Reflections on the Politics and Location of Knowledge Making in a Time of Crisis

Christopher L. Connery
Department of Literature
University of California, Santa Cruz, USA

Abstract

The politics of knowledge making in the humanities and humanistic social sciences were profoundly impacted by the social, political, and cultural movements of the 1960s. Disciplinary foundations, including the subjects and objects of knowledge, as well as the locations of knowledge, were questioned and shaken. The hegemony of “the West” was subject to sustained critique. New disciplinary and sub-disciplinary formations arose, including cultural studies, feminist studies, and various “identity”-based studies, and these were institutionalized in various ways in various locations. One such project that arose in the late 1980s, the World Literature and Cultural Studies program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, not only sought to intervene in disciplinary character, but also experimented with new approaches to pedagogy and intellectual authority. The fiscal crisis in US universities tempered many of these experiments, and over the course of those two decades universities increasingly adapted themselves to a more purely economic logic, greatly narrowing the imaginative and liberatory field of possibility that the earlier trajectory had unleashed. In the wake of massive student protests in recent years, however, new pedagogical practices are once more on the agenda. Greater attention to and participation in these developments might prove to be a useful response to the current crisis.

Keywords

cultural studies, economic crisis, radical pedagogy, world

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How do dreams end? Analyses of the current crisis in the US and Europe, across the political spectrum, have referred to the “wake-up call” delivered to consumers, policy makers, and citizens, who have been told, variously, that the economic transformations of the last forty years have concealed weak and untenable foundations; that the great achievements of social democracy and its derivates—social welfare, free and accessible higher education, universal health care, housing provisions, and the range of programs aimed at the promotion of equality and the public good—are economically unsustainable; that massive unemployment or under-employment is a “structural” feature of the contemporary capitalist economy; that the banking and finance system must set the norms and priorities for fiscal administration; that the days of ever-growing prosperity for the working and middle classes are over. This “waking up” has to date produced no moment of clarity, no sense that “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 8). Rather it is to opacity, to chaos, into the disjunctured concatenations of lives unbound from the accumulated sense-making mechanisms of the life world that the dreamers are delivered. In some quarters this has stimulated anarcho-fantasies of collapse, and intimations of a new order of life and love in the ruins. The more likely short-term scenario for the advanced capitalist countries purged of their dynamism is some version of “the stationary state” (Balakrishnan).

At the level of the political, it is clear that neither the parliamentary democracies nor the party states are, to date, capable of charting a new course. Even in China, whose GDP growth has given global capitalism the great part of whatever has constituted its recent vitality, there is a sense that the model of state interventionist investment-led growth is wearing thin. But the loudest voices for reform there are those for further privatization, and restructuring along those same neo-liberal lines that helped bring the US and Europe to their current state.¹ The American Century, as some have called it, is over, but the form or center of the new century—or even if it will have a form or a center—is far from clear. The new forms of anti-systemic politics that have emerged in the wake of the crisis are largely the politics of exit, of “cracks”²—either taking the form of temporary creation of autonomous social spaces (occupation movements in the Arab world, Europe, and North America), or of local, communitarian, autonomous spaces that

¹ See, for example, the 2012 World Bank report, “China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, and Creative High-Income Society,” which despite being of non-Chinese origin is often referred to as a model by Chinese neo-liberal intellectuals.

² For more on this, see Holloway.
seek to de-link from the dominant system (the communization movement in Europe, the UK, and North America, or community-based solidarity movements such as those in Greece which are promoting the use of alternative local currencies and “sharing,” as well as the local extra-state support networks and practices that have emerged in post-Fukushima Japan). I will refer below to the new forms of politics and to possible articulations with them, but here want to register something of the distinctiveness of the present moment: the bankruptcy of ideas at the level of the state and its institutions, and the enormous disconnect between the knowledge and awareness of systemic unsustainability on the one hand, and the system’s incapacity to address this systemic malfunction on the other. Mark Fisher, in his recent *Capitalist Realism*, refers to the “reflexive impotence” characterizing this period of political stasis. This new situation, I argue, has consequences for the forms and practice of knowledge, for what we do in the university.

