

PRODUCING TRASH: THE LABOR OF DIFFICULT THEORY IN THE UNIVERSITY

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I am a PhD candidate in Politics at SOAS University of London; my PhD thesis, in progress, is titled *Reconceptualizing Resistance in Light of the End and Failure of Hong Kong's 2014 Protest*. Working with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the event, the thesis reconceptualizes the process of resisting as irreducible to the historical outcomes of failed collective political resistance. As a guest researcher with the GCSC, I am a speaker of Research Area 3: Cultural Transformation and Performativity Studies. From spring 2025 onwards, I will be searching for a postdoc position to explore the role of desire in the rise of the German New Right.

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Producing Trash: The Labor of Difficult Theory in the University

_Abstract

Scholarship often regards theory as a passive object of human agents: composed by an author with an intention, assigned to a student by a teacher for a purpose, and used by a student to understand, explain, or predict something. And yet, at some point in the academy, depending on the disciplinary context, both students and researchers will encounter ‘difficult’ theory. Such theory is difficult on two levels, in that both its content and its form of expression resist straightforward understanding. Instead, such theory excels in the production of different forms of knowledge and the exploration of new ways of producing knowledge. Encounters with difficult theory frequently produce knowledge that either doesn’t meet the university’s quality standards, or that the author simply discards. From the vantage of institutional epistemology, there’s something ‘wrong’ with such theory because it doesn’t function, yet the university continues to engage with such theory, for its difficulty provides cultural capital by means of habitual distinction. Though the university coerces difficult theory to provide understanding and methodical knowledge, such theory doesn’t do what it *should do* but slows down knowledge production and/or produces unintelligible gibberish: theoretical trash.

1_Introduction

In the university, teachers and students alike constantly produce trash: knowledge, represented in formal and informal verbal and written statements, that fails to meet the institutional standards of quality. Such knowledge isn’t inherently trashy; rather, it is turned into trash. Epistemic content undergoes a process of evaluation against formal (structure, clarity, length, language, and so forth) and substantive criteria (argument, originality, contribution, etc.); once evaluated—for instance, in a seminar discussion, or in the grading of a paper—and its areas of failure established, a verdict is issued. Whether in the eye roll of a colleague, a teacher’s attempt at verbal correction, or the return of a marked paper, the enunciation of the verdict accomplishes an act of failing, instantaneously transforming the pending ‘knowledge’ into ‘trash.’¹

When I reflect on epistemic trash, I think of a particular piece of my own writing: a draft chapter of my dissertation for the SOAS University of London’s Master of Research (MRes) in Politics with Language (Japanese). I titled my (final) dissertation: “The German Red Army Faction and the ‘War on Terror.’” In my MRes dissertation, I set out to illuminate the reconfiguration of the discourse of the Red Army Faction (RAF, a left-wing terrorist group in postwar West-Germany) in the post-9/11 ‘war on terror.’ I worked with the tentative thesis that in the ‘war on terror,’ the othering of

non-Western Islamist terrorists facilitated a transformation of the RAF from a condemnable renegade into a preferable enemy because the RAF's familiarity now constituted it as an intelligible opponent.

Until 2017, the intercollegiate SOAS Politics MRes program with Birkbeck University of London was a two-year program that accepted students from different disciplinary backgrounds and offered students training in social science methods. Teaching staff at SOAS often emphasized the unique preparation this degree offered for a subsequent academic career, reflected in part in the 25,000-word dissertations that MRes students produced (compared to a more typical 10,000-word limit). In this *Perspective*, however, I refer to the recent SOAS guidelines and assessment criteria for such 10,000-word dissertations in one-year Politics Master's programs. These guidelines more closely resemble the requirements of other higher education institutions across the United Kingdom (UK).² In my experience, however, SOAS is uniquely open towards heterodox methods, as well as methodological and theoretical approaches and the study of 'niche' empirical phenomena.

After completing my MRes, I continued under the same supervisors at SOAS to pursue a Politics PhD. In my doctoral thesis, for which I am currently working on post-viva corrections, I heavily rely on Deleuze's philosophy of the event. My engagement with such texts has always been encouraged by my supervisors in both my MRes and PhD programs, who have always had open minds towards 'difficult' theory.

From the perspective of the university, a discarded draft—like the one for my MRes dissertation—doesn't matter. In my case, only the dissertation that I submitted in the end mattered, because this—and not the draft—was graded; this final version decided whether I received the degree or didn't. My draft mattered only as a tool to improve my work, to learn from a lesson of failure.

Allow me to go on a detour to compare the trashiness of such drafts with technological accidents: During a presentation, seemingly without external interference, the projector suddenly starts to flicker, rendering the slides illegible, and then turns off altogether, not showing any slides at all. Here, technology is not only not doing what it *should do*, but rather—in the hardware, or the hardware/software interface, doing something on its own—technology does what it *mustn't do*. This spontaneous and un-called-for production of such an 'event,' an undesirable accident that disturbs the sys-

tem in whose context it takes place, demonstrates the agency of technology. For the presentation, a variety of components had been arranged to facilitate communication through the exchange of information; the projector's malfunctioning, however, slows down and then stops the presentation altogether, because one cannot do a slide presentation without a working projector.

