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Sketching a Place for Education in Times of Learning

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Contents

In 1915, a student named Walter Benjamin published his first article, entitled "The life of students". In this reflection on the condition of student life, Benjamin touched upon one of the most puzzling features of the university: its disconnection from the real world. Benjamin draws our attention to the "huge gulf between ideas and life", which the university was supposed to bridge through its connection with the state. Benjamin claims, however, that there is no such bridge. On the one hand, we have university life, which is all about living and breathing theory, about "the will to submit to a principle, to identify completely with an idea", as Benjamin puts it. On the other, in the world, we have the unchangeable rites and practices, institutions, marriage, family, jobs, legal systems, and tacit rules of proper behaviour, a way of life to which everyone assents by dedicating their own life to it. Benjamin is saddened that the world remains the same no matter how many students pass through the university, where they engage in an intense theoretical life. The university stage of life ends abruptly, when the graduates are cast away, back to the other side of the gulf, on the shore of the old world, which cannot be changed by the abstract theories smuggled out from the university.

Although sometimes acknowledged, the huge distance between university and life, or "the gap" as we shall call it here, has not really been a matter of concern for most university scholars. A notable exception was Fichte, for whom the problem of the university was its not teaching the right things needed to change the world. Fichte hints at the gap when envisioning a new kind of university, one where students "will be schooled in the great art of life and activity, in which as a rule no university gives instruction" (Fichte 1804). Fichte's vision was later put into practice by Wilhelm von Humboldt through his plan for the new Berlin university (1810), which most scholars now recognize as a revolutionary reform of the university. A century later, Benjamin, studying in Berlin, at the very same university dreamed by Fichte and built by Humboldt, sadly remarks that the gap remains. A reform had been implemented, yet the distance from the world had not been bridged.

The main reason why this gap has not been problematized is already indicated by Benjamin's article: people assume that the university fulfils some state functions, that there is some external purpose designated by society for the universities. This is the functionalist view of the university, which prevails even today in current debates about universities. There is something of an "honest barbarity" to functionalism, thinks Benjamin: "'people assume with brutal simplicity that the aim of study is to steer its disciples to a socially conceived individuality and service to the state" (Benjamin 1915). The functionalist view is the current dogma under which we labor, and this stops us from seeing the university as something with a meaning in itself, as another way of life. Benjamin tries to point at the university's specificity: "a student is only a student because the problems of spiritual life are closer to his heart than the practice of social welfare" (Benjamin 1915). According to Benjamin, abstract notions and theories are more important for study than the concrete problems that gave rise to those theories in the first place. The university is a commitment to another form of life, a life dedicated to ideas, not another institution that should solve society's problems.

