

Plastic Knowledges: Transformations and Stagnations in the Humanities

André Keet

At the limits of reflection, the value of knowledge, it seems, depends on its ability to make any conclusive image of the universe impossible (Georges Bataille 1988: 25).

Abstract

The crisis in the humanities and social sciences seems to preside over the gradual ends of public debates and the inhibitions of social imaginations and *transformations* in higher education. Employing Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, I first argue that the challenges of the humanities and social sciences are internally constituted around their scholarship and the social practices of the agents and authorities of the disciplines. This is because these disciplines already produce the principles of their own production and *stagnations*, so determined historically. My reasoning proceeds, second, via the interpretive scheme of Malabou's excavation of the concept of *plasticity*, which suggest that *transformations* are inscribed in the humanities and social sciences because their originary positions are *plastic*; their knowledges are plastic. Using the notion of *plastic knowledges*, and in speculative argumentative form, I formulate various interplays between *habitus* and *plasticity* to provide an explanatory frame for *transformations* and *stagnations* within the humanities and the social sciences.

Keywords: Knowledge, plasticity, habitus, humanities, social sciences, transformations, stagnations

Introduction

To speak about the Humanities and the Social Sciences (HSS) as an ailing or cantankerous intellectual and practical exercises, has become commonplace. The ‘crisis in the humanities’ has taken on articulated forms in a variety of ways throughout different historical periods, especially in the form of lectures, reports, books and scholarly articles on the subject. Bell (2010: 69) notes that

in 1922, Austrian art historian Josef Stryzowski lectured in Boston on ‘The Crisis in the Humanities as Exemplified in the History of Art’ [whilst] in 1964, British historian J.H. Plumb published a volume of essays entitled *The Crisis in the Humanities*. Between 1980 and 2000 a ‘crisis in the humanities’ was discussed more than a hundred times in the pages of major scholarly journals.

Bell thus (*ibid*) asks:

Is there anything new to be said about it? Has the hypochondriac finally come down with a life-threatening disease? [...] Certain forms of apprehension do seem built into the very structure of the modern humanities.

Indeed, what new can be said about this hypochondriac amidst a battery of reports on its illnesses over the past 25 years (Academy of Science of South Africa [ASSAf] 2011 Consensus Study on the Status of the Humanities in South Africa and the 2001 Charter for Humanities in South Africa). In this paper I explore how the maladies of the humanities and social sciences can be linked to the ‘substance of contemporary humanities scholarship’ (Bell 2010: 72) and scholarly dispositions; an argument which is also, *inter alia*, forwarded by ASSAf’s Consensus Study (2011: 125 - 126):

[First], [t]here is a crisis in the Humanities reflected in declining student enrolments, falling graduations, and decreasing government funding (in real Rands) within institutions of higher learning. [Second], [t]he evolution and administration of government policy in the post-apartheid period has systematically benefited Science,

Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (the so-called STEM disciplines) to the exclusion and even detriment of the Humanities disciplines in the country. [And third], [t]he Humanities within institutions of higher learning are in a state of intellectual stagnation and singular innovations notwithstanding, have remained in this moribund condition for more than 15 years.

There are thus not simply external influences working in on the ‘crisis of the humanities’, but rather an internally constituted ‘crisis’ of intellectual stagnation. However, the intellectual challenges are not limited to the humanities, but afflict most of the disciplines in different ways as expressed in works such as the *University in Ruins* (Readings 1996); *Scholars in the Marketplace* (Mamdani 2007); *Between Race and Reason: Violence, Intellectual Responsibility and the University to Come* (Susan Searls Giroux 2010); *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom 2008); *Achieving our Country* (Rorty 1999); *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Bok 2006); and *Universities in the Marketplace* (Bok 2009). One can argue that the ‘legitimation’ crisis of the humanities is simply the most protruding articulation of a series of structurally-anchored challenges within higher education globally. If we accept that the writings of the authors that Bell (2010: 71) cites use the Habermasian notion of ‘legitimation crisis’ that refers to periods when the ‘organizational principle of a society does not permit the resolution of problems that are critical for its continued existence’ (see Heath 2004), then the ‘legitimation crisis’ in relation to the humanities suggests that its disciplinary organisation - its substance and effect - works from the inside to express its ‘crisis’ outwardly. The ‘legitimation crisis’ in the humanities, properly understood as part of the broader challenges within higher education globally, links not only with the state of scholarship within the humanities. It also joins up with a set of disciplinary practices within which money and power coalesce to provide ‘pathways for the transmission of privilege’ with the academy as a key mechanism for the ‘sharing of the spoils of hegemony’ (Wacquant 1996: xii), and at the same time presents such spoils as acquired rights. Once such a stage is reached, the purposes of the humanities are not only internally compromised but falsely expressed as a predicament solely brought about by external factors.

