

# Whither the Libidinal University?

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## Abstract

In this paper I examine some of the recent texts regarding the “crisis” of the University. I discern a fundamental absence in these discourses; while there is a well-developed understanding of the *political* economy of the University, there is no development of a *libidinal* economy. I turn to both Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* and concurrent strands of Italian Autonomist thought to examine how present configurations of capitalism work to redefine what is considered legitimate forms of knowledge. By returning to Lyotard’s oft-ignored text *Libidinal Economy* I show how the libidinal always escapes efforts to tame it. By focusing on the libidinal we can better understand not only our own desires in trying to “save” the University from itself, but also how we can foster structural impurities in the University via pedagogical relationships.

Keywords: libidinal, Universities, Autonomism, Lyotard, Deleuze, knowledge  
legitimation, immaterial labor

I hope and plan for Cornell to still be a comprehensive university, and to not lose its focus on liberal education. It will be tempting to forego the kinds of courses that don’t contribute immediately to job skills ...but we need to teach students to be good citizens. At the same time, we have to be one of the campuses ...that does top

competitive research ... Those two things may sound opposite, but we have to do both  
(Cornell President David Skorton quoted in Lawyer 1, ellipses in original).

## 1 The Continual “Crisis” of the University

“The University is in crisis!” We hear these words regularly these days, from University presidents sounding an air of imminent danger, from provosts keen on reigning in spending from the non-applied research departments, from department heads facing the unenviable task of deciding which staff members to ask to retire early, from students involved in protest actions against the school, from comic strip authors, columnists, and people not even in the University. The “crisis” today manifests itself semiotically in “financials”, “money”, and “declining endowments”. We are told that we must “espouse restraint”, “cut back” on “unnecessary” waste and programs, and prepare for “lean times” in the near future. Such words have material impact in colleagues losing their contracts, graduate students being forced to take on higher work loads and finish their degrees in less time, and staff members again faced with the prospect of doing more work with fewer people.

Nevertheless, accepting this discourse of a “crisis”—both inside and outside the university—assumes that terms of the game. It fails to question the ongoing processes that are the supposed foundation of the “crisis”. And it produces an environment of fear where the only response appears to be a point-by-point refutation, a move that already admits the validity of the given statements. This fear limits potential responses to confrontation alone, rather than more playful responses based on justified incredulity.

Yet why are we so worried about the “state” of the University? Why do faculty and staff risk their jobs to lobby for desired—if “expensive”—programs that bring little to the University’s

“bottom line”<sup>1</sup>? Why do students risk arrest and the “tarnishing” of their records by being involved in protest and occupation actions? Is not the University simply an “institution”—in many cases a state-sponsored one, nevertheless—that is part of the apparatuses that enables the s(S)tate to propagate itself, training others to become “good citizens” involved in the “competitive research” that are the economic “drives” of a nation in the twenty-first century? What is the meaning then of all of this *energy* that is put into fighting for the University?

In this paper I will focus on exactly this question: why do we worry so much about the state of the University? I want to raise a fundamental absence in most of the discourses surrounding the University, that of *libidinality*. I mean this in two senses: (1) the investment many of us have in trying to “save” the University from itself; and (2) the activities that can escape managerial accounting procedures and provide one way to destabilize the institution. I will argue that we need to add an analysis of the libidinal economy to our existing understanding of the political economy of the University. By doing so we can better understand our reasons for an investment in the University qua institution and discover locations for where we can better direct our energies. In short, how does our present inability to think the *libidinal* with regards to the University enable us to fall into the trap of merely calling for institutional reform? What would it mean to take seriously the libidinal—and the ways in which repetition and difference are encoded within it—in any discussion of alternative configurations of the University? How could understanding the libidinal allow us to move beyond confrontational approaches and into playful productions that create our own terms of the game? And how might engaging with libidinal energies help us to understand the root of the underlying fear that is produced in discourses of the “crisis”?

This paper can only hope to be an opening on these matters, and does not harbor any desire

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<sup>1</sup> See the recent conflicts over the closure of the Middlesex University Philosophy department and the suspension, at the time of writing, of faculty and students involved in the fight to reverse the decision: <http://savemdxphil.com/>.

itself of providing a plan or structure on which to build. Rather, it is an affirmation of opening our discussion to hitherto rarely discussed aspects of the issue, aspects that come towards the underlying motivations that presently inform our activity within the University as institution<sup>2</sup>. Once we begin to take seriously the libidinal we can consider components of the University—components that are seen as rejects, as the impure, as that which destabilizes things—within the social relationships that underlie pedagogy, looking to how we can foster the development of further impurities that can go and infect other structures, propagating the *process* rather than the *institution*.

