The University of Crisis

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the history of the university as a modern social institution through the epistemological framework of crisis. Starting from the historical understanding that the university has always-already been in the throes of crisis, and that such crisis (or crises) are cemented into the conceptual architecture of both the university itself and the inherently promiscuous nature of knowledge in society, this exploration of the university in crisis endeavors to show how crisis is as old as knowledge itself. Building on the insights of such social theorists and historians of the university as Samuel Weber, Bill Readings, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Gregg Lambert, my hope is to draw out from these writers the intellectual sustenance that is sorely needed (and largely lacking) in today's discourse on the "university of crisis."

> "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."
> -Paul Romer, Chief Economist of the World Bank (Rosenthal 2009)

Introduction

Is there a more ubiquitous concept in higher education today than *crisis*? A cursory search of Amazon.com, now the world's largest retailer of books (Farfan 2019), reveals nearly 300 titles that invoke the term alongside one or more of the academy's perennial problems. There are crisis books on the student debt debacle (Kirsch 2019; Mitchell 2021); books on the crisis of campus sexual assault (Wooten and Mitchell 2015); books on the crisis in academic labor and the "adjunctification"

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of higher education in neoliberalism (Bousquet 2008; Lorenz 2012; Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019); books that are now considered classics on the legitimation crisis of the university as a modern social institution (Lyotard 1979; Readings 1996); and, of course, books on the crisis of the humanities, of which there are far more than I could conceivably include in a single parenthetical citation (Davidson 2017; Jay 2014; Bérubé and Nelson 1995).

In 2019 alone, before COVID-19 brought colleges and universities to their collective knees, a slew of articles sought to call attention to one of higher education's many existential crises. In recent years, these kinds of pieces have at times appeared in response to particularly blistering events, such as when students at the University of Missouri protested race relations in 2015 (Seltzer 2018), or when white nationalist Richard Spencer spoke at the University of Florida and other major university campuses in 2017 (Bauer-Wolf 2017), or in 2020 when protests broke out on college campuses across the country in response to police killings of African Americans and the ongoing activism of the Black Lives Matter movement. At other times, articles appear that are think-pieces on some long-bedeviling problem in higher education, such as the increased reliance on contingent labor (Harris 2019), the university's sticky enmeshment in the performative logics of neoliberal capitalism (Brown 2019; Newfield 2008), or the ever-increasing bloat that has come to characterize higher education's managerial-administrative class (Devinney and Dowling 2020).

The sense of crisis that many associate with the contemporary university is not just relegated to academics and professional journalists, either. Recently, the Gallup-Purdue University Index 2015 Report surveyed over 30,000 college graduates in an effort to determine 1) whether graduates feel that college was worth the ballooning price of admission and 2) whether graduates feel they are well-prepared to find employment and economic fulfillment. Across institutions of all types (public, private nonprofit, private for-profit, and research-intensive), the report found that 50 percent of graduates strongly agreed that their degree had been worth the cost (Gallup 2015: 6). While this may seem like good news on the surface, the other half of college graduates did not strongly agree that their degrees were worth

the cost of tuition, and the level of dissatisfaction was highest among those students who graduated between 2006 and 2015; in the words of the report, these graduates were "significantly less likely than all graduates overall to think their education was worth the cost" (Gallup 2015: 6). Meanwhile, tuition rate increases continue to outpace inflation by a factor of three, and the total amount of outstanding student loan debt in the United States stands at a nearly-unfathomable $1.5 trillion in late 2020, according to the most recent data available (Baum and Looney 2020).

However, this article is not a laundry list of the various and sundry crises plaguing higher education. As this brief introductory review suggests, anyone with a reliable Internet connection, money to burn on Amazon, or a subscription to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* can find more than enough to read about the contemporary university's various ills. Rather, this article attempts to both understand the nature of crisis and trace this sense of crisis onto the epistemological structure of the university as a modern social institution. Starting from the historical understanding that the university has, in a very real sense, always-already been in the throes of crisis, and that such crisis (or crises) are cemented into the conceptual architecture of both the university itself and the inherently promiscuous nature of knowledge, this article endeavors to show how crisis is as old as knowledge itself.

For instance, it should be noted at the outset that the invocation of crisis presents the writer with an irresistible discursive opportunity to step back and pontificate, not unlike the rhetorical questions and "since the dawn of time …" statements that so often adorn the opening lines of our undergraduates' papers. The present examination does not pretend to be exempt from this sort of rhetorical opportunism. In fact, for illustrative purposes, I would like to consider the extent to which the present rhetorical situation—this article—participates in some of the same discursive movements as does much of the current crisis discourse on the modern university. Note the way the introduction mimics that which is characteristic of much "crisis" literature: from the highly self-conscious, grand style of urgent admonition—the "crisis is everywhere" move—to the much plainer, pedestrian academic

mode of examples, explanations, and plodding explications. In what follows, I will more closely analyze the appeal of what I will call "critical distance" as one of the distinct tendencies of the crisismode of discourse.

Building on the insights of such social theorists and historians of the university as Samuel Weber, Bill Readings,[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Gregg Lambert, my hope is to draw out from these writers the intellectual sustenance that is sorely needed (and largely lacking) in today's discourse on the "university of crisis." As misinformation, "fake news," and disinformation campaigns have come to characterize our current epistemological moment—alongside a global pandemic that may turn out to upend education in ways not seen in 100 years or more—we are now entering an unprecedented era for higher education and for the status of knowledge in general. How we respond to this critical moment may shape the future of the university for centuries, and we must remain cognizant that the university itself is not so ancient a concept that it cannot be radically altered or transformed. This could well turn out to be a good thing.

