

Technology is Non-All Zahi Zalloua

The neoliberalization of the university was taking place well before the pandemic. But the exceptional character of the pandemic does seem to have accelerated the weakening of the university, rendering it less autonomous, more toothless and subservient to neoliberal interest. To be sure, Giorgio Agamben, in his recent critical post on the changing face of education in the age of the coronavirus, does not paint a rosy picture of the university, lamenting the “degree of corruption and specialist ignorance”¹ that permeates this once sacred institution. But still, Agamben’s nostalgia is unmistakable: faculty who teach online are considered nothing less than collaborators with Fascist power, and students for their part are urged to decline their interpellation in this new normal and not give way to their desire for a university free from “technological barbarism.”

Reminiscent of Heidegger, who warned of technology’s instrumentality and colonization of the lifeworld (how it insidiously regulates and controls our modes of being, where things and relationships are “enframed,” disclosing themselves exclusively as resources to be optimized), Agamben urges an immediate protection *of* what is, who we are, of what it means to be human—or more specifically of what “being a student” means—and a protection *from* technology’s overreach, from its myopic reprogramming of our ontological being. He decries “the cancellation from life of any experience of the senses as well as the loss of the gaze, permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen.”

Psychoanalysis follows a different path from the techno-conservatives à la Agamben. It is by no means inhospitable to technological innovations. On the contrary, such new conditions, for Žižek, “*compel us to transform and reinvent the very notions of freedom, autonomy, and ethical responsibility.*”² Psychoanalysis counters the exaggerated fears of engineered life not by assuaging the concerns of humanists and neo-Heideggerians, but by foregrounding the inhuman already at work in the human, the improper at the heart of the properly human. Here we might want to substitute technology for biogenetics: “It is not so much that with biogenetics we lose our freedom and dignity. Rather, we experience that *we never had them in the first place.*”³ Rather than seeing the new online reality as an external threat to our profession, we must enlarge our critical gaze and ask how, under neoliberalism, our freedom and dignity (as students and faculty) already exist in a compromised state.

Technology’s negative impact on our *Lebenswelt* is not in doubt. We know that humans, as the masters of technology (recall Descartes’s view of human knowers as “masters and possessors of nature”⁴), are paradoxically not immune from the effects and logic of enframing. We too can become/have become mere resources. Still, this recognition for Heidegger/Žižek gives way to a new insight: “this danger also contains the potential for salvation: the moment we become aware and fully assume the fact that technology itself is, in its essence, a mode of enframing, we overcome it.”⁵ We introduce a gap or a critical distance between us and technology. Technology is non-totalizable, subject to the Lacanian logic of the “non-all,” allowing, in turn, for the (re)politicization of the university. Our attitude toward the fantasy of technology is not purified or extinguished (which would entail imagining a world without technology, or a world prior to

the primacy of enframing—Agamben’s nostalgia for an *unmediated* experience of the senses, a liberated gaze). Rather, technology’s way of disclosing the world is effectively denaturalized.

What follows from this denaturalization is crucial and far from self-evident. A flight from anything related to online interfaces strikes me as reactive, deciding in advance on what technology *is*, what it necessarily forecloses. This puts the remedy to technology outside its operations. Agamben’s non-Fascist professors and courageous students are the exceptions to the fallen state of the university, currently visited by “technological barbarism.” Unlike the masculine logic of the exception, however, the logic of the non-all posits technology as incomplete and imperfect, plagued by contradictions. The task of the critic is to affirm and exploit technology’s autoimmune or pharmacotic character—how it is at once a remedy and a poison to higher education. The emancipatory potential of technology, if it has one, can only be realized if we take seriously the possibility that *technology enables as it disables*.

¹ <https://medium.com/@ddean3000/requiem-for-the-students-giorgio-agamben-866670c11642>

² Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 125.

³ Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, 130.

⁴ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 35.

⁵ Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 31.