## 2 Partial Diagnosis of the Situation

To explore the literature that examines the various “crises” in the University would require a book-length treatment of its own<sup>3</sup>. Instead, I want to point to two recent texts that are emblematic, Henry A. Giroux’s *The University in Chains* and Marc Bousquet’s *How the University Works* (Giroux; Bousquet). Both approach the issue from their own disciplinary perspectives: Giroux, a scholar in critical pedagogy, and Bousquet, a scholar of literature, composition, and labor theory.

Both Giroux and Bousquet structure their texts as case studies by examining in detail various components of the University through a critical lens. So, for example, in Giroux we can find out how IBM has partnered with universities to create courses and programs specifically designed for their business needs (Giroux 127–8) or read about the conservative attacks on Ward Churchill, a former professor at University of Colorado, Boulder (158–162). Similarly, in Bousquet we read

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2 I want to note that I am writing from the context of an American university, yet I will often turn to texts by scholars employed in non-US universities such as Canada, France, and Italy. While I do not want to play down the differences between the various systems—which are many—I believe that an engagement with their thought, and their own struggles, can be productive for the specifically American context.

3 For some recent activist articles and booklets in this area, see, among many others, Beverungen, Dunne, and Sorensen; counter-cartographies collective; Do; Newfield; Petrina and Weir; Rossiter; Triggs; Washburn.

about the “informationalization” of the University (Bousquet 57–71) or the heinous practice in the Louisville, KY, USA area of farming students out to work in the graveyard shift at UPS in return for limited educational support (125–156). In both books we are faced with page after page of “data” that would cause most academics’ blood to boil and thus, rationally, provide ample support for calls to rework the system.

Giroux bases his project in the work of Paolo Freire’s critical pedagogy, most well-known through his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire). We see this most clearly when Giroux writes that, “Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of the university, if not to democracy itself” (Giroux 180). And later: “Pedagogy must be understood as central to any discourse about academic freedom, but, more important, it must be understood as the most crucial referent we have for understanding politics and defending the university as one of the very few remaining democratic public spheres in the United States today” (186–187). Giroux, without making direct reference to Jürgen Habermas, gestures towards the rational communicative “public sphere” where, given the right conditions, everyone is able to present their positions and come to some sort of consensus through open discourse. For Giroux critical pedagogy plays a key role on fostering this sphere (these spheres?) by being “central” to the concept of academic freedom, or the ways in which people must retain the ability to “question and assert”. According to this view, the university thus should be the prime space whereby students learn to pose questions to power, to come into their own as agents of critical thought.

Bousquet, on the other hand, draws from the Italian Autonomists. I will further address the relevance of Autonomist thought in the next section. For the moment, however, it suffices to say that the Autonomist tradition comes out of unorthodox readings of Marx, whereby capitalist development is not seen to develop according to its own internal logic, but rather in direct

response to the ongoing actions of workers' challenges against it. Instead of teleological development, capitalism only changes as a result of incorporating worker resistance in continuing processes of accumulation (Tronti). Autonomist thought is especially concerned with the changes in labor in so-called "post-Fordism", or labor in its "immaterial" or "cognitive" mode—modes that today exist both within the factory and without. Importantly therefore, Autonomists drew from not only industrial workers, but students (via the movements of the late 1960s), women (via the "wages for housework" campaigns of the 1970s), and knowledge workers (via the changes in production brought upon by informatization in the 1960s).

Following on this strand of thought Bousquet writes that, "Late capitalism doesn't just happen to the university; the university makes late capitalism happen" through the "transformation of the university into an efficient and thoroughly accountable environment through which streaming education can be made available in the way that information is delivered" (Bousquet 44). For Bousquet, this is an issue foremost of *labor*: the ways in which it is precarious (the use of contingent, part-time, adjunct faculty or graduate students), quantifiable (the reliance on cybernetic models of measurement and transmission, therefore seeing students as simple input-output machines), and disciplined (the crackdown on faculty and graduate student union organizing). Bousquet proposes alliances with other forms of labor (not only workers in the factory, but precarious "creatives" as well) as a means of "building a culture of opposition" and "raising the consciousness of those who work" (53). While the Autonomists, because of historical conflicts with respect to the Italian Communist Party (PCI), were hostile towards traditional labor union structures and more in favor of autonomous workers' organizations (Wright), Bousquet, on the other hand, suggests in the US context that university employees and traditional labor unions need to form alliances to better further their joint goals, especially with respect to the informationalization of labor. While these alliances can provide important tactical advantages, they must be combined with poetic activities that question, as Bousquet calls it, the "labour

aristocracy” of “old-style craft unionism” (Terranova and Bousquet).

