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BILL READINGS was Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the Université de Montréal.

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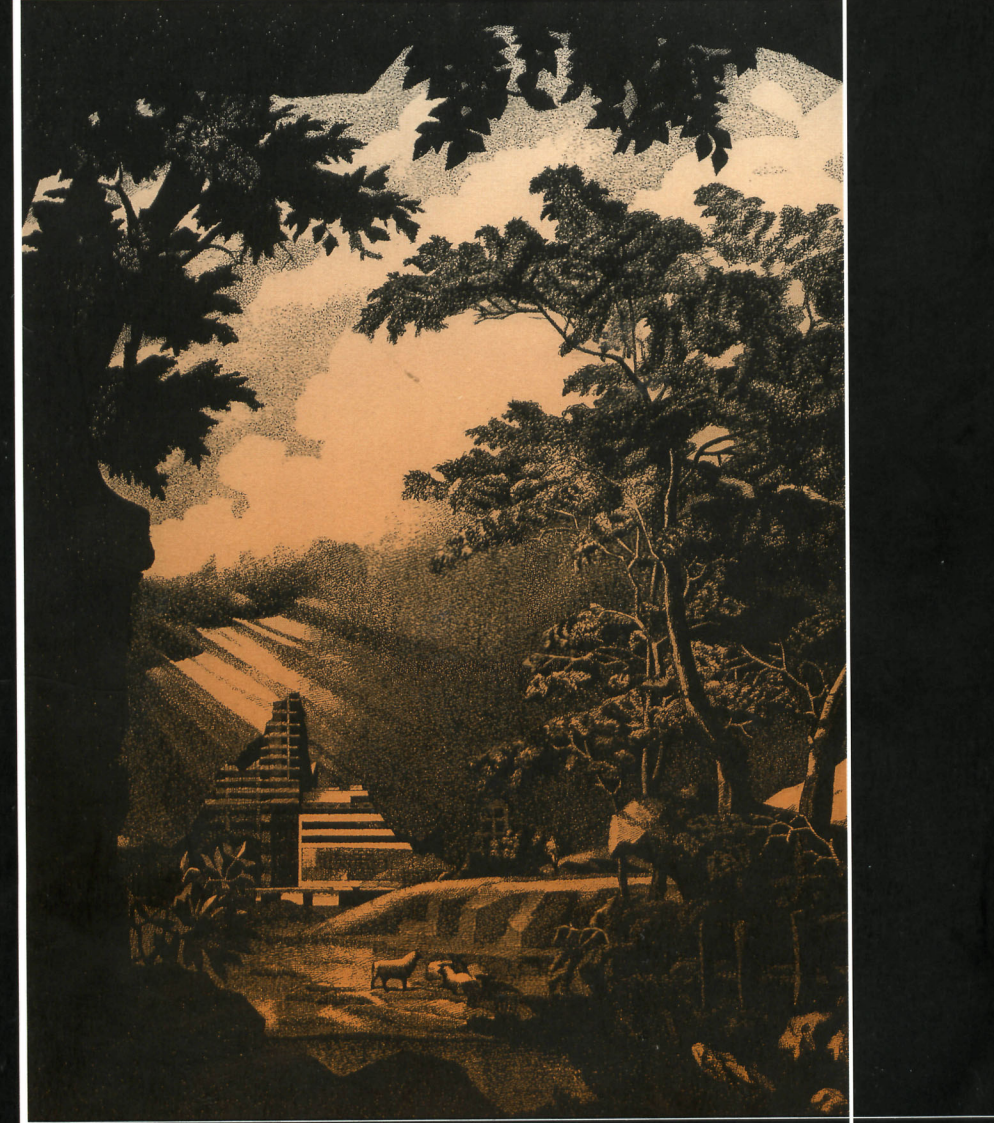
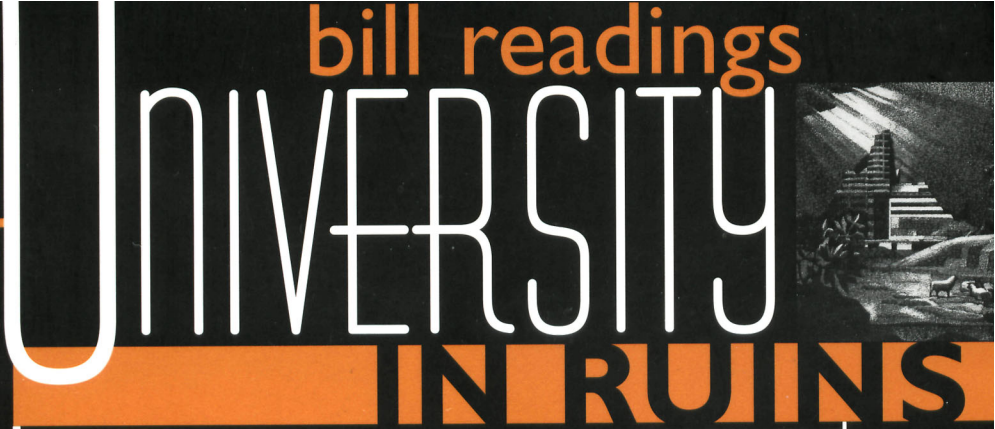
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≈ BILL READINGS

The University in Ruins

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≈ Contents

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≈ Foreword

Bill Readings was in the process of making the final revisions to this book when he died in the crash of American Eagle flight 4184 on October 31, 1994. I completed the revisions on which Bill was working, taking his notes and our many conversations as my guide.

Editing each other's work was once just something Bill and I did. At the time, it never seemed extraordinary; it never seemed like something that would need to be talked about, something that would mark, as it does now, the line dividing life from death. Revision and conversation—with me, with friends and colleagues, with students—were Bill's way of trying to create possibilities for thinking together.

If there is anything I could say about how this book evolved, how Bill imagined it would continue to evolve, it would have to be in terms of the many conversations that informed it and the many more that he hoped would follow from it. Dwelling in the ruins of the University was not usually a silent occasion for Bill. Talk—whether it led to agreement or disagreement, whether it was serious or silly—had everything to do with how he worked, thought, and envisioned a future for the University.

To say that conversation with Bill can never again take place is to acknowledge the painful finality of his death. And to insist on talk as a part of the very fabric of this book is perhaps a step toward acknowledging the singularity of a voice, a place, and a time which would not exist apart from the University.

Diane Elam
Montréal, 1995

≈ Acknowledgments

It is hard work to be excellent, since in each case it is hard work to find what is intermediate.

Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics

The writing of this book has been made possible in the first place by grants from the Québec Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l'Aide à la Recherche and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Besides the infrastructural support that these grants have provided, they have enabled me to work in collaboration with other members, both students and faculty, of the research team “L’Université et la Culture: La Crise Identitaire d’une Institution” at the Université de Montréal, and to benefit from a number of important conversations with speakers invited by the group. The main argument of this book was developed in the course of directing a pluridisciplinary seminar at the Université de Montréal on the topic “La Culture et ses Institutions,” and I am grateful to the students, faculty, and members of the community who participated. My pressing sense of the urgency of the question of the University as an institution of culture goes back even further, to the beginnings of a number of debates with former colleagues at the Université de Genève and at Syracuse University. An invitation from the graduate students of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo first made me aware that I had something that I wanted to say on the topic. Further productive opportunities to test the general argument were offered by conferences at the University of Western Ontario, the State University of New York at Stonybrook, the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia, Trent

≈ Acknowledgments

University, the University of California at Irvine and at San Diego, the University of Wales at Cardiff, Stirling University, and the Université de Genève. Finally, my thanks are due to Gilles Dupuis and Sean Spurvey for preparing the index.

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I have forbore to name the individuals who have influenced this book because they are so many and because I am not sure whether I would be doing them a favor. I will, however, take the risk of mentioning by name the person who first made me aware that the University could be a place to think: Ann Wordsworth. She taught me about something that Oxford called “Critical Theory” and she did so on a short-term contract, teaching in a hut in the garden of one of the brick mansions of North Oxford. I dedicate this book to her.

Bill Readings

The University in Ruins

≈ 1

Introduction

Jeremiads abound concerning the “betrayal” and “bankruptcy” of the project of liberal education.¹ Teaching, we are told, is undervalued in favor of research, while research is less and less in touch with the demands of the real world, or with the comprehension of the “common reader.” Nor is this—as some academics seem to believe—just the lament of the middlebrow media, motivated by media commentators’ resentment at their failure to gain access to the hallowed groves of academe. Forever deprived of the chance to sit on the Faculty Promotions Committee, such pundits, it is claimed, take out their frustrations on the University, constrained as they are to content themselves with huge salaries and comfortable working conditions. The causes of the media’s sniping at the University are not individual resentments but a more general uncertainty as to the role of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution. It is no coincidence that such attacks are intensifying in North America at the same time as the structure of the academic institution is shifting.

It is not merely that the professoriat is being proletarianized as a body and the number of short-term or part-time contracts at major institutions increased (with the concomitant precipitation of a handful of highly paid stars).² The production of knowledge within the University is equally uncertain. An internal legitimation struggle concerning the nature of the knowledge produced in the humanities, for ex-

ample, would not take on crisis proportions were it not accompanied by an external legitimation crisis. Disputes within individual disciplines as to methods and theories of research would not hit the headlines, were it not that the very notion of a research project is now a troubled one. Thus, the impulse behind this book is not simply to argue that the University needs to recognize that new theoretical advances in particle physics or literary studies render old paradigms of study and teaching obsolete. Nor is this book simply another attempt to engage with the web of conflicting and often contradictory sentiments that currently surround the University. Rather, I want to perform a structural diagnosis of contemporary shifts in the University's function as an institution, in order to argue that the wider social role of the University as an institution is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society nor what the exact nature of that society is, and the changing institutional form of the University is something that intellectuals cannot afford to ignore.

But first, some preliminary warnings. In this book I will focus on a certain Western notion of the University, which has been widely exported and whose current mutation seems likely to continue to frame the terms of transnational discussion. If I also pay particular attention to the changes currently occurring in the North American University, this is because the process of "Americanization" cannot be understood as simply the expansion of U.S. cultural hegemony. In fact, I shall argue, "Americanization" in its current form is a synonym for globalization, a synonym that recognizes that globalization is not a neutral process in which Washington and Dakar participate equally. The obverse of this inequitable coin is that the process of expropriation by transnational capital that globalization names is something from which the United States and Canada are currently suffering, a process graphically described by the study of Flint, Michigan, in the film *Roger and Me*. The film's director, Michael Moore, traces the profound impoverishment of the once-rich town of Flint, as a result of the flight of capital to more profitable areas—despite the fact that General Motors was in relatively good economic health at the time of the plant closings. The resulting devastation of Flint (after failed attempts to make it into a tourist destination by opening the "Autoworld" theme park) means

that the majority of new jobs available there today are in minimum-wage service industries. "Americanization" today names less a process of national imperialism than the generalized imposition of the rule of the cash-nexus in place of the notion of national identity as determinant of all aspects of investment in social life. "Americanization," that is, implies the end of national culture.

The current shift in the role of the University is, above all, determined by the decline of the national cultural mission that has up to now provided its *raison d'être*, and I will argue that the prospect of the European Union places the universities of Europe under a similar horizon, both in the states of the European Union and in Eastern Europe, where projects such as those of George Soros sketch a similar separation of the University from the idea of the nation-state.³ In short, the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture. The process of economic globalization brings with it the relative decline of the nation-state as the prime instance of the reproduction of capital around the world. For its part, the University is becoming a transnational bureaucratic corporation, either tied to transnational instances of government such as the European Union or functioning independently, by analogy with a transnational corporation. The recent publication by UNESCO of Alfonso Borrero Cabal's *The University as an Institution Today* provides a good example of the terms in which this move towards the status of a bureaucratic corporation may occur.⁴ Borrero Cabal focuses upon the *administrator* rather than the professor as the central figure of the University, and figures the University's tasks in terms of a generalized logic of "accountability" in which the University must pursue "excellence" in all aspects of its functioning. The current crisis of the University in the West proceeds from a fundamental shift in its social role and internal systems, one which means that the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured.

