



The accelerated university: Activist-academic alliances and the simulation of thought

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abstract

Resentment regarding the demise of the university due to neoliberal corporatisation proliferates, and for good reasons. For many academics and activists, what is needed to salvage the 'original' university is a move outside its institutional borders so as to foster online and mobile alliances with anyone or anything that represents radical alterity vis-à-vis neo-liberalisation. This paper will show by way of analysing 'activist-research projects' that many of these projects reveal a passionate nostalgia or desire for the 'real' liberal university and its possibility of justice through social critique and dialogue. It will argue that this performance of the liberal university of critical thought, its move 'beyond' its institutional walls, and its desire for dialogue with and enlightenment through the 'other' to make happen the university's original objective, is itself complicit in an ongoing usurpation of such thought in a increasingly accelerated global economy and its new modes of disenfranchisement. The paper concludes that the belief in social justice through the interplay of thinking and action that lies at the heart of technological acceleration renders the future outcomes of this acceleration more violent as well as more promising.

It is ... our humanist ethos *itself* that works most efficiently in the direction of un-differentiation ... and of mono-thought. This regime has at least some positive aspect however, insofar as it offers us the chance to call into question [its] basic elements. (Baudrillard, 2000: 26)

In view of what interests, *to what ends* do they wish to come with these heated proclamations on the end to come or the end already accomplished? (Derrida, 1993: 125).

Cries announcing the demise of the university abound, in particular in Europe and North America. Those who utter these cries often do this in an admirable attempt to renew the original mandate of the university, namely the fostering of truth, justice and democratic debate. Giving up on the now largely neoliberal and managerial university system that plagues Europe and the United States, some such critics try to mobilise a renewal of this mandate outside academia's institutional walls with people and groups who represent an alternative to neoliberal globalisation. Much of this mobilisation is in turn done through technologies and discourses of mobility and tele-communication. Examples here are the European anti-Bologna 'new university' projects like *Edu-Factory*, the various autonomous virtual universities, and the intellectual collaboration with local and international activists and non-Western academics. I am referring here in particular to the promising formation of various extra-academic 'activist-research' networks and

conferences over the last years, like *Facoltà di Fuga* (Faculty of Escape), *Mobilized Investigation*, *Rete Ricercatori Precari* (Network of Precarious Researchers), *Investigacció* (Research), *Universidad Nómada* (Nomadic University), and *Glocal Research Space*. Characteristically, these projects organise events that try to set up dialogues between non-Western and anti-neoliberal activists and academics, and carve out spaces for offline and web-based discussion and participation. Initiators and participants of these projects often conceptualise their positions as relating closely to alter-globalist activism – positions which hence are hoped to effectively subvert neo-liberalism as well as the elitist-managerial university space and its problematic method of scientific objectification for capitalist innovation.

In this paper, I will explain how such announcements of the university's demise, the conceptualisation of its current situation as one of crisis, as well as the mobilisation of the true academic mandate today which often segues into a nostalgia for the original university of independent thought, truth and justice, are themselves paradoxically complicit in the techno-acceleration that precisely grounds and reproduces neo-liberalism. This is because the playing out of such nostalgia typically runs through the problematic invocation of the humanist opposition between doing and thinking. This causes the terms and their mode of production to become increasingly intertwined under contemporary conditions of capitalist simulation in which 'thinking' is more and more done in service of an economist form of 'doing'. The aforementioned commendable projects thus paradoxically appear foremost as *symptoms* of acceleration.

Moreover, I will argue that this acceleration increasingly renders certain groups and individuals as targets of techno-academic scrutiny and violence. This increasing objectification that runs through the contemporary prostheses of the humanist subject hence spells disaster for non-technogenic forms of gendered, raced and classed otherness. I therefore suggest that this disastrous state of affairs is precisely carried out by the humanist promise of transcendence, democracy and justice that currently speeds up institutions like the university, and vice versa. Following this line of thought through, I claim that technological acceleration then surprisingly also harbours the *promise* of the coming of a radical alternative to neo-liberalism, and that it is precisely through the eschatological performance of this promise – arguably a repetition of the Christian belief in the apocalypse – that these activist-research projects and their neo-liberal mode of production may fruitfully become the future objects of their own critique. In short then, this paper attempts to affirm and displace the projects' call for reinstating the original 'true' or transcending the current 'spoil' university, in the hope of gesturing towards yet another alterity, through its own accelerated argument.

I argue that the complicity of projects like *Edu-Factory* and *Facoltà di Fuga* in technological acceleration should primarily be understood in terms of what I in my work call *speed-elitism* (Hoofd, 2009: 201). I extrapolate the idea of speed-elitism largely from the work of John Armitage on the discursive and technocratic machinery underlying current neoliberal capitalism. In turn, I will argue that these activist-academic projects exacerbate speed-elitism by connecting the latter to Jacques Derrida's ideas on technology and thought, as well as the late Bill Readings' and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's critiques of the contemporary university. In 'Dromoeconomics: Towards a Political Economy of Speed', Armitage and Phil Graham suggest that due to

the capitalist need for the production of excess, there is a strong relationship between the forces of communication and the logic of speed. They connect the logic of speed specifically to a certain militarisation of society under neoliberalism. In line with Virilio's *Speed and Politics*, they argue that the areas of war, communication and trade are today intimately connected through the technological usurpation and control of space (and territory), and through the compression and regulation of time. Eventually, Armitage and Graham suggest that 'circulation has become an essential process of capitalism, an end in itself' (Armitage and Graham, 2001: 118) and that therefore any form of cultural production increasingly finds itself tied up in this logic.

