Productive Disappointment: The Modern University and Authority

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Before broaching the central concerns this article addresses, I must first acknowledge that its title has taken several terms for granted. For instance, what the title implies by the “modern” as opposed to the pre-modern or ancient university is vague. Implicit in its modernity is the University as a structure, not just this or another university in particular but the university generally as an institution that exists across many distinct social conditions, cultural or ethnic groups, and national boundaries. A further trouble is the question of whether or not such a notion of the university may be comfortably aligned with the adjective “modern,” if the singular and superfluous article is even viable. Does this mean a modern university in the sense of being industrialized or some other specific identifying trait? In the case of industrialization as the condicio sine qua non of modernity, nearly all existing universities today have always been modern. This would seem insufficient for the purposes here. Instead “modern” is our colloquial terminology used as a means of drawing a distinction between others and ourselves: that is, between our naturalized assumptions about the relations among people and institutions of power versus other people’s naturalized assumptions. To be “like us” in form, function, or social purpose is to be “modern,” and to be otherwise is to remain somehow out of joint with the times. The “modern university” is, then, the social institution that has grown beyond the confines of brick and mortar to become a certifying body granting approval to those subjects who pass through its machinery, typically operating under the regulation and supervision of a government-sanctioned system of formalized accreditation. The modern university is inextricably bound up with the concerns of the state, unlike the theological or self-governing bondage of its ancient self, which is trotted out today principally as a cliquish anachronism with ceremonial pomp.
I propose something more specific than this for the purposes of this paper: the modern university in relation to productive disappointment and authority. Universities have always been affiliated with authority, whether it was the University of Bologna’s ties to the Church and Law in the Medieval world that began with its founding nearly a millennium ago; the nineteenth century’s use of the university as an institution for the reproduction and expansion of nationalist culture, such as through the training and enculturation of imperialist subjects who would administrate and expand national empires; or the globalized university of today that has instrumentalized the educational process to move beyond church, law, and state to instead serve the demands of transnational capital or corporate interests. We readily find three representative scholars famously discussing each of these three centres of authority—the church, the state, and the economy—in relation to the university, although so much discussion in recent years has made the academic study of the university in modern society something of a cottage industry in scholarly publications. However, three suffice as representative figures. Cardinal John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* from his time as Rector of University College, Dublin, in 1858, stressed the importance of religious faith and a broad general education rather than a narrow vocational training for the expansion of the mind and development of good citizens. Edward Said, in his most famous book *Orientalism* from 1978, presented an

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1 Distinct from the nineteenth century works, among which Newman’s stands out, the twenty-first century scholarship appears to be a critical trend on its own that has been developing since Bill Readings’s posthumously published book *The University in Ruins*. Notable works over the past few years include as Frank Donaghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Howard Woodhouse’s *Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009); Ian Angus’s *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009); Anthony J. Nocella, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren’s *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010); Janice Newson and Claire Polster’s *Academic Callings: The University We Have Had, Now Have, and Could Have* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2010); and Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli’s *Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2011).
alternative vision of the relationship between power and knowledge in relation to colonialism by showing how Michel Foucault’s concept of power-knowledge was reflected in the academic construction of disciplines like Schools of Orientalist Studies, which became a way for the imperial West to express its power through the construction of knowledge about the colonized East. That is to say, the university became a social institution less orientated to the authority of the church and religious faith and instead became a function of the production of nationalist culture that served the imperialist ambitions of the expanding empires of the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries. More recently, in 1996 in his book *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings gave voice to a widespread disappointment over the shift in purpose the University experienced as it revised its mission from the generalist education that eschewed narrow vocational training while at the same time reproducing and expanding nationalist culture in the service of empire—in Readings’ assessment, the University began to operate as the producer of assets for transnational economic interests. That is, the modern university has reduced its religious and national observances in order to take up its corporate budget.

