

# Some Questions Towards a Discussion on University Crises and Their Alternatives

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*It is pointless to discuss the “function of the university” in abstraction from concrete historical circumstances, as it would be a waste of effort to study any other social institution in this way. In a different society entirely different questions might arise as to the function of the university and the problems that are pressing.*

—Noam Chomsky<sup>1</sup>

When looking at what is today called the crisis of universities, one initial question concerns precisely the origin of the problems attributed to academia. This interrogation is motivated in the first place by the structure of the university itself. Many twenty-first-century academic reforms have suggested that the configuration of the university—its obsolescence, its elitism—is the main cause of its crisis. This position implies that the crunch faced today by academia is exceptional—an assessment easy to argue against when we consider the broadness and complexity of the universities’ traditions. Indeed, if we assume a historical angle, the condition of impasse appears as a constitutive trait of academic identity. A cyclical event, over the last two centuries recurrent crises

have forced institutional revisions of the university’s main scope, that is, to produce research and pass knowledge on to younger generations and adults—a set of tasks that necessarily entails constant critical reflection on the way this mission is performed.

While not voluntarily pursued by the institution itself, reforms of curricula and cultures of research have been prompted by governments, social parties, and the economic world. Connected to these changes, academic upheavals occur at times when dissenting voices challenge the ability of the university to respond to social and economic changes in their educational programs. In this line, in the midst of the nineteenth century a first phase of democratization in higher education took place, responding to new perceptions of labor brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the birth of modern nation-states. Also functioning as a smokescreen that provides cover for economic and political agendas, the nineteenth century reforms had an impact on the definition of academia’s contemporary identity:

- In 1850s Great Britain, the establishment of civic universities offering more contemporary and diversified curricula in response to the Industrial Revolution provided alternatives to Oxbridge exclusive rule;

- At the end of the 1860s, France revised the Napoleonic academic system and developed the *Écoles pratiques des hautes études* to compensate for the lack of practice in theoretically oriented faculties;

- In the 1870s in Germany, the crisis of the Humboldtian predicament arose in conjunction with the diversification of students’ educational backgrounds at a time when the classical high school curriculum was no longer the only option to access academic studies.<sup>2</sup>

1. Noam Chomsky, “The Function of University in Times of Crisis” (1969), in *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, ed. Carlo Peregrino Otero (London: Routledge, 2003).  
2. See Christophe Charles and Jacques Verger, *Histoire des universités, XIIème–XXIème siècle* (Paris: Quadriège, 2012); Christina Lutter and Markus Reisenleitner, *Cultural Studies, un’introduzione* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2004).

The nineteenth-century university model was debated and protested against in the 1960s, when a second wave of crises contested the narrowness of academic curricula. The aim was to redefine learning institutions as sites where major contemporary issues and citizenship are at the center of debate. Caught in the crossfire, the elitist application of the academic mission was criticized based on the belief that citizens have some stake in the forms and sources of public and private funding supporting universities.

Finally, a third crisis emerged in the twenty-first century in conjunction with civil society protests, and relates to general political unrest as well as cultural contradictions inscribed in the way academic institutional narratives are constructed and delivered.

Official histories of the university present its institutional evolution as a linear narrative of accomplishments coauthored by governments, economic change, and academia itself. Individual teaching and research that explored and practiced alternative learning situations *within* academia and *as a response to* its curricula and policies are mainly recorded in non-institutional accounts.<sup>3</sup> Self-referential academic histories often ignore the lineage of the many countercultural experiments that were eventually included in university curricula. These official histories neutralize antagonism and erase the connection between nineteenth-century workers' night class flexible schedules and universities' lifelong learning policies after World War II; they present critical studies of academic curricula as an adaptation to the times, and not as a demand originated by 1960s teach-ins; they interpret the inclusion of daily experience in academic curricula—today institutionalized in internships and through the involvement of profession-

3. I refer here in particular to the following histories of the university: Christophe Charles and Jacques Verger, *Histoire des universités, XIIème-XXIème siècle* (Op. cit.); Charles Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (New York: Henry Holt, 1923); Olaf Pedersen, *The First Universities: Studium Generale and the Origins of University Education in Europe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sigmond Diamond, *Compromised Campus: The Collaboration of Universities with the Intelligence Community, 1945–1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

als in teaching—as adaptation to the labor market and not as a response to students' requests. Even though we may discuss whether these ideas were assimilated in an adequate way, the missing connection between “reform from below” and the daily practice of academia has consequences in the actual possibility for this institution to foster change from the inside.

Another remark concerns the presentation of diversity in academic histories. The definition of universities implies, etymologically, an idea of totality (universality) to which is added, from medieval times, the notion of corporatism motivated by the desire to share knowledge. Triggered by this claim to wholeness, institutional histories present universities as a global “imagined community” at the root of European history. The subtext of this operation—which is authored by Western academia, and produces a discourse that reinforces the dominance of its model<sup>4</sup>—is that universities gained universal importance and sovereignty in the field. Over time, this claim was at least partially corrected by the introduction of postcolonial, cultural, and gender studies into the curricula. These are today increasingly challenged by financial cuts, with the effect of again narrowing the scope of universities to a limited Eurocentric experience, at the expense of non-Western alternative learning institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Starting from these initial questions, this paper proposes a reflection on the motives, reforms, and alternatives that emerged within the third structural university crisis—the one that started in the mid-1990s and has been at the center of public dissent and protests especially in the twenty-first century. It was a crisis that was solved before it even began, as the reforms arrived (top-bottom) without much fuss, and were mainly contested when the linear vision of the university proposed by governments and

4. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

5. Consider for instance the case of women's studies undergraduate courses in Britain that were suspended and/or absorbed by other departments in the early 2000s: “Last Women Standing,” *Times Higher Education*, January 31, 2008, [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/400363.article](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/400363.article).

transnational bodies cracked under the pressure of financial crisis. The communication strategy of new university reforms succeeded in flattening the dispute around academia to two primary issues, namely, cost effectiveness and connection—or disconnection—from real society and the job market.