A Brief History of the University (in Crisis)

The rhetorical "irresistibility" of crisis is only part of the story. We should not overlook the very real human suffering produced by very real crises—student unrest, the decline of the humanities and the shuttering of whole programs and departments, sexual assault on university campuses, world-historical events like the COVID-19 pandemic, or even yet another *Chronicle of Higher Education* op-ed about students' lackluster writing abilities. However, we also should remember, as I will show in this article, that education, knowledge, and crisis have been yoked together for some time:

> Historians are fond of reminding us that the notion of a cultural crisis, as reflected in serious criticism of current educational practice, is hardly new. Indeed, they are able to furnish quotations dating back hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years that provide an astonishing resonance with contemporary displeasure, anxiety, and even horror over the present and future prospects of our educational system. (Purpel 1989: 1)

To understand the outsized role that crisis now plays in how the university looks, thinks, and talks about itself to itself and its various publics, we need to first go back to its formative years in the Enlightenment era to examine how crisis is baked into the conceptual architecture of the university.

The University of Reason

In the fall of 1798, at the ripe age of 74, Immanuel Kant published his final book. Titled *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, or *The Conflict of the Faculties*, the book was Kant's attempt to ground the idea of the university, which as the 19th century dawned was still a relatively new concept, in what he called *pure reason* and to lay out a sort of hierarchical plan for how it would function.[2] What most concerned Kant, however, was to give form and *reason*—in every sense of the word—to an institution that in the 1790s was just coming into its own. The university as idea and as institution had existed in one form or another since the Middle Ages, of course, and, before that, dedicated, centralized spaces for learning had been a prominent feature of Western civilization going back as far as the ancient Greeks. Sophists like the pre-Socratic Gorgias and, later, Isocrates pitched itinerant schools wherever there were willing students, while Plato instructed the offspring of Athenian elites as they nestled comfortably in the groves of Academe. In the medieval university, the seven liberal arts provided the disciplinary distinctions considered crucial to learning and human development, divisions that had remained mostly unchanged since Aristotle.

However, until the Enlightenment, the university, as well as its all-important connections to the state, to the church, to capital and commerce, to specialized guilds or workshops, and to its various publics, had for centuries been a mostly localized matter. The great English colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, for example, operated quite differently and with different structures than the cathedral schools on the European continent (Clark 2006: 3–30). In the various lands and regions that would much later become unified Germany, the beginnings of what we would now associate with the modern research university were just starting to take form as the 18th century drew to a

close.[3] In short, Kant was in the right place at the right time to begin work on such a project, and he was most concerned with providing a plan for this institution that would be essentially self-regulating and autonomous, free from the meddling influence of the proto-German state and the religious authorities of the day, while also existing comfortably within a changing Europe that was just beginning to feel the effects of both the Enlightenment and early market capitalism on its major institutions.

One of Kant's major contributions is to divide the university into the lower and higher faculties. The higher faculties—theology, law, and medicine—are so called because of their close relationship with both the state and religious authorities, as well as the general public. Kant reasoned that the threefold functions of the government and the church were to provide for 1) the eternal well-being of its citizens, 2) the civil well-being of its citizens, and 3) the physical well-being of its citizens, each of which corresponds to one of the three higher faculties (theology, law, and medicine, respectively). However, Kant (1798: 32–33) admitted that when it came to humankind's own preference or "natural instinct," the order was reversed, such that people preferred to prolong their lives first and foremost, then protect their possessions and legal status, and finally concern themselves with the promises of the afterlife. "[F]or even the clergyman," he wrote, "no matter how highly he commends the happiness of the world to come, actually perceives nothing of it and hopes fervently that the doctor can keep him in this vale of tears a while longer" (Kant 1798: 33).

In addition to serving as the intellectual instruments of state and the religious authorities, the higher faculties also take their direction not from reason itself, according to Kant (1798: 35), but from their texts: the theologian from the scriptures, the jurist from the law, and the professor of medicine from "medical regulations." This dependence on outside texts as a source of knowledge and therefore power places the higher faculties in a subordinate position to the lower faculty of philosophy, and what we would today call "the humanities and arts," because they are bound by the teachings and strictures of these written texts. The philosophy faculty, meanwhile, are at liberty to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to engage in what Kant (1798:

35) called "the free play of reason." To Kant, the medical faculty were closer in some respects to the lower faculty simply because their texts and teachings were drawn from nature rather than from either the religious scriptures or from society and the law. Medical professors, however, also are tainted, to a certain degree, by their reliance on the state to support their profession via the establishment of hospitals and dispensaries. They also are in a problematic position precisely because the general public is already so familiar with the benefits of their teachings. In fact, Kant viewed all three of the higher faculties as potentially problematic from the standpoint of their necessary relations with these powerful external authorities as well as with the general public. The lower faculty does not have these external connections, nor are they or their knowledge legitimated or authorized by any outside text, law, or scripture. Rather, the lower faculty are guided (and goaded) only in their dogged pursuit of pure reason, what Kant (1798: 43) called "the power to judge autonomously."

Again, Kant's basic idea was that the lower faculty of philosophers, who exercise and safeguard reason and who thus have no intrinsic content of their own, would keep tabs on the higher faculties through the inevitability of what he calls "legal" conflicts (Kant 1798: 53–59). Legal conflicts have to do with not only the freedom of the lower faculty to place before the general public and the state various disputes with the higher faculties, but indeed their *obligation* to "investigate … with critical scrupulosity" any principles, ideals, teachings, or propositions thereby submitted for examination—hence, the primacy of pure reason in his conception of the university (Kant 1798: 53–54). The task of the lower faculty of philosophers was to submit to the test of reason any utterance or enunciation by the higher faculties or even the state in some cases. What Kant called "illegal" conflicts applied to any conflict in which critical debate or scholarly discussion was either explicitly silenced or somehow threatened by what Kant dubbed "inclinations": fraud, bribery, or force (threats, whether implicit or explicit) (Kant 1798: 47).

