



PROJECT MUSE®

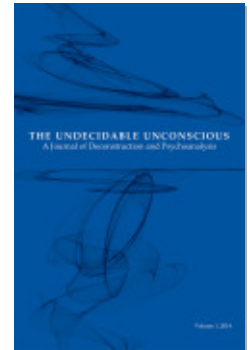
What Is the Institutional Form of Thinking?

Simon Critchley

The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis,
Volume 1, 2014, pp. 119-133 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ujd.2014.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/572076>

What Is the Institutional Form of Thinking?

SIMON CRITCHLEY

Academic institutions are unavoidable. Institutions are unavoidable. My discipline, philosophy, has always been a school discipline, beginning with Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, but also the hugely important example of Epicurus's Garden. Such schools are institutions of an informal kind, usually organized around a charismatic master and devoted to the transmission of the master's teaching to the pupils. The model is discipleship, and the purpose of the institution is the production of disciples. This model, which Lacan calls "the master's discourse," is easy to criticize, but what is interesting about these philosophical schools is their small-scale, autonomous nature and their commitment to teaching. Plato's dialogues weren't written as research projects but as ways of extending the audience for a teaching. For me, what the humanities can offer is an *experience* of teaching, where teaching becomes the laboratory for research. But I will come back to this later.

As a philosopher, I am concerned with thinking, with thinking about all sorts of things, with thinking as creatively, clearly, and rigorously as possible. Nothing should be alien to a philosopher. The question is: what is the *form* of thinking? Well, at one obvious level it is what *appears* to take place in your head, in the articulation of concepts. But what is the *collaborative* form for thinking or the institutional form for thinking? That is the question.

My worry is that I don't think that the university, particularly

the state university, is the right form for collaborative thinking. The university in its modern form is a largely German, Humboldtian, nineteenth-century invention, with its pyramidal hierarchy and its division into disciplines with professors in chairs and varieties of submissive assistants kissing the hems of their academic gowns. It is beautifully and properly Prussian. Its philosophical expression is Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which is the philosophical apologia for the state where Plato's philosopher king becomes the state bureaucrat. This is what Husserl had in mind when he described the philosopher as the civil servant or functionary of humanity and what Heidegger had in mind when he ominously described philosophers as the police force in the procession of the sciences. Let's just say that I don't see philosophy, or indeed the humanities, as a branch of the state bureaucracy or a police academy.

The linking of the university to the state, whether the classical nation-state or the European super state, generally has a deadening effect. Tying the university to the state might have been justified and productive at certain points in history, but at the present time it risks turning academia into an increasingly uniform and pleasureless machine, a kind of knowledge factory at the service of the abstractions of the state and capital. I think we need to think and think again about what might be a better collaborative form of thinking, about what institutional forms might better serve the students we teach.

There are, of course, exceptions to what I'm saying about the university, bureaucracy and the state. I'm sure that there are counterexamples in various contexts and, to be clear, I'm not arguing for private universities. It was otherwise, for example, in England in the 1960s. In 1959 C. P. Snow gave a famous lecture in Cambridge where he identified two cultures in English academic and social life: the cultures of science and literature. Furthermore, he argued that there was a crisis in English society because these two cultures couldn't talk to each other. They didn't even share any common vocabulary and didn't really have any interest in what the other side was doing.

The great project of university reform in the 1960s respond-

ed directly to Snow's challenge. Experimental universities were founded, like Sussex, Essex, Kent, Warwick, York and Keele. It was a fantastic experiment, but at the core of universities like Sussex and Essex was the idea that students from the humanities had to take courses in the sciences, and vice versa. Students weren't in departments, but in large and diverse schools that effectively had complete autonomy over their curricula, like the Schools of American or European Studies at Sussex or the School for Comparative Studies at Essex. I was a student in the latter in the early 1980s, and it was originally decided not to have a philosophy department, but to have one philosopher in each department. For example, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre was professor of sociology for some years at Essex.

These universities had a tripartite structure: departments, schools, and universities. The schools were like soviets ("all power to the soviets," as Lenin said), departments were pretty weak, interdisciplinarity was extremely strong, academics ran their own curricula through various democratic fora with heavy student input, and the administration was tolerated but held at a polite distance. In fact, as a consequence of extended student protests and occupations from 1968 until the miners' strike in 1984–85, it is fair to say that the administration was frightened of the students and many of the faculty.

