

## On a Small Glossary of Academic Anti-Intellectualism

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**William Díaz,**

**"On a Small Glossary of Academic Anti-intellectualism"**

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**Abstract:** This article presents the *Small Glossary of Anti-intellectualism*, where the most common rhetorical strategies and themes of contemporary academic anti-intellectualism are commented on. Anti-intellectualism is as old as intellectual life itself. However, its contemporary version is historically and sociologically rooted in the very structure of modern culture industry. It is a manifestation of a now universal pseudo-culture (*Halbbildung*) which, according to Adorno, has become the "dominant form of contemporary consciousness." Arthur Schlesinger said that anti-intellectualism has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman; today, anti-intellectualism is certainly the antisemitism of several social and political groups, including academia itself—a fact which by the way might attest to how influential businessman-ideology is in our society. In recent years, education and research have undergone crucial changes that redefine their nature and their relation to society, feeding new forms of anti-intellectualism, which manifest in the vast penetration of managerial discourse in the institutions for higher education. But academic anti-intellectualism is also the result of the institutionalization of ideas, which are naturalized as commonplaces. The six entries of the *Glossary* that are presented in the final part of this article assume one of the most important tasks of the intellect: to break and open the narrow margins of ossified thought.

## William DÍAZ

### On a Small Glossary of Academic Anti-intellectualism

#### 1

Anti-intellectualism is not a new phenomenon. Its origin dates back far before our age of fake news, Brexits, Trumps and Bolsonaros. Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963) was in part a reaction to the 1952 election and "the McCarthyite rage" that followed. Of course, American anti-intellectualism did not appear during the fifties. "Our anti-intellectualism," he says, "is, in fact, older than our national identity, and has a long historical background" (6). One might go as far back as the mocking image of Socrates in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*—and the final fate of the real Socrates—and conclude that anti-intellectualism is as old as intellectual activity. In the neoliberal age, however, the age of the dissolution of the national state as a regulative idea of contemporary societies, when the economic pressure of multinational corporations turns into the most important *de facto* political power, and mass media and the web play a major role in the formation of individuals, anti-intellectualism has become a strong polarizing force, with a huge impact in society as a whole.

Anti-intellectualism is neither the anti-rationalism of, say, Nietzsche, Freud or Bergson, nor "the ill-mannered or ill-considered criticism that one intellectual may make to another," affirms Hofstadter (8). Criticism of Western rationality is the main foundation of Western rationality itself, and cannot be confused with anti-intellectualism. Similarly, criticism of other intellectuals is "one of the most important functions of the intellectual and he customarily performs it with vivacity" (8). Anti-intellectualism is not a current of thought but something like an atmosphere: vagueness is what keeps it alive and gives it its strength. There is no "hard" definition of anti-intellectualism. In other words, anti-intellectualism is a manifestation of a now universal pseudo-culture (*Halbbildung*) which, according to Adorno, has become "despite all Enlightenment and the spread of information, indeed with their help, the dominant form of contemporary consciousness" (94). Or, to quote Hofstadter *in extenso*:

As an idea, [anti-intellectualism] is not a single proposition but a complex of related propositions, as an attitude, it is not usually found in a pure form but in ambivalence—a pure and unalloyed dislike of intellect and intellectuals is uncommon. And as a historical subject, if it can be called that, it is not a constant thread but a force fluctuating in strength from time to time and drawing its motive power from varying sources. [...] The common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life. (7)

According to Adorno, there is a dialectics of culture in modernity that produces and reproduces pseudo-culture. Culture in its bourgeois sense presupposes the idea of a "condition of humanity without status or purpose"; it "infringes upon its own dignity" as soon as it becomes "embroiled in the praxis of socially useful labour in the pursuit of particular ends." However, when conceived in its purity, culture becomes ideology and is therefore guilty (97). The basic contradiction between culture and society, Adorno argues, does not simply result in "a lack of culture in the old style, the peasant style." On the contrary, today rural areas are "breeding grounds of pseudo-culture" because "the pre-bourgeois conception of the world [...] was destroyed there in a short space of time" and "displaced by the spirit of the culture industry." Under these circumstances of rapid change, individual autonomy—which is the "a priori of the bourgeois idea of culture"—had no time to consolidate. The authority of the Bible was rapidly replaced by "the authority of the stadium, the television and the 'true stories'" made up by mass media (99). Culture was then atomized and transformed into a cult of crude facts and the information industry.

Contemporary anti-intellectualism is historically and sociologically rooted in the very structure of modern culture industry. In *Idiot America*, Charles Pierce traces the first manifestations of American stupidity back to the figure of Ignatius Donnelly, known for his fringe theories concerning the Atlantis as the source of all civilization—Donnelly is one of the founding fathers of what we call pseudo-science. When it appeared in 1882, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* "became an overnight sensation." It "went to twenty-three editions in eight years, and a revised edition was published as late as 1949" (Pierce 25). *Atlantis* is a seminal product of anti-intellectualism at the early age of modern culture industry. "That Donnelly reached his conclusions before gathering his data is obvious from the start, but his brief is closely argued from an impossibly dense synthesis of sources" (24). The book is indeed a curious piece of erudition, a mixture of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the sea*, and a kind of

