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Introduction: Inhabiting the Ruins of Excellence

The military outpost of Oush Grab—the Crow’s Nest—is situated between the city of Bethlehem and the Judean desert at the narrow bottleneck of the migratory paths of birds of different feathers. Yearly, more than 500 million swallows, wheatears, eagles, storks, and cranes navigate the skies over the Jordan Valley as they migrate from northeastern Europe to East Africa and back during spring and autumn. Located on a high hill and surrounded by a giant earth mound erected by soldiers during the Second Intifada, the barracks are a common point of orientation for the flocks. The birds recurrently interrupt their migration on the hilltop, giving way to an instantaneous and precarious ecology of small predators and other wildlife attracted by the feathered passers-by.¹

Given its location on a hilltop, the site has a long history of being a strategic point. It is of significance not only to the age-old back-and-forth movement of flocks of migratory birds and their companion species that temporarily inhabit the site, but also to human beings that have a military interest in the surrounding, lower-lying lands and seek to obtain a more permanent residence there. Situated in the boundaries between town and desert, and due to the distinct topography of the hill, it has served as an excellent lookout for centuries. Before its occupation by the Israeli military, the Crow’s Nest was led by the Jordan Legion, who took it over from the British troops during the Arab Revolt of 1936–9. Some believe that in earlier times it served as an Ottoman outpost and may have been first used for military purposes by a Roman regiment.²

One early morning in April 2006, the inhabitants of Beit Sahour, a small town on the eastern outskirts of Bethlehem, witnessed the evacuation of the Crow’s Nest. The withdrawal of the Israeli army was the last act in a long struggle of Palestinian activists against the oppressive presence of the base. Continued opposition against the outpost by the local community and the concurrent refashioning of the military’s geographical organization in the area led to the sudden abandonment of the base. On the morning after the evacuation, people

from Bethlehem overran Oush Grab, smashing windows, walls, and doors with iron bars. At the same time, others tried to salvage everything of even the least worth. Doors, furniture, and electric plugs were detached from buildings, and the water tower in the center of the base partially collapsed due to the removal of steel reinforcement bars.³

How to Live with and in Ruins?

The evacuated military base, desolate and destitute, confronted the inhabitants of the neighboring area with the issue of how the ruins of such an oppressive architecture could be re-inhabited at “the very moment that power [had] been unplugged: the old uses [were] gone, and new uses not yet defined.”⁴ It opened up questions concerning the remnants of the Crow’s Nest: given its current state, how could it be inhabited in a different, less violent, way in the future?

Shortly after the raid, Palestinian government officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocated the view that a police force must defend the base in order to avoid further vandalism, and hence to continue using the base within the framework of a military occupation. Some of the inhabitants, however, opposed this perspective and suggested “to stay with the trouble”⁵ and to start to think about possibilities for use other than the two that had already begun to actualize, namely brutal destruction or unquestioned reuse.

According to these inhabitants, neither destruction nor reuse seemed to be a desirable course of action because both refused to engage with the present ambiguity of the place, either to eradicate its colonial past or to superimpose a future that would entail a continued unproblematic re-inhabiting of the infrastructure. Through the inhabitants’ efforts, the situation began to initiate a thinking process around the issue of decolonization as such and, more specifically, the question of “how people might live with and in ruins?”⁶

The question of the possibility of life in the ruins of colonial oppression is all the more urgent for Oush Grab since most of the refugee camps in the area came into being in 1948, shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel, an event narrated in the camps as the Nakba, the catastrophe that caused the Palestinians to flee from their homes. Historically speaking, the main narrative of resistance in the Palestinian refugee camps is hence that of the right of return, of the desire of the exiled people to return to their homes from before the Nakba.⁷

However, to the young refugees living in these camps, who were born there and raised by parents who themselves lived most of their lives in the camps, the

right of return remains, despite its narrative force, a somewhat abstract claim, as they have never actually lived in the houses that they would return to. Therefore, it is hard for them to understand decolonization in terms of an effectuated right of return. Instead, from their perspective, the possibility of decolonization and the challenges that come with it evoke another question.

Reformulating the question from “how to effectuate the right of return?” to “how to live with and in ruins?” makes a slightly different problematization of the situation possible, opening up a different mode of response. Whereas the first question seems to necessitate political and even juridical action aimed at a predefined goal, the second question allows the inhabitants to think through what is happening in their present lives and opens up the possibility of a response that entails more than a plea for a return to the private home of the past.⁸

Instead, it requires thinking collectively about what it means to live inside the “extraterritorial” space of the camp when it is no longer a temporary state of exception, but has become an enduring condition where exception has become the rule. Taking extraterritoriality not as an exception to be remediated but as a starting point for speculating about different modes of living together, inhabitants of the camp felt they needed a way of organizing themselves other than, for instance, as a political action group, an NGO, or a social work organization in order to sustain the processes of thinking about decolonization instigated by the abandonment of Oush Grab. Interestingly, they decided to gather as a university, a place for collective study.⁹

In doing so, Campus in Camps, an experimental university in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, tries not to abandon the ruins. Instead, the studiers take up the challenge of responding to the question of how to live there, how to create, in the present, a future that differs from those informed by ideas ranging from “the militarized security institutions of ‘Israeli liberal democracy’ to the rabbinical theodicy of some of its colonists, from the militant Islamism of Hamas to the quasi-secular authoritarian rule of Fatah in the West Bank.”¹⁰

The work of Campus in Camps is all the more interesting as the initiative explicitly claims the name *university*, despite the apparent dissimilarities with contemporary understandings of the university. Campus in Camps, for instance, does not offer degrees; there are no admission criteria for prospective students, nor does it have an extensive research program of which the results are published in academic journals. Moreover, it does not strive for “excellence” or seek to attract the interests of the industry or other big funding bodies. On its website, no information can be found about the different faculties, research centers, or curricula, simply because it does not have any.

