



Dissidence, Compromise and Submission in Higher Education Today

by Scarlett Baron

Is dissidence possible in higher education today?

Three years ago I became a lecturer in a friendly, well regarded, and sensibly run English department. Since then, the pleasure and relief of having joined such an institution – magnified by the intense employment-related anxieties of my doctoral and postdoctoral years – have not abated. And yet to a degree such feelings endure in spite of the day-to-day realities of university life. Indeed, these resilient sentiments sometimes seem but vestiges of a conception of academia I have already been forced to relinquish.

Academic life has turned out to be substantially different from the exalted visions of rigorous teaching and arduous scholarship I once entertained. I feel as strongly now about the value of literature and its study as I ever did. And yet my experiences within an institution which might be expected to provide an ideal environment for such a pursuit instead conspire to foster a strong sense that my work, and my reasons for making it central to my life, are misunderstood, devalued, and actively interfered with at every turn. With startling regularity, I find myself disheartened, aggrieved, or incensed by the bureaucratic obstacles and administrative guff that are thrown in my way.

The story is a familiar one – one told in the numerous books penned in defence of universities in general, and the humanities in particular, in recent years. It is the story told by Stefan Collini in *What Are Universities For?* (2013), by Helen Small in *The Value of the Humanities* (2012), by Thomas Docherty in *Universities at War* (2014). It is a story of misrepresentation and disempowerment – the story of the imposition of what Collini calls ‘an increasingly economic agenda on universities over the past two decades.’ In practice, this imposition takes the form of managerial insistence that all academic activity be translatable – and indeed swiftly translated – into indices of relevance to the worlds of policy and commerce.

Like many of my colleagues, I spend a fair amount of time publicly complaining and privately fuming about the way things stand – about the need to think about the ‘delivery’ of syllabi, the inculcation of ‘transferable skills,’ the ‘impact’ and ‘relevance’ of research whose aims are frankly incommensurate with such governmental watchwords. But neither of these activities amount to meaningful dissidence. And for all the swelling chorus of frustration emerging from the country’s universities, no truly effective channel for dissidence appears to have yet been found.

The difficulty is partly that the problems and parties involved are impossibly numerous and inextricably intertwined. For one thing, it is very hard to know to whom, or to what, academics should in fact be opposing resistance. Should we be expressing dissidence from the government? From the electorate it claims to represent? Or does the root of the problem lie in something far more abstract and intractable – what Fredric Jameson famously termed the ‘logic of late capitalism,’ with its infinite ambit and concomitant ring of utter irreversibility? Or is the enemy – as one is tempted to call a faceless problem in beleaguered times – on the inside? Should one’s ire be directed at the high-ranking university administrators who demand that such measures as are set out by the government of the day be implemented – that the game promptly and efficiently be played, the rules swiftly abided by? Have our high fee-paying students themselves become the face of some of the problems we used to be able to locate outside the academy? Have they themselves, to a degree, become the mouthpieces of a view of education structured and supersaturated by economic thinking? In a sense, how could their expectations and demands *not* partly be shaped by the economic transactions that subtend their studies and that will govern their financial arrangements for some years beyond? Certainly, a number of them already seem to speak of their studies in the same instrumental, quantitative language – asking for more contact hours, more handouts, more guidelines and guarantees – as dominates public discourse about education. Finally, the enemy may be within the walls in an even more perturbing way: it is worrying but realistic to suspect that the language of business, with its ‘outputs’ and ‘deliverables,’ may have begun to colonise our own minds.

Aside from this uncertainty as to where responsibility lies – often the only answer seems to be ‘everywhere’ – it seems difficult to know what can concretely be done to alter the status quo without seriously endangering what sound and untrammelled teaching and research one can still get away with.



It is risky to teach or conduct research in ways that depart from certain modish formulae. To teach in ways which do not fit the assessment-focused, packaged-learning formats that are currently in vogue is to risk jeopardising one's own standing within a department, but also, via the National Student Survey, to damage that department in the eyes of the faculty, the school, the university, and of course the media and its league tables. And to carry out research into areas of thought or knowledge that are not currently fashionable (that is, easily convertible into mercantilistic political clichés), is drastically to reduce one's chances of obtaining external funding, the securing of which is key to the realisation of major scholarly projects.

So by and large we muddle on, teaching in ways we hope are worthwhile whilst also (or despite) satisfying fee-paying students; and writing often preposterous research proposals which make promises about 'impact deliverables and milestones,' gush about 'leadership development plans,' and detail unique 'project management skills.'

One dreams of not compromising in such ways – of making dramatic statements, undertaking sensational action, leading mass rebellion. And yet when soberly considered the large majority of such plans promise only the temporary alleviation of anger expressed, and the likely dissatisfaction of harming the wrong people: one's own students, one's own department, oneself.

The temptation, in the face of all this, is to play the ostrich and bury oneself in books. The remedy is only partly escapist – for fictions about higher education do have some counsel to offer. David Lodge's satires of the educational policies of the 1980s are a case in point. In *Nice Work* (1988), the Head of Department of Rummidge University receives a memo about a new Industry Shadow Scheme. 'As you are no doubt aware,' it begins,

1986 has been designated Industry Year by the Government. The DES, through the UGC, have urged the CVCP to ensure that universities throughout the UK [...] make a special effort in the coming year to show themselves responsive to the needs of industry [...] There is a widespread feeling in the country that universities are 'ivory tower' institutions, whose staff are ignorant of the realities of the modern commercial world. Whatever the justice of this prejudice, it is important in the present economic climate that we should do our utmost to dispel it.

