Artes Liberales Lectures

No. 5

Szymon Wróbel

# AN ATTENTIVE UNIVERSITY IN THE TIME OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

In the **Artes Liberales Lectures** series we publish texts by eminent scholars who have visited the Collegium Artes Liberales and have given important lectures there.

In this series thus far were published:

- Donald W. Harward, *Liberal Education and We*, Wydział „Artes Liberales", Warszawa 2018.
- Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Arts and Risks for Freedom*, Wydział „Artes Liberales", Warszawa 2018.
- Ulyana Vinokurova, *Ecosophy: a Response to the Global Climate Change*, Jan Kieniewcz, *Looking for a New Civilizational Paradigm*, Wydział „Artes Liberales", Warszawa 2019.
- Walther Ludwig, *Cicero's* De officiis *in Humanist School Instruction – The* Philologus incomparabilis *Hieronymus Wolf and his great Commentary (1563)*, Wydział „Artes Liberales", Warszawa 2020.

The **Artes Liberales Lectures** series is a continuation of the **OBTA Lectures** series in which two books were published:

- Thomas Molnar, *Unity of Knowledge*, OBTA, Warszawa 2004.
- Roman Szporluk, *Zachodni wymiar kształtowania się współczesnej Ukrainy*, OBTA, DiG, Warszawa 2004.

Szymon Wróbel

# AN ATTENTIVE UNIVERSITY IN THE TIME OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

Wydział „Artes Liberales"
Warszawa 2020

Series Editor
Jerzy Axer

English Proofreading
Anna Olechowski



**ISSN 2658-1752 (print)**
**ISSN 2658-1760 (online)**
**ISBN 978-83-63636-96-8 (paperback)**
**ISBN 978-83-63636-97-5 (online pdf)**

Wydział „Artes Liberales" Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego
ul. Nowy Świat 69, Warszawa
www.al.uw.edu.pl

This book was published with the financial support of the "*Artes Liberales* Institute" Foundation (www.ial.org.pl).

Printed in Poland in 150 copies.
Paper: Olin Regular Natural White (120 & 250 gsm). Fonts: Adobe Garamond Pro & Museo Sans Cond.

# An Attentive University in the time of Platform Capitalism

## Data as Raw Material (Deskiling Process)

Universities are among particular institutions dealing with the production and legitimization of knowledge in the context of platform capitalism[1]. I will be considering the innovativeness and productivity of universities beset by a new phase of capitalism, focused less on material products and more on knowledge and information. I will question the *raison d'être* of universities, as we know it, from the times of Alexander von Humboldt and Immanuel Kant to the times of Martha Nussbaum and Jacques Derrida. The same times in which, thanks to ICT technology, humanity entered the age of the zettabyte (Floridi 2014; Moore 2015). A university that needs rethinking is a university of generations to first experience the

1 The lecture presented here was delivered during the International Week "Innovation in Humanities and Social Sciences" at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje (Macedonia) on 19. February 2020. I would like to thank Maja Gerovska Mitev for the extraordinary kindness shown to me during the conference and above all the invitation to give this lecture.

zettaflood, a generation that has been subject to the tsunami of bytes submerging from our environments. What is a university in the infosphere? Has it sunk like the Titanic or the Kursk to merely become an archaeological monument, or is it still an attractive device that allows one to sail on the oceans of information?

From the time of Karl Marx to the time of Thomas Piketty, we have pondered the phenomenon of capitalism; what makes capitalism a unique socio-economic formation that is as equally admired as it is hated. It is not very innovative to say that capitalism is successful at raising productivity levels. This is the key dynamic that expresses capitalist capacity to grow at a rapid pace and to raise living standards. But what makes capitalism different? What explains capitalism's productivity growth is a change in social relationships, particularly property relationships. Under capitalism, economic agents are separated from the means of subsistence and, to secure the goods they need for survival properly, they must now turn to the market.

One of the most important consequences of this model of production, oriented towards the market, is that it demands constant technological change (Marx, Engels [1848] 2008; Stiegler 2015; Srnicek 2016). In the effort to cut costs, beat out competitors, control workers, reduce turnover time and gain market share, capitalists transform the labour process. This was the source of capitalism's dynamism, as capitalists tend to increase labour productivity continually and to outdo one another in generating profits efficiently. Technology is also central to capitalism for other reasons; it has often been used to deskill workers and undermine the power of skilled labourers. These deskilling technologies enable cheaper and more pliable workers to come in and replace the skilled ones

(Stiegler 2015; Srnicek 2016). Behind these technical changes lies competition and struggle – both between classes and capitalists, in their efforts to lower the costs of production below the social average. In a sense, what online learning has done to academic professors, demonstrates the deskilling process of university workers. University professors are currently experiencing technologically induced declassification, i.e., proletarization.

Invention becomes the crux of capitalism. Invention becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production, itself, becomes a prospect which both determines and solicits it. Scientific instruments have become machines to which scientists, who are more and more technologists and less and less scientists, must adapt themselves without having time to go back to the axioms and synthetic judgements that govern the mechanisms through which they formulate judgements, expertise and measurements (Stiegler 2015). The result of this process, which is a kind of destructive creation, creative destruction, is called by Bernard Stiegler ruthlessly – disembraining [*décervelage*].