knowledge in comparative mythology, anthropology, history and cosmology which burgeoned in the editorial industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"The book is a carefully crafted political polemic," writes Pierce. But what is the polemic about? Anti-intellectualism is not a defense of ignorance, but quite the opposite: it requires a great deal of work and energy, precisely because it is often directed against the intellect, which is seen as a closed institution. The most prominent spokesmen of anti-intellectualism, affirms Hofstadter, are "in the main neither the uneducated nor the unintellectual, but rather the marginal intellectuals, would-be intellectuals, unfrocked or embittered intellectuals, the literate readers of the semi-literate, full of seriousness and high purpose about the causes that bring them to the attention of the world" (21). The impact of *Atlantis* was so bombastic, that some scientists were almost forced to take it seriously. Charles Darwin, among many others, wrote to Donnelly, but only to tell him "that he was somewhat skeptical, probably because Donnelly's theory of an Atlantean source for civilization made a hash of Darwin's theories" (Pierce 24). If we judge it for its success, however, Donnelly's book was worth the effort: it reinforced "the feeling he'd always had [...] that he was a genius for whom the world was not yet ready" (Pierce 53). Once the snowball of anti-intellectualism has begun rolling, there is no way to stop it.

## 2

Arthur Schlesinger famously remarked that anti-intellectualism has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman; today, anti-intellectualism is certainly the antisemitism of several social and political groups, including academia itself—a fact which by the way might attest to how influential businessman-ideology is in our society. Most of modern anti-intellectualism is "academic" in the sense that it carries out some of the most common attacks to the academic institution—or what Bourdieu called the academic field. The kind of anti-intellectualism we are dealing with is not simply that of the "marginal" or "would-be" intellectuals like Ignatius Donnelly, the evangelist Billy Graham or the media executive and political strategist Steve Bannon. It is easy to see, in the academy itself, some interesting rhetorical strategies that add vitality and efficacy to most anti-intellectual arguments: images, metaphors, semantical displacements, spatial constructions, apparently neutral concepts that are charged with hidden moral values. These strategies are very common, not only as weapons against academia, but as seeds that are growing within the university. *Academic* anti-intellectualism is thus the anti-intellectualism that develops *inside* the academy—though its basic impulse may come from other fields.

The most evident case nowadays is the vast penetration of managerial discourse in the institutions of higher education. There has always been a tension between managerialism and the university, between economy and knowledge. The advance of economic globalization and neoliberalism, however, has gradually pervaded all fields of public policy and transformed them from within. It is symptomatic, for instance, that new public policies tend to view education—and especially higher education—as a commodity, even as a set of tradable goods to be negotiated by Trade Ministries and not Education Ministries. This situation leads to very complex and subtle forms of anti-intellectualism. One of the most prominent cases is the now normalized use of the expression "economy of knowledge." Knowledge, which in theory must be autonomous in order to develop itself, has become the object of an economy, and therefore the subject of a new order of means and ends, based on profit and productivity. This contradiction has been largely overseen, and the term "economy of knowledge" has been adopted without further questions by academic administrators and professors alike.

## 3

All these ideas led us (me and the members of a research group on anti-intellectualism) to conceive the project of building a small glossary of academic anti-intellectualism, a glossary in which we could ironically comment on the most common rhetorical strategies and themes of this trend. The actual omnipresence of terms like "academic leadership," "excellence," and "efficiency," in universities, has transformed culture, scientific research and intellectual activity into practical for-profit activities. In our small glossary, we do not try to analyze the effects of such a transformation—an enterprise that has been successfully undertaken by the sociologist Richard Münch. Schlesinger's metaphor of anti-intellectualism as the antisemitism of the businessmen might serve well to explain our objective. Like antisemitism, anti-intellectualism has created a wide range of images and labels to describe and define the nature of the object of its scorn: "egghead," atheist, communist, indoctrinating, falsely sophisticated, elitist, dogmatic, ideologized, immoral, etc. These images are efficient because they appeal to the heart and not to reason: a short-circuit between the object and the image produces a suspension of judgement. Most of the terms we discuss stop intellectual activity and provide simple answers even before the real questions are formulated.

Thus, our *Small Glossary of anti-intellectualism* does not aim to define the terms it includes, but to comment on them—we are not building a “dictionary” but a “glossary.” We want to see how some terms are rhetorically validated in public discourse on and in the academy, and how they block the exercise of the intellect. When we talk about “populism,” for example, we are not interested—at least not directly interested—in the *content* of the word, since we do not explore academic discussions of its meaning. Instead we deal with the form in which the term is validated, the rhetorical mechanisms that produce taboos and accepted meanings for it: the images, feelings and short-circuits of thought that the figure of the “populist” produces and reproduces. That is why our primary sources are not the “heavier” products of academic scholarship, but its “lighter” manifestations: not the treatises, academic books and articles in specialized journals, but the journalistic essays, web pages, interviews, etc. We have seen that, within them, one can better perceive the ideological dimension and the rhetorical strategies of anti-intellectualism.

