



**To cite this podcast:**

Araneta, K., Fraser, J., & Maatwk, F. (Hosts). (2022, June 14). Christopher Newfield: American schooling, Critical University Studies and decolonising university funding (No. 30). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster. <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34737/w12vw>

**Podcast transcript:**

**Kyra:** *Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with the Director of Research at the Independent Social Research Foundation in London and the newly appointed President of the Modern Languages Association, Christopher Newfield. With a background in English Literature, his central interests also include critical university studies, management theory, fiscal control, and more. In this episode, we discuss his academic journey, critical university studies as a school of thought, and the ways in which university funding sustains coloniality and racism.*

**Kyra:** *Hi Chris. Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's so nice to finally have you as a guest. How are you doing today?*

**Chris:** I'm doing fine. I'm really very happy to be with you also.

**Kyra:** *So, I like to start things off with our guests just sharing a little bit about themselves, so, first things first, where were you born, where did you grow up, and I guess where are you situated currently?*

**Chris:** I was born in Los Angeles in California, and I grew up there, and I really didn't get away until I went to university, and I ended up doing kind of a tour of the US just through higher education. So, I went to university in Portland, Oregon, and then graduate school in Philadelphia and then in Upstate New York, and my first job was in Houston, Texas. Then, I ended up sort of doing a great clockwise circle around the US. I ended up teaching for 30 years in Santa Barbara, California, which is just about 100 miles sort of northwest of Los Angeles, so I kind of got reconnected with the point of origin there at the end, after the educational part was done.

Oh, and now, well, actually, yeah, you're talking to me in London – we're not that far from each other – because I just started a job as the Director of Research at the Independent Social Research Foundation in London, so I'm now living in London, and have been since 2020, which is something I'm quite happy about.

**Kyra:** *Amazing. So, just going back to kind of like your upbringing and I guess growing up in Los Angeles, in terms of race, how would you say it was kind of seen and felt in your household, and I guess the community that you grew up in as well?*



**Chris:** It was...sort of to one side as a major social issue but not at the dinner-table, right, in the sense that my parents were opposed to racist behaviour – so, for example, if some little boy did a sort of racial slur either against Black folks or Latinos, who were becoming a majority in the state when I was growing up, I was never allowed to play with them again. On the other hand, the city of Los Angeles is racially completely segregated. It was then and it is now. So, I lived on the west side, which is very white. So, there's [no/some] class integration that was decreasingly the case. It also got very class stratified through increasing property prices in sort of the late '70s and after. But it was absolutely systematically and deliberately racially segregated. And by "deliberately", I mean that the County of Los Angeles which has, now, you know, 10 to 12 million people in it, has somewhere between 80 and 90 cities, and many of those cities were formed after World War II with housing covenants that enforced basically racial or religious exclusions, and the point of them setting themselves up as little cities was precisely to have basically white Christian enclaves within what everybody could see, even after World War II, was an increasingly diverse part of the country. So, what that...it's a long way to saying my schools were very white. The friendship circle was very white. The main internal conflict, if that's what it was – it wasn't really – were between Christians and Jews because my neighbourhood was very Jewish and they tend to be also, in the American sense, politically liberal [...]. [If you think they were] from New York, which is a completely different political culture. They were also better educated politically than the Christians were. I went to Catholic school, and it was much more conservative politically. So, my whole political education came from my Jewish neighbours. So, again, there was no like...there's no racism, you know, between the two, but there was some like religious goading, teasing, and... I guess this was something that was just like...you were always aware of being an issue, and you just thought that we were on sort of a road towards post-racism but that we were absolutely not there, like it was just [laughing]... And then, you know, there were...Rodney King, in 1992, the uprising that responded to that just made the simmering racial...racist structure visible to everybody, and that was, what, that was 30 years ago, and Los Angeles is more segregated now than it was then [laughing], like it's just...there's been no progress in terms of school mixing or residential mixing. So, it was just...yeah, it was very present and very white and very "Oh, we're going to solve this" and we never solved it. That was my entire autobiography politically [laughing]! "We're going to solve it" and we never solve it!

**Kyra:** *So, thinking, I guess, about your school curriculum, like were you introduced to issues of race and coloniality? Like, considering the fact that they were pretty much almost at your doorstep as well, like how did an awareness of race kind of manifest in school, or did it at all?*

**Chris:** Well, all the violence was white-on-white violence [laughing]. The only people who ever really tried to kill me were other white people that looked exactly like me. And it was partly because, you know, they were the majority in my various neighbourhoods, but that wasn't the only reason. It was just like...they were much more violent, we, white people, we're the violent people, right, and that's... When I went... the big change was, when I was



14, I went to a Jesuit high school in central Los Angeles, so I had to commute on the Santa Monica Freeway. It's 15 miles. It's like a big deal in terms of...you're 14 and you're getting in a car driven by a 16-year-old, which is legal in California, who's just driven 75 miles an hour down your residential street to pick you up [laughing], you know, so there were those kind of life and death sort of risks just with teenage driving. But the good side of it was the Jesuits were in their kind of Sandinista phase – you know, they circulated their personnel through Latin America. They were doing liberation theology. This was a total revelation to me after, you know, my pretty conservative neighbourhood, and it fit much better with the...kind of the...the liberal Jewish neighbours that I had who were connected both to other political traditions, and, also, my best friend had an older sister who was going to Berkeley and we'd sneak in her room and read her revolutionary books that she was being taught in her first year. We were 14 and she was 18 then, and she had all these really cool books.

