

# The **STUDIOUS** UNIVERSITY

A Marxist-Psychoanalytic Groundwork

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**Abstract** It is not uncommon to hear criticisms of the university today. From the right, the university is seen as nothing more than a mere liberal bastion or hotbed for leftist ideological indoctrination. And from the left, the university is considered nothing more than a factory, part and parcel of the military-industrial complex, or a mere puppet of corporate control. The centrality of corporate, neoliberal logics, ideologies of managerialism and excellence, and the universalization of individualist policies over and above public purposes all seem to indicate that the university is undergoing a major identity crisis. What many of these analyses fail to recognize is the underlying educational logic at work in higher education—a logic that informs both conservative and progressive analyses of the university. Building on the work of Giorgio Agamben, we present a critical analysis of the connections between the university’s educational logic of learning, the rise of student debt, and neoliberalism. We then suggest studying as an alternative model of university education that suspends the economy of learning and its connections with debt. To further expand upon Agamben’s ontological analysis of study as a state of educational potentiality, we explore its political and economic dimensions through a psychoanalytic-Marxist framework. In particular, we draw upon Marxist notions of reification to understand how learning and debt are lived by the student, and in turn, how Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic notion of dehiscence provides a way in which the student can experience studying as a dereified expression of educational life. The result will be a theory of study that is capable of undermining educational investments made by and through neoliberalism into learnification.

**Keywords** university, crisis, neoliberalism, Agamben, study, student debt, potentiality, reification, dehiscence

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It is not uncommon to hear criticisms of the university today. From the right, the university is seen as nothing more than a mere liberal bastion or hotbed for leftist ideological indoctrination (see Kors and Silberglate 1999; Horowitz 2007, 2009; Kimball 2008). And from the left, the university is considered nothing more than a factory, part and parcel of the military-industrial complex, or a mere puppet of corporate control (see Schrecker 2010; Giroux 2007; Giroux and Giroux 2006; Aronowitz 2001; Reading 1997). The centrality of corporate, neoliberal logics, ideologies of managerialism and excellence, and the universalization of individualist policies over and above public purposes all seem to indicate that the university is undergoing a major identity crisis (Lea 2014). While austerity measures are lauded on the right as a form of fiscal responsibility, on the left, the very same practices signal a radical undermining of investments in the democratic potential of universities, of study, and of research (Giroux 2015). Large-scale transformations in structure, governance, and function signal a precipice in the history of the university. Beyond criticisms from the right and the left, some have started to ask deeper questions concerning the very existence of the university as a particular kind of institution. Perhaps we are no longer living in an age of the university but rather witnessing its eclipse? Are we living in the ruins of the university? And if so, does this mean that we must search for new forms of educational life beyond its walls, or does such decay signal a new moment of possible invention and experimentation (Simons et al. 2011)?

Yet even the most strident critics of the university (on the right and the left) miss an important question: What is the precise educational logic of the university

today that makes it amenable to corporatization, which the neoliberal right applauds and the radical left abhors? It is our basic contention that both right-wing attacks and left-wing utopian revivals have failed to adequately address this simple question. Rather than propose a political agenda to reorganize the university under the banner of social justice, or propose an economic solution to its declining status, or propose a new formula for improving student outputs across the curricula, we suggest instead a turn to a more basic and fundamental philosophical concern: how the very educational logic of the contemporary university coincides with the economic logic of late capitalism itself. If the left leaves this fundamental question unanswered, then, as Paulo Freire once observed, the very same pedagogical logic of oppression will simply be reproduced under a “liberatory” guise (2001).

With students in Germany recently proclaiming “We Are No Human Capital!” we can begin to understand the political, economic, and educational dimensions that unite the university and late capitalism. As Jan Masschelein and Maartin Simons argue, “the term ‘students’ has become synonymous with the resources to be exploited, the talents to be mobilized, the object of investment, the guarantee of a country’s competitiveness or, when addressing the possible disobedient component of human capital, the customers to be seduced” (2011: 165). Against this backdrop, students are protesting the collapse of education in the discourses and practices of learning as flexible skill development. Indeed, we are living in what could be described as a “learning society” (Masschelein et al. 2006), wherein lifelong learning is just as much an educational mantra as it is an economic imperative to

become a self-regulating, self-directing entrepreneur capable of continual adaptation to the flexible and highly volatile market. While Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2012) list the indebted, the mediated, the securitized, and the represented as the key subjective figures that have emerged from within the neoliberal crisis, we would argue that the current educational apparatus of the industrialized West has also produced the subjective figure of the “life-long learner.” If, as Hardt and Negri argue, the real subsumption of social relations by the factory has happened under late capitalism, then so too have we witnessed the simultaneous “learnification” (Biesta 2014) of society. The university is at the very crux of this intersection between economic, educational, and social forces transforming the logic of learning into an economic logic of production, and transforming the economic logic of production into an educational logic of learning. As such, it is not good enough to merely critique the financialization and bureaucratization of higher education. Underlying these changes is another educational change: the hegemonic dominance of learning.

