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THE USEFULNESS OF USELESS KNOWLEDGE

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Preface

This essay is based on a lecture that I held in the context of a series called *Think! Humanities. Perspectives for an endangered species*. It was set up at the University of Amsterdam in January 2015 to provide a discussion platform to exchange views on what course the humanities could take in the context of the, then starting, protests against the neoliberal university agenda.

When I announced the title of that lecture, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* in January 2015, I could not know yet that I would present it two months later in March not at the originally planned venue, but in the Maagdenhuis. When the lecture series had been brought into being it was still the time *before* the occupations, first of the Bungehuis, and then the Maagdenhuis, quite at the beginning of the activities of Humanities Rally. Nobody then foresaw the eruption that has rededicated the function of this building within such a narrow time-frame. But in spite of the unprecedented events that happened – and brought staff and students towards a *different actuality* compared with that in January of the same year – the orig-

inal intention of my lecture had not lost its urgency, notwithstanding the fact that the motivation for the lecture was to give a programmatic and historical account. It is caused by the title of that lecture. As actual as it might sound in times of *rethinking the university* it is already nearly eighty years old. I borrowed it from an article that was published and written in 1939 in the United States shortly after the beginning of World War II, by Abraham Flexner.

In the following I will swing open a triptych of three historical positions that at the end I will bundle up to propose some possible further steps for the New University. Next to the position of Abraham Flexner, the second one belongs to Simon Critchley. It was formulated in 2010 in his article called ‘What Is the Institutional Form for Thinking?’ Simon is attacking here the ‘disaster’ of the bureaucratization of English universities since Margaret Thatcher that caused a growing culture of depression ‘turning English academia into an increasingly uniform and pleasureless machine, a kind of knowledge factory at the service of the abstractions of the state and capital’ (2010: 20). His argument is of special importance, not only for exemplifying the consequences of the European university politics that were first implemented in England, but also because the UvA praises again and again the English model for defending the current steps already taken to restructure the Humanities. The third position finally is the speech Jacques Derrida gave in 1998 in the cause of the Presidential Lecture Series at the University of Stanford California: ‘The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the “Humanities,” what *could take place* tomorrow)’. It is a fierce defense of the autonomy of the Humanities, the university and profession of the scholar, presenting various future scenarios in the mode of *as if*, thus in a performative way. These future scenarios about what *could take place* tomorrow, spoken out in 1998, will eventually have taken place in the University we foresee here and now. And exactly this overlap in different time-zones stresses the urgency of the topic. Derrida prophetically ended his speech with the phrase: ‘Take your time but be quick about it, because you don’t know what awaits you’ (2002: 237). Now we know, the French Humanities scholars Barbara Cassin and Philippe Büttgen (2010) tell us: The French law supposed recently to institute the ‘autonomy’ of universities, grasped in the ethics of *performance*. But this supposition is not more than a cynical perversion of Derrida’s

words – meaning exclusively *the culture of results*. That what counts for politics is *evaluation* and ranking of universities by the impact factor.¹

These three positions – Flexner’s in 1939 US, Derrida’s in 1998 France and Critchley’s in 2010 UK – will be laid out in the following to discuss the matter of knowledge provided in universities in our times.

The value of knowledge

To bring up anew the topic of the use of knowledge by questioning the usefulness of useless knowledge in these times is due to the necessity to bethink the *value* of knowledge, especially in the Humanities. Similar to the above-mentioned inversion and perversion of the Derridian concept of the autonomy of the university by French politics, we can observe a slinking transvaluation of the value of knowledge in universities. Exemplarily, I refer to a text of Arne Brentjes, the financial manager of the College van Bestuur of the UvA. It was published in 2014 in the journal *Thema Hoger Onderwijs*. In the English translation, the title runs ‘Tranquility without Stagnation. How the UvA finances its educational program.’ In this text Brentjes explains what he calls the *Big Bang* of the financial operation model the UvA implemented in 2006. With this model full economic costing was introduced by resting its calculations upon the so-called end product and its profitability (the *rendement* - performance). It means a shared service model for professional and efficiently standardized customer service. This model, inclusive of the calculation base for the *rendement* and the *allocatiemodel* (the calculation factors 1, 1, 3 and 1,5 to distribute the state money to the different faculties), was taken over from the UK, because The Netherlands did not have any indicative statistic material for a stringent model of their own. Therefore the significant factor for distribution are respectively 12, 15, or 20 contact hours per week per student, which have only recently, two years ago, been introduced in the Faculty of Humanities at the UvA. Other measurements to calculate the profitability of an educational program are ECTS points and their accumulation in diplomas in a limited time of study. This means that the quality of a higher educational program and the knowledge that is provided is defined

