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Miserable Priests and Ordinary Cowards: On Being a Professor

“Who would want to begin?”

Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991: 17)

Where I work, strong emphasis is placed on graduate education. As in many graduate programs, students are required to complete a seminar in which they are introduced to various aspects of the profession, to the language of advanced study and scholarly research, and to our discipline. The hope is to begin the process of their habituation to the institutional and cultural norms of academic life. A couple of years ago, it was my turn to run this seminar, and in what I now concede was a moment of gratuitous cruelty, I elected to begin by assigning several texts that cast critical light on the contemporary university, texts that attempted to measure the distance between certain historical but persistent ideals concerning the role, orientation, ethos and practice of the university and the material reality of what it has become under the auspices of neoliberal, technological capitalism. And so the students were treated to sobering accounts of the eclipse of priority on teaching by something that gets called research, the decline of the useless arts and humanities in relation to the useful arts and techno-sciences, the precariousness of contingent academic labour vis-à-vis the tenured professoriate, the erosion of the university’s independence of inquiry via a gradual assimilation of the priorities of the state and corporate capital and the collapse of collegial governance at the hand of executive administration. And they learned of the manner in which all of this has been accompanied by insidious discourses of excellence, accountability, leadership, partnership, renewal and innovation.

The effect of these texts was catastrophic, as the optimism, energy and purpose with which intelligent students customarily commit themselves to graduate education was systematically crushed in the first fortnight by a self-satisfied ass who had the audacity to make such a gambit from the extremely privileged and secure position of being a Canada Research Chair and tenured professor at McGill University. What was I thinking? Demystification? Reflexivity and self-

examination aimed at generating critical consciousness? The actual outcome was paralysis: this was professionalization as demoralization. I had wounded them and, when they asked me why, I did not have a satisfactory answer. I think I do now: I did it because I felt guilty, and I wanted them to share the burden of my complicity. Of course, they also asked me many good questions about the state of the university and the academy: is the university really such a *terrible* place (no); isn't this just a conservative, romantic, nostalgic lament dressed up in critical clothing (partly); haven't many of the reforms to traditional university faculties, disciplines, curricula and practices been good from the perspective of justice and equality (yes); aren't there significant sites at the university that escape or exceed the hegemonic logic of neoliberalism (yes, there are); isn't the university still one of the few institutional settings where something like independent and critical thought, even radicalism, has a viable place (yes, it's true).? But none of them ever once looked me in the eye and asked me the questions I dreaded: Where were *you*? What did you *do*? How did things get this way? Is it because you, *professor*, allowed this to happen? Is it because you did *nothing*?

And, so, an apology is in order.

Assuming diagnoses of the contemporary decline of the liberal, humanistic, critical, relatively autonomous university are accurate, what would it take to rescue the institution from its final instrumentalization under the auspices of technological neoliberalism, and to instead orient it toward what Ian Angus, in his recent and insightful book *Love the Questions: University Education as Enlightenment*, identifies as its rightful role as a place for “reflection with public significance situated at the contested sites of network society”? (2009: 132). Angus closes the book by suggesting that hope for realizing this possibility lies in “a widespread reflection and debate about the role of higher education in society,” in which a population that values “free thought” and “democratic participation”—a population made up of citizens, parents who worry about their children's futures, young adults who “crave ideas” and “older people” who want to “understand their lives”—will come to see that “a university devoted to the humanistic ideal is a part of that project” (133).

I would like to explore an alternative possibility: halting the slide of the university into ultimate instrumentalization and re-orienting it toward what Professor Angus calls “the humanistic ideal” demands not just public reflection and debate, but political intervention, specifically an intervention that would take the form of active resistance, led not by a public of citizens but by university professors. In what follows, I will try to measure the remoteness of this possibility.