But critique is not enough. Any deconstruction of the logic of learning must be coupled with a reconstructive move to find alternative educational logics that interrupt and suspend learnification. One such possibility can be found in the distinction between learning and studying. For Masschelein and Simons studying is “free time” (2011: 167) within the public space of the university. As opposed to the student as “not yet” (the employee, the citizen) who “must be” (this or that subject with *x*, *y*, and *z* skills), the student should be rethought of as the one who studies without determinate ends, without

identifiable interests, and thus, one who is open, exposed, and attentive to the world (Simons and Masschelein 2009). In a world of quotas, bottom lines, and instrumental calculations, the student as studier is the political figure par excellence: the one who suspends the underlying educational logic of the system of neoliberalism, the one who prefers not to participate in entrepreneurial self-(re)construction, the one who disidentifies with the role of learning to labor, the one who prefers not to pay his or her financial debts.

In order to theorize the nature of study and why the fate of the university is linked to this practice, we will explore the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben is now recognized in diverse disciplines as seminal for understanding politics, literature, cultural studies, theology, philosophy, and linguistics. Yet with multiple edited collections on his work<sup>1</sup> as well as multiple secondary sources that summarize, critique, and analyze his corpus, there has been little focus on Agamben’s ongoing theory of the act of studying.<sup>2</sup> This article hopes to develop and extend Agamben’s initial comments and observations on studying by (a) juxtaposing studying with learning, (b) examining the ontology of the potentiality of study, and (c) demonstrating the importance of Agamben’s insights into studying for intervening into current debates on the fate of the university.<sup>3</sup> But Agamben will be more or less a jumping-off point for our analysis. Agamben only makes passing remarks about the university, dismissing them as merely part and parcel of a contemporary problem with the relationship between the past and the present (2007a: 95). Indeed, it is most peculiar that Agamben does not mention the university in his essay “What Is an Apparatus?” (2009), for it would seem that the university is,

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as we will argue, a defining apparatus of learnification. Thus his own critique of the university is limited. Further, he does not connect his scattered notes on study with any positive potentiality that remains within the university to become what he might call a “counter-apparatus” (Agamben 2009: 19). If an apparatus captures and monitors the gestures of living beings, then the *studious* university might very well offer a profanation of this apparatus and thus reopen the question of a common university or the free time of the university (as Masschelein and Simons would argue). Despite the possibilities as well as the urgency of such a project, Agamben does not follow through on this line of inquiry, thus producing an opportunity for further critical reflection and investigation. Picking up on the potentiality that remains within Agamben’s own work and moving it forward, we hope to provide a robust groundwork for understanding the radical potential of study to undermine learning and thus profane the neoliberal university and its twin logics of human capital investment and financial debt.

To complete this groundwork, Agamben’s ontological analysis of potentiality and studying needs to be further developed in relation to psychoanalytic Marxism, which enables us to further Agamben’s analysis in two respects. First, Marxism helps ground ontological claims within the specific neoliberal economy of learning and debt. And second, psychoanalysis helps explore how ontological conditions are lived/experienced by the studier (as opposed to the learner). In terms of the former, we draw on the classic Marxian notion of reification; for the latter, we turn to Jacques Lacan’s theory of psychical dehiscence. The result will be a theory of study that is capable of undercutting the

ontological, psychological, and educational investments made by and through neoliberalism into learnification.

### **Studying**

It is not at all clear that Agamben’s brief, if not cursory, remarks on the logic of studying were meant to be a radical interruption and suspension of the hegemonic logic of learning, yet the provocative fragments that he gives his reader offer a starting point for imagining an education that is not beholden to the process of measurement and quantification that is found throughout all sectors of the “educational economy.” Briefly summarized, *studying* for Agamben is an “interminable” and “rhythmic” activity that not only loses a sense of its own end but, more importantly, “does not even desire one” (1995: 64). The studier seems suspended in a state of oscillation between sadness and inspiration, of moving forward and withdrawing from certain aims, certain forms of identifiable subjectivities, and certain outcomes. Thus studying emerges as a kind of potential state of educational being that interrupts any notion of educational “growth” or educational “realization” of latent possibilities. Indeed the studier is defined by three “weak” powers (Lewis 2014) that include (a) “preferring not” to participate in educational reproduction, (b) suspending occupational or vocational destinations (the studier is a learner *as not* a learner), and (c) deactivating divisions between the ignorant and the knowledgeable (the studier is *neither* ignorant *nor* a master, thus rendering inoperative institutional hierarchies, ritualized forms of legitimation, and codified social roles).

