

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The University Now: A Provocation in Five Readings

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Abstract

This essay in five sections grew out of a critical-theory reading group set up in French and Francophone Studies at the University of Sheffield, in 2017. The group was called “La Perruque,” a term borrowed from Michel de Certeau (1984, pp. 25-26) who defines it as:

the worker’s own work disguised as work for his [sic] employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. [...] The worker who indulges in la perruque actually diverts time (not goods, since he only uses scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative and precisely not directed toward profit.

So we were at university, on university time and pay, thinking against the university as it currently operates...¹

¹ I am also indebted to Ansgar Allen for his insightful comments on a first draft of this work.

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Reading 1: On the New Poverty of Student Life

In 1966 a Situationist group of students hijacked the systems of the University of Strasbourg and published the revolutionary tract *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (Khayati, 1966). It is time to renew their radical critique of the pervasive poverty of student life.

On all levels the student is maintained in a state of prolonged infancy, at once irresponsible and docile

University now manages perversely to be still school (infantilizing support systems, co-opted parents) and already work (chronic stress, burn-out). It calls this state of double misery the “student experience,” an apprenticeship in indignity widely accepted without indignation. This “student experience”—always, oddly, in the singular—is marketed by each university as an all-inclusive package holiday, a break from a putatively more brutish reality. And like so many all-inclusive package

holidays, each “student experience” is paid on the never-never and guaranteed free of the creative stimulus of *ennui*. It is experience as consumption, not as experimentation. Thus the student’s intellectual disenfranchisement is tricked out as consumer empowerment. You’ll be having so much fun you won’t have time to realize how truly miserable you are.

The economic system demands the mass production of students who are uneducated and incapable of thinking

Pity there aren’t jobs for them all. But if the student today isn’t guaranteed employment, she at least has “employability.” In its crudest form, employability involves overworked teachers selling the benefits of exploitative internships or zero-hours contracts to students. It’s the casualized preaching to the casualizable, or the normalization of job insecurity and wage slavery.

Rebellion is contained by overexposure

It starts by overloading the student with debt. A tried-and-tested strategy, as debt is the ultimate economic form of devolved self-policing. It works for states (Greece, Argentina) as it does for individuals (students, mortgage owners). Debt is a means of ensuring that students collude in their own subjection. But if earnest resistance occurs, brief and futile as it may be, the university has invented other ingenious ways of recuperating the very expression of revolt. In short, it seized on the intuition that the most efficient way to monitor its students was to get them to monitor themselves and report back. All the university needed was to find the right tools to let them do the job: Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, HEAR reports, etc.

(what you might call self-policing). The university now controls its students by encouraging them to communicate as much as possible, to generate the data, to audit themselves 24/7. Any revolt, any dissent is nullified by being “liked,” by trending, by being instantly consumed. Rebellion needs a narrative; instead all the student has is information-sharing, indeed all the student is is information. She is a constantly self-correcting algorithm. As university management know, algorithms don’t rebel.

It is work itself that must be called into question

Student life should be the ideal place and time in which to put an end to the labour/leisure alternation—two mutually reinforcing alienations—the endless production of commodities and their mindless consumption. But such is the protean acquisitiveness of modern capital that the student’s place and time, her potentially liberating “experience,” is seamlessly commodified and sold back to her. It is absorbed into the latest evolution of the market: from a goods economy to a service economy, and now to an “experiences” economy (think of the rise in audit-like bucket lists and the trendy travel companies to service them). But the student’s experience is branded in a specific way: it is always “transformative.” Of course, being made redundant or becoming chronically ill are also transformative, but not in the student’s insistently positivized sense of transformation. What then are today’s students transformed into? Fully-fledged debt-laden consumers of instruction... is too easy an answer. The response might rather be that they are turned into tomorrow’s workers, morphing into the next corporate

caste or, more likely, its submissive underlings. Work, then, in its current guise, remains the enemy. It will only be challenged if the university becomes a privileged site not of marketized “transformation” but of critical resistance; if students don’t yearn to be the next captains of industry, but task themselves with being today’s dissenters, sceptics and dreamers. An obvious place to start would be with junking the imbecilic imperatives of university branding: *Start Something Amazing. Be Unexpected. U Can Be. Be Employable. Become Unstoppable. Dare to be Fearless. Dare to be Different. Reset your Personal Best. Find your Future. Upgrade your Future. Shape your Future Here. Go Beyond Belief. Get Ahead. Get Job Ready. Think Ambitious. Explore – Dream – Discover. Change – Evolve – Succeed...*

