



University, Failed

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Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (1983)

What is the modern university for? By what or whose standards is it to be judged? Is its existence justified by simple virtue of its being the case? Is it instead to be understood as a means towards the attainment of a particular end or set of ends? Or is it, just like the Socratic *Republic* (Plato, 1993: 358a), to be said to be amongst the very best of things: those which are simultaneously justified in themselves *and* by virtue of the various ends which they can be said to have achieved?

Such questions come with quite a degree of pedigree. They are questions which divide the university's inhabitants perhaps just as much as they divide those divided from it. They are certainly questions which lend themselves towards discussion and debate. They are, therefore, just the sorts of questions which our contributors have been invited to address and engage.

This special issue then, with its driving call for open discussion and debate, already has something very much of the university about it. For isn't 'open discussion and debate' precisely the sort of thing which many have come to characterise the modern university in terms of? To some extent it is. And yet, of course, the modern university cannot be simply defined as a vehicle for discussion and debate. For, on the one hand, the role of the modern university cannot be said to start and stop with discussion and debate. And on the other hand, the modern university can hardly be said to have any sort of monopoly upon discussion and debate.

The discussion staged within this special issue, therefore, is simultaneously of the modern university and not of the modern university. 'Of', to the extent that we have constructed the stage for it from within modern universities. 'Not of', to the extent that this stage is not solely determined by the source of the invitation to the performance. The role of the modern university, in other words, is not only a debate staged between and on behalf of its inhabitants. The discussion has a much wider remit, a much broader public.

Historically, the question of *legitimation* has frequently confronted arguments for the modern university with a pronounced degree of antagonism. Why has the modern university always been in need of legitimation, and why has this usually involved antagonism? For Jacques Derrida, this is because the modern university is “a stranger to power”, “heterogeneous to the principle of power” and consequently “without any power of its own” (2001: 236-7). The university thus puts itself in a position where it is

often destined to capitulate without condition, to surrender unconditionally. It gives itself up, it sometimes puts itself up for sale, it risks being simply something to occupy, take over, even buy; it risks becoming a branch office of conglomerates and corporations. (2001: 237)

This antagonistic history of the modern university and power starts even before the birth of the modern university. Immanuel Kant’s preface to *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798/1992) – one of the founding documents of the modern university – takes the form of a defence of the university against a recent attack made on it by the Prussian King. Kant’s argument for what the university should be, namely, an institution which holds reason as its foundational principle, can be seen to have been grappling with the question of legitimation at its very inscription. This struggle for self-legitimation also led to the university’s having to compromise the extent of its relationship with the broader social world (see Bridgman and Murdoch, this issue).

The work by Wilhelm von Humboldt and others in preparation for the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 – the first modern university – is best read more as a policy document for the Prussian State and less as a *Streitschrift* (in the way of Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties*) (Engel et al., 1990). Under Humboldt, then Minister for Education, the modern university simultaneously appeared as both a prop for the Prussian state apparatus and for its nationalist educational programmes. For Humboldt it was culture that was to serve as the foundational principle for the modern university. It wasn’t only good, reasonable and self-reflective critics that the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University) sought. This particular incarnation of the modern university, which was to become the model for the universities throughout Europe and the United States, simultaneously sought to mould equally good, *national citizens*: “each mind an analogously organized mini-State morally unified in the supermind of the State. Prussian mind-meld” (Massumi, 1992: 4-5).

In constructing the modern university by buttressing it upon the principles of reason and culture respectively, Kant and Humboldt sought to establish the modern university upon solid, irresistible foundations. These foundations were to be so strong as to withstand and overcome outside interference. They were supposed to specify and guarantee the internal organization and functioning of the university, to protect it from falling apart, to protect it from corruption (see Derrida, 2004). The earliest line of defence for the modern university was therefore a set of ideas: the idea of reason and the idea of culture.

This notion of a university with an idea, Jean-François Lyotard (1984) argues, is in turn bolstered by two ‘meta-narratives’: one of the speculative spirit, stemming from German Idealism, and the other of the emancipation of man, stemming from the French Revolution. And both of these meta-narratives were to be united in the idea of *Bildung*, the gradual ennoblement of character (Lyotard, 1984: 33). But Lyotard also argues that

today, these meta-narratives can no longer guarantee knowledge, that they have lost their social persuasiveness.

If this is correct, namely, that ‘reason’ and ‘culture’ have become objects for a generalised scepticism, a generalised cynicism even, then what comes of the modern university? Upon what is it to be buttressed if the foundations of ‘reason’ and ‘culture’ are no longer stable and assured? Where, in other words, does a general suspicion as to the guarantees of meta-narratives leave the modern university?

The answer of Bill Readings (1996) to this question is clear: in ruins. The abandonment of the foundational ideas of reason and culture has resulted in the turn towards the foundation of ‘excellence’. But for Readings, ‘excellence’ cannot serve as a foundational idea for the university in the way that ‘reason’ and ‘culture’ did. This is because ‘the university of excellence’ can mean more or less anything: ‘excellent’ league table positions; ‘excellent’ library; ‘excellent’ levels of grant funding secured; ‘excellent’ canteen facilities; ‘excellent’ parking; and so on. As Readings argues:

[T]he appeal to excellence marks the fact that there is no longer any idea of the University, or rather that the idea has now lost all content. As non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system, excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology’s self-reflection. All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ration in matters of information. (Readings, 1996: 39)

This is a problem for Richard Rorty, amongst others, who laments the days when “university professors concerned themselves with issues in real politics (such as the availability of health care to the poor, or the need for strong labour unions) rather than with academic politics” (Rorty, 1997: 179-180). But might this abandonment of the university with an idea not rather give some cause for celebration?