Politics exposes power and joins questions about what is just and good to political judgement and action. To *politicize* is to expose the characteristics of power in a manner that demands response, to open matters of justice and the good to judgement by and among a plurality of people, and to act on the judgements that

arise from that exposure. For the most part, we live under conditions in which exposure of the sources and character of power and inequality fail to move us, in which fundamental questions about justice and the good go unasked by most people, most of the time, and in which the risk of political action is one that few people are prepared to take. Contrary to our fondest democratic imaginings, politics is not what defines a citizen in her daily practice; it is, instead, a burden that most citizens would rather avoid. In many ways, this is what contemporary citizenship is: a license to abstain from the burdens of political judgement and action.

Under these conditions, engagement in political judgement and action is not normal. Instead, politics is a pathological event that a reasonable person would normally avoid if she had the choice. Politics *happens* to us, it is not something we normally *choose* to do. Politics—responding to the exposure of power, joining questions about justice and the good to judgement and action—is exceptional, disruptive, antagonistic, risky and dangerous. Politics is like a sore that erupts on the smooth skin of democracy. Following Jacques Rancière, we might say that politics tends to arise only in response to a fundamental wrong, a wrong that takes the form of a structuring exclusion or silencing, a basic miscount that produces an antagonism between the whole and the “part of those who have no part” (1999: 11). Such wrongs typically materialize in the structure of publicity itself, at the border between those who are counted as part of the public and those who are not. We might say that politics arises to refuse or contest the social, conventional and material inequalities that are institutionalized over and against the incontestable equality that is otherwise basic to our humanity. It is for this reason that politics is always threatening. Politics is not the realization of our innermost essence, and it is not necessarily joyful, festive or fun; it is work, onerous, dangerous work, work we would rather not have to do, but that we must do because we are moved by a wrong that is intolerable. This is how politics happens.

And this is one of the reasons politics does not tend to happen to professors in the context of the university: we do not experience what goes on at the university as a fundamental and structuring wrong by which we are excluded, brutalized or discounted. In relation to the university, professors are not “those who have no part” and we are not, for the most part, silenced. Professors like me take part—we play a part, have a part, participate—in the university every day. We teach and decide and consent, whether expressly or tacitly. And we speak and write, often critically, as I am doing now. Politics does not happen to professors at universities because we do not experience the university as the site of a material wrong, even if we disagree with how the place is run from time to time. This is not always the case: sometimes the university is the site of a wrong done to individuals—people who are denied the part that is due to them on unjust grounds such as race, ideology, gender or sexuality—and, in these cases, other individuals often become politicized, and take the risk of standing up with, or on behalf of, those who

have been wronged, to demand that they be counted.¹ But such moments are exceptional—their exceptionality is what qualifies them as political. Normally, there is no *collective* experience of the university as the site of a fundamental wrong that might move professors *collectively* to take the risk of a political intervention.² The university is *defined* by the structural *inclusion* of professors. Professors *count*. And so politics does not tend to happen to them, at least not there.

Another way to put this is to say that professors are not moved to intervene politically in the future of the university because the university as it exists is something they deeply *enjoy*, in the manner of Slavoj Žižek’s rendering of Lacan’s *jouissance*, or enjoyment. In her book on Žižek, Jodi Dean describes *jouissance* as “an excessive pleasure and pain, that something extra that twists pleasure into a fascinating and unbearable intensity.... Enjoyment is that ‘something extra’ for the sake of which we do what might otherwise seem irrational, counter-productive, or even wrong” (Dean 2006: 4). The university is the structure of the professor’s enjoyment. It is not just that we like the university more or less as it is and enjoy the material benefits, privileges, security and status that come with being a part of it. It is also that we enjoy the suffering or pain that we endure in order to be part of university. There is nothing that academics enjoy more than their suffering: careerist students who can’t read and can’t write and can’t think; colleagues who are lazy and insufferable; granting agencies that are biased against our work; incompetent, corrupt, bean-counting administrators; governments run by philistines. We enjoy them all. We could not live without them. Our suffering is what distinguishes us. And, in rare moments, our enjoyment of the pleasures and pain of the university converge: we get on airplanes and stay in hotels and stand in front of audiences and say clever things about how the university makes us suffer and then go back home and submit articles based on what we have said and add lines to our CVs and get raises for doing it.