For Newman, conflict arose between the religious and intellectual life of the university, being both an institution arising from faith as well as an educational institution defined by the birth and rise of scientific rationalism. In his articulation of this conflict and shift in the university’s function we encounter both the liberal curriculum and the scholarly function of the university:

> The University [...] has this object and this mission; it contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture; here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this. It educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it.\(^2\)

For Newman, this general educational and scholarly function must be very specifically distinguished as the “object of a University [...] and apart from the Catholic Church, or from the State, or from

any other power which may use it.”

This is both an articulation of what the university is as well as what the university may become, and it is strikingly independent of the forces that shaped Newman’s work as an educator. Before turning to Said’s discussion of the university, his response and attention to precisely this passage from Newman is worth recalling as a more nuanced unpacking of the problem at hand. For Said’s 1999 commencement address at the American University in Cairo, he quotes this same passage, one widely attended to by many scholars, and follows it with advice for the graduands:

Note the care with which he selected his words for what actions take place in the pursuit of knowledge: words like exercise, educates, reach out, and grasp. In none of these words is there anything to suggest coercion, or direct utility, or immediate advantage or dominance. […] Newman was arguing earnestly for a type of education that placed the highest premium on English, European, or Christian values in knowledge. But sometimes, even though we may mean to say something, another thought at odds with what we say insinuates itself into our rhetoric, and in effect criticizes it, delivers a different and less assertive idea than on the surface we might have intended. This happens when we read Newman.4

In both instances, we find Newman and Said agitating for the notion of the university as an independent scholarly community that had derived from the political and ideological authority of the church but evolved toward a distinctly anti-authoritarian model for intellectual exchange and exploration of knowledge without “anything to suggest coercion, or direct utility, or immediate advantage or dominance.”5 In particular for both, this is a notion of the university that struggles against the sacred authority on which its heritage grew and the competing secular authority of the state that nurtured and employed it.

This cultural-cum-ideological function of the university manifested in what we now call the Liberal Arts curriculum and was

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
competing at the same time with the university’s service to nationalist culture. Precisely this problem with the modern university is strikingly taken up by Said in *Orientalism*, the text most responsible for the shift from the Marxist orientations of the body of critical theory centred on the decolonization movement in Africa to the institutional and representational analyses that now characterize what is more loosely called postcolonial theory. This surprises, since Said’s text is not typically taken as an indictment of disciplinary academia. For Said, Orientalism is a discourse, and more specifically an academic discourse that expresses power through the construction, development, and maintenance of knowledge in the West about the East. Hence, Schools of Orientalist Studies disciplined knowledge in a way that expressed the fact of imperialism, and “To speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise.”

Having decoupled the Orient from Orientalism and Orientalist discourses that express the power exercised by the West, Said goes on to argue that “Therefore, as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary [in institutions] that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.” This idea and its history are inextricably caught up in the centres of knowledge production in the universities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite their private status ostensibly independent of the state. For Said, this idea of the Orient is the product of academic disciplines within the university’s administrative self-construction, and in a Foucauldian sense, these forms of knowledge reflect power such that the independence of the university is given its lie via the service its disciplinary divisions render to the interests of the nation state: schools of Orientalism as an expression of the culture of imperialism. For Said, the outcome was inevitable:

Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferated out from Orientalism into

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7 Ibid, 5.
the general culture.\textsuperscript{8}

While the modern reader may be inclined to consider Said’s emphasis as falling to the relationship between cultural products and nationalist adventure, the bawd’s service rendered by the institutions housing “Orientalism, as a system of knowledge” must also be remembered. Said’s critique is as much focused on the casual racism and imperialist agenda expressed in children’s books such as G.A. Henty’s and R.M. Ballantyne’s didactic novels as it is on the university curriculum that lent institutional \textit{imprimatur} to racist and imperialist epistemologies. For Said, this is not an implicit link—it is explicit in his articulation:

In the universities a growing establishment of area-studies programs and institutes has made the scholarly study of the Orient a branch of national policy. Public affairs in this country include a healthy interest in the Orient, as much for its strategic and economic importance as for its traditional exoticism.\footnote{Ibid, 26.}

We may see this easily today in the institutional support (and state funding) for programs in Arabic language and various “oriental” cultures in the United States of America following on the events of September eleventh 2001. The same process continues to operate in the instrumental function envisioned for programs in World Literature, which seem ascendant as the second decade of the twenty-first century opens, and likewise in the linkages between specific disciplines and Mandarin language or written Chinese programs of study. Individual students may see a pathway to personal success, and institutions may see a pathway to potential funding or corporate partnerships, but the service of nationalist interests remains prominent.

