

# Precarity, the Humanities and Slow Death

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**L**AUREN BERLANT DEFINES *SLOW DEATH* AS 'THE PHYSICAL WEARING OUT OF A population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence' (96). Those defined by slow death are 'marked out for wearing out', that is, they are a designated other whose expected decline is so inscribed within discourse that they signify disintegration and abasement (278 n19). They are denounced as an impediment to progress, and the political climate that caused their precarity and disintegration is concealed behind a rhetoric of failed personal responsibility, which is then used to legitimate judgement and intervention. While the group that Berlant analyses as marked by slow death are those suffering from and within the obesity epidemic, the group that the current economic and managerial ideologies operational within university administration have figured as 'embodied liabilities' (106) are the humanities. To link the humanities to the slow death Berlant maps out is to recognise the image of the humanities within university management and wider neoliberal structures as one of indulgent elitism, inefficient proselytising, an unwieldy inability to change, and an addiction to a value system whose seeming impracticability in the free market renders it little more than self-harm. The humanities, in the eyes of the neoliberal hegemony, are antiquated and ill, and that sickness leads to their precarity. Of course, from the perspective of one committed to neoliberal ideologies the humanities are also dangerous as a contagion, as their value system might spread to derail the

neoliberal machine. The rhetoric of numbers and profit so often used against them is a blind; even when the humanities create ‘healthy revenue streams’, which they regularly do, they are still not valued as an income-generating aspect of the corporate university, as their interest in free and open critique remains a threat.

The symptoms of the humanities’ disorder are understood in the fact that to those who have been put in a position to judge—university administrators, governments and funding bodies—the humanities’ self-defence is an act of self-destruction: in a world of quantifiable outputs and actuarial models an appeal to knowledge as of intrinsic value, and of learning as the creation of an ethical, empathetic citizenry, serves only to exemplify the humanities’ neurotic remove from the hegemonic politico-economic model.<sup>1</sup> The humanities’ illness is both real and illusionary, as in being made to signify sickness they become so, both in appearance when viewed through corporate, consumerist lenses, and in actuality as these corporate, consumerist lenses are turning the humanities, and universities in general, into places of casual, underpaid labour, inflated grades, the over-production of under-quality courses and research works, crippling layers of bureaucracy, and an emphasis on immediate consumer gratification over long-term social purpose. It is this model that renders universities fast food emporia that make their students, staff and societies simultaneously obese and malnourished.

Hence During’s call for an adjustment of the humanities:

In the end, we don’t have to defend the humanities, we have to attune them to an emergent global social order whose conditions are not under our control. And that attuning requires, amongst much else, analysis of the cultural past from the perspective of the current social regime, that is to say, from a position in which precariousness and debt are primary and in which state capitalism has become largely immune to democratic negation.

A history or genre of precarity is a useful resource, but a worrying defeatism lurks around these words, as During’s call for a change in type and focus of the humanities positions them as wholly vulnerable before the large politico-economic forces shaping the environment. But of even greater concern is the version of the humanities that During presents. As During’s analysis maps out, the heyday of the humanities was during a period of social capitalism, a political structure During deems complicit with ‘exploitation at the global level’, as its

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<sup>1</sup> On the relation between the liberal arts model and democracy see Brown, ‘The End of Educated Democracy’. All articles in *Representations*’ special issue on ‘The Humanities and the Crisis of the Public University’ offer excellent insights into the scope of the Humanities’ precarity.

stability is predicated on world-wide disparity and exploitation. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is aligned to 'a process in which, for the first time in history, capitalist profits are being distributed across the globe so as to increase income in many previously impoverished parts of the world in a process that is also in the interests of global social justice'. Under neoliberalism the humanities are worthless; within social capitalism, Daring argues, they had a use in 'training [populations] into appreciation and knowledge of history, philosophy and cultures of the imagination'. Thus within Daring's account the humanities are the ideological tools of an out-dated social order, one whose seeming adherence to democracy, educated citizenry, and enlightened social practices masked international disparity and exploitation. There is no doubt that the humanities have been, and are, complicit in many deeply inequitable power structures, but they are also the place of queer theory, gender theory, race theories, feminism, postcolonialism and post-structuralism. They are places of the decolonisation and deconstruction of systems of thought and practice, and the idea, implicit in Daring's account, that they have value only in the abstract, or as 'socio-spiritual functions', reveals not only an inherited insecurity about the place and function of the humanities, but a remove from the very real way in which the humanities have provided motivation and structure for activism and social change. As such, the humanities that Daring wants to attune are already the ill, degraded humanities created by the lens of current corporatized and politicised structures, and he is in danger of adapting them to the seeming inevitability of this adulterated position.