Where, in the midst of all this, is there a wrong fundamental enough to motivate professors to act politically and risk undermining the structure of their own enjoyment? Even existential commitment to the “humanistic ideal” will not suffice, especially since we can enjoy even that, and enjoy its demise perfectly well by running around the country talking about it while *doing* nothing. There is even the possibility that those of us who fantasize about the salvation of the university might enjoy our ongoing failure to achieve it. As Dean puts it:

the very failure to satisfy desire can become itself a source of enjoyment. The circular movement of drive is enjoyable; enjoyment, in other words, is the pleasure provided by the painful experience of repeatedly missing one’s goal.... The nugget of enjoyment is not what one is trying to reach but cannot, it is that little extra that adheres to the process of trying. (2006: 6)

At this point, our enjoyment derives not from the achievement of our end—a university in which the humanistic tradition is recovered—but rather from an

investment in the very means by which the achievement of that end is perpetually deferred: the university as it is. As Dean writes: “enjoyment results when focus shifts from the end to the means, when processes and procedures themselves provide libidinal satisfaction” (7). This is the very formula for the peculiar and somewhat pathetic sort of conservatism that most professors, especially we critical ones, inhabit.

Recovering the possibility of the humanistic university requires something of professors that we are not normally situated or inclined to provide: a political intervention that would disrupt our own enjoyment of the university as it is. Politics of this sort is not something a reasonable person would normally choose to do. It is something that happens to a person, and a person has to have courage in order to be taken by politics when it does happen.

In his attempt to characterize the 20th century, Alain Badiou describes it as a “call to courage” that was haunted by fear, a fear that continues to stand in the way of most of us becoming political subjects. According to Badiou:

what immobilizes the individual, what leads to his powerlessness, is fear. Not so much the fear of repression and pain, but the fear of no longer being the little something one is, of no longer having the little one has.... We like our life to be orderly so as to avoid insecurity. And the subjective guardian of this orderliness is fear. (2007: 124)

The name Badiou gives to the subjectivity of fear is “ordinary cowardice,” a conservative, middle-class obsession with personal security defined by the reliability of our conventional identities, relationships, responsibilities and rewards—what he describes as “the routines of place and time”—however diluted these might be. Security is what the middle classes can count on, and very few of us, even those who count themselves as progressive, political or leftist, would actually be willing to wager it against the uncertainties of meaningful material change.

According to Badiou, “one of the fundamental questions is that of knowing how not to be a coward” (124). Courage is the opposite of cowardice. Part of courage is tenacity—holding on—in the face of an impossible situation occasioned by a wrong that cannot be tolerated. I have suggested that professors do not normally experience the university as the site of a wrong that would move them to hold on to justice despite its apparent impossibility. However, our experience of the university does promote ordinary cowardice, whereby we cling fearfully to the security of established regimes and their little comforts. It thus becomes clear that the possibility of politics demands a type of courage that is more than just holding on. It demands something truly *extraordinary*. It demands letting go.

As Badiou writes:

in the end, in order to cease being a coward one must fully consent to

becoming. The crucial idea is this: *the reverse of cowardice is not will, but abandonment to what happens*. What tears one away from the ordinary rule, from 'sedentary, static, orderly life' is a particular kind of unconditional abandonment to the event. (125)

