

# *L'engage*, or The Faculty of Unnecessary Things

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On October 1, 1794, philosopher Immanuel Kant received a letter from his monarch, Frederick William, by the Grace of God King of Prussia etc., etc.

The letter reads as follows:

Our most high person has long observed with great displeasure how you misuse your philosophy to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and holy teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity ... We expected better things of you, as you yourself must realize how irresponsibly you have acted against your duty as a teacher of youth and against our paternal (*landesväterliche*) purpose, which you know very well. We demand that that you give at once a most conscientious account of yourself and expect that in future ... you will be guilty of no such fault, but rather, in keeping with your duty, apply your authority and your talents to the progressive realization of our paternal (*landesväterliche*) purpose. Failing this, you must expect unpleasant measures for your continuing obstinacy.<sup>1</sup>

In his reply to this letter, Kant promised to “hereafter refrain altogether from discoursing publicly, in lectures or writings, on religion, whether natural or revealed”. And indeed, he kept his word; his famous book *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (The Conflict of the Faculties (1798), which contained a more developed answer to Friedrich Wilhelm, was to be his last. Here, he gave, as required, “a very conscientious account of himself” as well as a very conscientious account of the structure of his contemporary machine for the production of learning, the university. The idea of such a public institution handling the entire content of learning, he considered “not a bad one,” but described the learning and the doctors produced therein, as divided into

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *The Conflict of the Faculties* = *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, transl. and Introd. by Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992/1798), 11.

three unequal, hierarchically arranged, classes. One was to produce *die Literaten*, professional intellectuals like theologians, physicians, and lawyers – the “businessmen of knowledge” in the service of the state. Such were to be trained by the “higher faculties”, dictated by the purposes of the state. The other two, the lower faculties, Kant described as “those who have their own judgment of what they teach”, a knowledge produced in the service of reason and truth, of which one was to be based on the work of pure reason (such as pure mathematics, pure philosophy, and metaphysics of nature and morals) while the other on historical sources (history, geography, the humanities alongside with empirical knowledge contained in natural sciences). These departments of lower faculty were to serve the interests of truth and reason, not those of government. Kant demanded a liberal autonomy for the lower faculties. This would leave it free to perform its service for the higher faculty, by supplying a critical commentary to those doctrines of the higher faculty directly contributing to government – and by doing this, obliquely steering the government in the direction of still greater reason and freedom. This lower faculty, deemed useless, un-needed, un-necessary things by the state was thus claiming autonomy from the faculty of the useful, or needed, or necessary things. But more besides it was claiming a right to criticize, comment on, and correct the content of “useful things”, i.e., practically speaking, to re-direct the interests of the state towards greater reason and truth. Thus, in response to an act of censorship by the king, Kant claimed the right of “useless” things to censor the king himself.

## Towards a Confessional Turn in the Humanities

The question of learning whether necessary or unnecessary for government, arose once again and dramatically quite recently at a big national convention in Slavic studies in the USA. The discussion in question showed that Kant’s observation of the hierarchical division of all learning, as described in *Der Streit der Fakultäten* over two hundred years ago, is more than relevant even today – while the leave-us-alone principle, of self-governing knowledge, remains more than ever a matter of wishful thinking. I was listening to a group of scholars/science bureaucrats discussing the principles of American financing for Slavic research in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. Taking part in the panel was an American scholar who very often acts as reviewer in various, rather highly placed, grant programmes. He had agreed to summarize and discuss his own experiences from the evaluation of pro-

posals submitted by Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians. It was a rare occasion to see an active participant (in grant programmes) appear at a public discussion – given that the reviewer is a notoriously anonymous, secretive, and invincible participant in the process who seldom accounts for his or her own judgment.

In his speech, the reviewer systematically referred to the East European grant applicants as “these people”, telling us colourful stories while sharing his concerns about the weirdness of their academic interests, competence and performance. His concerns clung faithfully to the Kantian hierarchy. He divided proposals into three categories: the positivist ones (i.e., “useful” research, archival or otherwise, that was good enough to be used as data for further interpretation by American scholars in their own East European research). Then followed a category that he termed “so to speak theoretical” – a counterpart, one can believe, of Kant’s pure reason subjects – with which in principle he sympathized, but rejected on account of its being too general and too theoretical. He was particularly upset by the inadequate use of Western theory in this category of research: “these people” quoted too many Foucaults, Derridas, and Baudrillards, not understanding fully the meaning of these theories, reading poor translations of these authors’ work, thus missing the point in the Western debate and its relation to their theories. Yet still, this was not as alarming as the research produced in the third category, what he termed “otherworldly” – a field of learning totally devoid of any reason at all (Kant’s equivalent, evidently, would be “historical”, i.e. based on “crooked” and dogmatic sources, not on the principle of reason, and therefore would be a-reasonable, un-reasonable *par excellence*).