Both Giroux and Bousquet provide cogent arguments that are necessary analyses of the present situation. Yet there is an underlying assumption of which we need to be cautious, and on which I will have more to say later in the paper. This is the assumption that the University *as an institution* should be a place of radical social change in the first place. Upon what factors do we ground this assumption? Why do we assume it still holds? We can see that Giroux holds manifestly to it, writing in 2007, as we remember, that the University is “one of the very few remaining democratic public spheres in the United States today” (Giroux 187). Bousquet himself gestures away from Giroux’s position and towards the stratification of the University when, in a discussion with Tiziana Terranova (a contemporary Italian scholar working in the Autonomist tradition) he says that, “A big part of the academic ‘labour of reproduction is the production, legitimation, and policing of inequality” (Terranova and Bousquet). As well, in *How the University Works* he writes of the regressive position of many tenure-stream faculty who have embraced “academic-capitalist values and behaviors” and a “managerial role” towards contingent faculty and graduate students (Bousquet 13). In a similar vein, Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber, in an introduction to an edited collection that explores alternative forms of knowledge production inside and outside the University, make the historical context of this assumption clear: “...what we saw in the ’60s was something rather unusual: a brief moment when the model changed. Universities were supposed to encompass intellectual life, intellectual life was to be creative and politically radical. By now the pretense is wearing thin. ...The critical thing is that universities were never meant to be places for intellectual creativity. If it happens, it’s not because it is especially conducive to them, but only because if you pay enough people to sit around thinking, some new ideas are bound to get through” (Shukaitis and Graeber 16).

Thus it would behoove us to keep this in mind: why the concern over an institution that has no pretenses of being a place for radical change in the first instance? Writing in 1962, Jean-François

Lyotard

says

that

The failure of university discourse to embrace the desire for meaning, for values to be embodied in activities, and for a reconstitution of community is not a recent phenomenon—did the Sorbonne, for example, hear or express the paroxysm of this desire a century ago during the Paris Commune? (Lyotard, “Dead Letter”)

This is at the very end of the Algerian war, and a full six years before the student and worker uprisings that culminated in May 1968 (and where the Sorbonne actually played a major role). Lyotard here too foregrounds the naive assumption regarding Universities as a place for the launching or the sustaining of left-wing social movements.

These concerns about the University function as well to highlight ongoing questions about how knowledge should be legitimated and, with the Italian Autonomists, how differing forms of knowledge legitimation lead to new forms of immaterial labor. Thus in order to understand how the libidinal plays into a discussion about the University we have to first return to another text by Lyotard that deals directly with the question of knowledge legitimation.

### 3 A bit on knowledge legitimation and immaterial labor

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* is oft-cited by leaving out what comes after the omitted colon: *A Report on Knowledge*. Focusing on the first phrase, many make reference to the quote in the Introduction regarding the “*postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives” (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* xxiv, emphasis in original). Yet what is forgotten is that *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* was not meant to be read as a

traditional philosophical text; rather, it was, as its title suggests, a *report* to the “Conseil des Universitiés of the government of Quebec” (xxv)—nothing more, nothing less. Indeed, the text is less a narrative of the decline of the “grand narratives” than it is about how knowledge is legitimized within modern society. While grand narratives provided clean-cut ways for knowledge to be accepted as legitimate in the past, Lyotard is more interested in how these forms of legitimation work: what are the mechanisms by which the grand narratives came to be, how do they function, and how does the process of legitimation function today in the absence<sup>4</sup> of these narratives?

While Lyotard’s text came out in an English translation in 1984, it was published in French in 1979, concurrently with the development of early Italian Autonomist thought, and with which it shares a number of affinities, if not exactly the same political goals. Lyotard here was most interested in the ways modern technology—embedded as always within capitalism—was changing the ways in which knowledge came to be seen as legitimate. He was keenly sensitive to how computing technology changed the very forms of knowledge itself: “We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way [into code] will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language” (4). Recall Bousquet’s comments about the transformation of the University into an “efficient and thoroughly accountable environment” that is more and more represented in the forms of charts, numbers, models, and game-like simulations (Bousquet 44, 71–78). This question about simulation—the abstraction, arrangement, and manipulation of signs—is, for Lyotard, “now more than ever a question of government” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 9).

