

A Report to an Academy: Some Untimely Meditations Out of Season

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The oversaturation of an age with history seems to me to be hostile and dangerous to life in five respects: such an excess creates that contrast between inner and outer which we have just discussed, and thereby weakens the personality; it leads an age to imagine that it possesses the rarest of virtues, justice, to a greater degree than any other age; it disrupts the instincts of a people, and hinders the individual no less than the whole in the attainment of maturity; it implants the belief, harmful at any time, in the old age of mankind, the belief that one is a latecomer and epigone; it leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of Cynicism: in this mood, however, it develops more and more a prudent practical egoism through which the forces of life are paralyzed and at last destroyed.

Nietzsche

“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”

Teachers are the forlorn hope of the culture of Western modernity. I use that expression in the original sixteenth-century Dutch sense (*verloren hoop*) of an assault party sent out on some dangerous offensive mission in advance of the main forces, as well as in its later English sense of an enterprise on whose success we have to depend, but which is in fact bound to fail. For the mission with which contemporary teachers are entrusted is both essential and impossible. It is impossible because the two major purposes which teachers are required to serve are, under the conditions of Western modernity, mutually incompatible. What are those purposes?

Alasdair MacIntyre

“The Idea of an Educated Public”

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THIS ESSAY WAS INITIALLY AN ADDRESS, and, in keeping with the spirit of an address, it has become here in the spirit of a Bakhtinian dialogical form an open letter addressed in a Kafka-like manner to “A Report to an Academy,” the well-known self-confession of the captured ape who addresses his captors in a dialogical utterance, in the spirit of Dostoevsky’s novel *Poor Folk*. Kafka’s mock address is not an academic argument as such but is a Menippean satire by an ape posing as an academic. Behind my report are a number of addressees, particularly Georg Simmel who, from his outsider position, addressed the crisis of modern culture. In Simmel’s 1918 essay “The Conflict in Modern Culture” he described the conflict within the old culture and the new culture as the conflict not only of class war but about who would carry out the task to create a new culture. Simmel was a classic “outsiders’ outsider,” who had difficulty getting a permanent academic position by defining the origins of his thought in a traditional disciplinary form, which then and now makes it difficult to place him in any traditional discipline.¹ In this way he was a forerunner of Walter Benjamin, who never had an academic position and who does not fit snugly into a disciplinary jacket. Simmel’s work sides with the outsiders in culture, the misfits and strangers—and therefore by extension raises the question of how we understand the Kantian notion of a radical and critical form of *Bildung* beyond the Enlightenment sense and project, what both Kant and Simmel refer to as the free self-possessed search for the autonomy of the person. *Bildung* cannot exist without living out a sense of dissident cynicism toward emerging culture itself. The shadow of Nietzsche’s comment on cynicism clings to the question, How is the university possible?, in an age of the mass market conditioning of culture when the nature of capitalism keeps us hysterically jumping with the speed of change.

The modern moment in the literature of the malcontented humanities can be said to have begun with the emergence of an educated public

1 See “The Conflict in Modern Culture,” in *Georg Simmel, Individuality, and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine 1971. Also see for a position close to my thoughts, David Frisby, *Simmel and Since Essays on Georg Simmel’s Social Theory*, 1992, for trenchant insights into the institutionalizing of mass consumption into specialization and the destruction of public culture through the money economy and the industrializing of culture. The reader should not be deluded into thinking that this is a new subject. The courageous C. Wright Mills already in the 1950s under the influence of critical German sociology had raised the question of the “transformation of a community of publics into a mass society” (353) that changed the objective of democratic education. Mills argued for a form of education that would address the “troubled person of the 20th century, and to the social practices of the citizen” (367).

burdened with the idea of democracy and the future of culture, if there was to be a future at all. The misfit of the humanities is part of its very identity. World War I is the background and foreground that positioned bourgeois culture within the convergence of the dissident movements in art and literature. The groundwork for future discussions of *Bildung* as the consciousness of self-creation in the search for both autonomy and freedom in light of the tragedy of culture was carried out in almost every cultural institution. Simmel asked who were the culture bearers who, like himself, asked the big questions, How is society possible? and How is history made possible? under the stars where the wars of modernity determine the future and the loss of the past. Put another way, at issue was the loss of a concept of loss itself, as culture seemed to dominate nature. These questions became the pillars of the anxiety of the modern university and brought with them the crisis of confidence facing bourgeois society and the war of positions in which institutions face, on the one hand, a class war and, on the other, the unconsciousness in institutions toward their own fate as culture bearers of the world of things that confront the means toward autonomy that are available to students of culture. Meanwhile, such students are tormented by the very culture that they study and speak.

This “Report to an Academy” consists of reflections on how the restlessly cynical university has become the last self-appointed bastion of the humanities in an epoch of the *undersaturation* of the age with history. In our time we have seen the swift descent of the bourgeois institutions’ historical self-identification with the freedom of the person, the latter facing what MacIntyre describes “cynically” as the “bound to fail” principle. The failure is masked by the crisis of culture, or what the critic of techno-utopias, Paul Virilio, in a felicitous title names as “The University of Disaster.”² The university in the age of the market-consumer society claims power over all institutions of culture through the instrumental identification with the scientific and technical industries yet cannot itself oppose that society. This leads me to explain why using cynical reason may be the position of choice for those of us who are left behind when the total modernization has been completed. Put another way, the face of a modernizing institution, the university as a vanguard of the public humanities, is the functional equivalent of the now defunct church. Put still another way, the measure of the cultural politics of the humanities

² Paul Virilio follows in the paths strewn with Simmel, Kafka, and Benjamin in his own pitiless critiques of modernity.

is the defining essence of the university position today as what might be named a pitiful baroque institution; the university is the allegorical inscription of that driven process in which modern humans live powerlessly, worshipping at the altar of knowledge in the wake of a tragically alienated culture: “The baroque knows no eschatology,” Walter Benjamin writes (*The Origin* 66); and “open letters” based lightly on Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” mirror the historicism of the anti-historical—the spectacle of the contemporary catastrophe. This is the eschatology of cynical reason.