From the institutional vantage of a place of higher education, the sole epistemic value of such an accident exists in its capacity to refine techniques to prevent its recurrence. Beyond that, this kind of accident 'in and of itself' constitutes an irrelevance that warrants no inquiry whatsoever. In my technological example, the projector caused the accident. In the case of my MRes dissertation, my lack of academic capabilities obviously caused my failure to write a decent draft chapter, which not only was not good, but was truly a pain to read. A paper that developed the causal relationship between the absence of my talent for writing and the failed draft would excel in telling "us what the world is like."³

In a lecture series on Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, Todd May relates an anecdote that points out the epistemic and political problem of such truthful work, drawing on this definition of philosophy in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy*: "Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure. Now, this cannot be known before being constructed."⁴ May recalls how during a presentation of a paper, he was facing critical comments from an audience he describes as being "convinced that philosophy should be just about the truth."⁵ An audience member suggested: "You can assume all you want that that wall doesn't exist, but if you bang your hand against it, right, you're gonna find that there's a truth there. So, ... we have to be after truth."⁶ May responded that indeed there's gonna be a wall in that case, but asked, "[will] anything interesting, remarkable or important happen?"⁷ No, of course it won't. We all know that there's a wall and that if you bang your hand against it, you'll feel the wall with your hand. The proposition on the wall confirms what was already known before the investigation. Such knowledge affirms the identity of the world as it already exists.

It is therefore not only epistemologically boring but politically invested in the maintenance of the world as it is. In other words, a *Perspective* that explored how my limited talent produced a bad draft would similarly reaffirm the university as it is

and, more importantly, how the institutional epistemic order explains success and failure with reference to talented vs. inept and hardworking vs. lazy dichotomies. Since, in this particular draft of a dissertation chapter, I used theory whose formal and substantive difficulty exceeded my understanding, I produced semantic gibberish. I claim that once one moves away from the incomprehensible meaning of my ‘work’ and its subpar quality, such ‘difficult’ theory seems to be doing something here. Namely, it quite effectively resists understanding and application, and produces and circulates affects. So, I picked this draft because it points to the labor of theory as another reason, besides my lack of academic capabilities, for my epistemic failure. This approach facilitates a “perspective through which the world takes on a new significance.”⁸ It disturbs appearances—what we think is going on (failure because of too little work and talent)—and informs a different ethics of knowing: attributing failed knowledge not to individuals but to an ontological constellation.⁹

Accordingly, this *_Perspective* treats theory—in its investigation of the labor of ‘difficult’ theory—as an actant. Consider this summary of Bruno Latour’s project of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT): “recharting the geography of the social as embedded in endless connections amongst ‘actants,’ that is things, people and ideas that shape that very geography.”¹⁰ ANT’s trajectory of reconceptualizing agency as something not solely confined to the human allows me to segue into the sphere of the ideational. Previously, ideas had been considered as mere constructs of human subjects and, at best, as matter in the form of texts. ANT, instead, reassigns ideas the status of actants that relate to other inorganic or organic entities and, thus, affects humans and the world. Hence, ideas literally *matter*.

2_‘Difficult’ Theory

While many theories exhibit ‘difficulty,’ ‘difficult theory’ here refers to continental philosophy, particularly a corpus of unintelligible French theory. When I speak of difficult theory, I don’t mean theory whose content is merely hard to get, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. This work poses some difficulty as an object of understanding. It requires slow reading, an engagement with secondary literature on phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty, and a familiarity with philosophy. If one wants to understand Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body and embodiment, for instance, as long as one does that work, the *Phenomenology of Perception*

is manageable. Similarly, one can turn Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology into a method by which to study an empirical context or other texts, utilizing a technique of reading that re-interprets the phenomenology developed in the text into a practicable method. That is certainly not easy to do, but also not impossible. The content of such theory is difficult to understand or to apply.

The theoretical texts that I'm thinking of not only develop complex content, but their form introduces additional difficulty. Two quotes illustrate this formal difficulty particularly well:

Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—brought about a complete change of atmosphere that quickly communicated itself to their numerous disciples. In some areas of speculation, traditional French clarity disappeared, to be replaced, in varying degrees, by obliqueness, preciousness, and hermeticism, as if these were, by definition, more valid modes of operation than lucid, rational statement.¹¹

According to John Weightman, a scholar of French literature, the French tradition of (post)-structuralism engages in formal obscurantism: It develops theoretical arguments in obscure language either because the authors lack the capacity to write intelligibly or as a means to add a veneer of sophistication to an otherwise trivial point.

Commenting on the writing in Lacan's *Écrits*—a collection of texts whose complexity puzzles even those familiar with the notoriously byzantine language of the psychoanalyst—Foucault offers a more generous evaluation of the literariness of such French theory: “Lacan wanted the obscurity of his *Écrits* to be the very complexity of the subject, and wanted the work necessary to understand it to be a work to be carried out on oneself.”¹² Foucault doesn't deny the obscurity of Lacan's writing in *Écrits*. However, he evaluates it as a technique of writing that produces texts that resist a reading that simply deciphers the meaning and treats the writing as a mere container of this meaning.¹³ From Foucault's stance, Lacan's writing forces the reader to develop a spiritual reading. As opposed to the literal meaning of the text, a knowledge of pure facts detached from the reader, Foucault speaks of a “spiritual knowledge”¹⁴ of a truth that “the subject as such is not capable of having access to.”¹⁵ Rather, the subject can only gain such knowledge through a reading that engages in sacrifice: “the subject has to undergo a conversion or transformation and therefore his very being is at stake.”¹⁶ Spiritual reading engages in a *Durcharbeiten*: it works through the text in an unpredictable process that operates directly on the self.