by efficiency and profitability (Shore 2008: 281). Dutch historian Chris Lorenz points to the problem of the inadequacy of this kind of calculation of the value of knowledge: ‘In contrast with the normal economy, in the education economy it is not possible to identify buyer’s preferences so that the educational products can be designed to meet them and against which their quality can be measured. The same applies for the efficiency of the production process’ (2012: 621). This practice of economization is drastically undermining the culturally defined value of academic knowledge that traditionally orients itself towards the extent and depth to which the gained knowledge is a result of many years’ process of sophistication. It is that value that goes along with the signification of the Latin term *educare*, meaning the formation of human beings, *leading them out into something new*, helping to discover one’s unforeseen potential. This kind of knowledge resists any measurement by calculation. But it is currently increasingly preyed upon by the economic value of knowledge that is defined by its market use. This goes along with that perversion of terminologies that I mentioned earlier. Quality turns into quantity and is translated again into quality by the language of New Public Management. The text of Arne Brentjes is a striking example. The set of values he is employing to define the value of academic knowledge is exclusively determined by its economic use, without taking into consideration any other quality, least of all the humanistic quality of knowledge. I quote the closing passage of his text: ‘The UvA regards her people as her real capital. And capital may not stand still. To gain a pay-back value [*om te renderen*] it has to serve the basic requirements: the results of teaching and research [where ‘results’ means money; K.R:]. Using the disciplinary effect of money the UvA has focused during the last years on research and teaching and has linked the question of budget strictly to the question of teaching [...]. This causes movement, inclusively the corresponding intern harassment, worry and anxiety. But on an administrative level it just causes much tranquility and predictability to be able to keep this institution on track with as minimal costs as possible’ (2014: 59).

Consequently teachers and researchers find themselves ‘reworked as producers/ providers’ (Ball 2003: 218) and are routinely judged not only on their academic credentials and skills but also on their customer-service skills and ability to satisfy the student consumer (Waring 2013: 2). In this

way, it is not only the workload and pressure on individual performance that is growing disproportionately; beyond that academic knowledge becomes an externalized and de-socialized commodity, neglecting academic freedom that serves to make value-decisions based on science (R.N. Proctor 1991: 175). In other words, arguing with Foucault, the problem we are confronted with on a large, not only academic, scale is a dramatic epistemological shift of our understanding of knowledge. I will quote extensively from Foucault's definition of episteme in *The Order of Things* to highlight the drama that is going on. Episteme, he elucidates here, is equal to '[t]he fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices. [They] establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. At the other extremity of thought, there are the scientific theories or the philosophical interpretations which explain why order exists in general, what universal law it obeys, what principle can account for it, and why this particular order has been established and not some other. But between these two regions [the empirical order and the scientific theories K.R.], so distant from one another, lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental: it is more confused, more obscure, and probably less easy to analyze. It is here that a culture [... can] discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones' (1994: XIX).

I have quoted this passage in length because I think it is high time to similarly ask whether the ruling orders that can be discovered in the present cultural domain are in fact the best ones. A huge problem is raised if the episteme that is equal to the fundamental codes of a culture, inclusive of its values, does not differ any more from any other extremity of thought – which are the scientific theories or the philosophical interpretations – because the overall episteme for both the empirical order and the scientific theories is capitalization.² In that case the domain where 'a culture [... can] discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones', in other words, the domain of critique, will delve into the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) that is totalizing all forms of life.