To be clear, this was not paradise, but it meant that students who wanted to stick to their specialism (students always want this; they are habitually born conservatives about education and therefore have to be educated into the virtues of working in several disciplines) were obliged to receive a broad humanistic education that included the natural and social sciences. What happened to these universities? Basically, the tripartite structure was inverted: the schools are now weak, effectively nonexistent; the administration is now called "central management" and rules with an arrogance and philistine brutality that would have been unimaginable even ten years ago. Departments are increasingly isolated from each other, competing with one another for students and scarce financial resources in a kind of Hobbesian

state of nature. The informal bonds of civility that tie a university community together are being stretched to the breaking point and in many cases being broken. Departments simply exist in order to please the management, and the management simply exists to carry out the endless shower of increasingly meaningless university reforms and make money pulling in research grants. What began under Thatcher as an ideological attack on the liberal intelligentsia in the universities, particularly those left-wing experimental universities like Essex, was perfected in a Blairite bureaucratization of universities obsessed with transparency, accountability, and quality.

Before continuing, let me just say that what goes on in teaching, in actually working with students, in the real experience of education, is very often not transparent. It is sometimes obscure and difficult to grasp at the time, and perhaps only really understood retrospectively, sometimes months or years later. Education isn't accountable in accordance with any calculative way of thinking. Finally, quality is something that can't be measured like coffee beans; it is something very difficult to define, like an ethos (I will come back to this word), an atmosphere that enables students to become something, to become more than they would ever have imagined. Education emancipates in ways that are often difficult to define and impossible to measure. There has been a middle-management takeover of higher education in Britain, and people with no competence and capacity for intellectual judgment force academics to conform to some sort of state administered strait-jacket. Another vapid buzzword of higher education is "excellence." The issue facing universities is very simple: excellence at all costs. But what on earth does that word mean? Nothing I fear. For a philosopher, it recalls the Greek idea of *arête*, virtue, and there is a long and fascinating debate in ancient and modern philosophy as to what excellence might mean and how and whether virtue can be taught. It's not at all clear whether it can be taught. But let's just say that excellence is dependent upon an ethos that is fragile, at times obscure, and one that can't be reduced to the bean-counting methods of measuring research quality.

In Britain there is a completely hypocritical situation with increasingly separate and professionally competent disciplines drifting apart and spinning centripetally into smaller and smaller orbits, and fighting tooth and nail for resources, let alone some recognition that they are good at what they do and are valued. Above those disciplines in their Hobbesian state of nature there floats an ideological patina of interdisciplinarity which can somehow be measured by quality assurance agencies, by the new police force. The true mechanism of doom in Britain was the RAE, the Research Assessment Exercise, which made cross-disciplinary collaboration much harder to justify and completely downgraded the importance of teaching. Some academics have been given overpaid jobs without much teaching in order to improve departmental research scores as part of some bizarre quest for increased income streams (I know a little about this as I had one of these jobs until recently—you see, I'm a hypocrite too). Teaching is looked on as loser activity; what counts is research at all costs, and research is always conceived on the model of the natural sciences.

What can one say? At some point in the late 1980s an ideological mist descended making academics obsessed with research, cutting the fragile bonds of solidarity with their colleagues (and collegiality is *so* important to academia and *so* fragile) and introducing an obsession with measuring and the ranking of institutions. Academics have almost entirely conspired with this process and are completely culpable. We have shifted from a model of oppositional politics in the Marxist sense, where there was a sort of war or class struggle between academics and the state which required strong unions, to a Foucauldian model where university academics learn to discipline themselves and govern themselves in terms, structures, and criteria handed down to them by their university management and state departments of education.

I watched this disaster unfold at Essex and other British universities and really saw it up close when I was head of department for a few years and obliged to do management training courses and the like. It was soul-destroying to watch the institution that

had taught me to think and to which I was fantastically loyal turn into something very different. So I left. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to leave. Since leaving, on my trips back I see the effects that the EU and the Bologna Accords are having on higher education. I'm sure there are benefits to it, but I just see universities across Europe in states of confusion, particularly with the pressure to publish in English in non-English-speaking countries. Universities have turned into football teams trying to pull in the faculty that are good at getting recognition and research grants.

I apologize for being polemical, but this is a topic that angers me because university education is so important, and it wouldn't be that difficult to make genuine improvements.



Are there other ways of thinking about institutions? For deep sociological reasons having to do with feelings of disenfranchisement, disempowerment, and disconnection, we are living through a time where there is a massive lack of creative thinking about academic institutions. We are living through a long anti-1960s governed by an overwhelming sense of psychical impotence and a fear of not being seen to follow the law, to submit to what the state demands. Overwhelmingly, academics want to be left alone to do their "research." They feel a growing sense of anomie and increasingly have instrumental, functional relations to their universities.