Hence, by claiming “university” as a name for their collective, Campus in Camps has simultaneously put in motion a process of thinking about what it means to be a university out of institutional bounds. Instead of looking at the university from the top, as an institution for research and teaching inhabiting a global knowledge economy, it requires focusing on the doings of the various forces gathered within the university itself and on how study allows them to go beyond the constraints of institutionalization to surpass what the university (in the “traditional” sense) demands from its inhabitants. Put differently, making abstraction of the institutional paraphernalia associated with contemporary universities, the work of Campus in Camps narrows the focus on the practices of the university and, more specifically, on its *practices of study*. As such, it offers a point of departure to reconsider the future of the university itself.

In times when universities seem to concern themselves less and less with societal issues that are not immediately profitable, it is interesting to see that the precondition for the work of Campus in Camps seems to be a deep and strong entanglement between the university and its sociopolitical environment. Crucially, however, this entanglement never boils down to an instrumentalization of study for the sake of liberation or emancipation in terms of futures already known. Instead, the wager of the studiers of Campus in Camps consists of having practices of collective study—such as reading texts, fieldwork exercises, discussing movies, and storytelling—to allow them to attend to the possibilities that persist inside the situation they find themselves in and thereby create footholds for speculation about alternative futures.¹¹

Moreover, these speculations never take place in general, but always in relation to the situation that is being problematized. Thus, in a genuinely pragmatic fashion, they allow for making other worlds possible, not in the sense of a purely abstract “out-of-this-world,” but as a different world *within* this world.¹² Studying, in that sense, is not just a means to *learn* about the camp and its inhabitants to acquire the skills and competencies that the status quo requires. Instead, it means to engage in transformative processes which give the camp itself a voice in the aspirations for its future.

The collective of studiers of Campus in Camps forces us to situate study on the level of the practices that populate the university as a vector of worldly becoming thoroughly enmeshed in and entwined with ruinous, messy environments, an *ecology of study*.¹³ What this exactly means will be explored throughout the book. The problem to begin with, however, is how the study practices of this Palestinian experimental university can also begin to matter to us, students and

scholars of another kind of university for whom the issue of decolonization and the question of how to live with and in ruins is a slightly different one.

From Decolonization to Decolonization

For those inhabiting the universities in Europe and America—the so-called excellent institutions for research and higher learning—it might feel somewhat remarkable that the camp dwellers of Dheisheh decided to organize themselves as a collective of studiers, a university. In the West, academics and students incessantly keep voicing their discontent with higher education policy and university management during protest marches, actions, and strikes. For us indeed, inhabitants of those “excellent” universities, the name of the university seems to have been spoiled, and its role played out. Not only is the university accused of being an ivory tower, remaining indifferent to the relevant questions and problems of everyday life, it is, at the same time, blamed for having re-organized itself into a knowledge factory that is only interested in useful expertise and the sale of degrees.¹⁴

Moreover, given the centrality of decolonization as a cause for collective concern, it seems all the more remarkable that the studiers of Campus in Camps started to assemble under the guise of a university. The university itself has indeed played a major part in the colonial project by creating and consolidating a Eurocentric system of knowledge with universalistic pretenses. Especially from the early nineteenth century onwards, the university became a crucial actor in the construction of a Western canon reflected within the different academic disciplines, often at the expense of non-Western ideas, thoughts, and ways of knowing. Important to note is that the excluded non-Western perspectives not only came from other-than-Western regions, but also that a process of “epistemicide,” to quote Boaventura de Sousa Santos, took place to eradicate those ideas that nevertheless originated in the West, but did not comply with Enlightenment ideas of universalism, emancipation, and progress.¹⁵

However, next to canonizing specific ways of knowing, thereby granting them a universalistic stature, at the expense of others, the university also greatly assisted in the spreading of these ideas, predominantly in the national context of the home country. First, the university was the prime educator of the social and cultural elites of the emerging nineteenth-century nation-states. To that extent, it functioned as a gatekeeper to the superior Western system of knowledge and

the professions that required this knowledge (e.g., lawyers, doctors, ministers). Besides, the university was a hotbed for the emergence of a national culture sharing these Enlightenment values to which lower layers of society could aspire. Lastly, and perhaps most saliently, the university played an important role in the construction of knowledge about indigenous populations and related race theories, including the spreading thereof to the public via the disciplines of history, geography, and anthropology.¹⁶

Therefore, when raising the question of how to inhabit the ruins of the university, a certain “decolonization” seems to be pertinent as well, although the notion assumes a different meaning here. In recent decades, decolonization has become a major theme in criticisms of higher education. Achille Mbembe underscores that decolonizing the university is a multifarious project that includes, for instance, the removal of colonial inscriptions from the campus, the inclusion of other-than-Western perspectives in the curriculum and the lecture hall, and the democratization of systems of access and management (e.g., hiring criteria, methods of evaluation). Interestingly, Mbembe claims that decolonization also implies “breaking the cycle that tends to turn students into customers and consumers,” thereby forging an alliance between decolonial and anti-capitalist struggles.¹⁷ Put differently, decolonization does not limit itself to the historical legacy of colonialism in particular, but also interrogates the logics and mentalities that continue to occupy the university until today.

Returning to *Campus in Camps*, it is intriguing that their concept of decolonization does not focus primarily on institutional or curricular reform. Rather, decolonization emerges as a stake in an ongoing process of study. Therefore, it is situated not at the end, but *at the core* of the educational process. Whereas for Mbembe and Santos, decolonization is first and foremost a political project with a strong epistemological bearing, the studiers of *Campus in Camps* present us with a practice of study that is itself a way of decolonizing, having the power to decolonize established perceptions and conceptions of the university as well. In that sense, a study of this experimental university could be a manner to meet the demands of a “permanent decolonization of thought,” to quote Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, a way of detaching ourselves from the capitalist and colonial conceptions of the university we have grown so accustomed to.¹⁸

In other words, because the disconnection of the university from common questions and concerns, as well as its reconnection into social life via market relations (e.g., student as consumer, the commodification of knowledge in patents and degrees, strengthening of industry–academy partnerships), has left this age-old institution in ruins, the question of how to live with and in ruins,

and hence of decolonization, matters to those inhabiting the contemporary universities in the West as well, although in a different manner.