In making such a wide-ranging diagnosis, I am, of course, going to tend to ignore the process of uneven and combined development, the different speeds at which the discourse of "excellence" replaces the

ideology of (national) culture in various institutions and various countries. For instance, in a move that might seem to head in the opposite direction to that suggested by my argument about the nation-state, the British conservative party is currently attempting to install a uniform “national curriculum.” The proposed educational “reforms” in Britain are not, however, inconsistent with what I will be arguing. This is a book about the spinning off of *tertiary* education from the nation-state, and such a move will probably accentuate the structural differences between secondary education and universities, especially as concerns their link to the state. Furthermore, the fact that an institution as ancient as New College, Oxford, should have begun to attach an announcement of its dedication to “excellence” to all public announcements such as job advertisements seems to me more indicative of long-term trends in higher education.

Just as this book will focus on a certain “Americanization” that moves the University further away from direct ties to the nation-state, it will also tend to privilege the humanities in its attempt to understand what is going on in the contemporary University. This emphasis likewise needs a few words of preliminary explanation. In choosing to focus on the notion of “culture” as I do, I may give the impression that the humanities are the essence of the University, the place where the University’s sociopolitical mission is accomplished. This would be unfortunate for at least two important reasons. First, I do not believe the natural sciences to be positivist projects for the neutral accumulation of knowledge, which are therefore in principle sheltered from sociopolitical troubles. As I shall argue, the *decline* of the nation-state—and I do believe that despite resurgent nationalisms the nation-state is declining—and the end of the Cold War are having a significant effect on the funding and organization of the natural sciences. Secondly, the separation between the humanities and the sciences is not as absolute as the University’s own disciplinary walls may lead one to believe. The natural sciences take their often extremely powerful place in the University *by analogy* with the humanities. This is particularly the case when it comes to the sources of the narratives in terms of which pedagogy is understood. For example, when I asked a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics to describe what he understood to be the goal of

undergraduate education in physics, he replied that it was to introduce students to “the culture of physics.”⁵ His drawing on C. P. Snow seems to me both very canny and fair, given that the contested status of knowledge in physics—the fact that undergraduates learn things that they will later discard if they pursue their studies—requires a model of knowledge as a *conversation* among a community rather than as a simple accumulation of facts. It is in terms of a model of the institutionalization of knowledge of which the humanities—and especially departments of philosophy and national literature—have been the historical guardians that the institutional fact of the natural sciences in the University has to be understood. In this sense, the general thrust of my argument that the notion of culture as the legitimating idea of the modern University has reached the end of its usefulness may be understood to apply to the natural sciences as well as to the humanities, although it is in the humanities that the delegitimation of culture is most directly perceived as a threat.⁶

As someone who teaches in a humanities department (although one that bears almost no resemblance to the department in which I was “trained”), I have written this book out of a deep ambivalence about an institution: it is an attempt to think my way out of an impasse between militant radicalism and cynical despair. I am still inclined to introduce sentences that begin “In a *real* University . . .” into discussions with my colleagues, even though they know, and I know that they know, that no such institution has ever existed. This would not be a problem were it not that such appeals to the true nature of the institution no longer seem to me to be honest: it is no longer the case, that is, that we can conceive the University within the historical horizon of its self-realization. The University, I will claim, no longer participates in the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the historical project of culture. Such a claim also raises some significant questions of its own: Is this a new age dawning for the University as a project, or does it mark the twilight of the University’s critical and social function? And if it is the twilight, then what does that mean?

Some might want to call this moment to which I am referring the “postmodernity” of the University. After all, one of the most discussed

books on postmodernity is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a study of the implications of the questions posed to the legitimation of knowledge by postmodernity. Lyotard's book is explicitly framed as a report on the University for the government of Québec, a report which doubtless was something of a disappointment to its patrons, despite its later success. Lyotard argues that it is written "at this very Postmodern moment that finds the University nearing what may be its end."⁷ The question of the postmodern is a question posed to the University as much as in the University. Yet since the postmodern has by and large ceased to function as a question and has become another alibi in the name of which intellectuals denounce the world for failing to live up to their expectations, I prefer to drop the term. The danger is apparent: it is so easy to slip into speaking of the "post-modern University" as if it were an imaginable institution, a newer, more critical institution, which is to say, *an even more modern* University than the modern University. I would prefer to call the contemporary University "posthistorical" rather than "postmodern" in order to insist upon the sense that the institution has outlived itself, is now a survivor of the era in which it defined itself in terms of the project of the *historical* development, affirmation, and inculcation of national culture.

What I think becomes apparent here is that to speak of the University and the state is also to tell a story about the emergence of the notion of culture. I shall argue that the University and the state as we know them are essentially *modern* institutions, and that the emergence of the concept of culture should be understood as a particular way of dealing with the tensions between these two institutions of modernity. However, before anyone gets the wrong idea, this is not because I am simply going to bash the University. I work in a University—sometimes I feel I live in it. It is far too easy simply to critique the University, and there is hardly anything new in doing so. After all, the specificity of the modern University that the German Idealists founded was its status as the site of critique. As Fichte put it, the University exists not to teach information but to inculcate the exercise of critical judgment.⁸ In this sense, it might seem that all critiques of the modern University are

internal policy documents that do not affect the deep structure of the institutionalization of thought.

It is also worth mentioning right from the beginning that when I speak of the "modern" University I am referring to the German model, widely copied, that Humboldt instituted at the University of Berlin and that still served for the postwar expansion of tertiary education in the West. I would argue that we are now in the twilight of this model, as the University becomes posthistorical. In this context, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* seems to me to be more in touch with reality than the liberal nostrums of Jaroslav Pelikan in his *The Idea of the University*, which recalls us to a lost mission of liberal education.⁹ Bloom's conservative jeremiad at least recognizes that the autonomy of knowledge as an end in itself is threatened, because there is no longer a *subject* that might incarnate this principle, hence Bloom's repeated ridiculing of much of what goes on in the University as unintelligible and irrelevant to any student (read young-white-male-American student). Pelikan, on the other hand, prefaces his work with a Newmanesque pun that suggests that *The Idea of the University* might well have been retitled *Apologia pro vita sua*. This pun arouses my suspicion because I am inclined to agree with Bloom's conclusion that the story of what he calls "the adventure of a liberal education" no longer has a hero.¹⁰ Neither a student hero to embark upon it, nor a professor hero as its end.

Some sense of how this came about can be grasped from reading a text such as Jacques Barzun's *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going*.¹¹ This work, which dates from 1968, has recently been reprinted by the University of Chicago Press, a remarkable feat for a text that claims a contemporary relevance in the 1990s and yet which was self-consciously out of date at the time of its first publication. Barzun remarks in a May 1968 postscript to the January 1968 preface (an ironic locus if ever there were one)¹² that he sees "no reason to change or add to the substance" of a text completed six weeks prior to the student "outbreak of April 23 [1968] that disrupted the work of Columbia University" (xxxvi). This insouciance might seem strange in a work centered on the question of how an administrator is to act. Yet

it is less paradoxical once we realize that the narrative upon which Barzun is engaged is that of the production of the enlightened and liberal administrator as the new hero of the story of the University. Thus Barzun explicitly proposes the formation of an autonomous stratum of non-academic administrators within the University, a “second layer”: “If caught young, such men [*sic*] can become top civil-servants and be accepted as professionals without being scholars; they can enjoy a prestige of their own and share fully in the amenities that are widely believed to adorn campus life; and they can do more than any other agency, human or electronic, to render efficient the workings of the great machine” (19). The central figure of the University is no longer the professor who is both scholar and teacher but the provost to whom both these apparatchiks and the professors are answerable. The difference between Barzun and Newman is that Barzun has realized what kind of liberal individual it is that must embody the new University. The administrator will have been a student and a professor in his time, of course, but the challenge of the contemporary University is a challenge addressed to him *as administrator*.

Herein lie the origins of the idea of excellence that I discuss in the next chapter. It should be noted, though, that Barzun does not feel the need to have recourse to the notion of excellence and is able to recognize that excellence is a “shadow” (222); whereas Herbert I. London, writing an introduction to the reissue of Barzun’s text twenty-five years later, bemoans the fact that “excellence” is no longer as *real* as it was in Barzun’s day (222n), since there has been a “virtual abandonment of the much touted goal of excellence” (xxviii). Thus we can make the observation that Barzun appears as the John the Baptist of excellence, preparing the way for the new law (“excellence”) in the language of the old (“standards”), while London appears as St. Paul, telling us that the new law will be real only if it is as strictly applied as the Old. Things have speeded up since Christ’s day, since the elapsed time required for the re-postponement of messianic promise is now down from thirty-five to twenty-five years.

Yet in comparing Barzun with the contemporaries who invoke him, I want above all to remark upon a question of tone: the tone that differentiates Barzun’s work (and Pelikan’s) from the denunciations of

Allan Bloom or even of Herbert London in his 1993 reintroduction of Barzun’s book. The remarkable difference is the loss of the mellifluous pomposity consequent upon entire self-satisfaction, and its replacement by vitriolic complaint. This is particularly clear with regard to the question of sexism. Throughout his text, Barzun refers to professors by the metonym “men.” Let me take Barzun’s description of the plight of the young graduate student as an example: “after the orals a dissertation has to be written—how and on what matters less than how quickly. For many topics Europe or other foreign parts are inescapable and disheartening!—Fulbright, children, wife working (or also a candidate), more library work, and in a foreign tongue—it is a nightmare” (228). Where Barzun remarks vaguely that women can indeed fulfill secretarial roles adequately in the University and perhaps even pursue graduate studies as a way of preparing themselves to bear the children of their male counterparts, Bloom and London see their University threatened by raving harpies.¹³ Where Barzun sees silliness and calls it “preposterism,” London sees “contamination” (xxviii). Despite the fact that books about the University marked by the enormous self-satisfaction of its (male) products are still being written (Pelikan is a case in point), it is clear that a significant shift has taken place. It is not that our times are more troubled; after all, Barzun pronounces himself untroubled by 1968. Rather, the problem that both Bloom and London labor under is that no one of us can seriously imagine him or herself as the hero of the story of the University, as the instantiation of the cultivated individual that the entire great machine works night and day to produce.

My own reluctance to assume the tone of self-satisfaction with which many of my predecessors presumably felt comfortable is not a matter of personal modesty. After all, I have not waited for the twilight of my career to write a book about the University. What counts, and what marks the tone of contemporary diatribes, is that the grand narrative of the University, centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning, subject, is no longer readily available to us. There is thus no point in my waiting. I am not going to become Jacques Barzun; the University system does not need such subjects any more. The liberal *individual* is no longer capable of metonymically embodying the *institution*. None of us can now seriously assume ourselves to be the centered subject of

a narrative of University education. Feminism is exemplary here for its introduction of a radical awareness of gender difference, as are analyses that call attention to the ways in which bodies are differentially marked by race. Both are targeted by the old guard, because they remind them that no individual professor can embody the University, since that body *would still be gendered and racially marked* rather than universal.

Given this condition, I am *not*, however, advising that we give up on the University, offering in its place reasons to indulge in cynical despair. In this book I will discuss how we can reconceive the University once the story of liberal education has lost its organizing center—has lost, that is, the idea of culture as the object, as both origin and goal, of the human sciences. My sense of this is the more acute because the particular University in which I work occupies a peculiar position nowadays. This position may seem outdated to those unaware that Québec, like Northern Ireland, is an area within the territory of the G7 group of industrialized nations where nation-statehood is still a contemporary political issue of consequence rather than a vestigial outgrowth to the increasing integration of the global economy. The Université de Montréal is a flagship of Québec culture that only recently replaced the church as the primary institution with responsibility for francophone culture in North America. Working at a flagship University of a nation-state (especially a nascent one) confers enormous benefits in that our activities of teaching and research have yet to be entirely submitted to the free play of market forces; they do not yet have to justify themselves in terms of optimal performance or return on capital.

