

**the fragility of collegiality:
'what remains of me at
the university, within the
university?'**

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In their exchange on the discourse of the academy, the French writers Hélène Cixous and Cathérine Clément ask: “*What remains of me at the university, within the university?*”¹ We might rephrase their question as “What remains of *us* at the university, of *us* within the university?” in the hope of undermining the rampant individualism that flourishes in the contemporary neo-liberal age. My suggestion is that we need to think more about our relations *with others* within the university, than with *our selves*—whether this be our successes, our triumphs, our productivities, or whatever. The question of what remains, echoes Cixous’s long-term concern with pedagogy, and the role of the academic institution which, as Jennifer Birkett points out, has “no criteria for assessing ‘genuine’ bedazzlement.”² And while I am supportive of the idea that we consider the case for “bedazzlement”—which we might think of in terms of an open and poetic response to the complexity we encounter in our thinking and in our work—I am concerned that our institutions (our universities) are failing us in other important regards. What remains of *us* at the university, of *us* within the university is—to put it simply—a collegiality we can only refer to as fragile, precarious.

To speak of collegiality, though, is to risk reifying a term that has a complex history of its own. While we can think of it as an unquestioned good, both a necessary and desirable state of intersubjective relations, we need to consider how differently collegiality manifests in different times and places. Indeed, in the context

of many Western universities, collegiality has, at times, supported a closed and very elitist conception of who our colleagues are. As Hannah Forsyth, in *A History of the Modern Australian University* argues, the radical critiques of this elitism—emerging throughout the sixties, seventies, and beyond—point to ideological and economic structures marginalising people “on the basis of class, race, gender and sexuality.”³ The idea or concept of collegiality can obscure the complex ways in which we exclude and marginalise, in order to gather a privileged elite in often (paradoxically) hierarchical ways.⁴ Such exclusion perpetuates political, social, and economic inequalities, impoverishing the potential of the university as a site both for radical social analysis and change.

While collegiality should not be uncritically celebrated, and any feminist analysis should most certainly take issue with its potential for exclusion and marginalisation, there is, nonetheless, a sense in which we can rethink collegiality today, at least strategically, as a set of practices aimed to gather and support disparate and often atomised individuals in the university in more collective and communal ways. If collegiality is to have any practical meaning, it must partake in practices that re-connect us one with another, practices that enhance the humanity of our everyday exchanges and communications. Practices that return to us our self-worth, rather than to our use-value. Practices such as these are crucial, and yet they take time.

In 2010, in his important essay “What is the Institutional Form for Thinking?”, Simon Critchley raises the question of collegiality, and while he does not address the potential problems associated with the term, what he has to say is helpful, I think, for any attempt to rethink it:

At some point in the 1980s, an ideological mist descended, making academics obsessed with research, cutting the fragile bonds of solidarity with their colleagues (and collegiality is *so* important to academia and *so* fragile), and introducing an obsession with measuring and the ranking of institutions. Academics have almost entirely conspired with this process and are completely culpable. We have shifted from a model of oppositional politics in the Marxist sense, where there was a sort of war or class struggle between academics and the state that required strong unions, to a Foucaultian model, where university academics learn to discipline themselves and govern themselves in terms of structures and criteria handed down to them by university management and state departments of education.⁵

Critchley's observation, that the competitive nature of the neo-liberal university threatens the fragile bonds of solidarity—the collegiality that is *so* important to the kind of work we do, provides us with both a positive account of collegiality as solidarity and collaboration, and a provisional response to Cixous and Clément's question above: at present, what remains of *us* at the university, of *us* within the university is something other than solidarity. Something other than collegiality. We are in danger of becoming the atomised individuals of neo-liberalism and late capitalism that many of our works decry.