Perhaps a brief aside on my relation to difficult theory: As you might have already gathered from the *_Perspective* so far, we're in a love-hate relationship, with a strong emphasis on the former. This *_Perspective*, however, explores the latter; it dives into my struggle with difficult theory, and, in doing so, excavates a productivity from my inarguably bad writing in discarded drafts under the influence of difficult theory. In this sense, maybe it can count as an exercise in what Andrew Culp, in his negativist and radical re-interpretation of Deleuze, called the practice of "cultivating a 'hatred for this world.'"¹⁷ That being said, difficult theory, and especially my ongoing encounter with Deleuze, continues to broaden my political and intellectual horizon on a daily basis both on a personal and a professional level. Having the opportunity to work through this stuff at SOAS with the support of my supervisory committee during my PhD has been and still is an incredibly rewarding experience.¹⁸

The tone of this *_Perspective* reads very differently, then, because it—again with Culp—strategically sets aside my belief in the present world or the imperative to find reasons for such a belief, based on the assumption that the world as it is (including both its terror and beauty) can take care of itself and doesn't require my stewardship. There are two reasons for this. First, anyone reading this *_Perspective* already knows about the merits of our universities, academic disciplines, and difficult theory. It might be true, but it doesn't get us anywhere interesting. Second, giving in to the often-unconscious reflex to defend 'our people and domain,' to acknowledge what's positive about our institutions and academic disciplines, and to give testimony to our good experiences leads to writing that holds back in the justification of what is. Giving up this need to include opposing arguments for the sake of balance, to attempt a truthful account of my real experience, and to add something 'constructive' on the state of the discipline and institution enables an experimental mode of writing that can lead elsewhere. However, that doesn't imply "a call to physically destroy the world"¹⁹ or the university and the academic discipline of politics. Rather, it unburdens thought to imagine different action than opposition or agreement.

3_Deleuze

I will introduce Deleuze's philosophical project here for two reasons. First, Deleuze wrote difficult theory. Second, I attempted to engage with his work in my MRes dissertation. While I elaborated on the formal and substantive difficulty of such theory in

my previous definition of difficult theory, this discussion didn't work with a specific text. Even though I addressed the ambiguous, playful, and often obscure use of language in this corpus, only the reading of the actual material can provide a feel for these texts and their style of writing: a difficulty that operates on an affective and experiential level. Moreover, whereas I can make many interesting claims about the work of difficult theory, only the study of actually difficult theory in a specific context can show what such theory does and why this matters.

Colebrook summarizes Deleuze's theoretical project of creating concepts as one committed to pragmatic intervention in the 'real' world: "a tradition of philosophy which challenged and disrupted life, such that new concepts and ideas would result in new possibilities for action and practice."²⁰ Whereas this kind of theory acts pragmatically, it disguises this sober enterprise in a particularly difficult kind of language. On the one hand, it makes sense to use a new language (schizoanalysis, rhizome, and assemblage—just to name a few Deleuzoguattarian terms) in order to break free from the commonsense captured in ordinary language.²¹ On the other hand, at its worst, the theoretical vernacular is unnecessarily inaccessible, unintelligible, and convoluted.

Particularly for my MRes draft, I read Deleuze's *Cinema* books to recruit tools to carve out a figure of the post-9/11 RAF terrorist from German post-9/11 cinema on the RAF. I will present two quotes from the "Beyond the movement-image" chapter of Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* that I used in the draft of my master's dissertation here. One introduces the concept of the cliché, the other a different kind of image.

Concerning the former, the cliché, Deleuze speaks about the processing of the "powerful organization of poverty and oppression" that one really encounters on a daily basis whenever, wherever—Deleuze mentions the "volcanic island of poor fishermen" that a Western tourist might see on vacation, and the "factory" and the "school" that almost everyone sees everyday:²²

And we are precisely not without sensory-motor schemata for recognizing such things, for putting up with and approving of them and for behaving ourselves subsequently, taking into account our situation, our capabilities and our tastes. We have schemata for turning away when it is too unpleasant, for prompting resignation when it is terrible and for assimilating when it is too beautiful. It should be pointed out here that even metaphors are sensory-motor evasions, and furnish us with something to say when we no longer know what do to: they are specific schemata of an affective nature. Now this is what a cliché is. A cliché is a sensory-motor image of the thing. As Bergson says, we do not perceive the thing or

the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interest to perceive, by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands. We therefore normally perceive only clichés.²³

Deleuze repeats the notion of the sensory motor in three different versions here: sensory-motor schemata, sensory-motor evasions, and sensory-motor image. Roughly put, this link pertains to the observation that a film audience reacts to what happens in a movie as if it were real because the brain matches the images to generalized perceptions and automatically responds with “learned patterns of motor response.”²⁴ The cliché constitutes a technology of concealment that reduces the image to a generalized perception, and its meaning to the consequent automatic motor response that habit elicits. Though politically troubling images—for example, the poverty that a Western tourist on a cruise ship might occasionally encounter—hold the power to paralyze the viewer, to question their situation and positionality, the cliché turns the singularity of the image into a generalization. For instance, ‘underdevelopment’ might motivate the benevolent purchase of souvenir, a pseudo-critical remark about the dangers of globalization, or an affirmation of free trade as a road to ‘progress.’

Regarding the latter, another kind of image, Deleuze continues,

But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be ‘justified,’ for better or for worse... The factory creature gets up, and we can no longer say ‘Well, people have to work...’ *I thought I was seeing convicts* [emphasis in original]: the factory is a prison, school is a prison, literally, not metaphorically.²⁵

This abstract description of the pure optical-sound image concentrates on its function and conceptual ontology but lacks an empirical context. Ronald Bogue points to “Rossellini’s *Europa 51*”²⁶—a movie that the Deleuze quote already teased at with the prisoner-worker couplet—as one of Deleuze’s cinematic examples of a pure optical image. Bogue summarizes the movie like this: “a wealthy housewife undergoes a series of purely optical moments as she learns to see the realities of poverty and misery.”²⁷ For instance, Bogue mentions the scene “when she helps a poor woman by taking her place at a factory for a day and gazes with incomprehension at the crowds of workers and the towering factory, at its massive rollers, cavernous expanses, labyrinthine passages and stairways, whirring conveyor belts.”²⁸ This example constitutes a pure optical image because “the housewife becomes a spectator rather than an

active participant, someone whose seeing is detached from her doing, and what she sees we also see—visions, purely optical situations disconnected from the common-sense coordinates of their standard usages and practices.”²⁹

For the housewife, the poverty of others witnessed in the factory scene transforms the hardship of the working class from something abstract, known, and acceptable, as Deleuze points out, into an “intolerable”³⁰ situation: “Deleuze explains that the intolerable is not defined by some quantum of suffering, terror or violence, but solely by the characters’ inability to react to their situation within the structure of the sensory-motor schema.”³¹ The witnessed misery paralyzes the character. She becomes an observer of her own life and can’t automatically respond to this intolerable situation. The housewife only knows that she doesn’t know how to react. Similarly, the viewer is reduced to really *seeing* these detached images without habit turning them into something horrible causing their body to automatically “turn away”³² or something sad evoking tears.