Until recently, disciplinary orientations in the humanities and humanistic social sciences have had an explicit or implicit geographical character that has had considerable institutional stability. Although we are all now “global,” expertise—when considered in hiring and in disciplinary formation—is still largely coded as area expertise. The ongoing interrogation of forms and locations of knowledge has changed this, but I want to argue here that this interrogation requires new foci and new urgency in these times of differential crisis. In this essay I want to trace some mutations in the political character of knowledge making in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences—in and about Euro-America, though mostly focusing on the US—and will conclude with a provisional suggestion that the locational terrain has shifted, that the most recent systemic mutation might suggest new directions for the situated politics of knowledge making.

In his essay “Americanism and Fordism,” Antonio Gramsci investigated the new (post-WWI) modes of factory and work organization associated with Fordist production, and their impact on Europe. He was particularly concerned with possible connections to fascism. Gramsci concluded that Fordism represented a generally progressive tendency, away from certain archaic forms of competition and class hierarchy, and towards new, progressive forms of rational planning and social cooperation. Gramsci was tracking an emergent social form, and of course was aware of its dialectical character: America as hegemon, in the service of capital, and

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3 *The Coming Insurrection*, by The Invisible Committee, is a central text here.

4 Several communities in Greece, in response to the crisis, are experimenting with local currencies as part of a larger social network movement. The best known is probably the TEM (acronym for Τοπική Εναλλακτική Μονάδα, “Alternative Local Currency”) used in Magnesia prefecture in Thessaly. See <http://www.tem-magnisia.gr/> (in Greek).
America as progressive, indeed liberatory force, when contrasted with European
domestic elite social and economic structures, not wholly devoid of their feudal and
post-feudal character. The question, for Gramsci and for other revolutionary forces
in pre-WWII Europe, was whether this new mode of production, transformed, could
actualize workers’ power.

The Cold War altered this equation. On the one hand, Gramsci’s intuitions
about the Fordist production regime bore a particular kind of fruit in Leninist
Taylorism in the Soviet Union, whose immunity from the Great Depression was
among several factors stimulating Western capitalist anxiety over the presence of a
clear systemic alternative. On the other hand, the emergence of the American
imperial super-power in an age of Cold War rivalry made it impossible to conceive
of the US in a neutral or benign way. Engaging perceptions of the US overseas in a
campaign for hearts and minds was part of this effort. American studies in Europe,
Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America was in many cases funded by the US
government and US foundations (Ford was a significant source). The J.F.K.
Institute at the Freie Universität in West Berlin, with significant US government
and Ford Foundation funding (the first building on the new campus, opened in 1954,
was the Henry Ford Building),\(^5\) was the paradigmatic case. Global studies of the US
were not simply to be area studies, but studies of a new civilizational beacon. In this
project, American studies in the US provided some foundations. American studies
in the Cold War US, as Donald E. Pease and other “New Americanists” have
argued, rested on a bedrock of American exceptionalism, which had both a
particular and universalistic character: the nature of US power was said to be the
product of a historical trajectory quite different from that of Europe, but at the same
time it served as the standard for modernization. The hegemony of this paradigm
had an extensive global reach before the 1960s, informing efforts elsewhere in the
world to master, out of defensiveness or admiration, the language and culture of this
distinctive and exceptional global power.

The Global 1960s and their aftermath transformed the situation. Student
movements outside of the US critiqued the American soft-power projection that
accompanied stepped-up projection of the much harder kind. In the US academy
and elsewhere in the world, critical scholarship on US power and social structures
newly flourished. Radical scholars in the US from the older generation—William
Appleman Williams is a salient example—found new favor, and were gradually

\(^5\) For photos and an ideological characterization of the building’s architectural principles, see
joined by the ranks of “tenured radicals” who entered the institutions in the sixties and their aftermath, creating a place in the academy for critical scholarship on the US and the West. These new members of the academy also struggled for new spaces for African-American, Chicana/o, Asian American, Latin American, feminist, and queer studies. Critical American studies, and critical studies of the West in general, formed a project joined by scholars across the globe, many of whom reached positions of significant intellectual authority. At the same time, in Europe, Latin America, India, China, the US, and elsewhere, radical elements in the universities raised new questions about the politics of knowledge, and about the relationship of the universities to society.