It is not difficult to understand Kant's (1798: 55) paranoia regarding the theologians, doctors, and lawyers of the higher faculties and the forces of the state in whose service they often functioned. Kant

was well aware that conflict (or crisis) "can never end, and [that] the philosophy faculty … must always be prepared to keep it going." As Jacques Derrida (1992: 29) remarked in his reading of Kant's essay, the philosophy faculty must remain *vigilant*, since the "truth under its protection will always be threatened." As previously noted, Kant also believed that the higher faculties' expertise and empirical knowledge in these areas made them more popular (or at least more widely known) among the general public and the *intelligentsia* than were the lower faculty of philosophers.[4]

The fact that they were widely known by those outside the university, such as by alumni and former students, the general public, and the professional class, accorded the higher faculties a kind of prestige that the lower faculty of philosophy simply did not and could not possess. How often do the various crises within the humanities, which again is the contemporary term for Kant's lower faculty of philosophers, center around these very same issues of public visibility and understanding of *what we do*? How often are such crises predicated on a concern with the humanities not being able to demonstrate adequately to the public the practical uses of its teachings? (Jay 2014: 21–25). How often do crises arise because the world of commerce has little to no interest in what it perceives as the non–market-driven specializations of humanities faculty—the lower philosophies of English, rhetoric, art, languages, music, and, of course, philosophy proper?

As a contemporary observer of the university might put it, the higher faculties, the *intelligentsia*, and other technicians and business-people of the state do not speak in high-flown, abstract "theory" but in the language and with the logic of the people: a doctor fixes health problems, a lawyer fixes legal problems, and a theologian or priest fixes spiritual ones. Seen in this light, it makes sense that the philosophy faculty, then as now, would not have such public favor since, as Kant (1798: 25) wrote, "a faculty is considered higher only if its teachings—both as to their content and the way they are expounded to the public—interest the government [or the public] itself." Not only is the state largely uninterested in funding or otherwise providing for the lower faculty, but, generally speaking, so is the general public, as any number of English or philosophy majors will readily attest.

But this lack of state and public support is precisely why Kant entrusted the lower faculty with the considerable burden of being the spokespersons and visionaries of the university of reason. Aside from the crucial fact that in Kant's university the philosophy faculty also happened to be the guardians of pure reason itself, the lower faculty was largely "free" from the "external professional and civil constraints" that often distracted and could potentially corrupt those in the higher faculties. Hence, the philosophers of the lower faculty enjoyed relative autonomy and, as Gregg Lambert (2001: 16) pointed out, were therefore in the best or more *reasoned* position to "emulate the 'pure interest' of reason itself … [and] to found the principle of reason that guides or *steers* the course of the university in society." Their role in the university turned out to be more significant—or at least more central—than the higher faculties, and the lower faculty thus provides the ground for the whole of the Kantian university. In a decidedly Christian reversal, it is the "last who shall be made first."

Why this lengthy focus on Kant's university of reason, an idealized portrait of the university that most likely never really existed in any material form? One reason is that Kant's model university provides a kind of historico-philosophical watershed for thinking about the modern university in its earliest form. In fact, Readings (1996: 14) argues that Kant's plan for the university, undergirded and legitimated by pure reason, constitutes its first modern articulation: the "University becomes modern when all its activities are organized in view of a single regulatory idea, which Kant claims must be the concept of reason." Derrida (1992: 10) considered *The Conflict of the Faculties* to be "a kind of dictionary and grammar (structural, generative, and dialectical) for the most contradictory discourses we might develop about—and, up to a point, within—the university." Before examining Wilhelm von Humboldt's plan for the University of Berlin, or the "University of Culture," as it came to be known, and then the contemporary "University of Excellence," we should first turn our attention to the first crisis of knowledge, the crisis that gave birth to philosophy proper.

The First Crisis of Knowledge

The first crisis of knowledge—and hence, of what would come to be called *philosophy* (*philo* + *sophia*, or "love of knowledge")—appeared in the earliest Greek city-states. A crisis precipitated by the burgeoning technology of the early Greek city-form, whose exemplar is undoubtedly Athens, this early crisis was one of how to organize and therefore mitigate the sense of destabilization or contingency produced by the heteroglossic city-form. According to Lambert (2001: 84–85), the city-form was characterized by "its openness to a diverse and often heterogeneous mix of ideas, techniques, and specialized knowledges (or what [Jean-Francois] Lyotard calls 'language-games')" as well as by "the spontaneous aggregation of different techniques, products, languages, cultures, and gods." In other words, as people gathered together in this new cosmopolitan form, Greek cities became centers of trade and the exchange of goods, services, and ideas. The first crisis of knowledge was how to deal with this proliferation of new skills, ideas, techniques, and knowledges among a diverse population of city dwellers, as well as how to rank and order knowledge based on its usefulness, accuracy, and general accepted-ness or consensus. This is a centuries-old crisis that has reasserted itself in a different form in the digital (or "post-digital") era. Left to its own devices, knowledge is promiscuous and tends towards separation and dispersal. Not only that, but if it is not stored and maintained, knowledge can be lost altogether, either through being forgotten or becoming too dependent on the individual knower. Knowledge, therefore, must be stored and maintained, as well as made reproducible and public, a central feature that Lambert (2001: 77) cited as having "its most acute historical expression in the Enlightenment in the public character of reason."