This line of reasoning was contested on different grounds. On the one hand, those who are nostalgic for the pre-reform university model blame the current crisis on the neoliberalization of education, leading to the assault on scholarship perpetrated by state reforms and enhanced by the 1970s and 1980s democratization of the curricula.<sup>6</sup> On the other side, students and civil movements equally contest the neoliberalization of education, but without regret for the university model preceding the reform. Their protest brings into question both the persistence of hierarchical and authority-driven learning models characteristic of the pre-reform university as well as the validity of academic curricula at times of wide unemployment and (again) the disconnection of universities from contemporary social issues.

What strikes as a déjà-vu in the configuration of the current crisis are the terms of the discussion. As the 2006 Penguins Protest in Chile has shown, we are once again discussing the publicness and accessibility of university studies and, by extension, real chances of social mobility. Second, the assumption that universities are isolated from society is again instrumental in identifying the subject of the crisis—universities—as the downturn's main perpetrator.

In other respects, this most recent crisis shows meaningful points of difference from previous ones, especially when it comes to the social background of the people involved. In the aftermath of the broadened social mobility that followed the 1960s, the academic population is today far more diversified than in Pierre Bourdieu's infamous 1964 portrait of academic elitism.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, social movements do not ask for a broad-

6. See Maurizio Ferraris, *Una Ikea di università. Alla prova dei fatti* (Milan: Raffaele Cortina Editore, 2009).

7. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers, les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984, 1964).

ening of universities' curricula, but claim a different academic heritage whose lineage traces back to previous moments of upheaval and not to the institution's official history. If in the past the effectiveness of counter-academic models was measured in terms of their ability to reform the actual university system, the question now is whether this model makes sense at all. This critique is joined by new academic subjects who traditionally belonged to the *Écoles pratiques des hautes études* and are today being assimilated into universities, and by non-Western higher education experiments such as the Uganda-based Multiversity, whose program promotes the visibility of indigenous scholarship "as a necessity to vitalize the world knowledges."<sup>8</sup>

In this context, it is worth considering that the core of the problem with universities may lie in the attempt to create a global, flexible, all-purpose institution in charge of solving, through the one and only Western model, the whole higher-educational dilemma. Where free universities and community-based educational projects have proven that the need for international circulation of ideas does not imply uprooting education from local issues, universities have detached themselves from specific social and political contexts in favor of universal and all-inclusive claims.

Articulated as a glossary, this paper tries to account for some institutional and countercultural ideas that have been recurrently engaged in the debate on academic models.

The connection between reforms and vocabularies adopted in the protests will be used to explain the scope and challenges of recent and historical academic overturns. The reason for this choice is that the nature, sources, and motives of the words employed and disputed in the context of these crises—inflected in a plural form in order to include as many diverse historical and geographical academic forms as possible—are essential tools for framing the educational agenda that they designate.

8. Joel H. Spring, *A New Paradigm for Global School Systems: Education for a Long and Happy Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 117.

## Crisis

**crisis** *noun* \ˈkrɪ-səs\  
2. the decisive moment (as in a literary plot)

3. *a*: an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; *especially*: one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome <a financial crisis>

*b*: a situation that has reached a critical phase <the environmental crisis><sup>9</sup>

### 1. Today, how can we not speak of universities' crises in global terms?<sup>10</sup>

*Does the university today have what is called a raison d'être? . . . To ask whether the University has a reason for being is to wonder why there is a University, but the question "why" verges on "with a view to what"?*

—Jacques Derrida<sup>11</sup>

Having been nominated professor at large at Cornell University at the beginning of the 80s, in his inaugural lecture Jacques Derrida assessed recent changes of approach in academic research and teaching, and the consequent redefinition of the roles that universities may play in the new scenario. At stake, he suggested, is the "raison d'être" of the university itself, and the opportunity for it to be "central or marginal, progressive or decadent, collaborative with or independent of that of other research institutions sometimes considered better suited to certain ends."<sup>12</sup> Responding to his initial question—what do universities have a view on when they have a *raison d'être*—Derrida pointed out that "the terms of this debate tend to be analogous . . . in all the highly industrialized countries," whereas in "the so-called 'developing countries,' the problem takes shape according to models that are certainly different but in all events inseparable

9. All the definitions in this paper are extracted from *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*.

10. Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," *Diacritics* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 2–20.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

12. *Ibid.*, 11.

from the preceding ones."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, he concludes, "such a problematic cannot always—cannot any longer—be reduced to a problematic centred on the nation-state: it is now centred instead on multinational military-industrial complexes or techno-economic networks."<sup>14</sup>

