

The university as microstate; or: contemporary modulations of the 'ethics of prudent mediocrity'

Inaugural address
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Abstract

Since the inception of the university as modern institution – and here we can take Immanuel Kant's *Conflict of Faculties* [1798] as foundational – the primary or core function of the Humanities has consisted in offering an internal critique of the process of knowledge production as such. Formulated more succinctly, the core function of the Humanities consists in interrogating the core function of the university; to make visible the invisible; to make explicit the implicit. In the spirit of that historic purpose I analyse recent developments in the debate on what 'a decolonised philosophy curriculum' may mean. The explicit call to make visible the politics of knowledge production is paradoxically accompanied by a global depoliticization of universities. In the second part of my address I argue that, as a direct consequence of the student protests/revolt of 2015-16, the University of Pretoria has reconstituted itself as a micro-state through a number of mimetic acts historically associated with state formation. Foremost among these have been the creation of border control and the declaration of a *de facto* state of emergency. The purpose of this reconstitution, I argue, is the depoliticization of the university in a way that is inimical to academic freedom and the democratic project.

Juanita and Maria Gaitova Praeg;
Colleagues and friends from Rhodes, UCT and UJ;
Students;
Colleagues in the Department of Philosophy;
Colleagues from the faculty of Humanities and other faculties;
Chair of Teaching and Learning Professor Hennie Stander;
Deputy-Dean Professor Maxi Schoeman
Dean Professor Vasu Reddy
Registrar Professor Caroline Nicholson
Vice-Principle Professor Stephanie Burton

I start with a quote by Hannah Arendt:

‘To be free in an age like ours, one must be in a position of authority.
That in itself would be enough to make me ambitious’.

Part I

Those of you who have attended inaugural addresses before will have noticed that I inverted the hierarchy of salutations. According to protocol I should have started by acknowledging the highest authority and ended with the lowest. The reason I inverted this order of things is because in Part II of this address I will critically engage the role this hierarchy of authority has come to play at the University of Pretoria (UP) over the past two years, that is, since the end of the student protests/revolt of 2015-‘16. I did not want to be complicit from the start in replicating this hierarchy and so, the best I could do to strike a balance between observing protocol and being consistent with my own argument, was to invert that order.

Of course, the notion of a hierarchy of authority that descends from highest to lowest has historically found its most explicit articulation in the notion of a Chain of Being which dominated the west’s conception of order in creation, from Plato through Medieval Christianity and beyond that, into the 18th century. In his definitive study, *The Great Chain of Being: a Study*

of the *History of an Idea*,¹ Arthur Lovejoy notes that “Next to the word ‘Nature’, ‘the Great Chain of Being’ was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, playing a part somewhat analogous to that of the blessed word ‘evolution’ in the late nineteenth (1957: 184)”. In this Great Chain all of creation was organized according to their degree of perfection, with God at the top and stones at the bottom. As for human beings – or ‘man’ in the antiquated patriarchal language of Lovejoy whose writing could not escape replicating the order he was writing about - the picture was pretty bleak: He writes: ‘Man was thus not midway in the series, but well down towards the lower end of it. He was the ‘middle link’ in the sense that he was at the point of transition from the merely sentient to the intellectual forms of being’ (1957: 90). He continues: ‘[Man] is therefore ... torn by conflicting desires and propensities; as a member of two orders of being at once, he wavers between both, and is not quite at home in either. He thus has, after all, a kind of uniqueness in nature; but it is an unhappy uniqueness. He is, in a sense in which no other link in the chain is, a strange hybrid monster; and if this gives him a certain pathetic sublimity, it also results in incongruities of feeling, inconsistencies of behavior, and disparities between his aspirations and his powers, which render him ridiculous’ (1957: 199).

Man’s restlessness, his ontological discontent with being half-way between sentient and intellectual forms of being, generated a profound problem for philosophers. For, how could the notion of a divinely ordained Chain of Being contain such ontological discontent? How do we account for the fact that God allocated us a place that we are eternally unhappy with? Does this not suggest a flaw in God’s plan? After much anguish, philosophers decided that man’s desire to ‘improve his station’ was simply constitutive of what it means to be human. His eternal discontent was an impotent desire; a castrated yearning typical of his station but not capable of liberating him from it. In this way, a potential instability in the system – man’s ontological discontent – became a constitutive instability. This way of resolving the tension was captured by a phrase that human beings would henceforth be guided by, namely ‘an ethics of prudent mediocrity’. To recognise one’s desire as an impotent desire amounted to an *ethics* in the sense that it guided human beings in what they may or may not do; *prudent* because it encouraged humans to prioritise the stability of the system above their own ontological discontent; and *mediocrity* in the sense that it converted being stuck ‘half-way up the mountain’ into a virtue. Rousseau gave us one of the most explicit articulations of this ‘ethics of prudent mediocrity’ in his book *Émile*, where he writes:

¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, 1957 *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press.

O Man! Confine thine existence within thyself, and thou wilt no longer be miserable. Remain in the place which Nature has assigned to thee in the chain of beings, and nothing can compel thee to depart from it ... Man is strong when he contents himself with being what he is; he is weak when he desires to raise himself above humanity (in Lovejoy, 1957:201).

