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REVIEW OF *THE UNIVERSITY IN RUINS*

Bill Readings has left us a sobering diagnosis of the positions of researchers, teachers and administrators in what he calls the "post-historical" university. As his title suggests, he sees the contemporary university as a "ruined institution," arguing primarily against redemptive and nostalgic visions of the rebirth of citizenship or reason as central to the purpose of the institution. His central analogy, placing us as the residents of a city filled with the ruins of past justifications for the university, serves as the basis for his strongest and most therapeutic claims. In the context of many of the utopian visions offered in the larger debate concerning the corporatization of the university, Readings advocates what he calls a "pragmatic" assessment of present conditions, and a response that aims to resist "Enlightenment faith" in reason and "Romantic nostalgia" (19-20).

Through Chapter 9, Readings devotes his energies to narrativizing the development of the corporate university: he analyzes the new god-term of the university, "excellence", revealing its fundamental emptiness and therefore administrative effectiveness. He provides evidence of the transformative effects of global capital within and beyond the university. He describes two major historical antecedents, first, the university as an embodiment of Kant's vision with reason at the center, and then as an embodiment of Humboldt's vision, privileging national culture.

Apologizing for his myopia while explaining how trends in his field have representative value, he devotes a chapter to the development of Cultural Studies, suggesting that its very existence is evidence of the death of national culture in general and especially as an external justification for the university institution. Readings writes,

We are no longer excluded, not because racism, sexism, and class difference have come to an end. They manifestly have not. Rather, we are no longer excluded because, in the strong sense of the word that the Idealists gave it, there is no longer any culture to be excluded from (103).

This statement is characteristic of Readings' broader argument; he wants us to see with him that the issues about which many left intellectuals in the academy fight passionately, issues based on resistance to a cultural hegemony, simply fail to matter in an environment where culture "no longer names a discursive project with both historical extension and critical contemporaneity from which we might be excluded" (103).

Readings' primary target seems to be certain left intellectuals whom he sees as having missed the pertinent issue and having taken the wrong tactics. He warns against a habitual protest response, saying that

. . . a repetition of the radical postures of the late 1960s is not adequate to resist the discourse of excellence. This is because the discourse of excellence can incorporate campus radicalism as proof of the excellence of campus life or of student commitment. . . (150).

He goes so far as to indict leftists for unwitting support of the university institution through their dedication to a set of assumptions not shared by or taken seriously by administrators. He writes,

This is one of the reasons for which leftists have proved such excellent functionaries of the University, even in conservative regimes: they believe that they are the guardians of a true culture of which the extant regime is merely a false ideological version (183).

In a similar vein, Readings specifically indicts Cultural Studies for providing a function directly at odds with the function its practitioners often assume: "Rather than posing a threat, the analyses performed by Cultural Studies risk providing new marketing opportunities for the system" (121). The power and pervasiveness that Readings assigns to the corporate model is revealed in his characterizations of left intellectuals. For Readings, there can be little or no effective political resistance based on traditional models because the administrative discourse of excellence dominates the very basis of value.

Although he claims to resist nostalgia for reason and nostalgia for culture as irrelevant external justifications for the university, it is the allure of culture that elicits his strongest claims and most extensive commentary. This may have to do with his own position as a humanities scholar, with his description of Humboldt's vision as our historical antecedent, or with fact that issues of culture have dominated the debate. Regardless, he does address the allure of reason, but with more ambivalence and less commentary.

One reason for this ambivalence and more limited coverage may have to do with his own recommendation, dare I say solution, to the problem of inhabiting the "ruined institution". In the final three chapters, Readings sketches his plan for negotiating the corporate university's "discourse of excellence" (150) by appeal to what he sees as an equally empty, but preferable, term:

What I would like to suggest is that we recognize that, with the decline of the nation-state, the University has become an open and flexible system and that we should try to replace the empty idea of excellence with the empty name of Thought (159-160).

Readings works to distinguish the emptiness of "idea of excellence" from "the name of Thought" by suggesting that it is a self-consciousness about the emptiness of "the name of Thought" that rehabilitates it, renders it more honest (160). In his other more persuasive and pertinent distinction between the two, he suggests that while the "idea of excellence" functions as an "answer", as a means of homogenizing, quantifying, and closing the question of value, the "name of Thought" functions as a "question" (160).

This move reflects his broader aim to hold open the question of value, and to hold open questions in general, in a corporate university where value is less a philosophical problem than an accounting problem. Readings puts it this way:

The question posed to the University is thus not how to turn the institution into a haven for Thought but how to think in an institution whose development tends to make Thought more and more difficult, less and less necessary (175).

The second part of Readings' recommendation for the future involves imagining what he calls "the community of dissensus" (180). He tips his hat to Gerald Graff, whose recommendation that we "teach the conflicts" informs Readings' vision. For Readings, the problem with the university of reason and the

university of culture is that they point to external justifications, community totalities that the university rests on and reproduces. In focusing on dissensus, Readings invokes Derrida's and Lyotard's challenges to ideal speech situations and presumptions of communicative transparency. He imagines a community which does not presuppose consensus, in which it is the very question of how it is that "singularities" will achieve partial (but never fundamental or enduring) "stabilizations" that should take the place of a static, presumed community (184). He writes,

In the horizon of dissensus, no consensual answer can take away the question mark that the social bond (the fact of other people, of language) raises. No universal community can embody the answer; no rational consensus can decide simply to agree on an answer (187).

Readings strongly resists any Idealist recourse to continuity.

The strength of Readings' argument lies in his efforts to shift the question from something like, "How can we recenter the university around teaching/culture/reason?" to one that recognizes the dominant discourse of administration, like, "How can we imagine a way to inhabit a university that does not depend on a center, on a mission?" Readings' insistence on a "pragmatic" approach is focused primarily on recognizing the dominant discourse of the university. When it comes to the specific material conditions of researchers and teachers, Readings has less to say. In his vision of a new, interdisciplinary humanities department, based on the model of Cultural Studies, he does demonstrate awareness of the stakes:

As a faculty member, I want us to be careful that the surplus value released by the erasure of old job demarcations gets shared among the faculty and students, and does not simply accrue to the administration. . . .we have to demand that University administrators plough back these savings into funding pedagogical initiatives (such as short-term concentrations for teaching and research, mini humanities centers) that allow interesting work to be done (127).

Despite this recognition of the importance for active agents, speaking subjects, to protect the bottom line, he devotes little attention to addressing questions of how researchers and teachers who operate within the "community of dissensus" will argue persuasively to university administrators concerning the value of their programs and necessity of their hiring preferences. If we accept Readings' position, that there can be no "external justification" for work in the university, then on what basis can we defend our jobs and research lines? Should we presume that Readings' appeals to "dissensus" and "Thought" will win over administrators, or are these only therapeutic appeals to cause us to rethink our own perspectives? What motive could we imagine that would cause "University presidents", as Readings' says, to begin "thinking about questions of value [rather] than juggling indices of excellence and filling in charts of 'goal achievement'" (133)? And, given the dominance of accounting and administration, what would cause "those in the University" to follow Readings and to "acknowledge the complexity of the problem of quality" (132)?

These challenges aim to trace limitations in Readings' argument, but at the same time to remind us that many of the questions that he poses are the crucial ones in the effort to inhabit the corporate university. His central question, "How are we to reimagine the University, once its guiding idea of culture has ceased to have an essential function?" (119), both soberly acknowledges the current "ruined" state of the university, and poses the difficult and still open question of how to do interesting and challenging work among those ruins.

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