Two decades later, when the subprime crisis burst, Derrida's predicament seemed to rematerialize as a central question of student protests. In 2006, and for the first time after 1968, strikes emanating from university reforms in Germany, Chile, France, Britain, and Italy contributed to inscribing particular national problems in a transnational frame. What happened between Derrida's 1980s statement and the post-2006 protests is that, on the one hand, the harmonization of curricula in the aftermath of the Bologna Process enabled local problems to be discussed globally. On the other hand, following a comparative paradigm, internal student strikes sprang from claims of international solidarity and recognition of common grounds. Both discourses led to a perception of higher-educational issues as shared questions to be solved beyond national borders, as we see in this extract from the German 2009 Manifesto for an Educational Strike (*Bildungsstreik*):

The current conditions and developments within the education system are no longer acceptable! *Worldwide* more and more aspects of *public life* are being restructured and do not primarily *serve the common good* anymore. Instead, they are being subjected to the "*forces of the market*."

For several years a focus has been put on the *public education system* to "reform" it as well: tuition fees and *privatisation efforts* have an impact on all of us.

The current *financial and economic crisis* clearly shows that decisions solely based on *competitive* criteria have severe consequences. In many countries, such as Mexico, Spain, Italy, France and Greece, people are protesting

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

against them. The Bildungsstreik 2009 [Educational Strike 2009] has to be seen in relation to this background.<sup>15</sup>

I underlined in this claim a few key terms:

- public life and serving the common good versus the forces of the market;
- public education system versus privatization efforts;
- casual effect between financial/economic crisis and competitive criteria.

These terms have been, between 2006 and 2013, the watchwords of civil society movements. Whereas in the 1990s strikes, university issues tended to focus on a specific academic context that was interpreted as the expression of a particular state policy, since 2006 they have more often been treated as one voice in the midst of a general revolt against the neoliberal system. Even though the academic system has been regularly accused of acting as an ivory tower, as seen in the previous paragraph, the arguments in favor of public education highlight the rootedness of universities in society and the consequent need to defend them in the context of a general humanist claim. In this light, the object of the dispute is more clearly defined as the debate on which social model the academic system should subscribe to.

## 2. Whose crisis, which society

**so-ci-e-ty** *noun* \sə-ˈsī-ə-tē\

*Society* is now clear in two main senses: as our most general term for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live, and as our most abstract term for the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed. The interest of the word is partly in the often difficult relationship between the generalization and the abstraction.<sup>16</sup>

15. [www.bildungsstreik.net](http://www.bildungsstreik.net)

16. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 287.

Post-2006 protests confirm that university issues are not special academic cases, but part of a more general crisis in civil society. The rectors of European universities underlined this point with force in the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum, where the connection between academia and society is claimed as a fundamental value:

The university is an autonomous institution *at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage*; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. *To meet the needs of the world around it*, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and *intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power*.<sup>17</sup>

Far from being a mere declaration of principle, the insistence on the historic connection between the university and society also responds to major criticism against the academic system, that is, its withdrawnness from daily life and, more precisely, its detachment from the labor market, as measured in terms of employability. Following this line, recent reforms of higher education have been presented as the chance for obsolete and enclosed universities to finally enter modernity. In the case of the Bologna Process, the ticket to modernity corresponded to the dismantlement of diverse national academic traditions in favor of the North American model. Presented as a reform that meant to enhance international exchanges and at the same time respect diversity and the central role played by universities within societies, the first declarations connected to the Bologna Process stayed close to the Magna Charta. However, already in 2001, during the Salamanca Summit, the terms of the discourse radically changed and the missions of the university were described through a new set of words:

- unconditional academic freedom is here reduced in scope

17. Magna Charta of Universities, [www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/the-magna-charta/english](http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/the-magna-charta/english), my emphasis.

by the related task of “empowering universities” and the duty of *responsibility*;

- knowledge exchange and the culture of peace are summarized by the call for “mobility in the higher education area” and “compatibility (in a) *flexible* qualifications framework”;

- “*employability* on the European labour market, *quality assurance* and certification (accreditation) and competitiveness at home and in the world” are listed among academic main goals in a list that never refers to notions of teaching or research.<sup>18</sup>

The words employed in the Salamanca Statement refocus the debate about contemporary universities onto the relationship between theory and practice. The issue has been addressed regularly in institutional and non-institutional contexts since the nineteenth century and, in this respect, the foundation of the *Écoles pratiques* in France and the anarchist vision of pedagogy constitute two fundamental antecedents for such reflection. However, the practical turn of the university, which is as much about pedagogy as research, does not reflect the anarchist ideal to overturn the hierarchies between mental and physical labor, but rather responds to a trend in the contemporary capitalist system to offer professional skills that are immediately expendable in labor market.<sup>19</sup> An extreme development of this trend are the so-called McUniversities designed by McDonald’s with the goal to “train people who might be managing a business with a £ 5m turnover by their mid-20s . . . (and) satisfy the firm’s appetite for senior managers, one of whom will eventually control the entire McDonald’s global empire.”<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that the first UK McDonald’s campus was founded in Thatcher’s times, in 1989.<sup>21</sup>

18. Convention of Higher European Education Salamanca, March 29–30, 2001, [www.ulpgc.es/descargadirecta.php?codigo\\_archivo=4853](http://www.ulpgc.es/descargadirecta.php?codigo_archivo=4853).