Neoliberal capitalism is hence a system in which the most intimate and fundamental aspects of human social life – in particular, forms of *thought* and linguistic difference – are formally subsumed under this system by being circulated *as* capital. In "Resisting the Neoliberal Discourse of Technology", Armitage elaborates on this theme of circulation by pointing out that the current mode of late-capitalism relies on the continuous extension and validation of the infrastructure and the optimistic discourses of the new information technologies. Discourses that typically get repeated in favour of what I designate as the emerging speed-elite are those of connection, instantaneity, liberation, transformation, multiplicity and border crossing. Speed-elitism, I therefore argue, replaces Eurocentrism today as the primary nexus around which global and local disparities are organised, even though it largely builds on the *formalisation* of Eurocentric conceptual differences like doing versus thinking, and East versus West.

Under speed-elitism, the utopian emphasis on the transparent mediation through technologies of instantaneity gives rise to the *fantasy* of the networked spaces 'outside' the traditional academic borders as radical spaces, as well as the desire for a productive dialogue or alliance between activism and academia. This would mean that activism and academia have become *relative* others under globalisation, in which the (non-Western or anti-capitalist) activist figures as some kind of *hallucination* of radical otherness for the Western intellectual. This technological hallucination serves an increasingly aggressive neo-colonial and patriarchal economic state of exploitation, despite – or perhaps rather *because of* – such technologies of travel and communication having come to figure as tools for liberation and transformation.

So the discourses of techno-progress, making connections, heightened mobility and crossing borders in activist-academic alliances often go hand in hand with the (implicit) celebration of highly mediated spaces for action and communication between allied groups. Such discourses however suppress the violent colonial, capitalist and patriarchal history of those technological spaces and the subsequent unevenness of any such alliance. More severely, they foster an oppressive sort of imaginary 'collective' or 'unity of struggles' through the myth of 'truly' allowing for radical difference and multiplicity within that space – a form of techno-inclusiveness that in turn excludes a variety of non-technogenic groups and slower classes. That these highly mediated spaces of thought and knowledge production are exclusivist is also shown by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades' study of the transformation of higher education in 'The Academic Capitalist Knowledge/Learning Regime'. Slaughter and Rhoades argue that new technologies allow the neo-liberal university to precisely cross the borders of universities and external for-profit and non-profit agencies in the name of development,

production and efficacy, resulting in ‘new circuits of knowledge’. These ‘opportunity structures’ (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004: 306) that the neoliberal economy creates, I in turn argue, become precisely those spaces of imagination that come to signify as well as being resultant of the university’s humanist promise of reaching-out to alterity. This paradoxically also leads to what Slaughter and Rhoades accurately identify as a ‘restratification among and within colleges and universities’ (2004: 307).

Thought is then increasingly exercised in, and made possible through, spaces that are just as much spaces of acceleration and militarisation. The increasing complicity of the humanities in the applied sciences within the contemporary university, and hence the integration of critical thinking and neo-liberalist acceleration, is also a major theme running through Jacques Derrida’s *Eyes of the University*. Derrida there suggests that neo-liberalisation entails a militarisation of the university, claiming that ‘never before has so-called basic research been so deeply committed to ends that are at the same time military ends’ (Derrida, 2004: 143). The intricate relation between the military (‘missiles’) and the imperatives of the humanities (‘missives’) also pervades Derrida’s ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now’, in which he argues that the increasing urgency with which intellectuals feel compelled to address disenfranchisement and crisis paradoxically leads to a differential acceleration of such oppression through technologies of instantaneous action. But the relationship between new technologies and the subject’s *perception* of and subsequent desire for the incorporation of otherness that speed-elitism engenders, is best illustrated through Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and *Monolingualism of the Other*. Derrida’s concerns here are not so much directly with the contemporary university, but rather with the link between how thought is situated in technologies of communication (like language) and the emergence of authority as well as (academic and activist) empowerment.

Allow me to digress here a bit into Derrida’s argument, as it will shed light on the claim of activist-research projects to renew the university. Derrida uses as well as critiques psychoanalysis in *Archive Fever* by showing that if psycho-analysis illustrates how archiving and memory work by repression, its own authority must likewise be constructed on repressing the symbolic and material violence of its own repression. This is after all what makes possible the claim to an ‘objective’ interpretation of symptoms by the analyst. Derrida goes on to argue that if at the base of this repression, as Freud claimed, resides the death drive, then our currently ubiquitous technological ‘archive fever’ – the frantic desire to store and communicate thoughts – must mean that there is today lots of death drive at work: violence, repression and repetition (Derrida 1996: 98). The speed of iteration through technologies of archiving results in the sensation that *origins slip away*, as copies are incessantly layered upon copies. This post-modern arena of simulation prompts a permanent state of nostalgia for lost origins, which in turn inspires the manifestation of all kinds of fundamentalisms. Importantly, these fundamentalisms claim to ‘recuperate’ a lost origin, but such an origin is only a hallucination brought about by incessant technological acceleration and simulation. The very nostalgia for a fundamentally ‘original’ and pure university is, I claim, precisely part of this recourse to fundamentalisms inspired by technologies of acceleration.

The slip that Freud makes from machine as metaphor for memory into equating machine with memory, allows Derrida to conclude that the archiving machine is in fact

internal to the psyche. In short, we think and remember through our machines – the machine is not external to the subject, but a ‘prosthesis at the origin’ (Derrida, 1998: 1). It is the fantasy that machines are outside and discreet from us, that allows for the sense of being an autonomous subject, as well as for that subject’s perception of otherness. A nostalgic desire for the ‘original’ university therefore can easily give rise to an aspiration to connect with the academic subject’s semiotic other, like non-Western folks, activists, or groups that *appear* as the subversive other of neo-liberalism. Satisfying the desire for such connections therefore often results in some sort of technological neo-colonisation through the discourses, institutions and technologies of the humanist subject.

