With or without U? Assemblage theory and (de)territorialising the university

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ABSTRACT
Contemporary changes in the domain of knowledge production are usually seen as posing significant challenges to 'the University'. This paper argues against the framing of the university as an ideal-type, and considers epistemic gains from treating universities as assemblages (e.g. DeLanda, M. 2016. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) of different functions, actors and relations. It contrasts this with the concept of 'unbundling', using two recent cases of controversies around academics' engagement on social media to show how, rather than having clearly delineated limits, social entities become 'territorialised' through boundary disputes. The conclusion extends this discussion to the production of knowledge about social objects in general.

End of universities?

There seems to be far-reaching consensus that universities across the globe are undergoing a transformation. Many critics have equated this with the 'crisis', or even 'death' of universities (e.g. Collini 2012, 2017; Docherty 2015; Eagleton 2015; Evans 2004; Readings 1996; Thomas 2011; Wright and Shore 2017). Michael Burawoy summarised it in following terms:

> The university is in crisis, almost everywhere. In the broadest terms, the university's position as simultaneously inside and outside society – as both a participant in and an observer of society (always precarious) – has been eroded. With the exception of a few hold-outs the ivory tower has gone (Burawoy 2011).

There are different elements of this crisis. Among the most frequently mentioned is the reconfiguration of the relationship between the universities and the state, primarily reflected in the changing framework of public funding for higher education and research. In this context, universities are increasingly expected to compete for a share of the budget allocated on the basis of their performance, usually measured as a combination of research output and capacity to attract external funding – with sources ranging from tuition fees, across governmental and industry research grants, to stocks and real estate (Naidoo 2003). This, in turn, is identified with the broader shift to neoliberalism as the ideological underpinning of policies regulating the production as well as provision of services (Brown 2011).

Transformation of the relationship between universities and the state, in turn, should be seen as part of the broader reconfiguration of the space of political power in the late 20th and early twenty-first century (e.g. Sum and Jessop 2013). Intensification of trade in services and the inclusion of education in GATS also led to the increase of relevance of trans- and sub-national agreements, bodies and institutions. For instance, European Union's flagship Erasmus programme and the Bologna Process were developed with the idea of increasing the appeal of Europe as a destination for foreign

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students. However, they also enabled a whole new host of actors – the European Commission, the European University Association, Education International, etc. – to exercise influence over higher education, which had hitherto been the exclusive domain of national-level policy-making (e.g. Nokkala and Bacevic 2014; Robertson 2010; Robertson, Bonal, and Dale 2002). This (at least partial) deregulation of higher education has also led to the growth of private providers and the field of transnational education, with universities from global centres building 'franchise' campuses, usually in developing countries. The constitution of new actors in the higher education arena, in this sense, cannot be extricated from the reconfiguration of the concepts of state, space and territory in the context of global capitalism.

Digital technologies play a substantial role in these processes. In early 2000s, so-called MOOCs (massive online open courses) were trumpeted as offering new possibilities of 'disembedding' knowledge from specific spatial contexts (Watters 2013). Of course, models of distance or blended learning are not particularly new. However, for enthusiasts, the spread and availability of digital technologies, combined with their capacity to circumvent traditional credentialising pathways still firmly lodged within the nation-state, held the promise of a 'democratisation' of knowledge on a previously unknown scale (Watters 2014). This idea has to be located within a broader ideology of 'openness' that sees free flows of data, information, and knowledge, as ways of erasing or at least 'disrupting' global social and economic inequalities in the 'knowledge economy' (cf. Bacevic and Muellerleile 2018). On the other hand, even authors who doubt the emancipatory potential of digital technologies often emphasise the ways in which they have reframed the processes of creation of knowledge and value, giving rise to the concept of 'platform capitalism' as a discrete and latest stage in the development of global economy (Bratton 2016; Hall 2016; Srnicek 2016).

Terminological differences aside, what is certain is that universities are now operating in a substantially different spatial and political environment that the one that gave rise to the metaphor of the 'ivory tower'. This poses substantial questions concerning how we conceive of mechanisms that shape and determine their role and relationship with different societies. This is particularly important given that, if we accept the sociological premise that higher education – like any form of social practice – both shapes and is shaped by social dynamics, it makes little sense to frame universities as static objects on the receiving end of these changes. Social institutions evolve and change; understanding the process and implications of these changes requires a more dynamic model of the interaction between universities and their environment than afforded by catchy terms such as 'multi'- or 'pluri-versity' (Kerr 2001 [1963]; Shore 2010).

The main objective of this article is to develop an account of the transformation of universities that recognises the dynamic and ambiguous nature of institutions in contemporary capitalism. This requires departing from the politically potent but ultimately theoretically vacuous image of the university savaged by the combined forces of capital and technology, and seeing the transformation of universities as part and parcel of new economies, ecologies, and geographies of knowledge production. In order to speed up this departure, the article reframes the university using assemblage theory. Initially developed in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, assemblage theory has been substantially reworked by authors such as Bruno Latour (2005), Michael Callon (1998), Graham Harman (2016) and Manuel DeLanda (2006, 2016); see also Latour, Harman, and Erdélyi 2011). The present article predominantly draws on the theory as elaborated in DeLanda (2016), which offers the most useful lens for thinking through processes of change in complex organisations.