So, the high school version of that was a bunch of priests who were really critical of the church, very critical of Pope Pius XII and his non-adversarial relation to Hitler and, you know, his kind of complicity with the final solution, and his refusal to really stand up [for/to] that. I was, you know, taught European history as sort of a march of, you know, violence and death squads and just constant warfare, which, you know, later on, I got sort of deeper validation of, but the high school version of it was pretty good, definitely on the right track in terms of demystifying European history.

But the other thing that was important is we commuted to a Latino neighbourhood because that's where the high school was, which was becoming Korean as we were there, and there was an open gate, sort of open door policy at the high school which really defused the...you know, like racial tension that really could have been there, meaning that the Jesuits opened the sports fields to the neighbourhood on the weekends and on afternoons when we weren't using it or when the football team wasn't using it. And so, there was basically no graffiti, etc., because they were just...considered sort of good neighbours. And the same thing happened with the boys – because this was an all-boys school – who were more racially mixed than where I came from. So, there was like a fairly decent diversity starting to happen, you know, in the '70s. And it was because of the...the non-barrier, when like some guy did go into the parking lot and steal somebody's radio tape-deck, as we called them then, we went like over to their house and negotiated its return. You know, like it wasn't...you know...it was...like there wasn't just this huge – nobody called the police. That was really another key thing.

We never called the LAPD on neighbours. People, you know, talked to people until we figured out where the radio had gone [laughing], and then we went over there to just sit on their porch and, you know, just like stayed there until somebody resolved it. So, it was kind of...that was also happening, and I really, em, probably more than, you know, like TV, em, radio, music kind of stuff, the experience of...what we call here like doorstep negotiation with people was really important. So, we're learning in classroom about Central America and about dictatorship, and then we're also practising non-dictatorial ways of dealing with our neighbours. And it was just...that, I really liked. It just seemed like



you could have grassroots democracy, you know, to invoke the cliché. If like 15-year-old knuckleheads from around LA can talk respectfully to working class Latino kids their own age who are not in a private high school like we were, and show enough respect and, you know, like whatever to be able to work through a conflict like a stolen radio, then, you know, there's hope for humanity [laughing]. Because we were not like on the high end of skill, right? We were just kind of learning on the job how to not be a jerk, a white jerk in particular, so...

Anyway, that was...that was kind of like my favourite thing about high school, and I didn't realise that until I was just telling you this, was leaving school and going into the neighbourhood at 2.30 or 3 or 3.30 or whenever it was, every single afternoon, and like, I don't know, hanging out at the shake- shack or just like talking to people for a while before you got in the car and did your freeway commute, or having to resolve some whatever...issue. It wasn't usually theft. It was just usually...you know, like somebody's sister...you know, just all sorts of stuff going on.

**Kyra:** *Yeah. No, it's refreshing to hear that because I think, nowadays, you find that, you know, there's...a lot of Black and Latino boys, especially teenage boys, like they're so quick to kind of be...we think of them as adults before we think of them as children or teens, and I think, you know, to hear your story of how, you know, you wouldn't call the LAPD on these teenage boys if there was any kind of like tiff going on and you would just try to sort it out between yourselves, it's refreshing to hear that.*

**Chris:** We also wouldn't call our teachers, like we didn't call the Dean of Students or somebody like that to come and help us, who probably wouldn't have anyways, like "You go sort that" – it would be, yeah, we were just on our own. And like people on their own, resolving their own problems, I think would make...would work better than what we have now [laughing], right, even if they're 15 years old – it would still work better.

**Kyra:** *Yeah. So, you talked about how, in your high school, they kind of demystified I guess European history. Was that the same...did that extend to American history as well?*

**Chris:** Yes. History of the Americas was a bit more...a North and South America together than...than the normal high school. I cannot say this was happening in other schools. You know, the LACD unified school district, it's just like a gigantic monster and they have standard textbooks, so I don't really know what happened with those. But yeah, it was very...it was, you know, about colonialism [in the US] – you could say that word in your high school history class because that's...what was happening [laughing]. I mean, [in the US, it was like] the Monroe Doctrine, that...assumed hegemony over all of those countries, like all of them, the entirety of Latin America, and the really failed results of that sort of hegemony, you know, the dismantling or the weakening of all of those societies, the impoverishing, you know, extractive economics, the impoverishing of the populations, leading up to the present day, you know, where the situation is worse. It is, again, one of those – LA is more segregated, and Latin America, at least the three sort of southern countries in Central America are worse than they were when I was first learning about



Somoza and the dictatorship in the '70s.