The long and the short of it is that the problem of man's ontological discontent could only be resolved through the intervention of human reason; through the invention of an 'ethic of prudent mediocrity' imposed upon man by man himself in order to stabilise the Chain of Being. In Part II of this address I return to a more contemporary version of such an 'ethic of prudent mediocrity'.

In his article 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms'² Ramon Grosfoguel recounts the story of a different ontological discontent. He writes: "In October 1998, there was a conference/dialogue at Duke University between the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group ... [This] conference was the last time the [two bodies] met before their split". The reason for this split, he goes on to explain, was that the latter, despite attempts at producing a radical and alternative knowledge, reproduced the epistemic schema of Area Studies in the United States. He writes: "With a few exceptions, they produced studies *about* the subaltern rather than studies *with* and *from* a subaltern perspective. Like the imperial epistemology of Area Studies, theory was still located in the North while the subjects to be studied are located in the South ... They underestimated in their work ethnic/racial perspectives coming from the region, while giving privilege to ... what they called the 'four horses of the apocalypse', that is, Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci and Guha ... By privileging Western thinkers as their central theoretical apparatus, they betrayed their goal to produce subaltern studies".

A very similar drama played out at the annual conference of the Philosophical Society of South Africa (PSSA) at Rhodes University in January 2017. At the start of its annual general meeting professor Michael Cloete of UNISA asked: "Does the PSSA have the moral legitimacy to take us into the future? Given where we find ourselves right now. Given its history of complicity in everything that's gone wrong [for] black people in this country over many, many

²*Cultural Studies* Vol. 21, Nos. 2-3 March/May 2007, pp. 211-223

years.”³ The question of moral legitimacy was raised because until that moment the society had been conducting business as usual, that is, by promoting and sustaining the self-evident supremacy of western over African philosophy. This issue was tabled during one panel discussion and resulted in calls for the dissolution of South Africa’s only philosophical society because of its intellectual racism. The discussion produced an ideological battle of which the parameters defaulted to the classic options: to reform the society or dissolve it and start over again. For some of the black philosophers the answer was simple: referencing Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon they argued that the PSSA should be consigned to the dustbins of history. In his own letter of resignation prof John Lamola of Fort Hare University stated that he was shocked to “observe that there is still a dominant inclination among members of the PSSA to protect and nurture their racially defined and class-defined position of privilege as both controllers of the producers of philosophical knowledge and dispensers of economic largesse to the ‘under-privileged’. He accused the society of being “self-insulated from the cries and pain of poor and oppressed members of the academy”⁴.

One of the consequences of this debacle was the formation, at UNISA, of the Azanian Philosophical Society - launched with its own conference in August 2017 as part of the annual Black August Festival. If the split documented by Grosfuegel came down to a difference between speaking *about* the subaltern and speaking *from* the position of the subaltern, in our case it came down to the need to establish a society of philosophers for whom African Philosophy would be the basis or foundation of philosophical praxis and not a lesser tradition that somehow needs to be accommodated by the professional society and departments of philosophy. One of the wider implications of this split has been that it crystallised the fault-lines of decolonial curriculum practices at our universities. As with just about every other debate in South Africa it comes down to race and racialised knowledge production. The creation of the Azanian Philosophy Society has had to defend itself against accusations that it is racializing philosophy at a time when we should be working towards non-racialism. The response has been familiar and predictable: what we need is to make whiteness visible and to make explicit its reproduction in the academy and to do that, blackness has to perform a radical stance variously conceived as performative or strategic essentialism. Whether or not this stance can or should be reduced to a weak moment in the dialectic march towards a non-racial society and an epistemically just

³ <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-02-07-no-one-philosophical-about-demise-of-philosophical-society> Accessed 5 August 2018

⁴ <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-02-07-no-one-philosophical-about-demise-of-philosophical-society> Accessed 5 August 2018

society, depends on who you speak to. My own understanding of the various positions that subsequently emerged on what a decolonised philosophical curriculum may entail, can very roughly be presented as a cartography consisting of the following options:

1. *Epistemic justice as substitution*: a decolonized philosophy department must primarily teach African philosophy in the same way that German philosophy departments are grounded in German philosophy, French in French philosophy, British in analytical philosophy et cetera. Epistemic justice is a matter of ‘inverting epistemic power relations’.
2. *Epistemic justice as supplement*: In this case it is argued that the existing western canon needs to be supplemented with substantial African philosophy offerings. Here, epistemic justice means a ‘balance of epistemic power’.
3. *Historicising epistemic injustice*: Here the starting point is the need to provincialize western philosophy in order to reveal how that tradition historically managed to establish its hegemony. We still need to teach the western canon, but we must anthropologise its assumptions. Here epistemic justice is seen as ‘active and continuous engagement with hegemony’.
4. *Epistemic justice means recentering Africa*: in this variant of the call for epistemological diversity it is argued that what we really need is a department of philosophies. Here epistemic justice is function of the recognition of ‘epistemic pluralism’ and we should teach western philosophy alongside African, Oriental, South American, and Indian philosophies.
5. *Epistemic justice as praxis*: From this perspective the point of departure is that philosophy is no longer the queen of sciences or the guardian of thought. This position advocates taking as point of departure the problems of the day - regardless of whether such problems are local, whether they belong to the global south or are truly global. For theoretical solutions and alternatives, we must draw on all philosophical traditions.