Agamben points out that studying and stupefying are closely connected (1995: 64). *Stupidity* here is not simply a

lack of knowledge but rather the experience of bewilderment when all vocations are left idle and when all verifiable signs of one's capabilities are suspended. If we think of learning as oriented toward the measurability of determinate, reliable skill sets that can be put to work for economic growth, studying suddenly appears to be a "useless" activity, devoid of quantifiable significance in the life of the student. To study is to undergo a certain inoperativity of the very logic of learning, which emphasizes productivity of an entrepreneurial self who is defined in relation to the simultaneous accrual of (a) human capital recognized by the market as a valued commodity and (b) financial debt that permanently binds his or her potentiality to the fluctuations of the market. Indeed, within the educational logic of learning, studying would merely be an obstacle to be overcome, a waste of time at best and at worst an antieducational distraction, delaying actualization of human capital and thus putting life itself at risk by incurring more debt.

As for the studier, he or she remains oddly invisible within the logic of learning—only included as an excluded outsider who refuses to "play by the rules" of institutional life. The studier changes majors too often, does not promise to graduate on time, seems to never take the required courses, and falls off track of the expected "freshman experience" prescribed by various administrators. To be stupefied means that the very predicates defining one's identity as this or that kind of person with these or those definable skills and specific career goals are suspended, leaving one without a specific location within the order of production. Hence Agamben's famous example of the paradigm of study: Bartleby the Scrivener—a figure that is paradoxical precisely because he prefers not to

accommodate himself to a world of evaluation, performance quotas, and measurable improvement. Like Bartleby, the studier is exhausted and exhausting (for any learning apparatus).<sup>4</sup> He or she is indifferent to the economic rationale of the institution, which commands one to produce evidence, move toward confirmation of work done, assesses progress toward definite goals.

Given the economy of learning found at the heart of the university, studying is the only educational logic that frees up potentiality from its subservience to actualization (Lewis 2013). Here is the major distinction between learning (which always concerns ends and measurements) and study (which concerns means released from ends and thus from quantification). Through education, the subject suffers an "alteration (a becoming other) through learning" where "the passage from the act implies an exhaustion and destruction of potential" (Agamben 2005: 179, 136). It is precisely this model of potentiality that currently informs discourses and practices of learning. Learning emphasizes investment into potentiality in order to fully actualize this potential in the form of performance outcomes and human capital development. Here the ontology of the educational subject is structured according to the strict logic of "not yet": not yet an adult, not yet a citizen, not yet a productive member of society. Thus the educational subject must suffer an alteration through learning that destroys the "not yet" in order to fully actualize a latent potentiality for adulthood, citizenship, or productivity (i.e., transform the "not yet" into the necessity of the "must be" of the professional, employable adult). But what exactly must be lost in the translation of potentiality into actuality? By thinking through potentiality as such, Agamben discovers that im-potentiality is

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the “*capability* of the act in not realizing it” (1998: 45) and thus “permits human beings to accumulate and freely master their own capacities, to transform them into ‘faculties’” (2011: 44). *Im-potentiality* holds together potentiality and impotentiality (or the ability to be and not to be in its totality). When potentiality passes into actuality, it is impotentiality (rather than potentiality) that is sacrificed. To fulfill potentiality is to destroy the ability to not be in the name of the economy of learning. The contingencies of impotentiality are what must be sacrificed in order for the individual to learn  $x$  skills for  $x$  purposes predetermined in advance by the social norms, traditions, and values that inform educational practices. Indeed, potentiality in this framework is more or less reduced to a series of *possibilities* that can either be actualized or not actualized. The logic in such cases operates through the function of the “or,” which separates and divides potentiality into a series of discrete, functionally oriented, and exclusive possibilities. Apparatuses of learning demand that you declare this *or* that degree, become this *or* that kind of employee. The university as an apparatus of learning functions through such subtractive exclusions: increasingly controlling and managing students’ choices through prescribed and guaranteed “four-year graduation plans” or accelerated “fast tracks” that cram as many courses as possible into condensed summer and winter sessions. The result is a narrowing of the curricular choices, streamlined majors with little room for electives, and a collapse of university life into economic viability. Students emerge with narrowing skill sets designed to meet the needs of existing markets, thus transforming potentiality into recognizable skills to be bought and sold as a form of human capital.

