The University as a Place of Possibilities: Scholarship as *dissensus*

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The university today makes increasingly visible its design in its strategic plans and policies, built spaces and pedagogy, and knowledge management. Yet there is much that remains invisible: affect, error, invention, idleness, sharing, even just thinking, talking and walking – thankfully, perhaps, given the tendency of that which is visible to become subject to measure in the university today. This unseen critical-creative surplus suggests to us *skholè* (Greek: "leisure" or "play"; "study" or "learned discussion"), or scholarship, as the raison d'être for higher education. *Skholè* is not the scholasticism of the drive to systematise knowledge that characterised the scholarly teaching of medieval academics (Le Goff, 1993). Nor is it the scholarship of the drive to demonstrate "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman, 1987) that characterises that of academics today, namely, the "scholarship of teaching" (Boyer, 1990). Instead, it is the scholarship that Plato (see Plato, 2000, pp. 246; 536d-537a) calls the *spoudaiôs paidia* (Greek: "serious play") that informs *paideia* ("education"). For us, the idea of *skholè*/scholarship as serious play can serve to ground the university as a place given over to the free play of possibilities, a place of "*dissensus*" (Rancière, 2010). To speak of the university this way is to conjoin the medieval idea of the university as a *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a "community of teachers and scholars" (Denifle & Châtelain, 1887, p. 77), and the "community of dissensus" that was Bill Readings' hopeful prognosis for the university in *The University in Ruins* (Readings, 1996, p. 190). Nonetheless, the university today often seems far from a place for the free play of possibilities – or perhaps its possibilities are just invisible to eyes accustomed to measure. How did it come to be seen this way?

The university today

It was a ruinous critique of the university today by a collective of students and staff of higher education institutions in Leeds called the Really Open University that occasioned this reflection.

Figure 1. What is a Really Open University? Really Open University, 2010c. Used under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License.

Here are the ROU's "Four Theses on the Invisible University" (2010a):

1. The university is a machine in the network of capitalism and empire.
2. There is no crisis. It is all business as usual.
3. The university cannot be saved.
4. Defect to the invisible university!

For us, these theses suggest four (rhetorical) questions. The first: *is not the university of a piece with the global economy?* Denizens of universities everywhere reckon daily with the commodification of knowledge and the vocationalisation of education, supposedly to repay the debt that they owe to the state – or, increasingly, to the banks that own states – for their survival. As a result, universities are increasingly beholden to transnational capital, as they once were to national capital. The second question is implied by the first: *has not the university always served outside interests?* The idea of the university as once

having been a law unto itself is mostly fantasy. Before the university served transnational capital (as the neoliberal "university of excellence"), it served the nation state (as the Kantian "university of reason" and the Humboldtian "university of culture"), and before that, monarchs or the church (the terms are from Readings, 1996). For it to serve some master is just business as usual – a measure of the indebtedness, we would say, that marks the university as a "parasitic" institution (after Serres, 1982), one hosted by its master grudgingly because it is disruptive, viz., in the language of the university of excellence, "critical" and "innovative." As for the third question: rather than conceding that the university cannot be taken back or transformed, as the ROU would have it, *can we not occupy the visible university in the name of an invisible one?* To do so is for us dependent on the following, final question: *can we not return to the idea of scholarship as the principle of an invisible university?* Like the ROU, we would argue that a new community must be built (albeit on a venerable model): a *universitas scholarium*, or community of scholars. As the ROU's "Charter" (2010b) contends, the university should be

- "communitarian" – because "the university is the people in it, not the buildings or even the institution";
- "autonomous," or disruptive – insofar as its indebtedness allows, we would note;
- "open," or offering free access for students and to information; and
- "invisible," or not identified with the institution or its buildings.

The first three conditions seem clear, but how can a university be invisible?

Invisibility

From 2010-2013, in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements worldwide, a number of collectives looked to create "para-universities" independent of or parallel to existing universities – no doubt influenced by the anarchism of The Invisible Committee's *The Coming Insurrection* (2009), in which it was declared that

"organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves" (p. 15). Those we followed most closely included the ROU in Leeds (see ROU, 2010a/b), the University for Strategic Optimism (USO; see University of Strategic Optimism, 2012) in London, and WATU (We Are the University) in New Zealand (see WATU, 2011), with which we were affiliated. (There is a long tradition of para-universities in Britain since the Renaissance, one being the "Invisible College" of Robert Boyle and others, which evolved into the Royal Society of London.)

Figure 2. *The Invisible College of the Rosy Cross Fraternity.* T. Schweighart, 1604, via Wikimedia Commons. Used under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License.

