

Fall behind. Get eaten

Zombies in the Academy: Living Death in Higher Education

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University of Chicago Press, 312pp, US\$30.00, 2013

ISBN 9781841507149

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WHEN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN LIBERAL MP JAMIE BRIGGS RECENTLY RIDICULED A number of Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded research projects in philosophy and across the humanities, we were reminded once again that universities—as entrepreneurial as they might now be—are still in the service of the state. The various defences of the humanities that followed were also familiar enough, inevitably playing out aspects of their own compromised predicament. For many, of course, the state immediately had to be placated. A September media release from DASSH (the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) defended the independence of the ARC’s peer review process and then went on to ignore philosophy altogether; research in their faculties, they told us, instead addresses ‘the “big issues” affecting social and economic change’ and aims to make the nation ‘prosperous’. This kind of cheerleading for the nation will not come as any surprise to humanities academics these days. The research priorities of the ARC itself have long been state-focused: health and well-being, national security, sustainability, and so on. Most universities—my own included—have simply replicated these criteria in their local research agendas, installing a ‘scientific model’ at their core which is built around identifying problems and finding solutions (through policy-making, etc.). In the interests of their own survival, humanities scholars have more or less entirely surrendered to these protocols and priorities. One of the philosophers singled out for ridicule by Briggs was Sydney University’s Paul Redding, who wrote a spirited defence of his ARC project for the *Guardian* newspaper. Philosophical research, he wrote, ‘is generally described as “pure” rather than “applied”. But “pure” does not mean “irrelevant”. Who would question that the activity of finding and attempting to fix problems in our collective thinking was a relevant thing to do?’ (Redding). But philosophy only worries about relevance and speaks of fixing ‘collective’ problems when the state rises up and reminds it—and us—all over again what its preferred methods and priorities actually are. On the other hand, and for better or worse, Redding did at least try to distinguish

his discipline from these things. Philosophy is special, he argued, because it deals with reason and ‘concepts’. It is the opposite of its more popular cousin, rhetoric, which triggers ‘an immediate response rather than a reasoned one’. State politicians have rhetoric, not philosophy: which means, in a certain sense, that they are both empty (without ‘concepts’, without a sense of disciplinary traditions, etc.) and enslaved. ‘That we all work with concepts at some level’, Redding writes, wanting philosophy to be popular in its own way, too, ‘allows us to exercise reason and act freely—to be more than mere bundles of conditioned responses’. Philosophers, he seems to suggest, are not zombies.

They may, however, be condemned to reproduce their predicament over and over. Let’s go back for a moment to Kant’s 1798 essay, *The Conflict of the Faculties*: a defence of academic freedom in response to state censorship, that went on to influence Wilhelm von Humboldt’s plans for the University of Berlin in 1810. For Kant, philosophy is a ‘lower faculty’, to be distinguished from the ‘higher faculties’ of law, theology and medicine. The latter serve the state, which gives them power but restricts their freedom. Philosophy, on the other hand, values the thing that makes the university modern and gives the university its critical function: reason, and the capacity to reason freely. ‘It is absolutely essential’, Kant says, ‘that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government’s command with regard to its teachings; one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything’ (Kant 27). The more freedom one has to evaluate, however, the less one is recognized—and authorized—by the state. This is why philosophy is the *lower* faculty: ‘for a man who can give commands, even though he is someone else’s humble servant, is considered more distinguished than a free man who has no one under his command’ (29).

Kant’s essay was the inspiration for an important collection of conference papers about the state of the university (if I can put it like that) published almost 200 years later, *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties* (1992). In Jacques Derrida’s contribution, ‘Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties’, the question of who authorizes what in relation to universities is now more, or perhaps less, open. A university authorizes, but it is authorized in turn by the state. So which one of these do academics answer to? Where does their responsibility really lie? For Derrida, unsurprisingly, it is never entirely clear: ‘When one pronounces the word “responsibility” today in the university, one no longer knows for sure with what concept one can still rule it’ (Derrida 7). Putting his faith in philosophy’s investment in ‘concepts’ and their capacity both to ‘fix problems’ and enable us to ‘act freely’, Paul Redding may well be dismayed by all this. No discipline is free from the university, and the university itself is not free. It looks as if the lower faculty is less able to be distinguished from the higher faculties than we first imagined. Although it is indeed less recognized and authorized by the state, it

may in fact be just as enslaved. From a certain point of view, we're all zombies now.