My sense of this is the stronger in that I used to work at Syracuse University, which does have the ambition of being entirely market driven, a notion that the administration called “The Pursuit of Excellence.” Hence the then-Chancellor, Melvin Eggers, repeatedly characterized Syracuse as an aggressive institution that modeled itself on the corporation rather than clinging to ivy-covered walls. Interestingly, during my time at Syracuse, the University logo was changed. Instead of the academic seal with its Latin motto affixed to University letterhead and other documents, a new, explicitly “corporate” logo was developed, and the seal reserved solely for official academic documents such as degree certificates. This seems to me directly symptomatic of the re-

conception of the University as a corporation, one of whose functions (products?) is the granting of degrees with a cultural cachet, but whose overall nature is corporate rather than cultural.

To analyze the University solely in terms of cultural capital, however, would be to miss the point that this is now merely one field of operation. Syracuse’s rhetorical rejection of symbolic capital in favor of “bottom-line” accounting (which carried through into the decision-making process of the administration and the corporate executive ethos favored by deans) unsurprisingly meant that the percentage of alumni who gave gifts to the University was considerably lower than at other comparable institutions, since everything in the lives of students encouraged them to think of themselves as consumers rather than as members of a community. For example, the “official” graduating class T-shirt for 1990 was sold to students with a significant markup and was perceived by many to whom I spoke as an attempt to squeeze further pennies from them as they left. The students at every turn are asked to buy the signs of symbolic belonging (hence University “book” stores devote a great deal of space to logo-encrusted desk items on the Disneyland model). Thus commodified, belonging to the University carries little ideological baggage and requires no reaffirmation through giving (any more than a consumer, having purchased a car, feels the need to make further periodic donations to General Motors in excess of the car loan repayments). That some students do make such gifts is an interesting symptom of an atavistic desire to believe that they did not attend a University of Excellence but instead a University of Culture. Some support for this belief could doubtless be drawn from the persistence in some corners of the machinery of individuals, groups, and practices that hark back to prior forms of organization.

Students’ frequent perception of themselves and/or their parents as consumers is not merely wrongheaded, since the contemporary University is busily transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation. Even in Universities largely funded by the nation-state, the signs of this process are to be found. For instance, Jacqueline Scott, president of University College of Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, recently referred to the University as an “integrated industry.”¹⁴ She

offered a remarkable rephrasing of Humboldt's articulation of teaching and research. Where Humboldt positioned the University as a fusion of process and product that both produced knowledge of culture (in research) and inculcated culture as a process of learning (in teaching), Scott's account of this double articulation has been significantly updated. She argues that the University, as a site of "human resource development," both produces jobs (through research) and provides job training (in teaching). With remarkable fluency, she preserves Humboldt's structural articulation of teaching and research while transferring it into a new field: that of the development of "human resources" for the marketplace rather than of "national culture."

This is hardly surprising as a strategy, since it is corporate bureaucratization that underlies the strong homogenization of the University as an institution in North America. University mission statements, like their publicity brochures, share two distinctive features nowadays. On the one hand, they all claim that theirs is a unique educational institution. On the other hand, they all go on to describe this uniqueness in exactly the same way. The preeminent signs under which this transformation is taking place are the appeals to the notion of "excellence" that now drop from the lips of University administrators at every turn. To understand the contemporary University, we must ask what excellence means (or does not mean).

And in that respect, on the surface this book makes a rather simple argument. It claims that since the nation-state is no longer the primary instance of the reproduction of global capitals, "culture"—as the symbolic and political counterpart to the project of integration pursued by the nation-state—has lost its purchase. The nation-state and the modern notion of culture arose together, and they are, I argue, ceasing to be essential to an increasingly transnational global economy. This shift has major implications for the University, which has historically been the primary institution of national culture in the modern nation-state. I try to assess those implications and trace their symptoms, most notably the emergence of a discourse of "excellence" in place of prior appeals to the idea of culture as the language in which the University seeks to explain itself to itself and to the world at large. Another of those symptoms is the current fierce debate on the status of the Uni-

versity, a debate that by and large misses the point, because it fails to think the University in a transnational framework, preferring to busy itself with either nostalgia or denunciation—most often with an admixture of the two.

I will begin trying to think differently about the University by discussing the ways in which University administrators, government officials, and even radical critics now more and more often speak of the University in terms of "excellence" instead of in terms of "culture." Chapter 2 attempts to situate and diagnose why the term "excellence" is becoming so important to policy documents in higher education. My argument is that this new interest in the pursuit of excellence indicates a change in the University's function. The University no longer has to safeguard and propagate national culture, because the nation-state is no longer the major site at which capital reproduces itself. Hence, the idea of national culture no longer functions as an external referent toward which all of the efforts of research and teaching are directed. The idea of national culture no longer provides an overarching ideological meaning for what goes on in the University, and as a result, what exactly gets taught or produced as knowledge matters less and less.

In Chapter 2 I also trace this process and insist that it would be anachronistic to think of it as an "ideology of excellence," since excellence is precisely non-ideological. What gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched. In saying that some things, such as the discourse of excellence, are non-ideological, I do not mean that they have no political relatedness, only that the nature of that relation is not ideologically determined. "Excellence" is like the cash-nexus in that it has no *content*; it is hence neither true nor false, neither ignorant nor self-conscious. It may be unjust, but we cannot seek its injustice in terms of a regime of truth or of self-knowledge. Its rule does not carry with it an automatic political or cultural orientation, for it is not determined in relation to any identifiable instance of political power.¹⁵ This is one of the reasons why the success of a left-wing criticism (with which I am personally in sympathy) is turning out to fit so well with institutional protocols, be it in the classroom or in the career profile.¹⁶ It is not that radical critics are "sell-outs," or that their critiques are "insufficiently radical" and

hence recoverable by the institution. Rather, the problem is that the stakes of the University's functioning are no longer essentially ideological, because they are no longer tied to the self-reproduction of the nation-state.

Where Chapter 2 diagnoses the discourse of excellence, Chapter 3 attempts to frame that discourse in terms of the movement of globalization in which it participates. Here I argue that the discourse of excellence gains purchase precisely from the fact that the link between the University and the nation-state no longer holds in an era of globalization. The University thus shifts from being an ideological apparatus of the nation-state to being a relatively independent bureaucratic system. The economics of globalization mean that the University is no longer called upon to train citizen subjects, while the politics of the end of the Cold War mean that the University is no longer called upon to uphold national prestige by producing and legitimating national culture. The University is thus analogous to a number of other institutions—such as national airline carriers—that face massive reductions in foreseeable funding from increasingly weakened states, which are no longer the privileged sites of investment of popular will.

In order to understand the implications of this shift, the middle part of this book engages in a historical investigation of the role that the modern University has sought to assign to itself. The history of previous ways of understanding the function of the University can be roughly summarized by saying that the modern University has had three ideas: the Kantian concept of reason, the Humboldtian idea of culture, and now the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence. The historical narrative that I propose (reason—culture—excellence) is not simply a sequential one, however. There are earlier references to excellence that precede recent accounts; likewise, there continue to be references to reason and culture. What I want to emphasize throughout this book is that the debate on the University is made up of divergent and non-contemporaneous discourses, even if one discourse dominates over the others at certain moments.

To begin with, then, I argue in Chapter 4 that Kant defines the modernity of the University. The University becomes modern when all its activities are organized in view of a single regulatory idea, which

Kant claims must be the concept of reason. Reason, on the one hand, provides the *ratio* for all the disciplines; it is their organizing principle. On the other hand, reason has its own faculty, which Kant names “philosophy” but which we would now be more likely simply to call the “humanities.” In his thinking on the University, Kant also begins to pose the problem of how reason and the state, how knowledge and power, might be unified. Importantly, as I will show, he does this by producing the figure of the subject who is capable of rational thought and republican politics.

Chapter 5 continues to trace the development of the modern University, discussing the German Idealists, from Schiller to Humboldt. Significantly, they assign a more explicitly political role to the structure determined by Kant, and they do this by replacing the notion of reason with that of culture. Like reason, culture serves a particularly *unifying* function for the University. For the German Idealists, culture is the sum of all knowledge that is studied, as well as the cultivation and development of one's character as a result of that study. In this context, Humboldt's project for the foundation of the University of Berlin is decisive for the centering of the University around the idea of culture, which ties the University to the nation-state. That this should happen in Germany is, of course, implicit with the emergence of German nationhood. Under the rubric of culture, the University is assigned the dual task of research and teaching, respectively the production and inculcation of national self-knowledge. As such, it becomes the institution charged with watching over the spiritual life of the people of the rational state, reconciling ethnic tradition and statist rationality. The University, in other words, is identified as the institution that will give reason to the common life of the people, while preserving their traditions and avoiding the bloody, destructive example of the French Revolution. This, I argue, is the decisive role accorded to the modern University until the present.

Chapter 6 looks at the way in which the British and Americans give a particularly *literary* turn to the German Idealists' notion of culture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the English, notably Newman and Arnold, carried forward the work of Humboldt and Schlegel by placing literature instead of philosophy as the central dis-

cipline of the University and hence also of national culture. Discussing the examples of Arnold, Leavis, and the New Critics, I trace the implicit linkage between the way “literature” gets institutionalized as a University discipline in explicitly national terms and an organic vision of the possibility of a unified national culture. The study of a tradition of national literature comes to be the primary mode of teaching students what it is to be French, or English, or German. In the case of the United States, this process is regulated in terms of the study of a *canon* rather than a tradition, in exemplary republican fashion. The canon matters in the United States because the determination of the canon is taken to be the result of an exercise of republican will. The autonomous *choice* of a canon, rather than submission to the blind weight of tradition, parallels the choice of a government rather than submission to hereditary monarchy. The role of literary study in the formation of national subjects is consequently what explains the massive institutional weight accumulated by literature departments, especially through their traditional control of the University-wide “composition course” requirement in many American universities. The current growth of a separatist movement in composition, concerned to demand its own disciplinary dignity, is symptomatic of the loosening of the link that ties the study of national literature to the formation of national citizen-subjects. The terms of literacy are no longer determined in explicit reference to national culture.

Chapter 7 looks at the parallel disciplinary rise of Cultural Studies and at the American “culture wars” from the historical perspective of the previous chapters, so as to understand what is at stake in the notion of “culture” over which we are currently battling. The German Idealists attributed the guardianship of culture to philosophy, although in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it has come increasingly to be housed in departments of national literature. We are now seeing a decline in national literary studies and the increasing emergence of “Cultural Studies” as the strongest disciplinary model in the humanities in the Anglo-American University. In this context, the radical claims of Cultural Studies display rather more continuity than might be expected with the redemptive claim that underpinned the literary model of culture, however much they oppose its institutional forms. I argue

that the institutional success of Cultural Studies in the 1990s is owing to the fact that it preserves the structure of the literary argument, while recognizing that literature can no longer work—throwing out the baby and keeping the bathwater, as it were. Cultural Studies does not propose culture as a regulatory ideal for research and teaching, so much as seek to preserve the structure of an argument for redemption through culture, while recognizing the inability of culture to function any longer as such an idea. To put it in the cruelest terms—terms that apply only to the attempt to make Cultural Studies into a hegemonic institutional project and not to any specific work calling itself “Cultural Studies”—Cultural Studies presents a vision of culture that is appropriate for the age of excellence.

And even like “excellence” itself, “culture” no longer has a specific content. Everything, given a chance, can be or become culture. Cultural Studies thus arrives on the scene along with a certain exhaustion. The very fecundity and multiplicity of work in Cultural Studies is enabled by the fact that culture no longer functions as a specific referent to any one thing or set of things—which is why Cultural Studies can be so popular while refusing general theoretical definition. Cultural Studies, in its current incarnation as an institutional project for the 1990s, proceeds from a certain sense that no more *knowledge* can be produced, since there is nothing to be said about culture that is not itself cultural, and vice versa. Everything is culturally determined, as it were, and culture ceases to mean anything *as such*.