The US sixties also produced important new visions of the university, and the trajectory of Clark Kerr, one-time president of the University of California, is instructive here. Kerr’s *The Uses of the University*, first published in 1963, was then the clearest articulation of what was to be imagined as the postwar academic monolith, the research university, a product of US federal policy decisions that research would be conducted primarily in universities rather than in national research centers. The new industrial state would require a knowledge-production institution whose complexity would have to reflect the complexity of society itself. Over the rest of his life, Kerr wrote several new chapters of *The Uses of the University*, reflecting on his experiences leading the university through the protest period and then through his dismissal by California Governor Ronald Reagan, who made his intention to dismiss Kerr—whom he accused of being too soft on protest—central to his campaign. Students had attacked Kerr’s notion of the multiversity as instrumentalist and as hopelessly wedded to dominant political and economic power, but, in students’ demands for “relevance,” engagement, and more universalized and democratic access to the university—the latter central to Kerr’s liberal democratic vision—Kerr saw a recognition of the convergence between the university and the economic and political life of the state. The nature of that convergence was at stake, and Kerr’s later chapters show considerable sympathy with student demands that the new university engage more directly with the whole of social existence. In the book’s later editions, though, the sobriety of his analytical focus leads him to focus relentlessly on the encroachments of economic rationality. He wrote that the reorganizations of humanistic and social scientific knowledge that

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6 The book’s different editions were published in 1963, 1972, 1982, 1995, and 2001, respectively. This paragraph of this essay is adapted from my article “Marches through the Institutions: University Activism in the Sixties and Present,” published in the journal *Representations* in 2011.
flowered in the wake of the sixties movements failed to achieve any significant and lasting organizational achievements, and saw in the rise of institutions such as the for-profit and largely on-line University of Phoenix part of the now-burgeoning and controversial for-profit higher education sector in the US—an important step forward in the degradation of the university into an auxiliary function of the labor market.\textsuperscript{7}

The post-war US university monolith had thus acquired a double character: it achieved global domination of knowledge production, and set evaluative and performance standards that were adapted around the world. Chen Kuan-Hsing and others associated with the journal \textit{Inter-Asia Cultural Studies} have noted the deformational effects visited by the US monolith on local knowledge production (though it is noteworthy that the evaluative and disciplinary use of indices such as the Social Science Citation Index, a use that Chen and others have critiqued extensively, is much more rigid and institutionalized outside the US than within).\textsuperscript{8}

But the sixties and post-sixties transformations of the university, at least up until the fiscal assaults on the university under neo-liberalism, also made it a place where many saw a possibility of a form of democratic, inclusionary knowledge production that stemmed from the new vision of the relationship of knowledge to society, and of knowledge to life. “Relevance” was the buzzword at the time. This claim for a “liberated” university is not meant to exaggerate the transformed character of the university. Universities in the US and abroad largely carried on business as usual, organized into the disciplinary structures that became consolidated in the immediate postwar years, and largely continued to function in the service of capital and the state. They were partially liberated zones at best, and struggles to institutionalize new forms of knowledge—ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, etc.—or to increase access to the university for those who had traditionally had none were only partially successful. But given the present crisis of universities in almost every part of the world, it would be an error not to recognize the achievements of the sixties and post-sixties universities, and the victories that those achievements represented. And just as importantly, given the tendency, beginning in the late eighties and accelerating during the present crisis, to hold universities accountable in accounting terms for value produced, to view students as “customers” or consumers, to conceive of the value of an education in terms of the lifetime income differential it

\textsuperscript{7} On the convergence of university policy with market logic, see the essays by Bob Meister and Suzanne Guerlac in the above issue of \textit{Representations}.

\textsuperscript{8} See the special issue of \textit{Inter-Asia Cultural Studies} in June 2009 edited by Chen: \textit{Neo-liberal Conditions of Knowledge}. 
produces, it would be an error not to recognize the sixties and post-sixties university’s character as an institution where noetic self-cultivation and *otium* retained a relative autonomy from the arena of value production.\(^9\)

