

The will to knowledge and cultural crisis in universities

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What is a university? Why should there be any universities? In one sense, the question is pure abstraction, fully detached and scholastic; it seems to invite an exercise in the creation of empty metanarratives, or vacuous mission statements. In another sense, however, we might expect that the very practice and social form of our academic lives already contain fossilized, tacit answers to these questions. After all, an institution can display an inner logic or structure, one might even say a guiding idea (Griffiths 1965), and even when the idea has been forgotten, or repressed, or never entirely conscious to begin with, the institution can continue to embody and enact it. And so it strikes me as politically *urgent* to figure out the structures that already, but perhaps unconsciously, organize our academic practice, to try to learn something about what we're already doing without knowing we're doing it.

In this paper I want to explore two hypotheses about what the university is. They stem from two initial observations. My first observation is that *universities have frequently been sites of intense cultural crisis*. It's interesting, in this light, that most analyses of universities regard them on balance as the servants of power, as instruments, with greater or lesser degrees of institutional autonomy, for reproducing the status quo, class difference, cultural hegemony, and so on. However, a rather different scholarly literature deals with the role of universities as loci of passionate, anti-authoritarian political activity, as places of rupture or attempted rupture in the status quo: May '68 in Paris, Tianenmen Square, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and anti-Vietnam War protests in the U.S., the riot of medieval Parisian students in 1229. Indeed, there have been student movements in Japan, Italy, South Africa, Kenya, Cameroon, Brazil, and practically every other country I can find; and professors, also, have been involved in many major public controversies. Here is a paradox: how can universities can be such potent instruments for the reproduction of hegemony and power, but also be the loci of major cultural crises? Is this instability due to the fact that universities have increasingly become central to mass social reproduction, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests in *Homo Academicus*? Yes, in part, but universities were involved in politics long before they were "massified" in the post-war period. But, then, what kind of relation does obtain between universities and politics? What kind of unstable relation between knowledge and power does the university embody?

Here comes my second observation: that *"knowledge" is a fraught and ideologically overdetermined category*. While some philosophers theorize knowledge as a universal human practice, there is a relatively recent discourse among sociologists to the effect that we now live in a "knowledge society," in which knowledge has become a force of production in a hitherto unknown way. This kind of discourse on "knowledge societies" seems to have accrued much policy importance: there is a major European Union initiative dating from 1997 called a "Europe of Knowledge" that argues that Europe needs to integrate and reorganize its university system in order to promote

employment and build citizenship. In the U.S., Margaret Spellings, the Secretary of Education, has released a committee report that calls us a "knowledge-driven society," and claims that universities are crucial to the nation's "ability to compete in the global market place" (Oldham 2006:x). Similarly banal sentiments can be found in many universities' mission statements. It seems to me that the whole narrative about the "knowledge society" suffers from being falsely universalizing *and* too parochial. On the one hand, it insinuates that knowledge is somehow new to our society, implying that non-western or earlier societies didn't have knowledge, or at least had less of it. This is a patent anthropological absurdity. Simultaneously, the current notion of a "knowledge society" is semantically vacuous, seeming to serve, if anything, as a nebulous bureaucratic metanarrative that allows divergent and conflicting academic interests to keep on existing tenuously under the same roof. Knowledge in the sense of cognition and social representation is found in every culture; but the universalizing *category* we call "knowledge" is highly institutionally specific and ideologically potent. My critical suspicions are raised when I hear it mentioned.

So I was a little bit stunned, the other day, in re-reading Jacques Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, to see him advocate something like the universal pursuit of knowledge, universal teaching and universal equality. "Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms" (1991:73), he says; "there are no madmen except those who insist on inequality and domination" (72). I was astonished at the sincerity of these statements. It struck me then that genuine equality and genuine universality are *unthinkable* in my social world; that my intellectual milieu always casts universality as an ideological smokescreen for the workings of power, as something that evokes only cynicism.

This cynicism towards the universal, I would argue, prevents us from understanding the university as it exists even today. What are we to make, for instance, of this passage in the Magna Carta of universities (did you know there was one?), signed in Bologna in 1988:

"A university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; its constant care is to attain universal knowledge; to fulfill its vocation it transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other" (Rectors 2003).