Alliances and connections are ever more made with that or (aspects of) those (which or) whom *can already be thought*, understood, perceived or recognised by new machines of perception. Understood in this way, the illusory status of *radical* alterity assigned to various forms of ‘non-Western’ or alter-globalist activist groups by these new university projects, masks these groups’ *relative* alterity in service of the speed-elite.

It may be useful here to remember once again that the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ArpaNet) – the predecessor of the current Internet – was largely developed in Western universities from military monies. The Internet then signifies a more aggressive and ubiquitous involvement of new technologies in the stratification of contemporary society, its individuals, and its various forms of exchange. It also signifies the ongoing faith in the supposed transparency of such forms of communication, as well as the desire to transcend institutional borders, even though such faith is increasingly a delusion brought about by the *circular logic* of such a system of knowing (the other).

In ‘The Academic Speed-up’, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney address precisely the way contemporary academia is engaged in what they call ‘the internalization of a cybernetics of production’ (Moten and Harney, 1999: 18) and its background in an imperialist Cold War logic. Moten and Harney are rightly wary of crisis-talk that assumes crisis is unique to the contemporary moment – rather, they claim, crisis is always part and parcel of capitalism, and hence of any academic project that needs to justify and re-produce itself within such an economic logic. Nostalgia for some lost ‘golden age’ of academia is therefore not only misplaced, but also dangerous, as it seeks to mobilize grounds for resistance in the *illusions* of academic independence, equal collaboration and autonomy. Instead, these illusions are themselves effects of the academic mode of production and of how the latter engenders new forms of in- and exclusion, creating a ‘way to organize *hopeful ideas*, and ... real rewards’ (1999: 12, italics mine). According to Moten and Harney, the progression from the assembly-line type of academic work towards the contemporary speed-up involves newer and more efficient ways of extracting academic surplus labour through out-sourcing, just-in-time production and flexibility in which academics are asking to ‘link a series of sites of production’ (1999: 13).

While they suggest that this ‘recombination of time and space discourage[s] the formation of alliance with alternatives’ (1999: 16), I instead conclude from their lucid analysis that the academic speed-up precisely encourages the formation of connections

‘outside’ its former institutional walls, especially since many of these activities are unsalaried. Such alliances namely facilitate capitalist acceleration – and therefore ‘relative immiseration’ (1999: 17) – because the cybernetic space signifies the imaginary potential for ‘pure and radical thought’ under neoliberal capitalism. In ‘Doing Academic Work’, Harney and Moten ask the crucial question: whom or what the increase of knowledge production, which ‘would always *seem* to be a good thing’, (Harney and Moten, 1998: 165, italics mine) finally serves. This enquiry leads them to conclude that within post-war academia, ‘newly produced knowledge contributes to the force of production’ (1998: 166) and hence, I would claim, to accelerated exploitation, not only within academia itself, but especially through those spaces that double its mandate.

The way in which I argue that many new university and activist-research projects paradoxically contribute to this global re-stratification of otherness through technological acceleration, also connects well with Bill Readings’ work on the contemporary university. In *The University in Ruins*, Readings argues that the change from the ‘university of reason and culture’ to the present-day ‘university of excellence’ means that the centre of power has shifted largely away from the nation-state (Readings, 1996: 22). To read power as residing primarily in the sum of ideological and repressive state apparatuses hence no longer makes sense. It would therefore not suffice to critique the university simply as an institution that functions as the nurturer of national culture and the cultured elites for the nation-state. Readings points out that it is telling that strong oppositional critiques of the university seem to become possible precisely at the moment where its centralising power and knowledge have vacated its premises. More importantly, the function of the university of excellence – one that successfully transforms it into yet another trans-national corporation – relies on the fantasy that the university *is* or *should be* still that university of reason and culture, and that it originally *did* pursue universal truth, justice and knowledge.

So the invocation of the fantasy of an originary university of knowledge and truth to which *Edu-Factory*’s and other similar activist-academics carefully seek to be responsible, facilitates the doubling of the production of information – *as if* it were still knowledge and culture – into speed-spaces outside the university walls proper. According to Bernard Stiegler in *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, new technologies of acceleration therefore lead to a tension in contemporary university practices under neoliberalism: they make possible thought through continuous differentiation into the virtual, but likewise reduce and manage thought to its calculable double – thus creating non-thought. The point for Stiegler is then to bring about ‘epochal redoubling’ which synthesises the current tension into an affirmation of technology as well as humanity (Stiegler, 2009: 7). While I agree with Stiegler on the ambiguity and doubling at the heart of acceleration, his imagined solution is nonetheless suspect. This is due to his narrative of the heroic overcoming of this tension in which an analysis of the complicities of a politics of difference is glaringly absent – in other words, the conceptual problem in Stiegler, activist-research, and eventually also in this article, is one of discerning (or *thinking*) ‘good’ from ‘bad’ doubling.

I claim for now rather, in line with Derrida and Armitage, that alter-globalist activism here in particular functions as the supposed ‘other’, and hence authentic locus of truth

and justice, where that fantasy of the originary university – which is the mirror-image of the fantasy of some future utopian university – is allegedly to be re-found. Alter-globalism can have this function because it is itself largely structured by the concepts and technologies of neo-liberalism. The borderlands of the real and the virtual, of West and the non-West, of thinking and doing, as well as of ‘alternative’ global activism and academia, become highly productive sites in the expansion and quickening of neo-liberal capital. Activist-research projects and alliances, as well as all narratives – like this one – that invoke the interplay between activism and academia as a positive means for the quest for truth and justice, are therefore symptomatic of the contemporary redefinition of the university, caused by the relative crisis of the nation-state in the face of trans-national globalisation.