Of course, there will be differences among individual departments and even among individual scholars within departments on which vision of epistemic justice would be more just. My own opinion is that there is no right or wrong here but only a form of intellectual pluralism and that choices will be guided by a combination of institutional history, intellectual traditions, institutional culture, available expertise and so on. Pluralism, whether political or epistemological, is not a problem to be overcome and there is no final consensus waiting at the

end of the road. For me, this will always be the legacy of the students protest/revolt of 2015-‘16: it yanked us all out of the political closet. We no longer have a choice but to make visible, not just our whiteness, but our academic and intellectual choices; to articulate the politics of those choices and to acknowledge the reality of a nexus of colonially determined power relations that continue to be reproduced in our institutions of higher learning. We finally no longer have a choice but to make our choices and our own politics visible; to theorise our choices ethically, and pedagogically: to present our choices, to argue them, to contest them – in short, to *be* the political creatures we are, by contesting the political nature of the knowledge we produce about the word.

Paradoxically, at precisely this moment in time, when it is demanded of us to interrogate and engage the politics of knowledge production head-on, we are witnessing, globally, but particularly at UP, the wholesale depoliticisation of our universities. We need to counter this tendency towards depoliticization and the creation of apolitical student-citizens that makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to even begin to speak of a vision for a philosophy department. In the second part of this address I want to take a stab at theorising the way in which this drift towards depoliticization has played out at UP over the past two years.

In order to proceed with that I first need to clear up what I think of as two fundamental misunderstandings; the one relates to the core function of the university, the other to the core function of the humanities. As far as the former is concerned, we have become accustomed to think of the modern university in terms of its three core functions: teaching, research and, of late, community engagement. But the student protests/revolt revealed something entirely more subversive in line with the intention to reveal the epistemicide at the root of the post-colonial university, namely that the institution’s unacknowledged *primary* or core business has always consisted in reproducing the core values of the society in which it is situated. At a fundamental level the core function of the university consists in replicating the world that *makes the institution possible*. Formulated more succinctly, there is a very real sense in which the core function of the university has always consisted in replicating its own institutional culture – that is why different institutions present so many different institutional cultures. It is also the reason why the question of institutional culture is in some sense logically prior to the question of decolonising disciplines, or why knowledge *of* institutional cultures is part of the decolonising project. Lastly, it also explains why institutional culture is such a sensitive issue, and why so many universities, in particular UP, have and always will do their best to avoid any confrontation with it. The student protests/revolt brought us face-to-face with the simple fact that you cannot separate from each other the politics of knowledge and the politics of institutional arrangements that enable the

production of knowledge.

As for the core function of the humanities: it's a truism that neo-liberalism has had the humanities on the back foot for some time now, having to defend its existence and usefulness to society. Again, I would argue that the concept of 'usefulness to society' relates to the *secondary* purpose of the humanities. Since the inception of the university as modern institution – and here I am taking Immanuel Kant's text *Conflict of Faculties* [1798] as foundational – the primary or core function of the humanities has consisted in offering an internal critique of the process of knowledge production as such, in our own faculty and all others. Formulated more succinctly: the core function of the Humanities consists in interrogating the core function of the university. That is our primary task: to make visible the invisible; and to make explicit the implicit. It is in the spirit of that historic purpose that I proceed in Part II of this address.

Part II

My critique will focus on the mode of governance adopted since, and as a direct result of, the student protests/revolt of 2015-'16. I do so in my three-fold capacity as:

1. Firstly, a philosopher in the faculty of humanities who considers the core function of his discipline to consist in an internal critique of the university's core function – which, as stated above, recognises the inextricable link between knowledge production and the institutional arrangements within which that production is situated.
2. But I also speak in a second capacity as intellectual who is not bound by the vagaries of place and mode of governance; a member of a small global elite privileged enough to get paid to think and for whom the notion of 'academic freedom' backed by a liberal democratic constitution that guarantees the right to freedom of speech, association and expression is sacrosanct.
3. In the third and final instance, I also speak as ordinary citizen, who recognises only the authority of the Constitution to limit these fundamental freedoms in as much as Art 37 of the constitution does. In particular, the suspension of basic freedoms we generally associate with a 'state of emergency' is the prerogative of the President and is circumscribed by law precisely by way of protecting all of us from abuses of authority.

I start my analysis of what has happened at UP over the past two years with a very brief reference to the larger global context within which we have to read the relentless depoliticization of our campus over the past two years. In his article 'The Right to the City'

David Harvey⁵ describes neoliberalism as effectively the globalization of the gentrification we have come to associate with the remodelling of cities all over the world. He writes:

Urbanization has always been ... a class phenomenon, since surpluses are extracted from somewhere and from somebody, while the control over their disbursement typically lies in a few hands. This general situation persists under capitalism, of course; but since urbanization depends on the mobilization of a surplus product, an intimate connection emerges between the development of capitalism and urbanization. Capitalists have to produce a surplus product in order to produce surplus value; this in turn must be reinvested in order to generate more surplus value ... [This] presents the capitalist with a number of barriers to continuous and trouble-free expansion. (2008:24)

Taking some liberty with summarizing the way capitalism overcomes these barriers, I think we can identify four broad strategic moves that capitalism deploys to remove barriers to its relentless expansion:

1. Firstly, *organisation of space* which always pivots on prioritising economic imperatives over politics-as-community-making; the university succumbs to this logic the moment it prioritises the production of employable students above fostering responsible, politically minded student-citizens;
2. Secondly, *the dispossession and reallocation* of land to productive ends;
3. In the third instance, *the commodification* of everything including knowledge; the reduction of knowledge to its exchange value.
4. In the fourth and last instance, *securitization* – which very often assumes the form of the creation of ‘micro-states’ such as gated communities and now, universities.