Some argue that capitalism renews itself through the creation and adoption of new technological complexes: steam and railways, steel and heavy engineering, automobiles and petrochemicals – and now information and communications technologies (Marx, Engels [1848] 2008; Rancière 2004). Hence the questions: are we witnessing the adoption of a new infrastructure that might revive capitalism's growth? Will competition survive in the digital era, or are we headed for a new monopoly capitalism? In digital capitalism, we continue to live in a capitalist society where competition and profit-seeking provide the general parameters of our world. However, there has been a significant shift created within these

general conditions, away from secure employment and industrial arrangements and more towards flexible labour and lean business models. New technologies, new modes of exploitation, new types of jobs, and new markets all emerge to create a new way of accumulating capital.

But what is a novelty here? A basic argument of Nick Srnicek in the book *Platform capitalism*, is that in the twenty-first century, advanced capitalism came to be situated in the center upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data (Schiller 2014; Moore 2015; Srnicek, Williams 2015; Srnicek 2016). It is essential to be clear about what data are. In the first place, we should distinguish *data* – information that something happened from *knowledge* – information about why something happened. Data may involve knowledge, but this is not a necessary condition. Data also entail recording, and therefore, a material medium of some kind. As a recorded entity, any datum requires sensors to capture it and massive storage systems to maintain it. Data are not immaterial. The internet, as a whole, is responsible for about 9.2 per cent of the world's electricity consumption (Maxwell, Miller 2012). Most data must be cleaned and organised into typical formats to be usable. Likewise, generating the proper algorithms can involve the manual entry of learning sets into a system. We should consider data to be the raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material. Just like oil, data are material to be extracted, refined, and used in a variety of ways. The more data one has, the more uses one can make of them. Altogether, this means that the collection of data today is dependent on a vast infrastructure to sense, record, and analyse (Moore 2015; Srnicek 2016).

In this new context of cognitive capitalism, the new business model that emerged is a new type of firm: the platform (Schiller 2014; Scholz 2015; Srnicek 2016). Platforms became an efficient way to monopolise, extract, analyse, and use the increasingly large amounts of data that were being recorded. What are platforms? At the most general level, platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They, therefore, position themselves as mediators that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects. Rather than having to build a marketplace from the ground up, a platform provides the basic infrastructure to mediate between different groups. This is the key to its advantage over traditional business models when it comes to data, since a platform positions itself (1) between users, and (2) as the ground upon which their activities occur, which thus gives it privileged access to record them. Google, as the platform for searching, draws on vast amounts of search activity which express the fluctuating desires of individuals (Schiller 2014; Moore 2015; Srnicek, Williams 2015; Srnicek 2016). Platforms are, as a result, far more than internet companies or tech companies, since they can operate anywhere, wherever digital interaction takes place.

Such a constellation changes the relationships between a university, business and the state because the traditional model of a university was involved in the creation, extraction, processing and distribution of knowledge and information. Today, universities have lost their monopoly role (Lyotard 1984; Collini 2012; Wellmon 2015). Perhaps it has also lost its function as a subject that is entitled to legitimize knowledge. In a sense, a platform like Google, that replaces a university in the capacity of distribution of information,

becoming not only a global encyclopaedia but also a source of data acquisition. Even more, thanks to digital technologies, platforms not only provide data to users but also take on the role of an education place. Today, online learning can offer more opportunities to listen to a variety of lectures given by famous professors on any topic than even the most prestigious university.

## University only for Profit (Edutainment)

What is the fate of a university in the time of platform capitalism? Is a university *itself* a platform? Does a university *want* to become a platform? Does it *have* to become a platform? *Should* a university become a platform? What could such a platform-university be; trying to regain the role of the monopolist of knowledge? In what sense can a university compete with other companies like Google, if such a feat is possible at all? After all, asking for such competitiveness is asking a university to meet the requirements of efficiency. Perhaps higher education is a public good, and not merely a set of special benefits for those who happen to participate in it? What follows then is a more general question, whether a university should become part of platform capitalism or instead, should it be excluded? Here is the "either/or" of a university.

If we opt for the first option, we should ask what capital a university has and in what sense knowledge is an info-capital at all? Perhaps, rather, the capital of a university lies more in its right to decide what is a knowledge-commodity that has the entitlement to enter the market and who has the right to talk about knowledge. If so, how would it differ from, for example, a commission empowered to decide whether a given commodity is authentic or not? Would

university then become a kind of knowledge police chasing counterfeit and false forms of knowledge? I ask again, what kind of platform would a university be?

After all, a university could not become an advertising platform because as such, it would have to trade information both about students and lecturers obtained during recruitment, exams and studies. The USOS web system, which currently administers universities, might allow it, but would our academic ethos permit such an application? In a sense, perhaps a university could take over the functions of cloud platforms, making it a space of digital socialization stimulating individual development paths and global communication. How would a university be different then from dating sites and social media platforms? Would the sole difference be the addressees – people with aspirations, reading Franz Kafka's novels and watching consecutive seasons of popular series sponsored by other platforms like Netflix?

One certainty is that it could not function as an industrial platform, imposing on itself new management and trading knowledge. However, even such an option exists, given that it might reduce a university to such a role by business economics. Finally, I'm not sure how to imagine university as a product platform. Would it be a corporation like Spotify, charging a fee for access to knowledge instead of entertainment, provided, of course, that there still is a difference between education and entertainment; what the term "edutainment" perhaps denotes? Should we then think of a university as a lean platform, like Uber, which reduces teaching costs to a minimum by cutting on ownership of goods and services, i.e., knowledge and competence?