The main argumentative posture of this paper suggests that there is a constitutive link between the *crisis* and *scholarship* within HSS. The crisis in

the humanities and social sciences seems to preside over the gradual ends of public debates and the inhibitions of social imaginations and *transformations* in higher education. Employing Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, I first argue that the challenges of the humanities and social sciences are internally constituted around its scholarship and the social practices of the agents and authorities of the disciplines; the disciplines already produce the principles of their own production and *stagnations*, so determined historically. My reasoning proceeds, second, via the interpretive scheme of Malabou's excavation of the concept of *plasticity*, which suggests that *transformations* are inscribed in the humanities and social sciences because their originary positions are *plastic*; their knowledges are plastic. Using the notion of *plastic knowledges*, and in speculative argumentative form, I formulate various interplays between *habitus* and *plasticity* to provide an explanatory frame for *transformations* and *stagnations* within the humanities and social sciences. Stated differently, the scholarly stasis in HSS joins together with these various economies, and through this, sets up the general architectonics of the 'crisis in the humanities'. This paper suggests that HSS can only begin regeneration by way of *plastic transformations* as a function of its own renewals and as a result of a critical analysis of its own social structures.

Habitus and the Academy

Elsewhere I (Keet 2014a) observe that, more so than any other social and intellectual arrangement, the disciplines permeate the life of the university. Academics and students are streamed; professional, academic and student identities are constructed; scientific authorities are established and maintained; social statuses are affirmed; social spaces are mapped out; recognitions, rewards and sanctions are distributed; and epistemic injustices legitimated. The disciplines and their authorities thus create lineages and streams by which certain groups are more speedily advanced within the disciplines and the academy, not simply on the basis of a fictitious conception of merit and excellence, but also on the basis of the self-perpetuation of the interest of groups who are already in power. It is thus surprising, perhaps not, that universities often underestimate, or deliberately misrecognise the steering authority of power (symbolic, social, cultural and intellectual) and money as reproductive forces of stagnant practices. These practices, in many instances, present themselves as transformative within the contexts of the demands for

democratic principles. However, far from it, they merely mask how cultural capital,

inhere [s] in the person of its bearers [t] he fact that it ‘manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition’ makes it uniquely suited to legitimizing the continued inheritance of social privileges in societies (Wacquant 1996: x).

The set of legitimating practices that are emerging, via HSS, ensure the active presence of past privileges within the faculties. Those who benefit from the powerbase provided by academic and other capital do not simply want to rely on the carnal force of such power. Rather, the expression of privileged positions, historically determined by political, social and economic orders requires a justificatory framework that converts such privilege into ‘rights’ so as to normalise its exercise (*ibid*: ix). Such exercise is not only influenced by the agent’s social structures, or social, cultural and symbolic capital, but also results from the cognitive structures that agents invest in their actions and representations (Bourdieu 1996: 2). Thus, the social and cognitive structures of the authorities and academics of the disciplines combine into a meaning-making framework that justifies certain academic practices. But these are achieved without conscious effort because the *habitus* of the academy and its disciplines always-already produces the principles of its own production which are historically determined.

Though over (mis) used, Bourdieu’s (1981a: 94) notion of *habitus* remains one of the most productive interpretive schemes for reflecting on the academy: its practices and its knowledge generation processes; and inertia to change. Though we generally think of ourselves as free agents, the regularities of social practices do not support our agency claims; whether these are racist practices, sexist practices, non-discriminatory practices, or other practices of exclusion and inclusion. Thus Bourdieu (Grenfell 2010: 50) remarks: ‘all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?’ Enter the notion of *habitus* as:

[S]ystems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations

which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu 1981a: 94).

If Menand (Bell 2010: 71) is right in stating that trying to reform the contemporary university ‘is like trying to get on the Internet with a typewriter’, then it is in the concept of *habitus* where he may at least find some of the answers. The practices produced by the *habitus* within the university tend to ‘reproduce the objective structures of which they are the product; they are determined by the past conditions which have produced the principle of their production’ (Bourdieu 1981a: 95). It should be clear why, for those who adhere to ‘romantic’ notions of human agency, *habitus* presents a ‘cynical’ and downright ‘unproductive’ scheme. They will do well to note that limited change in the primary practices of universities and their reproduction of privilege and exclusions (in general, a trend away from social justice imperatives) has occurred in post 1994 South Africa, despite an array of policy and other interventions. ‘New’ higher education leaders and administrators, despite their best efforts, have not been immune to the way in which university practices produce the principles of its own production and thus remain ‘regular’. Even higher education spaces that by one or other measurement are being regarded as transformed, more or less ‘produce’ university practices as products of their ‘historical-objective’ structures, albeit on a changed *topography*. Thus, *habitus*, like Foucault’s *discourse*, seems to me a much more authentic basis from which to ‘think’ the very possibilities of higher education transformation, which, in the logic of some, it has rendered *impossible*. Such bases may become differentiating mechanisms by which we are able to discern real change from its *simulations*; a task at which we have become flimsy.