In thinking through the complex issues that have structured the research I have undertaken in my recent book, *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution*, I have come to think that the question of collegiality ought to be central in any discussion of what constitutes good philosophy (or good thought, more generally). Collegiality, the kind that welcomes diversity and works to undo marginality, is arguably what is most at risk in our current work environments. I have argued⁶ that the competitive frame of our encounters with others (for status, funding, and prestige), disturbs the fragile intellectual “ethos” that Critchley describes as falling somewhere between—on the one hand—“atmosphere, climate, and place” and—on the other—“a disposition for thinking and thoughtfulness.”⁷ If collegiality is the key to an ethos that promotes thinking and thoughtfulness, then the fragility of collegiality, in the context of today's corporate university, is cause for serious concern. Not just for us as academic and institutional philosophers, but for our society and culture more fundamentally. Thinking and thoughtfulness are what we most urgently need to protect.

Our “collaborative being-with others”,⁸ based on familiarity and trust, is under threat in the fortified world of the corporate institution. Isolation takes the place of engagement and exchange. Resentment increasingly thrives under conditions of high time pressure and even more so when teaching is pitted *against* research.⁹ Under such conditions collegiality is a fragile possibility at best, and reclaiming pleasure and joy within the institutional context can be seen as a political act of resistance. For some, Simon Critchley and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht for example, teaching provides the locus of resistance. Reclaiming pleasure and joy within the context of teaching offers us ways of resisting the resentment and isolation that characterises the corporate and increasingly competitive capitalist university.¹⁰ Critchley refers to the “delicate tact of teaching” and its involvement in “the formation of human beings”¹¹ and this reminds us of the great privilege that teaching is. His call for “a better, collaborative, institutional form of thinking” based on our

enjoyment of teaching is helpful, I think, for drawing our attention to the excesses of the corporate institution. In a similar vein, Gumbrecht argues that our primary pedagogical task ought to be identifying instances of complexity and exposing our students to these.¹² This, too, provides a pleasurable engagement with the work we undertake within the university, permitting us to experience the joy of sinking deeply into a slow and careful engagement with the complexities of thought.¹³

While I wholly support these claims, and I have spent a great deal of energy in the book pursuing the important *pedagogical* implications of slow philosophy and slow reading, I am concerned here to ask us all (as professional philosophers) to reflect on our collegial relations—our collaborative being-with others—as expressions of pleasure and joy.¹⁴ Let us imagine collegiality as the ethical centre of a revival of what it means to do good philosophy today.

We know from Plato’s dialogues that philosophy is a person-to-person relationship, an intimate and transformative relation propelling us from one existential state to another. Philosophy is an intense person-to-person encounter that has the potential to move us from a state near ignorance to one closer to wisdom. Given this, we need to think of our collegial encounters as potentially transformative ones, and if we do we begin to understand why anything that heightens the fragility of these relations is less than desirable. In fact, anything that increases the fragility of our collegial relations detracts from the philosophy that we are able to do. We cannot *calculate* the importance of these relations, and if we try we cease to think philosophically. As the corporate university begins to take hold, the risk is that calculation takes the place of encounter. Indeed as Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber in their work *The Slow Professor* (2016) contend, the rise of the corporate institution is accompanied by a deterioration in collegial relations which leads inevitably to an increasing isolation: “As [we] academics become more isolated from each other, we are also becoming more compliant as resistance to the corporatization of the academy *seems* futile.”¹⁵ This environment further encourages instrumental and calculative relations with others:

We are enjoined to spend our time in ways that can be measured and registered in accounting systems. Deans’ reports tend not to have sections with headings such as ‘helping a colleague figure out why a lecture didn’t go well’ or ‘offering support to an overwhelmed junior colleague’ or ‘expressing enthusiasm for a colleague’s new research project.’ In a climate of accounting, such activities belong to [what Bill Readings has referred to

as] ‘an economy of waste’ and, given the increasing faculty workload, it is not surprising that they fall by the wayside.¹⁶