In that sense, *Campus in Camps*, this small-scale, radical practice of collective study that has begun to call itself a university, offers a starting point for recovering and reinterpreting the spoiled name of this decaying capitalist and colonial institution. Triggered by this sudden reclaiming of the name of the university, the question is how the ruined institutions of higher learning—ivory towers and knowledge factories alike—can be reconsidered, and how it is possible to think differently about the relations between science and society, knowledge and action, or the public and the university.

Therefore, three questions motivate this book. First, there is the question concerning the tasks of the university. Traditionally, these have been regarded as three separate domains of research, teaching, and service. Second, there is the question concerning the relationship between the university and society, or put differently, how the university takes part in processes of worldly transformation. And third, there is the question concerning the future of the university. How do certain contemporary issues and challenges urge us to rethink the university radically?

Throughout the book, I propose to reclaim the university as an *ecology of study*, to re-entangle the three traditional tasks of the university, to reconceptualize the relation between world and university, and to reconsider the university's future.

Inasmuch as the three questions above orient my inquiry, what principally *situates* it is the practice of study of *Campus in Camps*. *Campus in Camps* offers an opportunity, both contingent and urgent, to think differently about the institutions for higher education that have become prime pawns in the competitive market for cognitive labor. Its study practices challenge to reaffirm the relationship between university and society without either accepting its instrumentalization in capitalist enterprises of knowledge production and commodification or hearkening back to the imagined Edenic past of an intellectual stronghold in which academics could study “in freedom and solitude.”¹⁹

Instead, in *Campus in Camps*, the university emerges as a place of assembly where questions concerning what can be known and how it can be known get thoroughly enmeshed with questions of living together, and the possibility of a future that acts upon the continuity of the present, rather than annihilating it or taking it for granted. Due to the work of *Campus in Camps*, the proposition of an ecology of study acquires a highly concrete and precise significance.

Nevertheless, turning to Campus in Camps does not mean to look for a blueprint for a university-to-come. Nor does it mean to instrumentalize Campus in Camps to illustrate a general theory. Both of these approaches would indeed turn the Palestinian experimental university into an example that either needs to be followed or clarifies a philosophical argument. Instead, pointing out that Campus in Camps *situates* my inquiry draws attention to the fact that it offers an initial—and given the exceptionality of the situation always precarious—impulse to think again about the current state of the university without determining *how* we should think about it, and without offering a model of an ecology of study.²⁰ In that sense, the study of Campus in Camps is itself a point of departure for decolonizing the university, or at least our ways of thinking about it, while reclaiming it as an ecology of study.

Before giving more substance to the proposition of the ecology of study, I will map the environment in which this proposition comes to matter, from which it draws its relevance, so to say. This approach first requires providing insight into the actual trends and tendencies that have left the university in a state of ruin. Furthermore, I will explore different ideas that might inspire new ways of thinking about the university, including the various problems these ideas confront us with. Bearing this in mind, at the end of this introduction I will return to the proposition of an ecology of study and how it will be developed throughout the book.

A Ruined Institution

The question of how to live with and in ruins may not be unfamiliar to those inhabiting the contemporary university. Since Bill Readings published his critique of university policy and management under the aegis of Excellence in *The University in Ruins*, it has become a common trope in debates about the faith and future of higher education. Readings' diagnosis indicates how the capitalization and entrepreneurialization of the university since the advent of the knowledge economy have hollowed out its intellectual and educational mission in favor of a more commercial one, namely the production, commodification, and sell-out of useful knowledge.

In his seminal book, Readings traces the history of the university from the influential reform movement in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which inaugurated the modern research university, to the neoliberal reforms of the last decades of the twentieth century, which aimed to promote

“excellence” in the university. The discourse of excellence, he convincingly argues, marks the decay of the university and the loss of a public mission of an institution that henceforth has been left in ruins.

At Readings’ time, and up to today, university administrators seem to be unable to refrain from speaking about Excellence. Excellence seems to be what universities seek, their ultimate motivation, and the standard against which professors, research projects, students, administrators, papers, and lectures are evaluated. The contemporary university aims for a position among the most excellent institutions within university rankings. They seek to continuously improve their profile in both research and teaching by producing excellent knowledge and an excellent workforce that has had excellent training. Academics, in turn, aim to publish excellent articles in excellent journals, and they are expected to deliver excellent courses for their students to obtain excellent grades. Readings strikingly states that “today, all departments of the University can be urged to strive for excellence, since the general applicability of the notion is in direct relation to its emptiness.”²¹

Readings emphasizes that the discourse of Excellence is itself not an ideology. Instead, it is symptomatic of an ethology, a way of behaving and inhabiting, provoked by shifts in the ecology of the university. Claiming that the discourse of Excellence is not an ideology means, in the first instance, that Excellence is not a matter of belief, but instead of measurement. Excellence presents itself to be an objective and value-neutral way to evaluate academic work, to make all equal before the tribunal of measurement. In doing so, the discourse of Excellence has no external referent that might function as a more or less fixed normative ideal to which academic work should aspire, or based on which it could be evaluated.²² For Readings, this is problematic because precisely such ideals used to imbue the university with a societal mission, which it now has lost as it only seeks self-improvement and the self-improvement of its members in the global knowledge economy.

Whereas for Kant and Humboldt, for instance, this external referent to which the university should aspire was respectively the Idea of Reason and the Idea of Culture, the University of Excellence only concerns itself with the empty formalism of its internal optimization. More specifically, this process of loss of ideological content marks a shift in the landscape in which the university is situated. Formulating the problem in this way shifts the focus from the discourse of Excellence as ideology to an understanding of striving for Excellence as a behavioral strategy for survival in an environment that has become increasingly hostile to the university’s original aspirations, be it toward Reason or Culture.²³

Readings argues that the behavioral strategy of universities and academics in a survival mode is a symptomatic response to the capitalist logic of measurement and calculation that has installed itself within its institutional infrastructure and within the minds of its faculty and staff. Indeed, the ascent of the discourse of Excellence seems to manifest a direct relation with the proliferation of metrics that aim to measure the results of academic work, ranging from impact factors, h-index, and university rankings, to professor ratings and student grading. Measuring academic work that is measurable, and making academic work that is not measurable quantifiable strengthens the general applicability of the formalist discourse of Excellence, and makes it painfully clear that it does not seek something else than eternal self-optimization.