In part, this statement indicates the cultural specificity of the university; it casts the university as a place of translation between cultures, and states that universities are the product of a specifically *European* tradition. But more disconcertingly, it says also that the "constant care" of the university "is to attain universal knowledge." Here, in good Hegelian fashion, the universal and the particular seem to be mutually constitutive. And on reflection, rather than dismissing this talk of universal knowledge as a false ideology, as cheap and superficial rhetoric, I think we should accept that it expresses a constitutive fantasy of the university. In short, I hypothesize that, in spite of all the historical disjunctures and revolutions that we're said to have experienced since the birth of universities in the eleventh century, the university can be understood as an institutionalized cultural fantasy of the *will to universal knowledge*. At a conscious level, I think that probably almost no one believes in this fantasy nowadays. Yet it seems to me inscribed in the structure of academic institutions and scholarly practice. Today we enact it without ever having to believe in it.

But what do I mean by a will to knowledge? What is an institutionalized cultural fantasy? As far as I can tell, the will to knowledge is most explicitly examined by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, although he defines it more through contrast and complexity than through positive assertion. The will to knowledge, in particular, is formulated as a dialectical reversal of its opposite: Nietzsche comments that "the will to knowledge [rises] on the foundation of a far more powerful will, the will to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue. Not as its opposite, but—as its refinement!" (1966:35). Moreover, this is a will without any temporal limits:

"[The hermit] will doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have "ultimate and real" opinions, whether beneath every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beneath the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish 'grounds.' " (231)

So every philosophy, every kind of knowledge, leads only to another knowledge beneath; every inquiry leads to another. And finally, for true philosophers, the will to knowledge is only the instrument of another will: "Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—*will to power*" (136). Who is this true philosopher with a will to power? "The man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the over-all development of man" (72).

In sum: the will to knowledge leads into a ceaseless abyss of further investigations and quests for truth, it is defined in opposition to other epistemic states like ignorance and falsity, and it is intimately connected with power, command, and human development. Yet there is a contradiction within the connection that Nietzsche posits between philosophical knowledge and political organization. For a true philosopher to assume "his" (sexism!) status as leader of the masses, he must first retreat from the masses into his own individuality, into his unique critical stance: "his enemy was ever the ideal of today" (137). The philosopher is at once central to society and beyond it. And this same contradiction is fundamental to the university, it seems to me: my paper's second hypothesis is that universities have simultaneously aspired to *unite and disunite* power and knowledge, to embrace the coupling of power/knowledge but also to disavow it, to dictate politics but also to withdraw beyond into the "life of the mind."

Let's consider the origin of this fantasy. It struck me recently to look up the context of the aphorism, famously attributed to Francis Bacon, that *knowledge is power*. I had always imagined that it was a secular principle, a bit Machiavellian perhaps, but it turns out to appear in a section called "On Heresies," in Bacon's little-known *Sacred Meditations*. Bacon comments that one lesser heresy involves positing an evil will in man that is due to purely voluntary choice. This way of thinking, says Bacon, amounts to "setting wider bounds to the knowledge than to the power of God, or rather to that part of the power of God (for knowledge is itself power,) by which he knows, than to that by which he moves and acts" (191). In other words, for Bacon the link between knowledge and power is embodied by God, because God's knowledge *is* God's power, and God's knowledge is universal just as his power is absolute. Consequently, the scholarly pursuit of universal knowledge turns out to have a theological basis:

"God has framed the mind of man as a mirror or glass capable of the image of

the universal world and joyful to receive the impression thereof, as the eye delights to receive light, and not only delighted in beholding the variety of things and vicissitude of times, but raised also to find out and discern the ordinances and decrees which throughout all those changes are infallibly observed" (1999:7).

