

Suspending the Academic Space

Georgios Tsagdis

*“For the universities
are far from having followed
the progress of the academies”
— Étienne de Condillac¹*

Summoning a few reflections, at most provisional and topical. They salute an auspicious beginning. A journal is born, engendered under the genitive: ‘of Intellectual Freedom’. The genitive claims thus a space under interminable siege. A journal is born at the barricades of thought and theory, since one can never give freedom without protecting and shielding it. An ancient name of the shield is *problēma*, what is pro-jected before the vulnerable body. It is a name that invites the problems without which freedom cannot be defended, without which its name is empty.

For it is clear: today freedom is threatened most by those who speak in its name. Who dares question the lady with the torch of reason and progress? Yet who sees in her more than a lifeless statue? A universal assent to freedom has long become the constitutive banality of market capitalism. The liminal practice of thought has thus abandoned the oppressive farce unfolding around its effigy. Silence is offered to her as last tribute.

In this beginning however the genitive transforms every free utterance into an utterance on freedom: a guiding correspondence and a regenerative responsibility. It thus insists on *asking for* and *before, again* and *against, with* and *without* freedom. For the first and most telling sign of the ongoing repression of thought in the name of freedom, is the eclipse of the question. Increasingly, in the guardianship of academic publications, aside of the object,

the method and the depository of data-information, ultimately the question comes to be predetermined by the demand for secure knowledge.² Thus, the safest way to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis, the two reviewers who represent blind, decisive objectivity for every journal, is to scavenge the journal's latest 'suggestions for further research'.

Those bodies that undertake the construction and dissemination of knowledge certainly suspect the feigned innocence of the question. Yet, if even the last bastion of the question must be surrendered, where is thought to find shelter? Derrida, speaking of the French university in the late 1970s, exposes in a gesture of hope its benevolent naivety: "Since the question is not, it is believed, a thesis, it would not pose, impose, or suppose anything. This alleged neutrality; the nonthetic appearance of a question that is posed without even seeming to pose itself, is what constructs the teaching body."³ Can we say that much today? Do universities, any more than journals, allow students and teachers to ask questions? Which spaces admit the question and who is allowed to access them?

Academy, since the millennial Platonic experiment in Athens, has been the name of countless renaissances. From its Florentine recreation by Cosimo de' Medici and the milieu organized by Bessarion around the Vatican Library in the Quattrocento, to the modern national academic bodies of science, humanities, arts and even the military, academies have designated radically diverse, yet always highly exclusive institutions. Today, we might attempt a most inclusive definition, by designating as academic the total space in which an apparatus⁴ organizes a system of bodies and non-bodies such as universities, journals, publishers, conferences, societies, projects and so on. This maximal space remains exclusive through multiple (economic, sociological, epistemological, micro-political) resistances.

Where in the coordinates of this academic space lies the rift between continuity and event and how does this rift determine the questions that must be asked today? This is already a question that comes from the rift, a question that confronts the present with the rift, a question that sets questions in motion. Thus one keeps on asking: can this maximal academic space, fragmented and tense, afford sufficient space to thought?⁵ Derrida reads Heidegger's move from *What is Metaphysics?* (1929) to his infamous inaugural speech upon the assumption of the Rectorate of Freiburg University, the *Self-Affirmation of the German University* (1933), as a move towards a realization that the responsibility of philosophy, proceeding from the call of Being cannot be fulfilled within the university.⁶ Can we even fathom this insufficiency today?

In the ever-broadening margins of para-academia the call for a radical reformation or abandonment of the university, the copyright and the countless

barriers to participation and creative practices, has been growing ever-louder. Its protestations are muffled however by the din of the ongoing generalized war of all against all. In this state of nature, it is not an obsolete absolutism, but an evergreen liberalism that decries freedom as a fatal act of imagination, as the untimely luxuriation of fat cows, oblivious to the nearing wolves. Freedom of thought is thus subjected to the freedom of market, consumption determines creation.

It is not a completed process. As in the epigraph of the text, a certain lag, an anachronism defines the academic space. While however Condillac's call demanded an institutional acceleration to catch up with the pace of thought, thought seeks protection today behind the problem of this asynchrony, where knowledge is commanded to keep pace with the market. The spirit of the university, the spirit which philosophy and the humanities at large have always championed, hopes to be rescued by the inertia of its institutional body. This spirit is forced however out of the body, a body that has no space for spirit, forced thus to wander as homeless spectre. Its exile is more often lamented as tragedy, than augured as the fulfillment of freedom. Is it because at the moment of its departure the spirit realizes it was all along nothing but body?