For the purposes of this paper, it is the way in which Bourdieu brings his considerable analysis to bear on the *academy* that is of great interest. In *Homo Academicus* Bourdieu (1988: xi) attempts to ‘exoticize the domestic through a break with his (the academic) initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him because they are too familiar’. Bourdieu believed that an analysis of the social structures of the

academy would disclose the categories of its self-understanding and the social derivation of thought that it employs (*ibid*: xii). Only on this basis can it (the academy) expect to make decisive progress. Such progress, however, is dependent on whether academics are capable of studying the ‘historical conditions of [their] own production, rather than by some form or other of transcendental reflection’ (*ibid*), and in doing so, can gain ‘theoretical control of [their] own structures and inclinations as well as over the determinants whose products they are’ (*ibid*). Here, Bourdieu, speaking figuratively, hits the nail on its head: forms of research that are associated with ‘transcendental reflections’ have flooded the academy post 1994 without shifting its practices in any ‘other’ direction. A wave of ‘self-indulgent narcissism’ (*ibid*) presented in research within the academy emerged as a function of *habitus* which steers, as a result of its anti-historical reflection, academics to reinvent their biographies to justify and therefore morally manage their present practices that remain, largely ‘regular’. History and its future are made present on *their* terms; thus, the durable dispositions endure.

When making sorties into ‘relativistic’, fashionable intellectual trends, what stands out is an academic spirit credited with licensing all sorts of self-indulgent research, ‘reflections’ and intellectual hide-outs. In spite of its vast pool of valuable insights, these trends tend to weaken epistemological vigilance and as such, hinder the academy in reinvesting in ‘scientific practice its own scientific gains’ (*ibid*: xiii). In short, it is difficult to bring together the production of knowledge (about the social world within the academy, which ordinarily’ if not for *habitus*, should lead to *transformations*) with the academy’s inertia to change which results in its *stagnations*. Bourdieu (*ibid*) suggests the following: First, academics belong to an academic field;

that site of permanent rivalry for the truth of the social world and of the academic world itself, and by the fact of occupying a determined position within it, defined by a certain number of properties, an education and training, qualifications and status, with all their concomitant forms of solidarity or membership.

Second, this ‘belonging’ ‘provides an opportunity for the conscious neutralization of the probabilities of error which are inherent in a position’ (*ibid*); like a conscious construction of ‘insights and blindness’ (*ibid*). Third,

there is a tendency not to ‘credit science, when it encroaches on the world of the scholar’. This suggests a link between the will to know with the will to power, which in the end disallows analyses into the individual and collective defence mechanisms of the academy itself (*ibid*: xiv). This

often takes the form of an operation of negation, and through which agents aim to maintain in being, for themselves and for others, representations of the social world which clash with the representation constructed by science (*ibid*).

That is, academics are seldom responsive to empirical research about the academy itself.

This analysis is central to Bourdieu’s study of the academy. For him *habitus* combines two approaches that should never have been dichotomised in HSS. First, ‘as an objective structure [that is] grasped from the outside [and] whose articulations can be materially observed, measured, and mapped out independently of the representations of those who live in it’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 7-8). However, as much as society has an objective structure ‘a materialist science of society must ... [second] ... recognize that the consciousness and interpretations of agents are an essential component of the full reality of the social world’ (*ibid*: 9); it is the interplay between objective and subjective factors that merges into one movement. But, if we are to proceed in scientific enterprise, we require a non-narcissistic reflexivity because ‘we are implicated in the world [and thus] there is implicit content in what we think and say about it’ (Bourdieu 1997: 9). Bourdieu has little faith in ‘reflection’ that turns thought onto itself because not even had the most militant doubt is capable of disrupting presuppositions:

The unconscious is history - the collective history that has produced our categories of thought, and the individual history through which they have been inculcated in us. It is, for example, from the social history of educational institutions (a supremely banal one, absent from the history of philosophical or other ideas), and from the (forgotten or repressed) history of our singular relationship to these institutions, that we can some real revelations about the objective and subjective structures (classifications, hierarchies, problematics, etc.) that always, in spite of ourselves, orient our thoughts (*ibid*).