More importantly, however, for our comparisons with the recent texts by Bousquet and Giroux

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<sup>4</sup> Or in their “unconscious” uptake, as Fredric Jameson suggests in his forward to Lyotard’s text (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* xii).

are Lyotard's investigations into the former modes of knowledge legitimation, the "grand narratives". Lyotard discerns two categories. The first has to do with "humanity as the hero of liberty", the "right to science" unencumbered by "priests and tyrants", and a "narrative of freedom" undertaken by the State in the education of its subjects (31–32). The second, and the one that forms the model for Humboldtian universities, sees knowledge not as the subject of the people, as in the first narrative, but rather "the speculative spirit" embodied, not "in a State, but in a System" (33). This second narrative sees knowledge as a means of further developing the individual, the Spirit, rather than being beholden to a criteria of usefulness towards the State. Put succinctly, these are, respectively, narratives of emancipation or speculation (37).

For Lyotard the changes underway in the University—in conjunction with the rise of the information economy—have resulted in the decline of these narratives:

The production of proof, which is in principle only part of an argumentation process designed to win agreement from the addressees of scientific messages, thus falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output relation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power (46).

The goal is no longer to create denotative statements ("Evolution explains the development of lifeforms") or prescriptive statements ("We must attack Iraq because they have weapons of mass destruction"), but rather the formation of statements that are themselves their own legitimation,

meaning they are performative (“Either you are with us, or against us”). And by being self-legitimizing, they augment power. Performativity refers not simply to the fact that statements become their own justification—there is no reference to an external form of legitimation—but also that statements now demand numerical accounting; that is, statements work by optimizing outputs given certain inputs, thereby foreclosing any uncertainty concerning future means of evaluation.

What does this mean for education, for pedagogy, in the University? “The desired goal becomes the optimal contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system. Accordingly, it will have to create the skills [or good citizens] that are indispensable to that system” (48). Elsewhere, Lyotard discerns the waning of poetic language while the “pragmatic and the interrelational aspect[s]” of language come to the fore (“Time Today” 69). Poetic language would allow for equivocation, would be evaluated not by hermetically sealed rules but rather by its ability to be open to alternative interpretations. For Lyotard, the rise of pragmatic language implies a lack of control over major funding decisions (those decisions are made by others with faculty left to parcel out the remainders) and turning every question away from “truth” and towards “usefulness”. In sum, those who are best suited to this new configuration of the system are the ones who exercise their “imagination” and who create “new rules for the [language] game” (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 50–52). One must be creative but within the boundaries of productivity.

How might we understand those who develop these new language games? Autonomist thought would use a variety of terms, including the general intellect, cognitive capitalism, and the one I will focus on here, immaterial labor<sup>5</sup>. For Maurizio Lazzarato, a recent Autonomist scholar, immaterial labor is the “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the

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5 It should go without saying that “immaterial” labor is somewhat of a misnomer. Obviously this labor involves the body and materials, but a body in a different mode than one stationed at an assembly line, and materials different from the large-scale use of steel. We would be remiss to erase the body here, just as we would be remiss to erase the infrastructure necessary to the production of “immaterial” commodities.

commodity” (Lazzarato 133). This labor is related to the imagination through the use of labor as “active subjects” where a “collective learning process becomes the heart of productivity, because it is no longer a matter of finding different ways of composing or organizing already existing job functions, but of looking for new ones” (135). Workers—those in the factory as well as the “creative” industries—no longer develop commodities—or statements—that only produce knowledge; rather, they are imbricated with the processes of communication itself, replacing consumption as the prime relationship to the commodity. Communication becomes the commodity. Lazzarato sees this as “putting subjectivity to work both in the activation of productive cooperation and in the production of the ‘cultural’ contents of commodities” (143)—meaning that this is a production of “social relations” (146) as commodities. Linking this to Lyotard’s analysis, then, we can see immaterial labor as being involved in the continual production of new rules to the current language game, the fabrication of abstract social relationships that have the semblance of reality.

Following on this Terranova, currently a Visiting Professor in the Department of American Studies, Culture and Linguistics at the Universit di Napoli LOrientale, sees the valorization of “free labor” in the so-called “digital economy” to be “the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy” 37). Free labor in its immaterial mode is nowhere near “free”: it is always already implicated within the continual production of capital that she elsewhere calls “socialized wealth”, meaning that which “cannot be measured by money but resides in the intensive value of relations, affections, modes of expressions, and forms of life” (“Of Sense and Sensibility: Immaterial Labour in Open Systems” 29). The university is predicated on these relationships, and the mapping of the informational economy onto the university leads is fundamentally incompatible.