Given the pain these imaginative experiments inflict, perhaps we should do everything to exclude universities from global trade. If we choose the latter option, we should promptly ask ourselves what indeed, makes it unique. Where is its unconditional autonomy grounded? Is its constitution embedded in the history and tradition of Enlightenment? How to justify its demand for absolute sovereignty? Perhaps it is also worth considering why platform capitalism – which makes of everything affective, attentive, and cognitive capital – would tolerate an institution excluded from the global logic of universal commodification? What price would universities have to pay for their economic sovereignty? Jacques Derrida in *The University Without Condition* was asking this difficult question: can the university affirm an unconditional independence? Can universities claim a sort of sovereignty without ever risking being forced to give up and capitulate without condition, to let itself be taken over and bought at any price (Derrida 2002)?

The problems of the modern university are not confined to its "foreign policy", e.g. contacts with the outside world, such as, with the media, social platforms, museums, or a liberal, corporate or national state. Universities are plagued by internal problems and rife with new internal divisions. The new university in the time of platform capitalism is no longer divided into complementary and relatively permanent faculties. It is no longer Kant's "conflict of the faculties" that is currently at the heart of those disputes, but the conflict between multiple studies which are continually subject to unlimited divisions (Kant [1798] 2001; Nussbaum, 1997; Lambert 2001; Wolfe 2010; Stiegler 2015). We enter a period of post-disciplinary university, in which animal studies, studies on non-Western cultures, African-American studies, women's studies,

gender studies, environmental studies, food studies, studies on human sexuality, but also film studies, media studies, jazz studies, and even porn studies are becoming the main matrix-platform for sharing university space.

The university has lost its orientation regarding what its content is (Collini 2012; Collini, 2017). What does this mean? It means that it is not the dispute between natural science, social science and humanities that becomes the central axis of division, but the very way of recognizing the problem above the division between humanities and natural science. Here we have a university seeking problems rather than disciplines. Here, we have a university that stays connected to politics for good and for bad. The fight to preserve its "objectivity" and "neutrality" towards politics is of no avail. Universities have always remained a politically "non-neutral" institution. Criticism of such politically charged universities – when it makes us reflect upon, or even recognize problems previously absent in the field of our attention – remains in blatant disproportion, if not contradiction, with the lack of such an incentive identical with indifference or insensitivity for an apolitical or non-political act.

For example, Martha Nussbaum, who is involved in the project of a non-profit university, a democrat, writes a lot about its generous and indecently rich sponsors. But don't these generous donors make universities hostage to their generosity and charity? Is the price that universities have to pay for their generosity, not a tacit consent to their potential influence on the content and form of teaching? Here is the real "either/or" of a university; trading at a university, autonomy in exchange for sponsorship deals, and commodification in exchange for the loss of validity and value. Is the state the only salvation for a university providing noble, yet

more inferior sponsorship deals? Nussbaum explicitly writes that we are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance – a worldwide crisis in education. During this crisis, the humanities and the arts are being cut from university education.

However, Nussbaum, who builds a fundamental difference, a gulf even, between an "education for profitmaking" and an "education for a more inclusive type of citizenship", writes, however, that we are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and one that promotes good citizenship. A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship; thus the proponents of what is called "education-for-profit" have adopted an impoverished conception of what is required to meet their own goal (Nussbaum 2010). What does this mean? That either the difference between "education-for-profit" and not-profit is misguided and false, or that "education-not-for-profit" continuously remains in the service of "education-for-profit".

Perhaps state sponsorship confirms universities in the conviction that it is a public institution entrusted with a special mission to educate the public. That is probably true, although one could reasonably question whether the university's mission is indeed more unique than, for example, the mission of Health Care? Why is shaping the minds of citizens more important than caring, supervising and improving the condition and health of their bodies? Perhaps here we find a key problem. Knowledge, especially societal knowledge, seems to be as pervasive as the air and as easily accessible as, let us say, violence in Hollywood. Similarly, nowadays, intellectual work is seen as nothing but joyful and spontaneous creativity – not work as such, which is why our imagination has

pushed it into the realm of unpaid labour. Only now we are revising this stance with the dawn of platform capitalism.

However, if we change our minds about unpaid work such as housework, shouldn't we likewise change our mind about the unpaid, that is, state-sponsored university study? You may say that some countries, the United States being at the helm, have already transformed their systems of education by implementing paid studies. But was it not, in fact, based on the premise that students would be taking loans to be later paid off throughout a healthy portion of their working lives? Indeed, bank-loan capitalism goes hand in hand with cognitive capitalism, but this is not what we are attempting to elucidate here. We are not talking about the alliance of the banking, university and economic system shaping the labour market. We want to bring out the true calling of the university. So what is the real mission of the university compared to other public institutions?

We should agree with Stefan Collini, who claims that terms like "funding", "impact", "access" – taken either singly or, more often, as a trinity – now utterly dominate the political and media discussion of universities. Also, he writes, that higher education is a public good, not simply a set of private benefits for those who happen to participate in it. And, therefore, it is a mistake to allow the case for universities to be represented as a merely sectional or self-interested cause on the part of current students and academics (Collini 2012). However, the question is, how can we justify that universities claim to be a unique public good? What are universities for in times of platform capitalism?