Situating the academic ethology within the contemporary, metricized knowledge *ecology* universities find themselves in, Readings' diagnosis places itself against the background of a dramatic shift in the environment of organizations and institutions that surround the university. From the 1960s onwards, the university has itself been recruited as an essential player in the new (knowledge) economy. Since the main assets and stakes of economic development had shifted from labor power and industrial production to education and training, economists have argued that the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a transition from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, apt to the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly globalized market of commodified information and communication.²⁴

In such a global knowledge economy, universities form an important link between supply and demand of information and knowledge. The university has adapted to its new environment and has become an autonomous and entrepreneurial knowledge organization that promotes competition, is eager to cooperate with private investors, puts higher education in the service of economic competition, and empowers students to maximize their skills and competencies in the global labor market.²⁵

More specifically, five ecological shifts can be distinguished that have redrawn the relations between the university and the broader landscape in which it is situated via the construction of networks that have sought to embed not only institutions of higher education, but also individual faculty members, administrators, and students in the new economy.²⁶ A first development is the rise of university–industry–government partnerships. Examples of such partnerships are the increase of funding from private industrial companies for profitable research projects, and the evaluation of research by patent officials, hence making applicability and profitability the norm for scientific research.²⁷

Secondly, licensing offices (management of intellectual property), economic development offices (linking research assets with economic needs), educational profit centers (provision of programs to niche markets), and other boundary-spanning organizations draw the university closer to the world of industry and economics, thereby forcing it to reconceive itself as a for-profit economic actor, on par with the ones it engages with.²⁸ Thirdly, network organizations such as the Business Higher Education Forum or the League for Innovation aim to solve common societal problems by gathering different forms of academic expertise and public and private interests. Although they involve the university in questions of public concern, the formulation of these questions in narrow economic terms rarely allows for in-depth discussions and comprehensive solutions.²⁹

Fourthly, preceding developments and the increase of workload they have brought with them have had profound effects on the management of universities, requiring an extended managerial capacity and an overall increase of administrative staff. The main tasks of these new managers, of whom no longer any real affinity with actual research and higher learning is expected, include the facilitation of new research collaborations and the involvement in network organization. The rise of the so-called *administeriat*³⁰ not only is the effect of a shift in the organizational landscape of the university, but equally causes itself a more frequent and intense collaboration between universities and for-profit and non-profit partner organizations.³¹ The fifth and last development concerns the increasing importance of metrics at different levels that have led to an entire industry of world rankings and league tables such as Times Higher Education or QS. Inter-university competition, moreover, goes hand in hand with an intra-university audit culture where consultancy offices such as McKinsey and Deloitte are hired to measure and optimize their performance in research, teaching, and administration to climb the scales in international rankings.³²

All these developments specify a more general shift in the organizational ecology of the university, with other-than-academic organizations parasitizing on the university. Correlatively, this ecological shift has given rise to an entirely different academic ethology as a way of surviving in an environment that is profoundly hostile to those who cling to the pursuit of knowledge for the public good, or for its own sake. Striking is the increased display of market and market-like behaviors by universities, “attaching a price to things that were once free or charging more for items or services that were once subsidized or provided at a cost.”³³

The ascendant regime of academic capitalism, Slaughter and Rhoades argue, values “knowledge privatization and profit-taking in which institutions, inventor

faculty, and corporations have claims that come before those of the public.”³⁴ Knowledge, in this regime, is conceived of as a raw material that should be commodified as a private good via patents, degrees, and trademarks. It acquires monetary value in the stream of profit-generating high-technology products that flow through global markets. The cornerstone of this regime is the necessity of a link between academe and commercial corporations for profitable growth.³⁵

Hence, taking Readings’ argument a step further, it could be argued that not only have Reason and Culture lost their ideological function as guiding ideas for the university, imbuing it with a *raison d’être* different from its survival as a self-optimizing institution, but also the idea of the Public Good has increasingly been placed at risk as a viable idea to which the university could aspire. Instead, the discourse of Excellence has installed itself to distract attention from the deep trouble—the state of ruin—universities find themselves in due to the loss of a sound idea that could animate their existence.

In conclusion, the rise of the University of Excellence has taken place against the background of dramatic shifts in the ecological system implicating the university. In their mutual reinforcement, these developments have provoked the current state of ruin of the university, which ironically coincides with its unabated self-glorification as an Excellent institution. This shift does not solely concern the ecology of the university, the increasing amount of other-than-academic organizations that have nested themselves in its surroundings since the 1960s, but also acquires an ethological signification in the behavioral strategy of eternal self-optimization in view of Excellence at both individual and institutional levels.

Reclaiming the University?

Having outlined the shifts in the ecology of organizations surrounding the university and the loss of its societal mission induced by those shifts, the question that remains is how to continue to inhabit the ruins of the university and to make a life that is not immediately measurable by profit possible? Which ideas could help in reclaiming the ecology of the university, to decolonize it from the capitalist logics and mentalities that occupy it? It is important to stress that *reclaiming* should not be understood as a return to a glorious past that was free of problems, where people still lived up to the ideals of the purest academic intellectuality.

Instead, the intended meaning is closer to the eponymous agricultural operation that seeks to make the lands that have been exploited by capitalist

production and monoculture capable of fostering life again. Reclaiming is foremost an operation that aims to generate life again in those lands where it had become impossible, and to heal from the damage and destruction done by capitalist modes of exploitation. To heal does not mean to recover and return to the “healthy” state of the past, but assumes the fertility of the remnants itself in fostering new life, whatever form it might take.³⁶

With Readings, it has been argued that the question to which Idea the university should aspire is centuries old. Confronted with the lamentable state of universities at the end of the eighteenth century, both Kant and Humboldt wanted to breathe new life into these ancient institutions and had formulated—as hinted at before—Reason and Culture, respectively, as guiding ideas.³⁷ At this point, it is relevant to dwell a bit longer on these ideas of the university, in order to get a sense of whether they still provide substance for resistance, whether they offer starting points for reclaiming, as well as to see which new ideas of the university have been formulated in more recent years.