The student, if she rebels at all, must first rebel against her studies

You may now turn over your exam paper/look at your essay topics... But ignore the question, and ask why it is being asked. Whose authority lies behind its innocuous formulation? Start by asserting your own right, at once willed and arbitrary, to ask questions of the question. This is interdisciplinary studies in operation. Don’t outsource your memory to Google. Don’t align your reason with the logic of power. Don’t limit your imagination to timorous corporate brain-storming. Instead, learn the poem or the mathematical formula off by heart and recite it to a friend or stranger. Discuss. Resist. Give all first-years just one text, the same text across all subjects (for instance, Thomas More’s *Utopia* so that they might dream big together). Ask them to read it aloud—in

groups and alone, in the street, in the pub, in the park. Start university with the universality of learning, the continuum of knowledge and a “reading commons.” University management’s greatest fear is that you will never graduate, that they will not be able to process you through the system, measure you, audit you; then talk to parents (pre-university) about where you will work (post-university). Never about you—*fully inhabiting* the university. So screw them all, rebel first against your studies. Study hard, as though you’ll never graduate.

Revolt must derive all its poetry from the future—a poetry made by everyone

The student, like the teacher, is now incessantly “managed” against possible failure. Instead let us give failure a chance. Do as Beckett suggests, and as the artist does, always daring to fail better. This would mean learning to breathe without the iron lung of bureaucracy; it would mean throwing off the stultifying layers of corporate governance and instituting in their stead a simple student-teacher learning co-operative. This is the original sense of poetry as *poiesis*, an act of making/creation not production, the interplay of spontaneity and organization, communication at once at its most raw (poetry as cry) and its most refined (poetry as form). Poetry, as Aragon says, thus becomes an alternative method of getting to know the world. As such, it is inexhaustibly resourceful, even when it fails. Who knows, one student-teacher co-operative might then connect with another student-teacher co-operative, and why not, with other self-organizing municipal councils, health trusts, conservation groups, transport networks, schools....As the

Situationists said in 1966: “*Revolution will be a festival or it will be nothing...*”

Reading 2: Unlearning Common Decency

Jean-Claude Michéa’s *L’Enseignement de l’ignorance* (1999) provides a damning indictment of turn-of-the-millennium intellectual decline. He deplores the loss of an Orwellian “common decency” in a world dumbed-down and enthralled by “tittytainment.” For Michéa the capitalist ideal of unfettered rational self-interest has become the principal motor of social relations—and the University has consciously embraced this model.

The dictatorship of the bureautariat

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we were told, marked the final triumph of western liberal democracy, of the free market over obsolete, sclerotic state communism. The end of history. Bla-bla-bla. In fact the reverse happened. Over time, with the failure of over-reaching neoliberalism, we have become net importers of Stalinist bureaucracy; we import it precisely to shore up failing neoliberalism. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the university. Here the bureautariat works tirelessly to sort out the entrepreneurial academics from the unprofitable ones, those embracing the opportunities of universal competition (especially with their peers) from those who cling forlornly to dusty collegial principles. As every aspiring dictatorship should have, the modern university bureautariat employs its own Newspeak: innovation means regurgitation, excellence means mediocrity, leadership means conformity. As every aspiring dictatorship should have too, it has its preferred tools of

mass communication. These are the daily micro-Stalinisms of email, Google Calendar and endless self-accountancy. Elsewhere ideology lurks in the adverbs of corporate communiqués: “Like every large organization, the University *necessarily* organizes its decision-making and communication in a vertical structure.” In this “necessary” hierarchy the services now command: financial services, learning and teaching services, admissions services, computing services, marketing and communication services—each hands down diktats and deadlines to teachers. And in the face of any sustained dissent, the bureautarian weapon of choice is the audit, the review. Despite what you’ll be told, this isn’t text-book crisis management; it’s management by crisis. Crisis, it turns out, is a most effective tool for stifling critique.

