

The Transgressive University and the City: Collective Memories and Student Movements on the Berkeley and Nanterre Campuses

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What does, and has, the university transgressed, and how? What is it to be a transgressive university today? This is the main point we would like to explore as science itself can be seen as the transgression of the prohibited, or the unknown, and the university should be the main space to this effect. Furthermore the questions that arise from these transgressions should also lead to an ethical critique of society on a larger scale, from the university to the city seen, from a lefebvrian perspective, as an aggregation of functions, the *Physis* and the *Logos*, theory and practice.

As we shall come to see, universities have been linked to cities in an inextricable fashion since their point of origin. According to an old medieval adage, “urban air makes you free”; but does setting one free today mean allowing for the acquisition of enough knowledge to develop one’s own critical standpoint enabling the shaping of new transgressive actions and organizations? In this sense, both the city and the university are key players for the emancipation of people over the age long inherited, and often alienating, social structure. The American University Settlement movement pioneered by Jane Addams and Robert A. Woods thought of the university settlements in poor urban districts as “laboratories in social science”. Robert E. Park then extended this vision to sociology, and famously claimed the city to be a social laboratory allowing for the emergence of urban anthropology. The city and the university are therefore inextricably intertwined and these laboratories have both grown at an exponential rate in the last century.

From a historical perspective, three traditional influences on the university as an institution stand out: the church, royalty, and the city (Dupront). Both the church and royalty are cloistered institutions, and even though they may still sometimes look like “ivory towers” universities have never been completely cut off from their social setting; on the contrary they have been important actors for both the physical urban expansion and the formation of social structure. As the global city is emerging, it is interesting to look back at the genealogy of the university in relation to the city. As we shall come to see with a flashback focusing on the great dispersion of 1229-1231, their relations have always been ambivalent. Universities are not disconnected from the city and even less from the structures of society as they truly are privileged instruments for multiple forms of social change, reproduction, and struggle.

In the turn between the universities modern and postmodern era, two institutions – Berkeley and Nanterre – both claim that the social movements led by their students in the sixties were a beacon for freedom. Of course the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of 1964 and the Movement of the 22nd of March 1968 have probably become some of the most commented and commemorated student movements of all time, still they are relatively forgotten on the campus by the students of today. This alone is worth analyzing in relation to the various uses and abuses of memory (Berliner, Todorov). Instead of commemorating the series of events by narrating the stories of the student rebels of the Sixties, we will focus on their urban aspects. For example, on one hand the traditionalist conformism of “greek culture” has deeply impacted the American campus and the city itself, and on the other the counterculture has flavored the streets and parks of the city of Berkeley.

If these collective memories have become woven into the city itself today, to become, in a sense, part of the social framework of the cities and universities collective memories (Halbwachs), they have often been altered and forgotten in many different ways. For example, we shall show that even though the Berkeley campus became a model for the “multiversity” hailed by university President Clark

Kerr against which many students rose-up in the sixties, it seems to have been forgotten in the official commemorations fueled by the neoliberal ideology of culture and knowledge as marketable commodities restricting both the past and the future to the perpetual present of financial value. Thus student activism of the past has become an important aspect in marketing the university on the global competitive market. Furthermore this model was actually imported by the French Gaullist regime, and we can show that the Nanterre university campus was built, albeit hastily, on this American incomplete and dubious model. Indeed the major flaw and criticism of the model that now seems to be all but forgotten is that it focuses solely on growth, and offers little regard for the populations that live, work within and around the institution.

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