Our thoughts are oriented by the categories produced by history: any reflection that does not account for this is not ‘reflection’ at all. The ‘overproduction’ of reflection-related inquiries in South African universities may precisely be of this ilk. At issue here is that reflection must be shown to be demanding; as it actually is in real life. An authentic assessment of the academy may ensue from such ‘demanding’, ‘non-narcissistic’ reflection:

[T]he most effective reflection is the one that consists in objectifying the subject of objectification. I mean by that the one that dispossesses the knowing subject of the privilege it normally grants itself and that deploys all the available instruments of objectification (statistical surveys, ethnographic observation, historical research, etc.) in order to bring to light the presuppositions it owes to its inclusion in the object of knowledge (*ibid*: 10).

In essence, Bourdieu (1995: 72) is establishing an ‘experimental science of the *dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*, or more simply, of incorporation and objectification’. The dialectic between objectivism and subjectivism requires the objectified subject; which means that academics are meant to break with the familiar intimacy of their own thought. A reflexive posture constituted by objectification may now be possible. Thus, when academics study the academy they are now able to view the scientific field ‘as a system of objective relations between positions already won (in previous struggles) [...] [it] is the locus of a competitive struggle, in which the *specific* issues at stake is the monopoly of *scientific authority*’ (Bourdieu 1981b: 257). Such authority is linked to ‘legitimate’ academic knowledges that have specified credentialising authorities by which truth and validity are established. It follows then that all disciplinary practices are ‘directed towards the acquisition of scientific authority (prestige, recognition, fame, etc.)’ (*ibid*: 259-260) which draw their legitimacy from ‘the relative strength of the groups whose interests they express’ (*ibid*: 264).

A set of implications ensues from Bourdieu’s study of the academy. First, scientific authorities are established and maintained and social statuses are affirmed by the reproductive power of *habitus* within the academy. And though the academy ‘works’ within the ‘inherent’ transformations of knowledges, its practices are determined by *habitus*, so historically

constituted and are thus *stagnant*. Second, such possibility of knowledge transformations is slim on the basis that academics seem not to study their own social structures to disclose the categories of their self-understanding and the social derivation of thought that they employ. Bourdieu calls for scientific reflexivity as opposed to naive self-analysis to construct an

equally rigorous and uncompromising political economy of the [...] [academy] [...] in order to uncover its invisible structure, to locate the specific forms of capital that are efficient in it, and to raise our collective awareness of the hidden determinisms that regulate our practices as symbolic producers (Wacquant 1990: 687).

It seems as if academics in the natural and social sciences and humanities are caught in a double-bind: first, they are oriented by *habitus*; and second, they lack the methodological and intellectual dispositions and tools to study the hidden determinants that constitute their own *habitus*. But, even though Bourdieu suggests that it is difficult to transform the academy and its knowledge processes, his ultimate aim is for academic struggles to ‘increase the autonomy of the scientific field and thereby the political responsibilities of its participants’ (*ibid*: 681). He wants ‘a rupture with the doxic acceptance of the existing academic world that may help open up new spaces for intellectual freedom and action’ (*ibid*). Those, such as Bruno Frère, (2011: 247) who ‘deliberately’ misread Bourdieu to set up a paper tiger that ostensibly suffocates the theoretical and practical possibilities of human agency, fail to appreciate the intricacies of *habitus* as ‘the link not only between past, present and future, but also between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency’ (Grenfell 2010: 51).

I will now turn to a discussion that relates the insights of Bourdieu’s analysis of the academy to the ‘crisis’ in HSS. Bell (2010: 73) suggests that *History* is on an ‘interpretive cul-de-sac’ that demands a new paradigm. He (*ibid*) extends this ‘crisis’ further:

I myself can hardly claim an expertise over ‘humanistic studies more generally,’ but my recent experience as a dean in an American research university gives me every reason to think that the sense of

drift and uncertainty felt by so many historians is shared by humanists in other disciplines.

