

The Neo-liberalization of Knowledge

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To evoke, albeit indirectly, one of my essential interlocutors, I cite the final three sentences of Walter Benjamin's The Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*: "In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last" (Origin 235). These lines, like most, say more than they mean, and certainly more than can be addressed in ten minutes, so I will simply observe that Bill Readings has prompted us to hear in their melancholic strains something urgent about the fate of the university, however much we might wish to quibble about whether any of the buildings on this or any other campus are in any sense of the word, great.

An odd opening gambit, to be sure, so let me explain.

One of the things I still like about Text is the connection forged there, under the heading of "disciplinary reason," between what Michel Foucault understood by "disciplinary power," and *the* disciplines, that is, those institutionally organized practices that we simultaneously elevate and debase by referring to them as "academic." At the time, this derivative innovation in the sociology of knowledge seemed important largely because of the way it helped bring the anti-disciplinarity of textuality to light. In other words, it helped me clarify in what way the figure of the text gave expression to a transgressive model of

interdisciplinarity. That is—in accord with Foucault’s construal of transgression as an activity that overruns a practice by exposing the limits of its exercise—an account of the text as the field of effects that emerges when various disciplines are, in this sense, transgressed by what they can no longer either agree or disagree about.

Missing from this discussion—and I now disclose why I have brought it up in the first place—is the attention brought to Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power first by Gilles Deleuze and later by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As I think is well-known this attention spawned a structural, even historical distinction between discipline and control, a distinction that, in the hands of Hardt and Negri was put to work to, among other things, cast light on Marx’s distinction between the formal and real subsumption of labor under capital. There is, of course, much to discuss here—including, for example, the formal character of the distinction between formal and real subsumption, or in a now anathematic expression, the blinding character of all light, but for my purposes what Deleuze’s innovation prompts is careful consideration of what happens to *the* disciplines with the advent of the society of control, with the advent of the real subsumption of labor under capital, or expressed in the language of contemporary public policy, neo-liberalism.

Marx himself, wily Moor that he was, provides important if unwitting insight when in elaborating the related distinction between productive and unproductive labor he writes: “A schoolmaster who instructs others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who works for wages in an institution along with others, using his own labor to increase the money of the entrepreneur

who owns the knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker.” And then the “phrase that pays”: “But for the most part, work of this sort has scarcely reached the stage of being subsumed even formally under capital and belongs essentially to a transitional stage” (Capital 1044). As a reiteration of a parallel he earlier draws between professors and masters within the context of guild production (1029), the later formulation invites one to consider both whether with the advent of the global society of control, school teaching *in fact* remains lost in transition somewhere between the pre-formal, the formal and the real subsumption of labor, but also to what extent and with what significance does education factor, and factor decisively in Marx’s thinking about the becoming real, of formal subsumption. As both matters may be further agitated in the ensuing discussion I’ll not develop them further except to assert, in the interest of effecting a transition of my own, that from where I sit the transition is over. The university is a “knowledge-mongering institution” and school teaching is now productive labor, which is precisely why syndicalism has asserted itself with urgency, if not success, in every corner of the educational field, but also, more ominously why the drumbeat of “deliverables” has become tortuously loud.

At the risk of squandering whatever good will these remarks may have generated, I move to conclude by invoking a speech given 75 years ago next month, namely, Martin Heidegger’s Rectoral Address, “On the Self-Assertion of the German University.” This much combed, much raked over address draws out a highly, perhaps even hypnotically suggestive connection between the university and *the* disciplines. Arguing that to be worthy of self-assertion the university must engage in a vigorous form of self-examination, Heidegger goes

on to specify that self-examination ought properly assume the form of a questioning that, “shatters the division of the sciences into rigidly separated specialties,” and, “carries them back from their endless and aimless dispersal into isolated fields and corners” (“Self-Assertion” 474). That he is thus binding self-assertion and what we would call interdisciplinarity is perfectly clear. So too, alas, are the political grounds of his questioning. But we need not endorse his studied ignorance to realize that precisely what neo-liberalism has achieved within all precincts of public education, K through 16 and beyond, is the elimination of the conditions of possibility for what Heidegger calls “self-assertion.” It has done so, and this is crucial, not by defeating or overcoming “self-assertion,” but by metabolizing both it and the interdisciplinary restructuring of knowledge it heralded, in the rather more statist and imminently manageable notion of faculty governance. In this sense, however controversial “self-assertion” may have sounded at the time, it was little more than a *re-assertion* of Immanuel Kant’s ill-conceived Faustian pact with Frederick II, the pact whereby access to enlightenment was secured by exchanging private service for public freedom. One might well argue, indeed I am prepared to argue, that *this* is the deep form of the public that the neo-liberal call for privatization is not so intelligently designed to re-structure. Surely this, or something very much like it, is what is at stake in the systematic weakening of tenure, in the uncontrolled proliferation of adjuncts, P&A appointments and part-timers, in the legislative obsession with graduation rates and progress toward degrees, in the unhinged resistance to syndicalism, in the unrelenting administrative rhetoric of “excellence” and “best practices,” and, perhaps most cynically of all in what David Horowitz refers to as the Academic Bill of Rights, that is, the farcical

repetition of the tragedy of the 60s when students here and elsewhere sought empowerment by making common cause with other social movements antagonized by the structural adjustments of Empire, not, as is now the case, by litigating over grades or a chimerical absence of balance on course syllabi.

Put simply, we are encamped in the self-assertive university that now stands in the ruins for which it had been destined. Inside, strewn in some forensically legible blast pattern are to be found the “interdisciplinarity” and “diversity” that are fast being drained of their transgressive charge, soon to be enshrined as buzzing beacons of banality. To catch hold of the new beauty that flares up at this moment of danger, to redeem the idea of the plan silhouetted by the ruins of this university, it will take different concepts in the hands of differently organized re: workers.

Risking a final injury, these concepts cannot and will not be forged from within those fields capable of enduring or otherwise collaborating with the neo-liberalization of knowledge. They will have to emerge from those fields sufficiently accustomed to living every day as the last to be spurred by what Benjamin called “the image of beauty.” These fields go, for better and for worse, by the singular plural, the humanities, perhaps even what Jacques Derrida called, “the new humanities.” But precisely for this reason, a more vivid sense of the danger we face would be impossible to find.