**Kyra:** *So, where did, I guess, what sparked your interest in English Literature then?*

**Chris:** Oh, that's a really good question because that's later [laughing]! I had no interest in English Literature in high school. I went...well, you know, it's sort of like the thing that you and I have talked about before, with the dominance of...you know, the colonial dominance of Science over non-Sciences, over the Social Sciences and over Literature and Humanities and Arts. So, if you were good at school, you basically were supposed to go into the Sciences, and so I was just tracked into Biology. My father... my parents were first generation university. You know, they went to free public universities. My father went to Santa Monica City College and then he transferred to USC, which is a private school – somehow he got kind of a fellowship. He was good at Math. And ended up, you know, going from... thinking he was going to be basically a car mechanic, because he liked...he raced and fixed cars for money in high school, on the west side of LA, which was...there were these long stretches of just totally empty roads and fields when he was a kid there, and you could really just race, illegally, and, you know, that's what he did, and he ended up going to medical school. So, because he had done this from basically, you know, a sort of working class background, the assumption was that I would certainly do it too, as the oldest son. He got less and less enthusiastic about the profession as it became increasingly controlled by private healthcare and health insurance companies, which is, you know, a huge problem that we still have in the US, and so he didn't really push me into it, and as I actually went through university, I got very interested in literature as...this thing that expressed the intersections of the individual, you know, traumatic inner life and social forces. You know, like you could see your emotional life, which, in my case, was very tumultuous at that age, in relation to a bunch of other things that were going on, political things, war, history, all that stuff. So, it kind of depersonalised it, like took me out of myself, and got me interested in the way that psychological forces and social forces interact all the time. So, I did Philosophy of Science, and I just exited Science itself, Philosophy of Science [being more] interesting, and wound up, partly because of the teachers that I had, in Literature, and I wrote an undergraduate thesis on the Victorian novel and its reconstruction of society, kind of novel as social critique. I ended up writing about American literature because...for other reasons, but that was really just...oh, literature is really about society, without leaving psychology behind.

**Kyra:** *So, was becoming like an academic always a part of your plan or was it kind of just something you fell into?*

**Chris:** I fell into it. I just wanted to...keep studying, because I'd found this new discipline in my last year of university. Everything I'd done up to then was Biology and Physics and...sort of the prerequisites for that. So, I just thought I would keep learning. Also, I went to Paris [laughing], as a complete idiot – you know, like I could barely speak French but I wanted to have an adventure. It was a gap-year thing.

And I had a job while I was at university, so I'd saved up some money for this. I got there,



and the dollar got weaker and weaker, essentially by the day, and I either was going to have to go home in shame and, you know, live with my mom, or find a job or find some illegal way of supporting myself. So, I found this – I was staying in this really cheap hotel, owned by a Moroccan woman whose French husband had left her but also left her with this building that had this [...] in central Paris, and her concierge left in the middle of the night and I said, “I’ll be your concierge.” She, you know, she cursed me in French and told me how terrible my French was, and I said, “That’s true, my French is bad, but my English is good and all of your clients speak English and you really need that from me – you don’t need me to speak French because you’re already doing that [in that insulting way you do].” And so, she hired me, and I was able to stay in this amazing...kind of crossroads hotel for various kinds of... There were tourists. There were sort of small-time Parisian crooks that came through there. Most interestingly, because of her North African roots, there were Sub-Saharan Africans and North Africans that just used it as kind of a place to hang out on their travels. So, I had this incredible education in this kind of...an actually multinational Paris, not the white Paris that I’d kind of gone to discover, which was much nicer than [meeting the white Paris] because of my friends – like they did not care and, you know, like they really helped me with all sorts of stuff, and where I really got the sense of... I mean, it’s like the French Imperial world coming back to the metropole – you know, because they were from Mali, Cameroon, Senegal, or Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and it was like the best education ever, that gap-year [laughing], like in what you’re studying, like International Relations. It was mind-blowingly interesting. You know, I learned about the war in Algeria, which, of course, I had zero knowledge of, but from people who had fought in it, you know, on the other side, or had parents who had fought in it and, you know, still like living history. It was great. And that got me interested in, okay, well, I better tell...understand the national story of my messed up, crazy country, so I became an American [?] to try and understand the...the deep pathologies of the United States [laughing].

**Kyra:** *I feel like I should have taken a gap-year as a concierge now!*

**Chris:** It’s not too late! [Because that, for me, it’s like, post-9/11], France has become more...much more Islamophobic than it was then. It was Islamophobic and it was racist. I mean, I really learned about police racism first-hand because I would go out with my French migrant friends to go to dinner. They would get stopped, not necessarily shaken down, but they would always have to show their valid Metro-pass. They wouldn’t even look at me, who was illegally there, right? I was an undocumented worker. I had no right to be there. I’d overstayed the tourist visa. My French was terrible. And, often, I was turnstile-jumping. So, most of the time, I didn’t actually – so, there was just this white privilege thing in relation to the police that, since I experienced it every time I went out with them, you know, I really just learned how to operate it because, yeah, I mean, they were just blatantly racially discriminatory and didn’t try to hide it, which I think is still kind of the case.