The entries included in our *Small Glossary of Anti-intellectualism* are diverse. Some terms belong to the adaptation of managerial vocabulary and imagery to academic needs (or maybe it happens in the exact opposite way: they are the adaptation of the academic needs to the managerial vocabulary): beside “excellence,” “academic leadership,” and “efficiency,” the glossary includes terms such as “quality,” “human capital,” “entrepreneurship,” “standards,” “impact,” “innovation,” and of course “economy of knowledge.” Other terms are related to the obvious political dimension of scholarship: “right,” “left,” “centre,” “populism,” “conservative,” and “political correctness,” for example. Others refer to the medium and the arena of public debate—“web” or “tweet.” Some entries refer to the pedagogic or the academic practices themselves—like “competences,” “evaluation,” “critical thinking,” “abstract,” “paper” and “peer review.” Other terms belong to the academic debate in the field of human and social sciences—“identity,” “canon,” “subaltern,” and “culture.” There are some terms with no specific origin, but which have certainly acquired some kind of unequivocal value and prestige among academics—like “Harvard,” “ranking,” “database” or “core journal.” Our *Small Glossary* also includes some entries about rhetorical strategies: images that build semantic fields based on oppositions—“centre / periphery,” “progressive / reactionary”—, and there are finally grammatical norms that have turned into moral mandates, like the use of the “gender inclusive” form, the plural form in some words (pluralities, diversities, masculinities, territorialities), prefixes (post-, trans-, multi-) and suffixes (-centric).

To expose the rhetoric of anti-intellectualism is an endless task because images and pseudo concepts proliferate and branch out incessantly. We have to put a stop to our project somewhere, and that is why we decided to write a *small* glossary of anti-intellectualism. We cannot be exhaustive, and therefore we have decided to describe only the most important rhetoric strategies and images, the most permeated by actuality, so to speak. When we discussed the limits of our project, we found out that our task would be over as soon as we were forced to include the word “anti-intellectualism” in our glossary. In other words, as soon as anti-intellectualism becomes an ossified category in the academic discussion, we will have to change our strategy if we want to keep critique alive. Anti-intellectualism is not alien to intellectual activity. On the contrary, the development of the intellect is in part a reaction to the ossification of thought. From this point of view, academic anti-intellectualism is also the result of the institutionalization of ideas. Some ideas are revolutionary when formulated for the first time, but soon they become common currency in the academy, and lose their effectiveness. We are trying to chase down common places in public academic discussions, but this does not mean that we are building an index of forbidden terms. If this was our intention, we would be missing our mark. On the contrary, we believe that some of those terms must be revitalized if we still want to have a truly critical academy, an academy that formulates the right questions and in doing so, responds to the demands of the present. One of the most important tasks of the intellect is to break and open up the narrow margins of ossified thought. Anti-intellectualism, like every form of dogmatism, is simply unable to laugh at itself. We are convinced that humor and irony are the most effective weapons against the traps of dogmatic thought.

#### 4

This is a sample of six entries of our glossary: “Knowledge Economy,” “Entrepreneurship,” “Excellence,” “Learning to learn,” “Paradigm shift,” and “Lifelong Learning.” All of them revolve around phenomena which, in turn, help to understand the increasing immobility of the academy in the face of the imminent return to the bad old days. There is obviously a line of continuity between the anti-intellectualism of the past and the present. The reader will be able to easily perceive which are our most important influences, from the 19th century on: Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary*, Karl Krauss’ political commentaries in *Die Fackel*, and Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*.

## Knowledge Economy

"The two greatest thinkers in the history of economics—Adam Smith and Karl Marx—believed that the best way to discover the deepest truths of economics was to study the most advanced practice of production" (Unger 3): This is how Roberto M. Unger justifies in his 2019 book the need to study the knowledge economy—the "most advanced practice of production" of today. Unger, whom Perry Anderson called one of the most brilliant minds in the Third World, is a philosopher and social theorist, a Harvard professor and a professional politician; maybe this explains the inveterate optimism and apparent candor that sparkles in his book. According to him, the attitude of the knowledge economy is "experimental," its subject is "imagination" and its practices are "revolutionary," it holds out a "promise of change" and opens up to the world the vision of "possible futures."

Not only will the future be transformed by knowledge economy in Unger's vision. The past will be rewritten as well by way of a new historical understanding. "We are accustomed to seeing the history of our economic activity as a field of pitiless constraint, in which scarcity, need, dependence, and coercion play major roles. From the perspective of the emergence of knowledge economy, however, economic life has always been a story of the troubled advance of the imagination" (5). Humanity has been blind until now: knowledge economy will allow us to see the past through the right lens.

An unwritten rule of political rhetoric says that the vaguer and more inaccurate the content of an expression, the more likely is to extract empty promises from it. When we speak of "knowledge economy," we evoke the attractive image of a paradigm shift (see below), an expression often used today to justify so many things of such diverse nature. The centrality that knowledge and information have acquired among human activities, it is said, has altered the rules of the economic game, at least from the perspective of entrepreneurs and civil servants. But, to tell the truth, this does not imply a new conception of productive life as a whole, and the promised revolution is more rhetorical than material. The paradigm shift that people accept so enthusiastically is actually more modest. It is difficult to accept Unger's claim that knowledge economy is just a new practice of production, comparable to agricultural or industrial production: knowledge as such does not produce tradable goods, nor food, nor means of transport, nor does it improve the material conditions of a society. All forms of material production require a particular knowledge, none of them can be directly and predominantly based on the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge. At best, and according to the neoliberal ethos, knowledge economy constitutes a profitable economic sector, and not a specific form of material production in the strict sense.

