

THE DESTRUCTION & ORIGINS OF KNOWLEDGE

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There are a number of problems within the academic academy. In his article, Pitt points to the difficulty of both institutions and individual scholars maintaining loyalty to each other as one of the major problems. Universities represent a community of scholars who are embedded within communities of schools, programs, and departmental disciplines. In this essay I am interested in pursuing two ideas that Pitt introduces though these are not his original ideas and may not be ideas he invests in himself. The first is that scholars are the "guardians of knowledge." The second is notion that there is a tradition stemming from "guardians of our cultural heritage" that the university itself and the scholars within need uphold "our cultural heritage".⁴²

When reading the phrases such as "our cultural heritage" and "guardians of knowledge" one must pause to ask some questions. The first would be whose culture and whose knowledge do universities and scholars guard?⁴³ Looking at the canon of disciplines within the Western University we find that the "tradition" consists overwhelmingly of white privileged European men. While there is much to learn from

⁴² Joseph Pitt, "On the Idea of the University."

⁴³ Balibar, Etienne. "Difference, Otherness, Exclusion." *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005): 19.; Collins, Patricia Hill. "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development* 26, no. 1 (1999): 85-88.; Harding, Sandra.

the canonical texts they do not provide an accurate representation of U.S. culture today, much less university culture in the 21st century.

There is an odour of nostalgia that whiffs up from the call for preservation and protection of "our" intellectual and cultural heritage. A beckoning to a past in which institutions and scholars presented a united front of loyalty and therefore were better able to fulfil their roles in society is misleading, in that it turns to a fictional utopic like past. This is especially true given that universities have long been sites of exchange between various cultures. A great deal of what is thought to be products of a pure "Western" imagination are borrowed from elsewhere.⁴⁴ By adhering to "tradition" many universities have created climates of stagnation in which neither the scholar nor the university are able to sustain each other in a meaningful or sustainable way.

To understand some of my concerns one must ask the second question; what does it mean to be a guardian of knowledge? Is knowledge something that needs protecting from loss or degradation? The history of human knowledge is in fact a history of loss, augmentation and abandonment. People have lost knowledge of events and histories that were deemed unsuitable for Western scholarship. Artefacts have been destroyed; family histories buried with the dead, libraries torched (such as the ancient Library of Alexandria) all leading to a loss of knowledge. From time to time knowledge has been updated as our tools for discovery allow us to see in ways that were never before imaginable.

Editor. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004; Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1979.

⁴⁴ Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Within the university disciplines often work to promote a certain canon of authors and a certain reading of the canonical texts. Philosophers at one university might interpret Hegel differently than philosophers at another university, and philosophers and historians will likely read Hegel differently. This situation can create a problem within a particular discipline, as it tends to make academics ruthless protectors of knowledge so much so that anyone who disagrees is shut out. In the contemporary disciplinary “silo-style” system, we must remember that knowledge in any cultural context has never remained static.

There was a point in time in which Western scholars believed firmly that the sun revolved around the earth. As instruments came about to increase human vision, it was discovered to be a false belief. Copernicus challenged tradition and knowledge when he argued that the earth was not the center of the known universe, and his ideas changed the way humans understand the solar system and lead to the rejection of a Geocentric universe. No canon of knowledge has managed to protect itself completely from outside influences or challenges to the current accepted wisdom.

It is here that we find Pitt's cautionary tale about arrogance and egotism playing out in the field of knowledge. The notion that what one knows is, has, and always will be correct or worth knowing is a danger to the ability of universities and individual scholars to fulfil the role of creators of knowledge. History has shown that knowledge is deepened when conflicting voices are not shut out, but are taken seriously and studied. No one should feel intellectually distained or discredited for having a different methodology or subject interest than what the current canon or tradition allows. For example, talking to an “analytic” philosopher can be nearly impossible, in terms of

scholarship and interest, from a "continental" point of view. Any attitudes that dismiss a scholar or their intellectual outlook without engaging in an open debate based upon respect and with a view towards furthering future inquiry on the part of all involved participants is harmful to scholars and universities alike.

While there is nothing wrong with confidence in your research, there is a big problem when one excludes someone who is interested in research you are not interested in, or research that promotes ideas you do not embrace. All of which brings us back to the problem of community. People are more likely to remain loyal to any given place if they feel they are part of a community. If the individual scholars within a university do not respect each other as scholars, how can they form any community? An institution that does not make a concerted effort to provide room for academic debate or dissonance within departments and schools fails to create an atmosphere in which ideas can flourish and new knowledge can be produced. This is particularly strange given the Western universities penchant for the Hegelian model in which knowledge is generated from the synthesis of opposing ideas.

Using the term "our cultural heritage" registers this problem in insightful ways. Is there one monolithic culture that is represented by the Western university? Perhaps yes if one considers white Judaeo-Christian European men have always, in the West, dominated the academy. However there is considerable evidence that European scholars as far back as Plato and Aristotle have been influenced by ideas coming from Africa, Asia and South America.⁴⁵ With the contemporary proliferation of electronic

⁴⁵ Bhabha, "Nation and Narration" in *Nation and Narration*. 1st ed. Routledge, 1990; Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*. 1st ed. Chicago: L. Hill, 1974;

methods of near-instantaneous communication, it seems safe to assume that the possibility of intellectual cross-pollination is more likely than at any other point in human history. It is in this moment that we, as scholars working in different fields and around the world, should not continue to perpetuate exclusionary and reified practices, but to reach across boundaries to shift our very understanding of what knowledge is, and how it can be re-envisioned as we move into the future.

The students in today's Western university come from many different places and cultures, as do the scholars teaching and researching within.⁴⁶ Non-Western people have become part of academic culture and this has made scholarship richer and more nuanced. When speaking of "our" culture it is important to remember that "ours" includes "theirs," and that the academic culture that exists today in Western universities is not a monumental European edifice of scholarship. Grasping so fervently for the mythic past causes one to often lose sight of the reality of the present, while shutting out important contributions to knowledge from opposing perspectives.

People want to stay in universities, schools, and departments when they feel respected and welcomed as part of an intellectual community. If the contemporary Western university and scholars are to successfully build an "academic community," respect for knowledge for sources that one is unfamiliar with will be the foundation upon which this community must be built. Where knowledge is concerned, the only way forward is to invest in communities which are rich in diverse methodologies, questions, and perspectives.

⁴⁶Ree, Jonathan. "Cosmopolitanism and the Experience of Nationality." In *Cosmopolitanism: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, edited by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, 77-90. Minneapolis: Social Text Collective.