

Freeing Knowledge: The Renegade Generation of Philosophical Writers in the New Age of Corporate Universities

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As one of the earliest members of the Reply Collective, I'm immensely proud of all we've accomplished in just the last five years. More than that, I think our greatest achievements, and our most difficult work, still lies ahead of us.

The roots of this difficult task are in the institutional context in which many Reply Collective contributors work for their paychecks: the university system. I am not one of these people, and I think many other Collective members will face the tough choice and attendant hardships that I did over the last few years. It's the choice between increasingly stressful instability and underemployment in universities, or the uncertainty of taking your skills and experience to other sectors.

People have always made these kinds of career changes. But the pace appears to be picking up speed as the university system changes. Stable employment in any sector is not a guarantee, but for younger entrants to the university faculty labour market, it's become a fantasy. Running away in the TARDIS is more likely.

The combination of administrative bloat, faculty austerity, and labour over-production means that most university teachers today have merely adjunct status. They're precariously employed on contracts that last no longer than the length of their courses, and are paid at a rate well below the poverty line. Yet they are expected to work full time, and contribute to research in addition.

Even researchers at prestigious universities are losing their research capacities and even their jobs as government funding for pure research dries up and the post-secondary sector relies increasingly on private industry partnerships that are hostile to critical work or research that cannot be immediately monetized. As well, corporate partners change a university's teaching mission from critical education to customer service, privileging student satisfaction instead of challenging accepted beliefs.

In such a terrifying climate, organizations like the Reply Collective are more important than ever. They must be the new home of creative research and writing now that universities are making themselves incapable of progress.

When I was a doctoral student in a philosophy department, colleagues and professors had a particular way of discussing teachers and grad students who started working in the business or non-profit world instead of the university sector. These people had "left philosophy."

Their presumption is that no longer working as a university teacher meant that you were no longer involved in philosophy, or any of the research disciplines where you had trained and worked in the university sector.

The Reply Collective offers an alternative research and writing community to the lonely and dejected isolation of the “independent scholar.” I, for one, no longer even consider myself a scholar. Scholarship is a vocation that can only be sustained in university infrastructures, a largely library-bound career as an interpreter of great texts for an audience of other professional scholars. I no longer write philosophy to publish it in the prestigious professional journals with paywalls and subscription rates so high that even some university can’t afford them.

Instead, I write to be read. Although my writing career still has a long way to go, I write to be read by a popular audience. This doesn’t mean somehow “dumbing down” content that should properly be technically dense and conform to the standard outlines of the professional journals that are never circulated for the public to read.

It means being free to experiment with genre and style to find new ways to engage professional knowledge disciplines with the broader public and public concerns. I admit it’s a bit easier to do this from philosophy, because so much of that discipline’s best work is more purely theoretical and interpretive than many of the social sciences.

Here are some of the experiments I’m trying, both at the Reply Collective, on my own website, and in other creative projects. These are just examples of possible progressive directions. Don’t treat this as instructions, but to inspire directions of your own.

New (and sometimes weird) approaches to book reviews. The Reply Collective offers opportunities for multiple-author reviews, and experiments with form come from dividing the writing labour in different ways. My solo reviews have sometimes gotten more experimental, with mixed results. But that’s what experimentation is for.

Applying conceptual creativity and exploration more typically associated with boundary-pushing philosophical works to blogging and journalism. Recently, I’ve applied my recent training in professional communications and media studies with my long-established skills at philosophical analysis to journalism on the politics of my country, Canada. And for more than two years now, I’ve published a daily blog chronicling all my research activities for long-term projects.

I’ve recently begun work as a freelance communications consultant for small businesses and charities in my city, Toronto. One major advantage that I bring to my clients is my ability to synthesize and probe ideas and real-world developments for implications that remain invisible to people whose only training is in business. Operating without the lifelong presumptions of the business world lets me see through the buzzwords and trends that too many of my colleagues (and competitors, happily for me) chase without forethought.

Thanks to my professional connections through the Reply Collective, I’ve published a polished version of my dissertation as *Ecology, Ethics, and the Future of Humanity*. Though it’s currently part of a scholarly line, I’m preparing for a softcover release when I can begin to promote it more widely to audiences of individual readers interested in a stimulating and trippy book that simultaneously works as a philosophical analysis of

environmentalist morality and ecological science, as well as a handbook for activism-by-example.

I've also published fiction that expresses and probes the philosophical ideas of *Ecology, Ethics, and the Future of Humanity*, as well as developing independent film projects that, while largely realist, apply the Nietzsche-inspired ideas of that book to their narratives and characterizations.

At our best, humanity handles crisis through creativity and regeneration. The university as an institution once offered a secure home where research specialists could produce and disseminate knowledge to progress and improve the human situation materially, technologically, maybe even morally and spiritually. But the modern university's corporate business model has irreparably corrupted its capacity for social progress. It is all too easy to think of this demographic of surplus professional university research and teaching labour as a Lost Generation, whose lack of institutional support will see their talent wasted.

I refuse such pessimism because it is pessimism and resignation. Instead of a Lost Generation, we can be a Renegade Generation, creating new flexible and decentralized institutions to create and spread critical knowledge that will not be vulnerable to the temptations of corruption and compromise with values of greed and callousness in the name of hyper-efficiency that defines too much of our modern world in business and education.

We will free thought by thinking freely. It begins with each of us.

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