The intellectual transformations wrought in the wake of the sixties are familiar to most readers, but I would like to emphasize the nature of the connection of those transformations to the sixties movements. The transformations in the academy from 1970 through 1990, roughly—and I’m speaking primarily of the humanities and social sciences, as well as of the larger set of policies that could fall under the rubric of “affirmative action”—were largely the products of sixties movements’ victories. The trajectory from anti-racism, civil rights, and various liberation movements—some labeled derogatorily or not as “identity politics”—to disciplinary reformation is obvious. But the intellectual legacies of the anti-war and anti-imperialist movement were salient not only in history and in the humanistic social sciences, but also in deconstruction’s attack on Western metaphysics, which constituted the “theory revolution” in the humanities beginning in the 1970s.\(^10\) Subaltern studies, which has been formative in shaping anti-Eurocentric epistemologies all over the world, has clear filiations to insurrectionary movements (Naxalbari, in particular) in India in the late 1960s. Sanjay Seth demonstrates very clearly, in an important essay that critiques the attack from the left stating that postcolonialism appeared on the academic scene at a time of declining revolutionary energies, the trajectory from Maoist revolution, to Subaltern studies, to dominant strands of postcolonial studies. All of this work constituted an important decentering of the US and the West, and wrought enormous changes worldwide in the study of Euro-America.

The global trajectories of the project of cultural studies present an interesting and more complex narrative. At origin, in Birmingham, UK, a sixties project (the University of Birmingham’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in 1964, but acquired most of its distinctive character after Stuart Hall became director in 1968), its blend of Gramscian politics, and focus on race, imperialism, gender, and popular culture quickened the turn, over the seventies and eighties in the UK, from literary into cultural studies.\(^11\) British cultural studies’ embrace of popular culture, mostly from the standpoint of reception, made it politically suspect in the eyes of some on the left, but this embrace was one of many factors that gave

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9 I use *otium* generally in the sense elaborated by Bernard Stiegler. See *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, among other works.

10 See the work of William V. Spanos, Paul A. Bové, and others in the early issues of *boundary 2*, the first journal to use the term “postmodern” in its critical sense, founded in 1972.

11 Antony Easthope sketches this trajectory very lucidly, albeit without much reference to the Birmingham center, in *Literary into Cultural Studies*. 


it considerable local adaptability. Cultural studies in Australia, post-martial law Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, and Latin America have been able to deftly negotiate the line between critique and efforts to shape and influence cultural policy formation. As in the case of postcolonial studies, cultural studies has remained subject to left critique as well as caricature (the specter of “Madonna studies,” for example). But a distinctive feature of cultural studies, especially in the early 1990s and beyond, was this impetus toward localization. Scholars originally trained in Euro-American-focused disciplines could, under the rubric of cultural studies, turn their focus to their own locations. In Italy, for example, most scholars trained in postcolonial critique were trained in cultural-studies-oriented English departments (or in a few important cases the Birmingham Center itself), and early studies of colonialism, postcolonialism, and migration largely focused on the US and the former British Empire. It took the work of cultural studies scholars in Naples\(^{12}\) to turn the focus to Italian colonialism, postcoloniality, and migration. This turn to the local, on the part of scholars trained in Euro-American studies, is of course quite familiar to Taiwanese academics, where it is often the Euro-Americanists themselves who have been central to the project of de-centering or provincializing Euro-America.

In the United States, cultural studies was one of the main early beneficiaries as literature departments sought to re-politicize themselves following the largely deconstruction-inflected theory revolution of the seventies and early eighties, a revolution whose professionalization allowed many of its adherents to forget or efface its political origins. But the post-1974 downturn and the ensuing consolidation of conservative and neo-liberal reaction in the eighties—a project that sought explicitly to reverse or to bury the legacies of the sixties—required stronger ammunition than Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida could provide to those who sought to defend and strengthen the earlier legacy. The eighties in the US academy, as it was elsewhere in the world, was an age of discrepant re-politicization, bringing to the study of Euro-American humanities meta-disciplinary critique and new ethical imperatives for a critical practice grounded in history, including the histories of those “without history,” political economy, or power relations. The counter-attack this produced from the US right was prodigious, and the right-wing attack on the multicultural canon and “political correctness” has continued to this day, providing some of the fuel for the waves of public-university defunding that began

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\(^{12}\) See for example the recent work of Lidia Curti, who was one of the editors of the 2008 collection of migrant women’s Italian writing, *Voci di donne migranti*. 
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in the 1990s and which in the current crisis have reached tsunami dimensions. But
there was also an attack on cultural studies from the left: not only the familiar
attacks on the perceived depoliticizing embrace of popular culture, but also some
unease over the fact that cultural studies’ multi-disciplinarity could be co-opted by
higher administrations wishing to consolidate unruly humanities departments. In the
end, the institutional achievements of cultural studies in the US were quite limited.
The University of Minnesota’s Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society
Department, identifying with cultural studies, was founded in 1986, and the
University of North Carolina’s Cultural Studies Department, founded by former
Birmingham student Lawrence Grossberg, was established in 1995. There was little
formal institutionalization beyond that. Disciplines are strong in the United States,
and the explicit anti-disciplinarity of cultural studies, particularly in its US variant,
made for a rough course. In retrospect, this was a lost opportunity.