I will also refer to this process as “dereferentialization.” By this I mean to suggest that what is crucial about terms like “culture” and “excellence” (and even “University” at times) is that they no longer have specific referents; they no longer refer to a specific set of things or ideas. In using the term “dereferentialization,” however, I do not want simply to introduce another bulky piece of jargon into our vocabulary; rather my design is to give a name to what I will argue is a crucial shift in thinking that has dramatic consequences for the University. In these terms, we can say that the rise of Cultural Studies becomes possible only when culture is dereferentialized and ceases to be the principle of study in the University. In the age of Cultural Studies, culture becomes merely one object among others for the system to

deal with. This polemical argument does not denounce the history of work in Cultural Studies so much as criticize attempts—however well-meaning—to make Cultural Studies into the discipline that will save the University by giving it back its lost truth.

The subsequent Chapter 8 seeks to imagine the University “after” culture and introduces the concluding part of the book by sketching the general terms in which the institutional question of the University can be posed in the age of excellence, once the historical project of culture has ground to a halt. I attempt to provide the terms of an institutional pragmatism that can make an argument for the tactical use of the space of the University, while recognizing that space as a historical anachronism. In so doing, I discuss the specific debates in which the University is currently engaged and the general terms in which an appeal can be made to the activity of thought. Significantly, this concerns the question of how the University is to be evaluated, and it argues for the need for a philosophical separation of the notions of *accountability* and *accounting*. I argue that it is imperative that the University respond to the demand for accountability, while at the same time refusing to conduct the debate over the nature of its responsibility solely in terms of the language of accounting (whose currency is excellence). To raise the issue of value precisely as a *question* is to refuse the automatic identification of globalization and capitalism. I want to argue that accountants are not the only people capable of understanding the horizon of contemporary society, nor even the most adept at the task.

Chapter 9 discusses how the questions of value that I am raising—and that are of such concern to the University today—become apparent in the wake of the student revolts of the late 1960s, for which “1968” stands as a synecdoche. Those uprisings open up an incredulity about the University as an institution, a committed unbelief that is helpful in trying to imagine what it would mean to be in the University without being able to believe in the University, in either its actual or its ideal form. What I find most interesting about the documents of the student revolt, as presented by Cohn-Bendit and others, is their remarkable *lack* of idealism, their tendency to deny the terms in which they have subsequently tended to be understood. In a reflection upon 1968, I seek

the terms within which we can think the University in the absence of a public sphere and outside the framework of a society that aggregates individuals as consumers.

How to understand the contemporary situation of the University without recourse either to nostalgia for national culture or to the discourse of consumerism is the burden of my three final chapters, which deal respectively with questions of pedagogy, of institutions, and of community. Chapter 10 focuses on the pragmatic scene of teaching and stresses that pedagogy cannot be understood in isolation from the institutional context of education. Much of the current furor over teaching has to do with a simple contradiction between the time it takes to teach and an administrative logic that privileges the efficient transmission of information. I argue that the aim of pedagogy should not be to produce autonomous subjects who are supposedly made free by the information they learn, which is the Enlightenment narrative. Rather, by relinquishing the claim to join authority and autonomy, the scene of teaching can be better understood as a network of obligations. Arguing that teaching is a question of justice not a search for truth, Chapter 10 tries to evoke what remains persistently troubling in the business of thinking together. As such, the transgressive force of teaching does not lie so much in matters of content as in the way pedagogy can hold open the temporality of questioning so as to resist being characterized as a transaction that can be concluded, either with the giving of grades or the granting of degrees.

Chapters 11 and 12 examine the terms in which the University as a space for such a structurally incomplete practice of thought can conceive itself. I argue first that it is imperative to accept that the University cannot be understood as the natural or historically necessary receptacle for such activities, that we need to recognize the University as a *ruined* institution, one that has lost its *historical raison d'être*. At the same time, the University has, in its modern form, shared modernity's paradoxical attraction to the idea of the ruin, which means that considerable vigilance is required in disentangling this ruined status from a tradition of metaphysics that seeks to re-unify those ruins, either practically or aesthetically.

The institutional pragmatism that I call for in place of either Enlight-

enment faith or Romantic nostalgia leads to an investigation in Chapter 12 of the way in which we can rethink the modernist claim that the University provides a model of the rational community, a microcosm of the pure form of the public sphere. This claim for an ideal community in the University still exerts its power, despite its glaring inaccuracy—evident to anyone who has ever sat on a faculty committee. I argue that we should recognize that the loss of the University's cultural function opens up a space in which it is possible to think the notion of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication. At this point, the University becomes no longer a model of the ideal society but rather a place where the impossibility of such models can be thought—practically thought, rather than thought under ideal conditions. Here the University loses its privileged status as the model of society and does not regain it by becoming the model of the absence of models. Rather, the University becomes one site among others where *the question of being-together is raised*, raised with an urgency that proceeds from the absence of the institutional forms (such as the nation-state), which have historically served to mask that question for the past three centuries or so.

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The Idea of Excellence

The significance of making a distinction between the modern University as ideological arm of the nation-state and the contemporary University as bureaucratic corporation is that it allows one to observe an important phenomenon. “Excellence” is rapidly becoming the watchword of the University, and to understand the University as a contemporary institution requires some reflection on what the appeal to excellence may, or may not, mean.

A few months after I first gave a talk on the significance of the concept of excellence, Canada's principal weekly news magazine, *Maclean's*, brought out its third annual special issue on the Canadian universities, parallel to the kind of ranking produced by *U.S. News and World Report*. The November 15, 1993, issue of *Maclean's*, which purported to rank all the universities in Canada according to various criteria, was entitled, to my surprise, *A Measure of Excellence*.¹ Now what this suggests to me is that excellence is not simply the equivalent of “total quality management” (TQM). It is not just something imported into the University from business in the attempt to run the University as if it were a business. Such importations assume, after all, that the University is not really a business, is only like a business in some respects.

When Ford Motors enters into a “partnership” with The Ohio State University to develop “total quality management in all areas of life on campus,” this partnership is based on the assumption that “the mission[s] of the university and the corporation are not that different,” as

Janet Pichette, vice-president for business and administration at Ohio State, phrases it.² Not “that different” perhaps, but not identical either. The University is on the way to becoming a corporation, but it has yet to apply TQM to all aspects of its experience, although the capacity of Ohio State’s president E. Gordon Gee to refer to “the university and the customers it serves” is a sign that Ohio State is well on the way. The invocation of “quality” is the means of that transformation, since “quality” can apply to “all areas of life on campus” indifferently, and can tie them together on a single evaluative scale. As the campus newspaper, the *Ohio State Lantern*, reports it: “Quality is the ultimate issue for the university and the customers it serves, Gee said, referring to faculty, students, their parents, and alumni.”³ The need felt by the author of this article to clarify the question of to whom the president was referring in speaking of the University’s “customers” is a touching sign of an almost archaic vision of education, one that imagines that some confusion might still arise on the issue.

Hence we might suggest a clarification for President Gee: quality is not the ultimate issue, but excellence soon will be, because it is the recognition that the University is not just *like* a corporation; it *is* a corporation. Students in the University of Excellence are not *like* customers; they *are* customers. For excellence implies a quantum leap: the notion of excellence develops *within* the University, as the idea around which the University centers itself and through which it becomes comprehensible to the outside world (in the case of *Maclean’s*, the middle and upper classes of Canada).

Generally, we hear a lot of talk from University administrators about excellence, because it has become the unifying principle of the contemporary University. C. P. Snow’s “Two Cultures” have become “Two Excellences,” the humanistic and the scientific.⁴ As an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential. Here is one example of the way in which excellence undermines linguistic reference, in a letter to faculty and staff from a dean of engineering (William Sirignano) complaining about his dismissal by the chancellor of the University of California at Irvine (Laurel Wilkening), reported in the campus newspaper:

“The Office of the President and the central administration at the UCI campus are too embroiled in crisis management, self-service and controversy to be a great force for *excellence* in academic programs,” Sirignano wrote in the Mar. 22 memo. He encouraged the new dean, department chairs and faculty to “create those pressures for *excellence* for the school” . . . The transition in leadership “will be a challenge to the pursuit of *excellence* and upward mobility for the School of Engineering,” he said. “It’s not going to be easy to recruit an *excellent* dean in this time of fiscal crisis.”⁵

In a situation of extreme stress, and in order to oppose the University president, the dean appeals to the language of excellence with a regularity that is the more remarkable in that it goes unremarked by the staff writer covering the incident.⁶ Indeed, the staff writer has selected those phrases that include the word “excellence” as being those that most precisely sum up what the letter is about. Excellence appears here as uncontested ground, the rhetorical arm most likely to gain general assent. To return to the example of the Ford–Ohio State partnership, a significant number of academics, I would guess, could see through the imposition from the outside of “total quality management,” could resist the ideology implicit in the notion of quality and argue that the University was not as analogous to a business as Ford claimed. But Sirignano is an academic, writing to an academic, for an audience of academics. And his appeal to excellence is not hedged or mitigated, is not felt to require explanation. Quite the contrary. The need for excellence is what we all agree on. And we all agree upon it because it is not an ideology, in the sense that it has no external referent or internal content.

Today, all departments of the University can be urged to strive for excellence, since the general applicability of the notion is in direct relation to its emptiness. Thus, for instance, the Office of Research and University Graduate Studies at Indiana University at Bloomington explains that in its Summer Faculty Fellowship program “Excellence of the proposed scholarship is the major criterion employed in the evaluation procedure.”⁷ This statement is, of course, entirely meaningless, yet the assumption is that the invocation of excellence overcomes the problem of the question of value across disciplines, since excellence is

the common denominator of good research in all fields. Even if this were so, it would mean that excellence could not be invoked as a “criterion,” because excellence is not a fixed standard of judgment but a qualifier whose meaning is fixed in relation to something else. An excellent boat is not excellent by the same *criteria* as an excellent plane. So to say that excellence is a criterion is to say absolutely nothing other than that the committee will not reveal the criteria used to judge applications.

Nor is the employment of the term “excellence” limited to academic disciplines within the University. For instance, Jonathan Culler has informed me that the Cornell University Parking Services recently received an award for “excellence in parking.” What this meant was that they had achieved a remarkable level of efficiency in *restricting* motor vehicle access. As he pointed out, excellence could just as well have meant making people’s lives easier by increasing the number of parking spaces available to faculty. The issue here is not the merits of either option but the fact that excellence can function equally well as an evaluative criterion on either side of the issue of what constitutes “excellence in parking,” because excellence has no content to call its own. Whether it is a matter of increasing the number of cars on campus (in the interests of employee efficiency—fewer minutes wasted in walking) or decreasing the number of cars (in the interests of the environment) is indifferent; the efforts of parking officials can be described in terms of excellence in both instances.⁸ Its very lack of reference allows excellence to function as a principle of translatability between radically different idioms: parking services and research grants can each be excellent, and their excellence is not dependent on any specific qualities or effects that they share.

This is clearly what is going on in the case of the *Macleans*’ article, where excellence is the common currency of ranking. Categories as diverse as the make-up of the student body, class size, finances, and library holdings can all be brought together on a single scale of excellence. Such rankings are not entered into blindly or cavalierly. With a scrupulousness of which the academic community could be proud, the magazine devotes two whole pages to discussing how it produced its ratings. Thus, the student body is measured in terms of incoming

grades (the higher the better), grade point average during study (the higher the better), the number of “out of province” students (more is better), and graduation rates within standard time limits (achieving normalization is a good thing). Class size and quality are measured in terms of the student-teacher ratio (which should be low) and the ratio of tenured faculty to part-timers or graduate teaching assistants (which should be high). Faculty are evaluated in terms of the number with Ph.D.’s, the number of award winners, and the number and quantity of federal grants obtained, all of which are taken to be signs of merit. The category “finances” judges the fiscal health of a University in terms of the proportions of the operating budget available for current expenses, student services, and scholarships. Library holdings are analyzed in terms of volumes per student and the percentage of the university budget devoted to the library, as well as the percentage of the library budget dedicated to new acquisitions. A final category, “reputation,” combines the number of alumni who give to the University with the results of a “survey of senior university officials and chief executive officers of major corporations across Canada” (40). The result is a “measure of excellence” arrived at by combining the figures at a ratio of 20 percent for students, 18 percent for class size, 20 percent for faculty, 10 percent for finances, 12 percent for libraries, and 20 percent for “reputation.”