Rather than a concept, "knowledge economy" is a metaphor built on contradiction and nonsense. Less than a century ago, no scientist or academic would have conceived that "knowledge" could be the object of an "economy." It would never have occurred to Diderot and D'Alembert that their *Encyclopaedia* was intended to be inserted into a cycle of production, consumption and profit, nor to Darwin that his theory of the evolution of the species would become the object of capitalist speculation, or to Einstein that the "value" of the general theory of relativity could be determined through, for example, a citation index. When science and knowledge are put at the service of pragmatic ends and the particular interests of governments, public and private agencies and individuals, they cannot develop freely, cannot produce revolutions in our conception of the world, cannot open up new horizons of reflection or serve humanity's greater ends. Economy and knowledge were, for those who dealt with that abstract thing called "knowledge," opposing terms.

If any sense of the idea of a "new paradigm" is to be accepted, it is this: knowledge has become an object of profit, and so it has been put into circulation in the magical whirlpool of profitable goods. The expression "knowledge economy" is a metaphor for a violent process that occurs, first of all, within language: it takes an activity, knowledge, whose autonomy is essential for its subsistence and development, and forces it to become the object of another one, economy, focused on immediate goals and individual interests. When its autonomy is consistently maintained, "knowledge" can in fact call into question the purposes and principles of the "economy," and above all an economy based on the idea of unlimited growth of capital and on the principle that the invisible hand of the free market corrects inequalities. When it is constrained by the economy, knowledge loses its critical edge: whatever it does, whatever it says about reality, it will be reduced to a mere form of production and will be inserted without further ado into the sphere of immediate use and the service of particular interests. Under the spell of economy, knowledge ceases to be knowledge and becomes a good, a commodity, a tradable object, stripped of its real content; its only value is the exchange value, which is profoundly arbitrary, the object of permanent speculation.

The knowledge economy is, in fact, the most audacious way of shaping a pseudo-market of knowledge in the image and likeness of the market of tradable goods. Academics and scientists are now

economic agents that manage their knowledge in the form of a product: they offer their papers, their lectures or their patents to the speculation of journals, academic congresses and the industry; and the exchange value in this symbolic market is established by citation indexes, points and rankings which establish criteria for the distribution of private and public funding. Like any capitalist market, this quasi-market of knowledge produces, as any capitalist market does, monopolies, accumulation, intermediaries and speculators: it is the paradise of economists and administrators, who take over the management of universities, research centers and even ministries and boards of education, science and technology. Even the very structure of the knowledge market is offered as a customer service, which universities and research institutes gladly buy in the form of databases, accreditation and recognition systems or access to rankings. Contrary to what is often believed and maintained by its theoretical proponents, the knowledge economy is not the form of production in the age of the knowledge society. It is, rather, the form that knowledge takes in the age of the economy society.

### **Entrepreneurship**

According to the last recommendations of the European Commission, the eight "key competences for lifelong learning" are: "Literacy," "Multilingualism," "Numerical, scientific and engineering skills," "Digital and technology-based competences," "Interpersonal skills and learning to learn," "Active citizenship," "Entrepreneurship," and "Cultural awareness and expression." A case can be made for language, mathematical or digital competences, as well as social skills, active citizenship and cultural awareness; it can even be accepted with some reluctance that "learning to learn" (see below) makes some practical sense, even if it does not refer to any material content. However, the link between entrepreneurship and lifelong learning (see below) is much weaker. The reason why such a strange competence has been included in the idea of learning, of course, has nothing to do with pedagogical or academic reasons, but with de facto assumptions that have become natural in recent years. Entrepreneurship so intimately permeates the capitalist ethos in times of neoliberalism that it is accepted as a human quality that does not demand further justification.

The document states that entrepreneurship "requires knowing that there are different contexts and opportunities for turning ideas into action in personal, social, and professional activities," also "an understanding of economics and the social and economic opportunities and challenges facing an employer, organization or society," and an awareness of "the ethical principles and challenges of sustainable development." Entrepreneurial skills, on the other hand, "are founded on creativity," "imagination," and "critical and constructive reflection." They also include "the ability to work both as individual and collaboratively in teams," and "the ability to make financial decisions" and "to effectively communicate and negotiate with others." This characterization, while recognizing a close link between entrepreneurship and the contemporary capitalist ethos, also leaves out any trace of historical reflection. A former document of the Commission (2006) puts it succinctly: "Entrepreneurship is understood as a person's ability to transform ideas into action" (17). A conveniently vague definition that seems to evoke the most innocent meaning of the term "entrepreneur": someone who takes something upon himself. If taking something on and turning it into action is to be an entrepreneur, then we are all entrepreneurs in virtually every circumstance. It takes only one step to get from this point to the next: promoting an education that makes us entrepreneurs of ourselves. This is also presented as a must.

The 2006 document states that the entrepreneurial spirit "supports individuals, not only in their everyday lives at home and in society, but also in the workplace in being aware of the context of their work and being able to seize opportunities" (17). In this sentence two different life dimensions appear miraculously balanced by the action of a neutral entrepreneurial spirit. Being an entrepreneur is part of human nature, and if we have not seen the manifestations of this human faculty in daily life, at home and in our social relations, it is because we have been blind to it. The function of education is, therefore, to bring us out of our ignorance and make us aware of this incontrovertible truth. As Ulrich Bröckling writes in a note on the term "entrepreneur" in the *Glossar der Gegenwart*: entrepreneurship is man's release from his self-incurred state of unproductiveness (275).