In the early 1990s, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I became
associated with a group called World Literature and Cultural Studies (WLCS).
Kristin Ross, then a UCSC faculty member, published an influential piece in
Critical Inquiry describing the project, and a few years ago I published an essay
resituating its intellectual agenda (Connery, “Worlded Pedagogy”). WLCS’s critical
project had multiple strands, informed by Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems
theory; Jamesonian periodization (the essay “Periodizing the 60s” was a key text for
the program, and the course on the world sixties that I have taught for 15 years was
in important ways shaped by that essay); the Sartrean-Jamesonian logic of “the
situation” and its privileging of the provisional, lived experience of rupture; and, of
course, the embrace of “world” as a critical category, one which sought to de-
naturalize not only the West but also all ideologically naturalized cultural-
geographical formations. This project differed in important ways from the
contemporary project of World Literature in the US—David Damrosch and his
well-financed and globally travelled World Literature enterprise is the primary
exemplar here—in that (here the “Cultural Studies” part of the program title is
important) there was no privileging of the literary as such. Recall, for a moment,
some of the spirit of the times. John Beverley’s Against Literature, published in
1993, railed against the hegemony of the literary, championing non-literary forms
such as the testimonio, title of another course taught in WLCS. I’m not arguing here
for a repudiation of the literary, or of the ethics of reading. Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak’s recently published collection of talks and essays makes an eloquent case
for an aesthetic education to the formation of a planetary consciousness. For a
genuine and material planetary consciousness, one’s relationship to the Other will
depend on forms of cognition for which the literary form is particularly suited. But it is certainly not coincidental that current trends in the US academy toward re-disciplinarization—partially in response to funding cuts—have strengthened the centrality of literature departments’ central methodological protocols, such as close reading. Despite the value of close reading, it also remains—like fieldwork, the archive, the survey—a form of disciplinary credentialization.

I want to emphasize here another dimension of WLCS, one that will lead me in the direction to my concluding section outlining some possible responses to the present crisis. Kristin Ross, in the article cited above, cites a colleague’s comment, in response for departmental discussion of the need for a course in South African literature, that he couldn’t be responsible for that because he didn’t have a Ph.D. in South African literature. WLCS, in its delineation of a new geography of knowledge, also envisioned a new relationship to pedagogy, one that sought to actively resist the reproductive character of pedagogy by experts. I quote her comments at some length:

Dominant ideology is not expressed in the discourse of an ideologue; it is first and foremost a power that is organized into a number of institutions: the knowledge system, the media system, and so on. In my colleague’s statement we see, first, an unquestioning assertion of a certain hierarchy of knowledge involved in the affirmation of training: the division between disciplines, the examination system, the organization and division of knowledge into departments and fields, modes of accreditation and certification. Second, we see the unanalyzed intention of reproducing those models in what we do every day: that is, in our own classrooms, the pedagogical situation. For the statement implies a whole model of transmitting information based on explanation whereby students are taught not necessarily any particular information but rather the idea that they should get accustomed, especially in view of their future role of being compliant and browbeaten citizens, to listening mutely to experts. It reinforces what Jacques Rancière has called the “myth of pedagogy”: a myth that effectively divides the world into knowing minds and ignorant ones, mature and immature, capable and incapable, superior and
At the heart of the pedagogical fiction is the representation of inequality as slowness, backwardness, delay. (668-69)

Teaching the “world” thus meant a new relation to expertise. WLCS’s primary critical orientation was toward worlding itself, toward the locally varied formations of capitalist worldedness, shaped by an anti-presentism (the group contained several faculty who had been trained in pre-modern studies) that saw in the rise of capitalist globality a historically distinctive, varied, and contingent phenomenon. WLCS did indeed see global capitalism as a universal phenomenon—while of course supremely attentive to local and regional variants, it generally avoided the discourse of “multiple modernities” or the plural capitalisms. Anti-presentism implied a rejection of a universal civilizational telos, and also allowed for close attention to emergences: of the nation form, of racism in its variants, of universals themselves. In its attention to pre-modern “global” phenomena, such as the tributary form, WLCS’s anti-presentism also sought to foreground the particular character of capitalist globalization.