The question I want to think about is what might be a better collaborative, institutional form for thinking, one that is not at the service of knowledge but—and I fear to say this in public—based on an experience of *enjoyment* that is at the service of *truth*. Did I really say that? Could we imagine the humanities based on enjoyment? A collaborative, institutional form of existence based on the cultivation of joy at what we do? This feels like a dirty, obscene, and slightly shocking question in the context of a culture of increasingly purposeless and endless work, but I'd like to pose it nonetheless.

Universities, particularly in the humanities, are defined by a mood of melancholy. This makes sense because people feel powerless and powerlessness induces melancholia. What I see in many British universities, and this certainly hasn't been refuted by my time in other corners of northern Europe, is a culture of depression. It's a depression that people really rather like (remember Dostoyevsky's remark that corporal punishment is better than nothing?)—at least it livens you up. In my final years at Essex, I saw colleagues whose entire existence was sustained by the depression that the university was causing in them. It seemed to be the only thing that gave their professional lives meaning and shape. This is hateful. They would wander around the corridors and cafés on campus desperately trying to find someone to complain to about the latest initiative that was being produced from the university central management at the behest of central government.

The problem here is *autonomy*. The goal of academic institutions is autonomy, both their own autonomy and the autonomy they induce in their students. What we are witnessing at present is a serious undermining of autonomy at two interconnected levels. First, the autonomy of teachers, departments, schools and universities is being undermined by an obsession with regulation, quality assessment, transparency, and all the other elements of the middle-management takeover of higher education. What I saw at Essex and other UK institutions was—to speak in Habermasian jargon—the colonization of the academic lifeworld by systems of administration and a cadre of administrators who seemed suspicious and sometime even contemptuous of the work of academics and who implemented new government initiatives with a strongly sadistic delight. It is a particularly beautiful sadism, because no one is responsible. "Listen," they will say, "you have to be punished because you can't do things in the way you previously did. You have been bad academics and need to be punished. But look, I'm not the person to blame. I am just the messenger. I am simply carrying out the instructions of the university central management at the behest of the national government in order to fall in line with new EU regulations."

We live in academic institutions where there is a palpable absence of autonomy: no one is to blame, no one is responsible, and no one can do anything. It all adds up to a crushing sense of psychical impotence, and it is really worrying. However, academics also conspire willingly with their own powerlessness and positively enjoy their depression and misery. They wouldn't want it any other way. So, the heteronomy is double: it is both imposed from outside and cultivated from within. People are utterly dependent on their feelings of psychical impotence. For as long as this situation continues, and we fail to analyze the sort of psychosocial economies of power that are at stake, conferences on questions such as what counts as theory or the future of the humanities or the nature of the university are going to do precisely nothing. Teachers and students will have a relation of heteronomy and quiet resentment toward their institutions and their teaching and dream of the moment they can get back to the library and continue their earth-shatteringly wonderful book on the experience of nothingness in some or other poet. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I used to sit in the library and write books with titles like *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*.



What, then, is the institutional form of thinking in the humanities? It is simple. It is *teaching*. It is teaching people to have an orientation toward truth. This is perhaps where philosophy provides an exemplary and compelling model. As everyone knows, philosophy begins in the Socratic dialogues by opposing itself to sophistry, which is the promise of knowledge obtained with a fee. What does philosophy offer by way of contrast? It offers a critique of sophistry and its spurious claims to knowledge. It offers a critical undermining of conventional views on justice, beauty, love, or whatever. But it doesn't offer knowledge in the form of information. It doesn't even provide wisdom. It simply offers a disposition toward wisdom, what we might think of as an orientation of the soul toward the true. This is what Socrates calls "philosophy," the love of wisdom. We might even say that

philosophy challenges the discourse on knowledge and offers in its place a non-knowledge where the object of philosophical investigation is not conceptualized, compartmentalized, or neatly defined, but where we might be inclined toward that matter in a certain, definite interpersonal experience. Philosophy begins in dialogue, in a drama that is a competitor discourse to that of the tragic poets whom Socrates excludes in the *Republic*. Philosophy offers a scene of instruction, of encounter; in a psychoanalytic sense it is a *transferential* experience, a teaching that is not the passing of information from teacher to student but something much more subtle and profound: a contact, a communication, a pedagogical erotics that has to be handled with tact and prudence and requires discipline on both sides. These are my watchwords: teaching, an orientation toward the true, contact and communication through the spoken word, enjoyment, tact, touch, prudence, and discipline.