The rhetorical inflation of entrepreneurship has made the entrepreneur the model of contemporary subjectivity, and universities have ended up giving the entrepreneurial spirit a privileged place when they reflect about its public function. They have no alternative in the face of the ideological and political steamroller of neoliberalism. It is increasingly accepted that entrepreneurship has a crucial role to play in job creation, economic growth and competitiveness. Entrepreneurship does not need to be justified because it is installed in the heart of the capitalist economy, while the university has everything to lose: it has a heavy bureaucracy, it is too expensive, too anchored in the past, too critical, too committed to the priority of knowledge and reflection, to the public use of reason. Under such conditions,

entrepreneurship cannot become an object of critical reflection in the university; on the contrary, academic reflection must be placed at the service of entrepreneurial training.

The title of a 2009 British report summarizes the spirit of the present times with respect to the academia: *Developing Entrepreneurial Professionals - Putting Entrepreneurship at the Centre of Higher Education*. This report was sponsored by major British business associations committed to innovation and, above all, contributors to the UK higher education and research funding system. The first lines of the preface describe the change that has taken place in universities, and announce optimistically what is to come: "When I was at university, in the 1980s, 'business' was very much a dirty word in academic circles," (3) says Lord Karan Bilimoria, founder of Cobra Beer—and one of the first two Visiting Entrepreneurs ever appointed at Cambridge University. Now he is "happy to say that the situation has changed dramatically, although there is still a great deal of work to be done." The UK's competitiveness, he argues, depends on "our ability to create business-ready graduates with entrepreneurial skills" and the creation of "an environment where students can flourish": Higher Education Institutions must "embrace business education if they want to appeal to students, offering the entrepreneurship and business courses they increasingly desire" (3). It is not enough to encourage the creation of spin-offs and startups in all areas of professional training: the entrepreneurial mindset must be fully inculcated in every student.

Along with self-help literature, entrepreneurship has already taken on the task of developing a rich rhetoric of complacency and frivolity. What is disturbing, however, is the way in which this rhetoric has permeated the official discourse of the institutions in charge of higher education. Referring to entrepreneurship, the document of the European Commission mixes dissimilar terms without the slightest hint of irony: entrepreneurship "is related to creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives" (17). "Creativity" and "innovation" associate the entrepreneur with the artist, the scientist and the inventor, "risk-taking" with the adventurer, and "project management" with the manager. The rhetoric of entrepreneurship makes the manager the embodiment of the man of total action. It is not by chance, therefore, that the language of coaching is so obsessed with the figure of Leonardo Da Vinci, the supposed incarnation of the universal man of the Renaissance. Artist, scientist, inventor and adventurer: the manager is a nonconformist, he sets a stagnant world in motion and always discovers new horizons. "There is no room for regulated and standardized disciplinary subjects in the culture of entrepreneurship," says Ulrich Bröckling (275): the cultivation of non-conformity is a distinctive feature of his individuality.

The jargon of entrepreneurship loves the hyperbole of the successful individual who breaks the limits imposed on him by the world and society. It relies on the example of great men who started businesses from scratch: Steve Jobs and Apple, Bill Gates and Microsoft, Jeff Bezos and Amazon, Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook. The entrepreneur stands out only in the sense that he creates himself as a trademark. But the mythical image that is recycled here is that of the young loner or the group of eccentric friends who suddenly have a great idea and carry it out. For it to become a flourishing business all that is needed is tenacity, a spirit of work and a desire to succeed; and if it fails, it is because one has not been entrepreneurial enough. It is often overlooked, however, that all these cases of great men and successful companies are supremely exceptional within the small island of exceptional cases. In fact, the rule is that entrepreneurial projects fail, the exception is that they have some kind of success, and what normally happens within the latter is that the success is modest. For a Steve Jobs to become the god who dominates the seas of technological products, millions of sailors must drown and a few must remain barely afloat. It is needless to say how crucial have been the millions of dollars Apple Corporation has invested in political lobbying and economic pressure in the sinking of so many companies and in the oblivion of so many shipwrecks.

This is, in a nutshell, the paradox that underpins the culture of entrepreneurship: it presupposes that everyone can be an entrepreneur but assumes that very few actually become one. And it is precisely there, in this radical difference, where the economic characterization of entrepreneurship and its entire capitalist ethos is based: the survival of the fittest and the individual guilt of those who fail. All the rhetoric of entrepreneurship, now adapted to academic life, pretties up an undeniable truth that, in the long run, will pass on his bill to the universities: when they cannot hide the piles of failed spin-offs and startups and it is no longer possible to simply blame individual guilt on young people who have failed, they will be held responsible for not having done enough to instill in young people a true entrepreneurial spirit. The University will then no longer be able to oppose new reforms likely in the form of undercutting and new demands for improved efficiency, as it will have been publicly identified as one of the major contributors to unemployment, poverty and the poor competitiveness of a region or a country. The seeds of this attitude can already be seen in official documents in favor of entrepreneurship, which often accuse the university of not being flexible enough to accept its role in economic development.