A number of things are obvious about this exercise, most immediately the arbitrary quality of the weighting of factors and the dubiousness of such quantitative indicators of quality. Along with questioning the relative weight accorded to each of the categories, we can ask a number of fundamental questions about what constitutes “quality” in education. Are grades the only measure of student achievement? Why is efficiency privileged, so that it is automatically assumed that graduating “on time” is a good thing? How long does it take to become “educated”? The survey assumes that the best teacher is one who possesses the highest university degree and the most grants, the teacher who is the most faithful reproduction of the system. But what says that makes a good professor? Is the best University necessarily the richest one? What is the relation to knowledge implied by focusing on the library as the place where it is stocked? Is quantity the best measure of

the significance of library holdings? Is knowledge simply to be reproduced from the warehouse, or is it something to be produced in teaching? Why should senior university officials and the CEOs of major corporations be the best judges of “reputation”? What do they have in common, and isn’t this compatibility worrying? Does not the category of “reputation” raise prejudice to the level of an index of value? How were individuals chosen? Why is the “reputational survey” included in ranking designed to establish reputation?

Most of these questions are philosophical, in that they are systemically incapable of producing cognitive certainty or definitive answers. Such questions will necessarily give rise to further debate, for they are radically at odds with the logic of quantification. Criticism of the categories used (and the way upon which they are decided) has indeed been leveled at *Maclean’s*, as it has at the *U.S. News and World Report’s* equivalent survey. This is perhaps why *Maclean’s* includes a further three-page article entitled “The Battle for the Facts,” which portrays the heroic struggle of the journalists to find the truth despite the attempts of some universities to hide it. This essay also details the reservations expressed by a number of universities, for example the complaint of the president of Manitoba’s Brandon University that “Many of the individual strengths of universities are not picked up in this ranking by *Maclean’s*” (46). Once again, the president argues only with the particular criteria, not with the logic of excellence and the ranking that it permits. And when the authors of the article remark that “The debate sheds a telling light on the deep unease over accountability,” they do not refer to a critique of the logic of accounting. Far from it. Any questioning of such performance indicators is positioned as a resistance to public accountability, a refusal to be questioned according to the logic of contemporary capitalism, which requires “clear measures to establish university performance” (48).

Given this situation, to question criteria is necessary, yet a more general point needs to be made concerning the general compliance of universities with the logic of accounting. The University and *Maclean’s* appear to speak the same language, as it were: the language of excellence. Yet the question of what it means to “speak the same language” is a tricky one in Canada. This survey is going on in a country that is

bilingual, where the different universities quite literally speak different languages. And behind the fact that the criteria are heavily biased in favor of anglophone institutions lies the fundamental assumption that there is a single standard, a measure of excellence, in terms of which universities can be judged. And it is excellence that allows the combination on a single scale of such utterly heterogeneous features as finances and the make-up of the student body. A measure of the flexibility of excellence is that it allows the inclusion of reputation as one category among others in a ranking which is in fact definitive of reputation. The metalepsis that allows reputation to be 20 percent of itself is permitted by the intense flexibility of excellence; it allows a category mistake to masquerade as scientific objectivity.

Most of all, excellence serves as the unit of currency within a closed field. The survey allows the a priori exclusion of all referential issues, that is, any questions about what excellence in the University might *be*, what the term might *mean*. Excellence is, and the survey is quite explicit about this, a means of relative ranking among the elements of an *entirely closed system*: “For the universities, meanwhile, the survey affords an opportunity for each to clarify its own vision—and to measure itself against its peers” (40). Excellence is clearly a purely internal unit of value that effectively brackets all questions of reference or function, thus creating an internal market. Henceforth, the question of the University is only the question of relative value-for-money, the question posed to a student who is situated entirely as a *consumer*, rather than as someone who wants to think. (I shall return to the question of what it means to “think” later in this book.)

The image of students browsing through catalogues, with the world all before them, there to choose, is a remarkably widespread one that has attracted little comment. While I would not want to imply that students should not get the chance to choose, I do think it is worth reflecting on what this image assumes. Most obviously, it assumes the ability to pay. The question of access to tertiary education is bracketed. Tertiary education is perceived simply as another consumer durable, so that affordability or value-for-money becomes one category among others influencing an individual choice. Think of magazine consumer reports about which car to buy. Price is one factor among others, and

the effect of the integration of heterogeneous categories of ranking into a single “excellence quotient” becomes apparent. Choosing a particular university over another is presented as not all that much different from weighing the costs and benefits of a Honda Civic against those of a Lincoln Continental in a given year or period.

In its October 3, 1994, issue, *U.S. News and World Report* even takes advantage of this potential parallel between the car industry and the University.⁹ An article straightforwardly entitled “How to Pay for College” is followed by a series of tables that rate the “most efficient schools” and the “best values,” comparing “sticker prices” (advertised tuition) to “discount tuition” (actual tuition once scholarships and grants are factored in). Student and parent consumers are reminded that just as when they buy a car, especially in the years of the U.S. auto industry’s scramble for customers, the first price quoted is not what they are expected to pay. *U.S. News and World Report* reminds its readers that there are similar hidden discounts in university education, and that wise consumers—who now span all the income brackets (the logic of consumerism no longer only influences the “less-well-off”)—should pay attention to value-for-money. Fuel efficiency, whether calculated in miles per gallon or spending per student, is a growing concern when measuring excellence.¹⁰

However much such a vision might scare us, or however much some of us might think we can resist the logic of consumerism when it comes to tertiary education, everyone still seems to be for excellence.¹¹ It functions not merely as the standard of external evaluation but also as the unit of value in terms of which the University describes itself to itself, in terms of which the University achieves the self-consciousness that is supposed to guarantee intellectual autonomy in modernity. Given that, who could be against excellence? Thus, for example, the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the Université de Montréal describes itself as follows:

Created in 1972, the Faculty of Graduate Studies [*Faculté des études supérieures*] has been entrusted with the mission of maintaining and promoting standards of excellence at the level of master’s and doctoral studies; of coordinating teaching and standardizing [*normalisation*] programmes of graduate study; of stimulating the development and coordination of research in liaison with the research departments of the

University; of favoring the creation of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary programs.¹²

Note here the intersection of excellence with “integration and standardization” and the appeal to the “interdisciplinary.” The French “normalisation” gives a strong sense of what is at stake in “standardization”—especially to those familiar with the work of Michel Foucault. Is it surprising that corporations resemble Universities, health-care facilities, and international organizations, which all resemble corporations? Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* explores the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reorganization of the mechanisms of state power, especially the judicial system, around the surveillance and normalization of delinquents in place of their exemplary punishment by torture and execution. Criminals are treated rather than destroyed, but this apparent liberalization is also a mode of domination that is the more terrible in that it leaves no room whatsoever for transgression. Crime is no longer an act of freedom, a remainder that society cannot handle but must expel. Rather, crime comes to be considered as a pathological deviation from social norms that must be cured. Foucault’s chapter on “Panopticism” ends with ringing rhetorical questions:

The practice of placing individuals under “observation” is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures. Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labour, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts in normality, who continue and multiply the functions of the judge, should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?¹³

The notion of excellence, functioning less to permit visual observation than to permit exhaustive accounting, works to tie the University into a similar net of bureaucratic institutions. “Excellence,” that is, functions to allow the University to understand itself solely in terms of the structure of corporate administration. Hence, as I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, Alfonso Borrero Cabal, writing the report *The University as an Institution Today* for UNESCO, consciously structures his vision of the University in terms of administration: “Part I—the Introduction—deals with administration in terms of the internal institutional

organization and the external or outward-projecting idea of service . . . Part II deals with the first meaning of administration: the organization and internal functioning of the university . . . Part III deals with the external sense of administration, that of service to society.”¹⁴ This primarily administrative approach is explicitly situated as a result of the University’s need to “become part of the international scene” (19). Globalization requires that “greater attention is given to administration” in order to permit the integration of the market in knowledge, which Borrero Cabal situates directly in relation to the need for “development.” With the end of the Cold War, as Marco Antonio Rodrigues Dias remarks in his preface, “the main problem in the world is ‘underdevelopment’ ” (xv). What this actually means is that the language in which global discussions are to be conducted is not that of cultural conflict but of economic management. And the language of economic management structures Borrero Cabal’s analysis of the university around the globe. Hence for example he argues: “Planning, execution, evaluation: the natural actions of responsible persons and institutions. They make up the three important stages that complete the cycle of the administrative process. In logical order, planning precedes execution and evaluation, but all planning has to start with evaluation” (192).

The idea that the sequential processes of business management are the “natural actions” of “responsible persons” may come as a surprise to some of us. What kind of “responsibility” is this? Clearly not that of a parent to a child, for example. The only responsibility at stake here is the responsibility to provide managerial accounts for large corporations, something that becomes clearer when Borrero Cabal begins to flesh out what he means by planning: “Since ‘strategic planning,’ . . . ‘administration by objectives,’ . . . and systems of ‘total quality’ are frequently discussed, it is natural to adopt these means of planning, which are as old as humanity even though they were not formalized until the end of the 18th century” (197).

Once again, the “natural” is invoked. Borrero Cabal cites a number of authorities in order to suggest that early hunter-gatherers were, in fact, engaged in reflection on total quality management, an argument that reminds one of the fine scorn Marx pours upon Ricardo:

Even Ricardo has his Robinson Crusoe Stories. Ricardo makes his primitive fisherman and primitive hunter into owners of commodities who immediately exchange their fish and game in proportion to the labour-time which is materialized in these exchange-values. On this occasion he slips into the anachronism of allowing the primitive fisherman and hunter to calculate the value of their implements in accordance with the annuity tables used on the London Stock Exchange in 1817.¹⁵

Borrero Cabal’s recourse to anachronism is, of course, the product of a desire to make the exclusive rule of business management not seem discontinuous with the prior role of the University. Although he does admit that economic criteria and cultural development are at odds, he simply notes the fact and then passes on to give more outlines for the management of University administration by analogy with a large corporation. Hence he admits that he has omitted “the all-essential ingredient of culture” from his analysis of the relation between “the university and the work world,” saying that: “Consequently it is often felt that economic criteria take precedence over the cultural development of people and nations. This reduces professional work to quantitative purposes: the profession is not conceived of as ‘the cultural and moral elevation of people and nations’ (Garcia Corrido 1992), but reduced to what is necessary but not sufficient, that is, tangible output and per capita income” (161).

Having acknowledged the conflict between a strictly economic rationale and the traditional cultural mission, Borrero Cabal goes on to provide a strictly economic description of the functioning of the University in terms of cost and benefit. He does make occasional remarks that we should not forget about culture but seems unsure where it should fit in. Hence, and not surprisingly, he is more at ease with the invocation of excellence. He approvingly quotes the Director General of UNESCO: “Federico Mayor (1991) gives the following qualifying terms: It is impossible to guarantee the quality of education without having the aim of excellence resting on the domain of research, teaching, preparation, and learning. . . . The search for excellence reaffirms its pertinence and closely links it to quality” (212). The aim of excellence serves to synthesize research, teaching, preparation, and learning, all the activities of the University, if we add administration (and one

of Borrero Cabal's only concrete recommendations is that university administration should be made a program of study). What is remarkable is how Borrero Cabal could suggest that these are "qualifying terms" in order to understand what "institutional quality" in the University might be. Excellence is invoked here, as always, to say precisely nothing at all: it deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good University, and by what authority they become those judges.