All argued for a university not identified with an institution or its buildings, invisible to the strategic plans and policies, built spaces and pedagogy, and knowledge management that characterise the university of excellence. Thus, the ROU (2010b) conceived of its invisible university as insurgent: it is "[i]nvisible the way a guerrilla movement melts back into, and is, part of the landscape." Similarly, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

(2013) describe their invisible university as illicit. It involves a class of subversive intellectuals drawn from the

> [m]aroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 30).

These "maroons" (fugitive slaves), some "tenured" and some not, work in the university and partake of "the outcast mass intellectuality of the undercommons" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 33). They are tasked "to sneak into the university and steal what [they] can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, […] to be *in* but not *of*" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 26; our emphases). They can be neither *for* the university, which is to endorse the universalist Enlightenment project of the "State," nor *against* it, which is to be co-opted by the existing state's project to replace it with teaching institutions (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 33). For this reason, Harney and Moten abjure critique and advocate "study," a kind of scholarship that involves "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three," a "common intellectual practice" that can take place anywhere (Shukaitis, 2012).Their university is invisible to the university of excellence and, like those of the para-universities, not identified with it because its class of subversive intellectuals identifies with a tradition of "black study" that is independent of the university and identified with "the surround," that is, "the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 17).

How do such ideas of the invisible university fit with more familiar ideas of scholarship – and how do the latter fit with our idea of *skholè*/scholarship as serious play? In *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990, p. 15), Ernest Boyer defines – and calls for the rehabilitation of – scholarship, which he argues "in earlier times referred to a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the

ability to think, communicate, and learn." Nowadays, he has it, "Basic research has come to be viewed as the first and most essential form of scholarly activity, with other functions flowing from it" (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). Better to capture the scope of academic work, Boyer offers a descriptive typology of scholarship as practised: the scholarships of discovery ("original research"), integration ("looking for connections"), application ("building bridges between theory and practice"; in Boyer 1996, it is called "the scholarship of engagement") and, most importantly for him, teaching ("communicating one's knowledge effectively to students"). Boyer's call for the rehabilitation of scholarship has resonated in universities in three unexpected ways. First, scholarly teaching, in the work of teaching fellows and other adjunct teaching roles, has been devalued to teaching informed by current research in the discipline of the teacher and in how to teach in that discipline (for the "demise" of scholarship, see Rolfe, 2013). Secondly, "truly" scholarly teaching has been reframed as teaching that takes itself as an object of research (Andresen, 2000). Boyer's text has thus become the reference point for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or SoTL, in the US and elsewhere (see Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997) – somewhat oddly, given that is doesn't say anything about what such research into teaching might look like. In our institution, teaching fellows are increasingly advised (despite their positions being explicitly not research-required) to research their teaching and others' as a way to exhibit leadership in their discipline. Thirdly, and as a result of scholarly activity being reframed as research, research has come to dominate talk about scholarship: the four scholarships have been reconceived as research proper ("discovery"), synthesizing research ("integration"), applying or sharing research ("application" or "engagement"), and researching teaching ("teaching"). (Research dominates scholarship even in the case of Lewis Elton's [2005] argument for scholarship as the bridge between research and teaching.) This is a long way from scholarship as "creative work" (Boyer, 1990, p. 15).

To think more "creatively," or constructively, about scholarship, it is necessary to consider Michael Oakeshott's scholarly institution in "The Idea of a University" (2003, originally published in 1950) and Pierre Bourdieu's idea of scholarship in "The Scholastic Point of View" (1998, originally published in 1989; see also Bourdieu, 2000a

and 2002b). Both conceive of scholarship as immune from worldly concerns. Oakeshott describes the university as "a corporate body of scholars [who] live in permanent proximity to one another" – and, thus, "a home of learning" (2003: 24) that is marked by a "conversation" about "how to pursue learning" (2003: 26). For him, "[t]he characteristic gift of a university is the gift of an interval" (2003: 28):

> Here is a break in the tyrannical course of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon the world and upon oneself without the sense of an enemy at one's back or the insistent pressure to make up one's mind; a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution. (2003: 28)