The need for entrepreneurship in universities has been justified in many ways over the past decades. Alongside its impact on job creation, economic growth and competitiveness, there is an appeal to its ability to release individual potential—what the staunchest advocates of entrepreneurship call the “flourishing” of individuals. Such arguments appear, for example, in the introduction to a special issue of *Industry and Higher Education* devoted to the role of universities in entrepreneurship. The text is seasoned with other, less optimistic reasons for an entrepreneurial spirit in the universities which contrast with the jovial tone in which they are presented: it mentions “increased economic uncertainty,” speaks of “shorter product life cycles” that force innovation, and also affirms that “mergers, downsizing, joint ventures, deregulation and privatization, among other things, have created the need for a flexible and reactive workforce” (172). It is inadvertently admitted that the deep causes for the current boom in entrepreneurship culture are more prosaic and worrying than the flourishing of individuals—since these can hardly flourish in such waste land. Job instability, the contraction of formal employment, the deterioration of working conditions, in other words, the annihilation of work at the global level, have led new workers to become entrepreneurs, which is nothing more than looking for a way to survive. It is understandable that politically influential businesspeople are calling for entrepreneurship to be placed at the heart of academic training, since it is part of their own ethos. It is less understandable, however, that state officials and university presidents should be so diligent in fulfilling such a request. They do so because they are bound by force of circumstance, but also because they are trying to deal with the powerlessness produced by the current state of affairs. The jargon of entrepreneurship in the university is nothing more than the manifestation of the bad conscience of officials and academics in the face of an undeniable fact: during the last decades, work has lost every battle in the struggle against capital, which is becoming increasingly stronger.

### **Excellence**

Like a false King Midas in a cheap market, the word excellence seems to transform everything it touches into gold. But it only gives it the luster of cheap jewelry. Its brightness is apparent, a rhetorical trickery. Once named, excellence compels everyone to conform and blocks any further questions. This is the source of its effectiveness. No one can argue against the need for evaluation; likewise, it is impossible to criticize our aspiration to excellence. But that is not everything: as an immediately positive aspiration, excellence does not need any political, cultural, economic or even academic framework. Some well-meaning generalizations and abstractions are enough—and if they are summarized in a convincing enumeration, much the better. “The 4 Pillars of Academic Excellence” in the University of Kentucky, for example, are “Belonging and Engagement,” “Student Health and Wellness,” “Academic Success,” and “Financial Stability.” Excellence is the new ideal of an academic world that does quite well without questioning itself about the role of education in the formation of any cultural identity, about the social, economic, or historical relevance of education and research under specific conditions, or about their concrete political implications. Excellence is the mirror in which the university nowadays—a university with no content or specific purposes—can contemplate its own self-satisfying image.

These days, excellence is iterative: to expand its meaning, you only have to repeat the word and apply it to any field of academic administration. The “Six Principles of Excellence” of the Indiana University are, according to its web page: “An Excellent Education,” “An Excellent Faculty,” “Excellence in Research,” “The International Dimension of Excellence,” “Excellence in the Health Sciences and Health Care,” and “Excellence in Engagement and Economic Development.” Thus, excellence is elevated to the condition of an indisputable and immediately constructive foundation. This is not a mere coincidence. The idea of excellence, free from any specific social or historical condition, comes from the old scholastic ideas about the nature of God. In its secular version excellence is still unattainable. However, its lack of consistency makes it very apt to be co-opted, by way of the rhetoric of self-help literature, by the managerial discourse.

Excellence is exceptional; that is the reason why it can only be applied to God. In its origin, it was used to name a few noblemen, the intellectual or artistic elite, or the best warriors. But today there is nothing so common as the policies that democratize the illusion that everybody, every scholar, every institution, can be excellent. They just have to follow a recipe, adapt themselves to budget cuts and be wise competitors in the quasi-market of knowledge. But all that is an illusion, a house of mirrors in which everybody is tricked. On the one hand, the real elites, those that dominate the academic market like oligopolies, act as if they competed in a fair playing ground where everybody has equal chances to win. But the truth is that academic capitalism is a fight in which the winner has already taken all, because the academic and cultural elites always have a comparative advantage that allows them even to set the rules of the game. They will always win in the free market, even if they do not take part in the competition. On the other hand, those who do not belong to the elite may feel momentarily part of the

select group of the "excellent," for example when they climb some places in a ranking table or receive some extra funds. But these are pyrrhic victories because nothing would really allow them to become part of the elites that constantly accumulate power and prestige. The illusion of excellence masks the real and concrete differences, and thus dispels the hope for true equality.

In order to make sense in the "real world," excellence must be appraisable, it must be measurable in terms of goals and indicators, it must allow comparison among individuals and institutions. Excellence has been transformed into profitable value, a form of capital that must be managed. That is why the ideas related to excellence include quality assessment, evaluation, performance, benchmarking and rankings: they all measure, calculate, order and manage excellence. For what? For the need to create an illusory marketplace whose agents compete among themselves to receive as much public and private funding as possible. Only "excellent" young people have the best education and receive "excellence scholarships," only "excellent" professors are hired by universities through "excellence recruitment processes," only "excellent" researchers receive funds for their projects through "excellence initiatives," only "excellent" universities in the first positions of "excellence rankings" are funded by the government.

