

# From Court Life to Cartel Life: Thought's Freedom

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In the spring of 1827, the Prussian naturalist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), after experiencing more than three decades of unfettered exploration, free-thinking, and global adventure, was ordered back from his footloose endeavors to a dreary, militarized Berlin by Friedrich Wilhelm III. This unhappy and untimely recall from the king was issued for a single purpose—to force Humboldt, who, next to Goethe, was the most famous intellectual of his day, to take up his showcase position as “court chamberlain.” For Humboldt, who most recently had been enjoying a cosmopolitan life in Paris and London, this meant not only an end to his geographical journeys, but an end to his intellectual explorations as well. “Court life,” he wrote “robs even the most intellectual of their genius and freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Wilhelm III's Prussia, more specifically Berlin, was exactly what Humboldt had sought to avoid—a “police state” in which public gatherings, as well as scientific meetings, were viewed with deep suspicion.<sup>2</sup> For the architect of an educational system and founder of an academic institution, a school for miners, Humboldt saw this state sponsored pall over a rich intellectual tradition as deeply troubling.<sup>3</sup> By using his fame and enormous influence with Wilhelm III, however, Humboldt managed to partially re-invigorate the failing educational environment in Berlin, convincing the king to invest in science and exploration<sup>4</sup> and to allow a modicum of intellectual inquiry. As much as Humboldt enjoyed a quasi-revitalized intellectual scene, he was still very much aware of the limits of “court-directed-thinking.”

Although Humboldt was later able to return to his geographical

explorations, most notably in Russia, he nevertheless was aware that thinking and basic intellectual inquiry required the court's sanction. It was only when he broke from his strict travel itinerary that he was able to experience unconstrained inquiry or thinking without the requirements and limitations of the royal court—the expectation of “thought-in-service” to the king. Humboldt's persistence in free thinking became his legacy. In many ways, he was the most influential circumscribed “independent scholar” of his era, which makes his predicament as a court chamberlain a worthwhile example to consider for the status of intellectual freedom today.

While the royal court, historically, preserved and advanced its own narrow political interests by forcing thinking into subservience, its once celebrated power has migrated in the (post) modern era to generic state or agency sponsored and directed inquiry, Althusser's “ISA's.” The royal court, in other words, has been replaced by academic apparatuses or cartels, interarticulated, transactional private and public systems that preserve and advance “servitude-based” discourses. The court and cartel, while historically different, share the need to direct intellectual inquiry away from their own structures of power, which need to remain invisible to function, and toward precise interest outcomes. Today's “court chamberlains” are the thought “trend-setters” or those who form academic cartels that directly and indirectly constrain and delimit inquiry.

“Cartel-work,” I will argue, takes shape in the space of publication or the general space of making discourse public. Sometimes what appears to be cartels at work is just the function of careerist, transactional academics looking to find celebrity and favor, e.g. “opportunity traders.” While prevalent and destructive to the intellectual community in the long run, it is rather low stakes. The greater threat to non-subservient inquiry, I'll argue, is found at the institutional or apparatus level, the manipulated, closed networks for making discourse public. For example, university presses, the primary distributors of disciplinary knowledge, often make a decision to publish scholarship based on a manuscript's engagement with what is “on-trend”—the “cookie-cutter” or “show-n'-tell” or “quote-n'-dote” text. Moreover, some university presses direct series editors to reel in celebrity academics as “in name only, for marketing” co-editors or contributors. As a business strategy this is understandable—these individuals significantly drive sales and, perhaps, even contribute to the wider discussion. However, when book series seemingly only exist to drive celebrity academic culture, it results in a high cost to scholarly inquiry. “Celebrademic” dominated fields of study eclipse inquiry based scholarship and lead to the production of “commentary-scholarship,” which paves the way for discourse cloning (not the “cloning” described by François Laruelle.<sup>5</sup>)

Think, for instance, of the many books that are published which simply “read” for the reader—catering to the needs of Jean-François Lyotard’s “bad reader”<sup>6</sup> ...one who needs to be “read to” and not think. This genre proliferates academic publishing. The problem with it, however, is not that it just reads for the reader; it reads for the reader in very particular and non-disclosed ways—these texts, for instance, may explicate the thought of a “significant figure” or simply “rehearse” it, but rarely, if ever, do the authors ask the question, the “figure” according to whom and for whom or what, exactly? Deleuze rightfully upended this genre with his critical “betrayals” of Kant, Nietzsche, Hume, and Spinoza. Derrida, too, in *Archive Fever*<sup>7</sup>, taught an important lesson about the incomplete Freud. But what about the “incomplete Derrida”? “Incomplete Deleuze”? The two major figures today, along with Foucault, who very often fall, “completely,” into the space of a cartel and who are used as a platform for constricted thought? If these figure based texts are about advancing the so-called “purity” or completeness of a figure or demonstrating fealty to a trope, then other texts, which “clone” discourse also may be driven by the expectation of disciplinary or methodological “etiquette,” which usually means non-theoretical, replicating inquiry.

If what is designated as thinking has spatially transitioned from court to cartel, then intellectual inquiry today desperately needs to produce “unsanctioned thought” or thought that is contra court and cartel—Laruellean inspired “cloned” thought perhaps. For this, we need new, non-subservient spaces for critical discourse, e.g., publishing houses, book series, journals, blogs, and other venues that can operate outside of the imposition of a cartel, namely its transactionalism. Like Humboldt, scholars today need to explore worlds of thought, not simply confirm the received ideas about them. Also like Humboldt, scholars today need to be informed by their predecessors, not obediently, sycophantically follow them or simply pay endless homage to them as a substitute for scholarship. Most importantly, the freedom to think today requires a *critical, liquid assemblage* of subject-respondents and discourses, a space of a global minority report, not a hard subservience demanding cartel directed by academic kingpins and neo-chamberlains.

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<sup>1</sup> Wulf, Andrea (2015). *The Invention of the Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 189.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Laruelle's concept of "cloning" results in the radical re-orientation of thought from a supposed fixed "posture."

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François (1988) *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, Jacques (1995) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.