The article begins by offering a broad sketch of the ontological tenets of assemblage theory. Assemblage theory has gained popularity in the recent years, with a lot of writing dedicated to discussing its details and implications of different framings for understanding everything from the development of urban infrastructures, to yeast, to the cultural economy of branding. Rather than retrace the intricacies of these discussions, the article will focus on its application to the sociological study of the creation of objects, meanings, and boundaries, and, in particular, the epistemological implications of this shift for understanding processes of change. In order to do the latter, it will contrast assemblage theory with the concept of 'unbundling', a related yet theoretically distinct framing

recently applied to the transformation of knowledge production (McCowan 2017; Robertson and Komljenovic 2016). Through this, the article will emphasise the value of assemblages, and related concepts such as territorialisation and coding, for understanding how global and local processes intersect and interact in the context of entities such as universities.

To illustrate the usefulness of this form of theoretical framework, the article offers an analysis of processes of 're-territorialisation'. Looking at two relatively recent controversies surrounding academics' activity on social media, it will show how through such 'boundary cases' universities become newly visible, or, in the vocabulary of assemblage theory, reterritorialised. In the end, these cases will be used to reflect on the broader implications of different forms of theoretical framing for understanding processes of change in higher education and beyond.

Assemblage theory and higher education

The major contribution of DeLanda's social ontology is a processual view of the constitution of social entities considered to be legitimate agents. Assemblages, in this view, are irreducible social wholes composed of heterogeneous elements. Some of these elements are persons, but some are buildings, machines, trees, animals, etc. Armies, nation-states, and universities are all composed of such entities. Rather than as a stable or bounded entity, an agent can thus be thought of as a network or 'bundle' of objects, persons, and relations, which change over time (DeLanda 2016, 11). However, this doesn't imply that 'agents' are purely placeholders or completely random agglomerations; DeLanda argues that the moment an object is 'assembled' it begins to exercise emergent properties, constraining as well as enabling its components. This shifts the question from how elements of an entity relate to each other to the question of how they come to be defined or taken as elements of that entity; in other words, from *interiority* to *exteriority* of relations (DeLanda 2006, 11–12).

Assemblages, in this sense, exercise agency not by the virtue of their internal composition, but because of the way in which their composition interacts with their environment. Two parameters that DeLanda (following Deleuze and Guattari 1987) argues are relevant are the degree of territorialisation and deterritorialization; and the degree of coding and decoding. Territorialisation refers to the degree to which elements of an entity are bound together – not only in space, but also through homogenisation. DeLanda offers examples of tightly-knit communities. In the case of universities, we could say the early 'monastic' communities of Oxford and Cambridge were highly territorialised, and their components quite homogenous: there was little difference in class, background, or gender, amongst teachers and between teachers and students. Coding, on the other hand, refers to the *expressive* components of an assemblage: language (DeLanda 2016, 22) but also rituals and other forms of mixed or non-verbal communication, which are shared among members but often obscure to non-members. Highly formalised assemblages, then, tend to come with a higher degree of coding; language and non-verbal behaviour will usually be defined or prescribed, and will serve to visibly distinguish between components of an assemblage and those who do not 'belong'.

Territorialisation, in this sense, is any process that gives a social interaction well-defined borders in space and time. Establishing a university through a royal charter, defining its governing bodies, and designating a specific building as 'Computer lab' are all processes of territorialisation. Deterritorializing, on the other hand, includes any process that decreases density, promotes geographical dispersion, or eliminates certain rituals (DeLanda 2016, 30). In this sense, the development of franchise campuses or outsourcing of teaching to contract-based providers can all be seen as processes of deterritorialization. However, it is important to bear in mind that though in practice this may often turn out to be the case, neither of the processes *necessarily* involves spatial (de)concentration: they are rather different ways of capturing change, including change in the object, or entities, that the social world is composed of.

The processes of territorialisation and deterritorialization address the questions of social change akin to those covered by concepts such as morphogenesis and morphostasis (Archer 1982, 2013), structuration (Giddens 1984), or, in a broader sense, the idea of dissolving structures of modernity

expressed in the concept of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 1999). Yet, assemblage theory does not assume society is composed of specific types of entities, such as persons, structures, or institutions. Thus, rather than observing change in specific structures and institutions, assemblage theory starts from the assumption that there is no necessary or 'natural' form of an institution; rather, the boundaries of entities are constituted and then extended or 'stretched' through historical and social processes. Tracing how far and in what direction this 'stretching' can go before the institution (or another entity) stops exercising agential powers, including over its components, is one of the key questions for assemblage theory. 'Territorialisation' and 'deterritorialization', thus, refer to forces at play in this process of extension and contraction.