The mindless acronymic bureaucratise, the knowledge that the whole exercise is conceived of as a deceitful pretence from the start, and the disgusted academic helplessness which follows the launch of the new scheme, are all painfully familiar. Little has changed it seems, and this is in itself a depressing observation. Indeed, in spite of the nebulous but widely shared sense that the requirement to justify the humanities in terms of practical usefulness is a new phenomenon, the pressure – framed in the kaleidoscopically shifting and reforming jargon of succeeding political fads – has in fact been exerted for decades.

Lodge's depictions of university life are full of such crisp renderings of the plight of literary academics. His fine accounts of ridiculous government initiatives and absurd academic situations play a large part in making his campus novels the comic delight that they are. Yet in a sense the laughter Lodge so successfully arouses diminishes the satirical bite of his parodies. There is something comforting and cosy rather than dissident about Lodge's clear-sighted ventriloquy.

The same cannot be said of the satire of France's academic institutions published by Michel Houellebecq last January. True to his reputation as an uncompromising debunker of entrenched assumptions, Houellebecq's portrayal of the decadence of France's universities strikes a disturbing note. As was widely reported at the time, *Soumission* was published on the very day the Charlie Hebdo attacks took place – a bizarre coincidence which propelled the seemingly prophetic book to the top of French and European best-seller charts. Amid the outrage that followed, little attention was paid to the fact that the novel, as well as seeming to adumbrate a clash of civilisations between secular France and its Muslim citizens, is about the country's higher education system and its relationship to the country's governing classes. In the book, the election of an intelligent, highly educated, moderate and likeable Muslim to the country's presidency leads to what is in effect an annexation of the country's universities by the government. The universities are briefly closed down; when they re-open, they have been redecorated with calligraphed suras from the Koran and pictures of Mecca. More importantly, conversion to Islam has become a condition of continued employment. Those who resist the overtures of the university's new governance are generously pensioned off and effectively silenced. The change to the new regime happens surreally smoothly. The new academic year gets underway under the auspices of submission – the submission of women to men, the submission of men to God, the submission of higher education to its new political masters.

The narrator, François – his name evidently chosen to indicate his metonymic function as the symbolic representative of his country – is a respected professor at the Sorbonne. At first, François is a low-level collaborator with the new regime. He does not convert to Islam, but he does take the generous pension offered him. After a period of intense wooing by the powers that be, however, François is persuaded to return to the Sorbonne by promises of an astronomical salary and multiple nubile wives. His submission is complete; France is on its knees.

The relevance of this scenario to the situation of academics working in England today emerges more clearly when it is borne in mind that one of Houellebecq's very strongest preoccupations is with the corrupting force of capitalism – its monetisation

of every aspect of our lives. (In 2014, his friend Bernard Maris, one of those killed in the Charlie Hebdo attacks, wrote an analysis of this obsession entitled *Houellebecq, économiste*.) As much as an interrogation of religion and democracy, Houellebecq's indictment of France and its higher education system is an attack on the capitalism which, in his view, corrupts as acid dissolves, making love and clear thinking all but impossible. The facts of the narrative invite such an interpretation. Indeed, the reason the pension and salaries offered by the Sorbonne's new administrators are so princely is that the Sorbonne has been bought – literally bought – by Saudi Arabia. In other words, it is money, quite as much as ideology, which enables the new education regime to be established virtually unopposed. In this light, Houellebecq's fiction of France in 2022 comes to seem legible as a fairly transparent satire of a state of affairs all too familiar to us in this country. Capitalism, privatisation, the instrumentalisation of education, its subjugation to the purposes of ideology, its reduction to economic reasoning, its demand that academics sell themselves to the catchwords of the day: these are all recognisable aspects of the situation here too.

Whilst extremely funny in places, Houellebecq's book is not characterised by that gentle bonhomie which runs through most other campus novels, whatever the acuteness of their observations. There is something much more troubling about Houellebecq's vision. The typical detachment and affectlessness of the narrator does not disguise the despair he feels – about the end of France as he knows it, the end of his academic career, the end of his intellectual life, and of course (he is a Houellebecquian character after all), the end of his sex life (until, that is, a new harem of young wives is offered him). He suffers interminable fits of weeping and inches closer and closer to suicide as the novel unfolds. His revulsion at his own circumstances steadily grows to encompass all humanity: 'Humanity didn't interest me,' he notes, 'it even disgusted me.'

As the furious responses to it made clear, the book is typically Houellebecquian in its sardonic darkness, daring to say what most do not dare to think, let alone to say. It is a dissident text. Houellebecq writes for freedom – for the right to think and write uncomfortable things, outwith the straitjacket of political correctness. Like all his books, this latest has garnered much vitriolic abuse – and in this very sense may show one way in which to be dissident in art, and jolt a readership into awareness.

On the other hand, Houellebecq has himself several times – including, memorably, on the night before the Charlie Hebdo attacks – publicly doubted the power of art to be anything but a personal salvation. As he states or dramatises in most of his books, art is a way of staying alive in this world, a reason – the only reason, in fact – to live on. But whether by saving himself he can do any more than provoke lucid thoughts and arouse passionate sympathies – whether dissident art, however excellent, can make anything happen – is, alas, an entirely different question.

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