consumer rights as benefitting students and the unions. The reasons for a lack of consistency in the participants’ discourses will be questioned and discussed in relation to their relationship with the university management and wider student population they represent.

15.30-15.45 Summaries

This event is organised as part of the project ‘Critical Analysis of the Higher Education Green and White Papers (2015-2016): Student Representation and Response’, funded by the British Academy with the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain as the partner organisation. Principal Investigator: Dr Rille Raaper, Durham University.