The Socratic dialectic emerged as a way to deal with this epistemological "diversity," one that could be rendered sensible—and therefore civically or economically useful—by carefully forwarding, testing, and disputing rational propositions toward the ultimate end of higher Truth (*alētheia*). Indeed, Lambert (2001: 84–85) considered this crisis of knowledge to be the crisis at the origin of Western philosophy: given that the city-form makes possible and indeed actively invites, through the ongoing activities of trade and exchange, the importation

of ideas, knowledges, cultures, languages, and so forth, a method is needed whereby this precipitous increase in knowledge can be evaluated, ranked, transferred, and eventually put to some use for the city as a whole. In order to do this, however, the various knowledges represented within the burgeoning city-form first had to be circumscribed, bounded, and demarcated in their totality, which, as Lambert (2001: 84) explained, was formally conducted through a *census*—a ritual procedure of "illumination" in which "the high priest would circumnavigate the city once a year to signify the completion of a temporal cycle, as well as the circumference of the *polis* or demonstration of a privileged location of 'totality.'"

Shifting from a discussion of the *census* as an actual historical practice to its epistemological operation in a more "philosophical" sense, Lambert (2001: 84) conjured up the image of Socrates inquisitively perambulating the boundaries of Athens, citing this philosophical-*census*—or philosopher-as-censor—as an early strategy in the totalization of knowledge on which the modern university is founded. Conducting this ritualistic procedure, the philosopher-*censor* assumed the responsibility of evaluating and ranking knowledges, and was also, as Lambert (2001: 44) wrote, the one "who knows where such critical decisions concerning whether or not something counts as knowledge need to be made."[5] When the knowledge represented by the city had been determined in its totality, it could then be arranged, hierarchized, and assessed according to a scale of evaluation by the philosopher, who acted as an epistemological *censor*. Those knowledges most crucial to the ongoing health of the city were accorded the highest ranking and were then disseminated accordingly to the various citizens, orators, politicians, thinkers, and tradespeople (Lambert 2001: 85). (Perhaps the most explicit instance of such ranking is evident in Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.)

This ancient philosophical practice is pertinent to the present discussion because it calls attention not only to this original crisis of knowledge but, more importantly, to the codification of a particular *response* to such a crisis, embodied here in the Socratic dialectic. The crisis of too many competing knowledges—brought about by the sheer openness of the *agora* and the attendant intensification of

commerce, trade, and market activities—is met with a particular response, a "common measure" (*mensus*): namely, the ritualistic, perennial demarcation of what is known, literally of what *is*, in the Greek city-form (Lambert 2001: 85). Nicholas Lobkowicz (1967: 7n9) argued that similar practices also existed among the Romans, for whom the expression *contemplatio*, which derives from the Latin word *templum*, "originally referred to the place which the augur delimited as the field of observation relevant to the prophecy." Significantly, both *contemplatio* and *templar*—as well as *theoria*—originally had religious or ceremonial connotations, and all three terms are closely related either to the act of speculation or to the condition of being a spectator, whether at a fourth-century BCE Greek festival or at a modern sports arena. As Samuel Weber (2004: 3) noted, both *theory* and *theater* share the same etymology, deriving from the Greek *thea*, which, like spectator or speculation, suggests "a place from which to observe or to see."

Even though the modern university would not really receive a full, formal conception until the Enlightenment, Lambert (2001: 76) maintained that this tendency toward the totalization of knowledge, the impulse to organize knowledge into a "total configuration," is the "primary function of speculation" and of the speculative "master-narrative" in the sense that Lyotard discusses it in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Explicitly comparing the modern university with the Greek city-state, Lambert (2001: 86) wrote that in the Enlightenment, with its supreme emphasis on the public use of reason, the "university becomes the means of resolving the same problems of heterogeneity that the (Socratic) dialectic had been designed to solve for the Greek city-form." The "invention of the university," Lambert (2001: 91) noted, was simultaneously a means for the storage of knowledge in a "centralized location that is easily accessible for society" and a space in which knowledges are continuously assessed and "censored" according to the dominant interests of its administrators, disciplinary experts, knowledge-handlers, or the various forces of the state and commerce. These days, according to both Lambert (2001) and Lyotard (1979), the common measure through which this demarcation of knowledge occurs in the university is called

performativity—the academy's "new" procedure of epistemological le-
gitimation. But we must also remember the important role played by
another, quite similar strategy or mode of demarcation, one that is still
absolutely central to the operation of the academy: namely, the for-
mation and maintenance of disciplines and disciplinary boundaries/
knowledge(s).

For about the last two centuries, the dominant model of
knowledge-production in the university has been the individual aca-
demic *discipline*, an epistemological strategy, or "language-game," in
Lyotard's (1979: 9–11) terminology, for organizing knowledge that,
similar to the perambulating operation of the *censeo*[6] or the wan-
dering figure of Socrates himself, delimits, demarcates, and assesses
available knowledge through careful attention to borders and bound-
aries (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan 1993: vii). This is what
Thomas Y. Gieryn (1983: 783) has called "boundary-work," an ongo-
ing process through which the "intellectual ecosystem [is] … carved
up into 'separate' institutional and professional niches … designed
to achieve an apparent differentiation of goals, methods, capabilities
and substantive expertise." As a result of this continual process of
demarcation, disciplines cohere and emerge when "ensembles of di-
verse parts are brought into particular types of knowledge relations
with each other" (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan 1993: 3). To
be sure, these boundaries are always in flux, shifting here and there
or revising themselves along various lines, but insofar as academic
disciplines invariably strive for stability and stasis in their targets,
methods, and interventions, an impulse reminiscent of the ritualistic
censeo, they exhibit the constitutive tension between the drive for
epistemological totalization—the encyclopedic, "Wikipedia-ization of
knowledge"—and the attendant anxiety toward the unknown that
inheres in the speculative meta-narrative on which the modern uni-
versity is founded.

