'Did the Humanities have it Coming?'
A Response to Simon During

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Simon During rightly argues against an 'us/them' analysis in countering the usurpation of social capitalism by neo-liberal precarity and the threat this poses to humanities departments both in garnering state support and in attracting students. But then (to borrow a phrase) 'what is to be done?' During offers a diagnosis but deliberately omits a strategy. 'In the end', he declares, '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'. How will this attunement take place? And how will it save or serve what is valuable in humanities education? There have been numerous attempts to defend the humanities, by locating their value in terms of an identifiable social good. As During argues here and elsewhere, ventriloquizing the language of public policy merely reveals the weakness of the instrumentalist case (During). Even less helpful are the internal jeremiads about the capitalist barbarian in the citadel or the demand that the only way forward is a return to the dirigiste model that prevailed in the prelapsarian yesteryear.

So what is to be done? The first imperative, I would suggest, is not to defend the humanities but to subject them to cold, honest scrutiny. How correct is the image of the humanities as a publically subsidized space of learning, a civic alternative to the brutish vagaries of capital? As anyone who has sought to get a job as a lecturer or to publish in 'prestige' outlets knows, the law of the market certainly

pertains within this protected sphere too and has done so for decades. From student consumer to publishing house to promotion panel, the humanities rely on constant product and branding, a stream of the 'new' becoming 'old', of grade inflation and modularization, of celebrity academics and hot new things. We have long been far closer to the dynamics of the marketplace than we like to think, and not simply as an imposition by neo-liberal management. But competition for preferment in the humanities has the added complication of inexactitude. Professional advancement is wholly based on peer approval, which inevitably relies on networks, cultural capital and implicit bias. The mere aura of prestige—of dreaming spires, ivory towers and ivy leagues—still commands far too much deference when it comes to the ranking of journals or job candidates.

Humanities scholars are drawn towards critique, radicalism, a hermeneutic of suspicion and innovation, but the structures on which the profession is based are remarkably staid, conservative and unchanging. Take for instance the disciplinary divisions—English, History, Philosophy—which emerged with the modern research university between 1870 and 1915. Everyone on campus, from radical sociologist to vice chancellor, enthuses about 'interdisciplinarity', but the humanities are still wedded to these original, manufactured divisions of knowledge acquisition, even in Australia where the Dawkins reforms sought to traverse them. Indeed the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity actually reinforces the disciplines, precisely through holding itself up as the boundary-breaking alternative.

But across the board, from the fifty-minute university lecture, to the persistence of periodization, the institutional practices of the humanities have been astonishingly sclerotic. While the intellectual culture allied itself to social constructivism and political radicalism, the systemic practices of the university remained undisturbed. 'Do we think that ideas all come in a limited number of sizes?' Eric Hayot pondered recently, before concluding that the normative length of the graduate seminar, and its bigger brother the academic article, would suggest that we humanities academics think they do (Hayot).

As Louis Menand has argued, the profession of the liberal arts is very good at reproducing itself (Menand). Perhaps nowhere is the inertia of the profession more glaring than in the persistence of the doctorate as the main qualification for becoming a professional academic. One can see the attraction from a university management point of view. It garners prestige for the university by enhancing research culture, commands hefty fees, especially from international students, but requires very little by way of resources. The PhD, which in the UK and Australia is essentially a long, mainly self-directed piece of research, became *de rigueur* for entering the academic profession only when more people wanted to be academics than the system could support. Needless to say, in basic form and

structure it has changed little over the last hundred years. Whatever value it has in inculcating research skills and self-direction, and indeed in testing tenacity, endurance and self-belief, it manifestly does not provide a young academic with the teaching, research, operational and interpersonal skills she needs to take up her first job. It is also one of the most glaring indictments of the humanities that we continue to direct our best and brightest students into years of lonely research, followed by years of precarious, temporary teaching, at the end of which most will fail to find an academic post. Academics usually blame university management and the neo-liberal ethos for the failure to secure employment for their PhD students, but the profession itself has become scandalously accustomed to a mismatch between supply and demand. In any other field, it would be regarded as inefficient, intolerable and even cruel. The precarity experienced by unemployed PhD graduates does not just come from philistine managerialism and neo-liberal capitalism. It is wired into long-maintained professional structures in the humanities itself, which grooms the best and brightest students for academic jobs that do not exist.

