

Tilburg University

Displacing the Young in the Neoliberal University

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Displacing the Young in the Neoliberal University

An Exchange on Atopia

TILBURG, FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Dear Michiel,

By way of an opening volley, let me share the following considerations on the topic of *Utopias in Higher Education*.

1. The invitation mentions that *Utopia* was famously coined by Thomas More in 1516 and is taken to mean either ‘no place’ (*ou topos*) or ‘good place’ (*eu topos*). Although More inclined towards the latter, what interests me is that, as a classical scholar, he must have known that neither exists in ancient Greek. What does exist, as More probably also knew, are *atopos* and its (rare) derivation *atopia*. Literally ‘without place’ or ‘deprived of place’, it is often used to denote something that is out of place, predominantly in a negative sense: extraordinary, odd, strange, absurd, wicked, or even monstrous. It appears to imply that being-in-place is the desirable, orderly, comfortable, stable, and safe condition. By contrast, *atopos*

is associated with disorder, discomfort, instability, and danger and, as such, is to be avoided.¹

2. This may explain why More decided to neologize, as he was concerned with discussing “the best state of a commonwealth” as “a place of felicitie” (More, n.d.). Nonetheless, I think that inquiring into the meaning and function of *utopia* in and for higher education may require us to first probe the meaning of *atopia*. If only, thinking of a good or better place than the place we find ourselves in is only possible if we allow ourselves to be displaced first.
3. Higher education involves displacement in different ways and on different levels. To begin with, from the historical beginning of formal education, students have been required to leave the place where they were born and bred, and to travel to attend institutions of learning, where they were turned into one and the same direction (*uni-versitas*) and led out (*e-ducere*) of their accustomed ways of thinking and acting. Second, the confrontation with unfamiliar texts challenges their opinions, values, priorities, biases, and prejudices, and thus invites them to leave the safe and familiar confines of their own minds to inhabit other minds. Leaving your comfort zone can be unsettling and frightening, but this atopic experience is a necessary condition for exploring other places.
4. The displacing and displaced dimension of higher education becomes visible in the figure of Socrates. Throughout Plato’s dialogues, he is often described as *atopos*, strange and uncanny. As any reader of Plato cannot fail to notice, both his appearance and his behavior are strange and disconcerting: never at home or at work, unkempt and with a piercing gaze, his odd questions disorient his interlocutors to the point of *aporia* or “having no way to turn to”. More often than not, they find themselves as displaced as their interrogator, who appears quite at home in his homelessness (Plato, *Symposium*, 203b-e). For Bernhard Waldenfels, this homelessness is characteristic of the

¹ It is interesting to note that, where *atopos* is an adjective that is never used as a noun, *topos* is a noun that is never used as an adjective.

properly examined life, and thus of the university dedicated to its pursuit:

“Der Topos der Universität trägt die Züge einer eigentümlichen *Atopie*, gleich Sokrates, der von Platon als *atopos*, also als ortlos, auch als seltsam bezeichnet wird. Sokrates gilt zwar als ordentlicher athenischer Bürger, aber nicht ganz und gar, da er die Standards, die der Lebensweise seiner Mitbürger zugrunde liegen, mit einem permanenten Fragezeichen versieht und da er, wie ihm vor Gericht vorgeworfen wird, die Jugend vom rechten Weg abführt. [...]. Daran zeigt sich der Risikocharakter aller Institutionen, die auf keinem unerschütterlichen Grund stehen. Übersieht man den riskanten Charakter einer Institution wie der Universität, so endet die Ortssuche bei bloßen Haushaltsdebatten.” (Waldenfels 2009, 13)

5. In this way, Socratic *atopia* may also function as a corrective: in its pursuit of utopia, the university should avoid risk-aversity and keep its foundations shakable.

Best wishes,

David

AMSTERDAM, FEBRUARY II, 2023

Hi David,

Thank you for opening this conversation on the “atopic” features of the university, which I’ll continue in a similar aphoristic style. It may not surprise you that I’d like to bring in a materialist perspective, picking up on what you write about homelessness.