This is particularly relevant as most current diagnoses of the crisis of the university are often based a highly abstract, idealised, and – not least – historically, geographically and culturally specific notion of the university. This is sometimes referred to as the Humboldtian model, presupposing the unity of teaching and research, close contact between teachers and students, and a high degree of university autonomy and academic freedom: in other words, support from but relatively little control by the state. Differently put, this model of the university is highly *territorialised*, integrated yet comfortably insulated from its environment – as Burawoy put it, both 'in' and 'outside' society. Consequently, all forms of reterritorialization are seen as a threat, end, or, indeed, 'death' of the university. The problem with this line of reasoning is not only that, as Ash notes (2006), it is doubtful to what degree this idealised Humboldtian notion of the university ever existed. While understandably appealing from a political and moral standpoint, the argument, ultimately, is not analytical: of course, that no current form of an object can hope to match the abstract and idealised notion of its predecessor. While, for instance, it makes sense to compare the earlier and contemporary idea of the university, or the earlier and contemporary organisational forms, policies, or populations of specific systems and institutions, the form of narrative that contrasts a Platonistic concept of 'The University' with actual intersections of political, economic, and social processes in contemporary organisations has very little to say about how and why different elements of this concept are changing.

Assemblage theory, by contrast, starts from the assumption that the processes by which elements become parts of emergent totalities are culturally and socially constituted, which means that they have to be understood in specific political and historical contexts. Rather than assuming a 'natural' or morally preferable fit between processes of teaching and research, this allows us to ask how is it that these activities became essential to a specific concept of what a university is, and what work does treating them as such perform. Similarly, we could ask how other functions, persons, or groups become more or less relevant for the constitution of an assemblage. For instance, why is it that academic-related or support staff like IT specialists and librarians are rarely seen as 'vital', while managers are increasingly visible, numerous and important? How does the university change once women and minorities are no longer excluded from it? How does it change when its 'community' extends beyond staff and students and into the physical, social and built environment such as the city?

Socialising and historicising the ontology of the university, then, entails establishing the link between its elements and the political and economic aspects of their transformation. Instead of, for example, thinking about how research relates to administration, we can shift the focus to historical processes that constituted one (that is, research) as an essential part of what it means to be an academic, both in the sense of labour performed and in the sense of the source of professional standing, and the other (administration) as a function subservient to research, performed by professionals but not academics. Similarly, instead of, for instance, focusing on the relative importance and power of academics vs. managers, we can ask why these two groups are seen as essential to the functioning of the university while being positioned in an increasingly mutually adversarial relationship.

Assemblage theory replaces abstract notions such as, for instance, the Market and the State, with contingent mixtures or aggregates of different elements (cf. Callon 1998; Harman 2016). This helps escape narrow economic determinism that hypothesises a direct link, a conveyor belt of sorts,

between global transformations of policies and actual relations on the ground; as well as equally narrow culturalist confines that see all alternative visions or versions of the University as a reflection, however warped, of the same Humboldtian idea(l). In other words, it allows theorising the transformation of knowledge production in contemporary capitalism in ways that integrate political, economic and cultural aspects.

Disassembling or unbundling?

A similar line of analysis is presented by the concept of 'unbundling' (Gehrke and Kezar 2015; McCowan 2017; Robertson and Komljenovic 2016). While forays into the concept were made as early as the 1970s (Wang 1975), until recently, the concept has been used extensively either by advocates of 'disruption' in higher education (e.g. Selingo 2013) or, conversely, by critics who see it as another manifestation of the destruction of the Humboldtian ideal (McCowan 2017). Its application in recent higher education research, however, is distinguished by building on the vocabulary and methods of political economy (in particular of the cultural bent) to think about the creation and processes of valorisation in higher education markets, and the ways in which these processes constitute and empower new actors in the higher education landscape.

Robertson and Komljenovic start from the assumption that a creation of higher education market requires disentangling or unbundling of intangibles – that is, 'a process of representing things and services as "packages" that are describable and predictable' (2016, 5). In the case of higher education this can mean

> framing a higher education institution as an object that can be bought or invested in; a student experience as a thing to be bought with clear distinctive elements that are part of the package; or information about the higher education sector as intelligence worth buying to guide strategic decision making. (2016, 6).

Different actors interact to bring these processes about: companies that move into the knowledge production arena previously occupied by universities in their study include Into Ltd. (a company providing pathways into UK and US higher education for international students), Laureate Education (one of the biggest for-profit education companies in the world), Quacquarelli Symonds (a company specialising in one of university rankings), and LinkedIn (which specialises in users' data). Together, these actors work to 'unbundle' specific functions of universities (for instance, student and staff recruitment and quality assurance), repackaging and selling them back as services. Even absent specific market actors, unbundling is a widespread tendency within higher education institutions: as McCowan notes, universities increasingly outsource services such as catering, cleaning, or student accommodation (2017, 737).