Both the concept of the cliché and the pure optical sound-image engage with the links between the arrangement of moving images, the movie characters, and the viewer. Deleuze does philosophy with cinema here. He recruits movies for his “powerful, systematic, and resolutely anti-phenomenological interpretation”³³ of Bergson.

4_Difficult Theory in the University System

Deleuze didn’t just randomly bump into the RAF on the street during the post-9/11 German ‘war on terror.’ Rather, they encountered each other in the context of my dissertation. In this system, Deleuze and other difficult theory operate as one of many components. In the facilitation of the performance of the dissertation, such difficult theory had a job to do. In order to understand what difficult theory does in this context, one must first attend to its assigned task in the dissertation, and how the system enables and restricts what difficult theory can do.

I previously mentioned that the work of difficult theory takes place in an ontological context, namely, a set of relations between components that are arranged according to a logic. Power constitutes the force that organizes such relations into a system and maintains the arrangement as is. For instance, a set of discursive rules exercises power within the university in the sense that it determines what propositions one can make in the institution, that is, propositions that may be considered false or true but

irrefutably belong to the domain of science.³⁴ In the case of dissertations, one might immediately think of the assessment criteria that enable the measurement of the quality of postgraduate work on a qualitative (fail, pass, merit, distinction) and quantitative scale (0–100). However, I am more concerned with the role of theory in such written postgraduate work.

In the Political Thought pathway of the SOAS Politics Master's, the university addresses theory as follows:³⁵

The Political Thought pathway offers a new approach to the study of political thinking and the ideas that underpin political life. Linked to the SOAS Centre for Comparative Political Thought, this pathway considers political theory as it emerges from everyday political thought, philosophical texts, and cultural production.³⁶

From this institutional perspective, theory constitutes a research object. Dissertations in this pathway may investigate the meaning of theory, for instance, by writing about the meaning of concept X in the work of author Y, or how a theoretical concept changes when it moves from one context to another. Accordingly, the university's epistemic standards demand that student work on difficult theory *should* either provide a better understanding of the researched text/domain of difficult theory or assist the study of other texts or contexts. Such knowledge constitutes what Foucault called "the knowledge of intellectual cognition alone,"³⁷ that is, only the facts, their acquisition, and the knowing of them provide access to truth.³⁸

Generally, SOAS stipulates the following with regards to a Master's dissertation in politics: "Students are encouraged to take up topics which relate the study of a particular region to a body of theory."³⁹ In my dissertation, I used theory to study the (dis)continuities in the development of the figure of the RAF terrorist in Germany, employing theory as a tool to investigate other contexts—to serve explanation, understanding, or prediction, for example. I required assistance from theory to provide me with conceptual tools—such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's or Foucault's conceptualization of discourse—and methodological tools—discourse analysis, or a Foucauldian genealogy, or history of the present—to study the empirical case. My reading of Deleuze for my Master's dissertation was an attempt to engage with theory to attain such conceptual and methodological tools.

So, what can Deleuze do; what's his thought good at? Deleuze's work intends to untie the utilitarian enterprise of academia, the application of theory for the purpose

of understanding/explaining, that is, representing something better. In my dissertation, the encounter of terrorism *and* cinema in a real study *with* Deleuze could have unsettled me and transformed me through questions, such as how the terrorist cliché within the post-9/11 German image of the Red Army and my subjectivity are entwined, and how the pure optical sound-image inside of this cliché can be liberated and disrupt this convenient and bourgeois constellation of academic voyeurism.

The flipside of commanding theory into service constitutes the prohibition. This ban is less concerned with knowledge produced in the service of truth that fails to meet the university's criteria (the failed dissertation), but rather, forbids different kinds of knowledge such as Foucault's spiritual knowledge or the Deleuzian disruptive and creative concepts. In the context of the traditional Western university, such 'alternative' knowledge interferes with the university's status quo and/or offers different ways of arranging knowledge production. Clearly, a university context doesn't allow difficult theory to generate such heterodox techniques of reading, practices of pedagogy, and alternative forms of knowledge: In other words, such theory mustn't do what it's good at. The university, hence, constrains what difficult theory *can do*.

5_ The Resistance of Difficult Theory

I propose that 'difficult' theory corrupts the sometimes already-existing capability of students to fashion an argument and to drive it home with an analytical narrative sustained by a sequence of structured and comprehensible paragraphs. In order to illustrate how theory performs such labor in conjunction with students, I will quote from the draft chapter of my Master's dissertation:

Lacan offers a typology for the Other. The big Other is the symbolic order contained in language. Symbolic means the system composed out of the relation between sign and signified meaning. The big Other may be condensed into an imagined religious or ideological agent and cause. The big Other is that 'Third, which is always present as the witness.'⁴⁰ Desires are contained and structured through the symbolic order. 'the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring'.⁴¹ When this order gets 'subjectivized',⁴² Lacan's Other becomes the neighbor—both radically different, unknowable and the self encountered as a 'mirror-double'.⁴³ [...] Rella critiques the essentialized reification of an Other in relation to the self.⁴⁴ Such an apolitical escape imagines the desires of the own self as an Other, detached from mundane political acts. However, these desires are constituted by the law that labels them perverse. Freud's Other is not one Other: [...]. Other and self co-constitute themselves but are both messy in their constitution and cannot be isolated.⁴⁵ Neither does the unconscious serve as a place of return. The unconscious emerges together with the

conscious. Therefore, the *heimlich* [emphasis added] and the *unheimlich* are neighbors.⁴⁶

What's going on in my draft? What kind of labor does difficult theory perform here? Before I can get to this, allow me to briefly return from my dissertation to the projector.