Once appropriately surveyed—and *surveilled*, in the Foucauldian
sense—knowledge must also be ranked, ordered, and hierarchized
on the basis of which knowledges are most critical to the life of
the city-state and the continued functioning of its dominant modes
of production. Hence, as Lambert (2001: 85) explained, embedded

into the first crisis of knowledge is an attendant concern with two principles central to the modern university today: "the encyclopedic form of knowledge" (the *censeo*) and "the speculative spirit, or what Lyotard called 'the speculative meta-narrative,' since the early dialectic submits all knowledges that belong to the city to a common measure, or 'language-game' performed by the philosopher." What "counts" as knowledge is always an open question, in other words, and the very form of the city-state presented a crisis in the proliferation of knowledges that inheres to this day in the basic questions of epistemology. This epistemological situation in society is especially acute now that we have entered the "post-digital" era (Cramer 2015: 13) and what Jay David Bolter (2019: 7–10) calls "the digital plenitude."

For Bolter (2019: 26), the chaos we are currently experiencing in the political biosphere is directly related to "the breakup of hierarchy and the loss of faith in education, in politics, and in the technological and scientific fields." In other words, the toxicity of our political ecosystem—and the larger epistemological breakdown that some have dubbed the "post-truth" era (McIntyre 2018)—is a result of an "anarchic media culture colli[ding] with social and political institutions that require shared assumptions in order to function" (Bolter 2019: 26). The same bedrock questions that animated the first crisis of philosophy of the Greek city-states all the way up to Lyotard's (1979: xxiii) diagnosis of the "crisis of narratives" in postmodernity inhere today in the era of digital plenitude: What counts as legitimate knowledge? Who determines what counts as legitimate knowledge? How is such legitimation measured, vetted, hierarchized, and understood? What is the relationship between the many diverse knowledges available in contemporary information ecologies and in the political biosphere and the legitimate knowledges embodied by the figure of the modern university? What makes these knowledges "legitimate," anyway? And just what should this relationship be? What is the totality of knowledges represented by the digital media ecosystem today? We will return to these critical concerns below in the discussion of the contemporary University of Excellence.

Following our historical trajectory, we might now more productively consider Wilhelm von Humboldt's plan for the University of Berlin, in which the nation-state and an attendant notion of national culture provided the university both with an extrinsic legitimating authority—that is, an entity or referent *outside* of itself—and its central organizing principle. That such a notion of culture could serve this dual function highlights the fact that this is a fundamentally different version of "culture" than that to which we are accustomed to speak about today. As Readings (1996: 64) explained, for Humboldt and other contemporary German thinkers, "culture" had a "double articulation": it named both an identity—that is, *Wissenschaft*, the totality or unity of all knowledge—and a process of development or *Bildung*, the growth or cultivation of character and the mind. For Humboldt, the university and the state are two sides of the same coin: whereas the university "seeks to embody thought as action toward an ideal," the state attempts to "realize action as thought, the idea of the nation" (Readings 1996: 69). The state acts as a powerful protector of the active idea of the university, while the university "safeguards the thought of the state" (Readings 1996: 69). "Each strives, synergistically, to realize the idea of national culture" from which both the university and the nation-state draw their authority and legitimation (Readings 1996: 69). More to the point for our purposes, however, the university becomes for Humboldt an institution poised within society to resolve *for* society the "crisis" produced by the dizzying heterogeneity of the totality of knowledge.

As Lambert (2001: 86) wrote of the relationship between the university and society, "the university becomes the means of resolving the same problems of heterogeneity that the dialectic had been designed to solve for the Greek city-form. It does this through its previously mentioned twofold function: 1) "to lay open the whole body of learning and to expound both the principles and the foundations of all knowledge"; and 2) "to orient its constituent element, science, to the spiritual and moral training of the nation" (Lambert 2001: 86). For Humboldt, as well as for Kant and other German intellectuals, the university functioned as a site for the encyclopedic production

and storage of knowledge (or data) as well as its deployment in the training of citizen-subjects. Universities in the United States pursued largely similar aims until the end of the Cold War, for reasons that will be unpacked in the next section.

Recall that for Kant, reason formed the ground of university operations as that which "gives the University its universality" (Readings 1996: 56). The founding of the university on Enlightenment rationality marks an important distinction between Kant's ideal university and the medieval universities of the 11th and 12th centuries. Whereas these earlier "proto-universities" were divided into separate disciplines corresponding to the seven liberal arts (whose authority could be empirically located and hence organically legitimated, Aristotle-style, in nature), the organizing principle or *raison d'être* of Kant's university is reason itself, which is "*immanent* to the University" (Readings 1996: 56). Reason, as an autonomous capacity or "faculty," does not therefore require an extrinsic referent, since its inculcation and practice is its own legitimating principle, and therefore the source of both its autonomy and immanence. What Lambert (2001: 10) calls the "Kantian architecture of the university" equates and hence legitimizes the autonomy of the university with the autonomy of reason, the free exercise of which was to be the domain of the lower faculty, which in Kant's era included philosophy and today would encompass the whole of the humanities. Again, referring to the philosophy faculty as "lower" is meant to suggest that in its disinterested pursuit of reason and free rational inquiry, it forms the "ground" or fundament on which the rest of the university is structured and to which the so-called higher faculties must publicly submit themselves for continual examination by the philosophers.[7]