Though we like Oakeshott's evocation of a sense of possibility for the university here, we would contend that his "doctrine of [an] interim" granted to students supposedly without regard to "pre-existing privilege" or "the necessity of earning [a] living" cannot hold up in the era of student debt (2003, p. 29). Others would assert (we would not) that his injunctions to universities to "beware of the patronage of [the 'real'] world" and of the "ulterior purpose" of "training [students] to fill some niche in society" (Oakeshott, 2003, p. 30) sound predictably unworldly. In his view of the university, Oakeshott silently evokes the discussion of *skholè* in Plato's *Theaetetus* (2014, pp. 50–55; 172c–176a). Here Socrates distinguishes unworldly philosophers "brought up [or 'educated'] in freedom and leisure" (Plato, 2014, p. 54; 175d–e) from those more worldly citizens– lawyers are his prime example – who are made "boorish and uneducated" by a "lack of leisure" (Plato, 2014, p. 53; 174d–e). The latter frequent the *agora* (Greek: "marketplace") and might as well be slaves. (Plato was in the habit of disparaging the Sophists for peddling their litigious brand of philosophy in the agora.) This passage is the locus classicus for the pun in Greek on *skholè* as both "leisure" or "play" and "study" or "learned discussion" to which most definitions of scholarship are indebted. For Plato, as for his student Aristotle(see Aristotle, 1996, p. 178; 1329a1), *skholè* came to mean freedom from a less important activity, namely, work (Greek: *ascholia*, or "being not at leisure") in order to pursue a more important activity, namely, philosophy, which requires leisure (Greek:

skholè). Those who must live by their labour to provide their daily needs – as many students (law students included) do today – can have no *skholè*.

Because of his view of scholarship, Oakeshott assumes that the university cannot be worldly. Bourdieu similarly sees the "scholastic point of view" as "a prolongation of [the] originary (bourgeois) experience of distance from the world and from the urgency of necessity." He asks after the "social conditions of possibility" (Bourdieu 1998: 129) of such a point of view – and of the "unconscious dispositions [and] unconscious theses" (ibid.) that it conditions. He concludes that "the condition of possibility of everything that is produced in fields of cultural production is [the] bracketing of temporal emergency and of economic necessity" (ibid.). But because of the dominance of this unworldly precondition of "the fields of cultural production" from law to philosophy, he argues, scholarship has a "monopoly of the universal … promoting the advancement of truths and values that are held, at each moment, to be universal, indeed eternal" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 135), which has conditioned all the works – and the world – such fields have generated. The "unconscious universalizing" (Bourdieu, 2000b, p. 49) that marks these works and this world produces the three forms of what he calls "scholastic fallacy": the epistemological, moral and aesthetic universalism that ignores that these modes of reasoning are socially conditioned. For Bourdieu, then, *skholè* is "the condition for the academic exercise as a gratuitous game" (Bourdieu, 1998: 128) and, writ large, for "[t]he history of reason" (Bourdieu, 1998: 138).

What might Bourdieu mean by saying that *skholè* is "the condition for the academic exercise as a gratuitous game" (Bourdieu, 1998: 138)? To answer this question demands that we quote at length his description of the *spoudaiôs paidia* (Greek: "serious play") that he takes to inform the scholarly situation:

> The scholastic point of view is inseparable from the scholastic situation, a socially instituted situation in which one can defy or ignore the common alternative between playing (*paizein*), joking, and being serious (*spoudazein*) by playing seriously … busying oneself with problems that serious, and truly busy, people

ignore – actively or passively. *Homo scholasticus* or *homo academicus* is someone who can play seriously because his or her state (or State) assures her the means to do so, that is, free time, outside the urgency of a practical situation, the necessary competence assured by a specific apprenticeship based on *skholè*, and, finally but most importantly, the disposition … to invest oneself in the futile stakes, at least in the eyes of serious people, which are generated in scholastic worlds…. (1998: 128)

For Bourdieu, in short, *skholè* conditions the "disposition to play gratuitous games," namely, "the inclination and the ability to raise speculative problems for the sole pleasure of resolving them, and not because they are posed, often quite urgently, by the necessities of life" (Bourdieu, 1998: 128). Again, there is an echo of Plato's leisurely *skholè*.

What, we would ask, is there of politics – of the serious – in such an idea of *skholè*? And what is to be made of the fact, as Bourdieu (1998) argues, that "*skholè* [is] being monopolized by some today" (p. 135), such that it is "unevenly distributed across civilizations … and within our own societies, across social classes or ethnic groups" (p. 137)? Does this limit *skholè*/scholarship to a (white, upper-class) scholarly élite in the ("Western") university? How might it be seen as, first, neither independent of the institution and insurgent (the ROU) or illicit (Harney & Moten), nor dependent on the institution and immune from society (Oakeshott and Bourdieu); and, secondly, not the privilege of a scholarly élite (ditto)?