This appears to leave us in a bit of a bind. The means of knowledge legitimation that underlie the postmodern, and the contemporary University, have as their goal the development of subjects who will knowingly give their free labor for the production of immaterial commodities that are predicated on the most basic of human abilities, that of communication. Yet we started this paper with authors for whom the University is the only site remaining that offers a place of refuge against contemporary capitalism or an oppressive state. We're damned if we do; we're damned if we don't. Yet Nick Dyer-Witheford suggests that things are not as bad as they seem: that while indeed the campus has been transformed into a site of "cognitive capitalism", students, faculty, and staff are regularly involved in struggles regarding unionization, control over biopower, and what he calls, drawing on the early Marx, "species-being" realizations (Dyer-Witheford). His writings would tend to valorize, again, the University as a special site for the development of alternatives *precisely because* of the need for Universities to foster the "unforeseen synthesis" or the opportunity for the "unpredicted but really profitable idea" (90). This optimism, coupled with his comments on student protest movements, dovetails with contemporary debates within the left regarding the power of the so-called "Multitude" against "Empire" as theorized in the books of the same names by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As we will see near the end, however, Dyer-Witheford's ultimate position is not too far from my own. Nevertheless, as Katie Vann warns, the power of the multitude—and consequently the ability for it to exploit the porosity of the University—may not be the decisive break as commonly theorized, but rather a product of the continuation of modernist practices of managerial control over labor (Vann).

So. We oscillate between optimism and pessimism, utopia and dystopia, an affirmation of the University as a particular location for the formation of resistance and alternatives, and an indictment of the institution as one of the main instigators of the transformation of workers into immaterial labor. Yet, to return to my original question, *why the concern regarding the University?* What is at work here that causes us to either valorize or demonize this apparatus of

power? How am I implicated through my own activities, as well as the activity of writing this paper? And what might be left out of these accounts that would help us to better understand the situation—as well as help us to formulate alternatives that are at once utopic and possible?

#### 4 The *Libidinal* University

If we think back to these accounts—the ones by Giroux, Bousquet, Dyer-Witheford, and others—we can feel upon reflection what is missing: an account of desire, the libidinal, that which cannot easily fit into explanations based either on Enlightenment humanism or Marxist political economy alone. Flows of desire, in the sense of either Lyotard or of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, play little role within the diagnoses of the University in crisis. Recall: Giroux's project aims to develop critical students who ask questions of power; Bousquet works to foreground the casualization of academic labor, and develop strategies for academics qua workers to organize themselves and form alliances with existing labor unions; and Dyer-Witheford lauds the existing tactics that take place on campuses contra capitalist power. Yet, as Terranova makes clear in her discussion with Bousquet, "Subjectivity and class are not simply modes of reproduction but also alchemical, microbiological and machinic factories of social transformation" (Terranova and Bousquet).

Thus, in order to augment the political economy of the University discussed above we need to add a *libidinal economy*, an economy that ought to help us explain not only the flows at work within the University as an institution, but also our own investments in working to maintain, reform, or revolutionize it in the face of committed attacks. While we could just as easily turn to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti Oedipus*, which was an attempt to work through the possibilities of combining Marx and Freud in the wake of the "failure" of the May 1968 student and worker movements, I want to turn instead to Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, a text published shortly after

Deleuze and Guattari, meant partially as a response, and, for the most part, relatively ignored (much to Lyotard's relief (Grant xviii)). The text's style is inseparable from its argument, as Lyotard, like Deleuze and Guattari, attempts to let the libidinal flows be set free in his (non-)critique of Marx and Freud. For many of his readers this book was abominable, a mish-mash of half-formed arguments, critique that denied its status as critique, and attacks on friends-now-turned-enemies. Yet there is much to find of use in Lyotard's book, a use that cannot be entirely subsumed to the use-value of knowledge in contemporary society. For Lyotard encourages a type of thought that would affirm the power of the libidinal absent the discourse of lack that is found in Freud. Surprisingly perhaps, some contemporary economists have returned to Lyotard's text as a means of trying to explain the "reaction to moments of evident disorder such as the wreckage wrought by financial crashes or the aftermath of speculative bubbles" (Cooper and Murphy 231–232), perhaps taking to heart John Maynard Keynes' reference to the "animal spirits" that sometimes motivates markets (quoted in Pasquinelli 13). Yet, as these economists recognize, all too often in standard economic accounts "desire reappears as a rational, orderly, and ultimately explicable operation" (Cooper and Murphy 232)—something we have seen at work in the present accounts of the University.