The 1990s saw a rapidly increasing sense of 'crisis' in the university that has lasted into the present day and shows no signs of going away. The book under review here, *Zombies in the Academy*, owes much of its life (or afterlife) to these earlier discussions, in particular Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* (1996)—even though it mentions Readings only a couple of times, has little to say about Derrida on the universities, and never references *Logomachia* (or Kant). For Readings, the modern university serves a much larger master than the state: namely, globalised consumer and finance capital. Because of this, he wrote, 'the grounds on which we used to make large claims for the humanities have been undermined' (Readings 90). Philosophy is simply one discipline among many others now, competing for attention and money, while other traditional core values like 'national culture' have also been dispersed (although this point is debatable). Readings was pessimistic enough to think that the modern humanities itself grew out of the very extinction of these things: Cultural Studies, for example, emerged 'at the point when the notion of culture ceases to mean anything vital for the University as a whole' (91). It is this sort of evacuation of content—of authentic content—that *Zombies in the Academy* takes as a given in universities today, which continue to live (and even prosper) but only in a kind of automated, 'conditioned' way.

The view that the humanities is its own worst enemy—supplanting, or even destroying, the values it once stood for—is, of course, a surprisingly common one among humanities academics, and is often tied to an abject belief that things were indeed once much better (more reasoned, more free, more authentic, etc.) than they are now. When he wrote about universities in the 1930s, F.R. Leavis thought that English was already in decline in terms of institutional influence. The 'intelligent critic' was supposed to rise above all this by continuing to transmit the best of culture and tradition to the nation: 'Upon this minority', as he famously put it in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), 'depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past'. The democratization of the universities—along with the fracturing of English as a discipline and the dispersal of its literary canons—all inevitably worked to make this kind of cultural elitism unsustainable. Soon, it seemed, universities, like zombies, were springing up everywhere. For so many English academics, democratization has therefore been a mixed blessing—as it is for universities broadly speaking, which have always had difficulty (if they bother with it at all) being socially and culturally representative. In a recent essay in the *New Yorker* called 'Why Teach English?', Adam Gopnik is upbeat about all this: 'English departments', he cheerfully announces, 'democratize the practice of reading' (Gopnik). Simon During's *Against Democracy* (2012) is a very different symptom

of this predicament, however, with its bleak post-Leavisite vision of English literary criticism as ‘a tiny, beleaguered, and disregarded sect’ whose ‘purposes are either meaningless, obsolete, or dangerously illiberal’ (75). As ‘lower’ faculties go, this couldn’t be any lower. But there is also something strikingly Gothic about this sort of stark juxtaposition of elitism and democratisation. The humanities locks itself in and bolts the doors; while outside, ‘society’ (which, Derrida says, has ‘no compelling respect’ for literary criticism) and the state (which, for Redding, is pure rhetoric, enslaved to itself, ‘mere bundles of conditioned responses’) circle around menacingly. No wonder a bunch of academics—several, in fact, from English departments—have got together to think about zombies.

There is in fact something zombie-like about *Zombies in the Academy*, not least because every essay in this collection (and there is some creative work here, too) says and does more or less the same thing, over and over. Neither the state nor global finance capitalism are the primary problem any more, however. Instead, as almost every contributor tells us, it is now corporatization and neo-liberalism. Leavis’s worst fears about ‘the machine age’ have been realized, with universities standardized into a world system and academic performance measured, ranked and ‘rationalized’ according to globally-shared ‘metrics’ etc. Even as it maintains its elite status, academic labour is now generally understood as suspended somewhere in between the proletariat and the *lumpenproletariat*, necessary and disposable, an instrumentalized ‘precariat’. For some of the essays in *Zombies in the Academy*, standardization makes zombies of us all as we willingly exchange knowledge for ‘information’. For others, this is the price universities had to pay for their democratization, with students-as-zombies now swarming into campuses but also in so many cases never appearing on campus at all, complicit with the tenets of neo-liberalism as they embrace their roles as consumers or ‘clients’ of online teaching programs from which they are increasingly remote. (There is nothing in this collection on MOOCs, however.) An essay by Gordon S. Carlson and James J. Sosnoski thinks that university textbooks work like some sort of voodoo ‘bokor’ or witchdoctor by deadening students’ minds with out of date concepts, turning them into zombies or ‘automata’ (159)—although how *up to date* concepts have to be before students come alive again is left unanswered. An essay by Jesse Stommel wants students to take charge of their pedagogies and technologies, to become zombies in a good way—although by this point, the meaning of zombies has been turned on its head with Stommel suggesting, against the grain of the way these swarming creatures are understood, that ‘they maintain their individuality all the while’ (76). The question of the relevance of the humanities still haunts a few other contributions. David Beer wonders about ‘glossy topics’ like celebrity studies, insisting that they have ‘social and cultural significance’ (306). For Beer, it is especially important for disciplines to demonstrate why their subjects ‘matter’ to the various forces gathered outside

the door (the state, neo-liberalism, audit culture, etc.). If they can't do this, they run the risk of living the life of a 'marginal zombie' (307), rather like During's 'tiny, beleaguered and disregarded sect'.