At the same time, the body which ejects the spirit, weary of its inertia, undoes itself. It dismembers its constituents and delocalizes its functions (agile structures, condensed intercontinental degrees, online resources, international funds, worldwide digital exposure). Thus the institutional body becomes pure space, its virtuality becomes its virtue, the efficacy and force of the root *vir*. It wields thus a power at once overbearing and precarious.

Here we have thus the first cascading manifold of suspensions: between spirit and body, body and space, space and power, power and extinction. What we might call *the academic*, traverses the manifold, extends and reaches across the suspensions to define its space. This space thus does not define, nor is it defined by the *occupation* or *keeping* of positions (chairs, offices, campuses, or any form of *establishment*), but by an interminable oscillation between opaque pasts and incalculable futures. Thus space opens onto time, which carries the semblance of a tout court openness of the academic space. This openness however does not preclude exclusion nor does it entail a promise any more than a confrontation with a testament, the reminder of an utmost danger, a *difficult freedom*.

Countless suspensions striate the academic space. A few vectors might be arranged, in the following, around four interweaving foci: finality, reason, knowledge and censorship. In all four the Kantian moment is nodal—and one cannot revisit this moment without passing through Derrida's extensive engagement with the ensuing problematic.⁷

Beginning thus with the *telos* of the *academy*. What is the end of the university, of the production and dissemination of knowledge, what is its limit and destination, defining it from its inception to the present and future? Even: should such a *telos* altogether *exist*? Should it be singular or plural? And if this logic of finality is to be preserved, should it be located inside or outside the academic space, fall within the sovereign power that defines its territory?

Power, already before the institution of the academic space, has entered the question. It is the relationship of power and finality that determines the founding act from which the academic space unfolds. This founding act, primarily liminal and thus exceptionally exceptional, is not subject to the logic that it founds, not bound by the laws that proceed from it, being of a different order than the order it produces. Accordingly, “the foundation of a university institution is not a university event,”⁸ nor is the foundation of an academic journal a publication event. In each case, a horizon opens which must engage a power that exceeds it. Thereby this very horizon, the end of each part and ultimately of the totality of the academic space, is called to delimit this power. It is not merely that the power exercised in the founding act decides the horizon: the horizon rather emerges as the containing and suspending limit in the face of a power that constantly attracts the interior of the academic space to an outside beyond itself.

Power has been insufficiently thought *from the limit*. Rather, two positions have dominated the historical possibilities of this space to the present day. The first, accepts the higher order that is operative in the founding act as a necessary heteronomy. Employability becomes then the service the university promises to deliver, the marketing of knowledge becomes the function of publications. Research is placed institutionally in the service of oil companies, think tanks and the military. This is not without effects upon the scope, practice, logic, language and technology of knowledge. The creation of the Internet is only the latest of the products of knowledge under military guidance. This guidance has wrought nothing less than a total transformation of information. And if ‘information or informatization’ is what relates the *basic* to the *oriented*, the purely rational and metaphysical to the technical,⁹ the military, spearheading the creation of the Internet has effectuated nothing less than a total transformation of the relation of knowledge with itself.

Such heteronomy creates the manifest possibility of the most radical benefit and danger. Thus a second response running from Plato and Aristotle, to Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger attempted to neutralize the danger, while utilizing the potential of the mutual investment of knowledge and power. This utilization rested on making knowledge, in thinking and teaching, an end in itself. Knowledge should never be a slave to a foreign master, the academic space

should have its own law. This law was to be reason.