Although earlier in this *Perspective*, I made a philosophical case for the epistemic worthiness of my failed draft, my commitment herein to a construction of a different university, as opposed to the affirmation of the identity of the existing higher education institution, the following discussion of technological agency—specifically the labor of technology—makes a practical case for how one can study accidents, and thus guides my investigation of theoretical labor, particularly the resistance and productivity of difficult theory.

The projector ceases to do what it *should do*—enlarge the slides from the screen of the presenter's laptop onto another more public screen—and engages in what it *mustn't do*—interfere with the presentation it is supposed to facilitate. I call this disobedience of orders and sabotage resistance. Such resistance warrants epistemic inquiry because it resists power—power thought as an organization of relations dedicated to the sustenance of this formation as is—and therefore belongs not just to the vaguely political but to politics.

Moreover, difficult theory doesn't act on its own on the receiving academic reader. Like the previously mentioned technological events, the labor of theory happens in the system of the university. The work of difficult theory in the university occurs in an institutionally produced mode of time (e.g. my Master's dissertation); the university constantly demands students and teaching staff to repeat similar performances, such as presentations, attendance, term papers, and so forth. This temporality structures teaching and learning in the institution. For example, all the MRes students had to submit a written dissertation at a set deadline. Before the actual writing of the dissertation, however, we had to draw up a proposal and find a supervisor in the department.

Furthermore, I previously addressed how power epistemologically structures the university. The conduct of conduct offers another way to think about power in higher education: “The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.”⁴⁷ SOAS, like other universities, does this in

two ways: first, in producing a certain subject (the curious student), and second, in implementing an incentivization structure (examination and grading). SOAS brands itself as “The World’s University”⁴⁸ where one can “discover the answers”⁴⁹ to questions, such as “Is there a solution to the world’s refugee crisis?”⁵⁰ SOAS here officially and publicly declares the production and transfer of knowledge as its purpose. Prospective students at SOAS *should want* to obtain knowledge. On the other hand, SOAS requires MSc Politics and International Relations students to obtain 120 credits in instructional course modules, and to write a “10,000 word dissertation worth 60 credits.”⁵¹ These regulations produce students focused on passing (possibly with good grades) to obtain a degree that qualifies them for research or the job market.

I (supposedly, primarily) went to SOAS to learn more about the world, due to my innate curiosity; at the same time, I had to write a certain number of words for my dissertation in a limited amount of time. The examination regulations incentivized me to write a dissertation whose content fit their specifications, so that the dissertation passed and obtained the respective credits (and degree), ideally receiving a high grade. However, the theory that I read didn’t help me with that task. Rather, the potential of Deleuze and psychoanalytic theory to produce another kind of knowledge and different ways of knowing carried me away from the scope of my Master’s dissertation and particularly from the previously agreed-upon research question/hypothesis, research area, and purpose of study. Obviously, you *can* write a Politics dissertation at SOAS (and under the guidance of my supervisor) drawing on Deleuze and psychoanalytic theory, and you can also obtain a high mark with such a dissertation. Difficult theory, like Deleuze or psychoanalysis, often does not explicitly engage with politics and displays a tendency towards complication that frequently doesn’t give clear answers to the questions it explores. I argue that the connection between such primary texts and a particular kind of politics postgraduate student (one prone to detours already without obscure theory) can interfere with the student’s task to come up with a precise research question and to write a dissertation examining that very question.

Deleuze’s theory, for instance, didn’t really suit such a confined application to a research object (the figure of the RAF terrorist in post-9/11 German discourse)—a relation ultimately defined by representation (what is that figure and how did it change in the ‘war on terror’)—ideally resulting in a catchy conclusion that would have

added both to real world politics and the scholarly debate on terrorism. Clearly, neither the concepts of the cliché and the pure optical sound-image, nor Deleuze's project of an anti-phenomenology, could assist my essentially descriptive task of how post-9/11 German movies on the RAF represent the RAF. Rather, such theory with its incomprehensible concepts and writing impeded instead of aided not only my understanding of Deleuze, but also of the scholarly debate on terrorism and the political phenomenon of terrorism, my analysis of the movies and post-9/11 discourse on the RAF, my development of an argument and analytical narrative, and my contribution to the study of terrorism. I read, and read, and didn't understand a thing. I progressed too slowly.

The substantive and formal difficulty of such theory resists academic readings to acquire an understanding of the texts as much as readings that want to apply the writing to study other contexts. Anyone who has ever engaged with difficult theory as a student or as a researcher has experienced this resistance: how it slows down one's reading and writing or stops it altogether. Accordingly, this theoretical corpus neither constitutes a suitable research object nor offers a method to produce knowledge.

6_Difficult Theory as a Means of Cultural Distinction

From such an institutional point of view, the university's preoccupation with this kind of theory doesn't make much sense. Deleuze and psychoanalytic theory weren't cut out to help me with my task. I shouldn't have asked for their help. So why did I go there anyway?

From an unjustifiably simplified Bourdieusian perspective, the academy's fetishization of such impenetrable texts produces cultural capital that allows the few in the know to distinguish themselves by speaking, writing, and behaving differently from the 'unknowing many'; and the university thereby maintains the current distribution of cultural capital. Crudely put, the same kids who will piss off their university-educated parents with their pseudo-radical gibberish will use these tools to maintain their class privileges and resources, and to secure their bourgeois identity. The cultural capital lens provides one very plausible explanation for the strong attraction of a certain kind of student (myself included) to difficult theory. I didn't read Deleuze to write my dissertation but to distinguish myself.