For both Kant and Humboldt, as well as for other German thinkers, including Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, the operative question in each case was always *what* the university should or could be. Although the precise nature of what the university could be was hotly debated, critiqued, and discussed—and indeed on Kant's model it had to be—it likely never would have occurred to these thinkers that the value of the question of *what a university should or could be* was anything but self-evident and

axiomatic. This is no longer the case. Pointing to this at the outset may help explain why so many contemporary invocations of a "crisis of the university" are actually re-instantiations of the question "What *are* we?"—whether the "we" in question are the humanities, English, sociology, rhetoric and composition studies, or something else. As Readings (1996: 62) pointedly averred: "The reason it is necessary to reread Humboldt, Schiller, Schleiermacher, Fichte, and Kant is that the vast majority of contemporary 'solutions' to the crisis of the university are, in fact, no more than restatements of Humboldt or Newman." Not only do many such respondents seem ignorant of these important predecessors, but it seems either too difficult to contemplate or has not yet occurred to many contemporary theorists of the university that modern academic institutions might no longer have a mission, purpose, or idea—that is to say, a *what* through which they might be organized or defined.

Like Readings, Weber (2002: 220) traced this line of inquiry back to John Henry Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*, and asked whether today we can still speak of the university as having an idea of its own—that is, "whether we can take for granted that there still is a single, unifying idea effectively informing the institution of the university." Thus, as Weber (2002: 220) suggested, it seems that the more pressing question for modern critics, contra thinkers like Kant, Humboldt, and Cardinal Newman, is not *what* the idea of the university might be, but "*whether* such an idea still exists." And I would add, whether it *can* exist.

Historians have speculated as to whether the Enlightenment university was really an autonomous institution relatively untainted by "corporate values" or the hegemony of the "bottom line." Lambert's (2001) overview of the first crisis of knowledge suggests the shaping force of the market in the Greek city-states as a prerequisite for the exchange of ideas and competing knowledges. In looking back at the landscape of academia in and even well before Kant's time, Clark (2006: 377, 12) assiduously ferrets out numerous instances of what he terms "academic managerial capitalism" dating back to the early modern era, and his analysis meticulously indicates how "capitalist precision machines"—hand-in-hand with the ministerial

machinations of the state—have continuously rationalized and "re-cast academic life" and academic subjects since the origins of the research university in 16th- and 17th-century Europe. By the time Kant was writing his book on the university at the dawn of the 19th century, it would seem that the forces of academic capitalism and techno-bureaucracy we tend to decry so loudly today had been firmly entrenched, at least in a rudimentary form, for several centuries if not longer. But today, the modern university's enmeshment in contemporary global capitalism is far more complex than at the dawn of the 19th century, as we will see in the next section on the University of Excellence.

The University of Excellence

In a recent episode of NPR's *Fresh Air* from October 2020, co-host Dave Davies interviews Fareed Zakariah on the response of the United States to the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic. At the beginning of the interview, Davies cites an October 2019 analysis of countries best prepared to deal with a pandemic situation like COVID-19. Noting that the United States was ranked first overall, Davies asks Zakariah to chime in on how the Johns Hopkins analysis could have gotten it so wrong. Here is his response:

> It's a great question, Dave, because I think that one of the things that we need to understand when we sort of look at the world is that the United States has so dominated the world, not just militarily and politically but intellectually. We set the agenda. Our experts tend to be the world's experts. Our great institutions tend to be the ones that get to do the ranking and the evaluating. So we tend to have what I would call home country bias. So probably what happened with these models is that we looked at the amount of money spent. The US does fantastically on that. We looked at the greatest research institutions and public health institutions like the CDC and the FDA. We looked at the great pharmaceutical companies. And you put all that together and America looks formidable.
>
> But perhaps we didn't ask ourselves, what about access to health care? Does everyone have it easily? We do very badly on that. What about the ease with which you can collect data, you know, having a centralized data system that allows the government or any organization to figure out who's

healthy, who's not, who's had what tests, who's not. We do terribly at that. So all our weaknesses get glossed over, and all our strengths get magnified. I think that that's a large part of the story. And then, of course, there is the specifics of how the Trump administration handled this.

Zakariah's (2020) response perfectly embodied Readings's (1996: 21–43) withering critique of "the idea of excellence" so enmeshed in today's university structure. It also reveals with striking clarity the dangerous tendency within contemporary capitalism to claim superiority on the basis of hollow metrics.

Readings (1996: 21–23) began his discussion of excellence by analyzing *Maclean's* annual rankings of Canadian colleges and universities, which are similar to those produced by *US News & World Report* that have become so central to how U.S. institutions keep score and track their "success" in matters of institutional performance. The problem is that just like the Johns Hopkins analysis of countries best prepared to take on a pandemic, the rankings are based on metrics—like "excellence"—that are completely internal to the system of higher education itself. As such, they either miss the mark entirely or are ultimately meaningless when applied to reality. What good are billions of dollars in research funding if frontline healthcare workers can't get face shields and masks, as was the case in the earliest weeks and months of the pandemic? (Parshley 2020). Of what use are billion-dollar endowments if universities refuse to touch the money under any circumstances, much less to help offset tuition costs? (Pohle 2020). The concept of excellence as a marker of value permits these and other critical questions—questions that on Kant's model would be the purview of philosophers—to become yet another input/output ratio within a closed system of values. As Readings (1996: 22) put it, "[a]s an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential" since it refers to nothing outside of itself.

