Between Representations: Identity Crisis and the Bureaucratization of the University

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And it may be that this self-evidence is actually blinding; it may be that it is, at most, recognizable but not thinkable. This question, however, will possibly be resolved only when it has been recognized, perceived, experienced, when it is no longer denied or covered over by the veil of tautology. [Castoriadis 1998:181]

During the years of Stephen Harper's Conservative Party's term in office, a number of TV and web advertisements were released in anticipation of 150 years since confederation. The ads themselves were peculiar: a hodgepodge of quasi-textbook moments from Canadian history designed to draw on Canadians' heart strings – including references to historical events which significantly precede confederation – on the one hand, and present day images of the Canadian military and hockey teams, on the other. Thus, while the War of 1812 (55 years before Confederation) and the Underground Railroad (which of course came to an end – except for those attempting to return to the US – in 1865 with the passing of the 13th Amendment) and the Franklin Expedition (which departed from England in 1845) and the meeting in Charlottetown which resulted in Confederation receive pride of place in representations of Canada, little is said about Canada since

Confederation. The Canadian Government in fact appeared to have a peculiar fetish for British North America and little to say for Canada itself except that we play hockey and fight in wars.

The reason for this is easy enough to understand; few people are going to be disturbed by representations of British North American history and no one, it is assumed, will be upset by the fact that we play ice hockey. The assumption was that the representations were safe. Partisan politics prohibits references to Canadian political triumphs or to specifically Canadian contributions to such things as Human Rights, international treaties, multiculturalism or struggles for recognition. There appeared, in fact, to be a general embarrassment about specifically Canadian history: Vimy Ridge and the Canada-USSR Series were, of course, exceptions.

It may seem peculiar to begin with representations of Canada in a discussion of the university and

bureaucracy, but it seems to me that there is an intimate relation between the two. Both can be understood as the result of a crisis of identity. The Canadian Government's inability to locate any substantial reason why Canada should be celebrated maps onto the university's inability to experience its legitimation in what universities in fact do and the resulting emergence of a self-legitimating bureaucracy. These are not, of course, new problems, but there does appear to be something of a change of emphasis in recent years. The crisis of representation is no longer presented or experienced as a crisis of representation or identity, but is rather celebrated and intended to be celebrated in its very pointlessness, meaninglessness or emptiness. The bureaucratic nature of the university, with its legions of administrators and administrators assistants, is itself supposed to be an indication of health and vibrancy. That the teaching and research, what George Grant (1969) referred to as the curriculum, which one might assume is the essence of the university, is in a state of perpetual crisis appears not to disrupt the bureaucracy's ability to generate representations of health and vitality. Max Blouw, president of Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, testified to the peculiar topsy turvy world in which we live when he quite rightly celebrated representations of Laurier as the "party school." I say "rightly," of course, tongue in cheek, but the point is serious. If the institution is legitimated and represented not for its research and teaching, but for the excellence of its bureaucracy, then the bureaucracy should take credit for whatever draws clients to it. Spin the insult to make it a positive reason for choosing Laurier! How far is the celebration of Laurier for being a party school from celebrating Canada for playing hockey?

I have used the word excellence in the preceding paragraph deliberately. The term refers not only to the official rhetoric of university promotion campaigns and self-congratulatory exercises, but also and more importantly to Bill Readings's attempt to consider the nature of the postmodern university in *The University in Ruins*. Readings' book performs two equally important functions: on the one hand, Readings works through the ways in which the postmodern university can no longer fulfill the function of the modern university and thus in an important sense ceases to exist as a university, while, on the other hand, he considers the self-representation of the university to find indications of this failure of the university to fulfill its traditional role. Readings argues that the modern university, the university out of which all our present day universities emerged, took as its essential mission the creation of the microcosm of the ideal liberal state. More than simply teaching and researching, the university was a community of scholars seeking to create the ideal conditions for the rational pursuit of civil and national well-being. It was, in other words, the ideal space for the generation of ideology and ideological in itself. Nonetheless, Readings argues, taking as his point of departure a contentious reading of Althusser, such a university only made sense within the context of the nation state. The process of de-legitimization of the nation state which began with the collapse of "really existing socialism" and the emergence of a globalization not hindered by explicit claims to empire, rendered the ideological function of the university null and void. The university could no longer legitimate itself by reference to the nation state nor be legitimated by the states reference to it: it could no longer function as part of the ideological state apparatus because the state itself had precisely lost its legitimacy. (Oh how times have changed!)