**Kyra:** *Yeah.*

But, that said, then there’s 9/11 and the French went...the [state at least] just went crazy



with...anti- Islamic stuff – you know, their obsession with headscarves and, you know, it's really... So, it's not as good – then, it really felt like there was going to be this plural world of...different world systems, and where cultural difference would dominate or would supersede political and economic uniformity. That's what it felt like to be there in sort of the early '80s in that kind of upside-down version of Paris that I was in. You know, I really hoped that we...people are still...(a) I hope people are still having those experiences when, you know, your age, and then, secondly, that we can still generalise that [laughing] away from this kind of increasingly oppressive structure that we have now.

Anyway, if you need the address of that hotel, it's still there...

**Kyra:** *Oh amazing! I'll look into it, for sure [laughing]. So, over the course of your career, you've written some popular books such as 'Ivy and Industry', 'Unmaking the Public University' and 'The Great Mistake', and each of these kind of fall under a school of thought called critical university studies, and I think it's fair to say that this is kind of a relatively new field and has gained like a lot of attention, especially in like the last decade and obviously in the midst of like the global pandemic. So, I wanted to ask you, what would you say are kind of like the key themes of CUS and I guess what sets it apart from traditional theories of education?*

**Chris:** Well, in its first iteration in the...right around the time of the financial crisis in sort of late 2000, it had two really core issues. One was the destruction of academic labour security. So, it was very concerned about labour precarity and the shift to short-term contracts for, you know, people, for teachers at university level. And the second thing was that it was very concerned about commodification of knowledge and the way that the market had kind of moved into what was basically a public good and a public service and was redefining the value of that as an economic pay-out from knowledge acquisition, so that meant the return on investment of your personal salary was how students were supposed to measure the value of their course, and of course, you know, as you know, the British government does in fact have this metric called LEO that does that, right - Longitudinal Educational Outcomes is a salary metric, it's not an educational metric at all. And then the other was knowledge being valued to the extent that it could be commercialised – research and [all of that]. So, you have teaching producing...creating human capital that would...whose value would be measured in terms of salary, and then you had all these different fields of knowledge whose value would be determined on the basis of whether they produced intellectual property that could be licensed, marketed, and generative of new industries at the most...[and at least] good profits, at the very least. So, what that did was it de-emphasised social and cultural knowledge because you can't really make money out of that unless you become, you know, like a Netflix director, and you can't really evaluate your learning in school in any kind of a valid way through your salary because it's not actually your learning that determines your salary, it's the job market and it's industry. It's companies that determine your salary. So, you have all these great culture people in this country being seen as...being on substandard courses, in part because the salaries that the cultural industry is paying are crappy, and somehow, like that reflects on the person taking them rather than on the completely stupid, you know, salary



structure of what is actually Britain's most valuable resource [laughing], its culture! You know, nobody wants a British car – I mean, they're all Japanese anyway. We really want British music, British architecture, British literature, British poetry - all that stuff is, you know, great! And so, anyway, these are the two things that critical university studies in that first generation really focused on, and it started to work on the thing I just mentioned at the end, which is sort of the negative consequences, [the practical consequences of that].

The other thing I should say is that it came out of a graduate programme in Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and it was sort of developed by graduate students and then the term was launched into visibility in the US through an article by Jeffrey Williams, who is a professor at Carnegie Mellon, that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2012, and, a few years later, John Hopkins University Press approached Jeff to edit a series and then he asked me to co-edit it with him. So, the [kind of the] institutionalisation of it in the US came through...the grad students at Carnegie Mellon talking about commodification and precarious labour.

Then my version of it, which is West Coast, is slightly different. One is...I mean, there's two things that I was particularly proactive with. One was the discriminatory effects of public funding cuts. So, I just mentioned one, which is that it screws over Social Science and Humanities and Arts. But what it also does is it underfunds the campuses and the fields that are most likely to have higher proportions of students of colour, first generation immigrant students, in them. So, I did a fair amount of work showing sort of the racism of declining public funding and that's...I mean, so that's been a theme – I don't know if you'd call it second generation, CUS, but, anyway, that's been kind of important to me, that the...it's...neoliberal racism operates through funding technicalities that, you know, I think are really important to try to tease out.

And then the other thing that I really was involved in is governance, because universities are very autocratic – that's true in Britain and it's true in the US. Even tenured faculty, senior faculty, are given a very limited area of...of power that they're allowed to exert their expertise in. It mostly has to do with curriculum and course assignments in their department. They don't get to decide budgeting. They don't decide research allocation. They don't decide policy for the institution. They decide the hiring in their particular unit. They don't have any control over the hiring of administrators. They are not co-equals in things like determining budgetary strategy when revenues are insufficient. So, at places like Goldsmith's and SOAS, Roehampton, you know, cuts are just announced to faculty, who are sometimes sacked in the process, rather – academic staff, I guess I should say, in this country – rather than being developed through a full partnership with the employees that are going to be affected by whatever the decisions are. So, I've been really interested in the democratisation as kind of a fourth theme. I've gotten absolutely nowhere in implementing it [laughing], but I think that there's a...there's been some good thinking and theorisation that's come out of that.