Though there may be sporadic optimism for HSS to renew itself, the upsurge in innovative scholarly work to back up these sanguinities is absent. We can thus logically argue that the dearth of novel research programmes contributes to the ‘crisis’ in HSS. Apart from its negative academic consequences, this pattern necessitates the question: ‘[W]hy and how [has] critique in the service of social justice [...] been hollowed out of post-apartheid politics’ (Jacklin & Vale 2009: 1-2). However, what they (*ibid*: 5-7) refer to as the ‘complicity of the academy’, is narrowly interpreted within the managerialist strictures of neo-liberalism; the re-organisation of the universities in line with these strangulations; and the consequent marginalisation of HSS. What is absent from such analysis are the disciplinary practices and conditions created within HSS that make its abrupt ‘present’ marginalisation possible. Thus, JM Coetzee’s (2013: xiv) argument in a foreword to Higgins’s *Academic Freedom* (2013) that we need institutions ‘where teachers and students can pursue unconstrained the life of the mind’, lacks, with a few exceptions, historical counterparts in social reality during the Apartheid era where such pursuits were demonstrated as ‘good for the individual and good for society’ (*ibid*). That is, HSS in higher education with a historical pedigree of social justice would have been less vulnerable to its own contemporary crisis. Is this not what Lalu (Department of Higher Education and Training, Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences, 2011: 26) intimates, that when one wants to defend the HSS ‘we would have to be careful of what was being defended’. Thus, despite a marked trend amongst academics and higher education institution managers to reconstitute their biographies in alignment with the ‘historical-critical’, the empirical expression of such in social reality, historically and otherwise, in the main, does not actually exist.

In the Jacklin and Vale (2009) publication, Neocosmos (2009: 112) dwells, in my reading, unintentionally closest to the dilemma at the heart of HSS crisis, if viewed from a scholarly perspective. The streaming of public debate in post 1994 South Africa into a human rights discourse that resulted in the social sciences and politics operating in the absence of an emancipatory project, according to Neocosmos (*ibid*), affirms Bourdieu’s logic vis-à-vis *habitus*, if one considers that an emancipatory project may, largely, never have existed in HSS in pre or post 1994 South Africa. There seems to be a

seamless continuity pre and post 1994 within HSS, as far as the logic of its scholarship is concerned. But, this claim is problematic in itself as Neocosmos (*ibid*: 115) suggests, since there might have been elements of a critical science in history. This is true, I will argue, only insofar as HSS has avoided being tied to ‘state politics’; something I think it failed to do historically and continues to do so now. It is precisely its dependence on conditions relating to ‘state politics’ that cast doubt over its entire scholarly enterprise. Why, one wonders, in a world where the need for the ‘emancipatory’ should be overwhelming, do knowledge formations require state steering conditions to be critical and innovative? Is the academy not ‘miseducating’ itself? I suggest that one response to these questions lies with the way in which the academy has constructed a notion of politics in mimicry to the state (see Keet 2014b), as a poor alternative to ‘real’ emancipatory projects viewed as an authoritative politics outside the state; in other words: a politics of *political outsides*. Therefore, unlike Neocosmos (2009: 115), I argue that what is evacuated from HSS is not *politics*, but ‘politics’; an argument that may explain the dilemmas of higher education in general. Thus, the recoil of HSS further into the ‘descriptive’ and the ‘given’ (*ibid*) is unsurprising if analysed against *habitus* and the social structure of the academy. The moribund condition of HSS has been imported from the past and projected into the future; serving a matrix of cultural, academic, political and financial economies within South African higher education. The *stagnation* that inevitably follows the entrenchment of these economies undercuts the transformative movements ‘inherent’ within knowledge; a state of affairs productively interpreted via the schemata of *habitus*. How are we to respond to this? I propose, following Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1997), to *retreat* HSS in the same way as *retreating* the political; the two should go hand-in-hand. In this regard I (Keet 2014b) explore explore a ‘retreating [of] the political’ (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1997) that wants to *retreat* from the political to *re-treat* it, to think it again in a new way, or to reinvent its actual conditions (Sparks 1997: xxvii). To withdraw, in this instance, means to displace the political in order to redraw its contours. The academic enterprise, in particular HSS, seems unable to *retreat* and thus *re-treat* itself; therefore, something cannot be ‘set free or unburdened’ (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1997: 131). Would it be too farfetched to suggest that HSS has lost its capacity for unburdening or, that it never had such capacity? Perhaps this is the reason why HSS continues to slip into positioning the state

as the ‘unifying horizon for all political representation’ (see Keet 2014b), including that of itself? If, as Neocosmos (2009: 115) argues, that politics is absent from HSS – and absent from life – because it is systematically removed by liberal democracy, why has HSS not *retreated* the political and reinvented its actual conditions? Rather, what we have seen is a research trend in HSS with an inclination towards social justice *lite*¹. This *lite*, as a notion indicating weight and substance, expelled the *political* from its midst as evidenced by the new intellectual currents in reconciliation studies, development studies, political studies, sexuality studies, queer studies and so forth. This, as argued in the Jacklin and Vale (2009) compilation, seems to be a general trend in HSS. If this state of affairs is a function of *habitus*, then one of the options available to us is to study the social structure of the academy to uncover and work against those internal mechanisms that limit the autonomy and thus, the political responsibility of academics. On this basis, we may proceed to initiate, or rather explore, the unlimited transformative potential of HSS as encapsulated in Malabou’s concept of *plasticity*.