What Borrero Cabal suggests for the University is a process of constant self-evaluation, in relation to "performance indicators," which allow us to judge "quality, excellence, effectiveness and pertinence" (212). All of these terms are, he acknowledges, "taken from economic jargon" (213), and permit the University's self-evaluation to be a matter of accounting, both internally and externally. In short, for Borrero Cabal, accountability is strictly a matter of accounting: "In synthesis, if the concept of accountability is accepted as part of the academic lexicon, it is equivalent to the capacity that the university has for accounting for its roles, mission, and functions to itself, and for accounting to society how they are translated into efficient service" (213). Note the use of "translation" in this passage; although "accounting" may exceed bookkeeping in the sense that it is not merely a matter of money, it is the principle of cost and benefit that acts as a principle of translation. Cost-benefit analysis structures not only the University's internal bookkeeping but also its academic performance (in terms of goal achievement) and the social bond with the University at large. The social responsibility of the University, its accountability to society, is solely a matter of services rendered for a fee. Accountability is a synonym for accounting in "the academic lexicon."

In this context, excellence responds very well to the needs of technological capitalism in the production and processing of information, in that it allows for the increasing integration of all activities into a generalized market, while permitting a large degree of flexibility and innovation at the local level. Excellence is thus the integrating principle that allows "diversity" (the other watchword of the University prospectus) to be tolerated without threatening the unity of the system.

The point is not that no one knows what excellence is but that *ev-*

eryone has his or her own idea of what it is. And once excellence has been generally accepted as an organizing principle, there is no need to argue about differing definitions. Everyone is excellent, in their own way, and everyone has more of a stake in being left alone to be excellent than in intervening in the administrative process. There is a clear parallel here to the condition of the political subject under contemporary capitalism. Excellence draws only one boundary: the boundary that protects the unrestricted power of the bureaucracy. And if a particular department's kind of excellence fails to conform, then that department can be eliminated without apparent risk to the system. This has been, for example, the fate of many classics departments. It is beginning to happen to philosophy.

The reasons for the decline of classics are of course complex, but they seem to me to have to do with the fact that the study of classics traditionally presupposes a subject of culture: the subject that links the Greeks to nineteenth-century Germany, and legitimates the nation-state as the modern, rational, reconstruction of the transparent communicational community of the ancient *polis*. That fiction of communicational transparency is apparent from the erroneous assumptions of nineteenth-century historians (still apparent in mass-cultural representations) that ancient Greece was a world of total whiteness (dazzling marble buildings, statues, and people), a pure and transparent origin. That the ideological role of this subject is no longer pertinent is itself a primary symptom of the decline of culture as the regulatory idea of the nation-state. Hence classical texts will continue to be read, but the assumptions that necessitated a department of classics for this purpose (the need to prove that Pericles and Bismarck were the same kind of men) no longer hold, so there is no longer a need to employ a massive institutional apparatus designed to make ancient Greeks into ideal Etonians or Young Americans *avant la lettre*.¹⁶

This disciplinary shift is most evident in the United States, where the University has always had an ambiguous relation to the state. This is because American civil society is structured by the trope of the promise or contract rather than on the basis of a single national ethnicity. Hence where Fichte's university project, as we shall see, offers to realize the essence of a *Volk* by revealing its hidden nature in the form of the

nation-state, the American University offers to deliver on the promise of a rational civil society—as in the visionary conclusion to T. H. Huxley’s address on the inauguration of Johns Hopkins University. It is worth quoting at some length the extended opposition between past and future, between essence and promise, that characterizes Huxley’s account of the specificity of American society and the American University, in order to see exactly how he can speak of America as a yet-to-be-fulfilled promise even on the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence:

I constantly hear Americans speak of the charm which our old mother country has for them . . . But anticipation has no less charm than retrospect, and to an Englishman landing on your shores for the first time, travelling for hundreds of miles through strings of great and well-ordered cities, seeing your enormous actual, and almost infinite potential, wealth in all commodities, and in the energy and ability which turn wealth to account, there is something sublime in the vista of the future. Do not suppose that I am pandering to what is commonly understood by national pride . . . Size is not grandeur, and territory does not make a nation. The great issue, about which hangs a true sublimity, and the terror of overhanging fate, is what are you going to do with all of these things? What is to be the end to which these are to be the means? You are making a novel experiment in politics on the greatest scale which the world has yet seen.¹⁷

Huxley himself, as Rector of Aberdeen, played an important role in the development of the Scottish University in the later nineteenth century, its independence from the Oxbridge model being marked by an openness to the natural sciences and medicine as disciplines and by the fact that it was not controlled by the Anglican church. These two features make the Scottish University more clearly “modern,” which is to say, closer to the American model.¹⁸ And Huxley’s speech picks out the crucial feature that will define the modernity of Johns Hopkins: the fact that the United States as a nation has no intrinsic cultural *content*. That is to say, the American national idea is understood by Huxley as a promise, a scientific experiment. And the role of the American University is not to bring to light the content of its culture, to realize a national meaning; it is rather to deliver on a national *promise*, a con-

tract.¹⁹ As I shall explain later on, this promissory structure is what makes the canon debate a particularly American phenomenon, since the establishment of cultural content is not the realization of an immanent cultural essence but an act of republican will: the paradoxical contractual *choice* of a tradition. Thus the *form* of the European idea of culture is preserved in the humanities in the United States, but the cultural form has no inherent content. The content of the canon is grounded upon the moment of a social contract rather than the continuity of a historical tradition, and therefore is always open to revision.

This contractual vision of society is what allows Harvard to offer itself “in the service of the nation” or New York University to call itself a “private university in the public service.” What such service might mean is not singularly determined by a unitary cultural center. The idea of the nation is always already an abstraction in America, resting on promise rather than on tradition. Excellence can thus most easily gain ground in the United States; it is more open to the futurity of the promise than is “culture,” and the question of cultural content was already bracketed in the American University in the late nineteenth century, as Ronald Judy points out. The contemporary advent of excellence may therefore be understood to represent the abandonment of the vestigial appeal to the *form* of culture as the mode of self-realization of a republican people who are citizens of a nation-state—the relinquishing of the University’s role as a model of even the contractual social bond in favor of the structure of an autonomous bureaucratic corporation.

Along the same lines, one can understand the point that I have already made concerning the status of “globalization” as a kind of “Americanization.” Global “Americanization” today (unlike during the period of the Cold War, Korea, and Vietnam) does not mean American national predominance but a global realization of the contentlessness of the American national idea, which shares the emptiness of the cash-nexus and of excellence. Despite the enormous energy expended in attempts to isolate and define an “Americanness” in American Studies programs, one might read these efforts as nothing more than an attempt to mask the fundamental anxiety that it in some sense *means nothing* to be American, that “American culture” is becoming increas-

ingly a structural oxymoron. I take it as significant of such a trend that an institution as prestigious and as central to an idea of American culture as the University of Pennsylvania should have recently decided to disband its American Studies program. That universities in the United States have been the quickest to abandon the trappings of justification by reference to national culture should hardly be surprising in a nation defined by a suspicion of state intervention in symbolic life, as expressed in the separation of church and state.

The United States, however, is by no means alone in this movement. The British turn to “performance indicators” should also be understood as a step on the road toward the discourse of excellence that is replacing the appeal to culture in the North American University.²⁰ The performance indicator is, of course, a measure of excellence, an invented standard that claims to be capable of rating all departments in all British universities on a five-point scale. The rating can then be used to determine the size of the central government grant allocated to the department in question. Since this process is designed to introduce a competitive market into the academic world, investment follows success, so the government intervenes to accentuate differentials in perceived quality rather than to reduce them. [Thus more money is given to the high-scoring university departments, while the poor ones, rather than being developed, are starved of cash (under the Thatcher regime, this was of course understood as an encouragement to such departments to pull themselves up by their bootstraps). The long-term trend is to permit the concentration of resources in centers of high performance and to encourage the disappearance of departments, and even perhaps of universities, perceived as “weaker.”

Hence, for instance, the University of Oxford has been moved to envision the construction of a Humanities Research Center, despite traditional local suspicion of the very notion of the research project as something that only Germans and Americans could think of applying to the humanities. Benjamin Jowett is supposed to have remarked of research, “There will be none of *that* in my college.” Such changes are hailed by conservatives as “exposure to market forces,” whereas what is occurring is actually the highly artificial creation of a fictional market that presumes exclusive governmental control of funding. However, the

very artificiality of the process by which a version of the capitalist marketplace is mimed throws into relief the preliminary necessity of a unified and virtual accounting mechanism. This is coupled with the structural introduction of the threat of crisis to the functioning of the institution. And the result is nothing less than the double logic of excellence at work in its finest hour.

Indeed, a crisis in the University seems to be a defining feature of the “West,” as is evidenced in the Italian students’ movement of 1993, or the repeated French attempts at “modernization.” Of course, it was the Faure plan for the modernization of the University that produced the events of 1968 in France (which I shall discuss in Chapter 9). However, such attempts at modernization have continued, and the arguments presented recently by Claude Allègre in *L’Âge des Savoirs: Pour une Renaissance de l’Université* display a striking consonance with the developments I have discussed in the United States, Canada, and Britain. Allègre was the special counselor to Lionel Jospin at the Ministry of Education from 1988 to 1992, and his book is essentially an exposé of the arguments guiding the reform of the French University, perceived as a locus of stagnation and resistance to change (an argument with which few could disagree). Interestingly, he argues that this drive to reform is “above all a resurgence of the aspirations of 68 . . . but a discreet and calm resurgence.”²¹ Just to whose aspirations he is referring is never spelled out, but it turns out that what 1968 meant above all was *openness*. And the twin characteristics of this new opening are, the reader will hardly be surprised to learn, integration and excellence:

We tried to develop [reforms] by opening up a University that was folded in on itself and bringing it closer to the City.

Opening up the University to the City: this is its adaptation to professional needs.

Opening up the University to knowledges: this is the effort to renew research and to recognize *excellence*.

Integration of the University in its City: this is the University 2000 at the heart of urban planning, it is the policy of partnership with local groups.

Integration of the French University in a European ensemble: this is the meaning of European evaluation.²²

The internal policy of the University is to be resolved in France by the appeal to excellence, which serves as the term that regroups and integrates all knowledge-related activities. This, in turn, permits the wider integration of the University as one corporate bureaucracy among others, both in the direction of the city and of the European Community. The city is no longer the “streets,” nor even a vision of civic life (the Renaissance city-state that Allègre’s title might lead us to expect). Rather, it is an agglomerate of professional-bureaucratic capitalist corporations whose needs are primarily centered upon the supply of a managerial-technical class. The city gives the University its commercial form of expression. And the European Community supplants the nation-state as the figure of the entity that provides the University with its political form of expression, an expression which is explicitly tied to the question of evaluation. The University will produce excellence in knowledges, and as such will link into the circuits of global capital and transnational politics without difficulty. This is because there is no cultural content to the notion of excellence, nothing specifically “French,” for example, except insofar as “Frenchness” is a commodity on the global market.

Excellence exposes the pre-modern traditions of the University to the force of market capitalism. Barriers to free trade are swept away. An interesting example of this is the British government’s decision to allow the polytechnics to rename themselves as universities. Oxford Polytechnic becomes Brookes University, and so on. This classic free-market maneuver guarantees that the only criterion of excellence is performativity in an expanded market. It would be an error to think that this was an *ideological* move on the part of the Conservative government, however. The decision was not primarily motivated by concern for the content of what is taught in the universities or polytechnics. Even if the tendency of polytechnics to form links with business in the interests of incorporating practical training into degrees might seem to fuel the strand of petty-bourgeois anti-intellectualism in the British Conservative party, it is also true that it was in the polytechnics that the work of the Birmingham school of Cultural Studies had had its greatest impact. Hence the sudden redenomination of polytechnics as universities is best understood as an *administrative* move: the breaking

down of a barrier to circulation and to market expansion, analogous to the repeal of sumptuary laws that permitted the capitalization of the textile trade in Early Modern England.