An open letter addresses the crisis of everydayness. For T. W. Adorno an open letter is a damaged genre, a “Minima Moralia,” a negative dialectical gesture that disguises rage behind informed cynicism. Here is Adorno’s case for the critique of cynicism:

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. (*Minima Moralia* 151)

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno continues his rage against the system that masks cynicism behind “idealized rage”:

The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism. It disfigures even Kant’s humanism and refutes the aura of higher and nobler things in which he knew how to garb it.... Nietzsche’s liberating act, a true turning point of Western thought and merely usurped by others later was to put such mysteries into words. A mind that discards rationalization—its own spell—ceases by its self-reflection to be the radical evil that irks it in another. (23)

The “Open Letter” here is an allegory on the ruins of a lost discourse on cynicism. An open letter straddles epistolary genres that contain apology, polemic, and propaganda; it is an aesthetic strategy that constructs dialogues for unknown addressees. The letter plays, camouflages, codes,

and disguises what public discourse cannot say. Kafka's own "Report to an Academy" is an exercise that exposes the doubleness of cynicism. It is a meditation on the protective coloration of the evolutionary joke: the captured ape is a cynic who refuses to devour itself in the eyes of the listeners.³ No one understands the ape's reason for speaking; his speech makes audible the silent cynicism that is a lost dialect from another world. Speech is addressed to unknown addressees; the letter has no reason to exist; it flees, returns, and waves futilely to both willing and unwilling addressees and perhaps to exiles as well. The writer is dialectically *reader, writer, actor, and author*. An open letter is unfinished; it resists any final construction that would identify the nameless recipients. It addresses the transient readers, the Cassandras, who are there in Kafka's and Nietzsche's forays into the life of institutional cynicism. A disaster is being played out behind the screen of the letter. Red Peter is trapped in a pitiful endlessness. The open letter bargains that someone will respond, and therefore there may be some way to negotiate with pathos, questioning if there may be a social contract somewhere and maybe a bridge to other bridges, arches, and doors that separate and connect to the room where one writes the letters of informed cynicism: Is there any escape hatch under the stars of self-preservation? Is there any escape from the "conflict of culture in the humanities"?

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I. Open Letter to Franz Kafka's Red Peter, the Star Attraction in Kafka's "A Report to an Academy," or "The Cynical Paradoxes of the University"

Dear Red Peter. This Letter Is About Our (And Your!) Failed Experiment To Learn Scientifically How the University Took on the Power of Cynicism and made it its Own Crusade for Self-Preservation.

The constancy of the crisis mentality in the university creates perpetual restlessness about its legitimacy; the university runs the gauntlets of the economy in order to redeem itself as the defining organ of the humanities and science. The problem: it is science and business that cynically trump the classic concept of *Bildung* as the self-consciousness of autonomy and freedom. *Bildung* is not an easy sell. The ideological aporias and uncertainties about what is important about universities in the absence of disident movements pervade.⁴ A letter is intimate. An informed cynical letter

3 See below for the reference to Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

4 Here one needs a discussion of bureaucratic capitalism and education for disemployment in an age of migrant workers and the desperate fear of unemployment. Even radical concepts of *Bildung* as a sanctuary from the epoch of technical

expresses doubt about shared intimacy. Kafka's "Report" is an exercise in candour and cynicism. No listener understands the ape's reason for speaking cynically. He refuses to be an imposter. His speech is unreasonable; it is essentially about his transience, his homeless existence. The speaker is *reader, writer, actor, and author*. The open letter remains unfinished and resists any final construction of the ape's identity. The ape addresses the transient reality of the nameless addressees who have invaded his integrity as a participant reporter. The report suggests endlessness in the age of the wandering of the peoples. Yet it is also a form of bargaining with the addressees' ideology, and therefore it is about frankness of expression and honesty of purpose in the hope for some social understanding about the ideological implications of all writing.⁵

Kafka's story-fable speaks for all apes. The ape is a fabulator of his *material existence* and is a storyteller, like those in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller." The ape lectures and is telling about the loss of experience but shows and yet resists cynicism by using cynical reason: the loss of the capacity to describe the loss of experience, the subject about which Walter Benjamin wrote on behalf of those who returned silenced from World War I but who tried to recover their lost capacity for human expression. The storyteller in Benjamin and Kafka laces art with cynical reason and constructs listeners who will revive their dead speech and awaken history again in those who have lost their capacity to see that the story is an artisanal act that builds on the rage of lost utopian futures. The story

reproduction of the same cannot encompass the university as ideology and its failure to historicize what is lost. For background to my commentary: "The Anthropological and Semantic Structure of 'Bildung'" in Reinhart Koselleck's, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 2002: "Bildung could, then, be defined as the reflexive and communicative force field that has attempted to integrate the heritage of life and of the arts as well as all the specific knowledge. One may discern a utopia in it, like one of those utopias brought forth by modernity with its open future. However, such a criterion would already be carried over, from the outside, ex post facto, to *Bildung* by ideology critique.... We first have to outline the empirically separable cultural heritage and specifications of knowledge as elements of a prevailing *Bildung*" (195). The prevailing censorship of the concept of the humanities is not directed at the professoriate directly but at the concept of the course itself and the use of online controls and appeals to recreate the course through course management that dilutes if not debasing the autonomy of the teacher masked through the business of learning that is not restricted to just online for profit schools. See footnote 6 below.