Knowledge, Plasticity and Transformations

Malabou argues that the ‘future of the humanities as a future of plasticity, [...] is already woven into the humanities - and into disciplinarity as such - from the start [...] [P]lasticity indicates malleability, suppleness, and being “susceptible to changes of form”’ (Williams 2013: 8). It seems that such transformative potential is not demonstrated and realised, despite the significance assigned to HSS. Such importance is consistently argued in scholarly and research endeavours. These include Menand’s (2010) *The Marketplace of Ideas*; Nussbaum’s (2010) *Not for Profit*; the ASSAf report (2011); and the Report on the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences (2011). Previous to this, a range of influential intellectuals such as Derrida and Foucault argued that the humanities are

endowed with the task of ‘critical resistance,’ of ‘analyzing and reflecting upon limits,’ [...] the humanities infinitely resist the determination of a demarcated ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ because the very

¹ This notion was first articulated by Willy Nel in a bilateral conversation in August, 2012.

questioning of borderlines and the power that enforces them comprises the most critical task of the humanities (Williams 2013: 7).

With no pre-determined boundaries the humanities have a democratic condition but have chosen disciplinary imprisonment by which, within *habitus*, its practices have become regular and non-plastic. What Neocosmos (2009: 114) reads as *political disorientation* and moribund ‘social thought’ make perfect sense within the reproduction mechanisms of *habitus* as far as university spaces and the academy are concerned, especially within the context of a humanities academy that may never have ‘realised’ the plasticity of its own domain, and the concomitant political and social responsibility that ensue from it. The mouldable and pliable ‘borders’ of the humanities which should have been its transformative apparatuses have become its rigid contours as produced by *habitus* and as an interplay between agents and structures; it has lost its engagements with ‘frontiers’. Thus, Malabou (2009:1) identifies the threat to the humanities as follows:

The frontier between the humanities and sciences has to be redrawn. This because the most accurate concept of the frontier is today being elaborated and articulated by science, and no longer by any of the disciplines that constitute the humanities. Science is gradually becoming a discourse on limits, thus depriving the humanities from their own content or task. I will insist upon the field where this re-elaboration is the most visible and spectacular, i.e. neurobiology, where ‘plasticity’ characterizes a new epistemological, ontological and political mode of being of frontiers.

Most of the contributions in the Jacklin and Vale (2009) compilation, but especially the contribution of Neocosmos (2009), as well as the findings of the ASSAf report (2011) and the Report on the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences, suggest an inclination long in the making of Malabou’s intellectual project. That is, ‘[t]he future of any kind of discourse or of discursive practise, be it philosophical, literary or scientific, is linked with the plasticity of its limits and frontiers’ (Malabou 2013: 1). In my reading, these contributions and the reports argue, *inter alia*, that HSS has ‘lost’ the ‘plasticity of its limits’. This may explain the link between ‘crisis’ and ‘scholarship’ in the humanities. Nevertheless, one is tempted to ask: Of what

is this ‘loss’ a function? Bourdieu would argue that this ‘loss’ is not arbitrary; it is not simply a result of an ‘incapacity’ of thought, neither is it merely an outcome of external factors. The loss is a product of *habitus*, perpetuating the loss of something that actually did not exist previously in the South African academic context. Malabou does hint at this ‘double-loss’ in arguing that the humanities have always been ignorant of their plasticity. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain*, she (2008: 1) argues that ‘[t]he brain is a work, and we do not know it’. To awaken the consciousness of the brain *as* history, what we may call ‘constitutive historicity’ which is ‘nothing other than its plasticity’ (*ibid*: 4), one has to acknowledge its transformative ability (*ibid*: 16) which can be extended to an ethical dimension (repair) and a political one (responsibility to receive and give form) (*ibid*: 30). Disciplinary practices in HSS can thus be seen as sets of behaviours that are unaware of the plasticity of the disciplines themselves. Thus, when she argues for the frontier of the sciences and the humanities to be redrawn, Malabou (2013: 1) suggests a dialogue with neurobiology, in

which the concept of plasticity (under the name of neuroplasticity) is central [...] [t]his dialogue is necessary in order for the Humanities to resist the threat that weighs upon them (i.e. their being designated as useless and unproductive), in order for them to avoid being swallowed, or eaten alive, by science without even being aware of it.