Is this the same as disassembling? While in many cases the terminology can be applied to the same processes or manifestations, there is one important difference. 'Unbundling' starts from the assumption of a pre-existing 'bundle' – that is, a group of functions the university is expected to perform: for instance, teaching and research. While not denying their historicity of these functions, the concept of unbundling nonetheless retains the assumption of 'the University' as a 'natural' home or starting point of these functions. This is the case in both types of unbundling that McCowan posits: 'disaggregation' – where a group of products previously sold together are now dispensed separately; and the 'no-frills model', where the product is sold in its barest form. McCowan cites cheap airlines' paring down of the experience of flying to the 'bare essentials' as the most prominent example of the second type of unbundling, but clearly it can also apply to the first, with disaggregation representing a necessary step in creating a pared-down product. Yet, the assumption still remains that there is something fundamental about the fact of *being* a university – that is, the ontology of the university itself – that allows us to conceptualise what its functions are and thus draw relatively unproblematic boundaries around the university as a social object. Outsourcing, in this sense, entails a clear sense of what is out; that is, what kind of entities or functions do not belong – or no longer belong – to the university.

Assemblage theory, by contrast, emphasises the porous and complicated nature of social objects. The way in which something comes to be thought of as a function or an element of an object is itself a product of social processes. Boundaries are an outcome of negotiation concerning what counts as internal and external. This does not mean that objects cannot achieve a degree of permanence or stability. Harman's case study of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) offers a good analogy: as a clearly identifiable social object, the VOC existed and traded during a particular period of time, and then ceased to exist (Harman 2016, 35–114). Yet, during this period, it was not just the components of VOC that changed, but also its powers, or, in other words, its capacity to act: it transformed from a trading company into an effectively parastate, or colonial superpower. Thus, while trade *in principle* remained the core function of the object, its agency extended far beyond – and, it would not be difficult to argue, in a fundamentally *different direction* – than its original brief.

Deleuze and Guattari refer to these directions as 'lines of flight'. A line of flight is an abstract line by which an assemblage changes its nature and connects to 'the outside'; they may constitute ruptures in the whole, but are at the same time parts of the whole (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Lines of flight, for instance, can include academics spending periods at a different institution as visiting scholars. While they are travelling as parts or representatives of one assemblage (their 'home' university), for a period of time they also make part of another assemblage, that is, another university. What 'flees' in this case can be conceptualised in different ways: labour (or labour-time), knowledge, money (e.g. in cases when these visits are funded by academics' home institutions), etc. Yet lines of flight are not necessarily unidirectional: for instance, prestige can flow in the opposite direction – say, if an academic from a less prestigious institution spends time at Harvard, etc. Obviously, however, there is a limit to the amount and vector of the lines of flight an entity can sustain before disassembling: for instance, if all of a sudden all academics employed at a university left for visiting posts abroad, it is doubtful the university could continue to operate – unless it swiftly replaced them by other staff, in which case it could be argued that, despite the disturbance, there would be no rupture in the continuity of the institution.

This is one of the reasons why assemblage theory prioritises processes of territorialisation and deterritorialization, as well as coding and decoding, in conceptualising change. Rather than positing a pre-defined object with functions that can be subtracted or reassigned, the challenge is to find out how assembling of different functions and objects gives rise to particular powers, or forms of agency. In this sense, a 'university' is not an entity that 'sits' in time and space independently of the agency it exercises: we could rather say it is manifested through the negotiation of the elements it comprises and enables, with differing degrees of strength. A university deterritorialised, thus, can still be a university.

Understanding the transformation of higher education, in this sense, requires looking at the negotiation of these 'boundary disputes', and the ways in which universities are recreated in these processes. It is to these boundary objects we turn to next.

Boundary disputes: intellectuals and social media

In an analogy for a Cartesian philosophy of mind, Gilbert Ryle famously described a hypothetical visitor to Oxford (Ryle 1949). This astonished visitor, Ryle argued, would go around asking whether the University was in the Bodleian library? The Sheldonian Theatre? The colleges? and so forth, all the while failing to understand that the University was not in any of these buildings *per se*. Rather, it was all of these combined, but also the visible and invisible threads between them: people, relations, books, ideas, feelings, grass; colleges and Formal Halls; *sub fusc* and port. It also makes sense to acknowledge that these components can also be parts of other assemblages: for instance, someone can equally be an Oxford student and a member of the Communist Party, for instance. 'The University' assembles these and agentifies them in specific contexts, but they exist beyond those contexts: port is produced and shipped before it becomes College port served at a Formal Hall. And while it is possible to conceive of boundary disputes revolving around port, more often they involve people.

The cases analysed below involve 'boundary disputes' that applied to intellectuals using social media. In both cases, the intellectuals were employed at universities; and, in both, their employment ceased because of their activity online. While in the press these disputes were usually framed around issues of academic freedom, they can rather be seen as instances of reterritorialization: redrawing of the boundaries of the university, and reassertion of its agency, in relation to digital technologies. This challenges the assumption that digital technologies serve uniquely to deterritorialise, or 'unbundle', the university as traditionally conceived.