Here then, is my first theoretical move: in the context of globalising neo-liberalism, our campus has effectively become the kind of gated community we associate with the process of urban gentrification. We have become a little securitised ‘micro-state’. The phrase ‘micro-state’ is key to my second theoretical move: for, micro-states constitute themselves as such by emulating or imitating the logic of state formation. In short, a micro-state will establish itself by imitating the

⁵ *New Left Review*, 53 Sept/Oct 2008

macro-state with respect to both form of government and mode of governance. The core of my analysis will consist in unpacking these acts of imitation because it is through them that a historic discourse on the *autonomy of the university* has elided into a discourse on the *sovereignty of the institution* in a way that is radically at odds with the status of the university as public good. From recognising that the institution is *owned* by the tax paying public, UP has reconstituted itself as micro-state; a quasi-sovereign entity that no longer recognises the fact that it *owes* the public anything. But let me take these acts of imitation through which an autonomous institution is reconstituted as quasi-sovereign ‘micro-state’ in turn.

The first act of imitation is as obvious as it is banal and amounts to the creation of borders aimed at secluding the university from all other micro-states. University citizens have access to campus only on the basis of the a-legal creation of biometric access control. I say ‘a-legal’ and not ‘illegal’ because the implicit illegality of the manner in which UP has gone about setting up its biometric borders, in the process unilaterally imposing changes in the conditions of employment, will only become explicitly illegal once students and staff invoke certain rights guaranteed by the soon-to-be-enacted POPI Act. For those citizens of the macro-state who are not citizens of the micro-state, gaining access to campus imitates the act of applying for a passport: one needs to have a sponsor inside the university who agrees to act as guarantor of the visitor’s actions and intentions. This requirement only mimics accountability because it in effect amounts to the pre-emptive criminalization of both host and visitor. Let us refer to this act of imitation as one that allows for the spatial organisation of the university as micro-state.

The second act of imitation is more interesting and relates, not to the *re-creation* of UP in spatial terms but to the *inception* of the micro-state through a state of exception which can be dated quite precisely to 15 February 2016 when, in a swift response to the student protests of 2015,⁶ the following message appeared on the University of Pretoria’s website:

⁶ The causality is explicit. One of the Events Policy’s ‘associated documents’ is the UP Gatherings Policy about which the university’s Institutional Manger for Information Governance at UP in an email response to an enquiry commented: “Neem asseblief kennis dat daar na die 2015/2016 betogings besluit is om die dokument te hersien en twee aparte beleide vir studente en personeel te ontwikkel. Dit is egter nog in proses van goedkeuring.” [“Please note that, after the protests of 2015/2016, a decision was taken to review the document [the UP Gatherings Policy] and to develop separate policies for students and staff. It is however still in the process of being approved”. Author’s translation].

We wish to draw your attention to a new policy approved by the UP Executive that applies to all events at the University of Pretoria, all campuses and properties, and all staff and students. In addition, the policy applies to all tenants of the University, be it on campuses or housed in any other property owned or leased by or to the University (UP Website 2016).

We are all familiar with what happened next. Any academic activity that falls outside the regular scheduled academic programme – whether it be a theatre production, exhibition or book launch - has to apply to the so-called Events committee for approval. And although nowhere stated as such, the main criterium this so-called Committee brings to bear in making its decision, is whether or not the planned event will be ‘too political’. In the context of mimetic micro-state formation I read the policy that created this notorious Events committee in constitutional terms. Created with the sole intention of regulating the parameters of the intellectual project which is now framed through a discourse of ‘risk management’, the policy that created this so-called committee is to the micro-state what the Constitution is to the macro-state: it defines the nature, content and limitations of the academic project, freedom of association, speech and expression through an a-legal limitation of the very cornerstone rights guaranteed by the Constitution. It is of some importance that we unpack the a-legality of this so-called Committee and to do so I will draw on three statements made by a representative of the executive at a faculty of humanities HoD meeting in response to objections to the role this so-called committee has come to play in determining the very content of the academic programme.

1. In the first of these comments, it was stated that we are living through a political crisis and that perhaps, one day, when things have settled down, we can perhaps relax these emergency measures and ‘become more liberal again’.
2. When asked if we could at least have academic representation on the committee to give input on the evaluation of the political ‘risk’ posed by any thought in particular, this request was actively discouraged. Instead, it was suggested – and this is the third comment -
3. that the Humanities faculty should rather consider creating its own ‘events committee’ to pre-screen applications before they are considered by the university’s so-called Events committee.