As we have seen in the previous sections, the modern university has since 1800 or so been conceived of by German Enlightenment thinkers as an institution that serves something outside of itself, whether the nation-state, culture, *Bildung*, or pure reason. The rise of "excellence" as the university's preferred standard of measure marks

the moment in history when, as Readings (1996: 39) wrote, "there is no longer any idea of the University, or rather that the idea has now lost all content." He continued:

> As a non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system, excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology's self-reflection. All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information. (Readings 1996: 39)

Excellence is that which "allows the University to understand itself solely in terms of the structure of corporate administration" because the nation-state and an attendant notion of culture no longer afford the university with an ideological function that would make sense within global capitalism. Furthermore, because the history of the United States is one that is structured by a promise or a contract based on exchange rather than one based on a shared notion of culture or ethnicity, Readings (1996: 33) suggested that excellence has found particularly hospitable environs in U.S. institutions. (Interestingly, Zakariah [2020] referenced the history of the United States on, essentially, the capitalist promise of exploitation and its founding distrust of governments a bit later on in the *Fresh Air* interview.)

Indeed, virtually everything in contemporary U.S. culture, from our uncritical celebration of the free market, to our distrust of Big Government, to our nostalgic love for the bootstraps narrative of personal responsibility and rugged individualism, to even our most deeply held conceptions of what it means to be "free," have been touched by the rise of a neoliberal fetishization of efficiency, cost-benefits analyses, and bottom-line fundamentalism (Brown 2015). The spokespersons of the contemporary university—namely, the modern administrative subjects whose responsibility it is to speak of and for the university and thereby provide it with a mission, a rationale, and an identity—adore the non-referential language of "excellence" precisely because it can be deployed with such ease *to say nothing at all*. "The point," Readings (1996: 32–33) wrote, "is not that no one knows what excellence is but that *everyone* has his or her own idea of what it is." One of the primary functions of the term "excellence" is to smooth

over potentially difficult—and often messy—substantive engagements with the immensely complex political, sociocultural, and pedagogical issues of our day.

Recall that what Kant called "legal conflicts" were particularly vexing questions that nevertheless had to be explored, debated, and responded to; for us, some of these questions or "conflicts" might include the following: What does it mean to learn or to teach? What is "the good"? What is a democratic citizen and which pedagogical program best ensures the reproduction of such subjects? Should this sort of citizen training be the goal of higher education? Or even more fundamentally: What precisely makes an institution of higher learning "excellent"? These are the kinds of bedrock questions—political questions *par excellence*—that animate so many of our crises today and yet are effectively swept under the rug through the administrative logic of the University of Excellence. The non-referential logic of excellence provides a kind of non-ideological escape hatch from the epistemological pressure of having to deal with—much less provide answers for—such difficult and foundational questions. And indeed, we no longer have the language to do so.

Conclusion: The University of COVID-19

The global pandemic caused by the novel COVID-19/coronavirus has exposed with renewed clarity the many crises of the modern university and its relationship with the society it serves. COVID-19 brought into full view the inherent contradictions between the time it takes to both teach and learn and the administrative logic of the efficient transmission of information, often reducing the richness of the former to the simplicity of the latter—this has not gone unnoticed by our publics. Because our terminology—"excellence"—is so inadequate to the task of actually addressing the sticky problems of the relationship between the university and its publics, university administrators have been unable to launch any substantive response to the charges that a college education is now just an expensive online commodity, the price one pays to try to enter the ranks of the middle class, one Zoom meeting at a time. The transition to fully online learning, hybrid models of teaching, and teaching via Zoom has called into serious

question—in several cases even ending up in court (Davis 2020)—the nature and value of higher learning itself. For years, the university has relied on the logics of excellence and performance to sell its wares to an unsuspecting public, cushioned by university campuses that resemble resorts more than spaces devoted to higher learning. The sharp rise in critiques and satires in the form of "Zoom U" and the "University of YouTube" suggests that the public is starting to catch on.

But the central crisis that underwrites all of this is the glut of information, misinformation, disinformation, and the post-truth hijacking of public discourse and public institutions in the digital era, a situation quite similar to the first crisis of knowledge explored in this article. What makes our current epistemological crisis so acute is that the modern university, unlike the Athenian city-state, lacks a critical terminology with which to meet this crisis at the heart of knowledge head on. Instead, we are left to grapple with the most insistent problems of our day, as well as the existential crises facing the university in the wake of this unprecedented global pandemic, armed only with the hollow terminology of the administrative University of Excellence and its attendant emphasis on neoliberal free market fundamentalism and celebrations of individuals as market actors.

However dire the situation, all is not lost. Like the Greek city-state and its invention of the censeo and the dialectic, new methods may rise out of the ashes. They have to. New values must appear from the ruins of the old ones. A quarter-century after Readings's (1996) trenchant diagnosis of the University of Excellence, where exactly does this leave us? Where can we go from here? What new form will appear on the horizon to usher in the new university? And what will such an institution look like? What will be its values?

There are precious few silver linings to be found in this viral outbreak, but as I hope to have suggested in this article, the history of the university as both social institution and capstone achievement of post-Enlightenment modernity holds several valuable lessons for how we might capitalize on the present crisis to transform the futures of higher education. While the last few months have derailed many lives, they have also highlighted several key features of the university

and its role in society. These are worth enumerating and reflecting on in more detail. First, in the post-pandemic classroom, we can no longer take for granted or as default the physical classroom meeting space. This will prompt us to continue to ask challenging questions about our pedagogy that get at the heart of what we do and how we see ourselves. Second, the university, as Lyotard (1979) persuasively showed and as others have argued since, is no longer at the center of society's information flows and credentialing apparatuses—another way of saying this is that learning, education, and schooling are no longer the sole provinces or products of the university, whereas at one point they were. Third, as a result, we as faculty can no longer afford, assuming we ever could, to view ourselves as the "masters of content," to use Richard E. Miller's (2016: 155) provocative phrasing. Instead, we must learn to be "masters of resourcefulness" (Miller 2016: 155). That is, what we can offer students in this new reality is to "model how to think in the face of an endless torrent of information" (Miller 2016: 155).