Benjamin, Fichte, and Humboldt concur in one belief, namely that the university-world gap can be somehow bridged by reforming the university – by changing the curriculum or the ways of teaching – as if the fault of the gap lies with the university only and it must be somehow repaired. However, the argument presented here claims instead that the gap is almost innate to universities' history, buried under the foundations of the first paradigmatic universities, Bologna and Paris. If the university wants to remain true to its origins, it needs to acknowledge this distance from the world. It does not need to be a vast gulf; an arm's length distance will suffice. In current debates, the university is required to become more relevant to society, as if the gap is somehow an unfortunate accident, a slide into lazyness. Here we want to open up the possibility to think differently about this gap, as a necessary condition for the university to do what it does best: to allow its students and professors to lead a different form of life, a life passionately dedicated to ideas and theories.
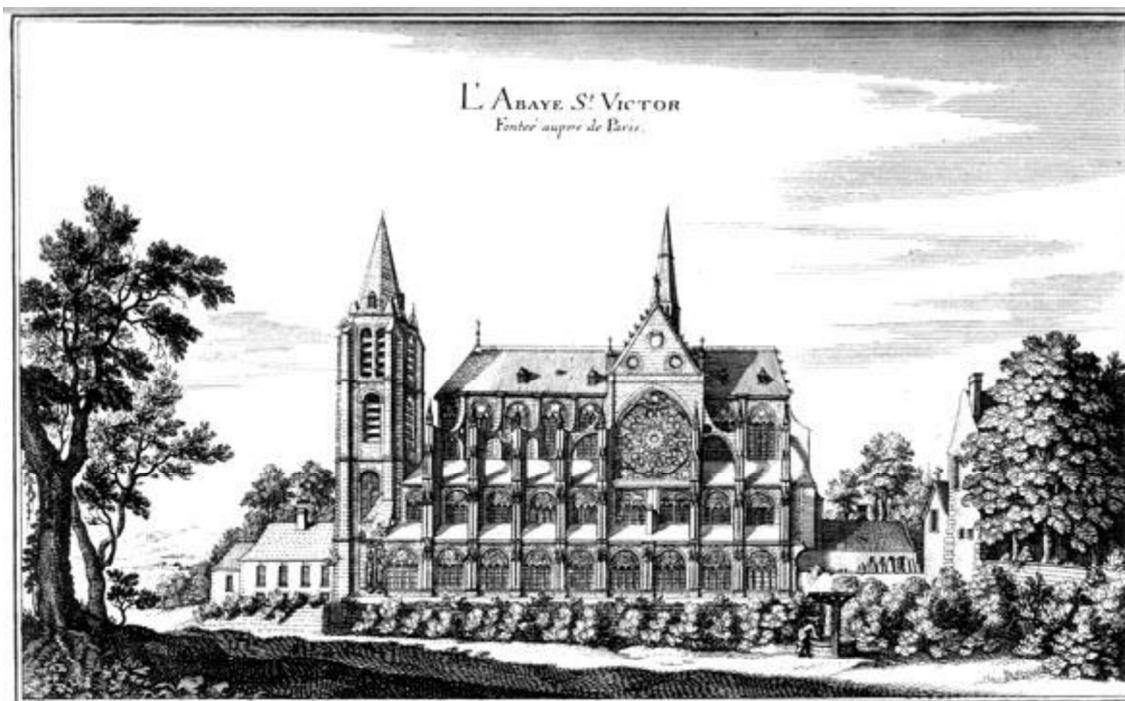
Figure 4 The abbey of Saint Victor (Paris) where William of Champeaux taught Abelard. 18th century engraving, Source: Wikipedia

In order to see how the gap came into being, we must return archaeologically to the foundations of the first universities in the Middle Ages. The pre-history of the University of Paris starts with one man fleeing from the city. His name was Abelard. As a student at one of the many monastery schools in Paris, Abelard could not stand the teaching of his master, William of Champeaux. The student Abelard was smarter than his teacher in the art of reasoning, or dialectics. At a certain point, Abelard decided that he had learned enough; he ran away from Paris to found his own school. Without credentials, with only the power of words and reasoning, Abelard attracted students who came to listen to him wherever he went. The story of Abelard's attempts to teach freely is a convoluted fugue: Abelard ran from village to monastery, founding new schools, until evicted by the local religious authorities, for his teachings were considered heretical. In France at that time, one needed the approval of the Church to found any school. At some point, exhausted by all these conflicts, Abelard fled in to the woods to teach uncensored.

His students followed him there. A river separating the forest school from the city made it clear who was on which side; the gap, enacted by the river, became clear. However, Abelard's forest community was not yet a university. The real university came into being when the students of Abelard returned to the city of Paris and began studying with other masters. The Paris masters had learned the lesson of Abelard: there cannot be such a thing as a one-man-university. One needs a community to defend the free right to teach under the demands of reason alone, against other communities with their different forms of life. Thus, the masters of Paris united themselves into a corporate community, a *universitas,* to jointly face the demands of the Church and the secular powers.

Universitas is the Latin word for association. The complete denomination for what we now call "universities" was *universitas magistrorum et scholarium,* i.e. a community of masters and/or students. Since its medieval inception, the university was a gathering of people thinking together about a matter of interest to them, usually framed as a theory, a book, or a problem. This thinking together did not happen spontaneously, people had to create an institutional framework to support it: they gathered at certain times of the day in certain houses to read particular texts, to teach them, to debate them. Masters were paid to teach certain books, students were expected to be on time for the classes. It is precisely this realization of the institutional framework for thinking together that created the distance from the world following the establishment of the universities. The river that had separated Abelard's forest school from the city was now internalized. Even though the students moved back to the city, and although the walls of the university were physically inside the city, the university itself did not belong to the city or to the church. The university was distinct, in its juridical status, from them both, despite these powers trying to make it fit their needs.