In 2014, the United Kingdom replaced the periodical Research Assessment Exercises—that Margaret Thatcher had established in 1984—with a new policy: The Research Excellence Framework (REF). A sparkling name, no doubt, like the golden patina that gilds junk jewelry. Excellence disguises what ultimately is no less than a strategy to reduce and privatize public resources for education and research. The "threefold purpose of the REF" is, according to its webpage, "to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment," "to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the Higher Education sector and for public information" and "to inform the selective allocation of funding for research." Today, excellence is the Trojan horse that businessmen and managers have introduced into the supposedly walled city of higher education and academic research. Once it becomes common currency in public discussion, it provides the ideological basis for the corporatization and commercialization not only of the university, but of any social and political sphere.

### **Learning to learn**

According to the European Commission, "learning to learn" is one of the eight key competences for the training of individuals demanded by knowledge society. The redundancy with which this competence is formulated is attractive, but not so much because of the initial vertigo produced by this kind of meta-action: "learning to learn" is a *mise en abyme* that simulates the depth of expressions such as "thinking on thought" or "critique of criticism." Its magical power, however, comes from elsewhere. On the one hand, it turns learning into something individual, adapted to the needs and desires of each person: one learns to learn because one is autonomous, because one recognizes one's own limits and wishes to overcome them. On the other hand, it evokes the well-known proverb that it is better to teach the hungry to fish than to give them a fish—a proverb, moreover, that is very much in line with the capitalist ethos of those who have never been hungry.

But it is impossible to learn to fish when there are no fish: there is no learning that makes sense if it is not deeply guided by the decisive questions of what is to be learned and for what purpose. No one learns, let alone learns to learn, if he or she does not fill learning with content. Konrad Paul Liessmann is right in his *Theorie der Unbildung* when he says that "the promotion of learning to learn resembles the proposal of cooking without ingredients": it is the formula for the pure movement of learning in a vacuum, the expression that masks "a fundamental inability to show what exactly it is that one should learn" (35)

### **Paradigm shift**

In the age of innovation and entrepreneurship, we are all invited with a suspicious insistence to change our paradigms. Workers need to understand the importance of virtual applications as a way to connect those who offer a service and those who use it in a friendly way, and to adapt to the freedom offered by the uberization of the job market. Journalists must realize that the advent of web 2.0 alters the relationship between news producers and consumers and take the reduction of wages and the increase in responsibilities as an opportunity and a challenge. Farmers must recognize that in a globalized economy, food production requires industrialization to be competitive, and they must courageously face the challenges of their new situation as agribusiness workers. The university must understand that the "medieval" and "pre-modern" scheme of education for culture is obsolete, and embrace the new horizons opened up by education for the labor market and the knowledge economy (see above). Teachers must realize that the "traditional" teacher is old fashioned, and not turn their backs on the new perspectives opened up by virtual platforms.

In its original Greek sense, "paradigm" means model or example. This is why Thomas Kuhn used the word to speak of the structure of scientific revolutions: a paradigm shift is a change in the explanatory models on which the particular sciences are based at a given historical moment. This is the sense that the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española*, for example, embraces in one of the meanings of the term: "theory or set of theories whose central core is accepted without question and which provides the basis and model for solving problems and advancing knowledge." The moralization of this word can be seen in the unilateral sense it has in public discourse. Because it is "accepted without questioning," an exhausted paradigm is a straitjacket, a conservative debris left behind by an abolished institution. Any new paradigm, on the other hand, will always be good; no one even dares to think that a paradigm shift could lead to something worse. On the contrary, in the discourse of politicians and bureaucrats, changing paradigms means opening the doors to a world full of possibilities that are denied to us today. The new does not need to have any content, except the representation of the promise of something different: no wonder it is so difficult to criticize the calls for innovation and paradigm shifts.

The historical origin of our passion for paradigm shifts is well expressed by an image of Milan Kundera in *The Curtain*. Until the beginning of the 20th century, he says,

mankind was divided in two—those who defended the *status quo* and those who sought to change it. Then the acceleration of History took effect: Whereas in the past man had lived continuously in the same setting, in a society that changed only very slowly, now the moment arrived when he suddenly began to feel History moving beneath his feet, like a rolling sidewalk: the *status quo* was in motion! All at once, being comfortable with the *status quo* was the same as being comfortable with History on the move! Which meant that a person could be both progressive and conformist, conservative and rebel, at the same time!. (55)

The *status quo* today is not just a nice rolling sidewalk: it is a train that moves at breakneck speed, powered by an engine that seems to run by itself and mounted on rails that lead nowhere. The paradigm shift that is demanded of us is not a shift at all, let alone a change of any *paradigm*. Changing our paradigms today means willingly getting in the train of the *status quo*.

### **Lifelong Learning**

The serendipitous incidents that gave rise to the concept of lifelong learning are an example of how certain ideas, through the addition and adaptation of specific terms, are charged with values and meanings that end up transforming and putting them at the service of completely different ends. A description of the way in which this concept ended up being sanctioned as a predominant term in education at the global level has an additional advantage: it shows more clearly than others how words stage ideological disputes, how meanings can be imposed through power struggles involving concrete institutions.