It is unusual, in any academic context, to use as the basis for theoretical analysis a number of statements made in the context of a management meeting but the circumstances are, as the member of the executive said, exceptional; and where exceptional circumstances exist, exceptional measures must be taken not just to resolve the exception but also to interpret it. And so I will consider each of these statements in turn because they provide a wealth of information we can use to unlock important dimension of the mode of governance we have experienced over the past two years.

I start with the first statement which must be understood in the context of the university's own policy document titled 'Code of ethics for scholarly activity' (2012) which doesn't just guarantee academic freedom but explicitly states that 'Association with the University of Pretoria may not encroach upon the constitutional rights of the individual in pursuit of their scholarly activities' (2012:6) and that 'students are given unlimited exposure to ideas and data' (2012:8). How do we make sense of the executive's systematic violation of its own 'Code of ethics for scholarly activities? The answer, I believe, lies in imitation. The executive has consistently justified its unethical and anti-intellectual violations by imitating the national executive's prerogative to declare a 'state of emergency'. But the similarity – instructive as it may be – is not as important as the difference. Most modern constitutions make provision for the declaration of a state of emergency in which certain rights may temporarily be suspended or limited for the duration of the crisis. But that executive prerogative is carefully circumscribed in the Constitution itself – in our case, Art 37 – in order to protect citizens from the abuse of executive power. This circumscription usually assumes the form of what legal theorist Bruce Ackerman (2006: 40) calls the 'supramajoritarian escalator' – that is, the requirement that a declaration of a state of emergency requires legislative endorsement within a very short time, and thereafter has to be renewed at short intervals⁷. But here's the fascinating thing: when the executive authority of a micro-state imitates this prerogative we end up, not with a juridical or *de jure* state of emergency circumscribed by law itself, but with a *de facto* state of emergency which, precisely because it has no legal foundation in the sense that it is neither permitted nor limited by the law, can violate fundamental rights without fundamentally violating them - in addition to not being obliged to give any sense of when the so-called state of emergency will come to

⁷ In David Dyzenhaus, 2006 *The Constitution of Law: Legality in a Time of Emergency*. Cambridge University Press.

an end or what mechanisms have been created to ensure that executive authority will not be abused. With the *de facto* state of emergency, then, we find ourselves in that grey and rather under-theorised domain where the violation of both the spirit of academic freedom and the spirit, if not the letter, of the Constitution, are concealed by the bureaucratisation of their violation. It is that bureaucratisation of violation that I denote as the ‘a-legal’.

But we cannot leave it at that. We have to trace the locus from where the ‘a-legal’ operates as mechanism of power. I think we can do this with reference to a number of what Laclau calls ‘floating’ or ‘empty signifiers’ which do the work of simultaneously enabling *and* concealing the unethical and the abuse of executive powers precisely because they mean nothing. The two obvious candidates here are the phrase ‘too political’ and the word ‘security’.

‘Too political’ refers to the main criterium that is invoked when the so-called event committee decides to allow or disallow an event. What does the phrase mean, one may well ask? The answer is simple: it means what the executive wants it to mean. It is a signifier whose meaning is determined by will and not by signification.

‘Security’ needs a bit more time and space to unpack so let me start with the basics. We would all agree that safety is the condition for the possibility of thinking. We cannot do our academic work if we do not feel safe on campus, on the way to campus, at night between residences and the library and so on. But there is a double movement through which a discourse on safety has mutated into a discourse on securitization. The first movement is from safety to *security*. We no longer have safety guards, or safety personnel; we have security guards, here, on campus and off campus, to ensure the *security* of students. This mutation is function of a greater global mutation where we no longer talk about the ‘police service’ but of the ‘police force’. The second movement is from security to securitization. If *security* claims to create the condition for the possibility of thinking – by making it *safe* to think - *securitization* comes about when the safety necessary to think is converted into its own limitation. Through a sleight of hand, the limitations imposed *on* the academic project are derived *from* the very conditions for the possibility of that same project. Here, then, is the real danger implicit in a university that conceives of itself in terms of the quasi-sovereignty of a micro-state: whereas the state has to securitise within the limits of the constitution, the micro-state doesn’t. All it needs to do, is to bureaucratise the *doublethink* involved in converting the need for safety into limitations imposed on thinking. In this way, securitization in the microstate becomes an exception to the state of exception; a doubling back onto itself that erases the traces of its double movement so that anyone who

questions the way the academic project is being limited, bizarrely finds him- or herself accused of threatening the conditions for the possibility of the academic project. ‘They’, ‘we’ are the ‘unpatriotic’ of the micro-state; the ‘traitors’ who recklessly and selfishly threaten to sell our country down the river. Of course, the self-defeating paradox is this: when students and staff live in a perpetual, because undeclared, *de facto* state of emergency, one in which academic freedom and basic civil liberties are violated on a daily basis, we all end up feeling unsafe, not safe. Nobody feels safe in a state of emergency – that is why it is called a state of emergency. Which brings me to the second statement made by the member of the executive at the meeting in question, namely that we should not bother with academic representation on this Orwellian ‘Events committee’.