The public engagement of those who authoritatively produce knowledge – in sociological theory traditionally referred to as 'intellectuals' – has an interesting history (e.g. Small 2002). It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that intellectuals became *en masse* employed by universities: with the massification of higher education and the rise of the 'campus university', in particular in the US, came what some saw as the 'decline' of the traditional, bohemian 'public intellectual' reflected in Mannheim's (1936) concept of 'free-floating' intelligentsia. Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) argues that this process of 'universitisation' has led to the disappearance of the intellectual ferment that once characterised the American public sphere. With tenure, he claimed, came the loss of critical edge; intellectuals became tame and complacent, too used to the comfort of a regular salary and an office job. Today, however, the source of the decline is no longer the employment of intellectuals at universities, but its absence: precarity, that is, the insecurity and impermanence of employment, are seen as the major threat not only to public intellectualism, but to universities – or at least the notion of knowledge as public good – as a whole.

This suggests that there has been a shift in the *coding* of the relationship between intellectuals, critique and universities. In the first part of the twentieth century, the function of social critique was predominantly framed as independent of universities; in this sense, 'public intellectuals' were if not more than equally likely to be writers, journalists, and other men (since they were predominantly men) of 'independent means' than academic workers. This changed in the second half of the twentieth century, with both the massification of higher education and diversification of the social strata intellectuals were likely to come from. The desirability of university employment increased with the decreasing availability of permanent positions. In part because of this, precarity was framed as one of the main elements of the neoliberal transformation of higher education and research: insecurity of employment, in this sense, became the 'new normal' for people entering the academic profession in the twenty-first century.

Some elements of precarity can be directly correlated with processes of 'unbundling' (see Gehrke and Kezar 2015; Macfarlane 2011). In the UK, for instance, certain universities rely on platforms such as Teach Higher to provide the service of employing teaching staff, who deliver an increasing portion of courses. In this case, teaching associates and lecturers are no longer employees of the university; they are employed by the platform. Yet even when this is not the case, we can talk about processes of deterritorializing, in the sense in which the practice is part of the broader weakening of the link between teaching staff and the university (cf. Hall 2016). It is not only the security of employment that is changed in the process; universities, in this case, also own the products of teaching as practice, for instance, course materials, so that when staff depart, they can continue to use this material for teaching with someone else in charge of 'delivery'.

A similar process is observable when it comes to ownership of the products of research. In the context of periodic research assessment and competitive funding, some universities have resorted to 'buying', that is, offering highly competitive packages to staff with a high volume of publications, in order to boost their REF scores. The UK research councils and particularly the Stern Review (2016) include measures explicitly aimed to counter this practice, but these, in turn, harm early career researchers who fear that institutional 'ownership' of their research output would create a problem for their employability in other institutions. What we can observe, then, is a disassembling of knowledge production, where the relationship between universities, academics, and the products of their labour – whether teaching or research – is increasingly weakened, challenged, and reconstructed.

Possibly the most tenuous link, however, applies to neither teaching nor research, but to what is referred to as universities' 'Third mission': public engagement (e.g. Bacevic 2017). While academics have to some degree always been engaged with the public – most visibly those who have earned the label of 'public intellectual' – the beginning of the twenty-first century has, among other things, seen a rise in the demand for the formalisation of universities' contribution to society. In the UK, this contribution is measured as 'impact', which includes any application of academic knowledge outside of the academia. While appearances in the media constitute only one of the possible 'pathways to impact', they have remained a relatively frequent form of engaging with the public. They offer the opportunity for universities to promote and strengthen their 'brand', but they also help academics gain reputation and recognition. In this sense, they can be seen as a form of extension; they position the universities in the public arena, and forge links with communities outside of its 'traditional' boundaries. Yet, this form of engagement can also provoke rather bitter boundary disputes when things go wrong.

In the recent years, the case of Steven Salaita, professor of Native American studies and American literature became one of the most widely publicised disputes between academics and universities. In 2013, Salaita was offered a tenured position at the University of Illinois. However, in 2014 the Board of Trustees withdrew the offer, citing Salaita's 'incendiary' posts on Twitter (Dorf 2014; Flaherty 2015). At the time, Israel was conducting one of its campaigns of daily shelling in the Gaza Strip. Salaita tweeted: 'Zionists, take responsibility: if your dream of an ethnocratic Israel is worth the murder of children, just fucking own it already. #Gaza' (Steven Salaita on Twitter, 19 July 2014). Salaita's appointment was made public and was awaiting formal approval by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, usually a matter of pure technicality once it had been recommended by academic committees. Yet, in August Salaita was informed by the Chancellor that the University was withdrawing the offer.

Scandal erupted in the media shortly afterwards. It turned out that several of university's wealthy donors, as well as a few students, had contacted members of the Board demanding that Salaita's offer be revoked. The Chancellor justified her decision by saying that the objection to Salaita's tweets concerned standards of 'civility', not the political opinion they expressed, but the discussions inevitably revolved around questions of identity, campus politics, and the degree to which they can be kept separate. This was exacerbated by a split within the American Association of University Professors, which is the closest the professoriate in the US has to a union: while the AAUP issued a statement of support to Salaita as soon as the news broke, Cary Nelson, the association's former president and a prolific writer on issues of university autonomy and academic freedom, defended the Board's decision. The reason? The protections awarded by the principle of academic freedom, Nelson claimed, extends only to tenured professors.