Possibility

For us, *skholè* must be grounded in the university as it is today, albeit in that part of it that is invisible. A university must remain a learning community and place, as Oakeshott (1989) argues (though he can imagine it only as a geographical place): "What distinguishes a university is … the pursuit of learning as a co-operative enterprise. […] A university, moreover, is a home of learning, a place where a tradition of learning is preserved and extended, and where the necessary apparatus for the pursuit of learning has been gathered together" (p. 97). This is why we would argue for the return of a medieval

idea of the university as a *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a "community of teachers and scholars" (Denifle & Châtelain, 1887, p. 77). But it must be a university (from Latin: *universitas*, "whole, aggregate") that is less a whole than an aggregate, a non-universalizing university that gives rise to what Readings (1996, p. 190) calls a "community of dissensus," of differences:

> Such a community, the community of dissensus that presupposes nothing in common, would not be dedicated either to the project of a full self-understanding (autonomy) or to a communicational consensus as to the nature of its unity. Rather, it would seek to make its heteronomy, its differences, more complex.

A university that "s[ought] to make its heteronomy, its differences, more complex," rather than seeking to play down differences through central planning, design and management, would be a more political – and more open – university, a place of dissensus rather than consensus.

Bourdieu goes some way toward an idea of the university as a place of dissensus. He maintains that the university status quo of *skholè* being monopolized by a scholarly élite can be overcome only by "working to universalize the conditions of access to universality" (1998, p. 137). By this, he means *not* that entry to the scholarly élite must be opened to all in society, but that the university must be defended as the "social condition" of a "struggle … for the legitimate monopoly over the universal" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 139): the university is that place that guarantees that consensus is contested. This, for us, is a disappointingly commonplace "realpolitik" solution, to use Bourdieu's term (1998, p. 139). Rancière goes further. To extrapolate from his discussion of the democratic school as "the paradoxical heir of the aristocratic *skholè*" in *On the Shores of Politics* (1995: 55), the university status quo can be disrupted only by making it "the site of a permanent negotiation of equality." The university would neither reproduce nor reduce inequality, whether that be "by virtue of the universality of the knowledge it imparts or … social levelling" (Rancière, 1995: 55). Instead, "by virtue of … a separation from productive

life," that is, by virtue of *skholè*, it allows for equality by opening to negotiation a multiplicity of political possibilities:

> for some it is the realization of equal citizenship, for others a means to social mobility and for yet others a right, independent of its actual use, be it successful or otherwise – a right which democracy owes to itself and to the wishes of its members, however indeterminate these may be. (Rancière, 1995: 55)

The university is a place of political possibilities – or, as Rancière would say, a place of many worlds. Rancière makes explicit the link between political possibilities and worlds. He grounds his politics in what he calls "aesthetics" (after the Greek *aisthesis*, "perception"), namely, "the system of *apriori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" (Rancière, 2006: 13). He argues that people perceive the world according to a certain "distribution [French: *partage*] of the sensible": "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière, 2006: 12). This "distribution of the sensible" thus determines both how the world is ordered and how it is partitioned. To take a straightforward example, the design of university buildings mirrors power relationships in the university: in the case of the University of Auckland Business School's iconic Owen G Glenn Building, faculty managers inhabit the top floor; academics, the middle floors; reception and retail outlets (the ASB Atrium), the ground floor; teaching spaces (and most students), the basement. For Rancière, such a "distribution" divides the world into that which "counts" (and those who count, or take part) in society and that which doesn't (and those who don't). That which doesn't count, an "uncounted" supplement, makes up what he calls the "part of those who have no part" (Rancière, 2010: 35). In the University of Auckland example, it could be argued that students are the "part of no part," consigned to the basement for the most part, except as retail customers or when "swiped into" academics' offices (or perhaps the real part of no part is the contracted workforce of cleaners and other support staff … or those denied entry to the Business School as students or visitors). Rancière argues that politics makes itself felt through *dissensus*, which is "not a confrontation

between interests or opinions," but "the demonstration of a gap [an opening] in the sensible itself" or "of a possible world" (Rancière, 2010, pp. 38–39) – or, when he speaks more loosely, "a clash between two distributions of the sensible," or possible worlds (Rancière, 2010: 39; translation amended). He gives the example of a factory being revealed to be a public rather than a private space when a worker speaks up about a public issue at work, which reveals another world. Taking the Owen G Glenn Building as an example, when we took a group of students into the reception area to sit under the portrait of Owen G. Glenn and map the movement of people around us, we were moved on within minutes by security guards, apparently at the request of the Dean. We were told that the reception area was not for studying or, indeed, for sitting: our class had become an occupation. When a corporate space (the ASB Atrium) became a learning space, not only did the clash immediately reveal the "distribution" of the space, but it also "redistributed" it – if only for a short while. Thus, real politics is "the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two [– or more, we would argue –] worlds in one" (Rancière, 2010, p. 37) by the revelation of "conflicting ways of doing things with the 'places' that [a distribution] allocates: of relocating, reshaping or redoubling them" (Rancière, 2011, p. 6).