## Information Overload (Experience of Excess)

Well, regardless of our preferences regarding the relationship between for-profit and not-for-profit education, we must admit that the university as an institution, and the Humanities especially, are under attack. They are often accused of being unproductive, old-fashioned in their approach and also of being out of touch with contemporary science and technology culture. In some ways, the technologically smart urban space displaces and replaces the university, by inscribing knowledge and its circulation at the heart of the social order. What happens then to the highly "sacralised" academic space?

Let's start from the voices and opinions reaching about universities. Here, we often hear anxiety concerning the potentially disruptive effects of digital technologies on universities. It is said that new digital technologies posed an existential threat to them. If a university did not adapt to the emerging new type learning environment, then it would become irrelevant. It is also said that universities had to reinvent themselves in the image of new digital technologies. Rosi Braidotti argues that the academic needs to unfold onto the civic and become embedded in the urban environment in a radical new manner. The city as a whole is the "science park of the future". The university consequently needs to transform itself into a "multi-versity" (Wernick 2006; Braidotti 2013), capable of interacting with the city space so as to create "a collective ethos of communal intelligence" with a "common goal of economic progress". Is such a task feasible? Is such a task desirable? Is this a real task for the current form of universities?

The critiques of the contemporary university describe its university by focusing on particular problems: low graduation rates, obscure admission policies, indifferent faculty, disengaged students, and uncontrollable costs. On the other side are the utopian voices warning that universities face existential threats and calling for entrepreneurs to offer bold, salvific solutions (Arum, Roksa 2011; Nash 2019). Digital technologies can reinvent the university for the twenty-first century, say these voices. And in contradistinction to both these groups are those who defend a tradition of residential learning and its celebration of humanist education over the endless accretion of research (Bloom 1987; Readings 1996). Finally, there are democratic arguments like Nussbaum voice in *Not for Profit*, who claims that universities should form democratic citizens (Nussbaum 2010).

Perhaps the crisis of universities is closely linked to the plight of its credibility. In *The Tyranny of Metrics*, Jerry Muller shows that the metrics of "accountability" culture in Higher Education are particularly attractive in cultures marked by a low social trust (Muller 2018). University managers like metrics because they provide an illusion of transparency and objectivity. Metrics seem to be intelligible to everybody; as a result, the general public can feel it is in control of issues as complicated as research in psychology, physics or ancient philology. Certainly, we live in the age of measured accountability, of reward for measured performance, and belief in the virtues of publicizing those metrics through "transparency." But the identification of accountability with metrics and transparency is deceptive. Accountability ought to mean being held responsible for one's actions. "But accountability has come to mean demonstrating

success through standardized measurement, as if only that which can be counted really counts" (Muller 2018, p. 13).

Another assumption that is often taken for granted is that "accountability" demands that measurement of performance be made public, that is, "transparent" (Muller 2018; Nash 2019). We are often told that gathering metrics of measured performance and then making them available to the public is a way to improve the functioning of our institutions. But is a university's performance, when all knowledge is inflation, something to measure at all? And doesn't the possible measurement of university inefficiency results in a further weakening of its credibility? Does the university's performance include the number of publications, grants, scientific discoveries, conferences held, student statistics, and promoted doctors? Would it be better for the university in the era of platform capitalism to be an institution ostentatiously unproductive in numbers and statistics? Would it not be a more noble gesture on the part of the university to clearly declare: I would prefer not to participate in these competitions in productivity.

We must consider the place of the arrangement of universities in our digital age. The crisis of the contemporary university concerns its place in the generation and dissemination of knowledge. The modern university was a historical institution that emerged to meet specific needs. More importantly, if the university's monopoly on knowledge has already ended, as critics suggest, then what distinguishes it from other sources of knowledge in an age of Google and Wikipedia? What is the purpose of the university in an age in which academic expertise has been eroded by the democratization of the tools for distributing knowledge? The modern university was an institution designed to sustain a particular practice and its

virtues, habits, and purposes. It was never merely a content delivery system. It was a source of epistemic authority in an age of media surplus and cultural anxiety about what counted as real knowledge.

We have to recognize that the university is not merely another business for which scale and efficiency are paramount. Higher education should not be conflated with other media businesses that distribute information. A university is an institution unique in its capacity to produce and transmit a knowledge that is distinct and carries with it the stamp of authority. The university has its own cultural logic and normative structure that allow it to generate and transmit a certain type of authoritative knowledge. Universities acquire, conserve, refine, and distribute knowledge. They belong in the same historical lineage of technologies which extends from the invention of writing and the codex to the printing press and the modern scientific lab.

Perhaps the most funny discovery of Chad Wellmon's brilliant book *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* is that our contemporary anxieties about new technologies and what counts as authoritative knowledge echo similar cultural anxieties among late eighteenth-century German intellectuals about print technologies and epistemic authority which eventually gave rise to the modern research university (Wellmon 2015). The ideal of the German research university was a response to a Enlightenment anxiety about information overload. Just as today we imagine ourselves to be engulfed by a flood of digital data, Germans of the late eighteenth century saw themselves as having been infested by a plague of books, circulating among the reading public. "Overload", in this sense, denotes experiences of excess. Historically, worries about

"excess" have been fundamentally normative. They made particular claims not only about what was good or bad about print, but about what constituted "true" knowledge.