The PhD is desperately in need of reform to make it suitable for non-academic as well as academic employment. It should be determinate in the length of time it requires, and designed to open the gap between the inside and outside of academia to the enrichment of both. This opening, this permeability, is surely both the peril and the possibility proffered to the humanities by the new precarity. 'If it were easier and cheaper to get in and out of the doctoral motel' argues Louis Menand, 'the disciplines would have a chance to get oxygenated by people who are much less invested in their paradigms' (153).

The system that we have is not immutable. It was structured for particular needs at a particular time (the start of the twentieth century, mostly). The humanities have long needed structural and institutional reform and the hope must be that the new ambient precarity pushes the humanities outside their safe niches. Not least of the benefits will be to increase dissemination and impact, and not simply in a coarse bureaucratic sense. The humanities need intra-mural reach within the universities too. Any professional field of enquiry or training can be enhanced by adding a self-reflexive element. A doctor will be a better doctor by knowing something of the history, philosophy and anthropology of medicine, a commerce student will learn more about business by learning economic theory. Above all, there needs to be more *entente* between the humanities and the sciences. Some of the most fertile areas of research in the contemporary humanities involve crossovers with science and technology. But the two spheres of knowledge often view each other with suspicion and caricature, a hangover from 'two cultures' debates. If philosophy was taught to physicists would Steven Hawking have declared proudly, as he did at a Google summit in 2011, that philosophy is dead? Among the most significant achievements of the humanities in the last quarter of

the twentieth century is the complication of the status of objective knowledge, a thinking together of fact and value that is of immense practical and political importance, but which has yet to spill far beyond the humanities disciplines.

The individualism of the neo-liberal ethos, the belief that consumers are autonomous subjects freely making choices about their self-advancement in the cultural market place, has eroded belief in the university professors as the custodians of cultural value and hermeneutic authority. It has also contributed to the flattening of ideas of quality and singularity, through the relentless processes of abstraction and deracination. During is correct to declare that 'under Western neo-liberalism, the socio-capitalist status of the humanities is being transformed', but there is still ground for debate about the value of culture and the culture of value which, if impacted upon by geopolitics, is not determined by it. The shifting environment and pressure on humanities disciplines does portend significant change, but also an opportunity to overhaul and re-envision the humanities, how knowledge is divided and unified and the relationship of culture to the institutions of learning.

The site for urgent cultural debate and theorization, untrammelled by the commercial exigencies and spatial limitation of newspaper and periodical, is shifting to blogs and websites, often in the case of the more successful examples accompanied by crossovers into print media and, generally, open access publishing. The internet affords both the key opportunity and the most significant threat to the current structures of the humanities. During mentions Lipovetsky's envisioning of a de-institutionalized humanities. Such an enterprise is burgeoning on the internet already. The so-called 'Accelerationist' movement seeks to break the us/them, friend/enemy paradigm that During repudiates precisely by following the deterritorializing vectors of global capitalism. Accelerationism rejects both local left-wing protest against capitalism and a return to Fordism, instead seeking 'an ecology of organisations, a pluralism of forces, resonating and feeding back on their comparative strengths' (Williams and Srnicek).

Accelerationism is one of many viable engaged interventions emerging from the periphery of academia and authored by the academic precariat. From experimental poetry to cutting-edge philosophy, the internet is beginning to make the institutions of the conventional humanities look sluggish and conservative, more laborious than precarious. It also, importantly, heralds the return of that creature we all thought was extinct: the 'man of letters' (Gross). For various reasons which I have explored elsewhere, this figure who enriched so much of twentieth-century cultural life by forming a bridge between academia and higher journalism disappeared from the public sphere in the final decades of the twentieth century (McDonald). The internet affords the opportunity to

reforge connections between thinking in the humanities and deinstitutionalized conversations.

If the neo-liberal threat which the institutional humanities now has to navigate means that it starts to germinate outside its conventional home in higher-level education institutions, then it is communities of scholars, intellectuals and activists, working singly and collaboratively online, which will afford the opportunity. However, equally important as getting outside the institutions of higher education is establishing meaningful intra-mural dialogue, not simply mimicking the methods and successes of research and 'discovery' in the hard sciences, but promulgating awareness and criticism of culture in all its senses.

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