The risk, here, is that we no longer talk with one another. Concern for career progression and status, vis-à-vis our colleagues, means that the corporate university divides and conquers an increasingly disengaged workforce: “Conversation is instrumentalized, and colleagues are turned into ‘either resources or hindrances’.”¹⁷ Either way this is an unacceptable reduction of our human relations. In fact, the favoured term of the corporate institution is not human relations, but much more tellingly “human resources”, and we recall well Martin Heidegger’s warning on the reduction of a relation to a resource.¹⁸

There are problems, as we have seen, with any uncritical or ahistorical adoption of collegiality as a counter to the corporate university. In addition, the concept of collegiality can today no doubt be made to serve instrumental ends.¹⁹ This is perhaps especially so when collegiality is reduced to the responsibility of the individual, rather than explored as a “fundamentally social phenomenon.”²⁰ While this is always a danger it is not, I think, a reason to ignore the important ethical and political dimension that a renewed appreciation of collegiality can bring. Such an analysis ought to explore the affective dimensions of collegiality or what Teresa Brennan has called the “transmission of affect.”²¹ In doing so, it can bring to the fore the importance of trust and respect in our institutional dealings with colleagues, in order to remind us what really matters.²²

In their discussion of the affective dimensions of collegiality, Berg and Seeber recommend that we “see the workplace as ‘a kind of holding environment’ or ‘support net’.” They argue that “a good ‘holding environment’ is able to contain fluctuations in its members’ emotions, allowing for the expression of negative as well as positive feelings.”²³ In support of this, they cite Frank Martela’s account of the affective dimension of institutional work: “respecting each other, sharing emotional burdens, encouraging each other, knowing each other as a person, and solving emotional problems together.”²⁴ Berg and Seeber agree with Sarah Wright’s observation that “the [university] workplace is populated by people who have social and emotional needs both outside of work *and* during work hours”,²⁵ and they conclude by offering the following practical advice: don’t make communal events compulsory, vent rather than whine, risk intimacy, think about what we have already lost and what we miss, and finally, never give up hope that a more [inclusive] collegial environment can successfully resist the corporate universi-

ty.²⁶ While collegiality can be thought in abstract terms, its intimate relation with sets of practical actions or practices should be noted, and these practices will no doubt differ from place to place, and from discipline to discipline. What is certain, though, is that developing and sustaining collegiality takes time.

The kind of inclusive and supportive collegiality we are exploring hits another obstacle, in the guise of “excellence”, exceptionalism, and the competitive frame these values require. In a brief piece on women’s working lives, in what she refers to as the managerial university, Angela McRobbie points to the corrosive effects of competition on collegiality, and the specific danger this holds for women who so often, for complex structural reasons, retain only a tenuous hold on the institution. She argues that collectively “embracing the idea of ordinariness” may be a strategic solution that is, at the same time, also “good for the soul.”²⁷ McRobbie urges us to invent new ways of thinking about the work we do, replacing the managerial talk of “talent” and “excellence” with “the more commonplace idea of a ‘good job well done.’” Such an orientation toward our work could counter the “self-promotional rhetoric” which she claims “wraps its way around academic self-description” in the university today. This rhetoric serves to heighten the competitive work environment—increasingly dominated by benchmarking and comparison—with the result that excellence stands in the way of any likely collegial experience.²⁸ “There is a requirement to be exceptional”, McRobbie writes, and “only a truly exceptional young woman, one who was also lucky in her life-planning with a partner could have children and could survive this new style of university governmentality without falling apart.”²⁹ Although she does not explore this, McRobbie’s argument requires a collective and collegial re-thinking, a gesture in solidarity that ensures no individual is left with the invidious task (or consequences) of re-valuing the values herself.