Malabou builds her central conceptual frame on her reading of Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel is generally regarded as the most methodical thinker of the post-Kantian period and ‘the first great philosopher to make *modernity* – in all its historical, cultural and philosophical complexity – his subject’ (Speight 2008: 1). Hegel’s thought is sometimes described

to have a *dialectical* character [...] when ‘it is shown that there belongs to some subject matter or other, for example the world, motion, point, and so on, some determination or other . . . but further, that with equal necessity the opposite determination also belongs to the subject matter (*ibid*: 56).

Malabou’s (2005: 13) creative reading of Hegel proposes a

dialectical composition of such concepts as the ‘future’, ‘plasticity’, and ‘temporality’ form the *anticipatory structure* operating within subjectivity itself as Hegel conceived it. To distinguish this structure from the future as it is ordinarily understood, we will name this structure ‘to see (what is) coming’, [...] It is an expression that can [...] refer at *one and the same time* to the state of ‘being sure of what is coming’ and of ‘not knowing what is coming’. It is on this account that ‘to see (what is) coming’ can represent that interplay, within Hegelian philosophy, of *teleological necessity* and *surprise*.

To avoid the standard but crude interpretations of *Hegelian dialectics*, one can, using Hegel’s own words, argue that a subject matter, ‘at one and the same time’, has a ‘determination’ and an ‘opposite determination’. ‘To see (what is) coming’ has the ‘determination’ of *teleological necessity* and the ‘opposite determination’ of *surprise*. Thus, ‘to see (what is) coming’, becomes, for Malabou, the central motor scheme of her project where the interplay between *teleological necessity* and *surprise* ties in well with Hegel’s philosophy. Derrida (Foreword in Malabou 2005: ix), in expressing admiration for his student’s project, paraphrased Malabou’s project when she used the French expression ‘to see (what is) coming’ (*voir venir*) as follows:

To see (what is) coming’ is to anticipate, to foresee, to presage, to project; it is to expect what is coming; but it is also to let what is coming come or to let oneself be surprised by the unexpected, by the sudden appearance of what is un-awaited.

Derrida (*ibid.*: xi) further notes that between the two

contradictory senses of ‘to see (what is) coming’ there is an *Aufhebung*, or a *sublation*, of one meaning into its other [...] the factor, the modality, that demonstrates this mobile and self-contradictory ambiguity of ‘to see (what is) coming’, is its *plasticity*. The ‘to see (what is) coming’ is plastic.

The Dialectic is Plastic

The *dialectic* also connects Bourdieu’s *habitus* (e.g. the interplay between the

objective and subjective) with Malabou's *plasticity*. Whereas Bourdieu provides us with ways of 'seeing' the challenges of transforming the academy through the lens of *habitus*, Malabou's *plasticity* suggests a transformative inscription in knowledge itself and combines with Bourdieu in the aim to 'increase the autonomy of the scientific field and thereby the political responsibilities of its participants' (Wacquant 1990: 681), so I would argue. Somewhere else I (Keet 2014c) engaged with Malabou's notion of *plasticity* along the following lines. Malabou's (2005) *The Future of Hegel* re-introduces the concept of 'plasticity' to mean 'a capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form' (Malabou 2005: 9). Plasticity also refers to a philosophical attitude that Hegel described as a 'sense of receptivity and understanding on the part of the listener' (*ibid*: 10) which Malabou (*ibid*) paraphrased as the reader and interlocutor being 'receptive to the form, but they in their turn are led to construct and form what they hear and read'. She interprets Hegel's dialectic as a process of plasticity, 'a movement where formation and dissolution, novelty and anticipation, are in continual interplay' (During 2000: 191). Hegel's dialectic does not lead, as generally interpreted, to a closure, but to a future that is open (*ibid*: 192). The dialectic is regenerated as a forward movement because of its 'plasticity' (Crockett 2010 xii). On the *regenerative* inscription of transformation into dialectic, Malabou (2011: 88) suggests that 'regenerative plasticity does [...] speak to us today of [...] regeneration without sublation', without *aufhebung*. In this instance, Malabou argues 'plasticity' in relation to the neurobiological sciences via the plasticity of the brain; the insights from 'regenerative medicines'; and the biological capacities for regeneration in, for instance, the 'salamander' (Malabou 2011). In essence, for Malabou (2008: 17)

[...] with plasticity we are dealing with a concept that is not contradictory but graduated, because the very plasticity of its meaning situates it at the extremes of a formal necessity (the irreversible character of formation: determination) and of a remobilization of form (the capacity to form oneself otherwise, to displace, even to nullify determination: freedom).

If we understand *plasticity* as set out by Malabou above, the future of HSS is then the future of plasticity, so inscribed. Thus, the tasks of HSS to facilitate critique at its own limits and frontiers require regeneration, or initiation.