In Germany, though, this anxiety was not just about the sheer numbers. The real issue concerned epistemological anxieties, and German intellectuals were unique in settling on the university as the solution (Wellmon 2015). Anticipating anxieties about information overload, technological change, and a crisis of the Enlightenment university, the German philosophers asked, what was the purpose of the university in the age of printed books? How could it advance knowledge without being redundant, simply reproducing what print did more efficiently? The first universities in Paris, Bologna, and Oxford had been an oral "Ersatz" for the general lack of texts. More than two centuries after the invention of the printing press and the "overabundance of books" the central pedagogical practice is still the lecture, professors are reading the books of another, canonical scholar aloud, as if students could not read on their own. What was the purpose of the university in an age where print had reached a saturation point?

The saturation of digital technologies, from Wikipedia to Google PageRank, is changing the ways by which humans create, store, distribute, and value knowledge in the twenty-first century. What constitutes authoritative or legitimate knowledge today? Chad Wellmon argues that at present time as in nineteenth century, people find themselves compelled to decide which sources of knowledge to trust, and which not to, in environments of extraordinarily expanded production and unlimited access (Wellmon 2015). The disciplinary-based ordering of knowledge embodied in the research

university was for long time a way of coping with a perceived proliferation of knowledge and the crisis in epistemic authority.

In 2006, Kevin Kelly, senior editor at Wired, predicted the advent of a universal library in which all the world's books would become a "single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas" (Kelly 2016). He envisaged the digitization efforts of Google Books resulting in a searchable library that would connect every book ever written. In Kelly's imagination ideas in the digital library would flow seamlessly. Others are less optimistic: the books in this library will simply be sunk. Either way it is vital that we realize that the situation we face is not unprecedented. In both the optimism of Kelly's predictions and the pessimism of those who fear that Google is "making us stupid" we can hear echoes of late Enlightenment debates in Germany about the necessity of rescuing people from the glut of knowledge. The flood of information brought to us by advancing technology is often accompanied by a distressing sense of "information overload", yet this experience is not unique to modern times.

Let's return to the distinction between raw data, information and knowledge, i.e. raw facts and explanations, which are institutional facts. At first glance, it seems, that information is "distinct from data", which requires further processing to be meaningful, and from knowledge, which implies "an independent knower". Information is discrete and small-sized items that have been removed from their original contexts and made available as little pieces ready to be articulated. Can we trust this distinction between information and knowledge? Where does this distinction come from? Who has the authority to distinguish one from another? My answer is that the sifting out knowledge from information

is always normative; that is, it always entails historical and cultural assumptions about what is worth knowing. To identify X as information and thus not knowledge is to make a judgment about the value of X (Blair 2011; Wellmon 2015). Information is, after all, "mere" information. What amount of "original context" is sufficient to turn information into knowledge? What then is knowledge – utility, wisdom, or something altogether different? The distinction between knowledge and information has its Enlightenment precedents in a range of distinctions: true and false learning, philosophical and historical knowledge, the aggregate and the whole. All of these distinctions were based on normative assumptions about what constituted true knowledge, as opposed to "mere" facts (Clark, 2006; Blair 2011; Wellmon 2015).

Debates on the distinction between knowledge and information concerned epistemic authority, that is, what counted as authoritative knowledge. What legitimates one form of knowledge over another? Which sources of knowledge are to be trusted? Which not? What practices and scholarly habits, techniques, and institutions render knowledge authoritative or worthy? Questions about distilling knowledge rely on assumptions about its value. Today, digital technologies from Wikipedia to blogs and social media pose a similar challenge to the authority that research university has enjoyed and defended for almost two centuries. But what most of the debates about these changes in media miss is that the research university is not just another content delivery device; it was and continues to be a donor of epistemic authority. The university does not just transmit knowledge. It legitimates and authorizes knowledge. This is a line of reasoning that Michel Foucault and other power theorists would certainly agree too.

Foucault writes openly in this matter: the university's primary function is one of selection, not so much of people as of knowledges. It can play this selective role because it has a sort of *de facto* – and *de jure* – monopoly, which means that any knowledge that is not born or shaped within this sort of institutional field that anything that exists outside it, any knowledge that exists in the wild, is automatically, and from the outset, if not actually excluded, disqualified *a priori*. The university has a selective role: it selects knowledges. One of the effects of this university monopoly on knowledge is a well-known fact that the amateur scholar ceased to exist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Foucault 2003, p. 184).

## Innovative University (Conservative Accelerator)

Let's return to the notion of invention and its relationship with the university. Well the basic question for us is: what are we talking about when we talk about the modern inventive university? One of the few books that do address that question is Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen's *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*. His arguments are now regularly invoked by critics insisting that the university change (Christensen, Eyring 2011). Christensen applies his theory of "disruptive innovation" – innovations that threaten established providers by offering more affordable alternatives – to higher education. For the first time since the introduction of the printed textbook, he writes, "there is a new, much less expensive technology for educating students: on-line learning" (Christensen, Eyring 2011, p. 25). In order to survive, universities will have to come to grips with new technologies or risk obsolescence.

Christensen claims that the current crisis in today's universities is real, and much of it is of the universities' own making. In the spirit of honouring tradition, universities hang on to past practices to the point of endangering their futures. Nor do they easily re-invent their curricula to better prepare students for the increasing demands of the world of work. Paradoxically, they respond to economic downturn by raising prices. From a market competition standpoint, it is slow institutional suicide. It is as if universities do not care about what is going on around them or how they are perceived. Unexpectedly though the authors of *The Innovative University* defend the university, also claiming that the traditional university is still indispensable (Christensen, Eyring 2011). Mastering the challenges and opportunities presented by a fast-paced, global society requires more than just basic technical skill and cognitive competence.

