

On Peripheral Philosophy: Para-Academia and the Call of the Outside¹

Peter Heft
Duquesne University

*[I]f there is to be a philosophy at all,
[it must be] withdrawn from all State influence.
–Arthur Schopenhauer²*

*[E]verything interesting happens on the periphery,
outside the standard modes of 'developed' existence.
–Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU)³*

*I don't say "interdisciplinary" anymore because
once a word becomes a talking point for the
administration, it has all vitality sucked out of it.
–Tom Eyers⁴*

The tri-fold relationship between philosophy, the State, and commoditization is a problematic knot that has roots as far back as, at least, Ancient Greece, with Socrates' relentless mocking of the Sophists who sold truth to the highest bidder and the State's attempt to exterminate undesirable thought with a glass of hemlock-laced tea. Despite being 'enlightened,' or at the very least, living "in an *age of enlightenment*" pushing us towards greater 'freedom' from the dogmatism of religion and the State – a trajectory we shall trace shortly –, our intellectual liberation has only remained nominally post-dogmatic with the overt repression of the Church and State replaced by an invisible system of exclusion born from more insidious hegemonic attitudes.⁵ Indeed, our intellectual revolution has tracked with Lacan's (in)famous comment to the 1968 student protestors in France: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master [and] [y]ou will have one!"⁶ The master of our intellectual liberation is none other than the institution we built to free us from the tyranny of religion and the State: The Academy.

¹ An editorialized and highly embryonic form of this argument appeared on *The Mantle*. See Peter Heft, "On Peripheral Philosophy," on *The Mantle*, published 1/25/19, accessed 3/5/19. (<https://www.themantle.com/philosophy/peripheral-philosophy>)

² Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Philosophy at the Universities," in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 137-197: 180.

³ CCRU, "Communiqué Two: Message to Maxence Grunier (2001)," in *Writings: 1997-2003* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017), (:)(:)-::(:), (:)(:).

⁴ Said in a classroom setting.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13-22: 21.

⁶ Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 12.

In what follows, I will briefly look at the history of anti-academic philosophy and then argue two things: First, traditional philosophy caters to a rigid, academic milieu that is intrinsically exclusionary and thus will remain deficient in its accounts of subjectivity, and second, the crisis of the relevance of philosophy not only within the Academy itself, but also to everyday life, can only be solved by taking seriously the radical Other of philosophy *as such*: the pseudonymous blogger, the anonymous poster, the peripheral philosopher.

The Spectre of State Philosophy

Arthur Schopenhauer, in the essay “On Philosophy at the Universities,” launches a scathing attack on what he sees as the Religio-State amalgamation of ‘professional philosophy.’ For him, the growth of professional philosophy – that is to say, philosophy at the institutional level as opposed to the street philosophy of Socrates – is inexorably bound up with the propagation and legitimization of the State. As he notes, interwoven with religious and metaphysical dogmas of the time, the State “promulgate[s its ideology] from all the pulpits by thousands of its appointed priests or religious teachers” and demands conformity. The effective dissemination of ideology thus requires that contradiction be denounced; “*improbant secus docentes* – ‘We reject and condemn the man who teaches something different’.”⁷ Can we really expect anything else, however? Indeed, the State is a structure that makes instrumental use of systems around it, co-opting religious institutions when spiritual sway is needed, capitalist institutions when market forces dominate, and so on. Operating according to axiomatics, there is no underlying belief system behind the State, rather it exists as pure fetish; fetish for self-propagation.⁸ Thus, professional philosophers employed by the State mustn’t “examine a new system that appears to see whether it is true,” rather they must “see whether it can be brought into harmony” with the current ideals of the State.⁹ Implicitly drawing upon Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?” wherein enlightenment is nothing but freedom from minoritarianism, that “inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another,” which, nevertheless, rests upon rigid duties, Schopenhauer goes a step further.¹⁰ The pursuit of truth – “*truth*, which has at all times been a dangerous companion and everywhere an unwelcome guest” – will always be mediated by the State: “Realists and Nominalists, or Aristotelians and Ramists,” the State has “taken sides” and in doing so has “trumpeted sophists.”¹¹

Further, as Kant, the great State philosopher notes, while all that is required for enlightenment is “*freedom*,” a very odd set of restrictions are applied. Indeed, for Kant, freedom as it relates to enlightenment involves *only* “the freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason.” Such an invocation of the public requires that we examine what Kant means. The public, for Kant, is the use of one’s faculties “*as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*”; the independent thinker invested in the marketplace of ideas. The private, in contradistinction, is the use of one’s faculties “in a certain *civil* post or office with which [one] is entrusted.”