One form of such market expansion is the development of interdisciplinary programs, which often appear as the point around which radicals and conservatives can make common cause in University reform. This is partly because interdisciplinarity has no inherent political orientation, as the example of the Chicago School shows.²³ It is also because the increased flexibility they offer is often attractive to administrators as a way of overcoming entrenched practices of demarcation, ancient privileges, and fiefdoms in the structure of universities. The benefits of interdisciplinary openness are numerous—as someone who works in an interdisciplinary department I am particularly aware of them—but they should not blind us to the institutional stakes that they involve. At present interdisciplinary programs tend to supplement existing disciplines; the time is not far off when they will be installed in order to replace clusters of disciplines.

Indeed, this is a reason to be cautious in approaching the institutional claim to interdisciplinarity staked by Cultural Studies when it replaces the old order of disciplines in the humanities with a more general field that combines history, art history, literature, media studies, sociology, and so on. In saying this, I want to join Rey Chow in questioning, from a sympathetic point of view, the unqualified acceptance both of interdisciplinary activity and of Cultural Studies that has been fairly common among academic radicals.²⁴ We can be interdisciplinary in the name of excellence, because excellence only preserves preexisting disciplinary boundaries insofar as they make no larger claim on the entirety of the system and pose no obstacle to its growth and integration.

To put this another way, the appeal to excellence marks the fact that there is no longer any idea of the University, or rather that the idea has now lost all content. As a non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system, excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology’s self-reflection. All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information.²⁵ This

is perhaps a less heroic role than we are accustomed to claim for the University, although it does resolve the question of parasitism. The University is now no more of a parasitical drain on resources than the stock exchange or the insurance companies are a drain on industrial production. Like the stock exchange, the University is a point of capital's self-knowledge, of capital's ability not just to manage risk or diversity but to extract a surplus value from that management. In the case of the University this extraction occurs as a result of speculation on differentials in information.

The implication of this shift in function is that the analysis of the University as an Ideological State Apparatus, in Althusser's terms, is no longer appropriate, since the University is no longer primarily an ideological arm of the nation-state but an autonomous bureaucratic corporation. To take another, perhaps less weighted, example we can compare the University to the National Basketball Association. Both are bureaucratic systems that govern an area of activity whose systemic functioning and external effects are not dependent on an external reference. The game of basketball has its rules, and those rules allow differences to arise that are objects of speculation. And while Philadelphia 76ers' victories have effects on their fans, and fans have effects on 76ers' victories (both as supporters and as financiers), those victories or defeats are not directly linked to the essential meaning of the city of Philadelphia. Results are not meaningless, but they arise within the system of basketball rather than in relation to an external referent.

For the University to become such a system involves a major change in the way in which it has been understood to produce institutional meaning. As I shall show later on, Schiller positioned the University of Culture as the quasi-church appropriate to the rational state, by claiming that the University would perform the same services for the state as the Church had for the feudal or absolutist monarch. However, the contemporary University of Excellence should now be understood as a bureaucratic system whose internal regulation is entirely self-interested without regard to wider ideological imperatives. Hence the stock market seeks maximum volatility in the interest of intensifying the profits attendant on the flux of capital rather than the stability of exchange that might defend strictly national interests.

The corollary of this is that we must analyze the University as a *bureaucratic system* rather than as the ideological apparatus that the left has traditionally considered it. As an autonomous system rather than an ideological instrument, the University should no longer be thought of as a tool that the left will be able to use for other purposes than those of the capitalist state. This explains the ease with which former West Germans have colonized the Universities of what was once the German Democratic Republic (GDR) since reunification. The Universities of the old GDR have been purged of those considered to be political apparatchiks of the Honecker regime. No parallel purges, however, have occurred in the Universities of the former Bundesrepublik, despite the fact that reunification was not supposed to be the conquest of the East by the West. The conflict, that is, is not presented as that between two ideologies (which would have necessitated purges on both sides), but as a conflict between the East, where the University used to be under ideological control, and the West, where the University was supposed to be non-ideological.

Of course, the Western universities had a massive ideological role to play during the Cold War, and much can be said about individual cases. But overall one is struck by the silence and speed of this replacement, by the fact that the counter-arguments that could be mounted in favor of the intellectual project of the former East Germany simply *cannot be heard* any longer. This is because the fall of the Wall means that the University is no longer primarily an ideological institution, and those from the West are better positioned to play the new roles required. If the posts of the purged have in many cases gone to young academics from the former West, this is not because they are primarily agents of a competing ideology, but because of bureaucratic efficiency. The young former West Germans are not necessarily more intelligent or more learned than those they replace; they are simply "cleaner," which is to say, less easily identifiable as ideological agents of their state. This is a primary symptom of the decline of the nation-state as the counter-signatory to the contract by which the modern University, the University of Culture, was founded. As my remarks on Allègre's invocation of the European Community have already suggested, the emergence of the University of Excellence in place of the University of Culture can

only be understood against the backdrop of the decline of the nation-state.

The demand for “clean hands,” be it in German universities or in Italian politics, may be presented as a desire to renew the state apparatus, but I think it is better understood as the product of a general uncertainty concerning the role of the state, a call for “hands off.” Complex and often contradictory, such a desire may result, as in Italy, in such paradoxical alliances as that of integrationist Fascists (the MSI) with separatists (the Northern League). Notably, this alliance occurred under the umbrella of Berlusconi’s oddly transparent organization, Forza Italia, whose nationalism is the evocation of a football chant, and whose claim to govern is based on a rather dubious assertion of “business success.” If I may offer a rather strange diagnosis of this apparent paradox, it is that the alliance in Italy is between those who wish for the question of community in Italy no longer to be posed: either because the Duce may return to provide an answer about “being Italian” and impose it with brutal violence (the Lega will tell people to “be regional”) or because Berlusconi will reassure us that it is not a question, that the answer is as transparent and obvious as the light blue haze emanating from a television screen, or the light blue shirt on a footballer’s back. Berlusconi does not offer a renewed nationalism (as his alliance with the MSI might lead us to fear) but a sanitized nationalist nostalgia that blankets and suppresses all questions concerning the nature of community.

Instead of the question of community, which was once posed both within and against the terms of nationalism, we get a generalized but meaningless nationalism that pushes aside questions. The national question, that is, is simply accepted as a generalized matter of nostalgia, be it for the evils of Fascism (Fini, the current leader of the MSI, is not a Duce, even in his dreams), or for the light blue colors of the royal house of Savoy. And the government is to get on with the matter of running the state as a business.

The nation understands itself as its own theme park, and that resolves the question of what it means to live in Italy: it is to have been Italian once. Meanwhile, the state is merely a large corporation to be entrusted to businessmen, a corporation that increasingly serves as the hand-

maiden to the penetration of transnational capital. The governmental structure of the nation-state is no longer the organizing center of the common existence of peoples across the planet, and the University of Excellence serves nothing other than itself, another corporation in a world of transnationally exchanged capital.

∞ 3

The Decline of the Nation-State

Universities have not always been bureaucratic systems devoted to the pursuit of excellence. As we shall see, the idea of the University has in the past been accorded the kind of referential value that excellence lacks. The reasons for this are intimately bound up with the nation-state: the appeal to excellence occurs when the nation-state ceases to be the elemental unit of capitalism. At that point, instead of states striving with each other to best exemplify capitalism, capitalism swallows up the idea of the nation-state.¹

This shift is usually referred to as globalization: the contemporary rise of those transnational corporations (TNCs) that currently control more capital than the vast majority of nation-states. Masao Miyoshi, in a brilliant brief study, makes the point that bourgeois capitals in the industrialized world “no longer wholly depend on the nation-state of their origin for protection and facilitation.”² Former multinationals (corporations that cross national borders but still have their headquarters clearly associated with a particular nation) become TNCs when the corporation internalizes corporate loyalty, becoming “adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere and exploit any state including its own, as long as the affiliation serves its own interest” (736). Drawing on Leslie Sklair’s analysis, Miyoshi points out that, of the largest one hundred economic units in the global economy, more than fifty are TNCs, rather than nation-states (739–740). For example, the transnational financier George Soros reported income of \$1.1 billion in 1993, surpassing

the gross domestic product of at least forty-two nations, although this would have made him only the thirty-seventh-most-profitable company in the United States. And as Miyoshi argues, the discourse of multiculturalism serves TNCs very well by redirecting corporate loyalty toward the corporate logo rather than the national flag of any one country.

The upshot of Miyoshi’s argument is that the nation-state no longer works as a social glue; it ceases to provide the bond of community and is being replaced in this role by the TNC. Within the global economy, “National history and culture . . . are merely variants of one ‘universal’—as in a giant theme park or shopping mall,” to be appropriated by “tourism and other forms of commercialism” (747). Likewise, culture is entirely internalized as an element within the flow of global capital; it is no longer the idea that the accumulation of national capital claims to serve.

My point of difference with Miyoshi arises where he addresses the implication of intellectuals and academics in this process. He situates individual involvement as a moral question, noting that instead of resisting, academics seem only too happy to become “frequent fliers and globe-trotters” (750). I would argue that individual consciousness is not the issue. I think that Miyoshi’s recognition of the complicity of the discourses of Cultural Studies and multiculturalism with the needs of TNCs has to be analyzed at the level of the University, where the University is understood as a bureaucratic institution developing toward the role of TNC in its own right.³ Hence the task of thinkers in the humanities and in other disciplines can no longer be pitched at the level of individual resistance, of the heroism of thought, since the institution doesn’t need another hero. There are no heroes in bureaucracy, as Kafka indicates.

Hence the status of the subject shifts with the decline of the nation-state, and this change has important implications for the University, the primary institution outside the nuclear family for the training of subjects of the modern nation-state. The emergence of the modern subject is intimately linked to the nation-state that stands as its specular guarantor. Instead of being subject *to* the arbitrary rule of a monarch, the modern citizen becomes the subject *of* a nation-state, a state whose

political discourse is legitimated by recourse to the collective enunciation of a subjective “we,” as in the phrase “we, the people.” Hence the aim of the modern state is the revelation of the identity of a national subject, be it the universal subject of humanity (in republican democracies like revolutionary France or the United States) or the ethnic identity of the national subject as the object of rational discussion (in liberal-democratic nation-states in Europe).

This subjection of the subject to the state arises in general because the revelation of this identity requires passage through the institutions of the state: in order for an “I” to become an “I,” to realize itself, it must pass through a “we.” The individual citizen, that is, must become for him or herself the bearer of a meaning that is only accessible as part of a collectivity. The subject finds itself as it is mirrored to itself through the representational institutions of the state: as he or she who says, “I am an American.” In Wlad Godzich’s words, “those who hold state power first co-opt individuals, thereby making them other with respect to the rest of society, and then let the state as an apparatus of power determine the configuration of the social.”⁴ The modern University, I shall argue, was conceived by Humboldt as one of the primary apparatuses through which this production of national subjects was to take place in modernity, and the decline of the nation-state raises serious questions about the nature of the contemporary function of the University.

In this book, therefore, I want above all to do two things. First, to trace how the integration of the University as an institution under the aegis of the concept of “culture” has been linked to the question of the nation-state. Second, to ask whether there is an alternative to the discourse of excellence: At the twilight of modernity, which is also the twilight of the University as we have known it, can another way be found to think the University? This is to ask whether the University, once stripped of its cultural mission, can be something other than a bureaucratic arm of the unipolar capitalist system. But if we are to grasp the nature of this question, it is first necessary to understand the contemporary situation in which the decline of the nation-state means that the economic is no longer subjugated to the political (this means that we speak of global consumers, not of national production). Rather than

being under national political control, the economy is more and more the concern of transnational entities who transfer capital in search of profit without regard to national boundaries. The erstwhile all-powerful state is reduced to becoming a bureaucratic apparatus of management. As Miyoshi has pointed out, the contemporary indicators of “statesmanship”—what all “world leaders” have in common nowadays—are domestic unpopularity and international weakness (744). The nation-state is a formation on its way to becoming as vestigial as the playing of drivers’ national anthems in celebration of Grand Prix victories, victories that are, in fact, the work of transnational technological conglomerates with whom no nation could any longer compete.