But this is only the first movement in the learnification of the university under neoliberalism. Stated bluntly, lifelong learning is coupled with lifelong debt. As Jason Thomas Wozniak has argued, reading philosophers of indebtedness such as Maurizio Lazzarato and David Graeber, students now experience their educations through the lens of their indebtedness (see Graeber 2011; Lazzarato 2012; Wozniak 2015; Williams 2006; Marez 2010; see also Williams 2006 and Marez 2010 on the “pedagogy of debt”). Graduates will live in the shadow of their debt, either through defaulting or living to service their debt by scrambling in a poor job market to make enough money to pay what is quickly becoming the next generation’s “first mortgage”: their education. Before they graduate, students and their families sense the pressure of debt at every turn: which classes to take, books to buy, and food to eat. In our ontological reading, learning sacrifices impotentiality (ability not to be) so that potentiality can pass seamlessly into actualization—one can “realize one’s full potential.” The goal is to produce evidence of one’s worth in relation to market variables. Simultaneously the student is also defined in terms of debt accrued through this process. Debt returns the student to a perpetual state of “not yet.” One is never free from a relation to one’s economic servitude. In this second case, one’s potentiality (the ability to be) is sacrificed. In both cases, ontological im-potentiality (as the simultaneous ability to be and not to be as experienced through study) is split. Thus we have to think learnification (Biesta 2014) with theories of debt (Lazzarato 2012) in order to understand the constitutive violence of neoliberal educational logics.

Agamben asks: What is an experience

of potentiality that does not sacrifice the im-potential? What would it mean to experience im-potentiality as such? Those who have knowledge are *in potential*, meaning that they equally have the capability to bring knowledge into actuality and *not* bring knowledge into actuality. Agamben then gives the example of an architect who “is in potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems” (1999: 179). By conserving itself, potential remains im-potential. Instead of sacrificing im-potentiality, we sometimes find strange examples wherein im-potentiality is actualized—where the act of actualizing is equally an act of de-actualization. Studying is one such act—is the educational paradigm of de-actualization, a point of indifference between potentiality and actuality.

In fact, it is the experience of im-potentiality that is the experience of freedom. Agamben writes: “Here it is possible to see how the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality. . . . To be free is, in the sense we have seen, *to be capable of one’s own impotentiality*” (1999: 183). What makes us human, according to Agamben, is precisely the capability to *not* be, to remain im-potential. It is this paradoxical existence that opens necessity to contingency—to the potential to act otherwise or to be otherwise. “Evil,” in this sense, is derivative of a flight from an indetermining im-potentiality into the logic of pure or complete actualization for a predetermined end. Citing Agamben: “Evil is only our inadequate reaction when faced with this demonic element [our impotential], our fearful retreat from it in order to exercise—founding ourselves in this flight some power of being” (1993: 31–32). Thus to enable students to experience their im-potentiality means that they must be given

the chance to experience their capability not to be—their capability to prefer not to be human capital, to prefer not to pay off their debts. Indeed, im-potentiality does not simply separate potentiality from im-potentiality (thus sacrificing contingency for necessity, possibility for impossibility), rather it recognizes that the subject emerges precisely in the gap that separates and binds together opposite forces in the atopic space existing between desubjectification (an unnamed subject position) and subjectification (recognizable within the order of things). Instead of separating potentiality into a series of mutually exclusive possibilities (to be *or* not to be), im-potentiality holds possibilities together, returning them to a more primordially indeterminate state (to be *and* not to be simultaneously). The educational experience of im-potentiality is none other than the stupification brought about through the interminable sway of study wherein the studier forgets any desire for ends, for assessments, for measurement. This forgetting is less a refusal than a preferring not to be defined by any set of predicates that would exclude the contingency to choose otherwise. In this sense, to study is to experience educational freedom that is antithetical to the capitalist logic of learning; it is to live an *educational life*.

In what follows, we will take this basic ontological characterization of study as a starting point for a much more detailed analysis of the underlying psychological economy of study. In particular, we will find useful tools in both Marxist notions of reification and Lacanian notions of dehiscence. Together, these concepts will further explicate the precise nature of “suspension” at work in study, as well as the paradoxical subjectivity of the studier as *neither* this *nor* that. The goal will be to realign the university with the free time



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and space of study, and thus cut the ties that bind the university and the psychological structures underpinning the formation of “the student” to capitalist logics.