When I asked him (and the others on the panel) what recommendations he could give Eastern European scholars in order to satisfy his standards of evaluation, I received a staggering answer – unanimously supported by the others on the panel as well as by many in the public, among them some bureaucrats from academic funding agencies. The unexpected and unanimous answer was “sincerity”. That was strange: where other scholars are expected to demonstrate academic quality, Eastern European scholars were expected to make clear their intentions. I asked whether this confessional u-turn in the practices of evaluation related only to Eastern European scholars. My attempt to insinuate that the American international funding agencies were discriminating against the ex-Soviets was repelled with a reference to a certain American research proposal, in translation studies, which had once also been rejected due to insufficient sincerity.

## The Cold War and the Autonomy of Knowledge: Why the Leave-Us-Alone Principle Does Not Work

Does Kant's claim to autonomy of university knowledge really hold water, and especially today, when the Cold War has reportedly given way to a society of knowledge? Can the present-day humanities serve as a safe haven in which one has the possibility of elaborating a critique of useful knowledge, with its service to the purposes of the state? And how should one understand "state" in an age of globalization?

In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant constructs his university as a complex system of binary oppositions, such as, for instance: knowledge/action, use value/truth, public/private, intra-university/extra-university, fundamental (pure)/applied, pure/historical, philosophy/State, and so forth. Thus, various faculties, and their respective functions, are given by Kant their own distinct and mutually non-translatable languages; their domains are delimited, and it is on the delimitation of territories that the principle of autonomy in Kant's philosophy is based. The principle of autonomy of knowledge, its leave-us-alone attitude, is thus guaranteed by non-translatability in the division of intellectual labour between what is needed by the state and what is required by reason. Given the mutual non-translatability of these languages, what is not clear is how communication between these autonomies is possible, and why, eventually, the state – the ultimate receiver of the critical message produced by the lower faculty – should be listening at all to philosophy's "pure", "disinterested", "power-free" formulation of reason and truth; why the state, guided as it is by the liberal leave-us-alone principle, should respond to the power-free *Gewalt* of reason at all.

In his critique of Kant's institutional architecture of knowledge (in *Theology of Translation*),<sup>2</sup> Derrida uses Schelling's idea of universal translatability. Derrida applies universal translation to the world of knowledge and academic institutions through which the State and truth communicate with one another. Universal translation is the negation of the principle of autonomy: in translation nothing is exempt from the circulation of meaning due to the leave-us-alone principle. Schelling in this sense is radically opposed to Kantian liberalism, and this allows Derrida to perform a critique of academic liberalism that is also valid for our present-day situation with liberalism in crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques, "Theology of Translation", *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, transl. by Jan Plug and Others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 64-80.

If one assumes Schelling's translation as the economy that governs the production and consumption of knowledge then the State itself, positive sciences (the useful higher faculty), and philosophy (Kant's useless lower faculty, including the humanities with their *raison d'être* in history) are all mutually translatable. Science and philosophy "resemble" each other as knowledge based on imagination while the State represents "the becoming-objective of originary knowledge *in the mode of action*" (p. 76). The disturbing implication, as borne out by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the character of the modern state: whether totalitarian, Nazi, Fascist, Stalinist, or other, a Schellingian-minded critic must accept that State is destiny, a translation of some unidentified Ur-instance and in its origin genealogically related, not opposed, to knowledge. From this point of view, to presuppose any *natural* autonomy or sovereignty of knowledge vis-à-vis the State is merely utopian. Even legally autonomous corporations (like universities) do not take sovereignty for granted, sovereignty being an attribute of action, not of institution. Sovereignty can be achieved in (knowledge as) action, not through mere membership in a formally autonomous institution.