WLCS also drew from cultural studies the democratic and egalitarian modes of knowledge formation that inhered in studies of popular culture. There was some resistance in WLCS to the wholly celebratory nature of popular culture studies—we were probably more inclined than many in that field to ideological critique—but the ethical/pedagogical position was anti-authoritarian, whether that authority be that of the canon, professionalism, or of symbolic capital. Unfortunately, WLCS came into formation just as the first wave of de-funding hit the University of California, as well as other public universities, and there was consequently reduced space for some of its curricular and pedagogical innovation, some of which did not progress far beyond the manifesto stage. Such were the 1990s.

The past two decades have not been a period of innovation in the US academy. Probably the only significant new lines of humanistic inquiry in this period have been versions of post-humanism: certain strands of digital humanities or new media studies, and animal studies. Some of the new directions that arose in the sixties and post-sixties turn were consolidated. In American studies, for example, the anti-imperialist and anti-American exceptionalist currents of the New Americanists consolidated an intellectual hegemony. The traditional humanistic social sciences departments became more attentive to worldedness (globalization was the more

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popular term) and multi-culturalism, although these demands were often checked by real or purported budgetary constraints. Various post- or trans-national orientations have consolidated themselves in fields that were once more area- or nation-bound, such as Asian American studies (and here, the work done in Taiwan is significant). These, as I have claimed about a range of post-sixties transformations in the academies, are not insignificant gains. But in the last two decades they have been accompanied by another trend line whose character has become clearer in the current crisis period. As I have stressed above, the sixties university revolutions were founded on egalitarianism, and aimed toward a non-instrumentalist integration of education with social and individual life. But neo-liberalism, triumphing in the long and contentious period of reaction of the 1980s and consolidated in the more technocratic rationalism of the post-Cold War Clinton years, also brought into political and administrative discourse the hegemony of the economic. This was the TINA (“there is no alternative”) era, during which university administrators were largely complicit in internalizing the logic of fiscal discipline and economic “productivity.” Students were commonly, in management-speak, referred to as consumers, and the value of a university education was more frequently expressed in terms of its contribution to the lifetime income differential earned by college graduates.

Within this new economic logic, what could be called a “left liberal” strand argued for greater investment in education in order to serve the needs of the emergent information economy or knowledge society. Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, argued that it was incumbent on US higher education to provide the new economy with its requisite massive corps of “symbolic analysts,” those who “solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols” (178). Reich’s vision of a twentieth century dominated by the symbolic analysts had its social-democratic utopian dimensions—expanded access to higher education would increase the number and diversity of these workers, who would form the bulk of the labor force, thus contributing to a more egalitarian society. And the post-national character of this new economic order would bring peace and harmony to a post-imperial and post-Cold War world. The right wing, fundamentally hostile to the academy ever since the sixties, maintained a continuous guerilla attack on purported “tenured radicals,” and demonized the universities as massively subsidized centers for politically-correct brainwashing and wasted resources. Gone on all sides was any non-instrumentalist discourse of the university’s relationship to a democratic, egalitarian society, or to a life of depth and meaning. University administrators refused to advocate for these broader aims
at the political level, and largely acquiesced in the demand for budget cuts and fiscal austerity.

The results were swift in coming. The modest contributions that the sixties and post-sixties universities had made toward social egalitarianism were reversed. Funds drained out of the public universities, the only significant institutional sources of the egalitarian trends, and accumulated in the ever-growing endowments of the private universities, fueling growing economic polarization.\footnote{For analyses of this trend line, see Donoghue; Newfield.} Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz’s 2010 *The Race between Education and Technology* documented with abundant data the direct correlation between the defunding of higher education and growing inequality. Yet Goldin and Katz’s analysis was itself wholly within the logic of the economic. The argument that the “value” of a university education was realized over an individual’s life-course of employment made it easier for administrators to justify access-denying tuition increases: student debt could be offset by income gains in later life. This was also the logic behind the for-profit universities, such as the massive University of Phoenix, with whom, and largely within whose logic, the large public universities now feel they must compete. The past two decades have seen a massive increase in student debt, so much so that there is now talk of the danger that the “student-debt bubble” poses to the continuing economic crisis.\footnote{See the series of articles in *New York Times*, “A Generation Hobbled by the Soaring Costs of College,” 13-15 May 2012.}