1. When thinking about homelessness and the university, my mind first turns to the homelessness of some of our students. Between 2014 and 2022, Tilburg University expanded its student body from 12.000 to a whopping 20.000 (Smout, 2022). In a city where almost ten percent of the households are student households (Van der Meer, 2018), this explosive expansion has had a tremendous impact on housing in the city, especially because it took place against the background of a more general housing crisis, and because student housing seems to have been no more than a secondary concern in the university’s expansion plans. This development has placed many students in very precarious positions: horror stories about slumlords abound. I would imagine that it has also had an impact on low-income Tilburgers who are not affiliated with the university and who may suffer from gentrification.
2. The student housing crisis has been affecting Dutch students very differently than international students. The vast majority of Tilburg University’s Dutch students comes from the region, and these students often stay in the homes and towns where they grew up and commute to the university. When they do move to Tilburg, many of them live and associate primarily with other Dutch students, despite the fact that almost a quarter of Tilburg University students comes from abroad (Smout). Indeed, it is horrifying to see how many advertisements for new roommates specify, in capitals, **DUTCH ONLY**. Far from letting themselves be “led out” of their accustomed ways of thinking and acting, these Dutch students build homes that

solidify rather than question their citizenship privilege and their class privilege. My guess would be that it is mostly white middle and upper middle class Dutch students who move out of their parents' house during their studies: Dutch working class and lower middle class students and Dutch students with a "migration background" different from the colonizing migration background of their white peers, most of whom do not enroll in our university but in the university of applied sciences down the block or in "vocational" schools, probably do not generally move out of their parents' homes until after graduation and/or until they move in with a partner or start a family of their own. Furthermore, because the university's rapid expansion coincided with the abolition of the universal national student scholarship or *basisbeurs* in 2015, most students spend a substantial amount of their time working low-wage, precarious jobs instead of studying or enjoying student life.

3. International students may be a better contemporary example of the historical practice that you mention, of students being "required to leave the place where they were born and bred, and to travel to attend institutions of learning." International students, many of whom come from Eastern Europe, primarily come to the Netherlands because Dutch universities offer higher education in English at a lower cost than the United Kingdom and its former colonies in the Global North. However, in their admission interviews for our University College, some prospective students also mention their desire to leave the socially conservative "accustomed ways of thinking and acting" of their home countries, and to move to a country that has a reputation for being "liberal." I wonder, however, to what extent the university challenges their "accustomed ways of thinking and acting." To put it very crudely: if today's world is dominated by neoliberalism and by a social conservatism that reacts against this neoliberalism, to what extent are the international students who are deliberately "leading themselves out" of the social conservatism of their home countries challenging, instead of simply embracing and reinforcing neoliberalism? To what extent has the contemporary "global" university transformed itself into an "atopic"

space for the cultivation of a global class of “expat” “professionals” who are trained to feel at home in their homelessness, following capital while hopping around between European cities, speaking an “atopic” “global” English without learning “local” languages, gentrifying neighborhoods, socializing only with other expats, and not participating in any form of politics?

4. If we take a Marxist perspective on the issue, our hope for a critical question mark on this arguably *atopic* way of life may be that many of our students are so poor that they spend more time working low-paid, precarious jobs than they spend on their studies, which may in fact generate fundamental critical insights. For instance, I was happy to see that one of our students used her experience as a delivery worker and union organizer as a basis for her bachelor thesis in labor law.
5. The question I want to pose to you, then, is how the idea of a Socratic *atopia* that you propose the university cultivates relates to the neoliberal *atopia* of the global university as a gentrifying institution that causes actual homelessness, encourages students to work low-wage jobs for several years, encourages “utopian” all-Dutch, all-white, all-bourgeois student homes and fraternities, and forges a global class of *atopic*, depoliticized “expats”? Shouldn’t we be fighting *against* the university’s *atopic* tendencies, and for an engagement with its actual locality? Shouldn’t our struggle for a critical university begin, for instance, by smashing the turnstiles that are intended to keep people from the working-class neighborhood next to the campus, and students from Tilburg’s other, less prestigious universities and vocational schools out of the university library?

best,

Michiel

TILBURG, FEB. 19, 2023

Dear Michiel,

Thanks for a trenchant rejoinder and a thought-provoking challenge – I’m happy to pick up the gauntlet. I’d like to argue that there is a considerable difference between Socratic *atopia* and neoliberal *atopia* when it comes to thinking about what a university is, what it could be and what it should be.