The present-day situation, as Derrida characterizes it, is determined by the epistemological and institutional conditions produced by the Cold War. Its essence is the double shift of functions as compared to the one suggested in Kant's architectonics of power and knowledge. On the one hand, the state (the king) is no longer the only commissioner and censor; the category of the state nowadays should also include "the State, or ... national and international, State and Trans-State capitalist powers"<sup>3</sup> and their respective "calculations of techno-political profitability" (ibid.). On the other hand, the university stopped being the only producer of knowledge. In the Cold War's East, research was performed by the academies of sciences. In the Cold War's West, research was carried out by think tanks, by PR, the media, banking institutions, and other experts. As the prerogative to make knowledge is surrendered to other agents, universities find themselves solely "being confined to the pursuit of reproducible teaching" (ibid.). The result is that "the academics surrender any representation as guardian or trustee of knowledge. One can no longer separate knowledge from power, reason from performativity, metaphysics from technical mastery" (Ibid., 95). Which, in its turn, results in the fact that "today, for reasons involving the structure of learning, (it is) impossible to distinguish rigorously between

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, Jacques, "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties", *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, transl. by Jan Plug and Others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 94.

scholars and technicians of learning, just as it is to trace between knowledge and power, the limit within whose shelter Kant sought to preserve the university edifice” (ibid., 96).

When the usefulness of knowledge depends on the calculability of profits, by the commissioning/financing/censoring state, the elimination of any distinction between fundamental knowledge becomes quite evident (the world of pure reason and the applied one, the useful knowledge produced for the “businessmen of learning”, the cognitive agents/manipulators on behalf of the State). The geopolitical and strategic calculations as dictated by the Cold War especially contribute to this situation of non-differentiation:

At the service of war, of national and international security, research programs have to encompass the entire field of information, the stockpiling of knowledge, the workings and thus the essence of language and of all semiotic systems, translation, coding and decoding, the play of presence and absence, hermeneutics, semantics, structural and generative linguistics, pragmatics ... literature, poetry, art, and fiction in general: the theory that has these disciplines as its object can be just as useful in ideological warfare...<sup>4</sup>

What I failed to find in Derrida’s Schellingian critique of Kant is how the conflict inside the lower faculty – that between reason and history, according to the American reviewer, the “so to speak theoretical” and the “other-worldly”, between the timeless structures of pure knowledge and the historical situatedness of a text, between theory and hermeneutics – is re-translated into the terms of the Cold War, apart from the general thesis that they can both be equally well utilized (prostituted) by war and security (of which examples are too many, and need not be cited). Derrida does not develop this further. The State can use history in the capacity of an ideological dogma, but can it use it in the capacity of information, as a calculable (therefore controllable) future? In other words, isn’t it possible to say that the conflict of the faculties in the post-Cold War era is no longer waged between the State and the truth, nor between the lower and the higher faculties, but inside the lower faculties, between theory (as calculable and reproducible knowledge) and history (as knowledge dependent on interpretation)?

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida, Jacques, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils”, *ibidem*, 143-145.

## “What is to be done?” A Russian question and a French answer

Again, this question can be asked only when we find the foundation for questioning, a position from which it is possible to formulate the question. This position is not given. By announcing the arrival of new times and some new humanities (as the title of this symposium does) one cannot be sure that the Cold War era has passed – nor can one reject the Cold War’s epistemological modus and institutional inventions as no longer valid. Kant’s principle of reason is not postulated by reason itself, just as the principle of knowledge does not belong to knowledge. Derrida suggested a solution based on performativity in deconstruction, a new pedagogy and a new institutionalization of knowledge. This pedagogic and institutional work that Derrida was engaged in during the 1970s and 1980s – the work he invites us to engage in too – is a less known aspect of deconstruction in practice, an episode of French intellectual history in action that is almost unknown both to the critics of deconstruction (who reject deconstruction as universally relativizing empty speech), but equally unknown to deconstructionists, the producers of reproducible models of teaching under the auspices of Derrida’s posthumous cult.

What I am referring to is Derrida’s engagement in the institutionalization of philosophy as part of GREPH (the Research Group on the Teaching of Philosophy) in the 1970s, his participation in the activities of the General Estates of Philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s, and his leadership in the establishment of College International de Philosophie in 1983. In this situation, we can observe a deconstructive philosopher – in the world’s opinion, an outright iconoclast – performing as institutional architect on commission from the State.

These forums and institutions were initiated by the Leftist thinkers in response to the so-called “Haby reforms” of the French secondary education system in 1975. Derrida received his commission from Mitterrand’s socialist government, when it won the national elections and took over after d’Estaing’s Gaullist administration, in 1981. The Haby reform was aimed at the universalization, unification, and systematization of schools, to give secondary education a more practical emphasis on technoscientific training and an improved bureaucratic management of the school system by the state. The French traditional system of schools was supposed to be unified and simplified, requirements to “the general cultural level” of the students were supposed to be lowered, and more hours were supposed to be given to training in technology, science, and sports (which remained the only obliga-

tory subject during the last year in the Lycée). The Haby reform was to eradicate the seeds of May-June 1968 in French education. As a means of preventing another 1968 in future, the reform proposed, among other things, to increase the practical value of school education through a radical reduction of teaching hours for philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The protests against the reform in its preparation had been voiced long before the announcement of the Haby Law in 1975, on the Left, and especially among the teachers' unions and the intellectuals, which resulted in the establishment of forums like GREPH and Etats Generales de Philosophie. Mitterand's socialist government, who came to power in 1981, supported this movement by giving these forums an official status and asking them to develop a system for education in the humanities in practical work, which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Collège International de Philosophie in 1983, Derrida receiving the appointment as its first director.