⁷ Schopenhauer, “On Philosophy at the Universities,” 139.

⁸ I am indebted to my friend, William Jones, for pointing out the State axiomatic.

⁹ Schopenhauer, “On Philosophy at the Universities,” 149.

¹⁰ Kant, “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” 17-18.

¹¹ Schopenhauer, “On Philosophy at the Universities,” 153, 168.

Thus, all that is required for enlightenment, is free thought in intra-personal affairs.¹² As the Academy becomes increasingly privatized, with funding for institutions coming from countless and unknown sources, however, vested interests become par for the course. Further drawing upon Kant, our proponent of freedom, it is vital to note that “for many affairs conducted in the interest of a commonwealth a certain mechanism is necessary, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must behave merely passively.” Not only must members remain passive, however, it is wholly “impermissible to argue; instead, one must obey.”¹³ While free to dissent amongst one’s cohort, the professional must not question the dogmas of the Religio-State apparatus as the individual was “employed by it on that condition.”¹⁴ Thus, as privatization spreads and funding is bound up with *what* is taught, the interests of the financier become more closely aligned with the goals of the Academy, thus necessitating the active discouragement of dissent.

Such a hegemon(otony) ought not seem utterly foreign to us, as Deleuze and Guattari make a similar point in their examination of ‘State/royal’ science in relation to ‘nomad/minor’ science.¹⁵ For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘State science’ – what we can simply call ‘royal science’ – is science with the end of subordination. Royal science sees all that is different as a threat where, in order to secure a stable base of knowledge, royal science “imposes its form of sovereignty” and makes the dynamic, uniform; the numerous, bound; ‘space, occupiable.’¹⁶ The relation of royal science to nomad science is not merely one of sovereign exertion of power in quantifiable ways, but rather is “a qualitative change” in how the world is seen. Indeed, under the epistemological framework of royal science, staticity is favored over dynamism as the former, when instantiated by the sovereign, promotes the control and management of bodies in space, in contradistinction to the intrinsic nomadism of the latter which promotes fluidity and vectorization.¹⁷ What’s more, royal science, as expounded by the State and its advocates, seeks to instrumentalize nature and make the world uniform by searching for laws and “extracting constants” so as to eliminate unknowns. Nomad science, on the other hand, always existing on the periphery, and attempting to avoid capture and appropriation, seeks instead to problematize the hegemonic worldview populated by the royal scientists by not only undermining them, but by fundamentally fuzzifying the world by “placing the variables [which royal science seeks to contain...] in a state of continuous variation.”¹⁸

We can thus draw a comparison between the professional philosophy Schopenhauer so despised, and the two different epistemic models put forth by Deleuze and Guattari.

¹² Kant, “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” 18.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 361-374.

¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 362-363.

¹⁷ Ibid., 364, 366. See also Michel Foucault, “Part Three: Discipline,” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 134-228.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 369, 362.

Reading Schopenhauer's professional philosophy retroactively through the DeleuzoGuattarian lens of royal science where there must be *a specific* taught truth that is static and conforms to the ideology of the State, we can see that dissident, nomadic science – that is to say, a philosophy of the unknown – must be squashed. Thus, “[w]hat is at stake in both cases is not argument, however rancorous, but the relation of mutual revulsion between the academy and a small defiant fragment of its outside.”¹⁹ This cat-and-mouse relationship between the State (with its academic fangs) and the Outside can be understood as a despotic game where the plugged is pulled whenever the tides shift. The justification for such malevolent moves can be traced back to Socrates' mocking of established systems of knowledge and exposing the hypocrisy of those in power.²⁰ These moves, moves to squash the nomads, moves birthed in Athens, have since become endemic to the Western philosophical tradition. Thoroughly infected with the State and its desire for control, when “exploratory philosophy ceased to generate the outcomes favourable to established (theistic) power, [...] we were suddenly told: ‘this game is over, let's call it a draw’. The authoritarian tradition of European reason tried to pull the plug on the great voyages *at exactly the point they first became interesting*, which is to say: atheistic, inhuman, experimental, and dangerous.”²¹

Radical thought, thought that is dangerous to the status quo can thus only be allowed into the Academy under one of two conditions: either its radicality must be thoroughly defanged, or it must fall in line with popular ideology. If Marxism, that ‘dangerous idea which killed hundreds of millions,’ is accepted, and indeed *taught* at universities, it is only because armchair theorizing has overtaken political action and rendered the ‘red menace’ nothing more than an aging department chair.