Very few people agreed with Nelson's definition: eventually, the courts upheld Salaita's case that the University of Illinois Board's decision constituted breach of contract. He was awarded a hefty settlement (ten times the annual salary he would be earning at Illinois), but was not reinstated. This points to serious limitations of the using 'academic freedom' as an analytical concept. While university autonomy and academic freedom are principles invoked by academics in order to protect their activity, their application in academic and legal practice is, at best, open to interpretation. A detailed report by Karran and Malinson (2017), for instance, shows that both the understanding and the legal level of protection of academic freedom vary widely within European countries. In the US, the principle is often framed as part of freedom of speech and thus protected under the First Amendment (Karran 2009); but, as we could see, this does not in any way insulate it against widely differing interpretations of how it should be applied in practice.

While the Salaita case can be considered foundational in terms of making these questions central to a prolonged public controversy as well as a legal dispute, navigating the terrain in which these controversies arise has progressively become more complicated. Carrigan (2016) and Lupton (2014) note that almost everyone, to some degree, is already a 'digital scholar'. While most human resources departments as well as graduate programmes increasingly offer workshops or

courses on 'using social media' or 'managing your identity online' the issue is clearly not just one of the right tool or skill. Inevitably, it comes down to the question of boundaries, that is, what 'counts as' public engagement in the 'digital university', and why? How is academic work seen, evaluated, and recognised? Last, but not least, who decides?

Rather than questions of accountability or definitions of academic freedom, these controversies cannot be seen separately from questions of ontology, that is, questions about what entities are composed of, as well as how they act. This brings us back to assemblages: what counts as being a part of the university – and to what degree – and what does not? Does an academic's activity on social media count as part of their 'public' engagement? Does it count as academic work, and should it be valued – or, alternatively, judged – as such? Do the rights (and protections) of academic freedom extend beyond the walls of the university, and in what cases? Last, but not least, which elements of the university exercise these rights, and which parts can refuse to extend them?

The case of George Ciccariello-Maher, until recently a Professor of English at Drexel University, offers an illustration of how these questions impact practice. On Christmas Day 2016, Ciccariello-Maher tweeted 'All I want for Christmas is white genocide', an ironic take on certain forms of right-wing critique of racial equality. Drexel University, which had been closed over Christmas vacation, belatedly caught up with the ire that the tweet had provoked among conservative users of Twitter, and issued a statement saying that 'While the university recognises the right of its faculty to freely express their thoughts and opinions in public debate, Professor Ciccariello-Maher's comments are utterly reprehensible, deeply disturbing and do not in any way reflect the values of the university'. After the ironic nature of the concept of 'white genocide' was repeatedly pointed out both by Ciccariello-Maher himself and some of his colleagues, the university apologised, but did not withdraw its statement.

In October 2017, the University placed Ciccariello-Maher on administrative leave, after his tweets about white supremacy as the cause of the Las Vegas shooting provoked a similar outcry among right-wing users of Twitter.[1] Drexel cited safety concerns as the main reason for the decision – Ciccariello-Maher had been receiving racist abuse, including death threats – but it was obvious that his public profile was becoming too much to handle. Ciccariello-Maher resigned on 31st December 2017. His statement read: 'After nearly a year of harassment by right-wing, white supremacist media and internet trolls, after threats of violence against me and my family, my situation has become unsustainable'.[2] However, it indirectly contained a criticism of the university's failure to protect him: in an earlier opinion piece published right after the Las Vegas controversy, Ciccariello-Maher wrote that '[b]y bowing to pressure from racist internet trolls, Drexel has sent the wrong signal: That you can control a university's curriculum with anonymous threats of violence. Such cowardice notwithstanding, I am prepared to take all necessary legal action to protect my academic freedom, tenure rights and most importantly, the rights of my students to learn in a safe environment where threats don't hold sway over intellectual debate.'.[3] The fact that, three months later, he no longer deemed it safe to continue doing that from within the university suggests that something had changed in the positioning of the university – in this case, Drexel – as a 'bulwark' against attacks on academic freedom.

Forms of capital and lines of flight

What do these cases suggest? In a deterritorialised university, the link between academics, their actions, and the institution becomes weaker. In the US, tenure is supposed to codify a stronger version of this link: hence, Nelson's attempt to justify Salaita's dismissal as a consequence of the fact that he did not have tenure at the University of Illinois, and thus the institutional protection of academic freedom did not extend to his actions. Yet there is a clear sense of 'stretching' nature of universities' responsibilities or jurisdiction. Before the widespread use of social media, it was easier to distinguish between utterances made in the context of teaching or research, and others, often quite literally, off-campus. This doesn't mean that there were no controversies: however, the concept of academic

freedom could be applied as a 'rule of thumb' to discriminate between forms of engagement that counted as 'academic work' and those that did not. In a fragmented and pluralised public sphere, and the growing insecurity of academic employment, this concept is clearly no longer sufficient, if it ever was.