Malabou (2013: 2) suggests three limits: ‘the limits of knowledge, the limits of political power, [and] the limits of ethics’. To be at the limits and to think at the frontiers, presumes an outside; a space partly delineated by the natural sciences. The challenge, according to Malabou (*ibid*) is that we constitute ‘frontier’ in ways that ‘always already rigidifies the meaning of the outside, and consequently of the inside as well’. She intimates that *plasticity* is undermined right from the start ‘by the fixity and determination of the spaces it is supposed to limit in a supple and malleable way’ (*ibid*). The logical consequence of this line of reasoning is that HSS has limited itself, as evidenced by the absence of innovative scholarly projects that disallow ‘genuine crossings, genuine formations of plastic borders *between* the inside and the outside’. Here, the ‘crisis’ emerges more as self-constituted and less than externally determined. The continuity between pre and post 1994 HSS in higher education in South Africa is now obvious; the pre and post 1994 crisis of the HSS is *one and the same*.

HSS are plastic knowledges; the human is plastic which means that it gives itself its own form, that it is able to transform itself, to invent and produce itself, and that it is nothing but this very process of self-formation

[and if HSS] have to be at the frontiers, as we said to begin with, it is to the extent that, according to the plasticity of the human, they have to recreate constantly their own being and meaning. Transformation here doesn’t mean the transformation of something pre-existing but the very emergence of what has to be transformed. (Malabou 2013: 3).

Malabou here seems to suggest a double transformation: first, the *emergence*, the way of creating the very being and meaning of HSS needs to be transformative; second, this *transformative* and its result that is yet to emerge need to be transformed ... a continual recreation at *plastic frontiers*, the knowledges are plastic. However, the *emergence*, that is, the ‘plasticity of criticism, implies [that there] is a priority of fashioning over being, the priority of transformation over what has to be transformed’ (Malabou 2013: 3).

Though Malabou (2013) sets up the *transformations* in HSS within its own knowledge formations, her main thesis is that HSS has not taken up the potential of its own *plastic frontiers*, which has resulted in *stagnations*; it

is thus at risk of being ‘swallowed, or eaten alive, by science without even being aware of it’ (*ibid*: 1). Here, she thinks of the tendency of neuroscience ‘to overpower the fields of human sciences ([e.g.] neurolinguistics, neuropsychanalysis, neuroaesthetics, or of neurophilosophy)’ (*ibid*: 5). Malabou (2008: 17-29) identifies three plasticities in relation to the brain: developmental plasticity (the formation of neuronal connections); modulational plasticity (the brain and its history); and reparative plasticity (the brain and its regeneration). If we insist on all three plasticities, the *historicity* of brain constitutes, via interplays between mental and social structures, the very possibility of *habitus*. The ‘durable dispositions’ are made durable by the brain as its own history. Thus, inasmuch as the *plasticity* of the brain suggests the *plasticity* of knowledge frontiers, the social practices of the academy are unfortunately rigidifying this very *plasticity*, through *stagnations*.

Conclusion

How did it become possible for inscribed, *transformative plasticity* within HSS to be abandoned within the academy? This seems to be exactly the point made by research reports on HSS. Bourdieu would suggest that our incapacity for ‘objectivication’ may be a contributing factor to this state of affairs. Foucault (as quoted by Malabou 2013:5) would argue that what is missing is a ‘critical ontology of ourselves (within the academy) as a historico-practical test’. Malabou would reason that HSS has never grasped the *plasticity* of its knowledge formations and frontiers.

At the very conceptual heart of our dilemma, is the non-emergence of a productive *dialectic*: between objectivication and subjectivication; between determination and its negation; and between formation and the remobilisation of form. *Plasticity* could be imprisoned by *habitus*, even if *habitus* suggests a limited *plasticity* itself. One could argue that Malabou herself caps *plasticity*, via the historicity of the brain, in line with Bourdieu’s *habitus* that is historically determined. Both Bourdieu and Malabou point to the *dialectic* between *transformations* and *stagnations* in the academy, and in HSS in particular; a Hegelian determination that has an equal opposite. If we read Hegelian dialectics through Malabou’s eyes, then the transformative forward movement of the *dialectic* is towards an open *plastic* future, and not a closed one (as orthodox readings of Hegel surmise), because the *dialectic* itself is *plastic*. If we then summon *habitus*, we have to do so to uncover the

challenges, with its limited possibilities, in all its complexities and economies that make up the social structure of the academy. When we summon *plasticity*, we would do well to do so by exploring the infinite transformative potential of HSS that is at *one and the same time* restricted, dialectically, by the state of scholarship within the disciplines themselves.

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André Keet
Director
Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice
University of the Free State
keeta@ufs.ac.za