

# Who is Afraid of Philosophy?<sup>1</sup>

Alexander García-Düttmann

Goldsmiths College

a.duttmann@gold.ac.uk

1. I am here to express my solidarity with my colleagues and with the students at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, and my support for the campaign «Save Philosophy at Middlesex». I believe that the unexpected national and international success of this campaign—who would have thought only a few weeks ago that the announced closure of a Centre for Philosophy at a British university would trigger such a reaction?—has an import and an impact which point beyond the case of Middlesex. Many of us, whether students, academics or non-academics, are fed up with the way in which Philosophy, the Humanities, and Higher Education more generally are treated by politicians and administrators, whether in Britain or on the continent or elsewhere in the world, for example in Australia.
2. In my statement this evening, I wish to comment briefly on two sentences. The first sentence reads: «I am afraid that no one is afraid of philosophy». This is a quote from an e-mail that a friend sent to me. I believe that it expresses a certain truth but that it would be naïve to think that it tells the whole truth. The second sentence reads: «Doubtless philosophy *in general* has never been attacked and defended». This is a quote from a text written in the mid-seventies by the members of GREPH, a French group devoted to the research of the teaching of philosophy, and published in a volume called «Qui a peur de la philosophie?» («Who is Afraid of Philosophy?»).
3. «I am afraid that no one is afraid of philosophy». Yes, but if no one is afraid of philosophy, this is not because so many out there in the real world feel confident enough to relate to it without fear. Let's admit, at least for the time being, that there is widespread indifference toward philosophy, though my hunch is that there exists more interest in it than one would expect.

1. Written for an event at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London (19th of May 2010).

Could it not be then that this indifference is itself a symptom, a symptom of a hidden or repressed fear, precisely? A fear of what? Of what philosophy ultimately means: namely an unbiased or disinterested interest in the thing itself, an interest in the argument for the sake of the argument (but not an interest that would shy away from dismissing certain arguments or from inquiring into the limits of argumentation), an interest in the concept unconcerned with an agenda or an ideology (but not an interest that would shy away from targeting agendas and ideologies), an interest that exceeds psychological constraints, an interest that will not stop raising questions where Power would like it to stop. It is the radical and in many instances unbearable challenge of philosophy's hyperbolic idealism, that politicians and administrators are ultimately afraid of, even if they do not know it or would shrug off the very idea as absurd.

4. It seems to me that in the past thirty years or so, philosophy has been undermined both from the outside and from the inside, and that this double erosion has something to do with the almost imperceptible fear that lurks behind the indifference. Philosophy has been undermined from the outside by the aggressive transformation of the university into a business. Whatever cannot account for its measurable success and whatever does not bring in money, has no longer a place in the university, we are told, has no longer a place in the world, perhaps. That every aspect of academic life, a life now determined by the imperative of getting external funding, can and should be assessed and monitored, and that such assessment and monitoring will enhance this life, is a fiction and leads to arbitrary measures, as can be gauged from the decision to close a Centre for Philosophy that was actually successful according to the adopted criteria. There is something utterly funny at times about grownups tackling a series of tasks with great seriousness that they know perfectly well to be meaningless, and that therefore will need to be taken all the more seriously. Those who work at universities are craving for comic relief, though they may not always be aware of it. Would it bring down the house? It is not a surprise, and has been repeated again and again, that a subject such as philosophy will be particularly vulnerable under the circumstances. But it must also be said that this external tendency, this undermining from the outside, is mirrored within the institution. A large number of academics, and a number of students as well, have endorsed and are still endorsing the transformation of the university into a business, sometimes even by pretending to be innovative and creative, and often by embracing the confusion between the private and the public that seeks to channel and exploit «relaxation» —the empire of the one-dimensional man or woman has many disguises. Such academics may be dimly aware of the mediocrity of their minds— just don't remind them of what they know already—, they may wish to be promoted, to gain power and recognition, or else they may simply be afraid of not following the rules, of sticking out their necks when to all appearances

everybody else is complying with constantly renewed directives. Who, attending a meeting, does not suspect that the important decisions are a foregone conclusion? Who does not sense that the Great Inquisitor today is the Great Administrator who keeps a blog? It should be noted here that the transformation of the university into a business is regularly presented as a kind of fateful development, as the way things are going, as a fact that does not depend on decisions made or not made.