In contrast to the Freudian method of constraining desire within certain psychic structures, Lyotard wishes to set it free in all of its power, to affirm the productive power of the libidinal: "Our danger, we libidinal economists, lies in building a new morality with this consolation, of proclaiming and broadcasting that the libidinal band *is good*, that the circulation of affects *is joyful*, that the anonymity and the impossibility of figures *are great and free*, that all pain is reactionary and conceals the points of a formation issuing from the great Zero..." (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* 11, emphasis in original). Instead of trying to explain away desire within a framework that prides itself on suppression and lack, Lyotard *desires*, and brings that desire to the forefront of his methodology (if it could even be called that, since desire and the libidinal

cannot be simply subsumed into the structure of a rigid methodology applied without thought—it is that-which-escapes method or structure). With respects to Marx Lyotard is decidedly unorthodox—unsurprising given his break with *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the disarray surrounding the other Marxist parties in France: “We must come to take Marx as if he were a writer, an author full for affects, take his text as a madness and not a theory, we must succeed in pushing aside his theoretical barrier and stroking his beard without contempt and without devotion...stroke his beard as a complex libidinal volume, *reawakening his hidden desire* and ours along with it” (95, emphasis mine). Lyotard diagnoses the continual *postponement* of revolution—the love of the postponement itself—as parallel to the postponement of desire within traditional Freudian psychology, a postponement that can of course never be complete yet always slips out in the most unexpected (and potentially dangerous) ways. Thus, it is not the completion of the Marxist revolution we need, since that would mean desire would be fulfilled, rather

...it is one revolution, and one, and one more...*permanent* revolution if you like, but on condition that this word cease to denote continuity and mean: we will never be sufficiently refined, the (libidinal) world will always be *too beautiful*, there will always be too great an excess of mute vibrant trembling in the most ordinary nonsense or depression, we will never stop becoming disciples of its affects, the routes of the affects ceaselessly crossing and recrossing the signs of representation and tracing the most unheard of, the most audacious, the most disconcerting itineraries on them. And on condition that *permanent* also mean: we do not seek to produce a cartography, a memory, a register of our efforts at refinement, an organization, a party of the refined, an anti-society, a school for a framework or of affects, an apparatus of refinement’s officials, the permanence in question is not

something that persists throughout a time identical to itself and from which could be distilled out of acquisitions, attainments, experiments and results, a knowledge in matters of intensities...(20, emphasis in original).

Traditional philosophy this is not. Lyotard continually refuses to let himself be pinned down, “contradicting” himself from one phrase to the next in a performance of the so-called “irrationality” of desire. While for Lyotard there is the promise of permanent revolution, this is not a revolution that, in light of the ultimate “failure” of the Bolshevik revolution, would recreate a State apparatus like that seen in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Revolution without a history that could then become *dogma*, without a map or codified knowledge (recall my earlier discussion about *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*). The libidinal *exceeds* all of this and can never be captured, and to attempt to do so leads us into the traps of Freudian lack. By failing to release the libidinal, by continually postponing revolution for some later time, for the time when consciousness has been sufficiently “raised”, communists use the language of “inhibition, which leads desire from its primary object towards the *means* of its realization; it is that of capital, which loves production rather than the product, and for which the product is only the means of producing; it is that of the ‘communist’ party, which loves not the revolution but the means by which they are *able* to make it happen, which in their hands is only a pretext to the machinery for capitalizing the desire for revolution” (103). Thus capital and communism are not that far apart: both prey on the *desire for inhibition*, the displacement of desire onto process rather than object.

However this desire is occasionally displaced entirely onto an object, the object of the Other. Some of Lyotard’s harshest words in *Libidinal Economy* are reserved for “political intellectuals” involved in revolutionary activities. Let me quote him in full:

Why, political intellectuals, do you *incline towards* the proletariat? In commiseration for what? I realize that a proletarian would hate you, you have no hatred because you are bourgeois, privileged smooth-skinned types, but also because you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital, its materials, its metal bars, its polystyrene, its books, its sausage pâtés, swallowing tonnes of it till you burst—and because instead of saying this, which is *also* what happens in the desire of those who work with their hands, arses and heads, ah, you become a leader of *men*, what a leader of *pimps*, you lean forward and divulge: ah, but that’s alienation, it isn’t pretty, hang on, we’ll save you from it, we will work to liberate you from this wicked affection for servitude, we will give you dignity. And in this way you situate yourselves on the most despicable side, the moralistic side where you desire that our capitalized’s desire be totally ignored, forbidden, brought to a standstill, you are like priests with sinners, our servile intensities frighten you, you have to tell yourselves: how they must suffer to endure that! And of course we suffer, we the capitalized, but this does not mean that we do not enjoy, nor that what you think you can offer us as a remedy—for what?—does not disgust us, even more. We abhor therapeutics and its vaseline, we prefer to burst under the quantitative excesses that you judge the most stupid. And don’t wait for our spontaneity to rise up in revolt either (115–116, emphasis in original).