**Kyra:** Yeah. So, I guess, how has this kind of understanding, and I guess your journey into





*kind of critical university studies, how has that impacted the opinion that you had of the higher education system before and I guess your role within it as well?*

**Chris:** Well, it's made me...it's given me technical knowledge about my workplace that I didn't have when I started 20 years ago, when I was first doing kind of the early versions of it, the early versions [of ? service]. And I think that that's a really important...form of...sort of basis of power, as an employee. I don't... You know, there's this [Audrey ? slogan] about dismantling...using [a master's tool] to dismantle the [master's house], and there's disagreement about whether the answer is yes or no to that [laughing]. I think it's useful to have access to the master's tools in the first place – whether or not they are sufficient. I don't think they are sufficient, but I think they are necessary as a first step, and so what that means, less metaphorically, is understanding how budgets work, understanding what the psychology is of administrative decision-making, you know, knowing of course the individual people on your campus and your area that are actually doing the decision-making, but one of the things that doesn't work is having a bad decision announced, getting really upset because it has terrible consequences because like your department is being closed, but, you know, (a) being too late, and (b) really not having the technical expertise to discredit or critique the basis of the decision that has been made. And so, you know, I really...at least wanted to have sort of eyes wide open relationship to what the institution is.

In terms of how it's affected my feelings about the institution, it's been very disillusioning [laughing]. Well, not really...because I didn't think that...I didn't think they were spaces of benevolence, ever. You know, there were too many horrible professorial fights when I was a grad student. I was [search/ research committees] and they were just horrible to each other. And departmental politics has never been good. You know, there's...there's a lot of unworked through issues that...just are really sour.

Decision-making is very poor...poor just, em, group discussion seminar rating scales that you see in heads of departments that are pretty routine. There's a lot of acting out. So, I wasn't idealistic about what unmanaged professors would do. I don't think that they're better than other people. If anything, I think they're, as a group, more entitled, and not as good at listening to other people, and not very good at respecting other people and so on. They're a little worse than other people rather than a little better. But what I didn't think was...I did think...there would be more rational self-interest on the part of top managers, and I did think that, when I started to write about public funding cuts, systematically during the financial crisis, that people would read it and say, "Oh yeah, you know, now that you've described it this way, I realise that we're poorer than I thought – we're getting hurt more than I realised, so we're going to really try to do something [...]." And that didn't really happen. They were just...like they argued, they pretended they hadn't read the piece... You know, when you have a blog, you can kind of see where...where the IP addresses are, the people that log onto it, and there were... lots of people, [and actually] the President of my university were reading these budget posts. I mean, it may have been staff as opposed to managers, but nonetheless, they were getting really quite consistently read. And there was just a...kind of a shutdown of discussion, and a narrowing of the



options, rather than an opening up of discussion and a broadening of the financial options. And when I started to talk about this more explicitly in relation to racism, and a state auditor report from the state of California that showed – and this is 2011/12 – that the least well resourced campuses in the universities of California were the campuses that had the highest proportion of what we call under-represented minorities, meaning African-American, Native American, and Latinx., the conversation was over, right? It was like...that was just like, “We’re not talking about this anymore.” You know, how dare you call us racists [laughing]! I mean, they [didn’t do that last thing – it was just like silence].

And that issue – so that was 10 years ago, and there’s never really been any systematic addressing of the injustice and, you know, what... I don’t want to call it this, because actual colonialism is so much more, but a kind of a closet colonial relationship between the central headquarters and the campuses, and then the top managers and the people who are trying to make things work on frontlines, and then between the rich disciplines and the poor disciplines, you know, where the gaps have just grown over the course of my career rather than gotten small.

So, I guess, at this point, like critical university studies becomes kind of an educational justice movement. You know, there’s kind of an activist – there’s always been an activist component, but its... I certainly...I’ve been, you know, framed as that person, so I may as well just say, yeah, well, that’s, yeah, that’s true, that’s true, it is about educational justice. And it’s about... For me, it was giving the current generation, which is minority-majority in California, 70% of the students in California K through 12 have been students of colour since the year 2000, right? I mean, this is a 20-year thing. This is not...didn’t happen in January. I want them to have the same opportunities – and I’ll use that kind of horrible word – that is the same support, the same financial support, from the state and from the affluent taxpayers of the state that my generation had when it was 85-95% white. So...we can do this [laughing]! We just have to actually do it and stop wringing our hands about how hard it is.

**Kyra:** *Absolutely. Have you ever actually had any kind of like direct criticism towards like your blog-posts and the articles that you write about these topics or has it always just been a kind of like...sweeping it under the carpet kind of thing?*