The customer is always right—and usually far right

For university bureaucrats email constitutes the micro-Stalinist tool par excellence—you can *bcc* your boss, how cool is that? In the hands of certain students, it is more a nagging micro-fascism. Not, as Foucault puts it (2000, p. xiv), the “enormous fascisms that surround us and crush us,” but the “petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives.” This is email as a relentless reminder of one’s subservience to education as the newest service industry. “Hi!” or “Hey!” the student-consumer hails the teacher-vendor, “I can’t come to class today, can you send me the notes.” No need to sign. It isn’t personal.

Producing more corporate space and less university

Universities have embarked on an arms race of real-estate projects, each seeking to outdo the other in state-of-the-art landmark buildings. So each racks up enormous construction debts and, despite substantial fees' income, is nonetheless obliged to slash other budgets—primarily those for teaching and research. When all the top universities have expanded their flashy estate, they will all look equally gaudy, equally crass. They'll all have look-alike pristine spaces successfully evacuated of any intelligent critique or debate. This is the *Subway* model of higher education. They are not interested in the homogenized fare they serve or the casualized staff they employ, but in making a killing on the purchase, redevelopment or lease of prime downtown sites. A sense of struggle at university thus becomes less social and more territorial. In this much the university often mirrors the city it is in, which produces malls, condos and surveilled squares but not social housing, community centres or libraries, investing instead in more urban space and less city, more private police and less *polis*. Take a virtual tour of the university (complete with muzak)—the perspective rotates oddly at a sanitized distance from any ungainly, *meaty* student presence, and even more so from any *messy* interactions in a classroom. The perspective is wary and multiple. It is a CCTV view of the campus, what we might call the drone's-eye view of university. And a drone twice over: the internalized suspiciousness of parasitic middle management (bee drone) and the ubiquitous surveillance of the shopping mall or multi-storey car park (security drone). We are invited not to visit the university, even less to inhabit its spaces, but to patrol it.

The ecology of the classroom

Sure, the university has its “green” policies in order to be ecologically correct. Likewise, it encourages “well-being” in its staff and student body. It does so, of course, as an insidious medicalization of education and as a means of obfuscating the root causes of physical and mental illness in its teachers and students: job insecurity, excessive workloads, publishing pressures, debt stress, peer competition, etc. As with other collective obligations at university, the responsibility for health is blithely devolved to the individual, outsourcing the institution's duty of care to its members. The flipside of this is the heavily sponsored research focus on “resilience” (as one civil rights lawyer put it, “Stop calling me resilient, because every time you say ‘Oh, they’re resilient,’ you can do something else to me”). One could still argue that corporate “greenness” contributes, albeit it in a limited and superficial way, to offsetting the continuing depletion of our shared natural resources. Corporate “wellness,” on the other hand, appears to be a murkier business. It actively masks, even aggravates, the ongoing exhaustion of our shared subjective resources in the university: attention, memory, will, feeling, curiosity, language...

The Adolphe complex

We are unlearning what Michéa calls, citing Orwell, “common decency.” This broadly means a courageous, open generosity of spirit often born of confronting injustice, inequality or other forms of abuse. The assumption is that we all have the capacity for such common decency (even City bankers tell their kids to share). But where a “commons” of

decency could easily be formed at university—in its very reading and debating “commons”—it is being stifled and denied. In its stead, students are encouraged to embrace what Michéa defines as the capitalist ideal of ruthless, rationalist self-interest; the ironic upshot being that their insistent self-centredness prepares them more to challenge their marks than to challenge Marx....As for the teachers, their voice becomes that of the spectral academic, heard only as “moan,” railing against a system they loathe but feel impotent to change. To top it all, the State directive for universities to adopt the “anti-terrorist” *Prevent* (Duty Guidance) enshrines mutual suspicion and fear as the norm on campus and in the classroom. Students and teachers are implicitly encouraged to spy on one another, to suspect and expect the worst in each other. The university thus consolidates and enhances the conflicted modern feeling par excellence: to be at once angry and powerless, furious and enfeebled, simultaneously indulging our outrage and our impotence. Social media and mass media are its relentless conduits; it finds expression in tweeting against atrocities or, more banally, in the class-scorn, race-scorn, nation-scorn, gender-scorn cultivated by reality TV shows that we *love to hate*.