The autonomy of knowledge meant then that reason should be the finality, the horizon, of the academic space. The principle of reason became the guardian and guarantor of knowledge. Construed by Leibniz as the principle of *sufficient* reason, it meant at once that everything that happened had a reason as well as that for every truth, reason could and should be rendered (“*omnis veritatis reddi ratio potest*”).¹⁰ This rendering of reason implies an exchange, giving reason in return for truth, which sets in motion an economy of knowledge as much as a structure of power (*potestas*). This principle of rendering reason became the ground upon which for Heidegger the university and science at large was founded and built, that upon which they both still rest (*baut, gegründet, ruht*).¹¹ The principle of reason came to structure thus what Kant called the architectonics of knowledge. We read Derrida: “Reason adds no content; it organizes a system, coordinates and provides the organic form; it totalizes according to an internal principle. Architectonics, the art of the system, is nothing other than the theory of the ‘scientificity’ of our knowledge, since this scientificity depends on systemic organicity.”¹² Reason is thus the power of classification, ordering, taxonomy, which defines the structure and domain of knowledge.¹³ Accordingly, the whole structure, its legitimating legitimacy rests on the premise that a singular reason guides the totality of knowledge. This singular reason, the reason that must always be rendered, provides the systematic unity of fundamental knowledge and distinguishes it from empirically organized, applied knowledge.¹⁴ The latter never enquires upon the unifying power that constitutes its ground, but this suspension of enquiry, the silence of the question, is for Heidegger not counter-productive, but the very ground of academic productivity.¹⁵

The academic space was founded, structured and organized by reason, which continues to determine it in apparent and subterranean ways. The principle of reason was seen as the most intimate finality of this space, its proximal self-de-finition. Reason was taken thus to suspend power, since what is ordered by and of itself has no need or use for power. In that sense the Kantian project appears as an attempt to delimit the censoring power of the state, through the non-power of pure reason, a reason conceived as heterogenous to power.¹⁶ This hope however was from the beginning a lost cause—not only because the church, the state, and finally the market have always exercised a constitutional power within the academic space, but because power and reason are the two faces of Janus, the singular god of becoming and of the gates that lead beyond the academic space.

This is why “there is no neutral or natural place in teaching.”¹⁷ Nor is there a neutral place in writing, in asking questions, in thinking. There is no

neutral place in the university and yet the university must be the natural space of neutrality. It must shelter what cannot be sheltered, what is essentially exposed to a power that proceeds from itself yet exceeds its own horizon. Accordingly, Derrida will join in the critique of Schelling: "Kant is wrong to wish there were something like a specialized institutional place, a department for philosophy. Since philosophy is everywhere, one must not reserve a place for it. Above all, one must not assign it a place."¹⁸ Since the power that traverses and exceeds the academic space, a space structured by reason, cannot be made into a separate species, since reason must be common *within* and *without* the academic space, the suspension that pertains to it is not between a powerless interior and a powerful exterior, an exterior saturated with forces alien to reason, but that of a precarious balance of power, the power of reason over against the power of the military, the state, the market and so on. In this balance, the opposing sides share more than they are willing to admit: reason pervades every structure, every structure structures in immediate and unforeseen ways reason.

To disregard this fundamental relation of reason and power, to wish to abolish or even suspend the latter, is the primary danger for the academic space: "one step further toward a sort of original an-archy risks producing or reproducing the hierarchy."¹⁹ Thought must confront the danger of its power and assume the principle of reason that dominates it, while moving beyond it. Thought itself must become the suspension between *archē* and *an-archē*. "Between the two, the difference of a breath or an accent, only the *enactment* of this 'thought' can decide."²⁰ This enactment is the step that leads beyond the academic gates.

Indeed, the academic space as we still primarily regard it, a protected realm where the diction of the outside has *in principle* limited power and where reason becomes its own omnipotent-powerless law, is a very brief moment in the history of thought. Kant stands at the threshold of this transformation: "he is a "Dozent," someone who reaches disciples and whose qualifications are recognized by the State. He has a status, which is no longer the status that dominated in philosophy before Kant. Neither Descartes, nor Spinoza, nor Leibniz, nor Hume, nor any of the philosophers of the eighteenth century had such a status. Between the formulation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason by Leibniz and the Kantian Critiques, there is a sort of becoming-institution, more exactly, a becoming-state-institution of reason, a becoming-faculty of reason."²¹

We are witnessing the end of this era. The moment is slipping irrevocably from our grasp. What power could suspend its passing? What power, except for that of pure, unadulterated reason could desire a sempiternal *nunc stans* of this moment? Kant could hope for no more than the imaginary space he demarcated for thought. This space was meant to protect the freedom of reason that would

find its end in itself, useless and powerless outside the academic gates. “Pure reason should, by rights, exercise no censorship and should be exempt from all censorship. Now, this limit between reason that censors and reason foreign to censorship does not circumvent the university, but passes right through it, right between the two classes of faculties: the higher faculties (theology, law, medicine), linked to the State power they represent and the lower faculty (philosophy). No power should have a right of inspection [*droit de regard*] over the Faculty of Philosophy, as long as it is satisfied with *saying*, not doing, with saying the truth without giving orders with speaking *within* the university and *not* outside of it.”²²