19. For anarchist pedagogies, see the case on the Modern School later in the essay.

20. “McDonald’s: Fries with What?,” *Economist*, April 27, 2013, [www.economist.com/news/international/21576656-degree-burgerologyand-job-too-fries](http://www.economist.com/news/international/21576656-degree-burgerologyand-job-too-fries).

21. *Ibid.*

Critical to this conversion, the sociologist Richard Sennett has delivered to the pages of the *Guardian* some observations on professional rigidity caused by the *flexibility* of the university:

Perhaps surprisingly in this regard, I’d like to see universities stop preparing young people for the work world, at least as they now attempt to do. Part of the problem is *misplaced specificity*: if you have a BA in hotel catering management and there are no jobs for hotel caterers you are, as it were, in the soup. Moreover, universities have expanded massively the numbers of students taking supposedly practical courses, making the problem of scarcity only worse; this year in Britain thousands of students will graduate with MBAs to then compete for a relatively scant number of jobs. We would do much better to provide young people with *intellectual challenge and depth*—which is what universities are properly about. The number of jobs would not thereby increase; the *integrity* of the academic enterprise would.<sup>22</sup>

Another term of the Salamanca Statement that requires scrutiny is the notion of competitiveness, presenting the reforms as an antidote to the waste of public money and a guarantee for excellence in teaching and research. But beyond the economic dimension, the choice between competition and collaboration reveals an ethical position with respect to the production of knowledge. The issue was addressed by Noam Chomsky in 1969:

Consider, for example, the *competitiveness* fostered in the university, in fact, in the school system as a whole. It is difficult to convince oneself that this serves an educational purpose. *Certainly it does not prepare the student for the life of a scholar or scientist.* It would be absurd to demand of the working scientist that he keeps his work secret so that his colleagues will not know of his achievements and not be helped by his discoveries in pursuing their own studies and research. *Yet this demand is often made of the student in the classroom.*<sup>23</sup>

22. Richard Sennett, “This Is Not the Kids’ Problem,” *Guardian*, July 4, 2012, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/04/unemployment-not-kids-problem](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/04/unemployment-not-kids-problem), my emphasis.

23. Noam Chomsky, “The Function of University in Times of Crisis”, my emphasis.

What Chomsky suggests here is that imposing competitiveness on educational systems with the goal of making public schools “profitable” in the economic sense may prove highly dysfunctional when it comes to keeping consistent with academic fundamentals. For example, the race to publish and the privatization of knowledge may challenge the effectiveness of research and limit its scope to existing, end-oriented practices.

Similar observations fit other terms employed to restructure universities since the end of 1999, including governance, efficiency, and flexibility. Evacuating the political connotations from the language in use, reforms have emanated from a general vocabulary shift, bringing into question the relationship between “knowledge” and “professional competence,” mixing up “academic freedom” with “financial autonomy,” asking research to be more “profitable” than “groundbreaking.” What these telling linguistic changes highlight is that the social model imposed over universities may be inadequate both for academia and for contemporary societies.

## Universities of Daily Knowledge

**teach-in** *noun* \ˈtēch-ɪn\

an extended meeting usually held on a college campus for lectures, debates, and discussions to raise awareness of or express a position on a social or political issue

**lib-er-tar-i-an** *noun* \li-bər-ˈtēr-ē-ən, -ˈtēr-ē-\

a person who believes that people should be allowed to do and say what they want without any interference from the government

**free university** *noun* \free u-ni-ver-si-ty\

a nontraditional educational program of courses often taught by nonprofessionals as an alternative to traditional academic programs, usually offered without prerequisites at low cost or at no cost

On the ground that both are contesting the effectiveness of social models in force, connections were established be-

tween academic protests on the one hand and, on the other, the numerous breakthroughs in civil society between 2006 and 2013. Yet the fact that social movements and academic dissidents share motives for protest in the twenty-first century does not imply that both sides accept or validate the university model. Indeed, what is at the center of the social movements’ critique goes beyond the reformed university and its complicity with dominant social and economic models. On this ground they question the very heart of the academic system, based on top-down learning and figures of authority. The validity of knowledge produced within universities is therefore discussed together with the actual ability of these “factories of knowledge” to act as platforms for social change.<sup>24</sup>

Particularly since 2006, several alternative pedagogy projects have been enacted globally as part of the protest, including a network of Occupy University cells and free universities proposing alternative learning situations based on horizontal knowledge sharing, the desire to learn, and self-learning.

This twenty-first-century line of academic critique strongly resonates with alternative models from the mid-1960s, springing from occupations of US campuses during the Vietnam War. Rooted in the encounter between critical theories and pedagogies, the first experiments leading to free universities were “teach-ins,” a practice that recalls, as the name indicates, nonviolent sit-ins first used in 1930s workers’ strikes. The first teach-in was organized at the University of Michigan on March 25, 1965, and was meant as “an alternative to the specialized, departmentalized education of the conventional classroom.”<sup>25</sup> As most of the teach-ins that followed, the first one offered knowledge that was not included in the official curricula, dealing with the contemporary political crisis and students’ personal concerns as citizens. In this context, the mission of US

24. This remark goes along, as shown earlier, with the assessment that motivated the rewriting of academic curricula in the context of the Bologna Process.