The university – if we still want to call it that – thus becomes in essence a nomad institution, able to vicariously pop up in various geographical and virtual spaces in the name of connecting to ‘truly liberating’ activists or non-Western peoples, as long as this facilitates technocratic (re)production. This technologically endowed dispersal and quickening of thought and expertise is paradoxically the effect of the desire for progress and liberation that humanist society seeks. The new activist-research endeavours are the latest productive results of this – productive, that is then, in the humanist *and* capitalist senses of the word. The emphasis in these initiatives on displacement and dispersal can thus once more be expected to valorise the terms and concepts of speed, such as mobility, flexibility, nomadism, transformation and creating connections, as well as a general rhetoric of autonomy and radicality, while expressing a strong allegiance to that project of justice that often goes under the heading of new social movements and technologies. The rhetoric of overcoming boundaries, both (inter)nationally and institutionally, plays a crucial role in the portrayal of such activity as liberatory or subversive. The romanticisation of certain forms of activism or otherness, as if they were harbouring ‘ultimate justice’, cross-bred with the appeal to the university of reason and culture as ‘original’, facilitates the emergence of technologically endowed nomad activist-academic-research initiatives as the new spaces and bodies for the generation of trans-national capital – *as if* that Enlightenment ‘subject of reason and autonomy’ still exists (or has ever existed). If one were to be unfriendly, one could perhaps say that through these projects, speed-elitist neo-liberalism parades *as if* it were justice.

Edu-Factory is one such promising initiative that nonetheless reflects the logic of nostalgia, accelerated perception and its usurpation of alterity outlined above, as well as the general appeal to transcendence and transformation through (online) networking. It was initiated by university groups and individuals with the laudable intention to oppose the Bologna Convention on Higher Education in Europe, which aimed at a far-reaching neo-liberalisation of European universities. Much of its interrogations of the neo-liberalisation of higher education are constructively imagining the possibility of an autonomous global university by debating the shortcomings of peer-review and for-profit education, as well as the need for more self-reflection – precisely those issues that this article also seeks to be responsive to. *Edu-Factory* strongly encourages dialogue and exchange with academics and activists locally and globally, stressing that they get quite some participation from ‘militants and students’ as well as researchers, and that its editorial board also consists of ‘activists’ (Edu-Factory, 2007). It also has links with ‘autonomous’ virtual universities like the Italian *Rete per l’Autoinformazione* (Self-

informed Network), the *Free University of Los Angeles*, and the *University of Openness*, and even inspired the making of a Masters of Arts in Activism at the University of Leeds. Interestingly, it seeks to interrogate popular representations of academic resistance, and mentions that its process ‘has not been without tensions and conflicts’ which lead them to the question of ‘translation, scale and resources’ in the aim to continue and expand its influence beyond its initial email list.

This is all of course exceedingly promising. Yet *Edu-Factory*’s first online manifesto narrates problematically a university in crisis in which its victimised knowledge workers are now perhaps in an equally precarious position as factory workers were under industrialisation. The manifesto overall conjures up a nostalgic image of the old university as relatively free of political tensions, whereas the current university is fittingly depicted as a corrupt space of highly politicised struggles that requires ‘open[ing] a process of conflict in the knowledge production system’ so as to ‘build up a trans-national network of research’ (2007). The manifesto presses for:

A series of transnational web-based discussions on the condition of the university today. [...] It is important that contributions come from all continents, from different types of universities, from people with different relations to the university. The aim is to [...] sound out the geographically disjunctive relations between the participants, creating a collective knowledge that contributes to the development of new forms of relation and resistance. (Edu-Factory, 2007; italics in original)

The manifesto not only harbours a rhetoric of nostalgia and crisis, besides the problematic suggestion of academics being victimised like factory workers, but in particular emphasises mobile trans-national alliances with ‘difference’ through electronic network- and archiving technologies. A host of diverse struggles within various universities worldwide roll by on its email-list as examples of resistance against neo-liberalisation, without adequate contextualisation or exploration of other (ethnic, post-colonial, nationalist) factors at work. By connecting such disparate struggles under the sign of ‘one collective’, *Edu-Factory* has managed to expand its list- and homepage operations and debates (hosted by Italian web-company Aruba) into new online spaces like Facebook and YouTube (in a section called EduTube).

Such differences and tensions in its ‘collective’ therefore figure in the creation of a *certain* resistance, which is precisely the point at which the manifesto repeats the humanist promise through its rather one-dimensional vision of techno-empowerment. This has led to the formation of a freely downloadable journal aimed at ‘open[ing] new spaces of thinking’ (Edu-Factory, 2010) – precisely the doubling of the academic imperative into the realm of online acceleration which today fatally enmeshes left-wing justice with capitalist violence. What is also telling is that the rhetoric and other tools of preference of *Edu-Factory* are remarkably similar to those of the denounced European Union position papers on higher education, like the Bologna Convention, as well as to those of the European Union’s 2005 Warsaw Declaration which defines the current political philosophy behind the Union. These Union papers likewise speak of the importance of trans-national participation and cooperation, inter-cultural dialogue through technologies of mobility and communication, fighting marginalisation, all in the spirit of democracy and humanist values. The only difference perhaps is the fact that the Union overtly states its allegiance to ‘creating a dynamic knowledge-based economy’ that can compete globally. But the effects and aims of *Edu-Factory*

eventually add up to much the same: participants gain credibility through global alliances with ‘difference’, which in turn allows their academic work to be productively inundated with ideas of social progress and justice, and hence provides them with ‘hopeful ideas ... and real rewards’ as Moten and Harney suggest (Moten and Harney, 1999: 12). Also, while the university is certainly a space of social struggles and not (in fact, never) a static ivory tower, to declare it as the ‘key space of conflict’ runs the risk of ignoring the relative privilege of many contemporary knowledge workers in terms of cultural capital and mobility.

One could therefore say that *Edu-Factory* manages to keep the humanist promise of (academic) justice alive by implicating itself fatally in speed-elitism through the intensification of a largely online and networked politics.