The turn away from this nationalist function of the university as a social institution to the global migrations of transnational capital was identified by Readings in \textit{The University in Ruins} and formed the centre of his critique of the internal contradictions of the corporate university, particularly its discourse. Fifteen years after Readings’ polemical study, we now see under increasing fiscal

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 6.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 26.
pressures the persistent globalization of an institution—the university—that formerly served the interests of nationalist culture. For Readings, two powerful problems are introduced during the rise of corporate discourses of “excellence” in institutions born from the pre-capitalist Medieval world of “service”: That is, “with the decline of the nation-state, the University has become an open and flexible system and [...] we should try to replace the empty idea of excellence with the empty name of Thought,” and to this concept he adds “The question posed to the University is thus not how to turn the institution into a haven for Thought but how to think in an institution whose development tends to make Thought more and more difficult, and less and less necessary.” All this is to say, we teach, conduct research and fulfill our professional service, and graduate students who are preparing to do so, during a time when the idea of a university is transitioning, in Reading’s assessment, from a space or specific location into a series of relations or reputations. Put another way, the University today is undergoing a process of redefining itself from being a means of recreating particular national cultures to become a post-national mechanism in the economic process of globalization that condemns national cultures to decline.

To the extent that these kinds of “spaces” have traditionally been predicated on exclusionary and imperialist cultures, very often racist, sexist, and elitist cultures, often literally walled towers, its ruin is welcome. An idea of the university that serves the community at large and dismantles authoritarian elitism seems a noble thought, and the rubble of such walls seems little to mark great woe. We might even build from it. However, insofar as the emergence of a new type of university simply marks the imposition of new forms of cultural hegemony and effaces spheres of cooperative thought and action, so much the worse for us. We may be simply exchanging our walls for the mind-forged manacles of self-imposed regulation: our pre-digital open source scholarly code for a DRM-locked production of corporate intellectual property. Readings reminds his readers that globalization “is not a neutral process in which Washington and Dakar participate equally…. [T]he process of expropriation by transnational capital that globalization names is something from which the United States and Canada are currently

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10 Readings, The University in Ruins, 159-160.
11 Ibid, 175; emphasis mine.
Twenty years later, the global university remains caught within this period of transition, which makes the transition period itself seem like the new era, and globalized universities flourish, whether it is Fairleigh Dickinson University in Vancouver or the University of Calgary in Qatar. Although, they do so with funds flowing nearly exclusively in the direction of former colonial trade routes: from abroad to the former centres of empire. We might ask, in a truly globalized world, how many Americans and Canadians are studying in a university in Bangladesh. How many British and French students do we encounter in Sudan and Côte d’Ivoire? Indeed, globalization names a process in which not all participants are equally global nor equally participate...

Nevertheless, contrary opinions exist and make their cases on reasonable and rational grounds. Concurrent to Readings’ excavation of the university’s rubble, George Landow responded to John Henry Newman’s nineteenth-century vision of *The Idea of a University* by arguing “all new developments in information technology have eventually fostered democratization, though some, like writing itself, took millennia to evolve from the property of the few to the empowerment of the many.” If the globalization of the university (in a bi-directional flow of intellectual capital as well as capital investments) is leading us to the expropriation of the developing world’s resources as well as those of Canadian classes served best by the democratization of social discourse through education, then what of the alternative contention that the very threats most feared could ultimately foster democratization and the empowerment of the many, as Landow contends? Does the modern technological university ultimately foster democratization? Does corporate culture reliably construct the roads to freedom? Perhaps the information age with widely distributed networks of learning is about to radically transform our understanding of excellence and the university ranking system that helps students to crunch the numbers in a cost-benefit analysis of the virtues of purchasing access to employment: the very choice that the University in service of nationalist culture saw in the purchasing of a military commission by graduates entering the military, which preserved the elite status of the officer class from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in Britain. If not, perhaps the glorious revolution of the modern digital uni-