In 2010, before moving to Shanghai, I was centrally involved in the movement to defend the University of California, in opposition to both state budget cuts, and in opposition to administrative policies that shifted the burden of fiscal cutbacks onto students, and undergraduate and graduate education.\footnote{I discuss my reflections on the movement at greater length in “Marches through the Institutions.”} Over the course of our movement’s repeated failures, I became convinced that the task at hand cannot be limited to defense. Notwithstanding the historical trajectory sketched in the preceding paragraphs, universities will remain with us for some generations to come, and will doubtless retain something of their critical potential even in straitened times. Spivak’s call for “aesthetic education” as the necessary prerequisite for a democratic, planetary consciousness is a program I fundamentally support, and Damrosch’s World Literature project can, in most respects, position itself within that program’s ethical and political parameters.\footnote{See the published conversation in Damrosch and Spivak.} Yet scholars like Damrosch, Zhang Longxi, and the epigones of transnational hermeneutics also fall
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easily within Reich’s figure of the “symbolic analyst” (178). Trans-national? Yes. Post-imperial? More or less. But in a time of crisis, perhaps more imagination is called for than a better and more ethical version of the transmission of wisdom from the “one who knows” (Rancière’s term for the figure of pedagogical authority).

University and social movements over the last few years all over the world have seen a variety of experiments in alternative organizations of education, from “free skools,” to “tent universities,” to radical summer camps, to various forms of autonomous, self-organized, temporary configurations of knowledge production, whether for know-how, for joy, for political/theoretical interest, or for practical responses to crises, as in the grassroots activist dissemination of radiation-detection technology and methodology in the wake of Fukushima. I must admit that when I was most heavily involved in defending the university, I was ambivalent about the efforts of some of the more radical anarchist students to exit from the university entirely and organize their own educations. I thought that in their characterization of the university as a failed and oppressive institution, they had not sufficiently recognized the university as a field of partial victory in the wake of the sixties struggles. I still feel this, to an extent, and still feel that the university system, even as it exists, has its value. But over the course of the movement’s history, I have come to feel that we academics need to be more supportive of and involved in these experiments. University administrators are notoriously risk-averse in times of crises; most new initiatives are pursued in no small part for their contributions to cost-cutting or fund-raising, parameters not exactly conducive to political or pedagogical imagination. More importantly, it is in these new spaces of knowledge that Rancière’s “myth of pedagogy” is being most actively resisted.

In For a New Critique of Political Economy, Bernard Stiegler offers a systemic diagnosis of the current crisis of capitalism, which consists of an economy based on consumption that has reached its limits “because it has become systematically short-termist, because it has given rise to a systematic stupidity that structurally prevents the reconstitution of a long-term horizon” (5; emphasis in original). Stiegler emphasizes the need to create an ethos of care and an “economy of contribution,” “a new regime of psychic and collective individualism and, with it, the possibility of a new process of transindividuation opening onto an unprecedented politico-economic perspective: an economy of contribution” (48). Stiegler, whose oeuvre has been centered on a philosophical inquiry into technics, takes inspiration for the “economy of contribution” from emergent trends in the
information/social media sector,\(^{18}\) whose utopian or transformative possibilities are championed in many locations.\(^{19}\)

Much of the current thinking about contributive economies and network socialities as forming new resources for anti-systemic practice comes from social media studies. It has been claimed that the Arab Spring revolutions, as well as Occupy Wall Street, were made possible by social media. As network critic Geert Lovink has written in several essays, though, this point is overstated. Social media, as earlier network theorists Duncan Watts and Albert-László Barabási have demonstrated, excels at valorization of weak links or ties. This creates networks whose sociality, given what we now know of the economics of Web 2.0 and beyond, can be easily harvested by Google, Facebook, and similar operations. Lovink writes in his recent *Networks without a Cause:* “A key moment for any social movement is the initial contact between two or more seemingly autonomous units. Call it the erotics of touching. Ever experienced the metamorphosis of weak links transmuting into revolutionary bonds? It is hard to imagine that this exciting phase will be removed from the digital equation” (165). And yet, especially in the age of “linking and liking” (Facebook), where one network’s economy of contribution becomes another corporation’s source of valuation, networks per se are never enough. Lovink looks forward to the time when organized networks (and he insists on “no networks without organization” [175]) can do the work of confronting state power. Perhaps.