**Chris:** Yeah, the vast majority has been...just shunning, right, or silence, the silent treatment, you know, just like pretend that you didn’t say that or you didn’t write that. I mean, you know, there’s lots of feedback and discussion among my colleagues, but my colleagues don’t run the institutions. You know, there are people around the US that say...you know, there’s people that started a New Deal for Higher Education that are, you know, working kind of in the same tradition as critical university studies, at very different kinds of institutions. But senior management is not in the dialogue. The ownership of data, institutional data, and the very selective distribution of that, is kind of the basis of...of their authority. It’s not the superiority of their ideas. And it’s certainly not [a quality/equality] democratic or even professionally based consultative process, because that doesn’t happen either. It’s...it’s data ownership and... And it’s, you know, to even say what I’ve just



said to you is offensive, even to say that, because it suggests that they are not men and women of goodwill. And they are, and yet they're part of a system that I feel is corrupt in that it's...there's massive data and knowledge asymmetry and massive power asymmetry that is...overlaps with that and reinforced by that. That means that the professional staff, whether they're in the classroom or not, whether they're in the laboratory or doing something else on the campus, are excluded from decision making. And, you know, there isn't...for thousands of years, we've been trying to solve that problem, reverse that form of authority, authoritarian power, in society, so why it's great to run our knowledge institutions like that is something I've never understood. I'm opposed to it [laughing]. But just it really rattles people to bring this up, and it also rattles one's colleagues because it just feels like you're going to upset them and then they're going to hurt us even more than they already are. You know, so, you know, you don't really make that much progress by even...by...asking the more foundational justice question. Nonetheless, we have to do it.

**Kyra:** *And you also expressed a kind of interest in like the non-monetary effects of higher education. Why is that a research area that is particularly important to you?*

**Chris:** Yeah. Yeah, that's a really important question also, and this is something else that I'm sort of associating with CUS and this current iteration. The reason that...that administrators and policymakers were able to move towards a kind of neoliberal understanding of higher ed as return on investment, etc., was there's this thing called human capital theory that had established, going back to the '50s, this idea that if you raised the educational level of your population, they would become more productive and you would be richer and they would make more money. So, the formula was: learning equals earning. It didn't really matter what was studied, in the beginning. It was just like, as long as you got a higher level of skill, you would make your society richer, which is really good for the economy. That is increasingly discredited, as a general theory. So, it really works for the high-end people, the people that go to very prestigious universities, for example, where you're buying a brand in part which helps you then make more money, and it works for people that come from more affluent, you know, higher income families, but it doesn't really work as a generalisation. So, I think, actually, there's an opportunity in this, you know, this increasing disillusionment with the university as a way of getting into the middle class, to say, look, you were kind of sold a bill of goods about the idea that you were automatically going to get into the middle class because you have a bachelor's degree, but you're going to get something else from a bachelor's degree, which is knowledge, skills, capabilities, abilities, friends, networks, an understanding of your place in the world, an ability to critique your society and make it better, political sophistication, cultural sophistication – you're getting all this human capacity as a result of having three years of intensive formal education on top of high school. And that is fantastic. And we do care that you get a job. You know, we're not just cutting you loose on the ground. So, there's a lot of things we could talk about, if you're interested, about what universities could do to better help people get into employment, but that's just like a...it's not the job of universities, and it's not in the control of universities to set wages and to set job access on the basis of their...the things that humans need to know, which includes history and art history and sociology and critical race theory [laughing], and, you know, all the rest of it,



right? So, I'm really interested in articulating what the non-monetary effects are that I just kind of generalised about, so that we can... you know, we can just make bullet-points – for every possible audience, we'll have a suitable way of talking about that, in short-form, long-form, whatever they want, in videos, in really long boring articles, so that society understands what higher ed is actually for, and judge it more accurately.

And then, finally, and this is I think the piece that will click with folks eventually, realise it has to be publicly funded because it's a public bit – it's not really a return on investment, I'm going to buy this house and it's going to increase in value, so, every time I pay my mortgage, I'm getting some money out of that kind of good. It's not that at all.

**Kyra:** *Yeah. No, absolutely. And I think just even still being a student and just hearing you talk about that, like it's refreshing for me as well because I think everything...when you're just hounded with like all the employability things and, you know, you need to think about like all the career stuff, like I think it can really taint, I guess, the experience of higher education. It can just make it like not so much enjoyable. Like I come to this space to learn and like, you know, I feel like that can be enough sometimes.*

**Chris:** Yeah. Well, I'm somebody that's here to tell you that getting off the employability chain made my life better. I mean, I do, obviously, I make less money than if I'd become a physician, or a specialist, some kind of specialist in US healthcare, and I have less money to do research than if I'd gone into medical research, right? I mean, it's just...you know, vastly better funded and supported than the kind of stuff that I do. But I don't care about that because I've just had a...I think, intellectually, and personally, a much more interesting and satisfying life [laughing]. It's, you know, when I...you know, as a white male of a certain age, say this to you, who is in higher ed now, I mean, one response that you could logically have is to say, "That was you, you know, this white male from Southern California, going to high school in the '70s, university and grad school in the '80s – you just had it much better." And that is...that is true, and yet there's something else that I think is worth remembering, which is the job market had already collapsed when we went to graduate school [laughing]. I thought I was going to just go to grad school, read Kant and Hegel and Emerson and postcolonial theory, which was really coming online then, and do race studies, and study with these really interesting people and try to put my thoughts on paper, and then I was going to become a paralegal in my thirties. I just thought that since I got into this programme and I can support myself – I made \$6,000 a year, but it was enough to live in Upstate New York, and I had this incredibly rich intellectual life, beyond anything I had imagined when I was growing up on the west side of Los Angeles, and [so I thought, okay, I'll] spend my twenties getting the knowledge, and also, in my thirties, trying to figure out what the hell to do with it since they'll never hire me in any university, and I'll find something later. I just...I want universities to be better at helping people like you and me who want to have that intellectual life, because I think that, as human beings, we are entitled to it, I think it's a human right to have a mental life like that, but I also think that we shouldn't be scared of going for it, even though conditions now are certainly different than they were when I was 29.