In “The Conflict of the Faculties,” a compilation of three essays written in the 1790s, Kant addresses the relationship between the university and its ecology, raising the question of how Reason can be given a place in a university instituted by the state, and as such bearing responsibilities for it. According to Kant, the state is concerned with the welfare of its citizens and, more precisely, with their health, security, and salvation. These three objectives correspond in the university to what Kant called the three higher faculties of Medicine, Law, and Theology, respectively. The lower faculty of Philosophy, however, has no such direct bearing on the administration of government and is solely interested in the pursuit of rational inquiry and disinterested knowledge.³⁸

The infrastructure of the Kantian idea of the university sheds a particular light on the dilemma between Reason and state, thinking and power. Kant discerns a conflict between the higher faculties, who work in the service of the state by providing physical, civil, and eternal wellbeing, respectively, and the lower faculty, which is only concerned with the conditions of truth and which acknowledges no other command than that of Reason itself. In this vein, Kant argues that the faculty of Philosophy, being the home of autonomous Reason, has to scrutinize the academic machinery of the higher faculties, monitor their interested claims to truth and use of reason. As such, the university, by holding together the higher faculties which operate in the service of the state, and the lower faculty, only obedient to Reason itself, constitutes a membrane between Reason and state.

Whereas the higher faculties are subject to the state and have a distinct utility in government administration, the lower faculty has to be conceived of as free

and subject only to the laws given by Reason, not by the government. In calling the university a parliament of learning, Kant puts the higher faculties, supporting the government's rules and statutes, on the right side of the parliament, "but in as free a system of government must exist when it is a question of truth, there must also be an opposition party (the left side), and this is the philosophy faculty's bench."³⁹ Ultimately, Kant understands this ongoing conflict as a constant progress of both ranks of faculties, which in the end will allow for a government fully inspired by Reason to come into being. In other words, the Kantian idea requires a university that functions as a membrane, protecting Reason from coercion by the state and protecting the state from the free play of Reason. Through the higher and the lower faculties, the membrane both separates and gathers power and Reason, respectively.⁴⁰

Wilhelm von Humboldt, writing a few decades after Kant, addressed the relationship between the university and its outside in different words. For him, the university was not so much the resolution of the conflict between state power and philosophical thinking, but rather a beacon for the advancement of (national) culture. Humboldt's text "On the spirit and the organizational framework of intellectual institutions in Berlin" has been vastly influential in the development of higher education policies, and up to today, its ideas form a powerful motive for university administrators and public officials to return to during celebrations of foundation days, honorary doctorates, and other academic ceremonies.⁴¹

The notions of *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* take center stage in the Humboldtian university as its most significant aims.⁴² Both are deeply intertwined and would benefit the individual as well as the nation-state. More precisely, the Humboldtian university aims to initiate processes of collaboration in which intellectual achievements of one person can arouse the intellectual interests of others so that what was first expressed by an individual becomes a shared intellectual intuition. Humboldt argues that the inner life of the university should "call forth and sustain a continuously self-renewing, wholly uncoerced and disinterested collaboration."⁴³

These collaborative research practices of the university—the seminar is probably most emblematic in this regard—are what keeps *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, professor and student, together. They foster the creation of knowledge for its own sake, while at the same time sharing it among professors and students alike. Both the accumulation of knowledge and its simultaneous dissemination among the members of the university contribute to the national Culture of the (German) nation-state, the ultimate frame of reference for the modern research

university in the Humboldtian sense.⁴⁴ In other words, the Humboldtian university aims to unite research and teaching under the sign of Culture, and therefore, the university's societal mission becomes part of a nationalist agenda that intends to promote the cultivation of reason among the citizens of the nation-state.⁴⁵

Both the Kantian and the Humboldtian idea of the university heavily stress the importance of freedom from state power. Their plea to safeguard the so-called uncoerced and disinterested nature of academic research has become a powerful motive in claiming academic freedom and keeping the state at a distance. Moreover, it has also been readily adopted as an argument against university–industry partnerships, namely that if research is to be really profitable, in a comprehensively cultural sense, researchers should be given the time and freedom to pursue their inquiries to where they might lead them, without any set agenda. Within such a narrative, the researcher is staged as “the goose with the golden eggs,” which should not be sacrificed for instant gains, but be granted enough freedom and autonomy so that it will keep on producing in the long run.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, it is highly questionable whether academic freedom in that sense really provides a space for resistance vis-à-vis the capitalization of the university, and whether it would make genuine reclaiming possible. First of all, the firm claim for academic freedom unties the knot between the university and a world for which its research could come to matter. Such an uncoupling not only risks turning the university into an ivory tower that does not concern itself with worldly issues and concerns, but it also leaves up for grabs the question of how knowledge generated during research could be received by those outside the university. More concretely, this means that knowledge becomes disembedded from the contexts where it mattered in the first instance, and can be commodified and sold on the market in the forms of patents and licenses.⁴⁷ In that sense, the “old” ideas of Kant and Humboldt do not offer a real alternative.

Recent years have interestingly seen an upsurge of texts that seek to provide the university with a new idea or mission, thereby emphasizing its relation with the world.⁴⁸ Most prominently, Ronald Barnett has proposed the idea of an ecological university that actively aims to engage with the world. Intrigued by Barnett's use of ecology to think about the university, the question now is to what extent his suggestion offers a valid alternative to the capitalization of the university and its disaffected intellectual independence.