5 The most complex book on cynicism as enlightened false consciousness and duplicity with a double edge of "artfulness, bluff, deception" is Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

recasts the material elements of experience into ethical questions about how to conduct life where the division of labour hides the self-destruction of cultural institutions.

Is it irony that the ape arrives already knowing how to speak? He performs his pure nature at the pearly gates of civilization. Although it is a *Report*, it functions *aesthetically* as an “open letter”—both parable and fable playing on the registers of captured autonomy. Freedom is not yet a cynical ideal. Domination, power, intellectual and manual labour play out in Red Peter’s fight against the naturalization of his labour that unveils the cultural ideology of his captors who find him to be an irresistible specimen for their entertainment and scientific enlightenment. He insists on telling his own story about his capture; he cannot flee. Because he resists judging those who made him into this writer-speaker, he reveals that a Kantian sense of the highest form of judging is at the heart of what happens. The art of this cynicism Paul Virilio describes as a “pitiless art” (*Art and Fear* 27–65).

The ape’s “open letter” is both parable and fable. Freedom is a cynical ideal. He insists on telling his own story about his capture; he cannot flee. He wants only to spread knowledge of his situation. This is in the end an aesthetic that illuminates chronic domination. It is Kafka’s own dilemma in his insurance man work as an analyst, writer, and interpreter of law and violence related to bureaucracy, welfare, working people, and the poor. His job is writing documents about injuries to unknown addressees who sometime come to his office without protest; the ape remarks with mock deference that he is “accompanied by splendid human beings” (147). But Red Peter does not give an account of his ape-life even though it is an honour to be asked to do so. Instead, he presents his argument against cynicism and for frankness in lawyerly words in which arguments are posed and will entertain the audiences on “all the variety stages of the civilized world: (Kafka *Ein Bericht* 148): the ape experiences his life-world just as he tells it; the fable asks the listener to experience what is happening to him in *the present epoch* by making visible his counsel about law-creating violence (Benjamin “Storyteller” 108):

Honored Gentlemen of the Academy. You have bestowed on me the honor of rendering and presenting an account of my ape-life. I am sorry that I cannot comply with your invitation in the spirit that you desire. Nearly five years have separated me from apedom, a short time perhaps if measured by the calendar, but an endlessly long time to gallop through it as I have done, here and there accompanied by splendid human

beings, advice and counsel, applause and orchestral music, but basically alone, since all my attendants in order to keep their image intact kept far from the barrier. (Kafka *Ein Bericht* 147).⁶

The dialogue is inward with the old culture and the new, vulgar obedience to things as they are.

The critique subverts the self-satisfied ethos of *Bildung* of the listeners. By addressing the academicians through the institution, we understand how his mental labour is performed in the academy and is transformed into the pitilessness of witnessing Red Peter's dialogue with nobody in particular. The everyday discourse permeating his thought accepts yet deviates from the procedures of the institutions. His tactics are to depend on the evidence of others about his capture. His own integrity should not be confused with the doubleness of the "performing ape" that in the evolution into culture became named "Red Peter." There is no real dialogue about what has taken place. Nor has he by the end of his story reached the limits of understanding of what is in fact the totality of the deferred error of his existence. The dialogue is inward with the old culture and the new, vulgar obedience to things as they are. The error of the listener would be to dismiss the utopian moment of reflection about his lost *Bildung*, his self-consciousness of his experiential desire for freedom. However, he has no illusions that becoming conscious of his education into humanity will be more than what we might comically describe as his role in the money economy: his deferred cultural capital based on his relationship to his work. He is unforgiving, shows the need to be resentful, but bears no grudges. He represents the posthumous knowledge of the wandering stranger, the exile.

In his doubleness Red Peter fights to protect his inner life from the impresario-teacher-handler, while being an object of entertainment and exemplum of educational enlightenment. The horror of the story is embedded in the figure of the impresario, the vague figure who organizes a show of freedom that turns into sublime unfreedom in the tension between the prison of the academy and the desire to get out, no matter in what direction, whether toward the political right or left. The more Red Peter learns about the future for his captivity, the more the vicissitudes of everyday life are entered into the story.

Subsequent to writing the story, Kafka composed a letter to Red Peter on behalf of the impresario-teacher [below] that is not contained in the published story itself; the impresario-teacher does not get the point of what he has done to Red Peter. The handler feels pity *for himself* for having been exposed when Red Peter faithfully reports that his handler was

⁶ Translation mine.

later sent to a sanatorium. Through the nuances of pity and pitilessness the ambiguities of the pitiful state of the academicians are displayed; the ethics of complicity with cultural legitimacy lie at the heart of the relationship of culture and institutions of education captured by the fear of the loss of *Bildung*. The half-domesticated ape performs the politics of resentment that creep into the academy through its pitiful helplessness at how its own institution has become a part of the process of accommodation to market power. We the readers peer at the ape. It is his *askesis* in regard to those who captured him that amazes us and warms us to him. He does not join up with market power.

