

# Precariousness, Literature and the Humanities Today

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**I**T IS NO LONGER NEWS THAT WESTERN SOCIETIES ARE UNDERGOING A STRUCTURAL SHIFT in which one regime—which we might call social capitalism—is being replaced by another—neo-liberalism (see Glyn; Streeck).<sup>1</sup>

What was social capitalism? An arrangement under which states committed themselves not just to economic growth but to providing for the population's basic needs, and in particular for the need for employment. This arrangement was based on Keynesian social and economic planning, from which perspective social capitalism's core value was not equality or fairness but 'totality', namely the idea that all a nation's citizens participate in a single, if internally variegated, society, economy and culture. It was this notion that guided twentieth-century planning as well as public debate especially where, after 1945, racism had been banished from official policy.

Why is social capitalism being replaced by neo-liberalism? Primarily for economic reasons, indeed so much so that political and cultural accounts of this shift have limited cogency. It is worth immediately noting that this political

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at a special session organised by David Palumbo-Liu on 'The Coming Community in an Age of Vulnerability' at the MLA Convention, Chicago, in January 2014.

economic understanding of the transformation means that no us/them or friend/enemy paradigm takes us very far in this matter.<sup>2</sup>

It is also important to recognize that neo-liberalism belongs 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. Social capitalism was only possible for a few Western states, since it depended on global dominance. It is also important to recognize that the humanities as we know them in the West will not survive neo-liberalism in the form they entered it, since they too were bound to social capitalism.

Let me analyse the causes of this transformation just a little more deeply.

Drawing on Robert Brenner, we can say that the breakdown of social capitalism began at the point when the Allies' post-war investment in defeated Axis economies enabled those economies to be sufficiently competitive as to reduce US rates of profit. This led to the US's abandonment of the Bretton Woods system from 1971 on (Brenner). US growth rates were further undermined by inflationary pressures caused by the cost of the Vietnam War, as well as, after 1974, by the Gulf's energy producers' increased capacity to engage in rent-seeking activities. And, most importantly, the post-Cold-war opening up of underdeveloped nations (primarily the PRC) to export-driven state capitalism meant that profit-expectations could not be achieved by OECD economies so long as they retained full employment and social-capitalist regulations and standards.

As a result, in the OECD, official policy mainly turned to anti-inflation and anti-regulation settings designed to make national and global markets more efficient, and the established finance centres—London and Wall Street—increasingly attractive to foreign capital and labour flows. To follow Wolfgang Streeck's recent analysis: these new policy settings sidestepped a legitimation crisis as foretold by theorists of so-called 'late capitalism' but only by establishing debtor states. From the eighties on, as finance capital came to dominate the US and Britain, access to credit was massified, so that citizens, now parsed as consumers, were, as it were, simultaneously bought off and indentured. The docility of the citizen as consumer, credit card in hand, helped immunize business from

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<sup>2</sup> This means that this shift can't just be blamed on particular groups or sectors, whether the intellectuals who joined Hayek's Mont Pelerin society after 1947 or Thatcher and Reagan or fellow-travellers in the affirmation of emergent neo-liberal ideas such as the later Foucault, or more recently, the 1% or oligarchs who have, indeed, profited from recent social restructurations. For accounts of the origins of neo-liberalism, see Harvey; Stedman-Jones. For Foucault on neo-liberalism, see Foucault. As an example of the friend-enemy analysis of the current situation, see Klein.

protest and inspection.<sup>3</sup> And, as Colin Crouch has noted, the neo-liberal state has only been strengthened by the way in which the 2006 bank crash was overcome by transforming corporate bank losses into sovereign debt (Crouch). Now, in many OECD nations, private debt is underpinned by state debt.

One reward of this kind of political-economic analysis is that it helps us recognize that neo-liberalism works differently in different regions. As social capitalism fades from view, it is clear that it was not, as was once often said, the culmination of a gradual, world-historical, extension of social stability and justice, but the product of a set of provisional circumstances in the West, including the intense communalism sparked by populations experiencing a depression and two 'total' wars in quick succession, as well as by the pressure to deal with—and absorb—the challenges set by a powerful competing social structure—communism. And, as I say, that it was a condition tied to the imperial aftermath, to exploitation at the global level.

And yet, neo-liberalism has existed and continues to exist in tension both with civil societies and received cultural forms. Three features of this tension are particularly relevant here.

First, for various reasons, neo-liberalism has produced a new social group—the precariat—who do not fit the class analysis that could be applied to both to industrial and social capitalism. This is the group of those who fall outside of citizenship, stable employment, and state support. They too are administered within increasingly surveilled and technologized societies but without actually belonging to those societies in the social-democratic sense of 'belonging'. They fall outside 'totality'. Importantly they lack the social agency that Marx ascribed to the now vanished industrial proletariat as well as the autonomy and genealogically-based identity ascribed by postcolonialism to the peasant 'subaltern'.