Could this suffice today? Everything is at stake. The space which was no more than nominally realized, is no longer tolerated by its outside. At the same time, the university continues to remove ideas from the public sphere,²³ not in order to protect itself from the repercussions, and even less in order to protect the ideas themselves, but in order to exploit them all the better. The university becomes thus a closely monitored laboratory of thought where ideas are tested to their depletion in an airtight environment, where a speck of the outside implicates catastrophe.

Fredric Jameson understands this removal and consignment of ideas to a minutely supervised environment as a sectoral specialization in line with the maximal division of labour of late capitalism. The academic space accordingly constitutes the *Aufhebung* or sublation of ideas: “assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them”²⁴ This preservation-elimination decides academic productivity as much as the silence that enshrouds the ground of reason. They are both tropes of *Aufhebung* if the latter is to be thought as a non-progression with regard to itself, that is, with regard to the originary interrelation of *logos* and *physis*. Perhaps in both cases it is more appropriate to speak of suspension. What seems preserved-eliminated is in truth suspended: the question of the ground as much as sectoralized discourses are trapped in the permafrost of the poles of academic space, whence they might or might not return to thought, namely to thought’s essential exposition to the outside.

There are questions that these few reflections have suspended, while others have been altogether abandoned. The very question on the meaning of suspension has been suspended in order to facilitate the free-play of these thoughts. All along, two senses have been operative: suspension as withholding within limits—arrest and adjournment—and suspension as hovering across and beyond these limits. These reflections will then have reached their provisional and salutary destination if they have made apparent that the freedom of the academic space hinges on the inter-determination of the two senses.

¹ In Jacques Derrida “Where a Teaching Body Begins and How It Ends,” 84, in *Who’s Afraid of Philosophy?, Right to Philosophy 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 67-98; Hereafter, *Teaching Body*.

² As an alternative name for objectivity, the coupling of security and knowledge to the point of indistinction, assumes a primary significance in societies of discipline and in societies of control. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992), 3-7.

³ Derrida, *Teaching Body*, 89.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” 194, in *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-228. Cf. Matteo Pasquinelli, “What an Apparatus is Not: On the Archeology of the Norm in Foucault, Canguilhem, and Goldstein,” *Parrhesia* 22 (2015), 79-89.

⁵ Such sufficiency cannot be merely quantitative, as its archenemy is that determination of knowledge, which from Francis Bacon to Quentin Meillassoux has sought to exclude anything that cannot be reduced to number.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties,” 88, in *Eyes of the University, Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 83-112; Hereafter, *Mochlos*.

⁷ Derrida’s work on the university, on education and the formation of knowledge, of no less breadth and force than his lectures and writings on the animal, has received less than a fraction of the latter’s attention. Trifonas is faithful to the truth in the Derridean trope of hyperbole when he writes: “deconstruction is perhaps nothing else but the elaborate expression of a new didactics, a poststructural pedagogy of the text.” Peter Trifonas, *Jacques Derrida as a Philosopher of Education*, Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education (online). Cf. Edward Said, “The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978), 673-714 and the appendix of Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York: Random House, 1965).

⁸ Derrida, *Mochlos*, 109.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” *Diacritics* 13:3 (1983), 14. Hereafter, *Principle of Reason*.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Principle of Reason*, 8-10.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), Lecture Three, 17-24.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "Vacant Chair: Censorship, Mastery, Magisteriality," 57, in *Eyes of the University, Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 43-63. Hereafter, Vacant Chair.

¹³ All of Foucault's work is an exposition and exploration of this this power of reason, reason precisely as this architectonic power.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Principle of Reason*, 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Vacant Chair*, 49. Cf. Derrida, Mochlos, 105.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Teaching Body*, 69.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Vacant Chair*, 63.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Principle of Reason*, 18.

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Derrida, *Vacant Chair*, 55.

²² Ibid., 50.

²³ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals, American Culture in the Age of the Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3-8.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 200), x.