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12 Ibid, 2.
versity is better suited to the language of corporate interests in outsourcing, cost reduction, or the secrecy of surrounding the terms of corporate donations. In the interests of clarity, Cornel Hamm, who introduced me to the Philosophy of Education in my undergraduate studies at a time when I was not inclined to squint past the opacity of educational institutions as temporally and culturally contingent edifices, states the matter plainly in his work. The primary purposes of education, as opposed to its secondary purposes, are distinct from its roles and functions in Hamm’s views. The four purposes toward which “teaching” and “learning” strive as distinct yet related activities or tasks, which may be carried out either successfully or unsuccessfully, are

1. The pursuit of general enlightenment [...] as liberal education [...] [T]his aim is so overarching and important that it alone is sufficient to justify the existence of schools.
2. Moral education [...]
3. Maintenance of the dominant culture [...] Thus the official language of a country, the law of the land, and a [...] form of government would be considered ideals to be transmitted by the school.
4. Creation of new knowledge.¹⁵

We may see Cardinal Newman’s interests in items 1 and 2, Edward Said’s anti-imperialist critique aimed toward the third and fourth, and Bill Reading’s disappointment as the addition of a fifth purpose that displaces all four: the production of useful information and labour for the engines of the transnational, perhaps even post-national, economy: a concept Hamm had not even considered in 1989.

To fulfill these ends, we engage in four activities in universities (setting aside administrative labour that ostensibly meets a service function for the real work of a university, though increasingly it appears that the perpetuation of non-academic administrative functions is becoming the institutional raison d’être). We train, teach, educate, and research—students may play a role in all of these ac-

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¹⁵ Hamm, Philosophical Issues in Education, 55.
tivities, though the fourth is too often divorced from explicit educational functions. Training is the development of specific and typically non-transferable skills for using tools or undertaking specific tasks. We may train students how to use a word processor, bibliography engine, a computational application, or to complete service tasks as employees. In contrast, teaching entails the transfer of information from teacher to student. We may teach the factual information of history, times tables, or the application of a particular theory. This activity comprises most of our labour in our contact with students, whether we are planning teaching, engaging in teaching itself, or measuring the effectiveness of the teaching we have done. Both teaching and training are direct and primary activities that may be directly measured and observed. Research is likewise quantified into status-ranked periodicals and productivity per year. Educating, however, is the indirect building of capacity in students that is not as easily measured nor directly engaged in. Cultivating transferability of skills or the ability to self-develop new skills is the aim of education as well as creative critical thinking and a student’s own capacity for developing new knowledge through research that supersedes or develops distinct from the teacher’s own knowledge. Like the habits of the vocal folds in singing or relaxation of the arms while playing a musical instrument, education cannot be easily shaped in a direct manner nor can it be easily directly controlled. That is, education arises as a secondary function from other activities even if it constitutes our primary goal in the university. Education is also a natural self-development that individuals spontaneously engage in independent of universities and teachers. It is at the same time a tertiary achievement grown from direct control over training, teaching, and research. This might prove difficult enough in its own right, but achieving education to an acceptable level is further complicated by the functions of teaching and learning articulated by Hamm: enlightenment, morality, maintenance of culture, and creating new knowledge, com-

16 The expansion of aboriginal education and institutional integration of indigenous knowledge systems offers a contemporary example of the maintenance of culture through education that does not reinforce the hegemony of the dominant national culture. For instance, see Colin Scott’s ground breaking “Science for the West, Myth for the Rest?,” *The Postcolonial Science Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 175-197; also see Jo-ann Archibald, “Transforming the University from an Aboriginal Perspective,” *Academic Callings* (Toronto: Canadian
pounded by the modern need to produce skilled labour in service to the post-national economy. As the institutional function of the university increasingly serves this corporate function, the capacity-building element of education itself comes into conflict and may engender disappointment or unrest among the labouring class.