Students’ interests and the disinterestedness of study

The move, as is often pointed out, is from education to instruction. What instruction means is the dispensing of knowledge in disposable, obsolescent chunks. Ideally vocation-focused, easily reproducible and remotely accessed. As a scholar, then, you’ll need retraining to unlearn attention,

curiosity, lateral thinking, the hours or reading and note-taking, the hours of reflection, alone and in company; you’ll need continuing professional development. By “continuing,” they mean always restarting and never enough. The research and scholarship can wait. After all, it’s in your interest to learn the latest virtual-platform interactive games. It’s how you’ll get ahead and stay ahead. Interest...this is the key. Students are advised to take certain courses over others because it’ll be in their interest—interest here is quasi-economic in meaning, urging financial speculation over philosophical speculation in making academic decisions. And students’ interests as consumers of education (instruction) are also what a pack of quango “watchdogs” allegedly protect. Yet, strangely, the student’s intellectual interest in her subject works in precisely the opposite way. A student’s interest is often keenest, most alive, most critically engaged when its field or object of knowledge is sought out in and for itself, having an intrinsic, often inexplicable, fascination; precisely when it presents the student with something *other* which is irreducible to her self-interest. Paradoxically, intellectual interest is most intense when it is *disinterested*. In a sense, it’s like the friendships you make at university—“because it was him, because it was me,” as Montaigne puts it (1965, vol.1, p.71)—which have no reason or self-serving motive before they happen. They just do, and are joyous.

Reading 3: Inside the Edu-Factory

In his *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (2013), Gerald Raunig reimagines the university as a factory in the post-industrial age, an anachronistic site of assembly (and so resistance) in the face of

the powerful diffusing flows of twenty-first-century capital. Yet for resistance to occur, student and teacher must first subvert the University's preferred forms of discipline and control: the "modular" unit and the "modulated" self.

If you say you think outside the box, you probably don't

We have entered a new *industrious* revolution, the age of outsourcing work to local, self-employed, precarious agencies. In the university, this is represented by two extremes of power and powerlessness: the consultant and the casualized. Yet as diffuse capital spills out of the classrooms and offices, we should hold on to the once decried model of the university-as-factory. For in concentrating the material, exploitative relations of labour, the university-as-factory also concentrates the material, creative possibilities of resistance. Like the factory, the university is an anachronistic site of assembly: of construction and communion. A box to think in.

The age of para-

We have also allegedly entered a post-industrial age. This is a classic Western delusion: we manufacture few goods but, strikingly, we consume ever greater quantities of them from delocalized factories in developing nations with cheap and plentiful labour and little or no protection of workers or wage-conditions. The age is, rather, *para-industrial*. Dirty, heavy industry hasn't gone away; it's just been removed from our hemisphere. Likewise, the post-industrial society is supposed to be characterized by the new knowledge economy (ideas not goods, stupid). The university is meant to have

replaced the factory. Again, it is more appropriate to speak of the *para-academic*, incarnate in the casualized teacher and the teaching consultant who work both alongside the academy (as per the *para-legal*) and against the academy (a sort of *para-dox*). But never inside the academy. This is the same university that merrily adopts the *para-industrial* model: establishing its brand in *para-colonial* franchises in the Far East which are little more than sweatshops of knowledge production. It supplements this *para-colonial* revenue stream with networks of "student trafficking," especially from China, using agents who work on commission from multiple, competing Western universities to maximize the through-flow of overpaying, overseas degree fodder.

The maximum possible output of performance

Capacity is a big deal in today's university. This is capacity as workload, office space, class sizes, module choices. It is never capacity as intellectual capability or ethical responsibility. It is capacity that can be crudely measured and manipulated as "targets." In English universities, it has leached into the research culture. We have thus moved from the industrial model of the Research Assessment Exercise (2008), and its talk of productivity and outputs, to the managerial model of the Research Excellence Framework (2014; 2021), with its key terms of impact, excellence and performance. The target, then, of its multiple targets—the research meta-target, so to speak—is the neo-liberal wet dream of the "maximum possible output of performance": the top number of top-rated

articles in the top-ranked journals. Or how to write as well as an essay mill.