Kafka's parable and Nietzsche can be put side by side: "an unhappy man seeks the counsel and wisdom of a contented beast: Why do you look at me and not speak of your happiness? The beast wants to answer, but says: 'because I always forget what I wished to say'" (Nietzsche 97). The trickster's parable about the unhappy man who would not believe in the answer anyway always anticipates another question that supersedes the answer of the beast. *The unhappy man learns about informed cynicism*. He would always anticipate history as the history of the unhappy consciousness. The ape's performance acts out the cynicism of the institution. The bad humanism of the *askesis* of power masks the humanistic virtues rescued from the past. Redemptive notions of progress are masked as the eschatology of cynicism. The uses and abuses not only of history but of its material manifestation in the cynical impersonality of bureaucratic thinking reveal the equivocal paradise of his former existence, which is lost forever, never to materialize on this side of the fearful *Bildungslos* institutions.⁷ This leads the ape into thinking about his powerlessness; the unfulfilled power of "not thinking things out" allows him to calmly use his considerable powers of observation in order to study how the observing of others *who study him* protects him from jumping into the ocean. He has become an academic.

In Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* the institutions of reason are characterized metaphorically as the bathtubs in which the old

7 The informed cynic of Walter Benjamin's "Destructive Character" displays the cynicism associated with invasion of the integrity of the person. See Irving Wohlfarth, "Resentment Begins at Home: Nietzsche, Benjamin, and the University," in Gary Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin*. Walter Benjamin's destructive character resides inside powerful cultural institutions; he cannot forget what injustices have been done to him, but in this battle of cynicism and resentment Benjamin designates a type in whom reactive forces prevail, never ridding memory of the insult; historicism is the cynicism of the destructive character.

Greek Diogenes bathed in ascetic disdain toward Plato's academy. The cynical metaphor teaches us, as does Red Peter, how we "subjugate ourselves to the power of exchange." Exchange is turned into cultural value, which masks how surplus value is used to "play with the lives of their populations" (322–23). When cynicism is also applied to the bureaucratization played out in the cynical art of marketing the university, we must worry about the public's perception of university rankings. "Stakeholders": this cynical cliché alludes to mining, but it is about the privatization of public good, and the cliché reveals how the language used by administrators self-satisfiedly transforms research into digital utopias that announce and parade the spectacle of prestige of the universities to the public.

As long as prestige and the research culture maintain what defines a university, the faculty will not care about in-built cynicism. Public intellectuals will be tolerated from time to time. When state funding declines and universities hustle money for their programs, such mendicant activity looks bad but it can always be dressed up as "culture" or as "community." And corporations—particularly giant mining, technology, or business corporations—are welcomed as part of the system of private endowments even as their technical, administrative-bureaucratic operations earn profits and communicate resentful cynicism in the impoverished lands where gold and silver are mined. Kafka wrote that when the leopards are invited into the temple they become part of the system. However, that means that they not only learn to like it there, but they thrive; they are fair game, and their skin and spots are part of the new institutional history. The leopards are part of the prestige game of money and corporate donations.⁸

Faced with the so-called turn of academic governance in the name of untrammelled academic freedom, the game is to restructure the "corporate" university. In *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, Frank Donoghue brings a historical and contemporary perspective to his analysis. He shows how tenure is eroded by the dis-

⁸ If the reader finds my "J'accuse" too strong (or not strong enough) I recommend reading a guidebook on how to "foster productivity" by "educating more students for the same cost, while maintaining or raising quality and access" (29) in the American study by Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*. Niche courses and uniqueness are the brand names for the just-in-time educational millennium of competition with designer-created lower budgets. The book may already be a bible for administrators, especially at those institutions who blare their goods and choose not to emulate the Harvard model of the humanities, which is the version of *Bildung* they scorn in the Harvard model that they claim all land-grant colleges try to emulate. Their truth lies in the cynical reason of the assumptions implicit in the market model.

employment of younger PhDs and by the demoralization of the inwardly looking, elite intelligentsia—the faculty.⁹ The ideological driving force that moves universities into alignment with the crisis of the economy demands they adjust to the fear of endemic unemployment. The universities cannot separate (or alienate!) the higher education system from the marketplace. Unemployment follows the increased technology and scientific emphasis in education, even as jobs in these fields swing with the pendulum of the technological fix. In this case, what happens to the rights-based principle that education is a civil right? The cynicism goes straight from the top into the teaching profession. The university is the ideology of the present.

The ape, Red Peter, becomes a human when he comes to an academic conference and then goes on to his cultural death as part of the plan to domesticate him into the spectacle that is run by the academy. The Menippean irony is furnished to the reader in the name of the master-slave dialectic that tickles our Achilles funny bone. Coming in from the cold of cynicism does not separate spectacle from history, and what historiographical imagination we have left can hardly separate fact, legend, myth, and fiction. The holy grail of that knowledge once embedded in archaic concept of *Bildung* is lost. The salvation of the critical intelligentsia depends on the consciousness of the apes to reveal the spectacle through the art of cynicism.¹⁰

In an unpublished fragment, Kafka characterizes the teacher-impresario, who had trained Red Peter *to be the ideal reader of his own life story*, by creating a letter from the old Impresario to Red Peter. The letter is a “memento mori” to Red Peter’s speech:

My dear honored Mr. Red Peter,

I have read with great interest the report, which you wrote for the Academy of Sciences, indeed with a pounding heart. No wonder, after all I was your first teacher for whom you found such kind words in remembrance. Perhaps with some consideration one could have avoided mentioning my stay in the sanatorium, but I do recognize that your entire report in

9 See Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, especially the chapter, “Professors of the Future” (105) and how the ideology of the future is based on “breakneck expansion” and profit.