25. James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the 1960s: Making Post-War Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 164.

mass education and the partiality of the knowledge proposed in the curricula—excluding alternative views on contemporary history and African American and women’s studies, as well as contemporary cultural practices—gave way, as early as 1965, to the foundation of the first free universities.

Free universities proposed a vision of the student as a cultural producer and, in the line of libertarian schools, they built an educational program that called for a revision of knowledge transmitted through academic curricula.<sup>26</sup> A poignant example of this trajectory is offered by the British case. In the second half of the nineteenth century, university extension programs had opened up higher education to less radical parts of the working class who were ready to sign up for the official national knowledge that is symbolized in the humanities by English studies. However, already in the 1930s and increasingly during the 1950s, the vision of higher education for the working class expanded to other questions, and challenged the kind of knowledge that is researched and taught in the university. In this context, the culture of the everyday—that the worker had actual experience of—acquired the status of an academic topic. This drive to broaden academic knowledge as to popular culture is beautifully portrayed in a scene of Ken Loach’s 1969 *Kes*, where the protagonist, Billy Casper, a working-class kid from northern England, appropriates the teacher’s question regarding the distinction between reality and fiction and recounts it through his daily experience of bringing up a hawk. On a more Hollywoodian note, the antiauthoritarian turn required of academic studies is rendered by Robin Williams’s (alias Professor John Keating’s) poetic empowerment exercises in the 1989 movie *Dead Poets Society*, where students are invited to mount the classroom tables to look at the world from a different subjective angle.

On the side of universities, the cultural turn allowed a radical change in research, on the one hand by applying to popular culture the methodologies used in the study of high culture. On

26. See Francisco Ferrer Guardia, *The Origin and Ideals of the Modern School* (Albany, NY: Kessinger, 2010).

the other hand, the inclusion of culture “from below” in academic subjects expanded the inventory of sources considered scientific, such as those practiced in oral history and micro-history. If the research program of these departments was so radically renewed in the face of the enlargement of the concept of academic knowledge, their pedagogical program largely followed the traditional university agenda.

We have to look outside the institution to find a critical reflection on higher education as an expression of subjective desire. A view of the widespread need to learn useful things in alternative social configurations is offered by the large success of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Initiated in the late 1960s by the American writer Stewart Brand, it consisted of a mail order catalog devoted to the daily needs of new communalism, including tools that were “relevant to independent education.” Along with Brand’s political and educational beliefs, the aim of the publication was presented as follows: “We are as gods and might as well get good at it. So far, remotely done power and glory—as via government, big business, formal education, church—has succeeded to the point where gross defects obscure actual gains. In response to this dilemma and to these gains a realm of intimate, personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”<sup>27</sup>

This program of individual emancipation through independent education would be eloquently expressed in the form of a manifesto for radical pedagogy by the Brazilian critical thinker Paulo Freire. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which quickly became a reference book for countercultural educational projects, Freire goes back to student protests and analyzes the chore of their requests: “[Students] demand the transformation of the universities (changing the rigid nature of the teacher-student relationship and placing that relationship within the context of reality), propose the transformation of reality itself so that

27. *The Whole Earth Catalog*, March 1969.



universities can be renewed, attack old orders and established institutions in the attempt to affirm human beings as the Subjects of decision.”<sup>28</sup> Counteracting the academic tradition that positions the teacher as the learning subject and relegates students to the role of objects, Freire brings along the notion of *coscientização*, that is, a condition of awareness of the surrounding reality that is a necessary premise toward a pedagogy of emancipation.

In the same year that Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published, Ivan Illich carried out advocacy for a “de-schooled” society, where education would take place through “learning webs,” which he defined as a form of learning among peers that was not bound to a specific time, space, or age.<sup>29</sup>

In the lack of a comprehensive history of alternative academic experiments detailing counter-curricula and educational spaces imagined in this context, Freire’s and Illich’s positions provide a nonetheless clear image of the terms at work in radical pedagogy. Based on the keywords of this reflection, we can identify the core values of an antagonistic position that equates education with a social need not enslaved to the economic principles in force.

Along with these statements, at the beginning of the twentieth century a group of French teachers defined “rejection of achieving” (*refus de parvenir*) as “the refusal, for a person who has benefited from an intellectual education, to accept privileges, distinctions, individual promotions in the context of trade unions, politics and the university.”<sup>30</sup> In this perspective, the vertical pattern of the traditional academic curriculum is replaced by the idea that education is an open-ended process directed not only at young people but also at adults. The refusal to be successful was in the background of several anarchist educational projects already in the nineteenth century, including the Spring Hill com-

28. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 43.

29. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (1970), [www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich/Deschooling/intro.html](http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich/Deschooling/intro.html).