Barnett's repurposing of the university is hinged on a double understanding of ecology. First, he uses ecology in a more neutral or descriptive sense in order to

distinguish the different ecosystems the university finds itself in (such as social institutions or the economy), and that together make up the so-called ecosphere of the university.⁴⁹ While claiming that the university is necessarily implicated in its ecosphere, Barnett underscores that the university not only moves through these ecosystems, but that it is always permeated by them. Secondly, when the university actively seeks to engage with these ecosystems, the notion of ecology acquires a markedly stronger sense, meaning that it becomes a guiding or normative framework for the university, an idea of the university if you like: “If it has a care for the world, the university is impelled to turn towards these ecosystems and bend its resources in assisting their advancement.”⁵⁰ Here, Barnett suggests that the university should take up a more active role in the shaping of current trends and developments in its different ecosystems in view of the advancement of “world well-being.”⁵¹

Despite the philosophical force driving Barnett’s ecological university, it might not provide sufficient inspiration to do things otherwise, to inhabit the ruins of the capitalized university in another way, because his proposition is still situated very firmly in the tradition of formulating Ideas of the University, without offering any prospect of how these ideas might play out in practice. In that sense, the Idea of World Well-being is next in line after the Idea of Reason (Kant), the Idea of Culture (Humboldt, Newman), and the Idea of Public Good (academic capitalism *ex negativo*) as providing the overarching normative framework that offers the university a steady point of orientation.

Idea, Organization, Practice

Having explored different positions that have been developed concerning the university’s state of ruin, it is time to distance ourselves a bit in order to get a sense of how these different responses make us affective to the questions concerning the future of the university and its relation to the world in one way rather than another. It seems that in the literature concerning the relationship between university and society discussed so far, roughly two approaches can be discerned. On the one hand, under the banner of academic capitalism, sociologists of higher education have lampooned the marketization and corporatization of universities, including the commodification of knowledge in terms of patents, licenses, and degrees. Traditionally, this approach has mainly focused on criticizing actual trends and developments in the organizations of

higher education, with considerably less effort spent on devising alternatives. This approach originated in the early postwar years, when the massification of higher education and the recruitment of science for the military-industrial complex took off. It picked up speed in the 1980s and 1990s when neoliberal policy reforms dismantled the university's protected status as a public institution and started to put it out for sale on the market.

The second approach, on the other hand, is older and goes back to the university reforms of the early nineteenth century. Given the state of decay of the university at the time, the question was raised how this age-old institution could be re-imagined. Thinkers such as Kant, Schleiermacher, and Humboldt in Germany, and Newman in Great-Britain, proposed different Ideas of the University, speculating about its purposes and trying to envisage the necessary institutional infrastructure (e.g., the Higher Faculties versus the Lower Faculty for Kant, the unity of research and teaching for Humboldt, the importance of the liberal arts in the Anglo-Saxon tradition). In contrast to the critical-sociological approach, these philosophers had a more imaginative take on the question of the relationship between university and society. They thought about positive ways in which the university could foster national culture anew without yielding to the power of the state.

At this point, it is possible to discern a robust implicit connection between the two approaches to the university: both discourses rely on a fundamental understanding of the *university as an institution*. It is important to clarify that the notion of institution is understood here as the formal structure, whether ideal or organizational, that aims to warrant the persistence of certain informal customs and values.⁵² However, although both approaches relate *differently* to the university, the university as an institution still does constitute a common ground that thoroughly conditions their respective understandings of what a university is and should be.

On the one hand, authors from the Humboldtian tradition require the university as an institution to put flesh on the bones of its idea. The idea of the university only makes sense if one conceives of it in relation to its institutional infrastructure. As such, to the extent that the idea of the university has to do with specific customs and values, with passing on knowledge to the broader public in view of national culture, these customs and values also need to be thought of as embodied in a formal institutional infrastructure that gives them exact meaning and grants them endurance. Put differently, the ideas of the university formulated by philosophers require sketching the university's institutional

infrastructure to concretize the relations within the university as well as with institutions outside of the university.

The critics of the regime of academic capitalism, on the other hand, conceive of higher education institutions as organizations that are increasingly enmeshed with other organizations. The reliance on an institutional understanding of the university might be less outspoken here. However, it becomes more apparent when considering the fact that they understand the impact of the ascending academic capitalist regime as a transvaluation of the values of the university as a public institution (e.g., community, openness, and universality) in favor of more entrepreneurial and mercantile values. What is presupposed here, then, is the “original” university as an institution that embraced and promoted values such as commonality and openness, before capitalization began to carry out its demolition.

In that sense, a reciprocal capture exists between both approaches as each position refers to the other to gain strength and relevance. Although this is perhaps less clear for the early texts of Kant and Humboldt,⁵³ contemporary texts that articulate the idea of the university, such as Barnett’s ecological university, often do so in relation to analyses of the critical-sociological kind in order to safeguard their idea of the university from the threats posed by current neoliberal policy reforms. Correlatively, these analyses of the university under the predicament of globalized capitalism seem to take the transcendental-philosophical accounts of the modern research university as a zero-degree to measure the impact of changing policy discourses on academia. The literature on academic capitalism often suggests that the idea of the university as an autonomous public institution for the disinterested pursuit of culturally valuable knowledge has been eroded since the early postwar years and more intensely since the development of neoliberalism.

Each perspective, however, comes with its own problems due to the focus on the level of the institution. Whereas the critical-sociological perspective risks placing us with our back against the wall, while making us aware how problematic the university’s situation is, the transcendental-philosophical perspective tends to offer far-fetched and idealistic visions of the university without providing a sense of how they could be realized. What both perspectives lack is a vision of a future that is different from the ones that present themselves as obvious or necessary. More concretely, they seem to lack substance for resistance. In opposition to these institutional perspectives, focusing on the organization and the idea of the university respectively, I want to suggest that it might be interesting to think about the university starting from its practices.

To Begin Again with New Beginnings

After having outlined the different approaches, it is time to formulate the problem along somewhat different lines than the organizational and ideational understandings of the university to trigger a slight shift in perspective, another awareness of the situation we find ourselves in. Such a shift in perspective could make us attentive to the possibilities that might still remain within the ruins of the university.

Reproblematising the problem of the university between university and society in terms of *an ecology* of study, with a focus on *practices*, might open up such a perspective. Before expanding further on what it might mean to understand the university as an ecology of study, I will explain how the three key terms of this proposition—ecology, practice, study—each address a specific challenge that comes with the three questions that motivate this book, concerning the tasks of the university, the relation between university and society, and the future of the university.

