For a nomad ontology against academic citizenship

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Abstract

This paper argues against the apparently benign concept of 'academic citizenship,' drawing on resources and conceptual precedents from within higher education generally and philosophy specifically. It does so not only in order to offer a critique, however. By considering the directions from which criticism can be levelled at the notion of 'citizenship', and the State-centric conceptualisation of the university underlying it, an argument for an alternative conceptualisation of academic being is offered. Ontology is suggested as a suitable route to dealing with the urgency of the questions confronting those inhabiting contemporary higher education. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, along with Isabelle Stengers, it proposes a 'nomad ontology' as both a form of analysis and possible mode of being for academics.

Keywords: academic citizenship; nomadology; philosophy of higher education; Deleuze and Guattari; Isabelle Stengers

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Introduction

This essay argues that we should resist or reject academic citizenship as a figuration of academic life and work. For all its ostensibly democratic improvement on the figure of the 'subject' in a feudal framework, as with all metaphors, the figure of 'the citizen' hides as much as it highlights (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Citizenship is by no means unconditional, nor is it the possession of all, and so academic citizenship is a notion that gives with one hand as it takes away with the other. Citizenship can be withdrawn, and sometimes is, but even that such a threat is possible should give us pause; this is as true of the academy in whatever national

setting we work, as in the wider polities in which we live.[1] In this sense, there is a claim of universality in 'citizenship' of which we are justified in being suspicious, whether the academic is a citizen of wherever their passport proclaims, or the inward facing 'academic citizenship' we construct for ourselves within the university. Citizenship cannot be thought of without thinking of its origins and the nature of the State. The academic locus of critique is not the destination for this essay, however. Instead, it passes through this route to get to its goal of proposing an alternative. We will leave academic citizenship as a 'matter of fact' to one side, in favour of the more important 'matter of concern' (Latour, 2004) from whence it derives.

As such, it might be better to take an approach from another direction, and for this, Deleuze and Guattari will help us to frame the alternative. Their overall project is to confront the legacy of failed revolution and to explore some routes away from or out of this failure. With 'failure' as the apparent signal affect of contemporary higher education, they have much to say to which it is worth listening. More to the point, Deleuze and Guattari's project is animated by the concept of *desire*, and the fact that even in the shadow of failure, there is still desire. This is the productive kernel of their project, one which compels them to exploration and experimentation in their writing, to find new lines of flight through which desire can leak out of the strictures of what has been thought before. Throughout, they warn us against forgetting 'the centrality of desire as an organizing force' (Buchanan, 2021, p. 62)—and so, keeping this in mind is a powerful solvent for the dangers of conceptual stuckness. It's worth continually asking of our theories and concepts: *just what is it that we want*?

Territory and nomads

A Thousand Plateaus ranges widely over a number of scholarly fields. While this book is often held up as opacity itself, it is relevant to our purposes in a surprisingly direct way. In Plateau 12, '1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine', Deleuze and Guattari (2004) start by discussing scholarship on the origins of the State. Focusing on the work of anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1987, as cited in Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), they address his conclusion that as a structure, the State

[1] Examples of countries without recognizable tenure (e.g., Denmark) are one of the clearest illustrations of this.

social form is neither inevitable, nor is it some kind of developmental endpoint.[2] By acknowledging this, the contingent nature of State formation becomes readily apparent, and the contingent *processes* by which States are formed can be interrogated. Deleuze and Guattari use this to problematise the question of what is made to be 'inside' the State, and what is 'outside'—made to be because the result is a contingent construction rather than naively accepted to be the way things are.

When Deleuze and Guattari consider how States are formed out of existing societies, they argue that society is prior, or 'exterior,' to the State. Making this point asserts that, counter to Hobbesian visions, there are forms of social association prior to the State—and here is where the nomad enter the discussion. The nomad is in some ways a self-explanatory figure, as an empirical substrate on which to build a counter-narrative to the State of social contract theorists.[3] The nomad resists, evades, attacks the State and is the outside or 'exteriority' that the State uses to define what is 'inside.' This constant process of border-making and of delineating the State brings us to Deleuze and Guattari's central concept of territory, especially in the processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The State expands its borders over space, asserts it claims to sovereignty, and thus claims space or 'territory' in a process of territorialisation. The nomad contests this, deterritorialises, and may reterritorialise that same space. With the State, the nomad, and the concept of territorialisation, we now have all the elements necessary for a 'nomadological' perspective of territory and being.

Territory is a valuable concept for understanding academic being, as it is synonymous with existing conceptual formulations of the work that we do in our disciplines, for instance within philosophy itself. For example, we read Schopenhauer (1818/2010, p.129) describing how we 'use philosophy to expand the limits of our cognition' and so 'we will look upon the sceptical arguments of theoretical egoism as a little frontier fortress that will undeniably be forever invincible, but whose garrison can never leave'. (Philosophers explore conceptual, cognitive space, and their different arguments seek to de- and reterritorialise what

[2] The title of Clastres's work, *Society against the State* (1987) captures what is at stake here. There are other parallels such as the work of James C. Scott, but more generally with the entire anarchist tradition. We might also note the title of Foucault's 1975-1976 lectures at the Collège de France, 'Society must be defended.' There's also something significant in Deleuze and Guattari turning to anthropology in order to explore the implications in the variety of ways humans have elected to arrange our lives and societies.