30. Marianne Enckell, *Le Refus de parvenir* (Montpellier, France: Indigène éditions, 2014), 5.

munity animated by Josiah Warren who, in his 1820s *time stores*, revisited Robert Owen’s notion of labor vouchers. The “time store” was meant to break down the hierarchy of production processes through a distribution system where products were paid for according to the working time employed to make them. Pendant to the “time store” was the belief that salaries should not be based on the function performed by the worker, but on the working time devoted to the task. If the specialization of work justified long and badly remunerated apprenticeships with the promise of accessing privileged knowledge that would guarantee a specialized job, Warren’s proposal was to imagine an organic worker who could fulfill different tasks and therefore be more able to face financial crises. Accordingly, the Spring Hill educational program proposed a time exchange scheme between students and teachers, based on the idea that “if we would have children know and claim for themselves the proper reward of labour in adult age, we must give them the proper reward of their labour in childhood.”<sup>31</sup>

Other anarchist pedagogical experiments include American versions of the Modern School inspired by the Catalan educator Francisco Ferrer Guardia. Designed between 1910 and 1960, these educational projects follow the principle of learning by doing, where intellectual and manual tasks are equally essential. Renouncing the pressure to be successful, the Modern School focuses on the free exchange of ideas at conferences and debates, and is disseminated through the pages of self-produced publications. Times and methodologies of learning are induced by the learner, with respect to which the teacher positions him- or herself as just another learner who facilitates and encourages the exchange.

An important element of the Modern School is that its mandate emanates from the community—and in this specific case, from the colony—in which the educational project takes place. In this sense, the Modern School is nourished by its educational program as well as by its continuous exchange with the social situation of which it is both agent and effect.

31. William Bailie, *Josiah Warren: The First American Anarchist* (1906), [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bright/warren/bailie.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/warren/bailie.html).

This same spirit led, between 2002 and 2003, to discussions regarding the Popular University of Social Movements (PUSM) proposed by the Brasília-based activist Boaventura de Sousa Santos during the World Social Forum. The objective of PUSM is not to educate the leaders of social movements, but rather to create an environment in which antihegemonic knowledge useful to social transformation can be processed, discussed, and archived for future reference. The PUSM project is based on the observation of two fundamental lacks in the institutional academic system. First, while not denying that radical forms of knowledge can emerge within the university, nonetheless such knowledge will inevitably be affected by traditional criteria of rigor and relevance. Second, the opening to truly alternative theoretical positions and transdisciplinary approaches will necessarily be reduced to academic department logic.

Moreover, the differences between PUSM and traditional universities rely on two different visions of the relationship between theory and practice. The knowledge that interests PUSM prompts to action, as it is produced and discussed in the context of political and social urgency. In this sense, as de Sousa Santos highlights, there is a need for a theoretical position that enables one “to think analytically on the (social movements practices) and clarify their methods and objectives.”<sup>32</sup>

For this reason, PUSM is organized as a network of knowledge whose program develops from the methodological and policy issues raised in the daily practice of the movements. The sites where seminars and workshops take place affect the nature of the issues discussed and are determined by meeting opportunities. The temporality of the PUSM program is dilated and alternates regularly spaced moments of encounter with sharing moments responding to demands from the current social debate.

The example set by anarchist schooling and deschooling projects reemerged in UK alternative educational projects

32. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (Zed, 2006), 149, [www.boaventuradesousasantos.pt/pages/pt/livros/the-rise-of-the-global-left.php](http://www.boaventuradesousasantos.pt/pages/pt/livros/the-rise-of-the-global-left.php)

between 2009 and 2010. In response to budget cuts made by the Cameron government to the detriment of British universities, independent universities arose in the context of campus protests. If 1968 inspired the shape of the teach-in and the free occupation of university spaces, the British strikes were based on the model of the “teach-out.” Already explored by the Occupy movement and more recently by Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, the teach-out is a sustainable and local initiative that aims to foster debate and exchange of ideas in public space. Its basic infrastructure is constituted of temporary libraries, debate situations, and common writing boards as well as social media. Its desire to remain outside the academy is a statement about the privatization of the higher educational system that, in view of the increase of tuition fees, is effectively growing increasingly private due to the limitation of its accessibility.

The new rise of alternative higher education programs implies that public universities are today counterbalanced by two options: on the one hand, the expensive private university, whose program is determined exclusively in the labor market, and on the other, a completely public university that does not require tuition fees, and whose program is defined by the desire of the students who participate in the educational project together with the teachers.

Among these numerous experiments, three types of alternative universities seem to elaborate in a particularly inventive way the heritage of 1960s radical pedagogies:

1. *Mixed associations of academics, students, and citizens who create an alternative degree outside the university.*

Exemplary in this respect is the work of the Social Science Centre, founded in 2010 in Lincoln, England. Designed as a non-profit cooperative, it is an autonomous and self-funded association of teacher-scholars and student-scholars that is supported through donations from members who may, without obligation, donate the equivalent of one hour of their monthly salary. The school curriculum incorporates a system of academic degrees,

albeit radically renewing the regular university curriculum. Following the model of workers' schools, titles are long-lasting and allow student-scholars to define the time of their studies on the basis of their research: up to six years for a bachelor's degree, against the three required by universities; up to four years for a master's degree; up to eight years for the PhD. The qualification is replaced by a portfolio that specifies the intellectual accomplishments of the student-scholar. Specializing in social sciences, the Social Science Centre hopes to create other centers focusing on different disciplines but based on the same values of "sustainable and resilient forms of higher education."

The horizontal construction of the academic degree was also practiced by the Free University of Liverpool within its BA in cultural praxis, interestingly mixing up academicians and artists at a time when in France and Switzerland the relationship between universities (*hautes écoles universitaires*) and universities of applied sciences and arts (*hautes écoles spécialisées*) was a crucial issue.