I quote Lyotard extensively in order to highlight the *performance* of his vehemence, his distaste for the patronizing attitude that he sees his fellow “political intellectuals” showing towards the proletariat. It is the problem of “false consciousness” all over again: who are we, as intellectuals,

to say that someone else's "consciousness" is false? Or that it needs correcting? Lyotard here is presaging what the activist and intellectual Stephen Duncombe has written about extensively in *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, which is that the so-called progressive "left" has to take seriously the desires, media interests, and understanding of the so-called "lower classes" instead of talking down to them as if they are somehow uneducated about their own situation (Duncombe). In line with this thought, Terranova says that "And as usual, we must be careful about not repeating the old mistake of thinking of the working class as existing in a state of 'unrealised consciousness' which needs to be awoken by an external agency" (Terranova and Bousquet). Lyotard, Terranova, and Duncombe recognize that to fall into that trap—of "preaching"—we only strengthen the power relationships that we are supposedly trying to diminish or reform.

But more important for the present paper are the ways in which Lyotard highlights the displacement of desire of the "intellectuals": rather than seeing the desire of the "capitalized" in their own terms (or recognizing that the intellectuals negate their own desire through this displacement) the intellectuals instead focus on the rational, the seemingly despicable act of the capitalized "swallowing the shit of capital", and work to "offer [them] a remedy". Instead of focusing on their own desires—Why do they worry about the proletariat? Why not concern themselves with the role of the intellectual in capital?—the intellectuals transfer this desire onto others by focusing on the rational development of solutions. The intellectuals "forbid" desire, wish for it to be "ignored", removed from the instrumental equation of emancipating the workers from their lowly position within capitalism. And the desires of the intellectuals remain unquestioned, left in the bonds of the asymmetric social relationships with the proletariat.

How "far" have we come in posing the question of desire with regards to *ourselves*, us who potentially make up the "political intellectuals" about whom Lyotard writes? We may not have come at all, and that is the problem. We tend to fail to see how desire is a *force* that cannot be

contained within Enlightenment structures. We read Deleuze and Guattari (and parts of Lyotard) regularly, but fail to see how it applies to our own selves and how it informs our relationships with those both inside and outside of the University as an institution. Producers of capital draw on the mutability of signs in order to fuel further accumulation, but too many on the left fall back on limited responses based on rational refutation of points. Desire remains the taboo, even while at the same time we read about it continually within our poststructuralist-inspired texts. This is the desire for meaning, the drive that motivates much of what we do, even if we bury it below the surface of our writings. It is that which the University as presently structured works to suppress within the confines of their own narratives of knowledge legitimation. Yet it is also that which can never be entirely recuperated by the University as institution; it is that which exceeds their own attempts to tame it.

## 5 Desire as impurity

Cultural desire is the desire to put an end to the exile of meaning as external to activities. It is at the same time the desire to put an end to the exile of activities as estranged from their sense. Its instrument cannot be the university, which dwells in this very exile, and is the product of it. Nor can speech alone be its instrument. Now we must look for the acts in which this desire is already silently present; we must hear in these acts the call of a sense, a call that has no truck with the operational world but that is nevertheless utterly contemporary; we must make the call ring out, at the cost of transgressing (destroying) the apparatuses that stifle it; we must find the ways to make it ring out, the opportunities and the means (Lyotard, "Dead Letter" 39–40).

