

The University Must Be Defended: Collateral Damage, part 37¹

“The question or questions that have to be asked are: ‘What types of knowledge are you trying to disqualify when you say that you are a science? ...What theoretico-political vanguard are you trying to put on the throne in order to detach it from all the massive, circulating and discontinuous forms that knowledge can take?’ [... Because] I see you assigning to those who speak that discourse the power-effects that the West (has) had, ever since the Middle Ages...”

Michel Foucault
Society Must be Defended²

Does History have an “Inevitable” Direction?

The short answer is: No.

The longer answer is: No – but it’s complex.

On the 10th of November, amidst a throng of over 50,000 peaceful protestors, angry at the violent cuts made to education, and the strong sense of betrayal suffusing every step along the winding march to Westminster, the Secretary for Business, Vince Cable, was reported to have surveyed the moment with this particularly weathered observation, “The roads to Westminster are littered with the skid-marks of political parties changing direction.”³ Would this to

¹Paper given on the occasion of *Surplus to Requirements?* A 3-day Exhibition and Symposium at The Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, Mar 2-4, 2011. The title is a play on Foucault’s well-known course, *Society Must be Defended*, given in weekly intervals at the Collège de France, from 7 Jan 1976 – 17 Mar 1976. To the students of today, and to Michel Foucault of yesterday, this presentation is dedicated.

² Michel Foucault, “7 January 1976,” **Society Must be Defended**, Trans David Macey, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 30.

³See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/10/student-protest-fees-violent> Also more than 50,000 attended with calm debate, discussion and

be an accurate accounting of events! For in truth, the only skid-mark visible on that cold autumn day was that of his political party and their wildly abrupt U-turn against their own Manifesto pledges, hammered home to the Electorate just prior to their somewhat patronising 'this hurts us more than it hurts you' deal with the Conservatives and resulting removal of New Labour from government.

(Two adages immediately spring to mind: First: when dining with the Devil, sup with a long spoon; and second: Power corrupts; absolute power's kinda nice).

In order to answer the question (does History have an 'inevitable' direction, which, in the present circumstance could be translated as the 'inevitable' destruction of academic freedom targeted at the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in the name of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) and 'exceptional economic times'), I would like to posit here, today, three points and one plea.

Point No. 1. It must be emphasised at the outset: *protest works* – our times *do* change as a result of protest – it is just that protest always exacts, on the one hand, a price, whilst simultaneously, on the other, requires a flexibility, a kind of leap into the unknown, or, as Wittgenstein might say, a throw from the saddle. The problem then becomes not a question of whether protests work, but how does one deal with its 'price': ie, the removal of, say, a real chunk of flesh – beatings, for example, kettling, unfair or ruined reputations, unemployment, angry colleagues, bad faith – something that many of you experienced first hand during the last several demonstrations and protest marches. A price is paid: this is true whether or not the protests are peaceful or violent or hilarious or aesthetically pleasing, or a million strong or just a tiny, but critical mass: if for 'some reason' (a reason to which I will return momentarily) the protest slices into the raw nerve of established power, sparks are going to fly. And if sparks fly, then there is always the possibility that an opening will take place. The question is: what kind of opening? And for how long? And at what price?

general well-being, this demonstration was reported as 'violent', as were the subsequent peaceful demonstrations. Kettling became the order of the day, quite literally.

Point no. 2: One of the reasons protest works today, in *our* culture, at *this* time – and, for that matter, one of the reasons it might not work today, in *our* culture, at *this* time (it's the same reason) – is because protest is an effect of and, simultaneously, both a nodal point and line of flight for, power. This is not to suggest an overarching, ahistorical, homogeneous nature to all 'protest', not to mention, power. Rather, the reverse: it is to emphasise the heterogeneic/multi-versal contingencies that coalesce to form our present-tense 'positions' that give those positions their sense of being, meaning, urgency, timing. This is a 'present-tense-position-here-right-now' that itself owes less to a clear demarcation of good guys v bad, friend v enemy (though, this, too, is certainly part of the picture). It is rather a synthetic map or plan – a kind of cartography in the best sense of 'graphing the mark' – multi-dimensional singularities, whose tracings, in the form of protests (and not just protests – Research for example), can and often do challenge the social structures and cultural fabrics, which seem to be – and certainly present themselves for all intents and purposes as being – 'permanent'.

But if today's world, our world, our contemporary social world is this richly discursive, stratified environ – a strangely codified 'plane of immanence' – then the question becomes not whether one is dealing with the 'inevitable' unfolding of an already given end point (called 'History'). Nor whether (as politicians for the last forty years seem to suggest,) we are living in 'exceptional times' or as Agamben so richly frames it, as 'a state of exception'.⁴ The question becomes: how can pluralised strategies with no specific Leader or Father or Head keep the social 'open'?