The value of the useless

Against this scenario, it is worthwhile to examine the obverse of use: the useless. Those confusing and obscuring intermediary domains of useless knowledge may help to provide a different order of knowledge. Let's start with the man who coined the phrase 'usefulness of useless knowledge'. Alexander Flexner is best known for his role in the twentieth-century reform of higher education in the US and as founder of the very first Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton, where he was director between 1930 and 1939. There are strong connections between this Institute and the Netherlands. Since 2012 Dutch professor Robbert Dijkgraaf has been director of that same institute. Much earlier, the Princeton Institute served Prof. Eugenius Marius Uhlenbeck as a model for the founding of The Netherlands Institute of Advances Studies (NIAS) in 1971. Already in 1964, Uhlenbeck offered to the Dutch Ministry a substantial report that contained the advice 'to establish a Dutch institute comparable to the American institutes of Princeton and Stanford' (Uhlenbeck 1994:18). It took some time and a lot of struggle to realize it, but in the meantime, since 1964, Uhlenbeck became a member of the newly-formed Discussion Group Future University (*Gespreksgroep Toekomst Universiteit*), a committee established in Leiden that was highly influenced by the ideas on higher education that Flexner had formulated in his article.

His argument for the usefulness of useless knowledge was as simple as it was strong: 'Institutions of learning should be dedicated to the cultivation of curiosity. (...) (t)hroughout the whole history of science most of the really great discoveries which had ultimately proved to be beneficial to mankind had been made by men and women who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity' (545). He proves this argument with numerous examples beginning at the Helmholtz laboratory, where Heinrich Hertz and Clerk Maxwell developed their theoretical work that brought forth the radio. But '(n)either Maxwell nor Hertz had any concern about the utility of their work; no such thought ever entered their minds. They had no practical objective. The inventor of the practical tool, the radio, in the legal sense was Guglielmo Marconi. (...) Hertz and Maxwell could invent nothing, but it was their useless theoretical work which was seized upon by a clever technician'

(545). Out of this conviction he argues for a free university where ‘learning as such is cultivated’ (551), which includes the Humanities. His argument extends to the point at which it negates economic reason. Out of the apparently useless activity of teaching and researching, he argues, discoveries will be made that may well prove of infinitely more importance to the human mind and spirit than the mere achievement of the useful economic ends that the schools demanded. ‘The overwhelming importance of spiritual and intellectual freedom’ needs to be protected, because ‘(a)n institution which sets free successive generations of human souls is amply justified whether or not this graduate or that makes a so-called useful contribution to human knowledge. A poem, a symphony, a painting, a theatre performance, a mathematical truth, a new scientific fact, all bear in themselves all the justification that universities, colleges, and institutes of research need or require’ (160).

Flexner linked the freedom of knowledge closely to the freedom of democracy. It is particularly worthwhile to note here that Flexner explicitly wrote his text not only at the end of the Great (financial and economic) Depression in the United States but also at the time of fascist totalitarianism in Germany and Italy.³ I certainly do not want to go so far as to talk about a renaissance of this kind of totalitarianism in our times, but the worrisome totalizing character of the episteme of capitalization should not be forgotten here.

This is also the argument of Simon Critchley, who covers the second position in the triptych I am unfolding here. Seventy years after Flexner he is pleading for ‘a nonknowledge’ (26) to regain what Humanities can offer, namely an *experience* of teaching that is concerned with ‘thinking as creatively, clearly, and rigorously as possible’ (20). Where Flexner was defending *curiosity* as the engine of knowledge, Critchley is, in a rather shameful way, reclaiming the notion of *truth* to make possible the necessity of ‘something new, something unpredictable and surprising, something with a relation to enjoyment, something that perhaps even idles in the relentless activity of knowledge and capital accumulation’(27). Analyzing and criticizing the culture of depression that has taken over English Universities since Thatcher, he argues fiercely against the knowledge factories universities have turned into. Neither is education in accordance with any calcu-

lative thinking, he argues, nor is quality ‘something that can (...) be measured like coffee beans: it is very difficult to define, like an ethos’ (22). If Universities have lost their autonomy, how can teachers under these conditions themselves encourage autonomy in their students? It is time to think about new institutional forms of thinking, he concludes, forms that enable what humanities have to do: teaching. Forms that enable us to ‘cultivate the conditions’ to encounter the experience of truth, forms that are ‘amenable to thinking, to collaborative thinking’ (27). Critchley consequently sketches seven models for other ways of thinking about institutions, proposing to remember anarchist traditions, American private liberal arts colleges, as well as Catholic Universities. But none of them is rigorous and creative enough to convince an all-consuming market-apparatus.