**Kyra:** *Mm, absolutely. So, I guess this leads nicely into like my next question: how can critical university studies move beyond kind of theory and move towards kind of making genuine transformation? Like what is...what does it require from us, as students, academics, community members, etc.?*

**Chris:** That is a great question because we haven't [laughing]...we haven't produced activist cells that can take the theory and apply it to institutional structures. It just...it hasn't worked. I think the first step is for instructors and students to talk about the institution together, either through courses that are about that or through, you know, non-course groups, reading groups, study groups, that get together and try to understand how the university is structured and what's...how the university works, what's happened to it, and proposed alternative governance forms and financial forms. So, wherever you're going, Westminster is a perfectly good place to do this, you know, trying to find five people, you know, Jennifer is an obvious person, some of Jennifer's friends, some of your friends, and, you know, put together a kind of a syllabus and just work through and see...get to the point where you feel like you've identified one problem that you as a group can start to generate some ideas on. I don't think any small group like that needs to take on the gamut of issues because there are too many and they're too complicated, but it's just one thing, you know, like how...how can we diversify the instructional staff here in our department, or how can we diversify the curriculum so that we're, you know, doing sort of decolonial theory in IR at the same time as we're learning the intellectual history of the field, which we do have to know in order to practise it, and how do we [...] with that. You know, where's the course on, you know, queer and trans theory in IR [laughing]?! I mean, you could just start there, right? It doesn't have to be "How do we fix British higher education after Willitt's wrecked it?" you know, it's... You know, it's one step at a time.

**Kyra:** *So, for my last segment, I wanted to dedicate some time to talking about funding in higher education more specifically. So, other than the kind of historical routes that universities have in colonialism, what other ways is HE funding and investment colonial and even racist?*

**Chris:** [Laughs] I was thinking of it in sort of reverse. It's racist in that it doesn't do full support regardless of people's backgrounds and financial positions, and, you know, [race EO], gender, and [subjectivities...] affect where they start university in. So, by turning it into something that you take on debt for and then by not really being particularly concerned specifically about how your individual background connects up to the course materials and the resources that are available to you just makes it...it just perpetuates the inequality, racially and economically.

And also, to extent, gender now – I don't know if this is happening in the UK, but in the US, men of colour are decreasingly finishing, you know, like the gender gap, where women have an advantage in completion has been growing in the last few years, and it looks like the pandemic has made that even worse. So, it's like the opposite of what you want social policy to do, which is to, you know, equalise, to make for unjust inequalities of the backgrounds of people and what...basically paying and then doing the submission systems,



test submission system that we have in the UK and that we have differently in the US, just carries that on.

Another way of putting this, maybe a little more simply, is that people that come from disadvantaged [?] backgrounds should have more resources in the university rather than less, and what they almost always have is fewer resources. In other words, if you're trying to get into Engineering from an under-resourced high school in a poor community, you need tutoring, right, I mean, you need one-on-one sessions with people to get your maths skills up to speed with the other students, and we don't do that. If you go to Oxford, you can do that, right, because they have a tutorial supervisory system there. It's more likely that you're going to – but it's pretty unlikely that you're going to be at Oxford to get the special stuff that high-end universities offer as a matter of routine.

So, the funding structure, where it's pretty much pay-as-you-go, it's tuition-based, it's debt-based, just puts everybody at...basically at risk of being able to get only what they are absolutely able to afford to pay for, and poorer people can afford to pay for less and so they will get less, and so the university becomes an inequality machine rather than an equality machine.

The only solution, basically, is net zero fees, so that nobody is discouraged from going by the prospect of debt. And then they have to bring back maintenance grants, which was the way that they got working class kids into university in the '70s and '80s, and they're going to have to do it again, and sooner or later, they're going to figure that out.

**Kyra:** *Is there hope that we can get back to that point?*

**Chris:** Well, the special schools that are not as well-known that don't teach popular courses – like learning Arabic is not popular, but it's really important. They will be healthier than they are right now, where they're just scrambling for students because they don't have the marketing and they don't have the brand names, etc., that UCL does or some of the players like that. So, the sector will be stabilised. Smaller and/or specialised unis will be more secure than they are currently, and they'll be able to go back to their original business, which is, you know, offering high quality education to a wide range of students, with very diverse backgrounds and needs, and that's [laughing]... So, a place like Goldsmith's, which is, you know, kind of historically famous for its contributions to arts and a bunch of other stuff, and which has really interesting [social] departments in research architecture and various kinds of art, historical training that you can't get at other universities, it's poor and it's really struggling now and it's threatened with the need to close some of its departments. A school like that would be stabilised as part of the larger ecosystem through public funding, and then people of any kind of background would be able to go to get the, you know, very cool whatever...fashion design and textiles and the whole range of creative arts training that they want to get.