The functionalist view is correct insofar as it points to the actual historical motives that lead to the foundation of a university. For those endowed with political power, the universities offered potential solutions to certain issues. We only need to look at the foundation of the University of Bologna to understand what was at stake there politically. Before the student-university of Bologna was founded, there were already many schools in the city teaching liberal arts. At that time, the old Roman law – the *Corpus Juris Civilis* – was not really used in practice, but rather regarded as a prestigious reference for the few lawyers who knew about it. In the political fights that emerged between the Emperor and the Pope, Roman law became a weapon for one side, carrying with it the authority of the ancients. Thus, at a time when political battles started to be fought in juridical terms, "the struggle between the Empire and the Papacy was essentially a battle of ideas" (Rashdall 1895). Since soldiers were needed to fight on this ground with the weapons of law and reasoning, some form of training was required. Matilda of Canossa was the informal patron of the Bologna school of law, and encouraged scholars to teach Roman law. The concrete aim at Bologna was to create a critical mass of experts in Roman law who could impose it as the prevailing legal framework and, in the long term, win the political war against the Papacy. Thus, the University of Bologna emerged when the masters of law gathered in an association to teach law by focusing only on one book, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. Previously, law was taught as a part of rhetoric, in the arts schools, yet now it emerged as a separate discipline with its own faculty. This separation, both disciplinary and institutional, marks the

foundation of the university, because the study of law required a "specialised attention" (Rashdall 1895), as the students of law did not spend their time with general studies of art. This is how the so-called "superior" Faculty of Law came into being at Bologna.

What nobody had anticipated, however, was the way in which this specialized study and dedicated attention would lead to a theoretical fascination with the subject matter itself. The *Corpus Juris Civilis* became worthy of study in itself, regardless of the political problems it was supposed to solve, giving rise to a "genuine intellectual enthusiasm" (Rashdall 1895). This enthusiasm for theory continued to be the mark of the university throughout the centuries, and this is where we see the functionalist hypothesis lose its grip. Undoubtedly, students do attend universities in view of solving real-world problems in the future, after they graduate. Nobody studies medicine for the theoretical thrill alone; there are people to be cured, diseases to be fought. Yet, during those years of study, there are times when a virus becomes fascinating in and of itself, worthy of study just because it is such a complex thing that raises interesting questions. In those moments of study, the world and its problems fade into the background and the virus shines alone in the spotlight, all attention directed at it. A virus, a problem, a formulation of a law become things of beauty in themselves because the university's way of life silences the world for a few moments, enough to remove the things from their everyday logic, to let them speak for themselves. This is the specificity of the university: the way it enacts the distance from the world in order to abstract a real problem, such that it becomes an object of study.

The university is a place in which abstract theories become concrete, because our study makes them present here and now. Yet, the theory never fully translates into the real world. An academic argument seems to lose its weight once it meets daylight. It is hard to speak using the same words in an academic conversation as in the small-talk of everyday life. It is not uncommon for academics to dedicate their life to elucidating one concept and then never being able to use that concept in everyday conversation, because now they know the complex universe hidden behind a word, they feel that they cannot do justice to it. When a piece of knowledge is taken outside the university and transplanted into a public debate, be it political speech or a talk-show, it loses its shine. In broad daylight, theories look sad and somehow grey. This is not just because in the real world there is no place for theory, but rather because theory requires us to slow down, to pay attention, to discuss it, to carve out some time for it, to study it. The world has no time and space for study, hence, a specific place for this activity was designated: the university. In the space and place of the university, the world is silenced and lost from view so that students can focus their attention on one object of study at a time, making it come alive in their interaction.

The gap between the world and the university is structurally enacted. This gap is what makes abstract thinking possible: by silencing the world, holding it at an arm's length, opening up a space to think about problems that happen to come from the world but end up as matters of concern in their own right. Inside the university, theories and concepts seem a matter of life and death, the most important thing here and now, in this conversation. Yet the echoes of this conversation will not leave the building. This does not mean that the conversation taking place

in the university is less important or real than the facts of the real world. Rather, it is a different kind of importance, a different kind of weight. That "huge gulf between ideas and life" is what makes possible the life of ideas, university life itself.

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