To sustain the current social order and distribution of cultural capital among classes, the university *should* engage with difficult theory. On the other hand, to produce knowledge in the form of understanding or methods, higher education *should* avoid this resistive corpus. And so, the institution throws punch after punch on its theoretical prisoner to make it deliver the institutionally exploitable knowledge that it can never offer, for its form prevents it. Inevitably, the university's coercion of difficult theory to do that very thing that it cannot do well results in the texts' constant resistance to producing proper knowledge about or with them. Certainly, not all academic disciplines, but parts of the humanities and social sciences have maneuvered themselves into and are stuck in this vicious cycle. Since difficult theory can do more than what it's forced to do and permitted to do, this *Perspective* is interested in the labor in which the excessive capacities of difficult theory engage in such restrictive circumstances.

7_The Productivity of Difficult Theory

Returning briefly to the projector: In the case of distortion, the projector resists, but it also does more than that. Namely, the projector no longer simply represents the slides on the screen of the presenter's laptop. Instead, the projector scrambles the slides into an illegible image. Apparently, the projector can do more than what it was designed for, because it now—all of a sudden—carries out a new function of differentiation. This aesthetic labor of the projector offers another logic of arrangement that permits the components of the presentation system to engage in functions that differ from what they *should do* and what they were built for. This unpredictable performance of excessive productivity is what I call creation: a machine in everyday language designates a technological tool designed to fulfill a purpose and that always functions just like that when ordered.⁵² Creativity warrants epistemic inquiry because a machine built to do the same suddenly does something different and new in lieu of a command to do so.

Similarly, difficult theory forced to provide a method, understanding, an undergrad term paper, content for a seminar, a presentation, a paper, or a piece of graduate writing doesn't just resist. It also creates: It produces trash. We've all seen it either in our own work or in that of others. When prompted, whether in a discussion or presentation, the poor souls in the lure of difficult theory—or the unlucky ones on whom the

academy forces it—start to waffle: things are suddenly vaguely discursive, and isn't this somehow lacking, like in Lacan, you know?

The buck, unfortunately, doesn't stop here, though: Difficult theory also produces very 'bad' writing, that is, work that neither meets the author's nor the audience's—not to mention the institution's—standards of clarity, argument, structure, coherence, and originality. For an example of such writing, we can simply return to the excerpt from the draft of my dissertation, only now paying attention to my supervisor's comments on it.⁵³ My supervisor responded to my efforts to work with psychoanalytic theory in a politics dissertation with this (very apt) feedback: “This page is an example of too many opaque quotes, insufficient clear writing and a lack of an analytical narrative. Why am I reading this?”⁵⁴ My supervisor's succinct comments put the vacuity of my 'use' of theory in a nutshell: I'm lining up quotes and list definitions in an attempt to explain the Lacanian conceptualization of the Other here; it's utterly unclear what the analytical purchase of all of this is and where it's headed; the passage from the draft lacks an argument, a structure, and a story that relays the absent argument convincingly. And so, it's not working: The draft reads more like notes than a draft chapter. Moreover, what's noticeable is my frantic search for a good definition that finally tells me what the Other is, so that I can get this dissertation over with. On the other hand, in my attraction to difficult theory, I'm clearly looking for these answers in the wrong places. Essentially, I'm reading literature that doesn't offer straightforward definitions like a dictionary here. And so difficult theory rewarded me with this pile of garbage.

Lastly, the example of the draft chapter for my MRes chapter already illustrates that difficult theory doesn't merely produce more words: My supervisor read this draft chapter to provide comments on drafty material. Let's think about that for a minute: to me, a draft is writing that's not perfect yet, but is indicative of the final product, and that one submits to a supervisor or editor because one can't get any further on their own. Commenting on such a draft allows a supervisor to assist a student to make it past the final stretch: to turn a first discussion of interesting ideas into a convincing text. What I handed in, alas, wasn't a draft. It was a set of vague notes on theory that I found interesting and loosely pertained to my dissertation clunkily forced into full sentences.

While reading the ‘draft’—or more specifically, this passage from the draft—my supervisor did not just find plenty of formal and substantive mistakes, but he also asked himself why he was reading this. This question can indicate a general lack of meaningfulness in his reading experience and/or scrutinize the meaning of this passage in the overall context of my dissertation. Concerning the former, the question invites me to explain to my supervisor what I wanted to do here.⁵⁵ With respect to the latter, the comment questions the meaningfulness of this passage in the context of my dissertation. That is, the question asks how these detached musings on the psychoanalytic conceptualization of the Other contribute to my investigation of the changing discourse on the RAF in post-9/11 Germany. In other words, what’s the point of this? Accordingly, my supervisor’s comment doesn’t just point out the formal and substantive flaws in my writing, but also reports his reaction to my writing back to me: a reaction that my writing generated in him. The interface between difficult theory and the delusional author (here: the MRes student Paul) affects an audience (in this case my pitiable supervisor) that must comment on the theoretical junk that this interface produced.

But as discussed beforehand, theoretical garbage frustrates not only supervisors: I—who deliberately chose to work with difficult theory—was fully aware whilst I was writing this draft that although I was getting words on the page, they just didn’t cut it. This frustrated me a great deal and similarly I didn’t enjoy reading my supervisor’s comments (mainly because I knew that they were spot on, and I wanted to do well). My theoretical junk thus disappointed me when it finally arrived—the long ‘morning-after’ of difficult theory. Likewise, difficult theory negatively affects teachers who need to grade such written work as much as an audience in a lecture or seminar who must listen to the theoretically dropped ball and can’t just leave.