Disappointment

All of this about the modern university is only to preface the actual title and principal concern of this article: “Productive Disappointment.” This may seem peculiar since the virtues of disappointment are unlikely to offer a rallying cry for “Thought,” an end to the racist epistemologies of imperialism, nor a resistance against the discourse of “excellence.” My concept comes from Simon Critchley’s work on ethics and politics in Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance. For Critchley’s study, disappointment serves a uniquely productive function:

> Philosophy does not begin in an experience of wonder, as ancient tradition contends, but rather, I think, with the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. Philosophy begins in disappointment.  

In tandem with the provocation from disappointment, Critchley adds the dissatisfaction that disappointment engenders or that we might even call a process of resistance in the Marxist sense that any given social condition engenders its own negation. To this, he adds an ethical obligation that is infinitely demanding yet unfulfillable, and hence always disappointing: “one’s existence is completely at stake in the relation to the other person, and to fail the other is to fail that existence irreparably.”  

Critchley derives the concept from Knud Ejler Logstrup’s “ethical demand” and “the radical, unfulfillable and one-sided character of that [ethical] demand and the asymmetry of the ethical relation that it establishes.”  

This is to say, my own subjectivity is defined by the ethical demand that others place on me and my responsibility to the other. I cannot simply

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Scholars’ Press, 2010), 162-169.

17 Critchley, Infinitely Demanding, 1.

18 Ibid, 51.

19 Ibid, 40.
be disappointed in my own loss of benefits, but rather my own sense of “a fantastic effort failed” takes the form of my infinite responsibility to others who are somehow wronged.

This shaped my conjecture here on the nature of disappointment and education. Rather than wonder and curiosity, I am asking in what ways a feeling of the failure of the world may provoke the purpose of education and the exploration of education’s function in society. Rather than “general enlightenment,” “Moral education,” or “Maintenance of the dominant culture,” proposed by Hamm or the production of new knowledge through the exercise power, what if education takes up these activities as an attempt to reconcile one’s disappointment with the existing state of the world based on the ethical demand or infinite obligation one may share with the others within it? If education serves the purpose of reconciling the world to disappointment, then how does the modern university (in whatever form such an institution may take) discipline knowledge and organize comprehension in a fashion that continuously evokes disappointment as a pathway to general Enlightenment and ethics, perhaps leaving behind the replication of nationalist culture and service to the neo-Fordism of outsourcing the vocational training needs of economic globalization? How might we productively disappoint our students day after day in a way that engenders the production of knowledge in service of the ethical demand of the other rather than the exercise of one’s own power under the guise of authority?

Authority & Conclusions

Regardless of how I answer these questions, the problem of authority is central. Universities have sought general enlightenment and the freeing of the mind whilst rigorously disciplining the exchange of knowledge. Moreover, universities are deeply sensitive to and defined by large-scale operations of social forms of power, such as the responsiveness of university curricula to the demands of the state, church, and economy. These operations of authority show the social construction of the purpose of the University as historically being the maintenance of institutions of authority that exist above the University itself. How then might disappointment function in an anti-authoritarian manner if it must be directed upward? What “indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed” can be
engendered in the interstices of one’s obligations to these institutions of authority, and is it possible for that disappointment to re-focus through one’s individual ethical obligation to the other?

In a practical sense, authority resides in the extra-ethical demands we have already seen in relation to the University: the just expectation of obedience that the Church had of the University of Bologna, the just expectation of obedience that the State has of the University in the construction and dissemination of nationalist culture, or the just expectation of obedience that debt and potential unemployment that post-national economies place on the University to produce trained employees who purchase the commission for their rank of employment. What, instead, of the anti-authoritarian demand of one’s ethical obligation to the other that is awakened through disappointment, through “the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed.” Rather than entertainment packaged in 15 minute increments that total 45 contact hours per semester; rather than the Fordian packaging of training in exchange for service employment; and rather than the enculturation of patriotism in service of national expansion, may we instead potentially open students to their own self-exploration and self-fashioning, their own self-directing pursuit of social change through disappointment? I suppose I mean to say that I am considering deliberately disappointing my students more and more frequently, and I hope to do it well.

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20 Ibid, 1.


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