

Douglas Steward

GÉRARD GRANEL'S OTHER UNIVERSITY NOW*

In 1980 philosopher and translator Gérard Granel published a manifesto for higher education titled “Appel à ceux qui ont affaire avec l’Université (en vue d’en préparer une autre)” in *Les temps modernes*, the great French journal of politically engaged thought founded in 1945 by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. A translation follows of Granel’s call for an *other* university, as republished in a collection of his essays, *De l’Université*. Granel’s essay is so eccentric, extravagant, and impracticable that it serves no other evident purpose than provocation. Indeed, it explicitly calls for a university that serves no social function. Why the devil translate and publish it, then, nearly thirty years later? After publishing a translation of Martin Heidegger’s notorious rectoral address fifty years after Heidegger delivered it, Granel took something like this question as the title for an article on the address: “Pourquoi avons-nous publié cela?”

Granel first translated Heidegger’s rectoral address as a rebuke to what he considered menacing behavior from the upper administration of the Université de Toulouse-Le-Mirail, a situation he describes in “Dénonciation du pouvoir.” In my turn, I hope that Granel’s radical positions on what the university should be will defamiliarize current debates on higher education in the United States, debates which continue to follow the trend toward consumerist and vocationalist discourses of educational reform, the long history of which is chronicled for the United States in Richard Hofstadter’s classic *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Such debates now also trend toward “personnal flexibility” and away from institutional sovereignty and freedom of intellectual inquiry protected by tenure. To these problems, Granel’s essay suggests unorthodox, anti-institutional responses. Granel takes an uncompromising position on several questions of pressing current interest: Why does the university exist? What is the university’s relation to business? What is the specificity of philosophy and doctors of philosophy in the university? How “free” can information be? How might the university reimagine a moribund, class-bound system of mere credentialing? What is the origin of

*Nous publions ici la présentation par Douglas Steward de sa traduction anglaise du texte de Granel intitulé *Appel à ceux qui ont affaire avec l’Université (en vue d’en préparer une autre)*. Pour la traduction elle-même, cf. « Versions », in English. *Les webmasters*

We give here Douglas Steward's introduction to his translation of Granel's *Call to those who have to do with the University (with a view to preparing an other one)*. For the translation itself, see « Versions », in English. *The webmasters*

student indifference and discontent? What are the role and character of academic debate? In their different ways, Bill Readings and Christopher Fynsk ultimately adjudge Granel's stance toward these questions an "impasse"¹ but agree that his essay poses them uncompromisingly.

Granel encourages us to consider that what we believe *is* is already political by virtue of its supposed existence as itself, and this is true even of those things that seem most obviously to be. He would have wryly sympathized with Bill Clinton's assertion that "It depends on what the meaning of the word is" ("President's Testimony"). For his part, Granel writes that "It is not obvious that the sciences *are*," echoing Heidegger and directly challenging the academy's most exalted and "certain" means of knowing what is: the sciences themselves, formalized bodies of knowledge. This sort of daring leads Granel to call for a "regression" to disciplinary principia and to reach for a wholly other way of being for the university and of conducting its work.

Granel's style will strike many readers as a dated one—that of high French theory—but his formulations of an other university were ahead of their time. Today, we are familiar with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act and its adversaries: the hackers, crackers, and phreakers who promote such respectable innovations as copyleft and the GNU project as well as a vast rhizome of shadier innovations. Granel's prescient, perverse article appeared four years before *phreaker* entered Webster's in 1984. The World Wide Web has only been around since the early 1990s and continues to revolutionize how information and art are disseminated through sites like YouTube, wikis, and the blogosphere. These popular modes of dissemination are to date virtually inassimilable to the existing systems of tenure and promotion; they are modes whose only reward for participants might well be, in Granel's words, "[h]aving contributed to this flood, and thus having one's name there".

Granel's impracticable propositions suddenly seem less impracticable when we consider that his call for the end of copyright was followed by the establishment of his own press, Trans-Europ-Repress (T.E.R.), which published *De l'Université* and specified a restriction on reproduction and translation only in French-speaking countries and the USSR. Granel thought extravagant, eccentric thoughts, then he put them into practice. In 1982 when *De l'Université* appeared, concepts such as *freeware* were just emerging or had not yet emerged even in a form that can be recognized in retrospect as larval. These phenomena are today exercising butterfly effects across the planetary terrain of information's dissemination. To be sure, information is not knowledge, and this transformation in forms of communication encounters entrenched resistance from some sectors. For instance, the report of the MLA Task Force on Tenure and Promotion found that administrators at some institutions of higher education consider the monograph the only possible standard for tenure. Their thinking is perhaps that a faculty member working in new media may have produced something usefully informational but has surely not produced something substantively intellectual unless it

¹ Fynsk, Christopher. *The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004, p. 4.

appears on paper bound in cardboard. Dead wood indeed. Granel's manifesto does not truckle with such hidebound notions of intellectual work, notions that his essay reproves from out of the past.

Still, Granel's idealistic call for "total dissidence" and "a university that would provide preparation for no social role" sounds downright anti-Oedipal in the United States, where such arguments are made— when they, ever more rarely, are made—in the more dutifully filial terms of a nonvocational education in the liberal arts and sciences that (notwithstanding its nonvocational nature) performs sundry profound social purposes: it's actually more socially and professionally useful not to have a useful course of study, the argument goes, because good citizens and workers need to be flexible, life-long learners. There is a mandarin whiff about Granel's Heideggerian argument that ill befits such American pragmatism, and we do well to recall that there are countless would-be students in the United States, as in France, who would die for a chance at a "merely" vocational education—and who might in fact die for lack of one, never mind an elite liberal arts education. Granel's is a paradoxically Olympian and demotic vision of intellectual and cultural production. In a review of a commemorative volume of essays on Granel (*Granel: L'éclat, le combat, l'ouvert*, edited by Jean-Luc Nancy and Élisabeth Rigal), Christian Delacampagne writes that Granel's reputation has been to date that of "a tremendous smuggler" of foreign-language writers into France thanks to his work with T.E.R. "A charismatic teacher," Delacampagne notes, "he upended the intellectual life of many generations of students with his stormy declarations in a stentorian voice." Among those students were such eventual luminaries as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Delacampagne cautions that if we do not pause to judge the value of Granel's work, obscured in its own time by more prominent names, then we "risk passing by an essential piece of the history of philosophy in France in the second half of the twentieth century." Indeed, we risk also passing by a potential set piece in current debates on the purpose of the Western university in the twenty-first century.

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