Here, two things. In the first instance: in a democratic dispensation, what are the basic requirements for a formal entity to be considered a committee? I think the following should go without saying:

1. That the proposed committee be issued with clearly articulated terms of reference;
2. That such terms of reference be shared with the wide university community as a basic principle of transparency and accountability;
3. That, as with all other decision-making bodies of the university and again as a simple matter of bureaucratic process, such terms of reference include an appeal process that would allow for the decisions taken by the committee to be taken under review.

None of these elements are constitutive of what has come to be known as the ‘Events committee’. Other than a classification of events on a sliding scale of ‘risks’ posed, it has no terms of reference; the main criterium of being ‘too political’ is nowhere explicitly stated and there is no mention of any appeal process. More disconcerting is the fact that, while this so-called committee’s own constitution compels the executive to appoint an academic member of staff to its membership, no such attempt has been made. In fact, as I referenced earlier, that suggestion has been actively discouraged by the executive whose response amounted to a simple case of dereliction of duty. And here the by now familiar difference between the *de jure* and *de facto* raises its uncanny a-legal head again. Instead of a committee run by six members, as required by its own constitution, the so-called ‘Events committee’ has been run by three: the former registrar, the person involved in the logistics of booking campus venues and my personal favourite, a part-time security advisor. This violation of its own constitution, which as I mentioned earlier I also read as the founding constitution of the university *qua* micro-state,

means that every decision this so-called committee has made over the past two years is technically invalid. I say ‘technically invalid’ because in the world of the bureaucratised violation of academic freedom and basic rights there really is no word yet for this special class of random and unfounded so-called decisions made by a so-called committee other than to denote the whole enterprise as a-legal. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the executive has substantially violated the university’s ‘Code of ethics for Scholarly activities’ through the creation of a so-called Events committee that encroaches on the academic freedom and individual rights of academics and students alike; and that this encroachment proceeded in terms of the violation of the very policy document that created the committee in the first instance. There is a double violation, then, of both the university’s ‘Code of ethics’ *and* the policy that created the so-called Events committee. Mr Dean, in light of this double violation it is very difficult indeed to avoid the conclusion that what we are presented with here, is an executive that has gone completely rogue.

To summarise what I have argued so far: over the past two years UP has reconstituted itself as micro-state through two mimetic acts: the first, the creation of border control and the second, by sustaining its founding state of inception as a state of emergency characterised by the *de facto* violation of academic freedom and the cornerstone political rights of freedom of speech and association. I now continue this line of argument in order to address the question: once founded as ‘micro-state’, what form of government has our micro-state been imitating?

In the history of political philosophy my choice would be limited to the three classic forms of government first identified by Aristotle: democracy, monarchy and dictatorship. I don’t have the time here to explain why, instead of extrapolating from one of these, I am going to suggest that a fourth form of government that Hannah Arendt added to the list is the most appropriate. This is ‘totalitarianism’ which, in the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, Arendt argues, presented us with an unprecedented form of government. In her essay ‘On the nature of totalitarianism: an essay in understanding’⁸ Arendt writes: “[Totalitarianism] exploded the very alternative on which definitions of the nature of government have relied since the beginning of Western political thought – the alternative between lawful, constitutional or republican government, on the one hand, and lawless, arbitrary, or tyrannical government on the other” (1994: 339). If totalitarianism as form of *government* explodes the difference between lawful and lawless, then I would argue that totalitarian *governance* explodes the difference between legal and illegal in order to produce the figure of the bureaucratised ‘a-legal’.

⁸ In *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, 1994 Schocken Books, New York.

How, then, to proceed with our extrapolation? The obvious similarity would be the extensive network of cameras and banks of monitors installed at UP over the past two years that allow security to observe nearly every movement made by its citizens. Beyond this obvious similarity and given the limitations of time, I can only very briefly consider the relevance of three other distinctive features of totalitarianism as identified by Arendt: terror, complicity and the misguided belief that everything is possible - including total control over the totality of things. I take them in turn.

In *Being and Time* (2008)⁹ Heidegger offers what I consider the most succinct definition of terror. He writes ‘If [that which threatens our existence] ... is laden with dread, and is at the same time encountered with the suddenness of the alarming, then fear becomes *terror*’ (2008: 182). All totalitarian forms of government have always understood the power of terror. The *locus classicus* of rule by terror is of course Stalin’s regime where the uncertainty and unpredictability of rule by terror played out in and through the binary of guilt and innocence. Under Stalin’s rule everyone was always already guilty. All that remained was to wait for the moment when you would be declared guilty – guilty of not displaying sufficient enthusiasm; guilty of not acting in the spirit of the collective; guilty of having capitalist desires: guilty therefore, of a range of sins that were impossible to disprove because the accusation itself was insubstantial and self-referential. I submit that this principle of rule by terror has over the past two years been institutionalised at UP through an Events committee that uses as its main criteria the similarly insubstantial and self-referential phrase ‘too political’. Here, as in any other form of totalitarianism, everyone is always already guilty of being ‘too political’ – it’s just a matter of time before you are found guilty of being ‘too political’. In both cases – guilt and being ‘too political’ – there is no way of contesting the accusation firstly because it means nothing and secondly because you are guilty by virtue of having been declared as such. In both cases the decision is arbitrary, and the content of the accusation self-referential or as Laclau would have it, ‘floating’ or ‘empty’. How does one defend oneself against the accusation of ‘not acting in the spirit of the collective?’ How does one defend oneself against the accusation of being ‘too political’? As with guilt, the secret power of the phrase ‘too political’ lies in the undecidability of its meaning and the unpredictability of its application: ‘too political’ means what authority says it means. That is what I mean by the ‘self-referentiality’ of the ‘empty signifier’. All it does, is

⁹ Heidegger, M. 2008 *Being and Time*. New York: HarperPerennial.

to confirm the power, not the authority, the *power* of the one who is in a position to determine its application.