Thirdly, let’s look at Derrida’s proposals for the future of the university. In his speech for New Humanities he contextualizes the pressure on teaching and research within a broader scope, calling up *the end of work*⁴ as the biggest-ever tragedy capitalism has created. What does that mean for the university? In Derridarian terms it means knowledge production under conditions of capitalization that may not be separated from the worldwide cyber revolution, hence: ‘This new technical “stage” of virtualization (computerization, digitalization, virtually immediate worldwide-ization of readability, tele-work, and so forth) destabilizes, as we well know, the university habitat’ (2002: 31). Consequently, a new ‘Kampfplatz’ and its theoretical battlefield is arising, that forces us to ask where in the cyberspace the communitarian place of the campus will take place, inclusive of the exercise of democracy. Against this background Derrida claims to ‘rethink the concepts of the possible and the impossible’ (31). He explicitly presents his talk as a declarative engagement, an appeal to faith in the university, and, within the university, faith in the humanities of tomorrow. Faith in a democratic university that claims and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an unconditional freedom to question and to assert ‘the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge and thought, concerning the truth’ (40). Interestingly enough, similar to Critchley, Derrida claims the commitment to truth as the profession of the new university. But he does not mean declarations of truth. Truth is something that has to be discussed,

especially in the Humanities departments. For the horizon of truth, Derrida says, is closely linked to the concept of man: ‘The question of man, of what is proper to man, of human rights, of crimes against humanity (and what does the end of labor mean to man), all this must find in principle its space of discussion without condition and without presupposition, its legitimate space of research and re-elaboration *in* the University, and, within the University, above all in the Humanities’ (29). In spite of all of us knowing that the university without condition does not in fact exist, Derrida insists in doing it performatively, creating events, events of thinking, performative discourses that create the event they speak of, events that follow the principle of resistance. This resistance is a force for keeping this space open, the space of the university without conditions. The Humanities, Derrida says, are the privileged space for its presentation, of manifestation, of safe keeping of the Humanities. Only by this, by the work of performativity, are we able to confront the current task of enlarging and re-elaborating the concept of Humanities relevant to our times. This is certainly ‘useless’. But *thinking about and within* the usefulness of the useless in terms of knowledge is probably the only way to resist the biggest-ever tragedy capitalism has created: the end of work (and the Universities).

Since March 2007, Kati Röttger is professor and chair of the Institute of Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She had completed her doctoral studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, in 1992, on Collective Creation in the New Colombian Theatre, after having spent two years in Colombia for fieldwork. Since then, she has been engaged in the mediation of cultural and academic exchange between performance artists and academics of Latin America and Europe. Between 1995 and 1998 she was postdoc at the Graduiertenkolleg „Gender-Difference and Literature“ at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany), followed by an appointment at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz (Germany) as Assistant Professor until 2005. Here, she completed her Habilitation on *Fremdheit und Spektakel. Theater als Medium des Sehens*. Her research activities are currently affiliated to Amsterdam Center of Globalisation Studies, the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis and to the Institute of Culture and History. Her actual research topics are Image Cultures and

Globalisation, Politics of Performance, Spectacle and Spectacularity (in the 19th century) and Intermediality. She is co-founder of the Master of Arts of International Performance Research that was running in close cooperation with the Universities of Warwick, Helsinki and Belgrade between 2008 and 2013. Currently she is dean of the department Arts and Culture Studies at the UvA.

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¹ This factor determines the admissibility of the applications for the senior researcher submitted to the European Research Council in Brussels. It classifies researchers, for example, by the number of their publications.

² This is the total value of all outstanding shares of a publicly-traded company. The market capitalization is calculated by multiplying the shares outstanding by the price per Share. Market capitalization is one of the basic measures of a publicly-traded company; it is a way of determining the rough value of a company. Generally speaking, a higher market capitalization indicates a more valuable company. Many exchanges and indices are weighted for market capitalization. It is informally known as market cap <http://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Capitalization>

³ The Princeton Institute is well-known for having housed many exiled scientists and scholars like Einstein, Herzfeld and Panofsky.

⁴ Derrida is directly referring to the study of Jeremy Rifkins (1995), *The End of Work*. New York: Putnam Books. (See Derrida: 43ff).

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