1. The clearest way to do so is to take my bearings in the words of Bernhard Waldenfels I quoted at the end of my first instalment. Waldenfels points to the “risk character of all institutions, which do not stand on unshakable ground. If one overlooks the risky character of an institution like the university, the search for a place ends in mere budget debates.” When I consider the inordinate amount of time and effort universities such as ours devote to budget debates regarding research and teaching (not to mention real estate), Waldenfels’s warning looks more like a prediction that has long come true. In many respects, universities are intensely preoccupied with minimizing risk and securing their foundations (which have become barely distinguishable from funding). Research applications that can’t boast time-tested methods and guaranteed outcomes are not even taken seriously. Those that are find themselves subjected to stringent and elaborate procedures and endless review cycles set up to avert failure. Teaching methods and courses are increasingly designed to be teacher-proof, to minimize the risk that learning outcomes should fail to match learning goals and students’ efforts should fail to be commodified into ECTS (Bennett, 2013; Blake, Smeyers and Standish, 2003, 197-198; Werler 2016). On both counts, a petrifying fear of making the wrong move seems to have replaced Socratic *atopia* and the search for a place.
2. In many of your observations on the predicament of students, I recognize a similar risk aversity and anxiety. “Dutch only” policies

avoid discomfort and make sure the institutional foundations of class privilege are never shaken. Meanwhile, the quest of international students for a place – physical as well as academic – too often turns out to have ended before it has properly started: many of those who do manage to find housing then enter ‘safe’ programs and career events that promise a high salary at the price of not challenging the neoliberal status quo. By extension, the life of the job-hopping global professional displays the same risk-free immobility in the same non-descript office rooms around the world. And turnstiles in the university library – now largely emptied of books – minimize the risk of awkward and potentially subversive encounters: formerly a public space that encouraged visitors to wander and discover, the library has been privatized and parceled into individual work cubicles.

3. Viewed in this light, the neoliberal *atopia* you decry strongly reminds me of Max Weber’s famous description of capitalism as an “iron cage” (rather a “steel casing” - *ein stahlhartes Gehäuse*), governed by the spiritual heir of religious asceticism: “Der siegreiche Kapitalismus jedenfalls bedarf, seit er auf mechanischer Grundlage ruht, dieser Stütze nicht mehr. Auch die rosige Stimmung ihrer lachenden Erbin: der Aufklärung, scheint endgültig im Verbleichen und als ein Gespenst ehemals religiöser Glaubensinhalte geht der Gedanke der »Berufspflicht« in unserm Leben um.” (Weber, 1905) Like many other institutions, the university has largely become part and parcel of the iron cage and its instrumental rationality. Neoliberalism may have been successful in pimping it with ergonomic desks, a coffee corner, charging sockets and neuromarketing tweaks, but many of our students, rich and poor, bourgeois and working-class alike, are caught in the headlights of “the idea of professional duty”, entranced and immobilized, with no time to blush or laugh. Thus, the frenzy of neoliberal *atopia* points towards *akinesia*, as per Weber’s remarkably prescient forecast: “[...] jenen mächtigen Kosmos der modernen, an die technischen und ökonomischen Voraussetzungen mechanisch-maschineller Produktion gebundenen, Wirtschaftsordnung erbauen, der heute den Lebensstil aller einzel-

nen, die in dies Triebwerk hineingeboren werden – nicht nur der direkt ökonomisch Erwerbstätigen –, mit überwältigendem Zwange bestimmt und vielleicht bestimmen wird, bis der letzte Zentner fossilen Brennstoffs verglüht ist.” (Weber, 1905)