The modular unit and the modulated self

On the one hand, the student's education is neatly compartmentalized into units called "modules." On the other, the student is insistently called upon to be flexible in passing seamlessly from one module to the next, in an incessant "modulation" of self. That is, each module fixes and defines incrementally the student's learning; yet the student herself is made malleable by this process of moving from one module to another. She experiences the double subjugation of discipline (the modular unit) and flow (the modulated self). This dual subjection is captured in two documents that are its crowning glory: the degree transcript and the CV. The former is a record of single units of study, each with a mark; the latter is a life trajectory, incorporating the degree transcript and forming a willed continuity without checks, breaks or contradictions, which literally "runs" uninterrupted from school to university to work. The graduate is just this: the graded and the gradual combined—the product of university discipline and flow.

Disobedient modes of knowledge production

So how can the student and teacher resist modularization? From the teacher's perspective, this involves reimagining the university as a factory and occupying its spaces and time-frames fully. Saturate Google (Stasi) Calendar to the point of uselessness. Embrace the modular system till its breaks: organize your modules as 37 minutes long, taken for 13 credits, taught on Wednesday afternoon at 2.41pm on the

concourse in summer and the café in winter. Modulate the modules until all their invisible institutional constraints emerge. By concentrating the university's forms of subjugation in this way, you uncover—factory-style—latent forms of resistance.

Knowledge doesn't pre-exist, it is fabricated in exchange

In the classroom, modular discipline can be broken down by refusing the set roles of teacher and student; by recognizing instead that the "capacity" of each is relative and reversible, especially in the common exercise of their affective, ethical and rational "capacities." What emerges from the class when it is not subordinated to teaching as instruction (handing down a skill-object) or teaching as wisdom (imparting a knowledge-object) is the production of *stances* where a stance means an ethical position arising from the movement of ideas, questions, discourse between the members of the class, offered as a sense of *care* for what others think and say, leading in turn to self-care and self-worth. Too often we forget that education is one of the caring professions.

Inventing the transversal intellect

Stance in this sense has the same roots from the Italian and Latin as the poetic "stanza." A stanza gives body to a poem, composing its regular units of verse, but it also imparts movement to the poetry across its component parts. The stanza offers us an alternative creative model of discipline and flow to the prosaic module. It represents the poeticization of university organization, if only poets ran our universities....What emerges from the production of stances (stanzas) in class is a new collective and individual sense of self, finding expression

in what Raunig calls the “transversal intellect.” This is founded on a fundamental equality of intellectual “capacities” in all members of the class, exercised in the genuinely democratic space of the university seminar, at once levelling and empowering. As is the case for assembled factory workers, the production of stances allows us to come together at university to resist, to “take a stand.”

Reading 4: The Value of Anti-Academicism

Geoffroy de Lagasnerie’s short text, “The University and its Critics” (2017), argues that the university’s posture as a space of radical critique is maintained only as long as the same critique is not applied to its own ideological framework and practices. It is the most illiberal of liberal institutions. High time we became rigorous and relentless anti-academics.

The University doesn’t have an essence

There has never been a Golden Age of the university. If this myth exists at all, it does so most acutely for liberal thinkers, wallowing in their obsolescence. The university thus becomes a space for counterfactual history, a place for remembering wistfully what never was but what might have been. This is all the more perverse in that counterfactual history is normally the preserve of right-wing fantasists (what if the Nazis had won the war, etc.). In reality, in any period of its history the university shapes, and is shaped by, prevailing ideologies. Thus in an age of withering austerity for the many and exorbitant bonuses for the few, departmental budget cuts go hand in hand with individual reward packages, often

awarded by top management to top management.

Our criticisms of the university are never sufficiently radical

Radicalization is dealt with in two ways at university. On the one hand, it is publicly censored, simply barred from campus. On the other, more insidiously, the great radicalizations of modern times—sans-culottes, chartists, suffragettes, civil rights movements, decolonization struggles, gay and trans- rights—are domesticated in its programmes. So many begrudging acknowledgements that “good” radicalizations happen...(More insidiously still, LGBTQ rights are co-opted into the corporate celebration of Stonewall rankings and curricula are surgically decolonized while the colonizing university remains intact). The irony is that what we often teach, drawing on these same radical movements, is thus fundamentally *egalitarian*: gender studies, social history, post-colonialism, queer theory, etc. But the institution in which this teaching is delivered remains rigidly hierarchical and supremely subordinating. We can question and discuss the need for levelling forces in society everywhere and at any time—except in relation to the university itself.