Permitting myself the essayistic luxury of making broad claims based merely on (fragments of) my own experience and the occasional chat with friends and colleagues, I argue that one can’t read the set of difficult theory in French theory that I discuss here without experiencing some frustration, due to its formal obscurity and as part of coming to terms with its often-indecipherable content. In other words, I render frustration as that which Foucault earlier articulated as the sacrifice, cost, or price that a subject in pursuit of spiritual knowledge must pay; only that in this *Perspective* the price refers to the *Durcharbeiten*—the working through difficult theory—that

painfully etches a transformation onto the body of the reader of unintelligible theory. In the form of primary texts, but more often mediated by the inept writing of confused students and early-career researchers, difficult theory, thus, resists and frustrates anyone exposed to it within and beyond the university system. This, of course, includes the students who must engage with such theory in their coursework, or researchers who need to react to the work of colleagues who are under the influence of difficult theory. However, one might also think of the partners, friends, and family in the periphery of the university who are suffering from the unintelligible and annoying gibberish of those under difficult theory's spell.

This traveling of negative affects shows that difficult theory relates to components other than simply the author of theoretical trash and the explicit recipient of such garbage. Rather, due to the relationality of the university system, the affects of difficult theory can circulate within the university system and its periphery, across the relays between the constitutive components of the university system. While the system and its constituents operate as such media for the productivity of difficult theory, the context cannot be reduced to a channel and recipient of the labor of difficult theory. Instead, the ontological constellation, in which difficult theory is embedded, facilitates its functions of resistance and creativity in the first place. In other words, while one can study the work of difficult theory detached from its context, only the ambivalence between the institutional logic of the maintenance of the current distribution of cultural capital (the pull towards difficult theory) and the insistence on meaningful and methodical knowledge (the push away from difficult theory and its restriction) empirically conditions what difficult theory can actually do in this situation. A study of the labor of difficult theory in the university system, hence, concerns as much the performance of difficult theory as the ontological constellation that facilitates difficult theory's production of trash.

8_Conclusion

This methodological proposition suggests that in order to intervene in the university, one doesn't need to look elsewhere. Instead, one should look into one's own process of knowledge production. First, think about your work: Where do you just not make any progress? Second, open your own epistemic dustbin: Where do you keep on producing knowledge that doesn't satisfy your own standards and/or those of the institu-

tion? Moreover, what do you read, what do you study, where and when are you, whom are you with, when you face resistance in your epistemic practices or produce garbage? What does the resistance of difficult theory do to you when it slows you down? And what's going on in these dismissed drafts, failed presentations, and unintelligible proposals? What effects does your epistemic trash have on yourself and your environment?

Typically, such analyses serve the purpose of improving one's knowledge production according to the university's quality standards. This project of neoliberal self-improvement continues to attribute epistemic failure solely to researchers: 'You just don't have the talent; you didn't take the necessary time; you didn't read enough; you work too slowly...' Consider this study of the project of psychoanalysis:

We are criticizing psychoanalysis for having used Oedipal enunciation to make patients believe they would produce individual, personal statements, and would finally speak in their own name. [...] But there is no question of that in psychoanalysis: at the very moment the subject is persuaded that he or she will be uttering the most individual of statements, he or she is deprived of all basis for enunciation.⁵⁶

Psychoanalysis, from this perspective, consists in the coercion of clients to speak the truth about themselves and to detach these confessions of personal secrets from the system that forces them out of the clients and interprets them according to the psychoanalytic model of development: "Talk as he might about wolves, howl as he might like a wolf, Freud does not even listen; he glances at his dog and answers, 'It's daddy.'"⁵⁷

Before I move on to the university, I would like to remind readers that these are not universal and generalizable principles by any means but merely essayistic musings, based on partial aspects of my personal experience as a postgraduate and PhD student. I largely experience SOAS and certain traditions, fields, and branches within the academic discipline of politics and international relations as places that encourage the engagement with difficult theory and welcome such curiosity. Here, however, I discuss how my personal predisposition, habits, and class in contact with difficult theory in the context of higher education in the academic discipline of politics often led (and frequently still lead) me into unpleasant conundrums. Namely, I was aware that I wasn't doing good and interesting work, but, at the same time, was so libidinally in-

vested in difficult theory that I couldn't let go, even to at least move on to intelligible and pertinent secondary literature.

Keeping the above in mind, a few remarks on the university: Researchers are in pain if the pace and quality of their work doesn't match institutional standards, because almost everyone who's not tenured is under financial pressure, threatened by job insecurity, and, hence, needs to publish their work. While the university blames these struggling researchers for their epistemic failure, such researchers also internalize this guilt and discipline themselves, thereby containing a system under strain within their subjectivity. In other words, researchers say, 'Yes, I did this. I failed. I need to improve. Thank you, Sir University.' Researchers thereby accept the blame and sign the failed piece as their work. More importantly, they also affirm the conception of research as a fundamentally individual enterprise, where either you make it or you don't. Whatever happens, though, it's on *you*. Furthermore, acceptance and internalization of failure contains the resistance and creativity of difficult theory in one's subjectivity, even though an ontological constellation facilitates this work. In other words, the researcher's subjectivity blocks the labor of difficult theory and shields the university from its impact—to the detriment of the researcher and the benefit of the institution.