*2. The focus on the relationship with the local community and the public nature of learning spaces has led alternative universities to critically reflect on the architecture of the class.*

From the experience of the Tent City University, a site for learning and protest developed by Occupy London, up to the Space Project of the Really Open University in Leeds, the leading rule is to develop a flexible structure that is partly nomadic (and therefore movable within the city) and partly situated in a regular meeting place. Plus, inevitably, digital platforms—blogs, Tumblr, shared calendars, Facebook pages—are used as a way to share information, texts, bibliographies, and audiovisual materials. The transparency of the structural organization of the educational project is a first essential step for the educational program to be shared. Besides the opening to digital platforms, the pedagogical activity, fiercely sustainable and local, takes place through physical encounters. At times when MOOCs (massive open online courses) are experimenting with education and distance

learning on a global scale, free universities bring offline one-to-one communication models that first emerged within digital cultures.

In independent academies, the relationship with the local community further invites comparison with universities on grounds of the sustainability of the big-campus model. The attitude of community-based alternative pedagogy contrasts with the decentralization of universities to peripheral areas that emerged in 1990s Europe as an antidote to the academy mass. Responding to the shortage of classrooms, several urban universities displaced teaching and sometimes also research activities from their headquarters to outside branches. Often proving less attractive than the central university, in particular because of the reputation of the faculty, with few exceptions the branches were quickly perceived as second-class universities and as a consequence of this, the practice of regional decentralization was abandoned. Since the end of the 1990s, the decentralizing trend has come back, but this time on an international level. With a peak in 2008, the opening of satellite campuses in Asia and the Middle East has become a major business for Western universities. This academic Guggenheim effect reflects a trend in other cultural institutions, such as museums, that are equally franchising methodologies and knowledge to so-called developing countries—a point that has provoked criticism about the risk of cultural imperialism and the privatization of the university mission.

*3. The notion of digital space as a network of knowledge linking together community-based and site-specific experiences.*

This position shows a direct link with the learning webs imagined by Ivan Illich in the 1970s, a period during which several other utopias of open knowledge emerged. Since the early 1990s, with the establishment of the World Wide Web, these utopias have given rise to a broad debate on intellectual property and the notion of scholarship. Following the introduction of bibliometrics, the limitation of peer review-

ing to an elite of scholars was further stiffened in contrast with platforms such as Wikimedia, which are premised on community-based peer reviewing and full accessibility of the research. In this context, the DIY learning culture promoted by alternative universities is extended, though more episodically, also to research activities that seem to be focused, for the time being, especially on the critical recollection of the recent history of the twenty-first-century social movements. Their pressure on the academic system has nonetheless provoked a scholarly response, particularly with the discussion about “participatory action research,” a methodology that includes civic engagement among research strategies and invites academics to develop research activities in collaboration with the community, where the latter is seen as a researcher-subject, and not as an object of inquiry.<sup>33</sup>

### Research, Open Access, Digital Cultures: the Problem with the Humanities

**research** *noun* /rɪ'sə:tʃ/

the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions:  
*The group carries out research in geochemistry medical research, and he prefaces his study with a useful summary of his own researches.*

*Example sentences:*

- The fact is that medical research is not concerned with the welfare of animals, and nor should it be.
- A place for qualitative research in systematic reviews now seems established.

**open access**

availability to all: open access to scientific and technological information

33. Alice McIntyre, *Participative Action Research* (London: Sage, 2007).

*Example sentences:*

- A system where users of a library have open access to bookshelves.
- Most holdings are on open access and require no retrieval by library staff.

**digital humanities**

The digital humanities is an area of research, teaching, and creation concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities. Developing from the fields of humanities computing, humanistic computing, and digital humanities praxis (dh praxis), digital humanities embraces a variety of topics, from curating online collections to data mining large cultural data sets.

I recently read *Una Ikea di Università* again, after eleven years. When Maurizio Ferraris gave a conference by the same title at the University of Torino, I was about to graduate in Northern American literature with a dissertation on contemporary art. I was the precise target of his conference, one of those students in Scienze della Comunicazione that Ferraris defined, through a misquote, “surface navigators.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet whereas some of my colleagues found his position conservative and discriminatory, I went to the conference as an undercover supporter. I had made a point of dissociating myself from our Frankenstein-like study plan that mixed up sociology, semiotics, marketing, history, linguistics, history of science, philosophy, cognitive psychology, and a number of other optional teachings, totaling thirty-five different disciplines.

Scienze della Comunicazione was simultaneously a post-1968 experiment and a laboratory for the Bologna Declaration that provided a first institutional alternative to old-school humanities and gladly welcomed the digital humanities discourse. Students who followed the Bologna Process cursus in an orthodox way may have been taught one research methodology per

34. Maurizio Ferraris, *Una Ikea di università*.

exam. This plurality of approaches was sold as “versatility,” something the job market would have valued. Unconvinced by this argument, some students forced the curriculum out of its multiple-personality syndrome and signed up for an extensive specialization in “old fashioned” disciplines: aesthetics, contemporary history, Northern American literature and history, contemporary art. Instead of sticking to the “professional profiles” proposed by our university, they opted for a knowledge plan.

Around 1995, all higher educational institutions in Italy became scienze (sciences) of something. The ISEF (Institute of Physical Education) became Scienze motorie (motoric studies), and other new departments were created to meet professional needs. Ferraris wittily summarized this change in a three-phase chronology:

Phase 1 (1960s–70s): Cinema enters the university. There is a new art to teach, therefore new chairs of cinema history are established.