So human beings have a faculty of universality, and they delight in it. And Bacon goes on, in the second book of *The Advancement of Learning*, to chronicle all the branches of human learning, organized in an elaborate tree structure — principally divided into History, Poesy and Philosophy, and subdivided into everything from Medicine to Magic to Metaphysic. Now, it's indisputable that our division of intellectual labor is no longer legitimated through reference to the universal knowledge of God. Foucault, for instance, has argued that, after Kant, unified knowledge is no longer possible because of an ontological split between empirical knowledge and its conditions of possibility (1970:247). But it's highly suggestive, I find, that Bacon's division of learning is profoundly *structurally similar* to today's organization of disciplines. Our academic structure is organized into major divisions (sciences, humanities, social sciences) and disciplines (chemistry, economics) and sub-disciplines (say, linguistic anthropology). It looks, in fact, as if today, too, the *form* of academic knowledge continues to be modeled on the tree of universal knowledge.

The fact that, as science studies scholars have indicated, each discipline has its own epistemology, ontology and aesthetics, only serves to obscure the fact that the will to knowledge thrives in many variations. And the volume of academic knowledge is increasing endlessly, recombining in new permutations of prior disciplinary structures (cultural studies of computer use, biophysics, mathematical models of neural networks), as if the unconscious structural principle is to cover the space of possible knowledges as thoroughly as possible (cf. Abbott 2001). Perhaps it is true that at the level of explicit ideological legitimation, as Lyotard (1984) has argued, the old metanarratives of universal pursuit of knowledge can only be viewed incredulously, but it seems to me that the form of academic knowledge is in some sense still based on a universalist fantasy that the sum of academic disciplines adds up to the sum of universal knowledge. I call this a fantasy because it is logically impossible to realize, and institutionalized because the organization of academic disciplines still seems to presuppose it. As if universality had become the uncanny dimension of academic life, something too close for comfort or recognition.

Now, Lyotard has also argued that the old legitimating metanarratives are being replaced by widespread logics of efficiency and commodification, where knowledge comes to serve as the "principle force of production" (1984:5). And I think I would do you all a disservice if, in this paper, I were to wholly ignore the long history of explicit metadiscourse on universities. We can identify at least three theoretical currents in this discourse: an idealist current, largely populated by philosophers; a functionalist current, largely the province of sociologists and policy-makers; and a nominalist current, which derives from a skeptical despair that universities have any conceptual form worth talking about. An idealist like Cardinal Newman (1996) claims (normatively) that the university should be the realization of a guiding idea, an idea of universal knowledge or of liberal education. A functionalist like Lyotard claims that the university fulfills social functions like class reproduction, credentialization, or knowledge production. And the nominalist is exemplified by Clark Kerr's famous

description of what he calls the *multiversity*, "a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money," or whimsically, "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking," or, minimally, "a name" (2001:15).

My positions here are the following. Yes, universities fulfill social functions, but these functions have shifted over time, and we need to ask ourselves, why is it the university that is selected to bear these functions? What is there in universities that is a relic of the past, that remains irreducible to functionality or efficiency? Yes, nominalists are empirically right that contemporary universities encompass everything under the sun, astronomical observatories to shopping malls, Catholic chapels to government contracts, nature sanctuaries to fraternity rows. But by examining only the empirical surface, do we not mask the cultural structures that make it possible to have universities at all, structures which unite universities as well as differentiating them?

Finally, idealism. Is this paper not just a new iteration of the old idealist project? Am I not idealist to view the university, not first as an active social field of conflict and struggle, but rather as an unconscious enactment of a cultural fantasy? In fact, I think it rather misses the point to dismiss idealism as a bad theory of academic practice. Of course, academic life is unruly and it exceeds its conceptual totalities, but I think we still must recognize that these idealist fantasies — of an institution realizing the will to universal knowledge — are not mere epiphenomena of scholarly life, are not hollow rhetoric. Rather, this impossible drive to universal knowledge still sets, in some respects, the rules of the scholarly game; the university is *the material institutionalization of an idealist project*. I don't say this as an endorsement, although I do think we should be wary of a hasty opposition to claims of universality. I do think, though, that the relation between the fantasy of universal knowledge and the frequency of cultural crisis on campus bears further investigation.

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