10 See my *The Insurance Man, Kafka in the Penal Colony*, for my installation of Kafka’s writing as the representation of the posthumous memory of writing itself depicted through the non-representability of the torment machine in the story. The story, like Red Peter’s fable, describes a journey from civilization to barbarism and back again by the narrator researcher.

its outstanding candour could not suppress that small detail, although it compromises me a bit even though it occurred to you in the putting together of your writing. But I was actually not going to speak about that, I am concerned with something else. (Kafka *Beschreibung* 242)¹¹

The irony here is that Kafka the teacher is not in a sanatorium in the story. He reproduces the very problem that Kafka's story illuminates: the bureaucratization of culture in the name of blindness toward the individual. And what is the underlying story? It is the plea for pity in a pitiless world of cultural accommodation.

II. Open Letter To T. W. Adorno and “The Taboo on the Teaching Profession”

Of course, in the contemporary university there is no taboo on teaching. On the contrary, there are constant evaluations, course managements, popularity ratings, online learning, and for-profit academies with supermen and superwomen teachers. The taboo would be to pay no attention to, or openly deride, the business of ratings. Adorno's “The Taboo on the Teaching Profession” can sharpen the fable of the philistines' taboo against *Bildung* expressed in the traditional hostility toward the powerlessness of the academic:

The ambivalence toward the knowledgeable person is archaic. The great story of Kafka of the “Country Doctor” who, after following the false alarm of the night chimes, becomes a victim, is truly mythical; ethnology tells us that a medicine man or tribal chief enjoys his honorable status, just as in certain situations he may be killed or sacrificed. You might ask why archaic taboo and archaic ambivalence were transferred onto the teacher while other intellectual professions were spared. He goes on to say that lawyers and doctors are equally intellectual vocations, are not subject to this taboo ... they are independent professions ... they are subject to the mechanism of competition. Because not walled in within administrative hierarchy that affords them security, they are not constrained, they are more highly esteemed ... the teacher's power is resented because it only parodies the real power that is so admired. (180)

11 This fragment, which to my knowledge has not been translated, is in Franz Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes, Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlaß*, 242.

Adorno raises the ghost of resentment and cynicism built into the teaching vocation. He refers us to Heinrich Mann's novel popularly known through the film "The Blue Angel." The teacher has no social power except for his performance indicators that recast resentment and cynicism into a dialectical, political critique of the university as ideology. Adorno writes, "The teacher is heir to the monk: the odium or the ambiguity associated with the monk's vocation was transferred to the teacher after monks had largely lost their function" ("Taboos" 180). This brings the departments and demoralized faculty into the economic agenda through the always present restructuring of the humanities in order to magically erase themselves and to correlate intellectual work with the need to impart skills and instrumental literacy to students who are in their own way asking to be clients of the system.

The students become employable migrants. We know little about these students, but we know at least that they are not allowed to plagiarize. We watch the barely employed sessionals who work door-to-door hoping to be invited into the meritocracy. These two anxieties that define academia in a mass-market university do not counter the mercantile interests as the basic influence on the university, but anxiety about mass culture is assimilated into it.¹² The bourgeoisie, following the Kantian ideal of *Bildung*, translates the Enlightenment into the separation of intellectual and manual labour. Time management separates the two; the university has no way of solving the separation except through the technological forms of abstraction that have become central to the spectacle of commodity formation and the ecstasy of the fear of not keeping up. The conditioning of the university as one of a number of abject institutions leaves *Bildung* as the self-determination of freedom behind in the dust heaps of history and as an archaic utopian project.¹³ This distances the Red Peters from their origins in culture.

12 My essay on utopian pedagogy is in *Utopian Pedagogy, Radical Experiments Against Neo-Liberal Globalization*. In that essay I refer to radical *Bildung's* potential in the classroom in the early days of a new university, even when the storms were brewing everywhere. Issues regarding academic controversies were discussed in the classroom and not just at meetings. Another missing element today is the continuing labour struggles of sessionals. Strikes at the time provided an opportunity for education to confront reality in regard to the professional behaviour of academics about meeting classes and crossing picket lines. Of course today, with the technological fix, one may not have an actual classroom to picket or a course that is not a part of commodity production or course management. At the time the fear of violence was in the air about student movements and their characterization as strikers and anti-war agitators.

13 See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemol-*

III. Open Letter: Dear President N, I Read Your Homo Academicus in the Light of the University and the Art of Cynicism

One might pity an honest president whose frankness is captured by the business of the postuniversity.