Academic freedom is not the same thing as free speech

In fact, it is often its opposite. The university stands as a censor of discourses deemed ignorant, unreasoned, extremist and hate-filled. It provides a public platform for an elite who claim to speak in the name of an objective, exclusive search for “truth.” Little matter that their truth is often performative: it is true because it enacts its law as law, its fact as fact. Its

organ of choice is the hermetically sealed, self-validating, peer-reviewed journal. To publish there is to present research as an empty form than conforms more than it informs, complying with a style, a logic, a rhetoric, a system of references. But aren't students, bus-drivers, journalists, cleaners also our peers if we cleave to our egalitarian values? How would our arguments fare if they were submitted to this peer group for review? (Remember that in class, one person's fact is another person's boredom). Instead, we turn away from our broader group of peers to pursue work which is recognizable, in the words of the anti-hero of *Lucky Jim*, for "the pseudo-light it throws upon non-problems."

Use the values of the university against the academic institution itself

When the university champions equality, diversity and inclusion, we have to ask for more than the symbolic diversity of a Benetton ad or the tokenistic inclusiveness of respecting the "school run." Diversity, ironically, means not having to countenance radical difference; inclusiveness works like multiculturalism—you can cook and pray in whatever way you want, but you'll still have to get up at 5am to do the shit jobs for your white male boss. As for equality, there is equality at university in all things for all staff—except in the material conditions of labour (unequal workloads, casualization) and its remuneration (VC expenses versus the gender and BAME pay gaps).

Deployability not employability

A perverse, implicit anti-intellectualism at university finds expression in the much-touted notion of employability. This is based on the faulty thinking—either

philosophically misguided or, more likely, ideologically devious—that there exists and persists a genuine distinction between the university and "the real world," between preparing for classes and getting "job-ready." Yet the university seminar is in the real world, it is the real world—none is more real, more engaged or more full of potential, ultimately more enterprising. Conversely, nothing is more "real world" in the early twenty-first century than the University's corporate language, rampant managerialism, casualization of staff, marketizing of its degree programmes, and gross indebteding of students—all of which give both students and staff a first-hand introduction to today's worst labour practices. Yet, by going along with this spurious divide between the university classroom and the world of work, we are also playing the market's game of steadily depreciating what we do; of instrumentalizing our intellectual activities and thereby impoverishing them; of reducing to utilitarian mantras (cultural agility, social enterprise, etc.) some of the most fundamental, unpredictable, unique experiences taking place in the democratic, empowering space of the university classroom. The underlying logic of the employability agenda is that graduates are not fit for employment when they leave university, that they are ill-equipped for the "real world" of work, for the ferociously competitive, deregulated global job market demanding above all specific technical skills and hands-on competences. But instead of trying to mould students into submissive job-fodder for the hardnosed world of work allegedly awaiting them beyond the university's gates, we would do well to ask them to challenge the value of this vision of employment and of

employer-employee relations. What if, instead of employability—arrived at by second-guessing the latest faddish skills-set or market opportunities emerging “out there”—we talked about *deployability* of students’ actual skills, competences and enterprise, but also of their opinions, ideas, intelligence, questions, wit? What if their critical agency, fostered at university, allowed them to live-work very differently?

Reading 5: Dwelling on the Ruins

Bill Readings’s prescient and precious *The University in Ruins* (1997) shows how, already in the mid-1990s, a vacuous cult of excellence had taken over from the university’s cultural mission; how the marketing of globalized business had replaced an obsolescent nation-state ideology. Its proposals for reclaiming the university remain urgently relevant today.