I am not against research in the humanities. Far from it. I have been known to engage in it myself from time to time. But I think it is a mistake to formulate an agenda for research in the humanities in a way that simply accepts the established criteria for what counts as research. What needs to be pointed out is the distinguishing of what we do in the humanities, the delicate tact of teaching, being involved in the formation of human beings, leading them out into something new, rich, and exciting. This is what the Greeks meant by *paideia*, and that is what we offer. Without it, a culture dies. My question is, what might be the institutional, collaborative form of such a *paideia*?



I find Lacan instructive here. He never described what he did as a theory or a psychoanalytic research program, but as a teaching, *un enseignement*, which required a persistent experimentation with institutional forms, largely due to the fact that he was repeatedly expelled from the institutions of the psychoanalytic establishment because of the radicality of his teaching and practice. Lacan makes a brilliant distinction between four orders of

discourse: master, university, analyst, and hysteric. The master's discourse is pretty much that of classical philosophy, which is concerned with the production of disciples and the irony of drawing unknown knowledge from the mouth of the slave, as in Plato's *Meno*. Implicit in Lacan's approach is the idea that there has been a collapse of the discourse of the master. This is paralleled with an ethical collapse. The idea that the highest good or happiness is the *bios theoretikos*, the dialogue of the soul with itself in contemplation, has been replaced by the idea of happiness as the happiness of the greatest number and morality as something quantitative and utilitarian. Morality becomes what Lacan calls "the service of goods." This is paralleled in the university discourse, which is also the discourse of capital. Both the university and capital are obsessed with accumulation. Universities become factories for the production of knowledge in the form of degrees, PhD theses, and research. Universities are phallic knowledge machines designed to accumulate at all costs. Capital and the university collide in the model of the rich American private university where the value of the institution really lies in the size of its endowment. Everyone wants to be well endowed. Private capital is the Viagra of the modern university.

Lacan works with an ad hoc distinction between knowledge and truth, where truth is what bores a hole in the self-certainty of knowledge. In this sense, truth is something new, something unpredictable and surprising, something with a relation to enjoyment, something which perhaps even idles in the relentless activity of knowledge and capital accumulation, something of the order of an *event*. We should be trying to cultivate the conditions under which such an event might happen, in our teaching, in our listening to students and our collaborative being-with-others.



Are there forms, other than the traditional Humboldtian university or the contemporary bureaucratic university machine, that might be more amenable to thinking, to collaborative thinking? Might there be collaborative forms where we might actually en-

joy ourselves? Let me sketch seven models for thinking about institutions, each of which is an open question:

1. The anarchist tradition offers rich resources for thinking about new institutional and collaborative forms. Contrary to popular stupidity, anarchy is all about order and organization, which is enshrined in directly democratic procedures like affinity groups. Anarchists are rightly convinced that institutions should not be organized hierarchically around a relation to the state or to God. Institutions should not have to be legitimated by the state, and academics should not be the civil servants of humanity or the police force at the procession of the sciences. Institutions should be horizontally self-legislating and self-organizing, like small republics, entirely accountable to their students. Perhaps the path to some sort of institutional autonomy is by keeping institutions as small as possible.
2. The problem that has to be confronted is the relation between such institutions and capital. For example, sometimes, on a summer's evening in central London, watching someone like the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist engage in two different conversations while calling someone else, I think that contemporary art institutions might offer a compelling form of collaborative thinking. It is undeniable that the art world has become increasingly culturally hegemonic and sometimes provides a space where thinking can take place. But the problem here is money, the way in which this form of cultural life has become a slave to money. Gallerists are often doing something really interesting, but are equally often whores to the market.
3. Another model is the American private liberal arts college. We have one at the New School in New York called Lang College for the Liberal Arts. It is perfectly utopian, and students have a freedom unimaginable in the UK and an ambition and honesty about what they want from their education. Life in the United State is an often dubious and

complex pleasure, but the importance placed on education, particularly humanities education, can be really breathtaking. Small liberal arts colleges are often collectively governed and extremely radical. But it comes at a high price, about \$40,000 per year.

4. We might also think about other examples of new corporate forms which are much more rhizomatic and horizontal than the classical hierarchy that academics might associate with business structures. I recently gave a talk at the Google offices in New York and toured the site. It is a wonderfully fluid, soft environment full of seemingly very happy creative people, but that shouldn't blind us to the hard business reality just beneath the surface.
5. The one place in academia where the question of the university is still being vigorously posed is in the Catholic universities. Think here of the work of Charles Taylor and Alasdair Macintyre. Obviously, the question is posed in relation to the question of faith versus reason and the nature of church hierarchy and church teaching in relation to a secular state. But at least the question of the nature of the university is still being addressed.
6. As I already mentioned, psychoanalysis is interesting to think about in relation to institutions, and the history of psychoanalysis is a largely bloody history of fights over institutions. Lacan had a highly fraught relation to institutions, but to his credit he constantly struggled with the psychoanalytic establishment around the issue of autonomy. This turns on the question as to *who* is a psychoanalyst, which has to be a question that is both self-legislating ("I am an analyst. I take responsibility") and requires some other form of legislation ("This institution legitimates your claim to be a psychoanalyst").
7. A final example that comes to mind in this connection is Georges Bataille. Throughout his life, particularly in the