***Groundwork: Psychoanalysis and Marxism, Reification and Dehiscence***

Since study is the educational act that suspends predicates defining the subject as this or that kind of individual with these or those kinds of skills, it is a lingering in im-potentiality—a “preferring not to.” In this sense, studying renders inoperative the basic structure and function of learning in society: socialization. For Biesta learning is essentially the functionalization of education for social, political, and economic purposes (2014). We would argue learning, as discussed by Biesta, becomes the specific mode of *reification* in the sphere of education. In this section of the article, we will outline a theory of reification as it relates to learning. It is only then that the rhythmic indeterminacy of study gains its full political and economic importance. Study, as theorized in the previous section, is the act that suspends extant predicates in the psyche, opening up the possibilities for new forms of educational subjectivity beyond “the learner.” In this sense, Marxism’s insights provide a powerful way to understand the economic and political dimensions of Agamben’s reflections on im-potentiality as a concept freed from subservience to any demands for actualization in this or that form and of potentiality freed from financial debt. Psychological reification is precisely how the sacrifice of im-potentiality is lived and experienced by the student.

To delimit the power of the studious pause and apply it in the contemporary context of the university, we must be careful and clear with respect to the two

psychical phases between which this studious hesitation constitutes a movement. Studying means going from one phase to another *within*. The first phase we call reification. The second phase we call dehiscence. In short, between the reified subjectivity of the learner and the free subjectivity of the studier, we find a moment of psychical dehiscence through which the im-potentiality of the learner is given back to itself. In conclusion, we will complete our argument for the Marxist-psychoanalytic groundwork for a studious university beyond learnification.

As Georg Lukács first argued, reification is the situation of the psyche included in capitalism. When one’s own activities are treated as commodities to be bought and sold, “[commodity] stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” (Lukács 1971: 100). In short, the psyche is thingified, and through its thingification, the psyche becomes a subjective universal identical to its objective demands in the relations of production (Bewes 2002) and the primary mode of intersubjective agency under capitalism (Honneth 2008). Reification is also the learner’s psychical status quo. On this reading, the psyche of the learner is a symptom of capitalism’s coupling with learnification and learnification’s expansion through capitalism. At the interface of these two dynamic forces lies the reified psychic economy of the learner him or herself, which is defined by the internalization of the commodity form and its externalization in measurable human capital development and debt accrual.

Though he may seem an unlikely ally, W. V. Quine’s linguistic theorization of



being from “On What There Is” is helpful in expressing this membership of the subject into the economy of learnification that defines the educational logic of capitalism. Quine argues there that being is “being within the range of a bound variable” (1948: 32). Bracketing the positivism surrounding this claim, the phrasing is helpful, because in terms of signifier and signifieds composing the psyche, linguistic entities like signifiers and signifieds can “bind” the “variable” quality of psychical experience. What it means to become educated, in this sense, is to ensure that certain kinds of signifiers hold within the psyche, or bind it. The kind of learnification mentioned in the first section is a case in point: lifelong learning is the constant updating of signifiers binding the psyche. Therefore inclusion, or membership, in a social formation—being educated, learnified—means being within the range of a bound variable. Likewise with learning as indebtedness: here the psyche is bound to the abstract quantity that one owes and that binds one’s life to particular institutional relations (debtor-creditor).

The economy of learning that forms the educational logic of the current university is precisely one that reifies the university community. The student has only one choice in the face of such reification. As Lacan warns: “Not that the knowledge that you are given is not structured and solid. On the contrary, you have only one thing to do, which is to weave yourselves into it along with those who work, that is with those who teach you, under the banner of the means of production and, consequently, of surplus value” (2007: 204). In other words, the student becomes a subject only through subjecting him or herself to the discourse of the university that reifies/bounds excessive variables to

the economy of production. The reified commodity (knowledge) is necessary for the subject to take up his or her place as this or that kind of subject, identifiable by these kinds of skills, talents, and aptitudes and this or that amount of debt. The result of the process of institutional reification is a split subject (\$): split from his or her constitutive im-potentiality to be rather than; split between the potentiality to function in a market according to human capital development and the im-potentiality associated with crippling debt. Im-potentiality is bound to certain extant variables, which results in the reified psyche of the learner as both marketable and in debt.

Chadwick Matlin, writing for the website *Medium*, describes a series of interactions with his father when attending Tufts University that clearly illustrate the binding of the psyche to marketability and debt. Matlin had decided to study anthropology, though both he and his father constantly worried about the “practicality” of this decision, given the looming \$100,000 loan they had taken out to pay for the elite degree. Matlin (2014) describes what this experience was like:

I had to write a term paper about anthropomorphism and physique in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and my weekly dodgeball game was exhausting. The major questions on my mind were, in ascending order: Why couldn’t Descartes write a coherent sentence? How long until Anna’s Taqueria raises its quesadilla price (\$3.11 . . . for now)? Who was that green-coat girl across the quad? I was at college to go to college. . . . Yet the backdrop to all of this was the debt. How does a person grow attached to a place when he knows it’s costing him \$100,000? How could any student’s first three semesters at college—composed of awkward late-night study groups, too many a cappella

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concerts, and a dearth of hands-on seminars—be worth \$100,000? If my time at Tufts was worth \$100,000, what did that say about how much I thought I was worth?