[3] An important caveat is that Delezue and Guattari are not making an empirical, anthropological argument—and nor am I. The nomad here starts from a descriptive ground, and is developed by Deleuze and Guattari to become a concept, and while not quite a 'normative' goal, it nevertheless can be said to have some normative *consequences*. I thank Prof Susan Wright for helping me to clarify my own thinking on this point.

has been gone over by others. Kant (1781/1998) provides an even more striking version of this in the preface to the first edition of his first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here, metaphysics is described spatially, with the rationalist dogmatics described as 'despotic' rulers, challenged by 'the skeptics, a kind of nomads who abhor all permanent cultivation of the soil' (Kant, 1781/1998, A ix). Territory, and the figure of the nomad, have a genealogy in thinking about philosophy, and from this, thinking about higher education more generally. Our conception of our academic fields is 'territorial' and its inhabitants are those who (re-, de-)territorialise.[4]

In Deleuze and Guattari (2004), their concern is the impact of methodological, conceptual Statism on our thinking. What do we do when '[t]hought as such is already in conformity with a model that it borrows from the State apparatus'? (p. 413) Is there 'a way to extricate thought from the State model?' (p. 413). What are the epistemological implications for the argument they make, and epistemological stances that map onto each of these positions, namely 'nomad science' and 'State science'[5]? The route out of this is to explore the difference between major, royal, imperial, State science versus minor, nomad science – and to embrace the latter. Nomad science, while 'very different to classify, whose history is even difficult to follow' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 398), nevertheless has some identifiable qualities. It allows for fluidity, flux or flow, rather than the solid; becoming not being; heterogeneity not identity; open space not closed space; the more open problem rather than the closed or defined theorem, the swerve rather than linearity and the straight line. Nomad science is

> continually 'barred,' inhibited, or banned by the demands of State science … the two kinds of science have different modes of formalization, and State science continually imposes its form of sovereignty on the inventions of nomad science. State science retains of nomad science only what it can appropriate; it turns the rest into a set of strictly limited formulas without any real scientific status, or else simply represses and bans it. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, pp. 398-9)

[4] This clearly admits of those in the academy who are concerned with territorializing, with borders and boundaries, as such there is no 'State science' without those within the academy to undertake it.
[5] There are a number of synonyms offered for each in the course of this plateau, so nomad science is also referred to as war machine, minor, vague, ambulant, or eccentric. State science is also referred to as imperial, or royal or major.

Here, Isabelle Stengers's work is another important voice to add to the chorus, as she explicitly addresses our concern for other possibilities. *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (2018) sets out Stengers's view of contemporary science in order to argue for an alternative:

> I would like to mobilise a type of scientific practice that is foreign to the standard notion of modern science; namely, that of the 'cameral sciences', defined by their service to the state in its role as guardian of public order and prosperity. (p. 60)

Cameral science is State science and operates through 'a straightforward relationship of capture' (Stengers, 2018, p. 74). That which is not captured is deemed foreign, external, perhaps an incipient threat. This 'cameral capture' of scientific activity is not just a reterritorialisation of what we do in terms of the evaluation of the impact of our work, but also a deterritorialisation of our capacity to define value on and in our own terms. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004) note of this process,

> The State does not give power to the intellectuals or conceptual innovators; on the contrary, it makes them a strictly dependent organ with an autonomy that is only imagined […] This does not shield the State from more trouble, this time with the body of intellectuals it itself engendered, but which asserts new nomadic and political claims. (p. 406)

State science is that which is well-funded, it is that which has 'impact'—whether economic or societal, is highly-cited, and aligns with institutional or national governmental goals. For instance, 'societal impact' discourse is the cameral, State capture of what research is *for*. Just as nomads exist in the same space as the State, so here we have

> two formally different conceptions of science, and, ontologically, a single field of interaction in which royal science continually appropriates the contents of vague or nomad science while nomad science continually cuts the contents of royal science loose (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 405).

One, in important respects, needs the other, since the 'State is perpetually producing and reproducing ideal circles, but a war machine is necessary to make something round' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 405). There is, however, a nomad rejection of

'common sense [as] State consensus raised to the absolute' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 415)—so, this is not a balanced, or stable equation.[6]

Beginning again—nomad ontology

When Humboldt (1810/1970), in 1810 described the relationship between the State and intellectual institutions, it was clear to him that '[t]he state must always remain conscious of the fact that it never has and in principle never can, by its own action, bring about the fruitfulness of intellectual activity' (p. 244). Since then, the imbalance between State and nomad has shifted, however. Despite Humboldt's vision for the university, the State has not stopped trying to appropriate the academy. Indeed, a qualitative shift can be identified, as now the State 'does not appropriate … without submitting it to civil and metric rules that strictly limit, control, localize nomad science' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 400). With the university coming to be viewed as more a tool of economic growth than anything else the room for alternatives has shrunk.