“Excellence” is like the cash-nexus in that it has no content

If excellence in university were only a relative criterion for essay and exam grading, then we could qualify it (and provoke open-ended debate about what it involves). But everything now at university is excellent: teaching standards, research outputs, module choice, student experience, employability prospects, library holdings, class sizes, social scene, sports pitches, parking opportunities....This cult of excellence, driven by university management and marketing, makes a relative value into a superlative. “Excellent” normally only makes sense in relation to “good-average-poor.” Now we are all excellent all of the time; which means that no one is. Everything is now excellent all of the time; which means that nothing is. What’s more, excellence is how

the university currently describes itself to both its internal and external audiences. This gives the impression of coherence by meaning nothing—twice. As Readings puts it, “the general applicability of the notion [of excellence] is in direct relation to its emptiness.” Apply this then to the Research *Excellence* Framework or its misbegotten bastard sibling the Teaching *Excellence* Framework. If we recall that excellence is basically a framing criterion (on scales of good-average-poor, etc.), then these two gold-plated bureaucratic exercises in inanity are then ultimately Framework Frameworks. Try out some synonyms for further proof of their utter redundancy. The Research Brilliance Template, perhaps? The Teaching Pre-eminence Grid, anyone?

We need to keep the question of evaluation open as a matter of dispute

Just as we need to take back notions of “excellence” from the administrative university, so we also need to re-appropriate the idea of “evaluation.” Evaluation is not a tick-box feedback sheet but a prime educational function. Teachers and students exchange qualitative judgements in open-ended debate over texts, events, questions; they trade in evaluations as forms of mutual accountability. Yet for university administration, evaluation must be limited to the performance management of teachers and the consumer satisfaction quotient of students, that is, to forms of reifying accountancy. As if a Nietzschean “re-evaluations of all values” started with “Feedback on my work has been timely”... Strangely enough, we need a lot more evaluation in universities not less.

The enlightened and liberal administrator is the new hero of the story of the University

Once upon a time, Readings claims, the university was the site of a classic narrative of mutual desire: the student protagonist longed to acquire the culture of the teacher-mentor, and the teacher-mentor sought to rekindle her own love of learning inspired by the ingenuous curiosity of the student. This is the “student experience” as Bildungsroman. But in the administrative university, the deep motivation of self-discovery has been superseded by the more shallow pursuit of self-accreditation. Eros replaced by logos, as the drive to learn. A sense of participating in a community of scholars thus gives way to a commodification of belonging represented by the student’s symbolic entrance and exit through the university gift shop. In this story, the Romantic self, founded on the remembrance of an often intense and conflicted rite of passage, becomes the consumer self with few memories at all, only branded souvenirs.

The time is out of joint (don’t forget Hamlet was a student)

Students at university are often “socially displaced by the strange temporality of education.” Being a student means living an anachronism. That is, in the arts in particular, it means engaging with texts and ideas anachronistically; this is how their past speaks to our present and reverberates there. But it also means holding open the time of questioning indefinitely, affirming the classroom as a space above all of *deceleration*. This is the university as a place of dwelling (in/on). And it has to be done in the teeth of administrative drives for ever greater speed, for constant

acceleration. (Perhaps the ubiquitous emblems of speed in today’s classrooms and boardrooms are the laptop and the coffee cup). So an administrative model has succeeded in introducing a need for speed in a place designed for deceleration, for fostering rumination, thickening questions, *making time* to think. Educationally, this inevitably results in mistaking what is efficient for what is effective. Where time should be stretched and savoured (i.e., the etymology of education as *e-ducere*, a drawing out, a making ductile), it is foreshortened and snacked. The result, as we know, is a proliferation of inefficient efficiencies... and intellectual indigestion.

Teaching is a question of justice not a search for truth

What Readings calls the “pragmatic scene of teaching” is first and foremost about relations, about a network of obligations between all the members of a class, teacher and students. As such, it goes beyond any one person in the room and her quest for settled “truths” standing as proof of her critical autonomy. Instead, it is an endlessly renewed question of justice; justice which always exceeds the reason and understanding of the individual student or teacher, no matter how enlightened they are. This classroom is then a joyously troubled collective. What we take away from the best classes is rarely a fact or axiom, but more often an anecdote or metaphor. These latter resonate longer and help us to live better, for they work like the poetic image described by Gaston Bachelard (1969, p. xix) which “has touched the depths before it stirs the surface.”

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