Second, while the precariat, as a relatively small social sector, feel the full force of societies that no longer offer full employment or universally provide housing, literacy, adequate pensions, for instance, a more pervasive sense of insecurity and precariousness covers many OECD societies as a whole. This ethos of precariousness has material causes: it is caused by debt itself of course, but also by the overhanging threat of un- or under-employment among significant sectors of society as well as the failure of full employment to lift many workers above the poverty line. Material insecurity of these kinds currently engages up to 80% of the US population, for instance.

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<sup>3</sup> Other mechanisms were at work here, including the entry of women into the workforce under the sign of liberation and the use of a suite of new concepts (including creativity and entrepreneurship) to describe the ethos of labour (see Boltanski and Chiapello).

But, third, this material insecurity grounds still more general intimations and feelings of precariousness and depression which cover, not least, the academic humanities. It is not just that full and secure employment is becoming rarer in the humanities too; it is that, under Western neo-liberalism, the socio-capitalist status of the humanities is being transformed. That is because the value of the public humanities ultimately depends on the belief that certain only weakly instrumental forms of pedagogy—namely the training into appreciation and knowledge of history, philosophy and cultures of the imagination—perform socio-spiritual functions important enough to be supported by the state and unified civil society rather than by private individuals, and that belief, a strut of social capitalism, is fading under neo-liberalism. In this context, many humanities academics come to belong to the bourgeois precariat too.

This analysis is discomfiting because it implies that the humanities cannot counter precariousness by themselves and that, in particular, defences of the humanities that appeal to dignity and social functionality are symptomatic. More than that: insofar as such defences don't help us adapt to a neo-liberal restructuring of society that we can't practically influence, they may be not just useless but damaging. 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.

My position here should not to be taken as fundamentally pessimistic, since I take Gilles Lipovetsky's point that global neo-liberalism is proving fertile ground for radicalized forms of cultural production, which may energise a de-institutionalized humanities (Lipovetsky). It may turn out that neo-liberalism is fertile for imaginative works and critico-creative theoretical practices in new institutional settings just because it combines oligarchy and precarity.

Let me finish by making a more general point about precariousness. It turns out that precariousness is not merely a social condition connected to capitalism. Rather it is built into the archaeology of Western thought and practice wherever the human condition is thought of as bound either to deprivation, danger, insecurity or uncertainty. Precariousness perhaps first becomes central in Genesis's narrative of expulsion from Eden, but it also organized much ancient Greek culture, as for instance in Homer where, as Charles Norris Cochrane put it, 'life is felt as eminently precarious, charged to the full with the possibility of peril and hazard' and thus as presenting opportunities for those who are 'willing to accept the challenge to live dangerously' (Cochrane 420). This fundamental orientation towards precarity survives into modernity: it haunts the thought of

Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Heidegger and Derrida for instance. But more importantly, the assumption that precarity is fundamental to human existence has often been transmuted into a will to precariousness as an authentic condition for being human. This orientation, we might say, grounds capitalism itself since, as form of social organization, it is deeply committed to risk, insecurity, adventure, destruction as the flipside of creation.

The belief that precariousness is the basic setting for human existence is however consistently countered by another line of thought, based on another lapsarian lesson, i.e. the notion that society was once more stable and coherent than it now is. Like the concept of primordial precarity, this narrateme has retained its force into the present: it hovers around, for instance, complaints that the humanities are under serious risk today. It is often called a 'myth' but that seems wrong since it is not clear that the West's drive to precarity, which undergirds capitalism, does not indeed continually destroy what is stable, coherent and secure—as Marx pointed out.

The argument I am urging is, however, that the humanities need to adapt to and accept their relation both to social and metaphysical precariousness. One way to do that is to pay more attention to a cultural history of precarity. But one needs to be careful here: what looks like precarity in the past isn't quite precarity as it exists today, just because older societies were, genuinely, more contained, coherent and hierarchically totalized than ours is today, even as they too were often suffused with lapsarian nostalgia. But there are many moments, especially since the onset of capitalism, when, for instance, something like bourgeois literary precarity has intersected with something like proletarian precarity so as to restage general relations to metaphysical, social or theological insecurity. Narratives like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Kafka's *The Castle*, poems like Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' or Elizabeth Bishop's 'Manuelzinho' are examples. In these texts, literature's cultural power under neo-liberalism (such as it is) can be especially sensitively gauged and engaged just because they articulate historical ways in which material precarity intersected with literary and existential precariousness. They illuminate, and belong to, the genealogy of neo-liberalism, and a humanities coming to terms with contemporary precariousness might, I suspect, still learn from them.

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