In this memoir, reification is a lived experience of the learner. The courses Matlin takes, his interests in food and social experience, are all considered in the context of his own “worth” and the value of his education. He asks at the end of this recollection “what did that say about how much I thought I was worth?” His university experience is limited, pressured, and prohibited by the sense of a dollar value haunting that experience. His memoir demonstrates the extent to which he “learned” at Tufts University, in the sense of learnification. While he uses himself as an example in this piece, and this experience is limited to an elite college and a middle-class family, Matlin explores the experiences of students at public universities, community colleges, and for-profit universities whose experience is far from elite and exponentially more costly. As a political consequence, as Andrew Ross has pointed out in *Creditocracy* (2014) and his work with the Occupy Student Debt Campaign, so much student debt clearly decreases the likelihood that university students will participate in social movements, protests, and, we would add, studying—all activities for which students have traditionally provided essential energy and organization.

Like the German students proclaiming “We Are No Human Capital!” we can also cite the rallying cries during the Occupy Student Debt Campaign and StrikeDebt movements in New York City: “You Are Not a Loan!” Read together they summarize the state of the learner as betwixt and between market-ability (as a potentiality)

and debt(in)ability (as an im-potentiality). The phrase “You Are Not a Loan” is telling: students taking out massive loans to mortgage their futures and identifying with their debt as they complete their degrees and leave the university is precisely the dominant form of intersubjectivity for students today. What they learn at university is that they *are* a loan: their psyche is composed of the exorbitant exchange-value of their degree. Reification is what happens when a student considers him or herself to be chattel that can be bought and sold on a market (Matlin asking himself, “How much am I worth?”). In the terms of our analysis, when im-potentiality (for this *and* that) is restricted by an extant commodity prohibition, educational potentiality becomes identified as a form of human capital that is marketable. Reification is therefore an outcome of education in capitalism, but also a process. The problem with learning is, in this sense, that the learner is the result of a learning process whose only result is the process itself: hence the eternal return of labor built into the very structure of lifelong learning and lifelong indebtedness. In such cases, the student as a thing (a debt that is marketable and a marketability that is indebted) is structured by an extant prohibition over im-potentiality, which leaves open the question of which signifiers count as “bound” to any specific social formation. The learner, by necessity, must be an entrepreneur who must prefer to sell him or herself like chattel in order to survive being in debt. In this case, one’s im-potentiality is divided against itself and made into an educational thing that can be actualized only in relation to a price.

The reification of im-potentiality through binding propositions forms the psychic kernel of learning as it manifests itself today within learnification. Learning

is not simply an educational logic restricted to the schoolhouse but is rather the very dynamic of reification as such, with its cyclic movement between result and process, potentiality and actuality, between training and measuring. To learn is to reify im-potential contingency into a necessary form of capitalist potentiality that has defined predicates with attending conditions of success and failure according to extant prohibitions. To “be on the market” is shorthand for the pressure of the learning society on and over the student to be a learner-as-entrepreneur who must put Marx’s labor potentiality to work. In short, learning is an educational symptom of capitalist production. But if this is indeed the case, then the very notion of higher education for transformation becomes paradoxical. Can one learn to unlearn learning? If learning reifies, then can one dereify the psyche of the learner through more learning (and thus re-reification)? The problem here is not an easy one to escape and, we would argue, largely misplaced by proponents of critical pedagogy who have failed to address the precise relationship between learning and capitalist production.

Here we have to ask (a) how it is that dereification is possible and (b) how this possibility is an educational possibility. Counterintuitively, we would argue that the gesture toward an educational logic beyond learning lies within the very reification process of learning itself—learning *in suspension* of learning, learning *as not* learning, learning that *prefers not to learn* . . . and thus opens itself up to study. But, before arriving at that moment, we have to understand the Lacanian theory of dehiscence, which, as Agamben might say, offers the slightest of shifts that nevertheless makes all the difference. Indeed, as we will argue, dehiscence is precisely the threshold that

both unites and separates reified learning and dereified study. For Agamben, all apparatuses are posed within a fundamental tension between subjectification and desubjectification. This tension is made concrete in the shift between reification and dereification, learning and not learning. In this sense, dehiscence is precisely the psychological mechanism that is missing in Agamben’s theory, and the point through which we can glimpse how it is that study provides a time and space for freedom in education to once again emerge from within yet against learnification, thus forming the core experience of the university as a counter-apparatus.