4. Is there any room for Socratic *atopia* in the iron cage? There’s plenty of reason to be doubtful: even if Socrates would manage to make it through the turnstiles without being intercepted by security, I’m not sure he would succeed in making himself heard to the duty-bound (many of whom wear headphones to boot). Thus, freeing our students – and ourselves – from the *fascinans ac tremendum* of duty would seem to be the primary challenge. I agree with you that this requires combating the real inequities of neoliberalism and capitalism on all levels and making sure that all students have the necessary *scholè* to school themselves. However, I’m not sure that material and financial security will suffice. Precisely if and when it succeeds in weaning our students away from the thrall of duty and instrumental rationality, the need for *goal* rationality, already acute, will be greater than ever. Perhaps this is where Socratic *atopia* may prove to be particularly powerful. Socrates’s eccentric philosophical *praxis* made young members of the Athenian elite question their own way of life and its underlying norms and values and raise the question of the good life. This made them – not to mention their parents – acutely uncomfortable and disoriented, such that Socrates was eventually executed for “corrupting”, “ruining” or “destroying” (*diaphtheirô*) the young” (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 24b). As we speak, several places in the world are enacting legislation curtailing critical questioning in education, allegedly in order “to protect the young”, but in fact to secure the social, political, and economic *status quo* of the iron cage and to save the idea of duty.² Socratic *atopia* may be helpful in making us wonder if the cage might not rather be a *cave*, and if duty might not be the fetters we have fashioned for ourselves. In the looming shadow of planetary destruction, destroying may

² E.g., Hungary and Russia, as well as of certain states in the US.

well be what the young now need most, and there, I think, lies a task for the university.

Best wishes,

David

AMSTERDAM, FEBRUARY 23, 2023

Hi David,

Thank you for these subversive thoughts.

1. Your comments about immobility and the iron cage are to the point. But I'd like to return to what you wrote in your first email, about Socrates feeling at home in his homelessness. Isn't the point of liberal arts education also to provide a home, or perhaps rather a shelter or a refuge, for the displacing and displaced dimension of higher education that you mention? A hospitable "safe space" where we can engage in the "eccentric" practice of radical questioning *together*, leaning on some institutional - and financial - stability?
2. I'm using the term "safe space" provocatively, because my sense is that the white bourgeois men who are obsessed with this concept, "arguing" that the alleged calls for safe spaces by students are destroying critical thinking in the university, are actually the ones entrenching themselves in safe spaces for *uncritical* thinking, fearing the shaking of the "centrist" foundations of their privilege, displacement from their central place in the "knowledge economy" in which they themselves feel unproblematically at home.
3. Libraries are often also shelters and safe spaces for the unhoused, or *daklozen*, "roofless," as they are referred to in Dutch, a population that has doubled in size in the Netherlands in a mere decade. (Waarlo, 2021) Many homeless shelters only provide shelter during nighttime, and libraries are some of the very few places where the unhoused can spend a few hours indoors during the daytime, go to the bathroom, and interact with fellow city dwellers, not as objects of pity or disgust, but as fellow library patrons, rather than making themselves invisible in the streets. Your remark about the displacement of the books from the library is also to the point: by way of compromise between the librarians and the (no doubt vulgar) Platonic anti-book ideology that has also infected our university, which reduces books to outdated

carriers of information that is more easily accessed in “the cloud,” the remaining books in our university library have now been put in electronically movable stacks. These stacks have been out of order every time I visited, but even if they would work, the displacement of books into this giant (and I’d fear physically dangerous) machine prevents chance encounters with books that simply catch your eye when you are studying or working in what used to be called reading rooms. I can immediately recall a lot of examples from the reading rooms where I found a place to read and write as a student and as a researcher, from the “public” libraries in my parents’ town, in Amsterdam, and in Brooklyn to the small subject libraries of the University of Amsterdam that were scattered throughout the city center of Amsterdam before the university sold their prettiest buildings to hotel chains.