Para-Academia and The Periphery

George Yancy, commenting on the stereotypical State philosophy of today, notes that there is a disparity between the thought that goes on within the gates of the Academy, and that of bodies not included. For the former, thought is abstracted with the goal of exposing “a weak argument, a fallacy, or someone's ‘inferior’ reasoning power” and ‘taking down’ enemies while presuming to “speak for *all* of ‘us’,” while the latter's thought is rooted in personal experience.²² The rigorized and highly structured mode of State philosophizing, at best, only excludes those not privileged enough to exist within the Academy and, at worst, denies the experiences of the Other. While there are certainly ways to *try* to remain radical within the academy by carving a niche for oneself, we must remember that for every comfortable, ‘radical’ academic out there, there are ten other thinkers existing on the edges of society who don't have a voice within the Academy.

¹⁹ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 10.

²⁰ See Socrates, “The Apology of Socrates,” in *The Trials of Socrates*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 26-61.

²¹ Nick Land, “Shamanic Nietzsche,” in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017), 203-228: 204.

²² George Yancy, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, No. 4 (2005), 215-241: 215.

Perhaps that's for the best, however. If we take Schopenhauer seriously, and indeed, it seems as if we must given the current, moribund state of 'radical' academia, then we ought to be weary about inclusion for the sake of inclusion. The Academy, like The Blob, assimilates and normalizes all that come too close by acting as a homogenizing force to turn "the philosophical lecture-room into a school of the shallowest philistinism" where radical ideas are salted before they germinate.²³ Back in 2001, the CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) began mapping precisely the movement of the nomad scientist toward the periphery:

Many members of the Ccru had fled cultural studies, disgusted by its authoritarian prejudices, its love of ideology, and its pompous desire to 'represent the other' or speak on behalf of the oppressed. To us, it never seemed that the real articulacy of the leftist academic elites was in any way superior to the modes of popular cultural expression which were either ignored or treated as raw material to be probed for a 'true' (i.e. ideological) meaning by white middle-class intellectuals.

[...]

Ccru engages with peripheral cultures not because they are 'downtrodden' or oppressed, but because they include the most intense tendencies to social flatness, swarming, populating the future, and contagious positive innovation, hatching the decisive stimuli for the systematic mutation of global cybernetic culture.²⁴

Indeed, with the blossoming of personal weblogs and the intensification of social disparities, those disgruntled with academia and engaged in "peripheral cultural processes" began setting up shop on the tatters of the digital map where new social enclaves built around pseudonymity and cyber-culture were, like bubbles, constantly arising.²⁵ Is it at all surprising that the response to the rigor (mortis) of academia and the explosion of locked-off academic journals was a rise in theory blogs? The Internet was, and is, alive with conversations that can't be found in the stuffy pages of *X, Y, Z Quarterly*. As pamphleteering was to the State, blogs and Twitter are to the Academy.

Apart from being nodes of non-traditional, and thus non-monotonous, philosophy, however, blogs and niche areas of study provide a counter to structural exclusionary features of the Academy. Indeed, to be 'taken seriously' within the Academy, 'authority' must be achieved by, typically, undergoing what Mark Fisher (a.k.a k-punk) called "the traumatic experience of doing a PhD." For him, such work – and the same can be said of academia more generally – "bullies one into the idea that you can't say anything about any subject until you've read every possible authority on it."²⁶ While there is certainly a level of expertise gained from studying a given thinker or topic for an extended period of time, what makes the confines of the Academy the best place to do such work?

²³ Schopenhauer, "On Philosophy at the Universities," 153.

²⁴ CCRU, "Communiqué Two," (:):(:).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mark Fisher and Rowan Wilson, "They Can Be Different in the Future Too: Mark Fisher interviewed," on *Verso*, published January 16, 2017, accessed January 3, 2019.

(<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3051-they-can-bedifferent-in-the-future-too-mark-fisher-interviewed>)

On the flip-side, if we take seriously the presupposition of academia – that is to say, that texts are ambiguous and thus require disambiguation *while retaining multiple potential meanings* –, can we really consider novel ideas anything but conglomerations of unique interpretations? If that's so, why ought we afford the academic any more credence than the pseudonymous blogger? To do so seems not only to be a reification of the fetish with established knowledge – royal science –, but is a powerful, institutional way to privilege certain subjectivities above others based on contingent educational factors.

What then, is to be done? Ought we burn our caps and gowns, shunning all academic mores? Perhaps. But that being said, we must also recognize that the Academy *does* exist and we can't just wish it away; instead we must engage with it in some form.