Other new activist-research initiatives also often draw on speed-elitist notions of autonomy and mobility, and tend to romanticise extra-academic and non-Western alterity and activism. *Facoltà di Fuga* (Faculty of Escape) for instance, set up in 2002 as an ‘independent’ branch of the university of Roma La Sapienza, defines itself in online magazine *MetaMute* as an ‘experiment in self-organised formation’ and a ‘free university in the Net’, which is created with the ultimate goal of ‘free circulation of knowledge and the free exercise of thought’ (Facoltà di Fuga, 2005: 1). In ‘EU free and self-governing European university’ on the radical Italian *rekombinant* mailing list, several unnamed authors say that the project was instigated by a dislike of the neo-liberalisation of the Italian universities into institutions of ‘speed, functionality and flexibility’ (Facoltà di Fuga, 2007: 1) – the kinds of fixations this article likewise seeks to critique. They acknowledge that this neo-liberalisation has caused strong competition between students, and has sadly led to those who are not flexible, creative, cooperative and mobile enough, to drop out.

However, despite all this lucid analysis, they problematically conceptualise *escape* from the university boundaries as an inherently subversive act. This forecloses an analysis of the privileges that underlie the access *Facoltà di Fuga* has to extra-academic spaces like the Net, sophisticated political language, and various local cultural centres. Moreover, the relativist term ‘self-organised’ pretends not only that there are no gendered, classed or raced hierarchies between the actors, but also suggests a subject capable of organising – one that has the knowledge, frame of mind and access to use tools and technologies for organising meetings and mailing lists. The type of ‘freedom’ they purport requires thus a very stratified sort of individual: one who can effectively engender and manage cross-organisational ties, thus linking ‘series of sites of production’ as Moten and Harney suggest happens under neo-liberalism in ‘The Academic Speed-up’ (Moten and Harney, 1999: 13).

Facoltà di Fuga gave birth to the larger initiative *Rete Ricercatori Precari* (Network of Precarious Researchers), which equally denounces the neo-liberalisation of universities in Europe. In ‘Globalisation, academic flexibility and the right to research’, they point out, in line with Readings argument, that a growing demand for internationalisation of research and education has led to ‘market-like behaviour’. This facilitated the creation of ‘centres of excellence’ that rely heavily on European-level networking, and that usurp available resources to the detriment of ‘less productive’ universities (Rete

Ricercatori Precari, 2007: 2). They argue that European-level legislation constitutes a 'globalisation from above' which should be countered by one 'from below'. For this purpose, they suggest the:

formation of a *post-national public space of research and cultural exchange* in which internationalisation would be perceived as a process aiming to develop practices of mutual recognition and encounter. (Rete Ricercatori Precari, 2007: 2, emphasis mine)

This formation should according to them happen mostly through web-spaces, as such spaces would allow for the humanist exercise of one's 'right to research' for as long as one wishes. Again, in all its good intentions, we see how the new media here function to uphold an illusory space of potential justice that nonetheless directly informs neoliberal acceleration, discursively as well as technically. This rhetoric from *Rete Ricercatori Precari* hence not surprisingly echoes once again quite closely the European arguments for neo-liberalisation of the universities in the Bologna and Lisbon Declarations, with its trans-national emphasis, its creation of 'virtual and lifelong learning' and its homogenisation of educational formats and grading so as to foster mutual recognition of grades and diplomas. The fact that *Rete Ricercatori Precari* requests a 'free circulation of knowledge' is also in tandem with what Readings and Armitage identified as the central premise of late-capitalism, where simply more circulation and more activity, no matter what its content, is required. The writers also interestingly remark that there is a disagreement within *Ricercatori Precari* to either see Europe as a 'space of constrictions and limitations' or as a 'space of self-organisation and collective mobilisation' (2007: 2). Their suggestion for an 'alternative university in the Net' shows that the former and the latter viewpoints are possibly one and the same, as it is the speed-elitist infrastructure of the European Union itself that precisely allows for such new forms of mobility and self-organisation. The opposition between 'from above' (European Union) versus 'from below' (academic-activists) – a very popular opposition in alter-globalist rhetoric – that the writers use is therefore highly problematic.

In short, *Ricercatori Precari* repeat the logic of European Union-style neo-liberalism in their strategy of empowerment by opposing activism and academia, while doubling the humanist myth of the 'self-organising' subject of rights and freedom into 'virtual' space.

Although *Facoltà di Fuga* and *Ricercatori Precari* do not ally themselves explicitly with the alter-globalist movement, their call against neo-liberalism and for online thinking and research in service of the struggles of 'the oppressed and marginalised' makes them quite suitable for creating such alliances. This call for 'knowledge in service of the oppressed' is more explicitly present in *Investigació* (Research), which was set up in order to combine the agendas of social movement activists with those of university researchers. In their flyer for their first international meeting on 'Social Movements and Activist Research' in 2004 in Spain, *Investigació* likewise aptly accuses the neo-liberal privatisation of knowledge as the main cause for current social exclusion. Knowledge, in their view, instead should be produced from the 'focal point of activist research' which should entail the 'actual subjectivities of research from and for social movements', instead of from those who reside within the privileged space of academia (Investigació, 2005: 1). The meeting is hopefully envisioned to be a 'space of encounter and self-formation' which 'self-constitute[s] as a-disciplinary so that we

can overcome the fictitious distinctions common to academicism' (2005: 2). Knowledge will thus, according to *Investigació*, be generated 'from our own subjectivities (in contrast to aiming for scientific 'objectivity') without limitations or hierarchies' (2005: 3).

