

ON THE 'DEATH' OF THE UNIVERSITY

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With all due (and sincere) respect to Couldry and McRobbie's attempt at provocation: ideas do not die, nor can they be granted death warrants. The metaphor is false. Instead: ideas, being materially immaterial, can be forgotten. And, sometimes worse: they can be assigned false histories; can become buried in confusion. Hence the real danger of false metaphors. At the same time: ideas can be rediscovered, rescued, reconfigured.

The neo-liberalization of the university (of which the recent measures in the UK are but one example) does not represent 'a death'. It does, however, signal a transformation in a particular institutionalized configuration (or, assemblage, or gathering) between: students, professors, and the State (and books, and language, and buildings, etc.). A configuration that has only really existed with such integrity since the nineteenth century founding of the University of Berlin. And one which has only recently (in the twentieth century) become so naturally identified with some thing called 'the university'.

Farther back: 'the university' used to refer to something much lighter, much different. In its earliest configuration in Western Europe - in thirteenth century Bologna, for instance - the university (or, *universitas*) was intended to represent the linguistic-affective-economic relation between masters, students, and booksellers/publishers, who rented out spaces for their activities throughout the city. The university was a mobile relation. The university, when it went on strike, would actually leave the city.

It was only as a result of the Papacy's (i.e. the nascent State's) attempt to quell the republicanism of Bologna in the sixteenth century that the first centralized university structure, the *Archiginnasio*, was built in the city. It could be argued that it was from this point forward that an alternative idea of the university, an

alternative configuration, began to circulate and to become historically productive - one in which 'the university' was associated with a particular set of buildings, at a particular site. Concrete, immobile. And, significantly: dependent upon the State (for funding, for legitimacy, for 'chairs', etc.).

Now, in 2010, as neo-liberalism completes its renovation of liberalism (i.e. as capitalism aligns itself with a new political handmaiden - or, better, palliative-care nurse - capable of assisting with inevitably shortened crisis-cycles), the State demands a new configuration in its relationship with students and professors (and the city, and technology, and the labour market, etc).

This is not a moral issue. It is historical. So: rather than bemoan the attitude of the neo-liberal State to higher education, rather than try to shame its functionaries for betraying the liberal promise of the university (as if the liberal promise wasn't itself already a betrayal-in-waiting), why not begin to acknowledge the possibility, in specific reference to 'the university', of what Paolo Virno refers to as a 'public sphere without the State'?

A configuration of 'the university' in which the State plays a very different role: the imagining of this possibility need not belong exclusively to those invested in a neo-liberal future. And yet: presently, the alternative that is offered from within the university is one of 'resistance'. Of pushing back. Holding the line. So that some thing towards which we feel loyalty - 'the university' - doesn't 'die'. This reaction is doomed from the start. False metaphors cut short the (quite material) labour of imagination. For the imagination needn't simply negate. It can also remember. And learn: not least of which, from past configurations. Provided that it doesn't get tripped up on poorly formulated language. From which we get: bad poetry, false metaphors, flat protests.

While, granted, 'the imagination' cannot provide immediate solutions to very pressing material concerns (such as unemployment, higher debt loads, inaccessibility, militarization of curriculum) - and to suggest as such would be truly flip - it can help us to articulate and remember and act in accordance with the fact that 'the university' is not a factory that we wish to take over, to occupy, to control. The university has only been a place, a set of buildings, since the sixteenth century. Instead: if anything (and I hope I'm not proving universally presumptuous here), the idea of the university that is worth defending represents a certain, and

certainly political, organization of curiosity. The State (whether Papal, liberal, or neo-liberal) has no monopoly over curiosity as a natural (and renewable) resource. Quite the opposite actually. The State needs the Curious. And the Curious may yet figure out how to strike in accordance with this quite material fact.

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