Yet to play its indispensable function in the new competitive environment, the typical university must change more quickly and more fundamentally than it has been doing. Regardless of the invaluable advantages, the way it has historically operated has become too expensive. Its unique design, created by visionary leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has until recently gone unchallenged and thus largely unaltered. Now innovation is disrupting the status quo. For the first time since the introduction of the printed textbook, there is a new, much less expensive technology for educating students: online learning. The combination of disruptive technology and increased focus on educational outcomes opens the door to new forms of competition, particularly from the private sector (Christensen, Eyring 2011).

It is only worth recalling that the theory of disruptive innovation holds that there are two main types of innovation. The first type, sustaining innovation, makes something bigger or better. Examples of sustaining innovations include airplanes that fly farther, computers that process faster, cell phone batteries that last longer, televisions with clearer images, and universities with more college majors and better activity centers (Christensen, Eyring 2011). A disruptive innovation, by contrast, disrupts the bigger-and-better cycle by bringing to market a product or service that is not as good as the best traditional offerings but is more affordable and easier to use. Online learning is an example.

The one of the reason for the lack of disruption in higher education has been the absence of a disruptive technology. Since the time that universities first gathered students into classrooms, the learning technologies – lectures, textbooks, oral and written examinations – have remained largely the same. Even when computers were introduced into the classroom, they were used to enhance the existing instructional approaches rather than to supplant them. Lectures, for example, were augmented with computer graphics, but the lecture itself persisted in its fundamental form. Even more than most organizations, traditional universities are products of their history. Much as the identity of a living organism is reflected in its every cell, the identity of a university can be found in the structure of departments and in the relationships among faculty and administrators. It is written into course catalogues, into standards for admitting students and promoting professors, and into strategies for raising funds. It can be seen in the campus buildings and grounds (Christensen, Eyring 2011).

Christensen describes university basically as a conservative institution that changes reluctantly, basically only under duress, in a state of higher necessity. To change is to disregard heritage preserved at university. With such a predicament universities often die of internal causes. However, Christensen forgets one important rule: innovations are costly and risky, and imitations are cheap and safe (Christensen, Eyring 2011). This breeds an interesting paradox that I am heading towards. Even Christensen when describes imitative university unable to change, asks if there is anything in which universities, even in their present form, are best? His answer is more than symptomatic. First of all, universities are good at conducting basic research that aims at the boldest and most important discoveries. Ironically, some of the university's discoveries now threaten its historical mode of operation. Online technologies such as computer chips and Internet search engines are the products of university professors and their students. So are the instructional and business strategies that allow for highly efficient delivery of a college degree.

Secondly, universities are reliable in conveying memory about the past of a given discipline – physics, biology, philosophy, etc., and thus cultivate the memory of their past. Finally, thirdly, universities provide students with real support in the form of a mentor, teacher-companion who supports efforts and answers individual questions and needs. This is of great value in the world of anonymous and mass teaching. Christensen admits that today the traditional university's challenge is to change in ways that decrease its price premium and increase its contributions to students and society (Christensen, Eyring 2011). Its expensive campus and professoriate must be deployed innovatively towards the jobs of discovery,

memory, and mentoring. What does this mean? This means that one reason university cannot allow to create more affordable product in education, however, is because it reflects on moral and life choices rather than dealing with claims and goods. In the era of cheap products and cheap imitation, its product must remain expensive because it is not an imitation.

What is the paradox here? The paradox is that this conservative institution, unable to innovate, is a machine for producing the most interesting and risky innovations. I claim that it is because modern research universities were created to meet the challenges and expectations of the state. The crisis of the state as a political institution is closely linked to the crisis of universities as a research institution. Hence, I would like to talk about an innovative university as a partner of an innovative state.

My main line of reasoning follows to idea of "entrepreneurial state". An innovative university is understood as an analogue of an "entrepreneurial state". Mariana Mazzucato in the book *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* has convincingly demonstrated that developments like railways, the internet, computing, supersonic flight, space travel, satellites, pharmaceuticals, voice-recognition software, nanotechnology, touchscreens and clean energy have all been nurtured and guided by states, not corporations (Mazzucato 2014). During the golden postwar era of research and development, two-thirds of research and development was publicly funded. High-risk inventions and new technologies are too risky for private capitalists to invest in (Mazzucato 2014; Srnicek, Williams 2015). Socializing of the risk and privatization of profits – this is the main climate of "dysfunctional capitalism" which is platform capitalism too.

An innovative state is a "risk-state" that provides vision and drive enabling new technologies. The visible hand of the active state acts not so much as a "magnet" attracting capital, but as an "accelerator" capable of intervening in the market at any moment of the business cycle. This vital state is not concerned with attracting investors, but stimulating – to use here the symptomatic Mazzucato imagery – "animal spirit of business" (Mazzucato 2014, p. 33). This state is therefore not armed with Leviathan's armour; rather, it is equipped with the temperament of the risk-taking player, resulting in real innovations such as – Internet, computers, space vehicles, mobile telephony, biotechnology, new generation drugs, GPS and nano-technology. Mazzucato, the ghostbuster of "bad state mythology", warns us, "You have to be a little crazy to deal with innovation, because they usually cost more than they bring". The innovative state is in a sense a "somewhat crazy" state. "Attempts at innovation usually fail – otherwise it would not be called 'innovation'. This is why you have to be a bit 'crazy' to engage with innovation… it will often cost you more than it brings back, making traditional cost–benefit analysis stop it from the start" (Mazzucato 2014, p. 28).