Lacan labels the gap, or the discordant space, at the heart of the human organism “dehiscence.”<sup>5</sup> Dehiscence is neither a positive nor a negative state of affairs of the psyche, nor even a “struggle” between an “either/or.” The psyche inevitably fills the gap with images, language, voices, and objects to complete itself. In other words, the psyche undergoes cathexis to objects, ideas, images, all of which give a sense of wholeness to that which is otherwise incomplete. But there will be occasions where dehiscence occurs: wherein the psyche will “return” or become aware of its primal discord, which cannot be puzzled out, cannot be fully sutured over, by the institution of certain extant signifiers. Dehiscence is therefore the process and product of the primal discord at the heart of the human organism—the opening to the ecstatic limit of the thou art that. We would argue that dehiscence is the phasic complement to reification: the deactivation of extant prohibitions in the psyche. In other words, dehiscence is the suspension of an item’s status as being within the range of a bound variable, and thus the deactivation of prohibitions on that item. The dehiscence

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with which we are primarily concerned here is the deactivation of prohibitions in the psyche particularly with respect to the exchange value predicate immanent to learnification, which transforms education into a commodity (human capital), which can be bought and sold on a market.

What does it mean for one to undergo an educational dehiscence of the reified psyche? An educational dehiscence would be a process of study that undoes the psychological boundaries introjected through learning (boundaries existing between marketability and indebtedness). Using Agamben's terminology, im-potentiality as experienced in study is a psychic loss of cathexis in this or that, thus opening up to an experience of that which is indeterminate (and hence free, even for a brief moment, from marketization or accrual of financial debts). For those readers familiar with Lacan's work, dehiscence may also be expressed in terms of Lacan's four discourses (the discourses of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst), though not as an instantiation of any one particular discourse. Rather, dehiscence occurs during moments of transition between discourses; this space of betweenness is precisely the space of the indeterminate im-potentiality of study.

In dehiscence, in other words, reification deactivates. A dehisced psyche is a *studious psyche*, a psyche between structuration and a-structuration, a psyche that is only defined in terms of the im-potentiality for this and that structure, without being pinned down to any one of Lacan's discourses. This is an indifferent position: indifferent in the sense that it has no name within any given discourse, university or otherwise. The psychological space and time of study interrupts the process of learning, dwelling in an im-potential

gap that both joins and separates the four discourses that Lacan offers. This is not a poststructuralist reading of Lacan in the sense that signifiers dissolve into endlessly deferred meaning and perpetual lack of presence. Quite the contrary. What such a reading misses is precisely how, in the moment of prolonged dehiscence, im-potentiality for this *and* that is made present as a kind of freedom that exists between desubjectification and subjectification (a kind of actualization of deactualization in the form of "preferring not" to learn or pay debts).

### Conclusion

A studier has suspended his or her psychic cathexis and in this state of suspension is stupid. Or at least stupid according to the discourse and practices of learnification. As discussed above, the learner is someone who has amassed a certain amount of human capital and debt and thus has a location within the economic and social order. He or she is "valuable" and "valued" in terms of a certain level of labor power that is always weighed against a certain amount of debt. The psyche of the learner is bound to a set of variables organized along a sliding scale between marketability and indebtedness. Yet where does this leave the studious psyche—a psyche that refuses to give way on its im-potentiality? The psyche that has dehisced itself and thus falls outside the discourses of the analyst, the hysteric, the university, and the master? If universities are to be places of free time as argued above, then what we need are stupid students, for only stupid students would dare to proclaim "We Are No Human Capital!" and "You Are Not a Loan!" To study is to open oneself up to abandonment by a learning society that only recognizes potentiality that

has been reified into a set of marketable skills easily actualizable in relation to the needs of markets and into a quantifiable amount of debt that is to be repaid.

In this sense, we end with an image offered up by Agamben. The studier stands before all possibilities with a certain detached indifference to personal gains, outcomes, and ends. As Agamben argues, "Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encounter seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that 'law of good neighbors' whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one" (1995: 64). Such an image of the perpetual studier is a profanation of the logic of learning that necessitates a clear path from cultivating *these* potentialities in order to achieve *these* goals as set forth by market variables. Indeed, to study is to offer a profanation of learning now practiced in the halls of academe. To break the cycle of reification that binds the student to learning and learning to capital, we need to find in stupidity an educational virtue of preferring not. This is the educational virtue of dehiscence through which the bound variables of learning are loosened in order to be otherwise than the market demands.