Again Lyotard, again in 1962. Desire is that which the University tries to “stifle”; the goal, then, is to “transgress” the structure of the University itself in order to let the “sense” of “cultural desire” become an active force. And so I end by returning to my original question—Why all the concern about the modern University?—by offering some thoughts about why all the concern is perhaps much consternation about nothing. As Irving Goh has recently written in respect to the intersection of Derrida and Bataille, there is always a “structural reject” that fails to be accountable to the prevailing structure, that is a “resistance to any external force that seeks to arrest it [the structure] in a hypostasis” (Goh). This is perhaps the “transgression” mentioned by Lyotard. Or, in a later writing from 1968, it is a *detournement* of the University as structure itself (Lyotard, “Preamble to a Charter” 41, 42), an obvious reference to the practice of the Situationists, for whom *detournement* was a major component of activist and artistic practices surrounding the May 1968 events (among other times as well). Rather than using the word *reject* as suggested by Goh, I would offer *impurity*, gesturing towards the ways in which desire works to muddy any clear, simple, and unequivocal accounts or actions. For desire can never be *describable* as such; and if we attempt to do so by forcing it to conform to our (rational) molds, we will quickly find it coming out with much vehemence in destructive ways. Embracing desire is then embracing this impurity, muddying our responses in ways that mirror the muddying of reality itself. This impurity can be understood as partially akin to what Dyer-Witheford described as the “porosity” of universities (Dyer-Witheford 90), the still-existing ability to import within particular locations and situations the mote that might cause an infection.

Perhaps this is what Deleuze meant when, in a rather strange passage in *Cinema II*, he writes of the need for a “belief in the world, before or beyond words.” This belief would be related to an “ethic or a faith...not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world”

(Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image* 172, 173). Is this not what we are faced with when we prostrate ourselves over the problems of the contemporary University? When we attempt to diagnose all of its issues with minute detail, in some hope that we might be able to recreate it as something anew? A crisis in belief that something else might be possible, that there is no possibility of resistance, that resistance is not already going on? Is this not ignoring the impurities that are already part of the University itself, the “undercommons” that, in the words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, already has taken hold of Lyotard’s questioning of critique and created a “nonplace”, the “uncanny that disturbs the critical going on above it” (Moten and Harney 115)?

Where then can we manifest this desire, let it come free? What I want to conclude with is the realization that the “impure” desire that destabilizes the structure comes not from the reconstruction of the University itself, but rather from the social relations that are embedded within pedagogy. This is pedagogy that incorporates both the critical mode of Freire, Giroux and Bousquet, as well as the libidinal mode described by Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari. To merely work to “reform” the University is to channel this desire in a way that becomes lost *within* the structure, becomes embedded within the solidity of buildings-as-unproductive-excess, rather than being mutated within the bonds between people, between students and faculty, and the unpredictability of the learning process itself. Embracing the libidinal would be not only questioning our own investment in the University as an institution, but also in fostering alternative ways of knowing that do not satisfy—and therefore exceed—quantitative relationships. Pedagogy would not be circumscribed by the walls of the classroom, encompassing only that which is on the syllabus, but would expand to include the relationship of what goes on within those walls to broader structures in society. Pedagogical relationships would involve more than the transmission of “knowledge”, and would thus have to exist outside of the realms of numerical accounting (Fisher). As Deleuze described in *Difference and Repetition*, within the

“Image of Thought” there is a tendency to subordinate “learning to knowledge, and of culture to method” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 167), a reliance on the assumption that to learn is to repeat without difference, to merely transmit within an input-output relation. Yet as Deleuze makes abundantly clear, there is always difference *within* repetition, and especially within the repetition of learning:

When a body combines some its own distinctive points with those of a wave, it espouses the principle of a repetition which is no longer that of the Same, but involves the Other—involves difference, from one wave and one gesture to another, and carries that difference through the repetitive space thereby constituted. To learn is indeed to constitute this space of an encounter with signs, in which the distinctive points renew themselves in each other, and *repetition takes shape while disguising itself* (23, emphasis added).

So what is this combination of desire with pedagogy if nothing else than that fostering of difference within repetition that is a component of learning? It is a recognition of the fact that through the process of repeating (learning) we can develop the impure—the questioning of knowledge as commodity, the suggestion of the artistic as an alternative means towards knowledge, the movement away from fear, the fostering of incredulity—in ways that truly exceed the structure of the University itself. It is not a condemnation of the University, nor necessarily of the attempts to rework it, but is rather an attempt to direct our “energies” towards that which is libidinally productive, the formation of alternative social relationships that exist in an impure relationship to capital. It is obvious that without the University qua institution we would be in a far worse condition; it would be a difficult task indeed to foster the development of these

impurities without it. Thus it is necessary to continue the struggles of organizing, of the development of new “organized networks” in the words of Ned Rossiter (*Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions*) that exist within and parallel to the University itself. Simultaneously, however, we can continuously develop permanent revolutions, fostering impurities in those already predisposed. This is based on a temporality that is not founded on ruptures or immediate solutions. Rather it is the development of conditions of possibility on multiple structural levels. Perhaps once we make this leap of “belief” that Deleuze mentioned we will find ourselves in a new space and with new possibilities that can not be so easily recuperated into the structure of the University.

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