Of course, one might claim in this particular case it would suffice to define the boundaries of academic freedom by conclusively limiting it to tenured academics. But that would not answer questions about the form or method of those encounters. Do academics tweet in a personal, or in a professional, capacity? Is it easy to distinguish between the two? While some academics have taken to disclaimers specifying the capacity in which they are engaging (e.g. 'tweeting in a personal capacity' or 'personal views/ do not express the views of the employer'), this only obscures the complex entanglement of individual, institution, and forms of engagement. This means that, in thinking about the relationship between individuals, institutions, and their activities, we have to take account the direction in which capital travels. This brings us back to lines of flight.

The most obvious form of capital in motion here is symbolic. Intellectuals such as Salaita and Ciccariello-Maher in part gain large numbers of followers and visibility on social media because of their institutional position; in turn, universities encourage (and may even require) staff to list their public engagement activities and media appearances on their profile pages, as this increases visibility of the institution. Salaita has been a respected and vocal critic of Israel's policy and politics in the Middle East for almost a decade before being offered a job at the University of Illinois. Ciccariello-Maher's Drexel profile page listed his involvement as

> … a media commentator for such outlets as *The New York Times, Al Jazeera, CNN Español, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, and his opinion pieces have run in the *New York Times*' Room for Debate, *The Nation, The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Fox News Latino*.[4]

One would be forgiven for thinking that, until the unfortunate Tweet, the university supported and even actively promoted Ciccariello-Maher's public profile.

The ambiguous nature of symbolic capital is illustrated by the case of another controversial public intellectual, Slavoj Žižek. Renowned 'Elvis of philosophy' is not readily associated with an institution; however, he in fact has three institutional positions. Žižek is a fellow of the Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Ljubljana, teaches at the European Graduate School, and, most recently has been appointed International Director of the Birkbeck Institute of the Humanities. The Institute's web page describes his appointment:

> Although courted by many universities in the US, he resisted offers until the International Directorship of Birkbeck's Centre came up. Believing that 'Political issues are too serious to be left only to politicians', Žižek aims to promote the role of the public intellectual, to be intellectually active and to address the larger public.[5]

Yet, Žižek quite openly boasts what comes across as a principled anti-institutional stance. Not long ago, a YouTube video in which he dismisses having to read students' essays as 'stupid' attracted quite a degree of opprobrium.[6] On the one hand, of course, what Žižek says in the video can be seen as yet another form of attention-seeking, or a testimony to the capacity of new social media to make everything and anything go 'viral'. Yet, what makes it exceptional is exactly its unexceptionality: Žižek is known for voicing opinions that are bound to prove controversial or at least thread on the boundary of political correctness, and it is not a big secret that most academics do not find the work of essay-reading and marking particularly rewarding. But, unlike Žižek, they are not in a position to say it. Trumpeting disregard for one's job on social media would, probably, seriously endanger it for most academics. As we could see in examples of Salaita and Ciccariello-Maher, universities were quick to sanction opinions that were far less directly linked to teaching. The fact that Birkbeck was not bothered by this – in fact, it could be argued that this attitude contributed to the appeal of having Žižek, who previously resisted 'courting' by universities in the US – serves as a reminder that symbolic capital has to be seen within other possible 'lines of flight'.

These processes cannot be seen as simply arising from tensions between individual freedom on the one, and institutional regulation on the other side. The tenuous boundaries of the university became more visible in relation to lines of flight that combine persons and different forms of capital: economic, political, and symbolic. The Salaita controversy, for instance, is a good illustration of the 'entanglement' of the three. Within the political context – that is, the longer Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and especially the role of the US within it – and within the specific set of economic relationships, that is, the fact US universities are to a great degree reliant on funds from their donors – Salaita's statement becomes coded as a symbolic liability, rather than an asset. This runs counter to the way his previous statements were coded: so, instead of channelling symbolic capital towards the university, it resulted in the threat of economic capital 'fleeing' in the opposite direction, in the sense of donors withholding it from the university. When it came to Ciccariello-Maher, from the standpoint of the university, the individual literally acts as a nodal point of intersection between different 'lines of flight': on the one hand, the channelling of symbolic capital generated through his involvement as an influential political commentator *towards* the institution; on the other, the possible 'breach' of the integrity (and physical safety) or staff and students as its constituent parts via threats of physical violence against Ciccariello-Maher.

All of this suggests that deterritorialization can be seen as positive and even actively supported; until, of course, the boundaries of the institution become too porous, in which case the university swiftly reterritorialises. In the case of the University of Illinois, the threat of withdrawn support from donors was sufficient to trigger the reterritorialization process by redrawing the boundaries of the university, symbolically leaving Salaita outside them. In the case of Ciccariello-Maher, it would be possible to claim that agency was distributed in the sense in which it was his decision to leave; yet, a second look suggests that it was also a case of reterritorialization inasmuch as the university refused to guarantee his safety, or that of his students, in the face of threats of white supremacist violence or disruption.