To let go is to allow ourselves to be moved into uncharted and unpredictable territory. Becoming political is not about being a hero. Politics is not something that we will ourselves into but, rather, something to which we abandon ourselves. The joining of judgement and action in political commitment arises, Badiou writes, "not from a lucid decision, but from a special form of passivity, from a total abandonment to what [is] taking place" (125-26). We let ourselves become political by letting go of the security of what already is, in the face of our fear of the incalculable future into which events might lead us. Acts of resistance require this sort of passivity, this giving oneself over to the uncertainty of an untold future. The various discourses of risk by which we are surrounded in popular culture make us reluctant to let ourselves go in this way. And so we find ourselves susceptible to the appeal of what Badiou calls the "miserable priests": those pragmatic calculators who weigh the potential costs of resistance or action against its uncertain benefits, and determine that the risks are too great to bear next to the certainty of an anemic, but at least stable, present. "At the century's end," Badiou writes, "the priest is everywhere" (145).

Politics requires the extraordinary courage to let go, a type of courage that is rare in technological and democratic societies, perhaps because the security offered by life in the republic of choice is so satisfying for so many of us. It is especially satisfying for those of us who are professors, even those of us who make our bread by biting the hand that feeds us. We might recall here Max Horkheimer's 1934 observation that "a revolutionary career does not lead to banquets and honorary titles, interesting research and professional wages. It leads to misery, disgrace, ingratitude, prison and the unknown, illuminated only by an almost superhuman belief" (qtd. in Leslie 1999: 119). It bears mentioning that, in 1969, these sentences were reprinted on leaflets circulated in Frankfurt to protest Horkheimer's and Adorno's conservative response to the student movement. I am not sure I can think of many colleagues, including those who are very critical of the university, who would be prepared to let go of being a professor. I am not sure I am; in fact, I am pretty sure I am not. My point here is not to moralize, but rather to apologize: I am guilty. Professors, I am trying to say, are structurally discouraged.

What to do in this situation is not clear. It does seem that the professor's customary response to her own discouragement will not suffice, at least not if the issue at hand is the necessity of a political intervention in the ultimate instrumentalization of the university. The professor's customary response to discouragement is to retreat into the consolation of thought. It is, to use Angus's terms, a retreat into enlightenment. In the note on enlightenment appended to his text, Angus refers

to Kant's famous borrowing from Horace to declare the motto of enlightenment, "*Sapere aude!* (Have courage to use your own reason!)" (qtd. in Angus 2009: 140). Angus goes on to say that, for Kant, "Enlightenment is the public effect of critique and rests upon the prior courage of the one who dares to think for him or herself" (140). However, when it comes to professors at least, the coupling of courage and thinking misreckons it. For a professor, it takes no courage to "think for him or herself": that is what a professor enjoys most, and it is what a professor gets paid for. Enlightenment, for the professor, is a refuge from that which would really call upon her courage: political action that would have her relinquish the security of her own native domain. Thought, even critical thought, is the professor's alibi for action not taken. Kant's formula of enlightenment thus corresponds perfectly to the Lacanian concept of the fetishistic disavowal, which Žižek identifies as the signature operation of contemporary ideology: "*je sais bien, mais quand même*" (I know very well, but all the same... (2007: 79). I *know* very well, but all the same I act as if I do not know, or I do not act at all. I know very well what is happening at and to the university, but all the same, *I am a professor*. In this respect, it is interesting that Kant's rendering of the motto of the Enlightenment as "Have courage to use your own reason!" stops exactly short of the next, arguably more important word in the passage he quotes from Horace: "*Incipe*" (Ferry 1956: 7). Begin.

Notes

This offering is based on remarks made at an event celebrating the publication of Ian Angus's *Love The Questions: University Education as Enlightenment* (Arbeiter Ring, 2009), held at the Institute for the Humanities, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, March 19, 2010.

1. It bears mentioning that Ian Angus exemplified this sort of individual bravery in his protest against his university's violation of the academic freedom of David Noble. For details on the case, see the material gathered at the link to "The University" on Angus's Web site at <http://www.ianangus.ca/>.
2. The obvious exception might be faculty strikes, though these are increasingly rare and, in any case, their status as political interventions is inconsistent and ambiguous.

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