In the 1980s a Simon Fraser university president objected to my arguing that new provincial centralizing policies would lead to a California-style mass multiversity—a term for one big university for one big developing society with one big budget. He denied it would. Today we do not need a multiversity because all universities are the same unless ratings are taken seriously. With different forms of prestige management they reach eagerly toward the society that gives them standing. Foundations, grants, and endowments are the business of academic business. This is the cynical new game that is reflected in a recent review article by a different former president of SFU. The review makes the argument that is essentially about managed cynicism with one important difference: he does not reflect on the illusion that presidential power can resist its own ideological position as a power broker for the restless cynicism of the university as ideology. One might pity an honest president whose frankness is captured by the business of the postuniversity in Michael Stevenson's review of Ross H. Paul's *Leadership under Fire: The Challenging Role of the Canadian University President*:

Paul's account of the changes and underlying tensions in Canadian university life touches all the obvious but vitally important issues: the pressure for growth and accessibility coupled to declining real per capita grant funding for enrolment; the anonymity, bureaucratization and managerialism that size, complexity, and unsustainable financing entail; and the increasingly instrumental interests of government and business in the university's contribution to labour supply and the pressures of external and internal stakeholders for transparency and accountability in the uses of public money ... the tensions around academic freedom produced by the increasing social diversity of the academic community ... the increasing corporatization of the university; the undermining of collegial relations and the souring of labour relations ... the never-ending demand for and cost of new technologies;... for institutional differentiation, internal structural adjustment

ogy: "Each step of emancipation is due to the directly social capacity of capital, to its nature as social power in private hands" (177). Private hands here means those who control the logic of production control the gap between rich and poor, opulence and poverty.

and retrenchment; and the pressures to increase tuition fees, research overheads and external fundraising and the increasingly competitive environment for such funding.... There is little here of the blood and guts promised in the military metaphor of the title.... On the fiscal pressures and retrenchment which have been such a depressing part of that experience across this country.

This reads like a cynical litany of all the in-built contradictions of the modern university in regard to the incapacity of intellectual work to manage the contradictions of how capital works in building ideological institutions: Where is the analysis?

The continuation of a long series of Taylorized crises that began in the postwar years produced a pattern of chronic crises of accumulation and economic collapses throughout the various sectors of the economy and the nation that became endemic to neo-liberal governance. The state's involvement is complex because the Keynesian surplus model and the techno-Fordist model created by periods of boom and stagnation control the fate of the humanities, for without them as a screen memory for the humanities the university is just one more institution. The hidden message: capital creates the cynical critical intelligentsia at the top of the power-broker heap that knows what is going on but tells only a partial story to the public. To speak this in public should make headlines. It is buried in the academic trade newspaper. The professoriate, the most privileged class and the essence in the Hegelian sense of the spirit of ideology of reality, are part of this malaise of institutions, and that message is played out in Kafka's Red Peter. The review speaks for itself: the university as an institution of cynical reason can do little more than adapt and conform, while struggling to maintain its dominant role as an instrument of culture-building based on neo-liberal technocratic veneration of itself. The presidential helicopter view of the university tells us something of a future battleground that will not change. Big fish eat little fish. The humanities fight for a share of surplus value that can be retranslated into the technological fix and become assimilated into the drive to collective existence that, when combined with technical planning, produces a particular kind of instrumental cynicism that cannot resist mirroring the demands of the marketplace.

It is no longer possible to demand that such a history show an awareness of the complex *inner structure* of a radical *Bildung*, with alternative conceptions that differ in the extent to which they can actually describe the power and the powerlessness of being an academic. The frank cynicism of a Red Peter would have to speak the truth in public, not through

platitudinous axioms about “excellence” and “research driven” on the one hand and increased demand for online learning on the other. Combine the stereotype of research as “cutting edge,” with the fear of the shadow of “sixties radicalism,” and Marx’s 18th *Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* appears on the horizon. Behind the back of this history of powerlessness we see the wandering of homo academicus’ failure to historicize the university to the public as a cynical institution.

iv. Open Letter to Georg Simmel, or the Wandering of the Academic Souls of Students, Faculties, and the Strangers Within

The great sociologist Georg Simmel was deprived of a permanent position in Berlin. His work could not be placed. He wrote many essays grounded in Nietzschean frankness about the burden of culture, including a study of Rembrandt, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer. In regard to his struggle not to adapt to cynical reason Simmel wrote that

wandering is the liberation from every given point in space and time yet its cultural alienating spatial inner world governs our conceptual thinking ... the conceptional opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the “stranger” presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics. This phenomenon too, however, reveals that spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations. The stranger ... not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself... Although some quantities of them characterize all relationships, a *special* proportion and reciprocal tension produce the particular, formal relation to the “stranger.” (143–44)¹⁴

14 Here is not the place to follow the critique of Simmel’s view of urban life and the loss of the power of *Bildung* and his sympathy for the newly invisible in the cities brought to the surface of the streets in the work of Siegfried Kracauer’s work on film and the city. See Richard Sennett on Simmel in *The Conscience of the*

The humanities in the age of technical reproduction mediated by the intelligentsia wander postmodernly in Simmel's understanding of intellectual labour and "nearness and distance." We are both traders and alienated wanderers; we represent humanity as the middlemen. The urban and collective illusions of modernity begin the story of separation. The students are the future worker-middlemen and worker-middlewomen who come to study with us and learn what we know but who are in the present epoch ignorant of the history of the universities. They wander through the institutions carrying what Simmel calls the burden of culture: he asked with pathos, "How is Society Possible at All?" The redemptive idea of progress merges time, history, and political realities into a spectacle of learning. The city of learning marches into modernity and shines beacons of cynicism into the sky. The university is the simulacrum of the city estranged from itself. The university does not know how to designate the peculiar unity of its public position with its market power; the city and the university are composed of certain measures of nearness and distance; this is the market distanced from itself by the technological fix.