In her entry to "Lifelong learning" in the *Glossar der Gegenwart*, Anna Tuschling shows that the aspirations for a comprehensive and continuing education of members of society can be traced back to the French revolutionary ideals of the late 18th century (152). That idea acquired global academic and political dignity in the second half of the last century thanks to the student movements of the 1960s, which, like their Enlightenment ancestors, aspired to a mature society, more thoughtful and willing to learn from historical developments. The proposal for "permanent education," whose institutional foundations were presented in the *Faure Report (Learning to be. Education of the future)*, published by UNESCO in 1972 arose in this context. Lifelong education was, according to this report, at the heart of societies in a process of continuous learning (learning societies). Their center was not the formal school, but the humanist conception of a whole man, an agent of political change, a promoter of democracy and the author of his own realization. This meant a comprehensive critique of traditional ways of conceiving education. In the *Faure* one could perceive, as some commentators have pointed out, the influence of the ideas of Paulo Freire on education for social change and of Ivan Illich on de-schooling. The mere "linear expansion" of traditional education systems, which is the goal that is usually pursued by governments around the world, is insufficient to remedy their obvious shortcomings, the authors argued. What was needed was a qualitative, innovative change that would encourage the strengthening of free thought, the formation of political awareness and an understanding of the structures of the world in which individuals must live.

One year later, the OECD published another report, *Recurrent Education. A Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (Centre). The expansion of traditional education, its authors said echoing the *Faure*, had failed to achieve true social equality. The "generalised need for lifelong learning has rapidly become one of the top priorities for education policy in the developed as well as in the developing nations," they admitted, referring explicitly to the UNESCO report. But the OECD document soon made it clear what

its terms and intentions were: "'Learning' is not, however, identical to 'education'. Learning is an essential characteristic of the living organism, necessary for its survival and evolution" (Kallen 17). Education, on the other hand "is organised and structured learning, confined to an intentionally created situation." Thus, the idea of "lifelong learning" acquires "a more precise sense" even closer to what, according to the OECD, the "learning to be" promised by the *Faure* wanted but failed to fully express: the concept of learning must emphasize "the need for adaptability through a constant registering and processing information, formation of concepts and development of attitudes and skills" (18).

While the *Faure* underpinned the aspirations of lifelong learning by a utopian base of a democratic, even radical, liberalism, the OECD Report vindicated the need for some form of recurrent learning to better respond to the demands of social and economic change. In other words, there is a shift, from one report to the other, from education for social transformation to learning for economic adaptation. As Ludwig Pongratz points out in his introduction to the concept of "Lifelong Learning" in the *Pädagogisches Glossar der Gegenwart*, while the idea of lifelong learning "refers to a participatory social model," the notion of lifelong learning "corresponds to a model of a market that relies on a well-trained, adaptable and flexible workforce" (164). Of course, it is not difficult to recognize which of the two models has become dominant in the era of human capital and knowledge society.

However, it is worth mentioning some significant events that served as the stage on which the triumph of lifelong learning was performed. In 1989, the OECD published the report *Education and the Economy in a Changing Society*, in which it triumphantly announced its vision of education as a producer of human capital after the fall of the communist bloc. The 1991 UNESCO General Conference agreed to establish a commission to produce a new report on education that would consider recent changes in global geopolitics. The result was the 1996 *Delors Report (Learning: The Treasure Within)*, which supported some principles of the 1973 report. It was also against the utilitarian and productivist vision of education proposed by the OECD and the *Priorities and Strategies for Education* report, which had just been published by the World Bank in 1995. But by then, with the supposed triumph of capitalism over communism, UNESCO was beginning to languish and become an increasingly marginal actor in geopolitics. In the end, the growing relevance of financial terms in defining what is important ended up imposing the mandates of the OECD for developed countries, and those of the World Bank for the poor.

UNESCO and OECD documents present two sides of the same idea which can be clearly separated. However, the current public consensus in favor of lifelong learning rests on its inherent misunderstandings and ambiguities. The idea of lifelong learning absorbs a romantic tradition, but transforms it into its opposite by distorting the relationship between the individual and society. First, because it is continuous, *lifelong*, learning is represented as something almost organic. But the celebrated lifelong learning is not really conceived as a process of individual growth through the assimilation of knowledge and experiences; it is, instead, a process that must be assumed "naturally" by any living organism to survive. In the idea of individual growth, so dear to the Romantics, there was at least a gesture of distancing oneself from the demands of the social world. Lifelong learning, on the contrary, throws the individual into the world, and forces him to adapt to its demands and evolve accordingly. The environment is constantly changing, and the subject is forced to transform himself to avoid annihilation: a kind of social Darwinism, no longer based on the survival of the fittest, but on the survival of the one who is best to adapt. Second, lifelong *learning* (and not lifelong *education*) places the emphasis on the individual, and seems to highlight his or her autonomy. But this is only the apparent autonomy produced by the illusions of the market: we believe that we are free because we can choose how to adapt, what "concepts, attitudes, and skills" we should develop to respond to changing social demands. The autonomy of lifelong learning only dispenses the State and society from the obligation to seriously question what should be learned and for what purpose; it is not by chance that the basic competence of lifelong learning is learning to learn (see above). The hidden doctrine of lifelong learning is simple: the market determines those contents and values by its allegedly invisible hand.

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