5. Then, as I have already said, I would maintain that philosophy has been undermined from the inside as well, by handing itself over to two of its enemies. On the one hand, there is the slick and streamlined professional philosopher, who may belong to one philosophical tradition or the other, and who, in order to be successful and be seen as «one of us», knows whom to acknowledge and whom to ignore, which conference to attend and which book to read, in which journal to publish and whom better not to quote, and so on. On the other hand, a series of new disciplines have emerged which often do not wish to be seen as disciplines and which tend to be concerned with some form of «culture» or other, some form of «media» or other, some form of «art» or other. These quasi-disciplines have equally contributed to the undermining of philosophy by using its concepts to fill the gaps in their own «practices», and thus often emptying the concepts of all meaning. It is not by chance that there is a complicity between the champions of academic drivel and the administration. They tend to be very good at dealing with applications and forms, and at relentlessly starting new initiatives and projects. Here, a fear of philosophy can surface and manifest itself in the form of active exclusions. Philosophy is then perceived as a threat to an established jargon or to intellectual limitations and indolence - after all, engaging with philosophy, coming up with an idea or a concept, perhaps, means to make quite a huge effort, as Deleuze never ceased to emphasize. To speak metaphorically, philosophy is seen as a cuckoo in the little nest one has built for oneself, more often than not with the aid of philosophy. At Goldsmiths, research students who share an interest in philosophy and have gathered in a group called InC —as you all know, the event tonight has been organised by these students— can probably provide —as I can, too— a few examples of this highly ambiguous fear of philosophy. Against all odds, and without receiving much financial support, InC, basically a no-budget initiative, has put on an impressive and unique series of events over a period of several years now, and I wish to salute the students who have committed themselves in this way to philosophy.
6. So, to conclude, I would say that we find ourselves in an unprecedented situation today. Precisely because no one appears to be afraid of philosophy, the fear of philosophy, of its uncompromising and yet not unreflective fearlessness, is all the more powerful, and for the first time philosophy

*in general* is under attack. But this does not mean that it needs to be defended. As Adorno says, to defend something means to give it up. Philosophy must, quite simply and forcefully, be affirmed, within and outside academic institutions.

**Alexander García-Düttmann** was born in Barcelona in 1961, although he has German citizenship. He attended the German School in Barcelona and later he studied philosophy in Frankfurt and Paris. He has held professorships in philosophy at the universities of Essex, Melbourne, Stanford and Middlesex. He is currently full professor at the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths College at the University of London. His main publications are: *Derrida und ich* (2008), *Visconti: Einsichten in Fleisch und Blut* (2006), *Verwisch die Spuren* (2005), *So ist es. Ein philosophischer Kommentar zu Adornos Minima Moralia* (2004), *Philosophie der Übertreibung* (2004), *Kunstende. Drei ästhetische Studien* (2000), *Liebeslied / My Suicides*, in collaboration with Rut Blees (2000), *Freunde und Feinde. Das Absolute* (1999), *Zwischen den Kulturen. Spannungen im Kampf um Anerkennung* (1997), «*Was Liebe heißt in allen Sprachen und Stummheiten dieser Welt*». *Nietzsche Genealogie Kontingenz* (1996), *Uneins mit Aids. Wie über einen Virus nachgedacht und geredet wird* (1993), *Das Gedächtnis des Denkens. Versuch über Heidegger und Adorno* (1991), *La parole donnée. Mémoire et promesse* (1989).

**Alexander García-Düttmann** nació en Barcelona en 1961, aunque posee nacionalidad alemana. Estudió en la Escuela Alemana de esta ciudad y posteriormente estudió filosofía en Fráncfort y París. Ha sido profesor de filosofía con puestos en la Universidad de Essex, Melbourne, Stanford, Middlesex. Actualmente es catedrático en el Departamento de Culturas Visuales del Goldsmiths College de la Universidad de Londres. Sus principales publicaciones son *Derrida und ich* (2008), *Visconti: Einsichten in Fleisch und Blut* (2006), *Verwisch die Spuren* (2005), *So ist es. Ein philosophischer Kommentar zu Adornos Minima Moralia* (2004), *Philosophie der Übertreibung* (2004), *Kunstende. Drei ästhetische Studien* (2000), *Liebeslied / My Suicides*, in collaboration with Rut Blees (2000), *Freunde und Feinde. Das Absolute* (1999), *Zwischen den Kulturen. Spannungen im Kampf um Anerkennung* (1997), «*Was Liebe heißt in allen Sprachen und Stummheiten dieser Welt*». *Nietzsche Genealogie Kontingenz* (1996), *Uneins mit Aids. Wie über einen Virus nachgedacht und geredet wird* (1993), *Das Gedächtnis des Denkens. Versuch über Heidegger und Adorno* (1991), *La parole donnée. Mémoire et promesse* (1989).