In a special issue of *Polygraph* dedicated to the question of the fate of the university and of the student in contemporary society, editors Luka Arsenjuk and Michelle Koerner (2009) further argue against the categorization of the student as a depoliticized educational consumer and/or indentured servant who is submitted to a host of administrative and managerial

discourses and practices. If the protests of May 1968 taught us a political lesson, it is that the figure of the student is not simply a sociological category to be managed but the name of a political dissensus. Drawing on a host of contemporary theorists concerned with the "student crisis" in the United States, Arsenjuk and Koerner ponder the emergence of a new form of educational logic. They write:

Study . . . would not be reducible to the accumulation of information, to the current organization of knowledge, or to the logic of professionalization that governs so many of our activities in the University. Study would instead name those "unprofessional activities" of thought and experimentation that leave one intoxicated, those moments of encountering in a text or conversation that blow one's mind, driven by curiosities that are closer to pleasure, to play, to wandering, to leaving work. From here it becomes possible to further disengage the figure of the student from the docile consumer or the inert product of the University and provide an additional definition of a "student": a student is not only an exploited and invisible worker, a person in debt, but also someone who *struggles to study*. Or even, as our favorite dictionary definition of the student has it: a student as someone "addicted to study" . . . [and] study [is] an activity of sabotage and refusal of . . . the dominant form of capitalist production today: governance. (2009: 8–9)

To struggle to study is to struggle to regain the freedom of im-potentiality as a capability to be *and* not to be any one kind of subject. It is to reject the fundamental logic of learning, opening up the psyche to indeterminateness and thus freedom to be indifferent to learning and its outcomes.

If we simply remain mired in the discourse and practice of learning, studying

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remains a burden, and the goal becomes an attempt to overcome this latency period as quickly as possible through the constituting act. Thus there is a rush to meet national standards through testing (“we have to meet standards *now* so that you can become productive citizens!”), or there is a rush to close the gap between education and political praxis (“we have to act *now* in order to change the world!”), or there is the rush to finish the dissertation (“the only good dissertation is a done dissertation!”), or there is a rush to transform self-study into a quantifiable stream of data (“the only way to maximize my happiness is to build a statistical model of my daily practices!”), or the need to become revolutionary vanguards (“now is the time for action, not studying!”), or there is an urgency to pay off debt so one can get back to living one’s life (“I have to take this shitty job so I can get out from under my debt!”). In these perspectives, studying is an obstacle, an irritant, an infuriating reality whose only utility is its reified value for reaching another end beyond itself. This apparent urgency erases the equally urgent need to study in order to rekindle inspiration out of its rhythms and its sadness. Inspiration is a state of suspension that has “joyously forgotten its goal” (Agamben 2007b: 86) to become this or that in order to sustain a relation of immanence with its own im-potentiality. To be stupid is to dwell in the space and time of study and thus find new inspiration.

In this sense, we end with a simple question: Can the university provide the free time needed to be stupefied and thus inspired? Can the university itself be a profanation of the university discourse given to us by Lacan and thus become a counter-apparatus? While apparatuses traditionally functioned by producing

subjectifications, Agamben (2009) argues that today we face the opposite problem: apparatuses function through the negation of subjectivity, or through a process of desubjectification. Although learning is highly personalized (students, for instance, can come to develop their own learning roadmaps or are encouraged to use college to experiment or develop their interests), it is also depersonalizing in many respects. Learning submits education to the control of numbers, rankings, and quantitative measures of success. It is concerned with statistical mapping in order to pinpoint the most effective forms of pedagogy and for constant improvement, excellence, and marketization. It reduces education to cost-benefit analysis and institutional life to the finances of debt. In this sense, a counter-apparatus would need to open a time and space for the indifference of im-potential study. In other words, neither classical and romantic theories of *Bildung* nor mechanized processes of learning will do. Rather we need a studious university. It is our goal to have provided the Marxist-psychoanalytic groundwork not only for personal but also institutional dehiscence.

### Notes

1. See, for instance, Carl Wall 1999; Agamben 2008; Agamben 2007c; Norris 2005. See also monographs such as Watkin 2010; De la Durantaye 2009.
2. Exceptions include Kishik 2012, which includes a brief analysis of the divine violence of studying; Clemens 2010; Masschelein and Simons 2010.
3. Agamben’s work has been tangentially mentioned in the secondary literature on the university. Readings (1997) uses Agamben to theorize the university as a kind of inoperative community, and Masschelein and Simons (2011) also employ Agamben to think through a profane history or counterhistory of the university as a pedagogical form. Our own work grows out of



these engagements but furthers it in important ways. In particular, we are concerned with the practice of study as it relates to reification and dereification processes.

4. On the difference between tiredness and exhaustion and the psychic economy of university life, see D'Hoest and Lewis 2015.
5. The word itself has botanical and anatomical meanings. A dehiscence in fruit is the opening or tear in its skin at a certain moment of ripeness where seeds may fall out. In anatomy, dehiscences are large openings in the skin, though no organs fall out of it (in contrast to evisceration). For more on the significance of "gap" in Lacanian theory, see "Gap" in Evans 2006: 72.

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