This legitimation crisis, however, generates a peculiar predicament for the university: the university still has to present itself in some way, it still has to find a way to emphasize its relevance. It is in his discussion of the rhetoric of representation that I think Readings' argument retains its greatest significance. In place of the ideological university, what emerges is what Readings calls "the university of excellence." What is important about the concept of excellence is that it is precisely an empty signifier: anything and everything can be excellent. Readings himself points to such things as excellence in parking and excellence in communications. At Laurier, amongst a myriad of other instances, we have a "centre for teaching innovation and excellence." A centre whose very title is quite simply meaningless. One might as well have called it the centre for teaching. But of course the introduction of the term innovation, another buzz word for institutions of all stripes,

does add the semblance of meaning to the term excellence. Innovation and excellence almost forces one to hear that teaching excellence has something to do with the use of new technologies in the class room. Of course, there is nothing intrinsic to the relation between innovation and new technologies, and indeed new technologies may precisely hinder the learning and teaching processes. But neither innovation nor excellence mean good.

It is, however, precisely the emptiness of the terms that works to legitimate the bureaucratic nature of the institution. A substantiation of what is meant by good teaching or learning environments, runs the risk of undermining the university's mission to fulfill the mandate of what Grant refers to as the dominant class. The dominant classes, those classes that set the agenda for the university, if not in fact, then surreptitiously through funding agencies, grants and ideologically, are not even remotely interested in teaching and learning, but in the production of a viable and malleable workforce. Within such a context what is required is not learning per se, but the acquisition of skills or know how. Within the university today it makes far more sense to speak of abilities, skills, practices, methods, in a word techniques, than of teaching and learning.

This was Grant's argument already in the late 1950s. For Grant, the university has ceased to fulfill its traditional function and has become for all intents and purposes a technical institute. The university exists in the interests of techno-capitalism, to be sure, but it also must function in the image of the techno-capitalist society. For Grant, then, if I am reading his argument correctly, the modern liberal university may have ceased to exist, but the university as ideal community of consumer-producers within the techno-capitalist nation state is alive and well. One of the first indications of this is the transformation of the university into the multiversity (not of course referring to the DC comic of the same name). The university, Grant argues, had as its mission the universal within the particular, it emerges out of a certain primary scene and moves towards a certain universal, with obvious echoes in Readings' modern university. The multiversity, by contrast has no single origin or mission. It works only insofar as it "keep[s] technol-

ogy dynamic within the context of the continental state capitalist structure." Innovation and excellence have to be thought within this structure.

An essential component of Grants argument is that "keeping technology dynamic" or fulfilling the mandate of the dominant class is only rarely itself contested within the multiversity. By and large, he argues, whether on the left or the right, those within the multiversity accept without question the technicization of the university. This is easy enough to argue for the natural sciences, medicine, law, economics, mathematics, and business faculties, but it appears counterintuitive for the humanities and social sciences. But it is precisely here that Grant argues the greatest problems emerge. The self-evidence of "keeping technology dynamic" within the natural sciences, the fact that natural sciences are understood as fulfilling a specific social function, makes many in the natural sciences resistant to the mandate. Research for its own sake and theoretical pursuits offer an obvious counter position to those who would endorse the mandate of the dominant class. But in the humanities and the social sciences, health sciences, criminology and social work being obvious exceptions, the idea that one is self-evidently teaching and learning in the interests of "keeping technology dynamic" appears far-fetched. The non-self-evidence, however, generates precisely the conditions of ideological blindness. Self-evidence breeds resistance; non-self-evidence breeds blind complicity. This complicity is manifest in a number of ways. Emphasis on method, quantitative analysis, statistics, data collection and surveys are more or less obvious ways in which the social sciences and humanities begin to manifest a fetishistic acceptance of the mandate. If this were the end of the story, Grant's argument would not have the peculiar power it still has today.

Grant's argument concerning the ways in which the humanities and social sciences fulfill the mandate of the techno-capitalist state is, however, somewhat anti-climatic. This may have had something to do with the conditions within which he was working; perhaps the goal of fulfilling the mandate was not as entrenched as it is today. According to Grant, the humanities and social sciences fulfill the mandate of the dominant classes by enticing those engaged

in these disciplines to engage in research and non-evaluative analysis. The key to Grant's argument rests on his understanding of the traditional role of the humanities (1969:120). Grant argues that traditionally, and here he goes back to the ancient Greeks, the humanities were concerned with "the search through free insight for what constituted the best life for men in their cities" (121). Clearly such a search cannot be non-evaluative. Non-evaluative research and analysis emerges within the context of techno-capitalism as a means by which the humanities take on some of the characteristics of the natural sciences. A value neutral approach to the subject matter, to literature for example, results in a continual stream of standard editions, commentaries and lives of even minor figures in the history of literature, on the one hand, and the production of various "classificatory sciences" (125) for the objective analysis of literary production, on the other. Grant refers here to Northrop Frye, but structuralist, Marxist, psychoanalytic approaches could all equally be incorporated under the general heading of classificatory sciences.

