

# Hostile Futures: Radical philosophy and the French university movement of 2009

Dissertation Précis

Eli Thorkelson

May 2, 2014

How does a utopian project survive within a university institution? What becomes of radical philosophy or radical politics as they enter into an institution they claimed to critique? And how do such projects react to, or even intervene in, the neoliberalizing university reforms that have traversed Europe in recent decades? In this project, I take up such questions via a study of philosophical knowledge production, institutional conflict, and militant politics in the French public university. Methodologically, I propose a multisited, multilayered anthropology of the university, one that traces the fault lines and fractures that connect ordinary life to political action, local sites to national and international projects, intellectual labor to institutional conflict, and disciplinary orders to utopian singularities. Theoretically, I aim to develop an account of the role of hostile, utopian and excessive temporalities within the political economy of academic time. And politically, I suggest that this inquiry points towards some of the reflexive limits of a Foucauldian critique of neoliberal reform discourse.

The analysis centers on the University of Paris 8 and its historically significant Department of Philosophy. The university, founded in 1969 as a state concession to the protests of May-June 1968, has been called a “university for burning” and a “myth for destroying,” and its philosophy department initially taught several forms of revolutionary doctrine, employing a set of famous left philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, René Scherer, Daniel Bensaid, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. As French sociologists like Charles Soulié have observed, the department and the university were organs of the French intellectual avant-garde, but ones that aimed to open up to the working classes, to the “people,” to the “world.” Shunned for years by the disciplinary mainstream, the Philosophy Department would seek to invert and displace philosophy’s disciplinary norms. In one late-70s statement, Rancière would go so far as to term his anti-establishment program an “antiphilosophy” — “the gamble of an inverted labor upon knowledge: a labor of sabotage aiming to make it unfit for consumption and useless for domination” (1978). But such an institutional project, inevitably, was rife with contradictions, which were not lessened by a new wave of neoliberalizing university reforms during the period under study here: that of the 2007-12 Sarkozy administration.

I have organized my ethnography of this scene in three sections, starting out broadly, then zooming in, and then panning outwards again. Part I, “The politics of university temporality,” begins at the national, public level, looking at the overall scene of the 2009 university strike, emphasizing how these national politics were shaped in part by utopian projects emerging from Paris 8. Part II, “The life of thought,” turns to look much more closely at the intellectual culture and institution of the Paris 8 philosophy department, following some of the same actors we met in Part I into their ordinary university life. Finally, Part III, “The twilight of reflexivity,” traces out several heterogeneous scenes from the aftermath of the 2009 university movement, looking at what connects the local with the national: namely precarity, campus politics, failed left internationalism, and the obscure fragments of utopian projects.

*Keywords: France, neoliberalization, political conflict, higher education, futures, utopianisms, intellectual production, post-Foucauldian philosophy, the limits of reflexivity.*