But far from an 'a-disciplinary self-constitution' that supposedly overcomes any fictitious distinction, *Investigació* for one relies heavily on the common fictitious distinction between activism and academia to validate their praxis. By contrasting their initiative to the false objectivity of academicism, they validate their own knowledge production by claiming to be in the margins as opposed to the 'ivory tower', as if the latter is a stable area from which one can detach oneself from the outside world and hence objectively analyse. Also, one could wonder *to what extent* one is actually speaking from the margins when one has the time, technologies, spaces and connections to organise an event like *Investigació*. The desire to generate knowledge from 'one's own subjectivity, without limitations' (2005: 3) is analogous to the mythical humanist narrative of breaking with and improving upon previous knowledge – a form of knowledge-innovation that the academic institution is also infused with.

The university of excellence as well as its doublings into projects like *Investigació* are therefore an effect of its repetitions (with a difference) into the neo-liberal mythical space of progress and acceleration. The creation of more and more 'spaces and mechanisms of production, exchange and collective reflection' (2005: 3) is indeed precisely what late-capitalism seeks to forge, as long as such reflection generates an intensification of production. The idea that subjectivities from social movements are in any way less produced by neo-liberal globalisation is highly problematic. In fact, such an idea suggests a rather positivist notion of the subject – similar to that supposedly objective academic individual *Investigació* seeks to dethrone. *Investigació* then somewhat nostalgically narrates a subject untainted by power structures and technologies. In fact, the *Investigació* initiative displays how the subject of activist research empowers her- or himself *through* recreating the fictitious distinction between activism and academia. S/he does so by reproducing this opposition, which in turn co-creates and accelerates these 'new spaces' – spaces that were created with the goal of facilitating global capitalism and its speed-elite, and that allow for the perfection of military power through technologies of surveillance.

The call for participants to become active and productive in co-organising the international event – of course, without any monetary remuneration – is also much present in *Investigació*'s rhetoric. They suggest that participants should engage with one another not only at the meeting, but especially through the online spaces *Investigació* has created for the purpose of generating activist research. 'Take action!' says their flyer, '[...] make it so the conference is yours!' This seductive appeal to the subject-individual as the centre of creative production is very common to neo-liberal consumerism and its emphasis on cybernetic interactivity. But it is also false in that it gives the participants a sense of control over *Investigació* that they actually do not have – eventually, the main organisers (have already) set the agenda and handed out the stakes. In short, the organisers fail to situate themselves by pretending everyone is on the same level of privilege – for example, not requiring monetary compensation – in

this project, and this failure is strangely an effect of their attempt at reviving a *more democratic* academic structure.

The non-validity of this collective or consumer-control becomes apparent in terms of the actual meeting and its website. This *illusion* of control is also apparent in terms of the activist-academic's general influence on subverting technocratic globalisation; counter to the common notion that the masses dabble in individual escapism, I would argue that many individuals worldwide are in fact more and more politically active. Nonetheless, this activity seems less and less capable of reaching the desired effect of countering or subverting neo-liberal globalisation. This is, as Jean Baudrillard, whom I will discuss shortly, would have it in 'The Implosion of Meaning in the Media', because the desire to be politically active is in fact increasingly a *function* of acceleration under late-capitalism. Political activity in general becomes an important motor behind capitalist circulation, and the new technologies intensify this process with their quality of instantaneity and simulation. *Investigació* thus fails to see that their call for activist action and their anti-academic stance implicitly upholds a particular *theory* of the politically energised subject that also underpins speed-elitism.

The arguments from *Investigació* that research should be done solely in the service and for the glory of liberatory social movements, in effect puts social movement activism on a pedestal that problematically results in a foreclosure of any critique of complicity of such activism in acceleration. Paradoxically though, it is this temporal foreclosure that allows for such activity – as for a theory of justice – to concern itself with and perform justice *as if* its praxis was 'truly liberating'.

A particularly vivid example of this strategy of foreclosure is 'Activist Research' by a group that calls itself *Glocal Research Space*. This group emerged out of the *Infoespai* (Infospace) project in Barcelona, which aims at empowering non-profit organisations and social movements through mass and new media solutions. *Glocal Research Space's* name already suggests a problematic conflation of the global and the local, pointing towards an instantaneous connection of certain places and spaces and a technological extension of a specific sort of locality onto the global. The piece mentions that the growing enthusiasm for social mobilisation seems to be accompanied by a strong emergence of activist-research initiatives, in particular in Europe and one of its favourite others, Latin America. While such an insight might inform an analysis of how this emergence appears as a symptom of neo-liberalism, they nonetheless propose that this emergence is proof of a 'new form of commitment and antagonistic subjectivity' (Glocal Research Space, 2003: 18). Moreover, they claim that social research should be:

Research that pursues the creation of a knowledge that is valued for its *practical* effectiveness ... *as opposed to* an objective and contemplative theoretical knowledge in the traditional academic fashion. That is, a knowledge that can then be added ... to social mobilization; a knowledge that generates and *maximises action*. (Glocal Research Space, 2003: 18, italics mine)

The demonisation of contemplation, and the economist urge to 'maximise action', sounds eerily close to the speed-elitist discourse of accelerating production by seeking to obliterate any doubt, delay or 'impractical' critique that may complicate the opposition between doing and thinking. I would claim that to simply maximise action says nothing about the effects of such action, and the implication that actions are

automatically subversive not only repeats the fantasy of the active subject as in control of the outcome of her actions, but also elides any critical reflection on the complicities of such actions. It is noteworthy also that this call for the intensification of activity is created through an opposition to a mythical academic space, again as if that university space is or has ever been purely objective and theoretical. Further on in the piece, *Glocal Research Space* argues that activist-research should also be ‘nomadic and travelling’ and that it should be conducted as ‘springing from the relation between subject-investigator and subject-investigated [...] without an object’ (2003: 18). They rightly note here that academic objectivity is an illusion. Nonetheless, they go on to validate activist-research through claiming that the people working in these projects are ‘open about their motives and opinions’ (2003: 19) unlike academic researchers. They even flip the narrative of objectivity in favour of activist-research by saying that the latter overcomes academic institutionalisation and hence ‘generates free, public, inclusive and non-discriminatory knowledge for universal use’ (2003: 19). This statement, as well as their previous argument that traditional academic knowledge is ‘objective’, effectively defeats their previous argument that objective knowledge is a fantasy.