4. I’d like to conclude by suggesting another way to relate the Socratic practice of eccentric thinking to displacement, inspired by your irreverence, by thinking of this practice as a practice of profanation. I borrow this concept from Giorgio Agamben, who borrows it in turn from Roman jurists who use it as the opposite of consecration or sacralization. Whereas to consecrate or sacrifice something meant to displace it from the human sphere and make it available exclusively for use by the gods, profanation returned these things to the human sphere and made them available again for human use. It may be the case that only some of us are true believers in academic fetishes such as the exchange value of ECTS (by the way, did you know that the Academic Forum provides certificates with credits for attending extracurricular events, so that students can put their attendance on their CVs?!), or the fetish of “innovation” (a good illustration of the frantic paralysis you describe, since innovation generally comes down to forking over university funds to big tech companies while forcing university workers to learn ever more new software skills in their free time). However, we all find ourselves taking these fetishes seriously sometimes nevertheless. Can the displacing and displaced dimension of the university that you call attention to perhaps lie in profanation, in irreverently touching, ridiculing, displacing, and

indeed destroying the fetishes of the temple - or iron cage or cave - of the neoliberal university? The point of smashing the turnstiles in the library would then, for example, not only be an act of destruction, but also an act of returning to use, of commoning and making worldly what had been sacrificed to capital?

best,

Michiel

TILBURG, MARCH 2, 2023

Dear Michiel,

Thanks again for a challenging reply. I'll focus on what I think is its core concern: how can we restore the university (including the library), not just as a common space, but also as a home for critical thinking and radical questioning together?

1. Given the diagnostic that has emerged from our exchange so far, it looks like a daunting task: in many respects contemporary universities have become "multiversities" organized and constructed to *dissociate* rather than to associate students and staff (Grant, 1975). Even in seminars and workshops, where students are physically together and invited to freely probe and query, one can't help noticing a strong sense of awkwardness, anxiety and isolation induced by Weber's professional duty: "Am I doing the right thing in the right way?" It goes without saying that instructors and administrators are similarly affected.
2. How can we shake our students and ourselves free from this spell? I agree with you that an excellent way to disenchant the university and remind it of its origins as an *atopia* may be irreverence, profanation or even *secularization*, which originally designated the desacralization of church property and its return to secular, civil use. Indeed, physically challenging the topography of the university can be very effective: undoing the standard arrangement of tables and chairs in rows and rearranging them into a square so that students face each other helps significantly in turning a seminar room into a proper common space (needless to say I've been scolded by university officials for the disruption). On the same note, it's interesting to note that the same university that had no qualms in erecting individual student cubicles put up stiff resistance when its budding Liberal Arts and Sciences program tried to organize a common room where its students could meet and study together.
3. However, we shouldn't hesitate to combine such material chal-

lenges with irreverence and profanation on the mental and cognitive level. The Cynic philosopher Diogenes used his own body in many ways to shock his fellow citizens and to “deface the currency”, to question the conventional values that held them captive (Diogenes Laertius, par. 20-21). His predecessor Socrates invariably used eccentric behavior and all manner of rhetorical devices to befuddle his interlocutors in order to guide them to a point where they suddenly realize they’re facing a genuine question. Socrates’s pupil Plato used his skill as a dramatist to allow his readers-spectators to share in this eccentric and atopic experience. In the *Republic*, we watch Socrates pursue the best regime in an all-night discussion in the Piraeus, outside of Athens. He and his friends had been promised a proper dinner, but they completely forget about their physical needs as they are carried away by Socrates’s enchanting rhetoric. By the end of the dialogue, we suddenly realize that the best regime has been there all along under our noses, hiding in plain sight: it’s the small atopic community itself of Socrates and his interlocutors, gathered around the question of justice. In this way, Socrates and Plato seem to suggest that, in the end, thinking and radical questioning may be the only thing we can *really* have in common. When Heraclitus - no stranger to eccentricity and iconoclastic irreverence - proposes that “thinking is shared (*xunos*) by all” (Heraclitus, 1903, 113 DK) he inserts a pun that is sounded only in another fragment: “Speaking with mind (*xun noôî*) they must hold fast to what is shared (*xunos*) by all, as a city holds to its law, and even more firmly” (Heraclitus, 1903, 114 DK). So yes, we are in need of safe spaces where the firm hold of the city and its law – our cage and cave – can be loosened, as we learn to hold more firmly to what we *truly* share by speaking and thinking “with mind”. If liberal arts education wants to respond to that need, its representatives shouldn’t be afraid of being provocative, perplexing, of afflicting the comfortable while comforting the afflicted (Dunne, 1902, 240), in a word, of being *atopos*.

Best wishes,
David

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