This also serves to illustrate why 'unbundling' as a concept is not sufficient to theorise the processes of assembling and disassembling that take place in (or on the same plane as) contemporary university. Public engagement sits on a boundary: it is neither fully inside the university, nor is it 'outside' by the virtue of taking place in the environment of traditional or social media. This impossibility to conclusively situate it 'within' or 'without' is precisely what hints at the arbitrary nature of boundaries. The contours of an assemblage, thus, become visible in such 'boundary disputes' as the controversies surrounding Salaita and Ciccariello-Maher or, alternatively, their relative absence in the case of Žižek. While unbundling starts from the assumption that these boundaries are relatively fixed, and it is only components that change (more specifically, are included or excluded), assemblage theory allows us to reframe entities as instantiated through processes of territorialisation and deterritorialization, thus challenging the degree to which specific elements are framed (or, coded) as elements of an assemblage.

Conclusion: towards a new political economy of assemblages

Reframing universities (and, by extension, other organisations) as assemblages, thus, allows us to shift attention to the relational nature of the processes of knowledge production. Contrary to the narratives of university's 'decline', we can rather talk about a more variegated ecology of knowledge and expertise, in which the identity of particular agents (or actors) is not exhausted in their position with (in) or without the university, but rather performed through a process of generating, framing, and converting capitals. This calls for longer and more elaborate study of the contemporary political economy (and ecology) of knowledge production, which would need to take into account multiple other actors and networks – from the more obvious, such as Twitter, to less 'tangible' ones that these afford – such as differently imagined audiences for intellectual products.

This also brings attention back to the question of economies of scale. Certainly, not all assemblages exist on the same plane. The university is a product of multiple forces, political and economic,

global and local, but they do not necessarily operate on the same scale. For instance, we can talk about the relative importance of geopolitics in a changing financial landscape, but not about the impact of, say, digital technologies on 'The University' in absolute terms. Similarly, talking about effects of 'neoliberalism' makes sense only insofar as we recognise that 'neoliberalism' itself stands for a confluence of different and frequently contradictory forces. Some of these 'lines of flight' may operate in ways that run counter to the prior states of the object in question – for instance, by channelling funds, prestige, or ideas away from the institution. The question of (re)territorialisation, thus, inevitably becomes the question of the imaginable as well as actualised boundaries of the object; in other words, when is an object no longer an object? How can we make boundary-work integral to the study of the social world, and of the ways we go about knowing it?

This line of inquiry connects with a broader sociological tradition of the study of boundaries, as the social process of delineation between fields, disciplines, and their objects (e.g. Abbott 2001; Lamont 2009; Lamont and Molnár 2002). But it also brings in another philosophical, or, more precisely, ontological, question: how do we know when a thing is no longer the same thing? This applies not only to universities, but also to other social entities – states, regimes, companies, relationships, political parties, and social movements. The social definition of entities is always community-specific and thus in a sense arbitrary; similarly, how the boundaries of entities are conceived and negotiated has to draw on a socially-defined vocabulary that conceptualises certain forms of (dis-)assembling as potentially destructive to the entity as a whole. From this perspective, understanding how entities come to be drawn together (assembled), how their components gain significance (coding), and how their relations are strengthened or weakened (territorialisation) is a useful tool in thinking about beginnings, endings, and resilience – all of which become increasingly important in the current political and historical moment.

The transformation of processes of knowledge production intensifies all of these dynamics, and the ways in which they play out in universities. While certainly contributing to the unbundling of its different functions, the analysis presented in this article shows that the university remains a potent agent in the social world – though what the university is composed *of* can certainly differ. In this sense, while the pronouncement of the 'death' of universities should be seen as premature, this serves as a potent reminder that understanding change, to a great deal, depends not only on how we conceptualise the mechanisms that drive it, but also on how we view elements that make up the social world. The tendency to posit fixed and durable boundaries of objects – that I have elsewhere referred to as 'ontological bias'[7] – has, therefore, important implications for both scholarship and practice. This article hopes to have made a contribution towards questioning the boundaries of the university as one among these objects.

Notes

1. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/11/drexel-places-controversial-professor-leave.
2. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/02/controversial-drexel-professor-resigns.
3. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/10/10/conservatives-are-the-real-campus-thought-police-squashing-academic-freedom/?utm_term=.ed65426b7dfa.
4. http://drexel.edu/now/experts/Overview/ciccariellomaher-george/.
5. www.bbk.ac.uk/bih/aboutus/staff/zizek.
6. http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/06/02/slavoj_zizek_calls_students_stupid_and_boring_stop_worshiping_this_man_video.html.
7. https://janabacevic.net/2017/12/18/between-legitimation-and-imagination-epistemic-attachment-ontological-bias-and-thinking-about-the-future/.

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