This understood, that the humanities are facing a crisis is not in dispute, and that this is not just an issue of values but of discourse and rhetoric is also clear. If the humanities argue outside of neoliberalism, avoiding its form, lexicon or popular avenues of discussion, they are unheard or misunderstood. But if the disputes are conducted from within the rhetoric and assumptions of neoliberalism there arises a performative contradiction: how can a discourse so deeply antithetical to the humanities do other than pervert and misrepresent them? How can the humanities harmonise with a discourse aligned to their suppression without a retuning that renders them no longer worthy of the name? Exacerbating this is the fact that while moving beyond a system from within the system might appear cunningly subversive, it is also in danger of embedding and normalising neoliberalism. The more time that is spent adjusting to neoliberalism, even with the aim of undermining it from within, the more it is paradoxically solidified as an external inevitability; an inescapable part of contemporary reality that can be adjusted but not replaced.<sup>2</sup> It is this sense of inexorability that led to the 'too big to fail' arguments and the justification of the public bailouts of banks and credit institutions. The humanities do not want to further assist the calcification of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Fisher on capitalist realism.

power, and all that goes with it, into neoliberalism, and thereby render them indistinguishable. It is surely this sense of the inexorability of neoliberalism that leads During to argue that neoliberalism 'is fertile for imaginative works and critico-creative theoretical practices in new institutional settings just because it combines oligarchy and precarity'. This attitude is particularly problematic, and a perfect example of what Berlant calls 'cruel optimism': 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy or *too possible*, and toxic' (24). While hardship and necessity might spur invention, gratitude to a punitive environment that elicits tragic art, or a restrictive, oppressive system that provokes protest literature, is surely the reaction of the already defeated. The state of vulnerability in which art is produced is an important contextual point, but should never extend to attributing that art to its destructive catalyst.

That said, neoliberalism and corporatisation is a problem now, and cannot be ignored. Thus, in response to During's proposed attuning, I suggest that the relation be inverted. First, we recognise that a commitment to, at least in its immediate applicability, a non-vocational, non-instrumental pursuit of knowledge does not render the humanities removed from a study of their contexts; what are the humanities but a scholarly engagement with the condition of being human in the world and an intellectual exploration of humanity's creations? Rather than seeing a need to attune the humanities to the precarity of their position within neoliberalism, it must be recognised that neoliberalism, as a social, cultural, political, economic system and practice, is already under the scope of the humanities. The attuning that needs to take place is not one of defeated realignment in approach or purpose, but an extension of boundaries through a reappropriation of topic and subject matter: neoliberalism and precarity as one of the many objects of critical and general study by the humanities.

In recognising neoliberalism as an object of study internal to the humanities' field and scope we recognise the autoimmunity and precarity of the humanities, but from a position of controlled self-reflection rather than retreat. Inasmuch as one can democratically elect an anti-democracy party, knowledge allows for knowledge to be used to form 'rational' arguments to close down education systems. Systems like neoliberalism, which render the humanities, and the university system in general, precarious, are the internal, cancerous cause and product of the necessarily autoimmune structure of free thought. Neoliberalism is already a structurally inevitable renegade of the humanities, a defector rather than an absolute other. In recognising this contamination we move away from the structure of 'us and them'; 'they' are 'us' not only in this abstract sense, but in the practical sense that academic staff within the humanities are embedded within the neoliberal university system and are complicit with it. Deans and

members of humanities faculties have approved the closure of their own schools and departments, and agreed to models that suit science and business disciplines rather than their own. The current structure oscillates between the occasional use of group ethos to discourage anti-institution sentiment, and the constant reinforcing of a deeply partitioning individualism that renders staff too physically and intellectually weary, and too aware of the fragility of their position, to effectively mobilise. But it remains a fact that for the humanities to regain some power they must reappropriate university structures and discourse. More people from the humanities, who are committed to the values of the humanities, must take on, even for brief periods, top managerial or administrative roles, so that the ideology embedded within university plans and strategies shifts alignment. In this sense movement can shift from subversive complicity as the only tactic—working groups drafting reports on the dangers of devolving the university into working groups dedicated to writing reports—to organisational structures not predicated on corporate models, ideologies and vocabularies. The rhetoric of exponential corporate growth needs to be abandoned, and a move from sprawling conglomerations inefficiently buttressed by arrays of non-academic support staff, to institutions whose academic and support staff are committed to the university as a place of research and education, not profit.