The master trope that legitimises this rule of terror is the second-order empty signifier ‘security’ which, despite or perhaps precisely because of its emptiness, has come to play the role of an ‘ideology’: every action is reduced to, in order to be judged according to the extent to which it enhances or threatens ‘security’. In this regard Arendt comments: “...the ideological consistency of reducing everything to one all-dominating factor is always in conflict with the inconsistency of the world, on the one hand, and the unpredictability of human actions, on the other. Terror is needed in order to make the world consistent and keep it that way; to dominate human beings to the point where they lose, with their spontaneity, the specifically human unpredictability of thought and action’. (1994: 350). This leads us to the next question: How is such rule by terror sustained? Obviously through a number of mechanisms, strategies and policies that I cannot go into here. All I can very briefly explore is the second defining feature of totalitarian rule as identified by Arendt, namely *complicity*.

As Arendt comments, every two-bit tyrant has always understood and appreciated the value of a well distributed spy system in order to sustain itself. This is not exceptional: in democracies, monarchies and tyrannies alike it is simply referred to as ‘intelligence gathering’. But in totalitarian forms of government the idea of ‘spying’ or passing on ‘intelligence’ is radicalised so that it is no longer the spies who spy, it’s every citizen who spies on every other citizen. In that way complicity becomes a constituent element of citizenship as such. And this is how I interpret the executive’s suggestion that we, as a faculty, should form our own Events committee in order to pre-screen applications before they are to be submitted to what would then become the Mother of all Events Committees: it was an attempt to make us complicit. We were effectively asked to become *complicit* in our own self-policing; to become *complicit* in this whole a-legal enterprise, in the bureaucratised violation of academic freedom and the *de facto* limitation of our fundamental freedoms of speech and association in a way that is both unethical and anti-intellectual.

But complicity is only the most obvious mechanism through which totalitarian governance is sustained. More dangerous for being more insidious is a psychological mechanism so well documented by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-four*¹⁰ namely ‘doublethink’. I remind you of his definition:

¹⁰ George Orwell 1984. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin Books.

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The Party intellectual knows in which direction his memories must be altered; he therefore knows that he is playing tricks with reality; but by the exercise of *doublethink* he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated. The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt. ...[The] essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty. To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary ... Ultimately it is by means of *doublethink* that the Party has been able ... to arrest the course of history' (1984:183).

The everyday experience of institutional culture at UP is replete with acts of 'doublethink'; acts of double-think that are concealed by the empty signifiers they appeal to; acts of doublethink that we are all expected to commit in order not to let the cognitive dissonance that doublethink exists to conceal, bring on the 'apocalypse' - which etymologically means 'unveiling'. I have already identified one of these acts of doublethink: we are expected to feel safer *because of* the daily violation of academic and political freedoms – a cognitive dissonance concealed from us by the appeal to the empty signifier 'security'. A second act of doublethink is at work when this entire unethical and anti-intellectual enterprise is defended and legitimised by the need to defend the institution's reputation when, in fact, nothing has caused more damage to UP's reputation over the past two years than its reinvention as 'micro-state' accompanied the abandon with which we have taken to policing our own thoughts. In a third example of doublethink an attempt is made to increase our status as research intensive institution by paradoxically limiting academic freedom and stifling intellectual initiative – all of this, by an executive who, in Arendt's words, actively set out to 'dominate human beings to the point where they lose, with their spontaneity, the specifically human unpredictability of thought and action'. In the most recent example of doublethink, all academics at UP have received emails compelling us to sign the University's 'Code of Conduct'. In what world are academics expected to sign a university's 'Code of Conduct' if the same institution's executive systematically violates the university's 'Code of Ethics for Scholarly Activities'?

At this point, Mr Dean, please allow me a short digression. You are aware, I know, of an incident that took place on campus about two months ago when, after a three-hour seminar, I took ten of my honours students to the lawn in front of the Aula for a game of soccer. Thanks to our world class surveillance system, it took security precisely four minutes to arrive on the scene to inform us that we cannot play on the lawns because it poses a security risk to other students. This got me thinking about a domain that I know preciously little about, namely the psycho-social driving force of totalitarianism. What are they so afraid of, I asked myself? The answer, I eventually realised, was quite primordial: pleasure; the capacity to have fun. Totalitarian rulers rule *through* terror because they are, in turned, ruled *by* terror – in this case, the terror of pleasure. And they resent those who are not terrified of pleasure. Pleasure, they know, is the greatest threat to security because people will go to extraordinary lengths to enjoy themselves, to experience the good life. In that precise sense, pleasure is a revolutionary force and something that needs to be contained and repressed at all cost. On this point, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers another poignant insight. For those who have not read it, in Orwell's totalitarian dystopia, marriage is indeed allowed – but on one condition: that you do not love the person you are getting married to, because love is pleasure and pleasure is a revolutionary force. Writes Orwell:

‘The aim of the Party was not merely to prevent men and women from forming loyalties which it might not be able to control. Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure from the sexual act. Not love so much as eroticism was the enemy, inside marriage as well as outside it. All marriages between Party members had to be approved by a committee appointed for the purpose, and – though the principle was never clearly stated – permission was always refused if the couple concerned gave the impression of being physically attracted to one another ... Sexual intercourse was to be looked on as a slightly disgusting minor operation, like having an enema’ (1984: 60-61).