While Grant identifies two basic tendencies within the humanities and social sciences, research and data collection and non-evaluative analysis, it seems to me that two other features have today become apparent. Together, these constitute a kind of false consciousness with respect to the mandate of the dominant class. The first is the most obvious: to legitimate study in the humanities and social sciences by reference to skills acquired. My sense is that when most of us make these kinds of arguments we feel a kind of dis-ease, we sense a kind of betrayal. This does not mean that we think of what we are doing as useless, but that we are suspicious of the form/content distinction that skills appears to imply. We want to say, we feel, that the content should matter, but formal legitimation is an easy sell and it is true more or less. The skills acquired will or at least should contribute to one's fitting into the "dominant state capitalist structure" and there are ample studies to indicate that it does. The second point is less obvious, but is perhaps more important. Far too often when we teach, perhaps out of laziness or insufficient time and resources, we transform theory into method to be applied to certain kinds of objects. Theory itself is transformed into technique. Here, of course, we get a repetition of the form/content distinction, but more importantly we establish a relation to theory, which could also mean a relation to social, cultural and political issues, which undermines the very nature of theoretical activity. Of course, Grant speaks of philosophy and religion, but the point is the same: the teaching of skills and methods, regardless of content, works in the interests of techno-capitalism. Here it will be worthwhile to consider the relation between theory and method.

How often do we ask our students or expect our students to apply a theory? We demand that a theory be transformed into a practice, technique, a way of doing things. But what if this were a misunderstanding of what constitutes theory, a misunderstanding moreover that is promoted by even some of the most respected theorists? Moreover, what if this understanding of the relation between theory and method were at the heart of the assumed parallel between theory and practice? Grant's claim that techno-capitalism informs even the social sciences and humanities demands that theory be understood as not being something that is or can be applied, that does not have an essential relation to practice. But then how is theory to be understood?

Theory does inform practice and vice versa, but they are not parallel activities. Method by contrast is meaningless outside of practice. Method refers to how something is to be done, it indicates the way to do something and periodically the best way to do something. Nonetheless, at some point during the 17th century, the terms theory and method started to be used as synonyms. Perhaps the most famous indication of this is Kant's attempt to respond to the claim that what is true in theory may not be true in practice. But even Kant understood that there is no immediate relation between theory and practice: theory and practice are mediated by judgement. Despite this mediation, however, there remains a relation: a true theory, correctly applied through the guidance of judgement, will result in true or correct practice.

This understanding of theory, though dominant in social theory is not the only understanding operative in modernity. The second, and in many ways more important, understanding can be traced

back to Descartes. For Descartes, the relation is between theory and reality which is itself mediated by, precisely, method. A true theory, in other words, should both correctly represent reality or nature or society and be capable of making true predictions about reality, nature or society when the correct method is applied.

The distinction between Descartes and Kant should allow us to begin to see the outlines of a genealogy of the terms theory, method, reality, nature, practice within the modern period. But this genealogy would also have to reveal the fact that prior to Descartes the concept of theory was quite different although Aristotle would be a difficult case. For most of the ancient Greeks and indeed for Plotinus and Augustine, theoria meant something more like contemplation than method or description. Theoria as contemplation indicates the etymology of the term meaning something like "to look at" and was used to refer to both the spectacle on the stage and to the watching of that spectacle. Theoria, in other words, was related to seeing, to ways of seeing, and to what was seen, but also contained within it the idea of distinct ways of seeing. This is most evident in Plato whose allegory of the cave indicates that a continued transformation of ways of seeing also brings about a transformation of what is seen.

I have no desire here to simply return to an original meaning as if it were the true meaning, but it does seem to me that the equation of theory and method has brought about a loss of something profoundly more substantial: that the transformation of the object of our experience is brought about in part by the transformation of our ways of looking. And this is precisely what most of the best theory in fact does, regardless of what it says it is doing. The best theory transforms how we look at the world and in the process transforms what we see. This transformation reveals possibilities that were precisely impossible under the old ways of seeing. Marx does not provide us with a method for bringing about a communist revolution, but he does transform how we experience capitalism and capitalist social relations. Adorno does not provide recipes for generating serious art, but he does transform how we experience the products of the culture industry,

so-called "popular" culture. Indeed, I would suggest that as soon as theory turns to prescriptions or techniques it becomes imbricated with techno-capitalism and loses its revolutionary potential. More than this, theory which prescribes is no longer theory.