The time is also right to reexamine three crucial moments in the macro-history of the university to suggest ways in which the next iteration of higher education—the version that will emerge from this present crisis—can work to alleviate the claustrophobic malaise of neoliberalism and deal with the challenges and limits of online education in the era of what Bryan Alexander (2020: 3) calls "information plenitude." As scholars, theorists, and futurists of the university, our next step is to review this history with an eye towards how the post-COVID-19 era will not only open up new possibilities for teaching and collaboration across fields and institutions, but also to make the case that advanced digital literacy must become a central cornerstone of all higher education and effective digital citizenship. Three transformative moments include: 1) the invention of the printing press, and the subsequent availability of—and need for—print media of all kinds, which led to a print-dominant culture that lasted centuries; 2) the unprecedented investment in U.S. higher education represented by the GI Bill and the accompanying economic expansion that followed in the postwar era; and finally, 3) the opening up of the Web in the early 1990s and the subsequent explosion in digital media, online

learning, and the changing social nature of information and media in the post-digital era. This new era of the university demands a focus on literacy; specifically, what is needed is a focus on a special kind of literacy—a critical literacy of the complex systems that now run, structure, and govern our lives. James Bridle (2018: 2–3) put it this way:

> If we do not understand how complex technologies function, how systems of technologies interconnect, and how systems of systems interact, then we are powerless within them, and their potential is more easily captured by selfish elites and inhuman corporations. Precisely because these technologies interact with one another in unexpected and often-strange ways, and because we are completely entangled with them, this understanding cannot be limited to the practicalities of how things work: it must be extended to how things came to be, and how they continue to function in the world in ways that are often invisible and interwoven. What is required is not understanding, but *literacy*.

We must take seriously the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic, far from just another hiccup or one crisis among others, represents a fourth transformative moment in the university's long history as a social institution. Whether we recognize it as such and take the necessary steps to adapt in its wake is largely up to us and those who follow behind us, but the path forward is to recognize that digital literacy should now be the cornerstone of learning in higher education. That is, students and people from all walks of life and in all occupations will need to be sufficiently schooled in the workings of digital technology; they will need to be able to parse out the subtle distinctions between misinformation, disinformation, framing techniques, and propaganda; and they will need to be trained in basic meditative mindfulness in order to deal with the disorienting effects of both information overabundance and lives lived increasingly online. There is no outside to the systems that we have created for ourselves; the only way out of this present crisis is "through."

Notes

1. This article bears a tremendous debt to many thinkers, but perhaps most noticeably to the work of the late Bill Readings, whose masterpiece

The University in Ruins was unfinished at his untimely death in 1994 in a commercial plane crash. In particular, I rely on Readings's (1996: 14–15) narrative of the modern university in its three historico-philosophical phases: 1) Immanuel Kant's University of Reason, 2) Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Culture, and 3) the contemporary techno-bureaucratic assemblage of the University of Excellence. While my own analysis departs from and expands upon Readings's in several key ways, I feel it necessary to call attention here to the extent to which my own arguments are predicated on his pioneering work. The time has long been ripe for a substantive reconsideration of *The University in Ruins*, and I am pleased to attempt such a revisiting in this article as the backbone of my historico-philosophical overview.

2. In setting out his thoughts on the university late in life, Kant unwittingly inaugurated a practice that would become a kind of rite of passage for aging, mid- and late-career academics over the following two centuries, including such intellectual luminaries as John Henry Cardinal Newman later in the 19th century and Clark Kerr, the 12th president of the University of California, in the 20th century. Taking the idea of the university as their subject—the structure that had provided them with intellectual sustenance and lengthy careers— could be viewed as a fitting epigraph to a life well spent in the pursuit of disinterested knowledge, the dictates of reason, and impassioned intellectual exploration. Interestingly, and with a few notable exceptions (Horowitz 1988; Maimon 2018), women have been largely absent from playing a similar role as chroniclers or historians of the university-as-idea.

3. The extent to which U.S. universities borrowed much of their structure, form, and mission from the German research model has been painstakingly and thoroughly demonstrated by a wide variety of scholars, including James Berlin (1987) and Gerald Graff (1987).

4. The *intelligentsia* were, in Kant's terminology, essentially a class of university-educated businesspeople, civil servants, professionals, state agents, and government officers. Today we would call them the "professional middle class."

5. In this same passage, Lambert (2001: 43) refered to the infamous "Sokal Affair," suggesting that physicist Alan Sokal took it upon himself to perform the role of censor in a "single-handed mission to unmask the Potempkin [sic] village of postmodernism." I mention this here because I want to imply a connection between crisis and disciplinary knowledge that is central to my analyses: that disciplinary identity-formation "happens" through the continual *circulation of crisis*.

6. Émile Benveniste (1978: 481) wrote about the transliteration of the term *censeo* from a religious concept to one that is central to the functioning of both political and civil institutions (including modern universities):

we could content ourselves in translating *censeo* by 'judge, think, estimate … ,' but as sociologist Georges Dumézil has argued, [t]he technical sense of *censor* and *census* must not be a secondary sense but must preserve what is essential in the primary meaning: To site (a man or an act or an opinion, etc.) in its correct place in a hierarchy, with all the practical consequences of this situation, and to do so by just public assessment …"

7.   As Lambert's (2001: 74–86) analysis demonstrated, Kant's trick here is to make the lower faculty the "higher" or more central by explicitly articulating its position as one of subordinance to the higher faculties. One wonders what Friedrich Nietzsche might have had to say about this rather interesting value inversion.

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