‘Activist Research’ shows how the call for justice from *Investigació* and *Glocal Research Space* falls prey to universalising its particularity by discursively repeating the action-thought dialectic and by eventually acting as if it has overcome this aporia by aligning itself to an ontological concept of action. But the justification of action still hinges on the particular humanist dialectic of action and thought. Therefore, their claim unwittingly erases how such activist-research is also always situated and limited to its techno-economic context, meanwhile silencing any type of research or experience that does not fit the humanist point of view. This claim thus makes the (false) idea of objectivity once more the overarching logic of social change. The idea that ‘knowledges generated by social movements’ (2003: 19) can in any way be transparently read as objective truths, as opposed to academic knowledge, not only discards the possibility that academic practice is culturally and historically contingent, but also employs the strategy of writing oneself into the margins as an empowering tool that obscures the privileges that allow such forms of empowerment.

It is also interesting that ‘Activist Research’ asks for ‘subject-researchers’ and ‘subject-investigated’ to enter a ‘composition process’ (2003: 18), and even goes so far as to argue that ideally, the researcher is the activist s/he investigates. This suggested confusion of the boundary between researcher and researched appears to complicate the traditional academic scene, though I would argue that the indiscernible entanglement of subject and object is today always already the case. To argue however, as *Glocal Research Space* does, that subject and object *should* enter a composition process presupposes that they are initially discreet entities which then requires a sort of nomadic crossing-over. This implies again that the activist-research nexus is a highly productive one. Likewise, the emphasis on nomadism in, for instance, the Spanish *Universidad Nómada* (Nomadic University) invokes the humanist imperative of this online space of thought, which is really an effect of the imperative of various forms of border-crossing for acceleration – hence the stress on ‘hybridity’ and ‘trans-nationalism’ on its website (Universidad Nómada, 2010). The website also drums up a certain radicality of the

Universidad through images of street-activists on its homepage, which is in fact hosted at the American company DreamHost in California.

These new dispersed and online ‘spaces of thought’ like *Edu-Factory*, *Facoltà di Fuga*, *Investigació*, and *Glocal Research Space* are therefore heavily implicated in the continuous flow of information that neo-liberal capital and its prime tools of colonisation require in their relentless craving for networked overproduction. The rhetoric of overcoming the contemporary constraints of the university from a supposed autonomous location is itself implicated in the duplication of Bill Readings’ ‘university of excellence’ into networked spaces through the myth of independent thought and transparent communication. As Armitage and Derrida suggest, thought indeed appears here as formally subsumed under neo-liberal capital. In other words, thought is limited as well as produced by the current horizon of techno-speed, which is itself grounded in the humanist promise of transcendence and transparency. In light of this, it is also no surprise that contemporary academic obsessions in the humanities and social sciences lie with analysing or locating subversive potential within those projects and peoples, like those who engage in networked activism and alliance, which validate academia’s own conditions of possibility within the hegemony of speed.

But clearly, more can and should be said about the concurrent acceleration of capital by means of humanist thought and politics – after all, this article is itself also a symptom of the current university’s neoliberal-humanist mandate that demands that thought be productive. If humanism today has mostly mutated into speed-elitism, then the affirmation of acceleration also *promises* a change *beyond* neo-liberalism. To finally raise the stakes of this circular logic of acceleration, it is useful to turn to Jean Baudrillard’s ‘The Implosion of Meaning in the Media’ and ‘The Final Solution’ in *The Vital Illusion* in which the effects of such a circular logic and its relationship to the rhetoric of transcendence figures prominently.

Initially, one could think that Baudrillard’s assessment confirms my analytical suspicion regarding activist-research projects. In ‘The Implosion’, Baudrillard starts from the premise that the increase of information in our media-saturated society results in a *loss* of meaning because it ‘exhausts itself in the act of staging communication’. New media technologies exacerbate the subject’s *fantasy* of transparent communication, while increasingly what are communicated are mere copies of the same, a ‘recycling in the negative of the traditional institution’ (Baudrillard, 1994: 80). New technologies are simply the materialisation of that fantasy of communication, and the ‘lure’ (1994: 81) of such a technocratic system resides in the requirement of active political engagement to uphold that fantasy. This translates in a call to subjectivise oneself – to be vocal, participate, and to ‘play the [...] liberating claim of subjecthood’ (1994: 85). The result of the intensifying circular logic of this system, he says, is that meaning not only implodes in the media, but also that the social implodes in the masses – the construction of a ‘hyperreal’ (1994: 81). Contra the claim of *Glocal Research Space* that such praxes of alliance are ‘without an object’ (Glocal Research Space, 2003: 19), this does not mean that objectification does not take place *at all*. Instead, and in line with Baudrillard’s argument, the urge to subjectivise oneself and the objectification of the individual go hand in hand under speed-elitism – a double bind that locks the individual firmly into her or his technocratic conditions.

Indeed, the argument in 'Activist Research' that 'research [should be] like an effective procedure [which is] in itself already a result' (2003: 19) describes the conditions of Readings' 'university of excellence' where any research activity, thanks to technological instantaneity, translates immediately into the capitalist result of increased information flow (Readings, 1996: 22). Active subjects and their others become the cybernetic objects of such a system of information flow. The insistence in 'Activist Research' on free, travelling and nomadic research simply makes sure that this logic of increased flow is repeated. Because of this desire for increased flow and connection, activist-research projects are paradoxically highly exclusivist in advocating the discourses and tools of the speed-elite. The problem with projects like *Edu-Factory* or the productive cross-over of activism and academia is therefore not only that their political counter-information means just more information (and loss of meaning) as well as more capitalist production, but that it puts its faith in precisely those technologies and fantasies of control, communication and of 'being political' that underlie the current logic of overproduction.