At the same time, modernity overvalued the cultural formations of *Bildung* as the heroic pathos of a culture that would produce surplus as the whole of the whole. Social contracts requiring compromises helped the social state to exist at all. In fact the Kantian work of Homo Faber that is so devoted to the historical understanding, or *Verstand*, that is *Bildung*, collapses reason into utilitarian purposeless purposiveness: the values exist independent of consequences which are the normless norms of frantic production. What Kant believes that we all desire, to find an ought that will transform historical purposelessness into its fulfilment over nature, and a radical form of will to autonomy, is embedded in its own bourgeois public sphere, that is the Digital University of Abstraction that has become *another separate institution*. It is the shadow reality of the objectlessness of *Bildung*, much like television, the press, special interest groups and political parties, parliaments, high commissions, armies, and stock exchanges. The public sphere is musical chairs of publically supported education, public and endowed chairs, and the legal system that makes the university an arm of the state. The neo-liberal corporate structures and think tanks are fused into a general concept of the public sphere. The

Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities, 148–49. The university is part of the urban setting in which we live out the collective delusions of capitalism and create "an intimate absence, of untouchableness. This is our experience of the sublime" (Sennett 117).

university cynically pretends *to be* the overriding public sphere that runs parallel to these competing fields. It lives as the abstract transcendent idea but is exploited by the interests contained within each sphere of domination. It is the ideological expression of the combined organized sectors of the productive public sphere. Any other sphere, regardless of its cultural function, must be constituted as nonpublic, a byproduct of capital. At the same time the university magnetizes anything into its Wal-Mart marketplace to be captured as research material. Those are also spatial spheres: libraries, archives, museums, and studios belonging to what is understood as the classical public sphere that are now reflected in the state or the governing institutions through the anxious dispersals of money and the new regulatory censorship of course objectives. The cry about the loss of, or decline of, a classical bourgeoisie that carried the promise of *Bildung* not only carries the sounds of crying for tradition. Behind the cries about the loss of literacy, or the rise of barbarism, or the disfiguring of artistic forms by avant-garde movements, is the lack of the realization that the university is the ideological face of the social and that the university is the cultural arm of the marketplace: in Simmel's sense of place, a noplacement of the coordinates of strangers.

Fate, as Adorno and Alasdair MacIntyre have put it, is the pathos of the humanities in the university. The aura of the university lies in its playing out of its identification with capitalism. The university cannot take any decision counter to the demands of capital.¹⁵

v. Letter to Walter Benjamin's Destructive Character and Modernizing Elites—Where Are You Hiding in the Postuniversity?

“The process of the atrophy of experience is already underway in manufacturing. In other words, it coincides, in its beginnings, with the beginnings of commodity production.” (Benjamin *Arcades Project* 804)

Whether or not one finds a piously placed departmental identity in a mass-produced university depends not just on the mantra cries of interdisciplinarity but on the will to face the Kantian question of the internalized image of “man” when the social state becomes the capital state; this is so even as the old *Bildungs*-rich Kantians could not get beyond the essence

15 See Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Idea of the Educated Public,” in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*. I am grateful to Murray Ross for pointing out MacIntyre's essay, which parallels and yet differs from Adorno's in ways that I cannot go into here.

as the highest form of religious moral self-determination buttressed by the Christian Neoplatonic variations of this flight from history into *Bildung*. The postuniversity materializes the cult value of culture branded by the Enlightenment as the reasonable sphere in which all participate. The danger: it makes the Enlightenment a form of cult value because following the demands of market values pushes us to pre-given goals, determined now by the idea of salvation of the present by the nexus of knowledge and power that leads to another superstition, that the university is the only location of function and value reproducible by technology. So the university intelligentsia works very hard to regulate against enfeebling its already weakened defenses against humiliation and the loss of the value of intellectual work. The drive to link intellectual work to private property represented by corporate values extends all domains of intellectual labour to the outside even when regulated inside. If one objects, one is made to feel disrespectful toward altruistic and philanthropically derived money, the great humiliating material power: to be ungrateful and deride money would be a joyously mordant anarchist cynical moment to infer that, no matter where money comes from, one should take it and run. But that would be cynical. The shadow of the object of resistance comes again and again to the University of Cynical Reason, and we believe that the documents of barbarism can always be “cleared away” by the age itself. But Heideggerean clearing the spaces does not clear the air saturated with cynical reason. That is, the atrophy of fear of decline that is at the heart of cynicism.

VI. Letter to Red Peter: Modernizing Elites and Negotiating Creolizers: Dear Red Peter, What Kind of University of the Humane Sciences Would You Like to Lecture or Study In?