1930s and 1940s, Bataille experimented with different forms of informal institutions, from *Contre Attaque*, the *Collège de Sociologie*, and the *Collège Socratique*, through to the more mysterious *Acéphale*. Now, I am not preaching human sacrifice in a forest anytime soon, but I find Bataille an interesting example to think about in terms of experimenting with institutional form.



Let me close by returning both to my own experience and to the importance of ethos, both in the sense of atmosphere, climate, and place and in the sense of a disposition for thinking and thoughtfulness. I used to be the director of the Centre for Theoretical Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences (CTS). This was an initiative created by Ernesto Laclau in 1990 to bring together theoretical work in a number of disciplines at the University of Essex and provide a context where we could talk to each other. I took over in 1995 and ran the Centre for seven years. It was a success because it simply formalized an existing informal culture of discussion and disagreement amongst a range of colleagues. The fact is that there were people with common interests in philosophy and politics, and we created a space where faculty and students from law, art history, sociology, literature, history, and various natural sciences could take part. It was a genuinely interdisciplinary space which produced a huge amount of research that went on to be published. This wasn't due to some policy on interdisciplinarity but because of an existing interdisciplinary culture that could be "hegemonized," as we used to say in Essex, and organized organically.

The point of the tale is twofold. On the one hand, the research flowed from oral presentations and collective discussions in an atmosphere—and this is crucial—of familiarity and trust. People took risks with their work because they knew they would find a sympathetic ears, although debate was often highly critical and contentious. On the other hand, at any point in the history of the CTS, probably only about five people were really active in plan-

ning and creating ideas. The core personnel changed, but the number was always small, and I think this is a virtue. What I want to emphasize is the *fragility* of such an ethos, and any other intellectual ethos. It is the easiest thing in the world to destroy. At the time of writing, the fate of the CTS is in grave doubt. There has been a top-down reorganization of the faculties at Essex, with a new management structure, and it looks like the CTS will fall through the cracks and probably disappear. It is a huge pity, but in no way surprising.

I moved to the New School for Social Research (NSSR) in 2004 and found myself in a very different academic culture, but with some surprising similarities. I won't go into the long and heroic history of the New School and its origins in the opposition to US policy on World War I at Columbia and the period of the University in Exile in the 1930s and 1940s when the New School was a home to many exiled German Jewish professors and then their French colleagues. The aim of the NSSR is a program of critical social research on the model imagined by John Dewey, who was involved at the origin of the institution. We don't have humanities as such, but a grouping of very humanistic social science departments along with departments of philosophy and history. Although many people at the NSSR are perhaps deluded about the importance of the NSSR in American academic life—I confess that I am one of them—it is a unique place with a really strong intellectual culture and a live institutional memory. This is combined with a secular Jewish leftist *Weltanschauung* and a healthy competitiveness among colleagues. Every year, there are threats to this culture, this ethos, and the university central management is particularly incompetent. But we keep that ethos alive through conversation, playful joking relationships, and a strong sense of solidarity. What I particularly like is that we refer to ourselves as a *collegium*, a collegial institution.

What is surprising about the NSSR to someone coming from the UK is the importance placed on teaching. We all teach pretty much the same load, and it is simply assumed that faculty are doing research. What counts is the quality of your teaching, your

engagement with students, and your presence in the institution. One's kudos among colleagues comes from the buzz around your teaching. Most of my colleagues are better teachers than I, and as a consequence I am constantly seeking to improve my pedagogical technique. Teachers have a level of autonomy over curriculum, assessment, and all the rest that would be unimaginable in the UK. But, oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, this doesn't produce autocratic teaching. On the contrary, classes are the most democratic that I have ever seen, and students expect to take the initiative and like to take it.



Of course, the question of the institutional form for thinking shouldn't be answered by old farts like me talking whimsically about a lost golden age and feeling powerless in the face of the new university machine. Maybe it is for another generation to decide. Maybe we should ask the students what they think? Maybe the students should design the curricula of their own institutions and their own manner of testing? Maybe we should allow for the emergence of some radically autonomous institution of thinking by establishing its conditions, sketching a framework, and then stepping back and letting the thing live on its own? Maybe. But what do students want?