Ontological analysis, on the other hand, allows researchers to think of their epistemic practices as an ontological constellation speaking through them. Such an understanding enables researchers to think differently about working within the university, that is, not to contain difficult theory's resistance and creativity but to operate as a relay that channels them onto the institution. This means not to reassess 'bad' writing as 'good.' Neither does such thinking advocate against improving one's writing. Rather, it calls to do something with that untapped reservoir of trash that we all carry with us. Perhaps, in the future, we may want to consider letting the university take care of its own junk. The next time that you don't move according to schedule, or you didn't 'make it' in some other way, you might not want to repress this and move on quickly but embrace this resistance and junk as just as worthy of your dedicated and serious attention as what you originally wanted to do. Undoing the university doesn't just happen somewhere 'far away.' Nor does it only happen through institutional work; grand gestures, radical declarations, and noble sentiments do not suffice. It can occur very quietly on an almost subterranean level in the here and now: when you stop and

consider where you invest in the university and reaffirm its truth, and whether you couldn't do *that* differently.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London et al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 94. If you're interested how language can produce such "instantaneous and incorporeal" transformations, see Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of discursive acts in the "Postulates of Linguistics" plateau on pages 93 and 94.
- ² I'd like to extend my gratitude to my supervisor who pointed this out to me in his comments on the first draft of this *Perspective*. I'd also like to thank him for his generous input on later drafts.
- ³ Todd May, "When Is a Deleuzian Becoming?," *Continental Philosophy Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 139–153, here: 142. Doi: [10.1023/A:1026036516963](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026036516963).
- ⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82.
- ⁵ DISPUK, "About Deleuze – Lecture 2_2 and 3," YouTube, January 14, 2019, sc. 59:06–59:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_8zKu_T3m0>.
- ⁶ DISPUK, "About Deleuze – Lecture 2_2 and 3," sc. 59:32–59:45.
- ⁷ DISPUK, "About Deleuze – Lecture 2_2 and 3," sc. 1:00.08.
- ⁸ May, "When Is a Deleuzian Becoming?," 142.
- ⁹ May, "When Is a Deleuzian Becoming?," 140.
- ¹⁰ Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis, eds., "Assemblage Thinking and International Relations," in *Reassembling International Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–15, here: 5.
- ¹¹ John Weightman, "On Not Understanding Michel Foucault," *The American Scholar* 58, no. 3 (1989): 383–406, here: 383.
- ¹² Michel Foucault, "Lacan, le 'libérateur' de la psychoanalyse," in *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (Montréal: Gallimard, 2001), 1024, here: 1024 as cited in Arnold I. Davidson, "Introduction," in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006), xix–xxx, here: xxvi.
- ¹³ Davidson, "Introduction," xxvi.
- ¹⁴ Davidson, "Introduction," xxv.
- ¹⁵ Davidson, "Introduction," xxiv.
- ¹⁶ Davidson, "Introduction," xxiv.
- ¹⁷ Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), introduction, para. 2. Doi: [10.5749/9781452958392](https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958392).
- ¹⁸ I'd like to thank my MRes supervisor and supervisory committee for my PhD and the SOAS Politics and International Studies Department in general for their open-mindedness towards difficult theory. Specifically, however, I'd like to express my appreciation for my supervisor's patience with my often all too clumsy attempts at writing under the influence of difficult theory.
- ¹⁹ Culp, *Dark Deleuze*, conclusion, para. 2.
- ²⁰ Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2002), xv.
- ²¹ Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, 52.

- 22 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 20.
- 23 Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 20.
- 24 Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, 152.
- 25 Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 20.
- 26 Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 109.
- 27 Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, 109.
- 28 Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, 109.
- 29 Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, 109.
- 30 Ronald Bogue, “Deleuze and Roxy: The Time of the Intolerable and Godard’s *Adieu au langage*,” in *Deleuze and the Animal*, eds. Colin Gardner and Patricia MacCormack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 275–292, here: 276. Doi: [10.1515/9781474422758-016](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474422758-016).
- 31 Bogue, “Deleuze and Roxy,” 276.
- 32 Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, 152.
- 33 Alexandre Lefebvre, “Review of: Michael R. Kelly (ed.): Bergson and Phenomenology,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, June 1, 2011, para. 4, <<https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/bergson-and-phenomenology/>>.
- 34 Michel Foucault, “Orders of Discourse,” *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (1971): 7–30, here: 15–17. Doi: [10.1177/053901847101000201](https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201).
- 35 As previously mentioned, I pursued a two-year MRes at SOAS and am discussing a draft for my MRes dissertation in this *Perspective*. However, since I lost my handbook and examination regulations for this now discontinued degree, I refer here—for the purpose of illustration—to recent information on current one-year postgraduate politics degrees at SOAS.
- 36 “MSc Politics and International Relations,” SOAS, accessed April 25, 2024, para. Political Thought, <<https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/find-course/msc-politics-and-international-relations/>>.
- 37 Davidson, “Introduction,” xxv.
- 38 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006), 17.
- 39 “MSc Politics and International Relations,” para. Dissertation.
- 40 Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 10.
- 41 Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 42.
- 42 Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 41.
- 43 Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 45.
- 44 Franco Rella, *The Myth of the Other: Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault, Bataille* (Washington: Maison-neuve Press, 1993).
- 45 Rella, *The Myth of the Other*.
- 46 Paul Kaletsch, Draft Chapter of MRes Dissertation “The German Red Army Faction and the ‘War on Terror’” (London: SOAS University of London, 2017), 12–14.
- 47 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–795, here: 789.
- 48 “Welcome to SOAS,” SOAS, accessed March 27, 2024, <<https://www.soas.ac.uk/>>.
- 49 “Welcome to SOAS.”
- 50 “Welcome to SOAS.”

- ⁵¹ “MSc Politics and International Relations,” para. Structure.
- ⁵² Daniel Smith, “What Is the Body Without Organs? Machine and Organism in Deleuze and Guattari,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 51, no. 1 (2018): 95–110, here: 99. Doi: [10.1007/s11007-016-9406-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-016-9406-0).
- ⁵³ Before doing so, I want to explicitly thank my supervisor here for the permission to work through this comment in a published piece; this shows an intellectual generosity and open-mindedness that one can’t take for granted in a professional context and that by far exceeds usual supervisory responsibilities.
- ⁵⁴ Kaletsch, Draft Chapter of MRes Dissertation “The German Red Army Faction and the ‘War on Terror,’” 13.
- ⁵⁵ As my supervisor kindly pointed out, in his comments on the penultimate draft of this *Perspective*, his question also fulfilled a didactic function in initiating a dialogue on the passage that he annotated in the draft chapter of my MRes dissertation.
- ⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 38.
- ⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 38.