Thus, in conjunction with the above, we can use contemporary critiques of international relations studies coupled with a 'post-modern' Edward Saidian launching pad to provide tangible alternatives to rigid State philosophy. Indeed, for Shampa Biswas writing on the relevance of Said, the Academy has become yet another battlefield upon which the tanks of neo-conservatism roll.²⁷ While Biswas will maintain that there is a technical distinction between “scholars working for the state” and a scholar’s “intellectual orientation,” such a dichotomy, if it ever existed, has long since evaporated in any practical sense. Indeed, just as “[i]t is not uncommon for IR [international relations] scholars to feel the need to formulate their scholarly conclusions in terms of its relevance for global politics, where ‘relevance’ is measured entirely in terms of policy wisdom,” philosophy within the Academy falls prey to the very same problems, as dominant discourses are reproduced, cults of personality are maintained, and professional philosophers “[r]ender [...] unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.”²⁸

For Said, what is required, in contradistinction to abject professionalism, is “a spirit of ‘amateurism’” to act as a bulwark against the onslaught of professional philosophy by becoming *truly* trans-disciplinary.²⁹ Not only that, but the amateurs embroiled amongst the professionals, lambs pretending to be wolves, in an odd inversion, are “‘a species of nomads, despising all settled modes of life’ who come from a wilderness tract beyond knowledge. They are explorers, which is also to say: invasion routes of the unknown.”³⁰ They “can enter and transform the merely professional routine [...] into something much more lively and radical; instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, [and] how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts.”³¹

As old academic models become outmoded and the Outside pushes in, a different strategy can be adopted. While not assimilating the Outside to the traditional philosophy, peripheral thought can be smuggled under the door. Elizabeth Lewis Pardoe of the University of Venus takes up the cry of the guerrilla intellectual, the “para-academic.”

²⁷ Shampa Biswas, “Empire and Global Public Intellectuals: Reading Edward Said as an International Relations Theorist,” *Journal of International Studies* 36, No. 1 (2007), 117-133.

²⁸ Biswas, “Empire and Global Public Intellectuals,” 122. Matthew: 22:21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁰ Land, “Shamanic Nietzsche,” 208.

³¹ Edward Said, “Professionals and Amateurs,” in *Representation of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 65-83: 83.

Far from being ‘under’ the academic as the prefix implies in its usage in ‘paralegal,’ for example, Pardoe borrows from the French and draws upon *para-* as “a combining form meaning ‘guard against,’” by noting that the para-academic can be found “camouflage[d], parachuting down into the back corners of campus quads, and skulking the perimeter, as [they] prepare to take the academy by storm.”³² For her, the “dual status” of being within the Academy while not being *part* of the Academy gives the para-academic the freedom to operate as they like and support the invasion from the periphery while holding back the assimilation of radical thought.³³ The para-academic can “think, theorize, and produce with rather than ‘about’ (or – even worse – ‘for’)” those not present in the walls of the Academy, all while operating unseen but all seeing.³⁴

It is important, then, for us to note that there are at least two roles in play: the para-academic and the peripheral philosopher. The para-academic, as described by Pardoe, is one who has accepted their fate of being inexorably bound up with the Academy – that is to say, operates within its walls and requires its affirmation but is *not* part of it –, while also acting as a mule, smuggling in dangerous ideas. The peripheral philosopher, in contrast, is shunned by the Academy – and is better for it – as they speak what is unwanted. Not only are they *bricoleurs*, hijacking ideas and repurposing them for alternative ends, but they are those who keep philosophy relevant and thriving. They are the Other who we refuse to speak for, but argue alongside; the Other who is an existential threat to the cushy order of things. We need them, not the inverse. All of us, as professional philosophers in-training, must don the fatigues of the para-academic and engage with the Outside, *not* to assimilate it, but to affirm it. By affirming the status of the Other as a legitimate thinker in their own right – something they hardly need but we, in order to stay relevant, desperately do –, taking seriously the contributions made by those pseudonymous bloggers and anonymous posters in cluttered comments sections, and by working with, and defending those who are Outside, a new form of academia can arise that can make radical moves against existent forms of knowledge production.

³² Elizabeth Lewis Pardoe, “Para-Academics,” on *Inside Higher Ed*, published 1/20/14, accessed 3/31/19. (<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/university-venus/para-academics>) She links to Dictionary.com as the source of her definition.

³³ Pardoe, “Para-Academics,” web.

³⁴ CCRU, “Communiqué Two,” (:)(:).