It is fair to say that under the regime of the ‘University of Excellence’, the university can no longer be analysed in terms of what Louis Althusser (2001) called an ideological state apparatus. This is precisely because the ‘University of Excellence’ is ‘non-ideological’ to the extent that excellence, meaning so many different (often times contradictory) things, has no necessary political content. The ‘University of Excellence’ therefore offers the potential for many things to happen in the name of excellence: left-wing criticism might even become excellent along this logic (cf. Readings, 1996: 13, 38-9).

This opens the university up towards a certain institutional pragmatism. Stanley Fish (2005), for example, revels in the idea of “administering the university without an idea”, that is, “the university with as many ideas as you can get funding and space for” (2005: 80). In the face of a “theory or vision of education” Fish will “immediately run in the opposite direction”. He celebrates “the post-historical university” and gives it the following motto: “No theory, no urgent mission, no sociopolitical cause” (*ibid.*).

Yet such celebration of the ‘University Without Idea’ might be a little premature. Does the loss of a foundational idea for the university necessarily lead to the proliferation of ideas? Certainly not. Rather, what it does is open up the university towards a new organizing principle, one which Lyotard (1984) predicted and warned against:

performativity. Once performativity becomes the principle which governs university conduct, the university becomes a manipulable means towards any number of ends, this precisely because it has reneged upon its ability to define its own ends. Without defining its ends, its ends become defined for it.

The university therefore loses its integrity in that it becomes little other than a plaything for just so many interests, divorced, as it is, from any interests of its own. The general effect of the proliferation of the performativity principle

is to subordinate the institutions of higher learning to the existing powers. The moment knowledge ceases to be an end in itself – the realization of the Idea or the emancipation of men – its transmission is no longer the exclusive responsibility of scholars and students. (Lyotard, 1984: 50)

In this sense it is quite difficult to share Fish's optimism in the face of the university's apparent functional abyss. While we can certainly acknowledge that the modern university has increasingly moved away from being determined by nationalist agendas, we must also acknowledge that it has moved increasingly towards becoming determined by the circuits of capital. In this light, we can come to understand the university as a 'knowledge factory' (Aronowitz, 2000), as part of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie, 2001) or even as just another workplace that is as profit oriented as any other (Bousquet, 2008). So, not only is, as Lyotard analysed, the durability of 'knowledge' eroding, but academics must at the same time work hard to retain their share of a knowledge market where once they had a monopoly (see Basbøll's interview with Fuller, this issue).

We might also account for how alterations in the nature of the university reflect broader alterations in the nature of capitalism. In this sense the university gets ascribed a sort of 'productive centrality' (see Do, this issue; Dyer-Witford, 2005; Federici and Caffentzis, 2007). And in considering the nature of the relationship between the modern university and the capitalist mode of production we are inevitably brought towards a consideration of the nature of the business school.

The work of Rakesh Khurana (2007) (see Butler, this issue) shows that the history of the business school has by no means been defined in terms of a comfortable relationship to the university. Whereas in its beginning the university-based business school sought respect within the wider university, "the thoroughly rationalized, bureaucratized, disenchanted (in the Weberian sense) university of today, as some have said, looks to management for guidance on how to be respected" (Khurana, 2007: 6). Tony Tinker goes so far as to describe the business school as "the Trojan Horse of modern capitalism" (this issue). Yet, as will be shown throughout this special issue, the business school is not simply the performative shill for modern capitalism (see also Jones and O'Doherty, 2005).

So if the modern university is no longer founded on reason, on culture, on *Bildung*, on excellence, on pragmatism, on performativity or on profit, then what are its foundations to be? Sievers (this issue) diagnoses the modern university as a psychotic institution. So should we divorce ourselves from such an institution and from the variety of ideas it once held dear? Or is there rather a sense, perhaps now more than ever, in which the

university has become an important site for discussion, for debate, for negotiation, for politics?

These politics might take place in the ‘university undercommons’ (Moten and Harney, 2004). They might involve a journey ‘from enthusiasm to exhaustion’ (Askins, this issue), based upon passion and invention (Dey and Steyaert, 2007). Or they might, indeed, lead to an exit from the university (Berglund, this issue). Might we strive to cling to the university and so to cling to the notion of critique and fearless speech (Bridgman and Stephens, this issue)? Might we, with Aronowitz (2008) declare ourselves ‘against schooling’ for the sake of a broader conception of what the university could be for (Land, this issue), and adopt the struggles that any such argument almost necessarily entails (Pason, this issue)?

This issue was a call to discussion, and what we have sought to achieve with it is to highlight the discussions already taking place within the university, and to spur on some new ones. Yet, as the entrance to today’s Humboldt University tells us, such interpretation is not enough. What counts is change.

Such change cannot, we believe, be achieved solely by the university itself. As Derrida (2001) points out, the ‘university without condition’ may not reside within what we perceive as the university today (see Sievers, this issue; Do, this issue). Premising that ‘the university is the university’ may be the predictable failure of this special issue of *ephemera*, since the members of its editorial collective are all placed ‘inside’ its walls (although few on permanent contracts). This Derridean insight creates huge challenges for other issues and interventions regarding the university of tomorrow: to open the discussion to other shareholders and constituencies within the knowledge factory, to pave ground for other residuals, where a university may take place. Where are these places? And what do these people – the students, the politicians, the medias, the immigrants, the elderly, *the people* – want with the university? Underneath the seductive toasts and touching speeches that the university enjoys again and again, unmistakable signs of mistrust secrete. A dialogue about this mistrust (which dwells well, also, within the university itself) may be what lies ahead, meshed up with the ongoing grand failure of the university.

Because the university, we believe, did try. It will have to try again. It will, as observed, fail. Fail again. But perhaps this time it will, following Beckett, *fail better*.

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