

LCCT 2014 stream: Philosophy and Critical Thought Inside and Outside the University
Organisers: [Again]

Panel 1 – Philosophical Externalities

‘Proving the truth in practice’ – Anat Matar
‘Misery and Nobility of Philosophy’ – Massimiliano Nicoli

Panel 2 – Roundtable

‘Introduction: philosophy and critical thought inside and outside the university’ – [Again] collective
‘Teaching-Led Research: Bringing the Outside In’ – Matthew Charles and Carl Cederström
‘Benjamin’s Critical Method: Lessons for Philosophy Today’ – Brian Elliott

‘Proving the truth in practice’ – Anat Matar, Tel Aviv University

Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking, in practice. (Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*)

Three assumptions form the background of my discussion: 1. It is the primary role of the university and its alternatives to deal with *truth* – not only in philosophically exploring its nature but also in overcoming the liberal fear of content and announcing truths-*as-truths*; 2. Truth is political: theoretical (“constative”) content cannot be separated from practical (“performative”) force, and the latter is always politically “tainted”; the liberal fantasy about academic purity and freedom eliminates truth and reinforces conservatism and obedience; 3. Theory should be interwoven with praxis – both within and outside academia.

I elaborated and defended these assumptions elsewhere. In the first part of the present talk I’ll explain them, but move quickly on to discuss the feasibility of implementing them within and outside the university through an examination of the case of research done in critically-motivated NGOs in Israel. While the quality and timeliness of this research finds no parallel in academic research, the former’s chances of becoming public knowledge and eventually “proving the truth in practice” are slim. The missing link in order to overcome this predicament is a vital Left, through community work, alternative journalism and also academic activism. Thus the upshot of my talk is that there’s no way of isolating the question of the university from the wider context of the present situation and the future of the Left.

‘Misery and Nobility of Philosophy’ – Massimiliano Nicoli, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS)

Nowadays in Italy, the role and the importance of philosophy (and critical humanities in general) within the school and the university systems are being strongly reconsidered. At the same time, neoliberal policies tend to objectify every sort of critical thought in measurable and evaluable scientific knowledge through apparatuses of meritocratic assessment, while extreme precariousness is the form of life which characterizes researchers in human sciences.

This complex political situation pushes critical thought into academic and “scientific” specialism on the one hand, or into spectacular and populist philosophy on the other hand, being “visibility” – at least just a moment of phosphorescence – the only reward for the work of thought.

In this frame, philosophy (especially political philosophy) should unceasingly redefine itself from the “low objects” which, from the bottom of our existence, constitute the material conditions that make us think what we think and be what we are. At the same time, “philosophers” might question their social and political place by criticizing their entrepreneurial conduct of life (nowadays intellectuals seem to be the champions of the so called “management of the self”); by founding their independence, autonomy and freedom on cooperation and mutualism with other figures of work, instead of extreme concurrence and competition typical of knowledge economy; by inventing new research and teaching institution capable to produce income and to abolish the privilege and the presumption which still distinguish knowledge workers from others, being the gesture of weakening the presumption of truth of the philosophical subject an act of resistance as well as the starting point of a struggle.

‘Introduction: philosophy and critical thought inside and outside the university’ – [Again] collective

This introduction will briefly present the context and motives behind [Again]’s wish to create intellectual and physical spaces for philosophy and critical thought outside the university institution. We will discuss the contemporary context of the increasingly ‘marketised’ university and the radically new pressures this brings to bear on students and academic staff. We will situate the impetus to move ‘outside’ the university in a history of non-institutional philosophers, and other alternative higher education movements in Europe. The dichotomy of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ will be shown to be a highly questionable one, as evidenced by the recent phenomenon of the ‘para-academic’, and the incursion of business and other interests into the ‘inside’ of university research and teaching.

‘Teaching-Led Research: Bringing the Outside In’ – Matthew Charles (Westminster) and Carl Cederström (Cardiff)

This paper will address the question of the boundaries of the higher education in terms not of "philosophizing on the outside" but of the transformations "inside" FE/HE institutions which have turned them into increasingly diverse social spaces, and will consider how an attentiveness to the experience of teaching under such conditions offers the possibility of transforming academic research in politically instructive ways.

It will depart from Walter Benjamin's fragment (given the title by editors, 'We Ought to Re-Examine the Link Between Teaching and Research'):

...subjects that have long been investigated and appropriated by scholars need to be emancipated from the forms in which such scholarly acquisition took place, if they are still to have any value and any defined character today. [...] The whole pernicious spectrum of critical methods must disappear to make way for more enterprising researchers, on the one hand, and above all for a less banal, more considered learning, on the other. In these areas, in short, we should not look to research to lead a revival in teaching; instead it is more important to strive with a certain intransigence for an – albeit very indirect – improvement in research to emerge from the teaching. [...] And if the alternative approach adumbrated above will be able to deliver the goods, this will only be because in principle teaching is capable of adapting to new strata of students in such a way that a rearrangement of the subject matter would give rise to entirely new forms of knowledge. (Walter Benjamin, *SW2*, pp.419-20)

‘Benjamin’s critical method: Lessons for philosophy today’ – Brian Elliott, Portland State University

In *One Way Street* Walter Benjamin attempted to apply the aesthetic practice of montage to philosophy. This attempt was in part a product of his frustrated efforts to find a permanent position within the German academy. Many key figures of modern European philosophy (Nietzsche, Bataille, and Lefebvre to name a few) had at best an uneasy relationship with the university and sought extra-academic outlets for their thinking. The increasing bureaucratization and marketization of today’s university give contemporary thinkers plenty of reasons to seek economic and expressive avenues beyond the academy.

Against this backdrop, it is ironic that Benjamin’s work is an increasingly important source for a host of academic disciplines. I argue, however, that Benjamin’s popularity mostly does not entail serious consideration of his attempts to revolutionize how theory is created and appreciated. The modernist montage technique employed in *One-Way Street* marked all his work up to and including his unfinished *Arcades Project*. The change in method calls for a change in reception: just as early German romanticism championed the critic as artist, readers of Benjamin are meant to *do* something with and beyond his texts.

With the social pathologies of the neoliberalized university becoming increasingly apparent to many philosophers today, desire to find non-academic outlets for critical thought is palpable. I argue that Benjamin’s proposed methodology can be useful to contemporary philosophy on a number of

counts: in clarifying the connection between philosophy and the creative arts; in revealing the material historicity of all effective thought; and in demonstrating the implicit ideologies of everyday material culture.