The problems confronting our collegial relations arise today within the context of a workplace where time has been reduced to a precious resource. This is not coincidental. Collegiality thrives on the slow and careful development of relations of respect and trust. Without this time, we fail to provide the ground necessary for ethical relations to flourish. Our philosophical work occurs within the context of the demands of a largely corporate culture, one that commodifies time. The corporate nature of the institution limits our possibilities for attentive reflection—both in terms of our own research and in our teaching. If philosophy is to continue to help us engage the increasing complexity of the world, then our current institutional practices need to be resisted. Encounters with complexity take

time and can best be encouraged within environments that support attentive reflection and critical engagement. The corporate nature of the university restricts time and rewards efficiency in ways that work against establishing a community of philosophers, or of scholars. An equation is established between efficiency and haste, and increasingly we fail to challenge the suitability of this equation for the kind of work we do. *Slow Philosophy* reminds us that we should always question the institutional framework within which we think and work. It is not an argument *against* the institution, but more importantly one against the restrictive and short-sighted frame that the institution, over time, has become. *Slow Philosophy* is a call to renew the institution, to return to the innovative moment, the instituting processes, that precede the instituted structure of philosophy. In the West, these instituting processes are linked with the love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*), and we can think of this wisdom today in terms of our ability to engage the complex world we inhabit.

It may be utopian to consider how slow philosophy can help to reconfigure the ways we teach, learn, and research, in order to enhance possibilities for collegial being, nonetheless it is important that we try.³⁰ Resisting competitive relations with our colleagues is an important first step in changing our institutional relations—relations that, as I have suggested, all too often become instrumental, calculating, and inhuman. The fragility of collegiality is something that each of us must address and this goes beyond our peer relations to the work we undertake in our role as mentors. While it is crucial that we build strong and stable collegial relations, this in itself is not enough. It is equally important that we undertake the delicate and essential work of support that builds confidence and capability in those younger philosophers with whom we work closely—with those we supervise and those we encourage. Together, collegiality and a strong and practical commitment to mentoring³¹ provide the grounds for more human ways of being in the university today.³²

Given that our universities harbour destructive, instrumental, and competitive relations—relations that benefit the institution and yet damage the individual *and* the group—we need to think carefully about the dangers of uncritically adopting a corporate mentality where “output” and “production” place unrealistic and unhealthy time restrictions on the work that we each undertake. By reclaiming the pleasures of a collaborative teaching, learning, and thinking, and by fostering an inclusive collegiality, we can, to some extent, recognise and resist the more destructive pressures of the modern institution.

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NOTES

1. Hélène Cixous and Cathérine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 146. Originally published as *La Jeune née*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975.
2. Jennifer Birkett, "The Implications of *Études Féminines* for Teaching" *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching*. Eds Helen Wilcox et al. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, 207.
3. Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014, 228.
4. Indeed, Forsyth analyses the reign of the "God-professors" with their almost feudal powers to simultaneously give and to take away. Forsyth, "A History," 67-87.
5. Simon Critchley, "What is the Institutional Form for Thinking?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21:1 (2010, 23).
6. Michelle Boulous Walker, *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 110.
7. Critchley, 29. Critchley points to the fragility of the intellectual ethos, which is, to his mind, "the easiest thing in the world to destroy." Critchley, "What is," 29.
8. Critchley, "What is," 27.
9. Boulous Walker, "Slow Philosophy," 125.
10. Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber describe Sheila Slaughter's and Larry L. Leslie's term "academic capitalism" simply as "the application of market models to universities." Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, 53.
11. Critchley, "What is," 26.
12. Gumbrecht refers to Niklas Luhmann's influential discussion of the university as an institution of teaching as well as research, whose primary function ought ideally be the production of complexity. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 128-9 and Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.
13. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003, 85.
14. For a discussion of the importance of Cixous's collaborative practice and what this means for our "collaborative being-with others," see Boulous Walker "Slow Philosophy," 169.
15. Berg and Seeber, "The Slow Professor," 70.
16. Berg and Seeber, "The Slow Professor," 72.
17. Berg and Seeber, "The Slow Professor," 80.
18. In *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution* I draw on Heidegger's work to set the scene for the technological reduction of thinking in the corporate institution: "Heidegger's insights into modern technological society have a bearing, I think, on what we could call the creeping technological nature of today's institutions. One of Heidegger's main observations is that our modern ways of being or existing are impacted upon by that aspect of technological life that reduces everything in its wake to a resource. Our understanding and our ways of being in the world are in danger of becoming technological themselves. Our very understanding is in danger of reducing the world in which we exist to nothing other than a resource, or to what Heidegger refers to as a 'standing-reserve.' To reduce the world and our understanding of it in this way is to fail, in Heidegger's terms,