For the Internet is of course also claimed to be the future of higher education, and “distance learning” is the buzzword on many budget-strapped campuses. Free e-courses offered by MIT, Stanford, and like institutions, held by many today as harbingers of the next great transformation, operate within a different logic, and there is indeed some indication that internet-based coursework has some pedagogical and democratic potential. But to return to my experience of defeat in the recent and ongoing movement to defend the public university, the most exciting dimensions of the new organizations of knowledge and knowledge production have

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\(^{18}\) Although *technics* for Stiegler is a much more philosophically rich category than that of technology, as deployed in contemporary studies of the new nature of work, his vision has some affinity with Jeremy Rifkin’s notion of the end of work, and with the program in McKenzie Wark’s *A Hacker Manifesto.* Somewhat reminiscent of Gramsci’s inquiry into the revolutionary potential of Fordism, these thinkers see in the rise of new forms of networked labor, forms of labor based primarily on knowledge and information, a possibility of a new organization of the work regime itself.

\(^{19}\) Open-source software creation as the path to communism has its most developed articulation in the work of the German group Oekonux. See their website <http://www.oekonux.de/index.html>.  

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not been in cyberspace, but in the squares, the parks, the tents, the woods, in theatrical stages, in those autonomous but material spaces where new forms of cooperative and contributive learning and being are taking shape. Space, social space, is still the central question.\textsuperscript{20} Rancière’s egalitarian anti-pedagogy, whose transformative power was grasped but never fully implemented by us back in the early 1990s days of World Literature and Cultural Studies, might only in the current era be coming into its own. There are promising experiments on the scene today, such as the Experimental Community Education of the Twin Cities in Minnesota, USA,\textsuperscript{21} or the Universidad Experimental in Rosario, Argentina.\textsuperscript{22}

In a globally networked social field in an era of crisis, the most important question might no longer be the location of knowledge production or the locational object of study, but the political form that this knowledge making takes. The de-centering of Euro-America and other practices under the rubric of critical globalization, referred to earlier in this essay, was an important first step. But even wordling, a critical practice that I have advocated in earlier writing, will only take us so far. One course I taught early in the days of WLCS, and from whose material I have published a number of articles, was entitled Pacific Rim Discourse, which analyzed a new geographical imaginary that had significant influence in the US academy, in business-management discourse, and in popular culture in the late Cold War years, between 1975 and 1990. In one article titled “Pacific Rim Discourse,” and in other writing, I expressed some skepticism over the liberatory potential of newly imagined “spatial fixes” in the realm of knowledge production.\textsuperscript{23} The world, I argued, was the area study that mattered. But now the discourse of the global and the planetary is everywhere, and perhaps the history of the academic spatial fix over the last forty years—a history of important re-imagination, but one whose social and political achievements have been fairly limited—might suggest another priority: active participation in the experimental reorganization of knowledge making itself. Those of us in universities can play a part in this effort, though we should probably

\textsuperscript{20} For more on this, see Harvey.
\textsuperscript{21} See their website <http://excotc.org/>.
\textsuperscript{22} See their website <http://universidadexperimental.wordpress.com> (in Spanish). See also the collection of essays in Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory, edited by the Edu-Factory Collective.
\textsuperscript{23} Asia itself is currently an area of interesting re-imagination. See particularly the work of Chen, Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization; and Sun. This new Asian imaginary has great liberatory potential, and has been a key catalyst in creating an anti-imperial Asian knowledge society. But as a political project, I would say that the prospects for an “Asian community,” should it be realized, are far from certain.
be careful of the positions we occupy, and avoid that of the “one who knows.”

**Works Cited**


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**About the Author**

Christopher L. Connery is Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His research includes work on: early imperial textual culture in China; comparative philosophies of oceanic geography; comparative social movements of the 1960s and beyond; and Shanghai Studies. His books include *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China*; *The Asian Sixties: The Sixties and the World Event*; and *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Age of Globalization*. His articles on oceanic geography have appeared in *boundary 2*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, and *PMLA*. 