Now, how did Derrida respond to the censorship of the Haby Law, which was explicitly seeking to suppress philosophy, and to do it out of purely *landesväterliche*, paternal considerations, for the best advantage of the students? He did exactly what Kant had done in his *Conflict of the Faculties*: by defining the place of philosophy in the system of education, he expanded the domain of its responsibility – engagement – so broadly as to encompass, within the field of philosophy's concerns, all other sciences and institutions of knowledge and censorship, including the State and State censorship themselves.

It is important to note here Derrida's use of "engagement". Etymologically, the word belongs to the sphere of economics. The Medieval French "gage" is a word with a meaning of "pawn", and "engagement" thus can be understood as "economic indebtedness, an economic obligation, something to be given as guaranteed deposit to be further on reclaimed". Derrida thus conceives of the universe of knowledge as a general economy, a circulation of mutual and reciprocal transfers, exchanges and obligations, a universe of symbolic indebtedness with a respective set of responsibilities.

In the spirit of Schelling's universal translatability, specifically his thesis about "philosophy being everywhere", Derrida attempted to radically open

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<sup>5</sup> On the Haby Reform, see Corbett, Anne and Bob Moon, *Education in France: Continuity and Change in the Mitterand Years (1981-1995)*, 1996; Trifonas, Peter Pericles, *The Ethics of Writing: Derrida, Deconstruction, and Pedagogy*, 2000; Thomas, Michael, "The Deconstruction of Pedagogical Institutions: Derrida, Politics, and the Principle of Reason", *NUCB JLCC* 6, 1 (2004), 47-58; Duclaud-Williams, Roger, "Centralization and Incremental Change in France: The Case of the Haby Educational Reform", *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol 13, No 1 (Jan 1983), 71-91.



up philosophy, to take away its privileged status as the judge of pure reason, as assigned by Kant. Instead, philosophy becomes a practicable, performative tool for the translation of anything into everything. Philosophy is not to be taught as philosophy, but as philosophizing (Kant's belief, too), and it should not exist as a sovereign subject in the curriculum (which had been Haby's idea as well). It is only in conjunction with other subjects, connected through a "slash", that philosophy (philosophizing) makes sense: as biology/philosophy, technology/philosophy, language/philosophy, and so on. Thus, the focus of attention shifts from its previous fixation on either philosophy or the discipline in question onto the slash between philosophy and discipline: the interface of economic exchange, mutual obligatedness (engagement), and reciprocal interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Here, I admit that I am not very well acquainted with the history of these institutions (they are all still working and flourishing), and I do not know to what extent Derrida's programme turned out to be practicable. My Russian scepticism tells me that one should be cautious in one's expectations of things that are designed for the better, because there is always a possibility that eventually they might turn out as they usually do. Still, one cannot deny that Derrida's programme – as it was designed in the midst of the Cold War and as it was reported, in the form of a concrete curriculum, after its announced termination in 1990 – to a large extent remains unfulfilled, at least in the context of the Swedish university, which has much in common with the French educational establishment. We still do not have a curriculum like Derrida's, and, to be frank, I cannot imagine a state that would be interested in institutionalizing it in the way Derrida proposes in his report. Nor have we finished with his philosophy-slash-everything-else programme, his version of the conflict of the faculties at the interface between them; the slash between philosophy and every other discipline still remains unexplored. Philosophy nowadays still cannot be considered a complement to, let us say, Slavic studies. Equally, let us say, Slavic studies are not seen as a complement to philosophy; both inferences thus preserve a peaceful status quo, an indifference towards each other, and a neutrality along the frontlines of the slashes. So, is the Cold War really over? Are there indeed new humanities that have come to replace the old ones, and are there any new times that these new humanities have ushered in? All this still remains to be seen.

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<sup>6</sup> For the project for practical implementation of this program in curricula and teaching plans, see Derrida's *Sendoffs* (for the *College International de Philosophie*) and *Reports of the Committee on Philosophy and Epistemology*, Derrida, *ibidem*, 216-249.