One problem with this book is that it runs its zombie metaphor right into the ground, to the extent that it is difficult to know whether zombies are indeed bad or good, inside the ivory tower or outside, a symbol of the modern, neo-liberal university or a symptom of its struggle to be relevant and useful. Zombies might refer to the effects of standardization and corporatization, or to academics, students, textbooks and/or subjects, to technologized education, or to pretty much anything at all. In fact, *Zombies in the Academy* has very little to say about particular disciplines (like philosophy, or English) and nothing much about university research. One essay talks about the 'zombification of the academy' in terms of academics' 'loss of control over research production' (61), which seems simply to mean that researchers shouldn't always be tied to university and state priorities; but it never pauses to outline what such research might actually be like. Can any researcher—to recall Redding—ever 'act freely'? In any event, this isn't a priority for *Zombies in the Academy*. Its focus is mostly on teaching and learning, and on the university as a 'sector' in a neo-liberal, global economy. It opens with an essay by Andrew Whelan on Jeremy Bentham and University College London, where Bentham's skeletal remains are preserved in a glass cabinet, shaped as a 'stuffed mannequin' seated on a chair, walking stick in his hand: a sort of inert example of the living dead. Bentham brought a utilitarian, pragmatic spirit to bear on UCL which, established in 1826, was the first secular university in England. For Whelan, however, corporatization has 'perverted' Bentham's vision, turning the modern university into 'a corpse forever at work' (25). I've already noted that it would have been good if *Zombies in the Academy* knew something about the 1992 collection *Logomachia*—because that collection gave us Robert Young's much earlier essay, 'The Idea of a Chrestomathic University', which had already talked about the founding of UCL and looked at the consequences of Bentham's reformist emphasis on 'useful' and 'efficient' teaching. Young had also drawn out the ties between this secular university and globalised business interests—with subjects in Hindustani and Sanskrit suggesting 'the extent to which the university, many of whose original shareholders were British administrators and businessmen in India, was designed to service the needs of the East India Company' (105). For all its interest in neo-liberalism and corporatization, however, *Zombies in the Academy* doesn't really pursue political specificities. The zombie metaphor doesn't help matters: instead, it steers the discussion in the direction of generalities, abstractions and fanciful apocalyptic scenarios. Like rhetoric for Paul Redding, it runs the risk of emptying its containers of content—and memory.

Even the numerous discussions of zombie films in this collection can seem strangely out of focus. An essay on the way technologies in the classroom ‘alienate students from their learning’ goes on to list a few early zombie films—like Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 masterpiece, *I Walked with a Zombie*—all of which end, the authors suggest, ‘with the bokor overpowered and killed by his zombies’ (145). This could not be more wrong. Another essay tells us that the protagonists of Tourneur’s film ‘feared not infection but the threat of revolt from...hordes of slaves’ (237): once again, a complete misreading of the film. I found myself wondering why no one from cinema studies contributed to this book. But I also entertained a thought about *I Walked with a Zombie* as a kind of allegory of the modern university. A young nurse—one of the ‘precariat’—comes to a Caribbean island to assist a zombified woman, the wife of a distracted plantation owner. Later, they take a long, suspenseful journey to a remote location where a voodoo ceremony is taking place—only to find that the ‘bokor’ presiding over events, and responsible for the wife’s zombified condition, is the plantation owner’s mother, Mrs Rand. Far from being killed by zombies or troubled by ‘hordes of slaves’, Mrs Rand triumphs. Remote management systems are now embedded in universities and are increasingly difficult to access. Most academics never see their vice chancellors (or any other senior manager) except at a distance, even though academics themselves are made increasingly visible, managerially scrutinized and audited more thoroughly than ever before. The modern university is indeed a triumph of post-Benthamite management principles; senior managers are the only labouring class in the sector that (having lost—all too easily—the battle over public funding) has adjusted perfectly to whatever the state, global finance capitalism, neo-liberalism and corporatization come up with. They are a university’s governing elite: not a ‘beleaguered sect’ but a powerful, self-replicating (and ‘gated’) administrative community. An article about universities published in an earlier issue of the *Australian Humanities Review* suggested that academics should open their doors, step over the threshold and meet these people face to face: ‘Rather than academics and senior managers allowing the system to place them on opposite sides—from which academics attribute all problems to the “managerial barbarians” at the gate, and managers attribute all problems to the self-centred and irresponsible attitudes of academics—we need to see ourselves as working towards the same goal—after deciding what that goal should be’ (Bode and Dale). Maybe zombies should come to love their ‘bokors’ after all. But I’m inclined to mix Kant up with Jacques Tourneur here by suggesting that for the ‘lower’ faculties—the humanities in particular—the journey to the remote world of senior management will indeed be a long and suspenseful one. As for working collectively to realize the same goal, whatever that might be: one thing we do learn from zombie films is that this only happens when ‘we’ become ‘them’.

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