The University as a Place of Possibilities

This brings us full circle to the idea with which we first began: that *skholè*/scholarship as serious play can serve to ground the university as a place given over to the free play of possibilities, a place of *dissensus*. The university is that (part of the) world that allows for the free play of political – and thus serious – possibilities, and thereby for the "worlding" of many worlds (Heidegger, 2010, p. 99). It is not a heterotopia, a place "outside of all places" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24), but a polytopia, and it is not just a university but a polyversity, a place of many possibilities. Further, it is, in a sense, both *of* and *not of* the world, both worldly and unworldly. In what does its unworldliness consist? It is unworldly because its condition of possibility, its ground, is its problematisation of conditions of possibility. There is a clue to how this works in Bourdieu's "Critique of Scholastic Reason," in which he evokes Vaihinger's (1924) philosophy of "as if" to

explain *skholè* as possibilizing: "the 'as if' posture – very close to the 'let's pretend' mode of play which enables children to open imaginary worlds – is what makes possible all … possible worlds" (Bourdieu, 2000a, pp. 12–13). However, Bourdieu's "play-worlds" are not unworldly – or un-serious (Bourdieu, 2000a, p. 13). The "as if" of *skholè* is not fictive, as Derrida (2002, p. 212) argues in *The University Without Condition*, where he takes the "as if" to characterize the "fictions, simulacra, or works of art" that define the humanities. Rather, it is conditional – but not unconditionally so. *Skholè* marks the university as a place of possibilities, but one where conditions of possibility – grounds and rules, or "ground rules" (Sturm & Turner, 2013, p. 55) – are asked after as a matter of course. (What marks Derrida's "university without condition" is the "unconditional freedom to question" – but also to "profess the truth" [2002, p. 212]. Professing *the* truth strikes us as a universalist Enlightenment project not in keeping with the university as a place of possibilities.)

One way in which we as scholars ask after the ground rules of our university – or perhaps of any university in an indigenous place – is to ask about the ground on which it sits. Ours is sited on a former colonial fort, Albert Barracks, on the site of a former indigenous fort, the Māori *pā* of Horotiu. The wall of the Barracks conspicuously bisects the campus; the stream that sustained the *pā* and gave it its name issues inconspicuously via a tap in the carpark of the School of Law. But seeing the university, as it were, in view of the place in which it sits and of everything that has happened there means more than reading the place as a historical palimpsest; it means seeing the correspondences between its military history and the paramilitary nature of management in the university of excellence (see Hoskin, Macve & Stone, 2006). And it is to see it as an uncommon commons, an eruption of place in the "non-place" (Augé, 1995) of the globally convergent university of excellence. That commons might even presage an Oceanic undercommons (Hau'ofa, 1993), of indigenous peoples across the Pacific, which they share with each other, but not necessarily with non-indigenous peoples – though they might otherwise "share" the same place.

We also attend to people and place in the university setting as models for worlds and ways of being other than neoliberal ones, to generate possibilities and explore their grounds. To this end, in our classes we explore a range of "playful" tactics like productive idleness, critical creativity and post-pedagogy. To do this, we use games, digital artefacts, and Situationist dérives (Fr. "drift"), which allow the surrounding architecture and geography to subconsciously direct the traveller in an exploration of a space/landscape. We also use tactics already in play in the university like invention, idleness and sharing … and just talking and walking, as Harney and Moten rightly say (Shukaitis, 2012). Such tactics echo the techniques of "ontological reframing (to produce the ground of possibility), rereading (to uncover or excavate the possible), and creativity (to generate actual possibilities where none formerly existed)" that inform J. K. Gibson-Graham's "politics of possibility" (2006: xiv, xxix-xxx). Through such tactics, *skholè*/scholarship as serious play (*spoudaiôs paidia*) marks the university as a place given over to the free play of possibilities. In fact, we would go one step further: the university is that part of the world that is open to, that *awaits*, the worlding of possible worlds. Before *skholè* meant "play" or "study," it meant "a holding back, a keeping clear" (Harper, 2015), a kind of watchful waiting that has been misread from Plato onwards as a withdrawal from the world. *Skholè* is an openness to the world, to new worlds. As Heidegger writes in *Country Path Conversations* (2010, p. 75): "In waiting we leave open that upon which we wait. […] Because waiting lets itself be involved in the open itself."

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