to ‘stay with things,’ to engage with the world in meaningful, non-utilitarian ways. By striving for ever more speed, efficiency and interchangeability, this technological world-view makes objects or resources out of the things [and even people] that have previously had meaning for us.” Boulos Walker, “Slow Philosophy,”xiv.

19. Berg and Seeber point out that the concept of collegiality can be mobilised in punitive ways, can comprise academic freedom, and, when appearing in the context of something such as the “Collegiality Assessment Matrix,” can be stripped of any critical response to the institution. In spite of these very real dangers they argue that we should not overlook the collective power of collegial relations and the benefit of these for our humanity. (Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”76-7). Additionally, they report findings from research into these matters indicating that 89% of faculty in US universities have identified collegiality as the most pressing need to best support young and early career colleagues (77). They go on to suggest that while recommendations, such as “works-in-progress series, speaker events, retreats, and reading groups” are laudable that they require time and energy that is all too scarce in the day-to-day reality of the corporate university (77): “Hall [in his recommendations] emphasizes personal responsibility, but personal responsibility can also slide into blame...” (77-8). While Berg and Seeber believe in the importance of individual agency, they are “wary of neglecting to take into account the institutional and political factors which set the conditions for our work...” (78). In short, they conclude: “Even well-meaning advice in the current climate is in danger of turning collegiality into the exchange of marketable skills. Seeing colleagues as resources precludes the affective dimension of talk, turning others into sound bites” (79).

20. Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”80. Forsyth suggests a more positive account of evidence for collegiality, in terms of how it has been transformed in the contemporary context. She writes: “Having relinquished long scholarly morning teas to focus on publication, collegial discussion happens nevertheless, over dinners, at conferences, through social networking and in the coffee shops that litter every campus” (Forsyth, “A History,”228-9). I am concerned, though, that this version of collegiality leans a little too heavily toward networking, which can involve practices that actually undermine the kind of collegiality I champion here. At its worst, networking instrumentalises our relations with our colleagues by reducing them to valuable resources, helpful in achieving our own individual research and career aims.

21. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004.

22. There is scope, here, to explore the connections between a reconsidered collegiality, Brennan’s transmission of affect, and a feminist ethics of care.

23. Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”82.

24. Martella cited in Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”82.

25. Wright cited in Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”82.

26. Berg and Seeber, “The Slow Professor,”84.

27. Angela McRobbie, “Women’s working lives in the ‘new’ university” (10 August 2015). <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/angela-mcrobbe/womens-working-lives-in-new-university> [11/04/2018].

28. In a similar vein, Forsyth reports that university structures of merit work “to exclude the very people who needed higher education the most.” Forsyth, “A History,”228.

29. McRobbie asks: “Is there room for any women other than the ‘exceptional woman,’ let alone women with children, in the new hyper-stratified university?” McRobbie, “Women’s working lives.”

30. Birkett reminds us that “Utopia should not be a place of retreat, but a way of remaking the

present.” Birkett, “The Implications of *Etudes Féminines*,”206.

31. My thanks to Lewis Gordon for reminding me how collegiality and mentoring work together to foster more ethical ways of being in the university. Indeed, Lewis’s participation throughout the entirety of the Postgraduate Day (and the following ASCP Conference) provides a model of engaged collegial mentoring.

32. Cixous writes: “Nothing allows us to rule out the possibility of radical transformation of behaviours, mentalities, roles... today. Let us simultaneously imagine a general change in all the structures of training, education, [and] supervision” (Cixous, *La Jeune née*, 83, cited in Birkett, “The Implications of *Etudes Féminines*,”205).