It is at this point that John Armitage and Joanne Roberts in 'Chronotopia' contend that such a 'cyclical repetition' (Armitage and Roberts, 2002: 52) is particularly dangerous because the fantasy of control remains exactly that, a fantasy. At the same time, this increasingly forceful repetition can only eventually give way to 'the accident' because chronotopian speed-spaces are fundamentally and exponentially unstable. Armitage and Roberts' idea of 'cyclical repetition' through chronotopianism does thus not mean an exact repetition of the speed-elite's quest for mastery – instead, I would argue that it is this immanent quality of difference in repetition, of the 'essential drifting due to [a technology's] iterative structure cut off from [...] consciousness as the authority of the last analysis' as Derrida calls it in 'Signature Event Context' (Derrida, 1982: 316) that allows for the accident or true event to appear. The difference through technologically sped-up repetition appears then perhaps as a potential, but only precisely as a growing potential that cannot be willed – in this sense, it will be an unanticipated event indeed.

One could then speak of an *intensification* of politics in what is perhaps too hastily called the neo-liberal university, opening up unexpected spaces for critique in the face of its neo-liberalisation, which in turn points to the fundamental instability of its enterprise. Activist-research projects add to this intensification by virtue of their techno-acceleration. This intensification of politics is no ground for univocal celebration, since it remains also the hallmark of the neo-liberal mode of production of knowledge through the new tele-technologies as excellent, regardless of its critical content. The current university's instability mirrors and aggravates the volatility of a capitalism marked by non-sustainability, a growing feminisation of poverty, the rise of a new global upper class, and highly mediated illusions of cybernetic mastery. This nonetheless also opens up new forms of thought, if only appearing as 'accidents'.

Derrida hints at this, but also at the university's elusiveness, in 'Mochlos, or: the Conflict of the Faculties', when he claims that he 'would *almost* call [the university] the child of an inseparable couple, metaphysics and technology' (Derrida, 1993: 5, emphasis mine). Almost, but never quite – here then emerges the possibility of truly subversive change. But this change will not be brought about by the mere content of the critique, but by the way it pushes acceleration to the point of systemic disintegration or

implosion. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard calls this the 'fatal strategy' that contemporary theory must adopt: a sort of conceptual suicide attack which aims at pulling the rug out from under the speed-elitist mobilisation of semiotic oppositions, and which shows the paradox behind any attempt at structural predictions.

In 'The Final Solution', Baudrillard relates this intensification of the humanist obsession with dialectics, mastery, and transparency – the quest for immortality that is at the basis of techno-scientific research – to destruction and the death drive through the metaphor of and actual research around cloning, which strangely resonates well with Derrida's investigation of the tele-technological archive in *Archive Fever*. I read Baudrillard's 'Final Solution' here as a metaphor for the duplication (cloning) of thought into virtual spaces outside the university walls proper. If contemporary research seeks to make human cloning possible, argues Baudrillard, then this endeavour is equivalent to cancer: after all, cancer is simply automatic cloning, a deadly form of multiplication. It is of interest here to note that the possibility of creating an army of clones has likewise garnered much military interest, just as academia today more and more serves military ends. As the logic of cloning as automatic multiplication is typical of all current technological and humanist advancements, the exacerbation of this logic can only mean more promise and death. At this point my argument mirrors the apocalyptic tone of the activist-research projects.

In the final analysis, the problem with *Edu-Factory*, *Facoltà di Fuga*, *Investigacció*, *Universidad Nómada*, *Ricercatori Precari*, and *Glocal Research Space* is that these projects entail a very specific form of subjugation with dire consequences for the slower and less techno-genic classes. Techno-scientific progress entails a regress into immortality, epitomised by a nostalgia typical of the current socio-technical situation, for when we were 'undivided' (Baudrillard, 2000: 6). I contend that Baudrillard refers not only to the lifeless stage before humans became sexed life forms, but also makes an allusion to psycho-analytic readings of the 'subject divided in language' and its nostalgia for wholeness and transparent communication. The desire for immortality, like archive fever, is therefore the same as the Freudian death drive, and we ourselves ultimately become the object of our technologies of scrutiny and nostalgia. The humanist quest of total transparency of oneself and of the world to oneself that grounds the idea of the modern techno-scientific university, is ultimately an attempt at (self-)destruction, or in any case an attempted destruction of (one's) radical difference.

The urgent political question, which Stiegler problematically avoided in *Disorientation*, then becomes: which selves are and will become caught up in the delusion of total self-transparency and self-justification, and which selves will be destroyed? And how may we conceive of an 'ethic of intellectual inquiry or aesthetic contemplation' that 'resists the imperatives of speed', as Jon Cook likewise wonders in 'The Techno-University and the Future of Knowledge' (Cook, 1999: 323)? It is of particular importance to note here that the very inception of this question and its possible analysis, like the conception of the speed-elite, is itself again a performative repetition of the grounding myth of the university of independent truth, justice and reason. Therefore, in carrying forward the humanist promise, this analysis is itself bound up in the intensification of the logic of acceleration and destruction, and that is then also equally tenuous. This complicity of thought in the violence of acceleration itself in turn quickens the machine of the

humanist promise, and can only manifest itself in the prediction of a coming apocalypse – whether it concerns a narrative of the death of thought and the university, or of a technological acceleration engendering the Freudian death drive. We are then simply the next target in the technological realisation of complete γνωθι σαυτον (know thyself) – or so it *seems*. Because after all, a clone is never an exact copy, as Baudrillard very well knows; and therefore, the extent to which activist-research projects hopefully invite alterity can thankfully not yet be thought.

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