Mazzucato finally repeats Joseph Schumpeter's thesis of "creative destruction" and "extraction of value" in capitalism, in which the transfer of profits from shareholder dividends is rewarded more than real value creation. This process of creative destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in. Capitalism is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never it can be stationary (Schumpeter, [1942] 2014). In capitalism under the name of 'innovation', "information society", "platform capitalism" knowledge has become the crucial issue in the economic war

currently destroying the world. This is the question that needs to be asked now: is the fate of the university the same as that of capitalism, including platforms above all fate of platform capitalism?

## Cause of Incompatibility (Attention)

What conclusion should we draw from this story about the university in the times of platform capitalism? In what sense does the university ever become innovative? Do we know any formula that tells us what innovation is? Here, my thinking turns to philosophy, not economics and sociology, i.e., towards some of Jacques Derrida's statements about the "invention" and Bernard Stiegler's statements about "technology" (Derrida 2007; Stiegler 2015).

I am starting from conviction that the very meaning of "invention" is determined on two poles of expression; assertive – discovering, revealing, unveiling what is, and performative – producing, establishing, transforming. How this distinction works for the university itself? Perhaps under the pressure of our high expectations and capitalist stimulation of productivity and efficiency sometimes we want to reduce the university to the "machine for programming inventions" and an institution where there is a growing awareness of the need to "re-invent invention, beyond all programming" (Derrida 2007, p. 27). "No doubt the coming of the other, if it has to remain incalculable and in a certain way aleatory (one happens upon the other in the encounter), escapes from all programming" (Derrida 2007, p. 39). This is the place taken by Derrida in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. Derrida treats here invention as a *cause incompatibility*. For Derrida an invention always presupposes some

illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract. It inserts a disorder into the peaceful ordering of things, it disregards the proprieties.

Derrida also proposes a kind of genealogy of invention, in which he emphasizes the *singularity of the question of invention today*, that is, in the context of industrial technology. If the word "invention" is going through a rebirth, on a ground of a desire to reinvent invention itself, including its very status, this is perhaps because, what is called a "patentable invention" is now programmed, that is, subjected to powerful movements of arbitrary prescription and anticipation of the widest variety. And that is as true in the domains of art or the fine arts as in the technoscientific domain. Everywhere the enterprise of knowledge and research is first of all a programming of inventions (Derrida 2007).

For Derrida, there is a fundamental difference between the space of opportunity and possibility and the space of computability. The first one is closely connected with inventiveness that cannot be programmed or calculated. In a sense, inventiveness escapes from the space of probability. Space of computability, on the other hand, is closely related to computational modelling, with computational psychology, economics, physics, biology, at the forefront. Our era is the era of computational modelling, which eliminates inventions as chance, inspiration, insight, disruption, perhaps epiphany. From a computationalist's point of view, any complex system is a computational machine that processes data in a regular and predictable manner. The basic feature of such a system is predictability. A university that would become a platform would be reduced to a paradoxical computational system that would produce anomalies, distortions in the form of new inventions. We must supplement this reasoning with one serious stipulations that

such a perspective on invention, which is very classical, starts from invention as origin of the dynamism of the process, and as initial disorder, whereas some philosophers of science and technology – Gilbert Simondon for example – are inclined to think of discovery as the dynamic necessity of invention as cycle, and as circulation within the metastability of the process (Simondon 2005).

We live in times that induce that we are no longer able distinguish knowledge from information, information from raw data, knowledge from wisdom, invention from computation. Similarly, we cannot distinguish authentic desire from ordinary drive; we can't manage our hunger for information. Perhaps the condition that accompanies us deserves to be called stupidity or shock, states of shock of stupidity. We are bombarded with overload information, but the fact that we cannot choose and make selections also indicates a lower ability to manage information and is a sign of our bulimic hunger for information.

Perhaps, as Bernard Stiegler in the book *States of Shock. Stupidity and Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century* suggests, the true vocation of the education system as a whole – in the sense of the *skholē* – is to form a type of attention that was initially called *logos*, and then reason (Stiegler 2015, p. 151). "Reason is formed. Every human being is reason-able, but their capacity to reason must be formed. The formation or training [*formation*] of reason (*Bildung*) passes through disciplines" (Stiegler 2015, p. 151). The disciplines through which reason is formed are themselves schools of reasoning. Reason is the attentional form emerging from those processes of individuation that result in rational disciplines. "Attention is always both psychic and collective: "to be attentive to" means both "to focus on" and "to attend to"" (Stiegler 2015, 152). As such,

the formation by schools of attention also consists in educating and elevating students. Derrida's university without condition is replaced by the vision of the university with conditions. The responsibility and autonomy of the university is replaced by autonomy and responsibility *in* the attentive university situated *in* dis-attentive society.

"We live, however, in an age of what is now known, paradoxically, as the *attention economy* – paradoxically, because this is also and above all an age of the dissipation and destruction of attention: it is the epoch of an *attention dis-economy*" (Stiegler 2015, p. 152). Stiegler asks an embarrassing question, closely related to the beginning of our reflection on capitalism, stupidity and knowledge or raw data: does the university not bear responsibility for the global unreason which seems to have taken hold of us, the platform capitalism of the twenty-first century, wherever on Earth we happen to be? Is not more than symptomatic the current "silence of the intellectuals" about the global political situation and the economic collapse to which it has led? Is this silence of intellectuals and the silence of the university itself not a clear expression of his indifference?