Phase 2 (1980s): Universities enter cinemas. The increased number of students causes a shortage of classrooms, and courses are taught in cinemas and theaters.

Phase 3 (1990s): Cinema reenters the university. Student enrollment decreases, there is no more need for cinemas, but to get someone in the classroom it becomes necessary to invite pop stars such as Claudia Koll.<sup>35</sup>

Phase 1 finds a literary parallel in a couple of academicians at the center of Alison Lurie’s campus novel *The War between the Tates*.<sup>36</sup> Confronted with the emergence of youth culture in the 1960s, Erica and Brian Tate try to deal with the language gap separating their department position (and their lives) from the alternative culture practiced by their students and children. Phase 2 corresponds to the mass inclusion of popular knowl-

35. Ibid., 94–95.

36. Alison Lurie, *The War between the Tates* (New York: Random House, 1974).

edge in universities, as parodied in Jack Gladney’s experience as head of the Hitler Studies department in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: “The teaching staff is . . . here to decipher the natural language of culture, to make a formal method of the shiny pleasure they’d known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods—an Aristotelism of bubble gum wrappers, and detergent jingles.”<sup>37</sup> Phase 3 may be compared to the protagonist A. M. Homes’s *May We Be Forgiven*, the Nixon scholar Harry Silver, who is dismissed from his functions like a contemporary Willie Loman in favor of a young scholar in future studies who gets better student evaluations.<sup>38</sup> We are now traversing Phase 4, and the new Jack Gladney may be a professor of digital humanities. In order to reduce infrastructure costs, his introductory courses may be soon broadcast exclusively via MOOCs. A hybrid version of YouTube tutorials and 1990s distance-learning academic experiments, MOOCs will probably substitute for class presence and face-to-face teaching in “introductory courses.” Each MOOC module includes an extremely limited bibliography and assignments are reviewed by pairs, without direct intervention of the teaching staff unless in the moderation of the forum discussion. The teaching format will be defined by available technologies. We are far away from participative platforms such as aaaaaaarg.org, open to free book sharing and collective bibliography making.

In the long term, Gladney’s classroom time will probably be devoted only to advanced students more directly connected with research. And the teaching subject of Gladney, “digital humanities,” the later evolution of new media studies, will provide at the same time the means for disseminating knowledge and research questions. The circle is complete, and at this point for Gladney, the distinction between fundamental and applied research is no longer necessary.

In the introduction to his book *Electronic Monuments*, Gregory L. Ulmer quotes an official definition of fundamental

37. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Penguin, 2009), 9.

38. A. M. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012).

research in the humanities: “No research paper can solve the problem of 9/11, but good research may give us knowledge that helps us solve it. So write your paper not to solve the problem about 9/11, but to solve the problem that there is something about 9/11 . . . that we need to know before we can deal with it.”<sup>39</sup> Ulmer criticizes the misunderstanding that research provides practical solutions to problems, as in applied research. He assumes that the distinction between these two research practices still makes sense, even though the new humanities disciplines such as “digital humanities” blur the borders between what is meant to solve specific problems and what is meant to focus on the big picture. The two positions are easier to distinguish in the sciences than in the humanities. However, humanities are today also joining the notion of applied research through their inclusion in a new academic body that emerged in Europe after the Bologna Process, the *hautes écoles spécialisées* (universities of applied sciences), claiming a specific position based precisely on applied research. We read in their statements that “universities of applied sciences and arts’ research generates knowledge and puts it to effective use.” If this is the distinction between applied and fundamental research, we may infer that pure research does not “put knowledge to effective use.”<sup>40</sup> But when it comes to the humanities, what do we mean by effective use?

Of course, the two definitions mentioned above are far from satisfactory, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning them because the terms of this discourse affect the current reflection on research. One of the reasons why it is difficult to distinguish pure and applied research from a theoretical perspective is the fact that this distinction was imposed politically and from the outside, without a real intellectual debate that would allow us to clearly name the purposes of either. If conceptually “the two research types” appear very similar, financially it is evident that one would expect applied research to put in place collabo-

39. Leaflet of the Western Switzerland University of Applied Arts and Sciences.

40. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Electronic Monuments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

rations with partners in the field—a situation that could actually also benefit fundamental research, relegated to the stereotype of being only indirectly connected to daily experience and far from practical objective. Yet, define “practical.”

The confusion aroused by the Bologna Process in European research reflects similar questions outside Europe. The convergence of new and old research subjects in similar if not identical fields is certainly responsible for the impasse. If within schools traditionally considered to be practice-led the research turn meets enthusiasm but also a number of detractors, the university is clearly determined to preserve its monopoly on research activities. The position is still too unclear to be discussed in detail, but it can be analyzed in relation with the cultural impact that digital technologies have exercised on the opportunity to consider research a protected field.

The problem is that while we focus on idle definitions of pure and applied research, we lose sight of the main issue—that is, the development of a research ethics that can be shared with anyone, academic or not, who meet the requirements of scholarship, independence of thought, and knowledge needed. The basic observation is that today’s universities remain a privileged site for research, although they can no longer claim a role as sole author of knowledge at a time when, paradoxically, a Wikipedia entry is more widely peer reviewed than a scientific article.

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