But I do need to start wrapping up. My point is this: in the University of Pretoria's securitised Chain of Being, academics have come to occupy a familiar place; a place which, in a world still enchanted by the sacred, used to be occupied by all human beings. Much like human beings in the Great Chain of Being we recognise in ourselves a desire to transcend our station, to be more than academics; to remain or become intellectuals, only to be told that our desire is but an impotent desire; a castrated longing; simply part of the paradox of what it means to be an academic at UP. The combination of ‘empty signifiers’ and ‘doublethink’ that stabilises

institutional culture at this university has effectively come to function as a secular version of the ‘ethics of prudent mediocrity’: an ‘ethics’ in as much as it defines what we ought to and ought not to do; ‘prudent’ because we are constantly being told that thinking poses a danger to our safety and that to suggest that we actually think and meet the political challenges of the moment head-on, amounts to a form of recklessness because in doing so we fail to prioritise the stability of the Chain over the pursuit of our narrow intellectual interests. Lastly, ‘mediocrity’ because the bureaucratised violation of academic freedom and the limitation of fundamental rights can only ever produce mediocrity. With that, I have finally reached my conclusion.

Conclusion:

We find ourselves in a moment of transition; a changing of the executive guard. This moment will give birth, in fact has already given birth, to contesting notions of legacy. On the one hand there are those who will point to an increase of UP’s ranking – of course, premised on the careful selection of which ranking system to use – and the fact that the institution is ‘financially stable’. But there are others, such as myself, who think that to frame legacy in terms of ranking and financial stability is but the final vengeful expression of depoliticization. I am left with no choice but to persist, right up until the last minute, in the task I set myself here, namely to insist on academic freedom, freedom of speech and to profess, as the etymology of the word ‘professor’ suggests, to speak ‘openly and freely’. I conclude, therefore, by articulating what I consider to be the most majestic *doublethink* that we are expected to commit at UP. Key to unlocking its meaning is ironically the word ‘transformation’ for it is my contention that under the present regime, this institution has been transformed into one where the executive now has the kind of totalitarian grip on the intellectual project that could never have been imagined under the stewardship of university managers during the apartheid era. Of course, they would never have needed to reach for totalitarian control because the entire state was run the way our micro-state is being run. That said and formulated in all the brutality that this moment calls for: the executive of this institution has responded to the call for the decolonisation of our institutions of higher learning by creating a micro-state that resembles nothing more than those failed micro-states of the apartheid imagination; an academic Homeland which now conducts all its activities under the meta signifier of Homeland security and no longer under the historical meta-signifier of the true university, namely the pursuit of academic freedom in the name of the common good.

I never did say anything about the third feature of totalitarian rule identified by Arendt, namely the misguided belief that everything is possible, that it is possible to control the totality

of things. She puts it so beautifully: ‘If Western philosophy has maintained that reality is truth ... then totalitarianism has concluded from this that we can fabricate truth insofar as we can fabricate reality ... This is the belief in the omnipotence of man ...; it is the belief that everything is permitted and, much more terrible, that everything is possible’ (1994: 354).

I can only imagine how this desire for total control which should be an enema – no sorry, *anathema* - to every true intellectual and university administrator, will play out in future. Somebody, somewhere is going to be called to task for the fact that I spoke as ‘openly and freely’ as I did tonight. And then there will be a flurry of new policies and amendments to existing policies – perhaps even an amendment to the constitution of the Events committee itself – aimed at total control over the inaugural that would make it impossible for future HoDs to speak with quite as much abandon. I can only end, then, with a melancholy apology to all future HoD’s who, as a consequence, may in future be expected to sign an affidavit declaring that the address approved by the Inaugural committee will be the same one they deliver. After all, it will be argued, making amendments is the prerogative of those far higher up the Chain of Being. But I also like to imagine this future HoD leaning over to sign the affidavit with her left hand behind her back, crossing her fingers in mock invalidation of her promise. To which the university will no doubt respond by installing more cameras to record future HoDs from all angles in the act of signing the affidavit; and to which future HoDs will respond ... and so on and so forth until the rabbit hole has bottomed out.

Mr Dean – I have taken up enough of everybody’s time. I suspect that much of my analysis of the moment will come as no surprise to a great many people and that all I’ve really managed to do was to articulate existing thoughts and to make explicit the implicit. But I have no qualms with such an evaluation for, after all, as Dame Iris Murdoch the British novelist and philosopher once famously put it: ‘philosophy is nothing but the sublime ability to state the obvious’. It’s been a pleasure.

Thank you.