Let me be clear about what I mean here when I say that the nation-state is withering. This is not the same thing as claiming that *nationalism* is no longer an issue. Nationalism, in places such as Bosnia and the former Soviet Union, is the sign of the breakdown of the nation-state (and not of its resurgence) precisely because no nation-state can be imagined that could integrate so many conflicting desires. Hence the despair of so many intellectuals in the face of such events. The kinds of nationalist movements we are currently witnessing are actually more in the service of globalization than the old nation-state. Under globalization the state does not disappear; it simply becomes more and more managerial, increasingly incapable of imposing its ideological will, which is to say, incapable of imposing its will as the *political* content of economic affairs. The state can no longer ask what constitutes “economic health,” since even to presume to ask this question is a sign of economic weakness. One sign of such weakness, for instance, is the absence of an “independent” central bank. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) determines the creditworthiness of nation-states on the basis of several criteria, but an important one is the presence of a central bank that is “independent” of governmental control (such as the Federal Reserve or the Bank of England), which is to say, more amenable to IMF control.

This hollowing out of the state is a process that appears to the erstwhile national population as “depoliticization”: the loss of belief in an alternative political truth that will authoritatively legitimate oppositional critique.⁵ The loss of faith in salvation is actualized in the rise of

the modern bureaucratic state as an essentially unipolar society. Thus, the capitalist system in its contemporary form offers people not a national identity (which was always a bad ideological bargain) but a non-ideological belonging: a corporate identity in which they participate only at the price of becoming operatives. The emergence of the unipolar or managerial state thus marks a terminal point for political thought. Rather than the political question being that of what kind of state can establish the just society and realize human destiny, the positioning of the state as the unifying horizon for all political representations indicates that social meaning lies elsewhere, in an economic sphere outside the political competence of the state.

Consumerism—which is correctly perceived as the most pressing threat to the traditional subject of university education in North America—is the economic counterpart of the hollowing out of political subjectivity that accompanies the decline of the nation-state. As such, it is a symptom of the almost complete internalization and reconsumption of the product of the system. Consumerism thus is less of an ideological falsification of well-being (bread and circuses) than a mark that no benefit exterior to the system can be imagined, no benefit that would not be subject to cost-benefit analysis (was that vacation a good buy?). Consumerism is not a political or ideological matter; it is not a matter for the nation-state. It is the sign that the individual is no longer a *political* entity, is not a subject of the nation-state. Thus, for example, a United Nations report of 1993 indicates that the world's population now includes 100 million migrants, of whom only 37 percent are refugees from persecution, war, or catastrophe. Migration, that is, is more of an *economic* than a political phenomenon. The exponential growth in the number of migrants can be grasped when we realize that this figure has doubled since 1989. The personal and cultural costs of migration are immense, yet what is clear is that the economic pressure to migration in a global market is rendering the labor force more flexible and adaptable to capital at the direct expense of the integrity of the nation-state as a cultural formation.

The terms of such a shift are clear when applied to the University. The preface to Alfonso Borrero Cabal's report for UNESCO and the International Development Research Center of Canada, *The University*

as an Institution Today, notes the “increasing internationalization of higher education. According to UNESCO, in the 62 countries responsible for an estimated 95% of foreign students in the world in 1990, the number of students abroad increased from 916 thousand in 1980 to almost 1.2 million in 1990 (29%).”⁶ This horizon of globalization means that the student subject is no longer the prospective national system. The benefit of this for the global capitalist market is clearly stated in a 1990 report of the UNESCO European Center for Higher Education, which calls for “an organization of teaching and certification, possibly on a modular basis, which would permit students to transfer on pre-determined conditions between institutions and courses of different levels.”⁷ The payoff of such an arrangement is that it “would not only serve a process of lifelong learning, but, if adopted on a community-wide basis, would be supportive of the mobility of EC citizens.”⁸ The international and interdisciplinary flexibility is envisaged with the goal of producing a subject who is no longer tied to the nation-state, who can readily move to meet the demands of the global market. Where the great W. E. B. Du Bois argued that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,” I am tempted to add that problem of the twenty-first century is that of the borderline, a problem intimately linked to that of race.⁹

I speak of the borderline because it is the non-place (in Michel Serres's term) at which the tensions of globalization are manifest. In his remarkable book *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben has characterized the effect of globalization upon the production of political subjects as the emergence of a global petty bourgeoisie: “If we had once again to conceive of the fortunes of humanity in terms of class, then today we would have to say that there are no longer social classes, but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie, in which all the old social classes are dissolved: The petty bourgeoisie has inherited the world and is the form in which humanity has survived nihilism.”¹⁰ Agamben's argument is that the planetary petty bourgeoisie has freed itself from the Fascist positioning of the petty bourgeoisie as the class that, above all others, traced the path of its potential access to bourgeois grandeur through a discourse of popular identity and nationalism (None more chauvinist than the shopkeeper). As Agamben remarks:

The planetary petty bourgeoisie has instead freed itself from these dreams [of false popular identity] and has taken over the aptitude of the proletariat to refuse any recognizable social identity. . . . They know only the improper and the inauthentic and even refuse the idea of a discourse that could be proper to them. That which constituted the truth and falsity of the peoples and generations that have followed one another on the earth—differences of language, of dialect, of ways of life, of character, of custom, and even the physical particularities of each person—has lost any meaning for them and any capacity for expression and communication. In the petty bourgeoisie, the diversities that have marked the tragicomedy of universal history are brought together and exposed in a phantasmagorical vacuousness. (62–63)

This might seem like a lament for the end of culture, a complaint that cultural specificity is being erased by a generation of global Reebok-wearers who all support the Chicago Bulls. But when Agamben goes on to argue that this means that the “absurdity of individual existence” has lost its pathos, has become an “everyday exhibition,” we recognize a reader of Walter Benjamin (63). Agamben is not content simply to mourn the lost meaning of culture. Just as Benjamin is concerned to *transvalue* rather than mourn the loss of aura once the work of art is universally exhibited, so Agamben attempts to transvalue the dereferentialization of culture—transvalue, that is, the process through which culture loses any specific referent.¹¹ In so doing, he actually leaves the circuit of culture altogether, since “culture,” I would argue, has always been positioned in modernity either as the reconstruction of a lost authenticity (in its nostalgic or romantic mode) or as a coming to terms with the loss of origin (in its ironic or high modernist mode). As Agamben puts it rather cryptically: “Selecting in the new planetary humanity those characteristics that allow for its survival, removing the thin diaphragm that separates bad mediatized advertising from the perfect exteriority that communicates only itself—this is the political task of our generation” (64).

What is at stake in Agamben’s evocation of a political task is an attempt to think against globalization from within—to think the non-coincidence of globalization and capitalism, instead of assuming their sheer isomorphy. This means that we can no longer oppose an au-

thentic, an ideal, or a national “culture” to capitalism, as if culture were the real mode of social processes and capitalism a false or anti-culture. In the 1980s the British Left sought to attack Thatcherism as a betrayal of a true national culture, a false nationalism that served the interests of global capital. They were doomed to failure from the start, because they misunderstood that the appeal of Thatcherite nationalism, what allowed it to serve the TNCs, was precisely that it was a nationalism *against the modernist idea of the nation-state*. This internal contradiction within Thatcherite nationalism was the root of both its appeal and its flexibility, so that exposing the contradiction was not enough to defeat the argument. Global fusion and national fission go hand in hand and work together to efface the linking of the nation-state and symbolic life that has constituted the idea of “national culture” since the eighteenth century. In this situation, to appeal to a notion of universal or global culture is to misrecognize that such appeals always model the universal or the global *according to the contours of the modern European nation-state*, the very instance that is being ground up by the TNCs.

The implications of this situation for the idea of the University are enormous. As Gérard Granel has argued, it is now pointless to seek the destiny of the University in its capacity to realize the essence of a nation-state or its people.¹² Heidegger’s “Rectorial Address” at Freiburg will have been the last attempt to subjugate economic technology to the political will of the nation-state through an appeal to ethnic destiny.¹² As a state ideological apparatus, the University had a cultural position roughly equivalent to that of a national airline, such as Air France. If we simply schematize an instance that in practice always has a more complicated nature, we may say that the national airline is an instance of the state’s attempt to realize itself by guaranteeing the hegemony of the *political* over the *economic*. Rather than being crudely subjected to the profit motive, the national airline is subsidized by the nation-state, for which it has both an internal and an external function. The external function is to assert the technological competitiveness of the state, and the internal function is to homogenize the territory of the state by ensuring ease of access to all its areas. This internal function is basically a subsidy that attempts to subject economic to political factors. Where market forces might cause ex-centric lines of trade and

transportation to develop and, in effect, cause internal divisions to arise within the state, the national airline (which must fly to all areas of the state, regardless of their economic importance) produces a kind of cartographic “flattening” and attendant centralization analogous to the demographic “flattening” of the State University (which educates all its students as subjects of the state, regardless of class origins). As with the State University, the state investment in a national airline works (although not exclusively) as a massive internal subsidy to the middle and upper-middle classes. The upper classes can always charter a private plane or hire a tutor. The middle and upper-middle classes can afford the marginal supplementary cost of state air travel or higher education in a way that ensures them and their children privileged access, while buffering them against the actual cost.

The decline of the national ideology means that capital no longer needs to offer the middle classes this ideological sense of belonging and is happy to proletarianize them—which is why most professors now travel economy class. More significantly, the fate of Pan American airlines (the refusal of the U.S. government to provide sufficient state subsidy to protect America’s image abroad) is indicative of the irrelevance of such a political vision of the state to the current global economic order of TNCs. Likewise, a report to the European Economic Community of 1994 recommended abolition of state subsidies to national airlines within the common market, as a measure likely to increase “efficiency” and ensure a return to “profitability” (while also doubtless resulting in the disappearance of several national carriers). A parallel withdrawal of funding is apparent in the University sector in the case of individual students, as European governments seek to introduce programs of student loans, while the U.S. government, with loan programs already in place, introduces stringent criteria of profitability rather than subsidy to its loan programs.

So how are we to think the institution of the University in which we find ourselves? It is clear that in the University we can never “find ourselves,” come into our birthright; we cannot achieve the pure auto-affection that brings thought to an end in the virtual presence of an entirely self-knowing and autonomous subject. Yet such a notion of self-finding has been, throughout the modern age, the grand narrative

of the function of the University. The subject of human history strives for autonomy, for the self-knowledge that will free it from the chains of the past, from its debts to a nature and to a language that are not of its own making. Thus, Kant thought we could find ourselves as entirely reasonable. The German Idealists thought we could find ourselves as an ethnic culture. The technocrats of today think we can find ourselves as “most excellent,” to cite *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*—a film which is an interesting attempt to understand the impossibility of historical thought once knowledge has itself become commodified as information.

The University becomes modern when it takes on responsibility for working out the relation between the subject and the state, when it offers to incarnate an idea that will both theorize and inculcate this relationship. This is its dual mission of research and teaching, and if the latter has always lagged behind the former in terms of real service performed for the state, this is hardly surprising. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the articulation of teaching and research is worked out by the German Idealists (most notably Humboldt). However, if we are to understand the significance of the University of Excellence, to grasp what is at stake in the posthistorical move beyond culture that is occasioned by the decline of the nation-state, then we must first take a look at how the birth of the modern University and that of the nation-state are intertwined. If we are to understand what it means that contemporary students are consumers rather than national subjects, we must first trace the emergence of the modern idea of the University.