Is, therefore, the postulated "politics of sensitiveness" my final position on the question of university? Would sensitiveness be a value and competence more recommendable than creativity, innovation, criticality, reflectiveness, efficiency or even imagination or empathy? Sensitiveness is above all the quality of being sensitive. How can one expect sensitivity from institutions which, by definition, are insensitive if not monstrously cold? You may ask: "Sensitive to whom?" – or, better yet: "Sensitive to what?". Well, I would say that it is only sensitivity that may break the spell of our narcissistic self-absorption. Only sensitivity allows us to go

beyond the shell of our self and to turn to the world. University that does not want to be taken over and absorbed only by itself must become a sensitive university. This means that it must learn sensitivity and teach it to others. Sensitivity is the only remedy for indifference. Contrary to the prevailing opinions, which are the opinions of the ruling class, sensitivity is not only a kind of internal prayer of the soul, it is above all a display of sensitivity to the world. Sensitivity is a mix of affects and competences. It is a cognitive power which from the very beginning is strictly political. Extinguishing or raising sensitivity are strictly political and by no means personal decisions. Exercises in sensitivity are exercises in love of thy neighbour.

I have to disappoint everyone here, especially at the conference on innovation, it is not innovation at all the object of my desire, because it is easily intercepted or privatized and it quickly turns against university. Nor is it knowledge and its legitimacy or any information control. The information stored in the clouds has long exceeded human computing power. University's new mission can only be attention and the ability to think carefully, to listen, remember, read, sometimes... also invent. An university employee – a professor, is someone who is available to pay attention to the student. I am not seeking an innovative but attentive university, i.e. university which has a certain level of sensitivity.

## References

Arum, Richard, Josipa Roksa (2011) *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Blair, Ann M. (2011) *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bloom, Allan (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Braidotti, Rosi (2013) *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Christensen, Clayton M., Henry J. Eyring (2011) *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Clark, William (2006) *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Collini, Stefan (2012) *What Are Universities For?*, London: Penguin.

Collini, Stefan (2017) *Speaking of Universities*, London: Verso.

Derrida, Jacques (2002) *Without Alibi*, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2007) *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Floridi, Luciano (2014) *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel (2003) *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey Picador. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, New York: *Picador*.

Kant, Immanuel ([1798] 2001) *The Conflict of the Faculties*, [in:] *Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology*, edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kelly, Kevin (2016) *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, New York: Viking.

Lambert, Gregg (2001) *Report to the Academy (re: The New Conflict of the Faculties)*, Aurora: Davies Group Publishers.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1984) *Postmodern Condition The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Marx Karl, Engels Friedrich ([1848] 2008) *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, London: Pluto Press.

Maxwell, Richard, Miller Toby (2012) *Greening the Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mazzucato, Mariana (2014) *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*, London; New York: Anthem Other Canon Economics Anthem Press.

Moore, Jason W. (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, London: Verso.

Muller, Jerry Z. (2018) *The Tyranny of Metrics*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Nash, Kate (2019) *Neo-liberalisation, Universities and the Values of Bureaucracy*, [in:] "*The Sociological Review*", 67 (1), pp. 178-193.

Nussbaum, Martha (1997) *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, Martha C. (2010) *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs Humanities,* Princeton University Press.

Rancière Jacques (2004) *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. A. Parker, Durham NC, Duke University Press.

Readings, Bill (1996) *The University in Ruins*, *Cambridge*, *Mass.*: Harvard *University* Press.

Schiller, Dan (2014) *Digital Depression: Information Technology and Economic Crisis*, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Scholz, Trebor (2015) *Platform Cooperativism: Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy*, New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. ([1942] 2014) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Floyd, Virginia: Impact Books.

Simondon, Gilbert (2005) *L'invention dans les techniques: Cours et conférences*, Paris: Seuil.

Srnicek, Nick (2016) *Platform capitalism*, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Srnicek, Nick, Williams Alex (2015) *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, London: Verso.

Stiegler, Bernard (2015) *States of Shock. Stupidity and Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wellmon, Chad (2015) *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wernick, Andrew (2006) *University*, [in:] "Theory, Culture & Society", 23 (2–3), 557–79.

Wolfe, Cary (2010) *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

## Szymon Wróbel

Szymon Wróbel is a full professor of philosophy at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He is the author of numerous books and articles scattered in various scientific journals. His books in English include: *Deferring the Self*, *The Animals in Us – We in Animal and Grammar* and *Glamor of Cooperation*, published in 2013, 2014 and 2015 by Peter Lang Publishing. In Polish: *Ćwiczenia z przyjaźni* (*Exercises in Friendship*), *Lektury retroaktywne* (*Retroactive Readings*) and *Polska pozycja depresyjna* (*Polish Depressive Position*) published by Kraków Publishing House Universitas in 2012, 2014, 2015. In 2016, IFiS PAN Institute published his book, *Filozof i terytorium* (*Philosopher and Territory*) on the Warsaw School of Historians of Ideas. His last book, *Atheism Revisited. Rethinking Modernity and Inventing New Modes of Life* has been published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2020. Currently, he is the head of the experimental Laboratory of Techno-Humanities at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" where for several years he realizes the "Technology and Socialization" project.