This is where the ontological aspect enters the discussion. Stengers (2018) and Humboldt (1810/1970) both offer us political arguments for keeping a sense of how the State's priorities differ from those of the academy; Schopenhauer (1818/2010) and Kant (1781/1998) approach epistemological concerns, with visions centred on their discipline. For the question of the *ontological* status of the academic, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) are a resource in so far as their work allows us to reconceptualise academic being itself. Deleuze (2004) elsewhere goes further, describing the nomadic as

> a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits. Nothing pertains or belongs to any person, but all persons are arrayed here and there in such a manner to cover the largest possible space. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 46)

Buchanan (2021) writes that '[t]he key to understanding the concept of territory is chaos defined as an existential condition rather than a physical state of affairs' (p. 85). Thinking of knowledge as a landscape—as space—and the academic as its

[6] A caveat here is that other aspects can be introduced, with multiple terms, in a more complicated formula. To the binary of State/nomad, inside/outside, aspects such as the in-between might then be considered, whether in terms of 'civility' as suggested by a reviewer of an earlier version of this paper, or my own favoured shades of asocial, resisting modes of liminality and anti-community.

inhabitant helps us to make sense of the existential condition of academic being. Our turn to ontology comes after turning away from political and epistemological possibilities, with the sense that a more radical alternative is required. Ontology is a route to breaking things open in favour of a variety of possible worlds.

A Thousand Plateaus is parallel to our own purposes, as it is 'less a critique than a positive exercise in the affirmative nomad thought' (Massumi, 2004, p. x). The nomad as a figure is an affirmative alternative, in its extravagant, extra-State aspect, exterior to the congealing of fluid social relations into the stasis of hierarchies of obligation and domination. It also creates space for an ontology of entanglement, whereby we are 'terrestrials,' in Latour's (2004) terminology—along with other animals, fungi, plants, and other organisms. This is how we see ourselves in nomad being, by recognising that society is not the State and that the State is not society. As Stengers (2018) writes, 'no one should be authorised to define generally "what really matters,"' (p. 79) least of all the guardians of 'appropriate' conduct, least of all the State. This nomad being also closely aligns with the call to 'unfix' the university in favour of an 'ontology of travel,' because while this has the immediate salutary effect of moving away from national, State agendas, it also implies being able to travel epistemically, socially, culturally, and ethically (Bengtsen & Gildersleeve, 2022). Unfixing the university is higher education and research by and for nomads, those whose being is travel.

If we recall the importance of desire, however, we must note that it is unbounded and never arrives at its destination. There is never an inside to the State once and for all, and the nomad is never totally outside.[7] There is also no one end in sight, and so we are always seeking new beginnings. For my argument, there is no claim to be made about being 'totally outside' the world of academic citizenship, nor is there a total inside. There is not an ontology of being, but rather a process ontology of becoming, contestation and interruption, against absolutes or binaries. Writing of the nomad and State science—and by implication, two modes of being in academia—Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p. 410) describe the nomad, ambulant, following mode as '[n]ot better, just different'. Better to have difference than not, though, and it's good to be reminded of this; good too, to think about just what it is that we desire, and use this to our own benefit. We can be confident in our being '[a]n ambulant people of relayers, rather than a model society' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 416), or model citizens, or whatever else. The ideal of the academy, to

[7] Bengtsen and Gildersleeve rightly avoid referring to a hypostatised, unfixed university, speaking instead of 'unfixing'.

which we belong and which we naively believe in, predates the State and the situation of parliamentary capitalism in which many of us find ourselves.

In our daily lives, we can see the limits of the appropriated academy, and royal, imperial, State modes of science. Making this explicit, perhaps we can now see the limits of the formulation of fundamental questions of being reduced to 'citizenship,' and the need to extricate our thinking from State perspectives. Embracing a nomadological stance is a rejection of the political contract we are told we signed up for, just by being. Contrary to a State perspective that would make us external to the academy—and the State internal, the controlling interest, with our participation conditional on a contract the State wrote without our input—we constitute the academy, and it belongs to us as much as we to it. It this is that leads us to the urgency of ontology as a response, to recall our exteriority, our outsider perspective. Our projects and solidarities cross borders (indeed, often making them irrelevant) and the political projects from elsewhere, with their claims to universality. Ontology connects us with the desire to have things be otherwise than they are, and answering the question of what it is that we want of the academy. Nomad ontology is not about being good, model citizens—there is so much more that we can be and do. We can and should, in good conscience, resist and even reject academic citizenship as a figuration of academic life and work.

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