First comes the term of *ecology*. As argued before, the capitalization of the university has intensified the commodification of knowledge not only in the sphere of teaching (e.g., degrees, modules), but also in the sphere of research (e.g., patents, licenses). This process of commodification has disembedded knowledge from the contexts in which it mattered in the first place and has cut loose the ties between knowledge production and societal questions. Foregrounding aspects of interdependency (instead of compartmentalization), indeterminacy (instead of fixed goals), generativity (instead of planned productivity), and mutual co-becoming (instead of exchange), ecological thinking seems to offer an exciting alternative to the capitalization of the university. It makes one attentive to how different human and other-than-human actors live together in symbiotic, predatory, or parasitic relationships, and how they thrive or suffer in co-created environments that can be either fostering or poisoning.⁵⁴

Remarkably, both of the aforementioned institutional approaches have witnessed an ecological translation in recent years. Situating the university in a knowledge ecology, instead of a knowledge economy, Susan Wright has made a case for a new conceptual lens to study the organizational landscape the university finds itself in.⁵⁵ Writing more from the philosophical background of the other tradition, Ronald Barnett has suggested the idea of an ecological university to understand how the university can relate to its ecosystems for the promotion of World-Wellbeing.⁵⁶

Taking into account these (institutional-)ecological perspectives on the university along the lines of a focus on the *practices* of the university may considerably shift the point of view, however. Understanding the university in terms of its practices, and the relation between university and society as never given, but always locally, partially, and temporarily enacted in the course of practices, requires an alignment with contemporary practice-theoretical approaches. These approaches seek to navigate the midstream between both totalizing social ontologies with their focus on structures and systems, and individualizing social ontologies that stress individual agency and self-determination.⁵⁷

In contrast to the organizational and ideational approaches, a practice-theoretical approach stresses the actual, processual gatherings and doings that take place within the university, rather than its institutional infrastructure, its normative ideals, or its organizational form. Adopting such an approach, Masschelein and Simons, for instance, have focused on university lecturing as an experimental practice of profanation in which what is being lectured about (e.g., words, viruses, rivers, currencies, codes, buildings, God, drugs, stones) is detached from its regular, sanctioned use and made available for new uses.⁵⁸ Roussel's plea for university learning environments addressing social and ecological change, with its stress on "series of emplaced bodies, objects, modules, networks and design elements that students and teachers collectively assemble into working prototypes and architectures to test ideas," likewise comes close to such a practice-theoretical perspective on higher education.⁵⁹

Furthermore, in view of a possible redefinition of the university's traditional tasks, I propose to grasp the practices of the university as practices of *study*. In recent years, the concept of study has been taken up again in discussions in educational philosophy and theory in order to conceptualize a radical alternative to the individualistic, opportunistic, conformist understandings of education under the banner of learning. Study, in contrast, would emphasize the collective and communal aspects of educational processes on the one hand, and link education to a radically anti-capitalist movement of resistance on the other hand.⁶⁰

Moreover, the concept of study appears to propose a welding of the three classical tasks of the university—research, teaching, and service to society. Study places the educational processes of the university right in the middle of a world of struggle where societal and political transformation is at stake. Besides, it draws together processes of knowledge production ("research") and dissemination ("teaching") in those moments and places where people, as collaborative units of study, start to question the world they are living in.

Conceptualizing the three core tasks of the university in their intertwinement and at the level of practices is one of the challenges this book aims to address with its proposition of an ecology of study. Adopting a different point of view, embracing not only an ecological take on the matter, but also situating itself in relation to the practices of the university (instead of its idea, its organization), requires another mode of *doing* theory as well, since both the critical-sociological and the transcendental-philosophical approach have fallen short in offering real alternatives to the capitalization of the university, and making its ruins inhabitable again. Therefore, the last part of this introduction further clarifies and contextualizes the mode of doing theory to which the book adheres.

Taking Up the Threads

Whereas the previous section tried to explain what proposition might be relevant to shed new light on the debate about the relationship between university and society, this final section aims to clarify which mode of doing theory might meet the demands of such a task. After all, it has become clear by now that an overly critical perspective only hardens the fronts by portraying a dim future, which leaves us without any real hope, whereas a strictly philosophical account often eclipses the problems it tries to address with all too abstract and utopian ideas.

At this point, I wish to pick up some threads found in the work of thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and Donna Haraway. In light of Latour's verdict that "critique has run out of steam," the urgent question is which role philosophical and theoretical work can and should assume now. Latour is not opposed to critique per se, but he problematizes its focus on denouncing and debunking existing positions, as this merely impoverishes a debate that precisely is in dire need of new perspectives.⁶¹ Moreover, the critical stance would operate a separation between the people who still live under a "false consciousness" from the critics who know what is really at stake, rather than forging new alliances or gathering a public around actual matters of concern.⁶²

Instead, what is needed are ways of doing theory that gather people, that do not proclaim to know what others still need to learn, but that incessantly relay stories in order to enrich and foster debate, instead of denouncing and debunking, which would only make the debate more sterile. Such stories do not necessarily aim to set an example, prove an exceptional case, or show us something inherently good (whatever that might mean). Instead, they are stories that recount the event of an achievement or failure in doing things otherwise, in reclaiming.

Isabelle Stengers (1949), the Belgian philosopher of science, former student of Noble Prize-winning chemist Ilya Prigogine, and Whitehead-scholar who provides the main philosophical inspiration for this book, has forcefully stated what is at stake in such stories:

We have a desperate need for other stories, not fairy tales in which everything is possible for the pure of heart, courageous souls, or the reuniting of good wills, but stories recounting how situations can be transformed when thinking they can be, achieved together by those who undergo them. Not stories about morals but ‘technical’ stories about this kind of achievement, about the kinds of traps that each had to escape, constraints the importance of which had to be recognized. In short, histories that bear on thinking together as a work to be done. And we need these histories to affirm their plurality, because it is not a matter of constructing a model but of a practical experiment. Because it is not a matter of converting us but of repopulating the devastated desert of our imaginations.⁶³

The story of Campus in Camps seems to be precisely such a story, not because it presents us with a model of an alternative university, or because it recounts the experience of innocent people who founded a utopian university in the most dystopian conditions, but because it is precisely a “technical” story of how things can be done otherwise, and how study can become possible even in an environment far removed from the comfortable lecture halls and seminar rooms of the universities in the West.