In taking ownership of the discourse, the precarity caused by neoliberalism can be further demystified. One step is to distinguish strongly between the precarity inherent to human existence, that is, the precariousness of life as a body surrounded by dangerous temptations and hazards, and the precarity that stems from a political and ideological structure arising from an economics aligned to the benefit of the few. Precarity in the latter sense, within the university and in general, is a system of hierarchy in which the precariat is excluded, or differentially included, so as to lack support, be deprived of opportunity, and be under- or misrepresented in decision-making. It is a vulnerability resulting from heightened exposure and risk that is maximised by institution-sanctioned policy and exclusion, and legitimised by the failure of the institution actively to acknowledge the repercussions of policy or the unjust nature of the exclusion. While recognizing the contamination of existential and economic precarity, it is important to separate ontologically inevitable vulnerability from ideologically constructed precarity, as the more that we see the economically-motivated construction of precarity as simply an extension of the general precariousness of living, the more justified the current neoliberal system becomes. Life is generally precarious, and the human animal is marked by a tendency towards risk, but this does not legitimate the creation of a structure that protects the investments of a few by exacerbating the risks of many. What is currently taking place within neoliberal rhetoric, be it within the university or in general structures outside it, is the attempted re-rendering of an economic and political construct as an

ontological inevitability. There is thus a circular movement of justification of neoliberalism: the risks that are faced simply by being alive are used to legitimate an economic policy and general practice that depends on creating an unequal and exacerbated distribution of risk, which is then presented as an intrinsic part of human life. Fundamentally the illogic can be mapped as such: because people die the death penalty is legitimate, in fact, the death penalty is an ontological inevitability. This is the old sleight of hand that presents culture as nature, and one would have hoped that following the demystifying discourses of various twentieth century theories we would be less vulnerable to such a timeworn trick. The fact that this kind of subterfuge prevails is indication that the humanities have been guilty of a distance from popular discourse, and need to disseminate knowledge more widely. In this regard the humanities do not need to conceal or change the symptoms that render them so alien to neoliberalism, but launch an attack that is felt beyond academic journals. Thus, rather than an attuning, what the humanities really need is an amplifier.

The danger, as we know, is that once the precarity caused by the privatisation of wealth, the bankrupting of the social, the normalisation of economic insecurity, the denial of rights and agency, the protection of financial hierarchies and the positioning of profit as a moral imprimatur becomes considered ontological we are in danger of rendering neoliberal precarity an essential part of human existence, rather than a political system that has been constructed and protected to suit particular interests. It must be remembered that the rhetorical insistence on the inevitability of neoliberalism is so strong precisely because of its need for protection; neoliberalism is not the 'natural' functioning of economic and political systems. Current economic structures are so exhaustively regulated precisely because they are a vulnerable construct, carefully sustained by powerful minority interests and the pervasiveness of their rhetoric. As Wendy Brown writes, 'Far from flourishing when left alone, the economy [in neoliberal situations] must be directed, buttressed, and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society' (*Edgework* 41). The neoliberal, 'corporate university' structure requires deeply inefficient numbers of administrative staff and managerial teams to function; it is not a refinement of the university system but the imposition of an economic ideology supported by the few who profit directly, and the many held in lure by the promise of a greater share.

During's diachronic outline of precarity is in danger of complicity with this normalising discourse, and requires a far stronger recognition and condemnation of neoliberalism's co-opting of the vulnerability of others to legitimise its inequalities. The essentialising rhetoric that spins economics into ontology and contingency into inevitability must be countered, and the skills

born of a humanities education provide a means of laying bare the device. Let us by all means turn to art and literature for forms of resistance to the precarity contrived by neoliberalism, but let us beware any rhetorical, ideological or structural legitimisation of a system that relentlessly configures the humanities' slow death.

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