The thing that...you know, like coming from the US, that's...I really see is that the United



States basically got a leg-up into the world economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through two things, one very bad, and one very good. The very bad one was slavery, you know, genocide, Western expansion, non-colonial appropriation of resources because it had this whole continent. But the very good thing, which was also important, was that it basically created an expectation of high school education...like almost a century before Europe, you know, like decades and decades, depending on the state you were in.

So, by the time you get to like the end of World War I, there's 10, 20, 30 percent, in some cases, of your population having high school degrees, and 10 percent or so having bachelor's degrees – decades before. The reason that that was possible was because those high schools were free of charge. The only way that you'd get a family to send their kids, who otherwise were going to have to work on the farm or work in the family business, the only way you'd get the family to send the kids to get education at aged 14 instead, to continue to age 18, was by making it free. And so, it had a massive equalising effect and also educational...more chance of levelling up effect. And now we have to do that for the final three years. And we've already done it. I mean, we knew that in the 1950s. Why don't we know it now? My explanation is, well, because, oh, we're not white anymore – that's the reason we forgot it, is because we're now having to fund a much more diverse society that, for at least some white voters, looks like it doesn't have their people in it. But we've got to overcome that, you know, big picture, because we were right the first time, we're wrong now, and we need to be right again, and that's basically free university.

**Kyra:** *Yeah. So, what is your opinion of – I'm sure you've heard of this already, but I think the government is trying to kind of like implement this new kind of policy where, if you haven't got an English or a Maths GCSE, you can't progress into university.*

**Chris:** Well, I think...just more generally, a lot of Tories want to reduce the number of university graduates because they just don't...they're not that comfortable with a broadly educated population, for one thing [laughing], because it tends to give them a hard time about their ideas. But the other thing is that they don't believe in generic human capital theory anymore, so that any kind of degree means that you're going to have more productivity and a richer society, which is kind of what they care about. So, it sounds like they're just trying to dial back on that and to lower their outlay for loans. You know, probably, from their point of view, first, get rid of the students who are less likely to pay back their loans because they're less likely to make a higher wage – I think that's kind of how the thinking is going.

There's a US movement also to say that university isn't worth it, right at the moment in which – you know, in my experience in California, where a majority of English majors, which used to be the white major, are now students of colour, a majority of them. This is the very moment when students of colour are clamouring to get social and cultural knowledge like, you know, white folks were entitled to get always. You know, they went to a high school and they'd just go to UC Santa Barbara, like my mom did in the '50s for free, and read Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and nobody was there to say, "That's not going to help you get a job – put down that Dostoyevsky, here's a training manual for..." whatever. You



know, like they rightly want the same exact kind of, you know, equality, broadening, deepening, sophisticating, capacity-developing education that earlier generations got. And this is the moment when everybody, you know, policymakers are scratching their heads thinking, “Oh, I don’t know if college is really worth it [laughing]! It’s surely not worth it to us! So, too bad for you guys!” you know, back to the fields and the factories for you. Or do, you know, Pepsi sales or something, you know, suited to your capabilities.

**Kyra:** *So, I guess, what advice would you give to students in or entering university that also kind of want to demand social justice within that space, whether it’s related to funding or racism, decolonising – what advice would you give them?*

**Chris:** Well, it’s a long-term effort – don’t give up. Keep at it and pass the torch to the next generation as you’re graduating is going to start it up – you know, they’re three or four years younger than you, like your little siblings. You know, preserving the knowledge and the know-how I think is the really key thing that gets lost all the time in insurgencies or protests and movements. It’s going to take...I mean, this is like an unfathomably long amount of time for younger people – it’s going to take 10 years. I mean, the folks that tripled fees in 2011 were working with ideas that were being developed in the 1930s, so we’re talking 70, 80 years of steady development. It’s not going to take 70 or 80 years to fix it, but it is...it’s going to be a struggle through the 2020s and we’ve just got to be in it for the long-haul.

**Kyra:** *Thank you. So, unfortunately, we’re coming to an end to our interview, but as something I like to end on, what is something you’d like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years? I guess we’ve kind of just touched upon that now.*

**Chris:** Well, yeah, I’d like movements to be seen as allies by management rather than as opposition because the motivations of the folks that are in them and leading them are really good and really positive. I’d like to see diversification, racially, like massively, and the democratisation that goes along with that around governance. So, it’s a kind of a...I mean, you could call it decolonising, you know, if that’s the package where you’re dealing with race and governance simultaneously as interlinked issues. But that I think is what’s going to have to happen to bring back knowledge and learning to the centre of the university which is where it belongs.

**Kyra:** *Chris, thank you so much for just sharing your thoughts and ideas with us today. I’m so happy that we got to have this conversation about your work, and your background as well, and just about funding in general in the university because we haven’t actually had the opportunity to talk about that in depth like this, so, yeah, thank you again for being open to this and joining me.*

**Chris:** I’ve really enjoyed talking with you, Kyra – thank you for asking me.

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