But again this does not mean that there is no relation between theory and practice. The transformation of modes of experience brings about the transformation of not only the world, but more importantly of possibility. Insofar as the world is transformed in relation to experience, new possibilities emerge with respect to action or creativity in general. Transformation of experience brings about the possibility of the new, just as the new, the unanticipated, the unpredictable has the potential to bring about transformations in modes of experience. These changes where they in fact occur prevent action or practice from becoming stagnant, from being incorporated into the technological. Importantly too this way of understanding theory allows us to see the relation between theory and ideology. Ideology, at least in part, is what works to incorporate into techno-capitalism, while theory reveals the processes of this incorporation.

Nonetheless, the university of excellence and innovation has as rather precise mandates the prevention of theory or the transformation of experience. Its desire is to manage education in the interest of producing workers, to determine in advance where resources are to be allocated, to reward those whose "research" or "teaching" promotes the pre-established mandate of the university, to manage down to the last detail the university as if it were a vast machine with determinable inputs and outputs. That this is neither in the interests of transforming politics or in the interests of the capitalist state should be self-evident, but the more important point is that it is not in the interests of the university.

It is enormously difficult to know how such a situation could be transformed, but it is easy to see how it is self-perpetuating. The teaching of skills and methods results in the production of students trained in the conditions of techno-capitalism and thus trained to reproduce the conditions of techno-capitalism. Nonetheless, it is clear that Grant's solution to the problem is unacceptable. There is no

reactivation of the Graeco-Christian tradition that could undermine present conditions. But Readings's solution seems like resignation. Relinquishing the universalist mission of the university and then engaging in local struggles within the institution or within the community seems like capitulation. Both sides of this debate, in fact, appear ideological albeit in powerfully different ways. But if this is the case then Readings's understanding of ideology has to be rejected. While the state does appear to be an intrinsic reference point in some analyses of ideology, it cannot be an essential reference under conditions of global techno-capitalism. Ideology must persist beyond the demise or at any rate transformation of the nation state.

What I am trying to suggest here is that while excellence and innovation do not legitimate existing conditions in the manner of truth and progress, they do nonetheless function as place markers for an ideology that has yet to formulate itself. Indeed, what is most striking about these examples, like those of Vimy Ridge or Canada-USSR hockey games, is that any critical gesture towards them is as empty as they are themselves. They are, in a peculiar way, self-legitimating, not because anything could be raised by way of justification, but because nothing can be raised against them. The self-legitimating character of excellence and innovation, like the government's commemoration ads, despite their ultimate meaninglessness, is presented in a manner that evokes positivity as in any state bureaucratic or corporate managerial structure. Meaninglessness is never presented as such. The positivity of meaninglessness and the arbitrariness of language are celebrated as if negativity had been banished from the conceptual scheme. And yet, the whole process is negativity itself. What is being negated through the emptiness of the corporate language and the bureaucratic proliferation is the very idea of the state or the university, but they are negated in such a way that their persistence is assured. Ideology here lies far more in the welcoming-come-what-may tone of official jargon, than it does in the emptiness of what is said. But it is the emptiness that gives to the tone its celebratory character. "Partying" goes on at every level!

But let's return to the question of changing the present condition. The main problem with critiques of the present day university is that they tend to repeat albeit in a variety of different ways the gestures of either Grant or Readings. Either we return to one of the many traditions that have constituted the modern university, including the techno-capitalist progressive tradition, or we resign ourselves to working within the postmodern university while attempting to bring about those changes on a micro-level that are within our capacity without however generating illusions of a transcendental or universalist function. Neither of the critiques are satisfactory or effective. Ultimately, one would want to enumerate all the possible permutations of the above arguments to indicate the ways they themselves may be complicit in the persistence of the techno-capitalist bureaucratic university.

Those of us who persist in our critique of the university as it exists today would need first and foremost to engage in a reflection on the ways in which our critiques themselves work to maintain the present structures. Part of this would require a recognition that the bureacratization of the university is not limited to the expansion of the administration, but includes both the active and often unacknowledged support of the faculty both inside and outside the classroom. Indeed, I would suggest that it is inside the classroom that the greatest threat of the persistence of present conditions is created and reinforced. Opposition to present tendencies is not enough: the ideological function of opposition and the proposed alternatives needs to be investigated. But this also means that the concept of ideology needs reinvigorating within a context in which meaninglessness functions as ideology. Opposition itself too often manifests itself as part of the mechanism of the techno-capitalist world reinforcing the powers that are to be opposed. I am not suggesting that opposition is never the response, but that perhaps at this stage we cannot know what form that opposition should take. We can neither go back, nor at this stage see how we are supposed to go forward, and yet we must go forward. We need to learn to see differently. Finally, the time has come for theory.

Acknowledgements

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