In that sense, it does not provide us with a critical story exposing how things go wrong in the contemporary university (in the way the stories of academic capitalism do). Nor does it make us dream of a university finally recovered from its vices and living up to its original mission again, as the stories about the Idea of the University make us believe. Instead, it merely discloses that things can be done differently, including the different problems and constraints that had to be met in order to transform the situation the studiers had found themselves in before they began to study.

In the course of the book, the conceptual proposition concerning an ecology of study and the technical story of Campus in Camps mutually provide a hold for one another. More precisely, the experiment of Campus in Camps allows us to situate the all too general questions of the three tasks of the university, the relation between university and society, and the future of the university in the palpable presence of a particular university and at the level of its practices. In doing so, it is not the intention to instrumentalize Campus in Camps for a theoretical argument that is of no concern to them, or to construe their practice as a critical lens to unveil that other universities no longer engage in study practices.

Instead, the study of Campus in Camps is a way of decolonizing thought because it allows us to interrogate a certain Western idea of the university and therefore possibly liberate it from the capitalist-colonial logics and mentalities that have occupied this conception, stressing excellence more than anything else. Not only is the geographically non-Western practice of Campus in Camps of use here, but also a re-reading of the non-Western elements of the European university in the Middle Ages, stressing its existence as a site of collective study, rather than the Enlightenment interpretation that retroactively recruits the university as a place of humanistic higher learning.⁶⁴ Therefore, the book proposes to think practices *with* other practices, stemming from the commitment that writing *about* is always writing *with* and, hence, that it is essential to consider what to write about carefully. In the words of Haraway, this goes as follows:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.⁶⁵

Relaying this line of thought to my questions, it is clear that it matters what university we study to study the university with. Taking further inspiration from Haraway, it means to understand doing theory as a game of cat's cradle, taking in hand a pattern that has been given and drawing out, via a series of possible transformations, new patterns by relaying and returning the thread.⁶⁶

The game of cat's cradle allows for discerning four features of doing theory that seem to be of importance here. First, in the game of cat's cradle, different people come together to play around a common thread, without submitting to an overarching logic of either growth and victory, or denunciation and loss. On the one hand, the different patterns that emerge when the thread is passed on present an idea of ongoing transformation without falling into the trap of growth, as the thread does not become bigger or longer. String figures are hence not about the accumulation of knowledge or profit. On the other hand, it is a way of creating a series of patterns without radically cutting the loop. It is not about denunciation or debunking in order to lay bare and cut loose particular presuppositions, to extract a specific position from the debate. Instead, the challenge is to compose with unasked-for patterns. Hence, taking care of and paying attention to the thread, instead of growing or cutting, seem to be the core rule of the game.⁶⁷

A second feature is that it demands a particular loyalty to what is given (maybe a methodology of "data" after all, in a very literal sense), and here loyalty

should be distinguished from fealty or fidelity. The loyalty of taking the relay has to do with the care for the thread that is required. Knowing that what you take in has been held out requires a thinking in-between, a willingness to take the relay, and draw out another pattern. As such, it is not the same as commenting, which often stays inappropriately close to what is commented on, or hacking a text to make it affirm one's own ideas. Instead, it is a way of playing with and being put at play by ideas that make one think, in which thinking hence is not so much an individual capacity, as it is the achievement of a series of collective, shared relays.⁶⁸

Third, thinking in relays requires a response to the trust of the held-out hand. It is vital to make clear that this trust is not trust in the (personal) other, but rather trust in the creative uncertainty of a specific encounter, an always partial connection in a particular milieu, of the in-between of the relay. It means to accept not to be the author of one's ideas, but to participate in a process and practice of thinking thoughts with other thoughts, to expose oneself to the risks of always-emerging beginnings without the security of fixed end-points. It is in giving hold and taking hold, passion and action, attachment and detachment that new patterns can be composed.⁶⁹

Finally, it is an activity in which the participants experience the joy of creation, of making and thinking together, of taking care of a common thread in relay and return, and of giving way to always new and unforeseen futures. It is a way of doing theory aimed at an activation of the possible, in the sense that it does not so much transmit a "knowledge of" as to give expression to a "belief in" that transforms the world "from something given into something to be explored, always to be constructed and created, and this again not according to the measure of 'what is' but according to the measure of 'what this world is capable of'."⁷⁰

Situated in the relays between the ecology of study, a theoretical intervention of the propositional kind, and the practical experiments of *Campus in Camps*, the book is conceived as a zigzag-movement going from the story of *Campus in Camps* to the conceptual elaboration of an ecology of study and back again. The book proceeds through various relays, offering new points of departure and drawing out three different figures that correspond to the different parts of the book.

The first figure concerns the emergence of the university in the Middle Ages. It offers a new entry point, a new beginning to think about the university. Returning to the medieval university provides a historical argument to bracket our institutional conception of the university and makes the proposition of the

ecology of study more palpable. Since the medieval university did not concern itself with science, the second chapter that makes up this figure raises the question of which place the sciences can obtain in the university. This chapter presents Stengers' theory of scientific practices as a reciprocal capture of requirements and obligations, to situate the sciences in the university, as well as to construct a theoretical framework for the analysis of practices of study.

The second figure, then, places Campus in Camps center stage. Stengers' conceptualization of practice will be brought to bear on the study practices of this Palestinian experimental university. The first chapter of this figure concerns the impulses that motivated the coming into being of a university in the refugee camp in the first place. Here, the question will be how the all too general question of decolonization acquired specific and concrete importance for the students of Dheisheh: which traps had to be escaped, which difficulties were encountered, which constraints had to be recognized. The fifth chapter, consequently, will delve deeper into the technical requirements that rendered this practice of study operative, efficacious—what made it work and how?

After having gone through the practical experiment of Campus in Camps, the last figure is a return to Stengers' reading of the speculative philosophy of Whitehead and his conception of the university as a home of adventures. The sixth chapter will unpack this proposition and take it further, drawing on the series of relays being played before, giving more substance to the proposition of the ecology of study. Assisted by Stengers' reading of Whitehead and situated by the study practices of Campus in Camps, the seventh chapter, finally, aims to propose a pedagogy of study.