Point no. 3. In the 16thc Niccòlo Machiavelli under the patronage of the Medici family, dedicated a slim volume on how to deal with power to 'those not in the know'.⁵ Entitled *The Prince*, those 'not in the know' included the rising mercantile classes, not to mention the very family who had hired him. In it, he wrote two things of

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Kevin Attell, trans., University of Chicago Press 2005).

⁵ Niccòlo Machiavelli, (1505/1515) "Chapter XVIII: Concerning the Way a Prince should keep faith," *The Prince*, Trans George Bull (London: Penguin, 2005).

particular note for today's discussion: first, that in order to lead, one must know how to be both 'man' and 'beast' ('man' in the most generous sense of the term: ie, as intellectual, as sensitive, as reasonable and intuitive; beast in the least generous sense of term: ie, as barbaric, ruthless, relentless, mean-spirited, devouring). He coupled this with the most famous remark of all: that society always operated on the basis of leaders and led (and if by chance or circumstance it didn't, then a 'true leader' should, with all the intelligence and force at their disposal, make that 'leaders/led' bifurcation happen). This, he remarked, was the 'first law' of a political science just then being born.

Today, we are in a world where (possibly because of the digital age, possibly because of the structure of 'Scientific Revolutions' – to make a passing nod to Kuhn – or possibly for some other reason altogether), this kind of bifurcation is not the primary rule of sovereignty.⁶ The primary rule of contemporary sovereignty is the relentless information economy and its infinite capacity to produce mass – a massification, which may – or may not – 'depending' on a variety of factors, non of which can be 'accidental', engenders a return to a 'leaders/led' power bloc.

To be as clear as possible, this 'return' *requires* a return to a specific kind of political machination, of the right, of the centre and/or of the left, to effect a juridical rule of Law. Or perhaps to put this clearer still and therewith say a slightly different point: at the moment, all political leaders prefer to have a leaders/led environment as the primary feature of governance rather than some kind of discursive 'plane of immanence'; otherwise it's just too bloody difficult. The move to put into place certain strictures, starting in commercial environments at the outset, then moving into the varying crevices of society, tend toward a kind of Corporate/corporatist hierarchy, a kind of molecular segmentation, quietly imposing/ implanting itself within any given social structure. Foucault has called this 'the continuation of war by political means'; Deleuze and Guattari name it

⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), (Chicago Press: 2010). Kuhn states that the genesis for the main thesis in the book began to percolate in 1947 whilst still a graduate student dealing with the twin events of Einstein's theory of relativity and the atom bomb.

‘the war machine’.⁷ We might simply call it “The Browne Report”, the chipping away and final abolition of the Research itself, specifically directed against the Arts and Humanities, but problematic for all disciplines for which experimentation and leaping into the unknown is key.⁸ And that includes all aspects of the arts, sciences and of life, commercial, non-profit or otherwise.

Whatever its called, its been going on for a number of years, before the ‘Con-Dems’ coalition, before New Labour, possibly even before Thatcher and certainly much wider than the geo-political entity called ‘the United Kingdom’. But what makes this time period, indeed the last few months, most threatening is not just the openly disingenuous approach to what can be called ‘education’; it is not just the rise in fees that threaten to make accessibility impossible for all but the very well off; it is not just the appalling destruction of Arts and Humanities in the name of Science (or as it is most recently put as the STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths).

It is, to top it all off, the ‘rational’ entrenchment toward corporatism and the self-directed return to a either/or sliced environment, while at the same time, promoting the homogeneity and empty massification of the social. And it is *that* combination, which poses the most deadly threat of all.

Plea.

We could wax lyrical about the ‘idea’ of the University from the last 800 years onwards. We could decry the corporatist leaning to which this Institution is now exposed in full fury. The threat to reduce by 100% funding for all subjects linked to the arts, humanities and social sciences continues without abatement. We must not give up

⁷ Foucault, ‘7 January 1976’, and further extended in whole of the following lecture, ‘14 January 1967’, **Society Must be Defended**, pp. 18-19 and 23-42, respectively. See also Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, “*Micro politics and segmentarity*,” in **a thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia**, (London: Athlone Press, 1988/1999), p. 215.

⁸ Lord Browne, *Sustaining a Securable Future for Higher Education in England: An Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance in England*. (London: 12 October 2010) <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/>

or, quoting Foucault one last time, become wildly disheartened, cynical “even though the thing we are fighting is abominable. One does not have to be sad to be a militant.” To this day, the University remains a strategic site of knowledge and, therewith of power, which, in so remaining not only re-presents the ‘to know’ at its most physical, rigorous, playful, imaginative, creative, carnal, sense of the term; it does so without closure or homogenising the multiplicities churning out by dint of the digital age. It is *this* University that must be defended.

Bio:

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