A conference in Liblice, Czechoslovakia, in 1963 opposed the murderous politics of Stalinist cynicism. Held in the name of redeeming the lost Kafka, the political philosophers rehabilitated—habilitated!—Kafka’s writing from its Stalinist and Fascist exile. Eduard Goldstücker and Ernst Fischer created a conference where Kafka could be extricated from Soviet state-sponsored cynicism. Goldstücker and Fischer later write about the struggle to avoid identification with the aggressors.¹⁶ Followers of Kafka,

¹⁶ Goldstücker saw in the expansion of technology confirmation of Kafka becoming a central figure in the battle for political *Bildung*: See “Eduard Goldstücker” in *The Politics of Culture*, 279–86. Fischer wrote in his autobiography that had he read Kafka before his life in the Comintern he would have understood how the Stalinist bureaucracy had operated on his conscience; it was only much later that he read Kafka and *The Castle* (299).

both had only transient identities in universities. Their project was history without cynicism, or how to explain how institutions could wander and then die with the speed of light. The speed of change measured their fate and destiny and created the wandering of the institutions that were also in exile between the wars. Their battles are inspiring. Then the institutions learned again to open doors to exiles, immigrants, outcasts and other border crossers, and returnees from east and west, north and south in order to face the cold war of the institutionalized towers of Babel. Persecution on the basis of political exclusion, ethnic identity, occupation, education, religion, and those who survived economic collapse or war disasters was integrated into postwar survival *Bildung*. This wandering of the peoples became the fate in the present, but our cultural techno-cold war ensures that techno-panic will become the cult value for the future generations in the already overwhelmed poor regions of the globe, including those recently loosened from the megastates in Europe. The new cold war is the mystification of *Bildung* within the techno-overdetermined disciplines that appeal to the mass-market student as clientele. The enlightenment-driven project of a democratic society produces a new gentry class governed by the neo-liberal hard goods commerce, technology, and global trading in this all-consuming process. A neo-European or capitalist-surplus citizenship, symbolic of capital expansion, can no longer be administered by a welfare state culture; education is now within the command economy that can determine what and who is educable and how we measure competence. Who comes in from the cold?

Cynicism and disemployment are the obverse of the cult value of the technology—based digital fixes that overdetermine the economy by capturing those who are not yet integrated technologically as they wish they were: completely. The techno-rational state cannot survive unless at the expense of the students as clientele so long as the crisis of capital does not, in its most inward nature of instrumental reason, completely overwhelm the state; and in this sense the university of cynicism experiences its own failure to predict the future that cult value requires. The institution itself serves science and technology as the dominant form of the self-consciousness of its own project, which can only be rescued from their twinning when the principles and concept of modernity can themselves be brought into view through the lenses of the cult of cynicism.

An Untimely Postscript to Red Peter’s Lecture to the Academy: The University of Exile

Predictions that will come true: twenty-five-billion people and going up—Dacca, Lagos, Karachi, Mexico City, Tokyo. No New York, Berlin, Rome, or London. No modernism of the neighborhood or the abstract made livable. No human rights can be fully imagined to make rights visible, whether in surrealism, the unconscious, the organization of work around meaningful time, or to be endured by the chronically bad time of the nomads in the cities or the indigenous peoples the world over in every corner. An aura of anarchism waxes and wanes in the optics of a rights-based vision of human relationships in spite of cynical reason. At one time, artists and humanists were thinking that an anarcho-communitarian, socialist alternative could extend the range of *Bildung* that taught into and showed where they were—the enclaves of survival against systemic delusions. We were reminded of the times when regeneration, revolution, reform, and renewal struggled against ideas of historical decline, degeneracy, disease, displacement, defeat, and devolution: the *re- words* against the *de- words*. Now it is money, not the transformation of the idea of the public that was the great historical movement. Why would Simmel *not* write a book on the meaning of money?

Today we believe we live fearfully in some bridging time, waiting out the baffling illusions that are prepared for us by the money economy. The university is the monument to the technological future of a flight without end; it lives in the present—a place that mocks time, a place of frozen time inside and outside of the techno-ecstasy of the stockpile of nuclear weapons and the greenhouse circulation of debris.

Higher learning is yet part of the lower learning of the destructive character of the Hobbesian mediated power echelons grounded in competition, bureaucracies, and the hope for mass education. These are for ends that the university cannot control. Our powerfully loud institutions only weakly acknowledge a rights-based value system of social justice, inspiring Paul Virilio to coin the term “university of disaster” in his book of that title. He means that the latent cynicism of university culture exists in and through the desire to be all-powerful; yet it is cynically powerless in what it communicates to the public. The provocation of a university of disaster means that the entire globe has in his Menippean, Karl Krausian critique become a “university”—a quintessential world of a techno-hysterical attachment-psychosis to knowledge production that faces to the informed cynic, the natural anarchist in us, who sees that the crisis of

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production always acts against the formative aspects of something like but not ever really contained in the duplicitous word “community,” sometimes called invisible social capital.

The university of disaster is based upon and nurtures itself in the uncertainty of its own future. While this gives many of the privileged “us” the chance to be part of an evolving culture of knowledge that can recognize the many informed cynical standpoints against the deterioration of now archaic forms of *Bildung* that expand into a merchandising of knowledge, our standpoint, our new cold war of education versus technology, we may still follow Red Peter’s cynicism into the Benjaminian “Theses on the Philosophies of History” against the historicism of the Hobbesian leviathan that will eat its children and then in the ways of Saturn chew and spit them out. We do not know how or where students of the future will find the breathing holes, the townsites, the enclaves, the mentors, the studios or social movements, the indigenous peoples created anew every time the market expands, or what kinds of poems they will write, or what they will learn to resist, or the art they will create. But we hope that in time Saturn, the sick and raging cynic, will become nauseated and spit out his creatures; yet he may then create a prosthetic appliance to replace his stomach. Then the angel of history will remember where it is and will flee by Saturn with the speed of light. Then the messages will no longer be “history out of season” even if the messengers will be.

Postscript: To Red Peter Adapted from Italo Calvino’s “Open Letter to Himself” from the Final Page of *Invisible Cities*

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno that we live in every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (165)

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