

Cultural Critique in Precarious Times: A Response to Simon During

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IN RECENT YEARS THE NOTION OF PRECARIETY THAT FIRST APPEARED IN EUROPEAN SOCIAL theory has become of increasing importance for the humanities. Let me suggest three major reasons for this. Firstly, and most obviously, over the last two decades the academic humanities have been at the forefront of declining employment prospects and conditions within universities, in both Australia and the UK. This is mostly due to changed funding mechanisms, such as (in Australia) the construction of a quasi-market in domestic enrolments, the increased importance of full-fee paying courses to faculty budgets, and the emergence of a nationally competitive system of research funding that discounts the significance of humanities research (Marginson). Such developments have been accompanied by a massive increase in casualisation of the academic workforce since the 1990s and a significant increase in the number of PhD graduates (Turner and Brass). As a consequence of this process of restructuring public tertiary education according to the tenets of neoclassical economic ideology, the viability of the academic humanities as a teaching formation, academic career, and knowledge discipline does indeed appear precarious from a range of positions.

Secondly, the new field of ‘creative labour studies’—a multidisciplinary field predominantly based in cultural and media studies—has provided a new critical object for humanists, one which provides opportunities for both theoretical and empirical inquiry. Academic interest in cultural work coincides with the activity

of cultural producers themselves, many of whom are humanities graduates (For example, Justin Heazlewood's recently published memoir *Funemployed: Life as an Artist in Australia* is nothing less than a survival guide to Australia's cultural field). The condition of cultural work is of interest to humanities scholars as it is based on a widely disseminated critique of Creative Industries policy-making that seeks to renew attention to questions of cultural value, as well as a renewed critical (Bell and Oakley) and historicising (Belfiore and Bennett) spirit in cultural policy studies. This field is related to a broader critique of the ideological role of 'creativity' in the development of new flexible and enterprising work relations in the context of labour market deregulation.

Thirdly, since the 1990s humanities scholars have become interested in a range of social groupings and identities produced by globalisation, such as refugees, migrant workers and diasporas, whose situation can be described in terms of an emerging 'precariat'. Such a focus often invokes the notion of 'cultural citizenship', with precarity referring to relations of exteriority to the nation state and the forms of insecurity that follow from this.

During's essay touches on all three issues, but only in passing. To be fair, his interest is less in charting the current situation or future options of the academic humanities than in accounting for the rise of neoliberalism in terms of the financial and political economies of OECD nations in the post-war period. The narrative he develops is compelling, and works well to set limits to the explanatory power of popular discursive accounts, such as that proposed by post-Foucauldian governmentality studies (see, for example, Rose). Although I don't share During's view that such accounts lack explanatory power, I am sympathetic to the need for a more engaged attention to economics, and especially financial economics. The humanities have a long history of drawing on the human sciences—especially political economy, linguistics, sociology and psychology—and it is in this tradition that I understand During's corrective intervention.

In this article, however, I want to focus on the *use* of this narrative about neoliberalism in the context of a discussion about precarity in the humanities. And I want to focus especially on the form of class analysis it draws on, as I submit that the imperative for this mode of class critique is, in the final analysis, moral-pedagogical.

In relation to the three foci above, During seeks to resituate the first of these, which he parses as 'feelings of precariousness', in relation to a history of moments in which the experience of an existential and literary mode of bourgeois precarity has intersected with 'something like proletarian precarity' (5). To be sure, this conclusion is offered not as an explicit critique of the

institutional or class location of humanities academics, but as advice on how they might adapt to a context in which belief in their spiritual and civic value is no longer shared. This is a context in which, During claims, the oligarchic institutional arrangements favoured by neoliberalism can be expected to support experiments in essentially boutique modes of radicalism, and in which academics might insist on the cultural power of literature through close readings of the literary canon.

As the tone of this last sentence suggests, this conclusion is calculated to be unsatisfying. Following the kind of macro-economic history During presents, and which essentially displaces the capacity of humanities to adequately contribute to knowledge of contemporary manifestations of precarity, During's conclusion seems like a prime example of the crisis of belief he refers to. This is a shame, as cultural histories of precarity of the sort During outlines *are* important, even if for reasons other than their ability to stage a meeting between the bourgeois literary experience of precarity and the material, non-existential conditions of the working-classes. Partly this reflects a problem with this binary class model of theorising precarity. In the long tradition of reflexive Marxian writing on how the intelligentsia might cultivate a less mystified account of their relation to the proletariat, such a 'meeting' is of course a theoretical proxy for the meeting of an ideological notion of precarity with its historico-material referent. But such a model, based on the primacy of the Labour-Capital relation for all class analysis, seems inadequate in relation to the complex processes by which precarity has mediated the restructuring of class positions in post-industrial consumer economies in the period under discussion. It may be, as some economists suggest, that we are returning to a period in which this relation will become so paramount that any more subtle form of class analysis—such as that which can engage the notion of social status/class—will appear as an obfuscation, but this case isn't made. Furthermore, Tak Chan and John Goldthorpe's recent empirical studies of the British class structure show that Max Weber's discrete notions of 'vocational class' and 'social status' hold up extremely well; the former being more powerful in explaining economic security, the latter holding more explanatory power in relation to cultural consumption and political ideals (2007). However, the Labour-Capital relation also seems like a crude lens through which to read the emergence of precarity as a theme in modern literature. In the novels of Austen or Balzac, for instance, various forms and experiences of precarity are mediated by an complex field of class relations and positionings in which gender, region, family position, social connections *et cetera* play major roles, and which cannot be reduced to mere 'existential precarity' in relation to a more fundamental mode of material precarity located elsewhere.

The real motivation for this mode of class analysis 'isn't any new argument for the primacy of the Labour-Capital relation or its efficacy for literary studies, but

rather an essentially Gramscian interest in the way in which the analytic category of precarity has come to displace that of the Subaltern in a process that is both obfuscatory and politically regressive: that is, the concern is with the ideological soundness of precarity as a mode of social description or explanation (During). The real problem here is that the class binary used to construct two competing modes of precarity is overlaid with a materialist theory of the relation between the cultural and the economic that only works to further distance the humanities from any sort of productive engagement with the social sciences (except for those strands that, when selectively engaged with, support this mode of cultural critique). In the face of a rich field of empirical research and intellectual discussion about the historically variable ways in which relations between the cultural and the economic are materially made-up (for example, Cultural Economy studies), as well as serious efforts by more recent economists to engage with humanities scholarship (for example, Piketty), such a model is reductionist to say the least. We might also cite the work of post-war economists who sought to theorise the limits to growth in consumer economies, such as Fred Hirsch, whose account of ‘positional goods’ offers a powerful means of theorising the changing relation of cultural consumption to class structure (Hirsch).

Simply to draw attention to alternative approaches however is at one level naïve: it is to miss the rhetorical purpose of During’s argument. I think the best way to understand the deflationary logic at work here is to note that we are dealing with a pedagogic tactic widely disseminated in literary post-Marxism, one that intentionally forgoes the possibility of the moral acceptability of any currently available positions or further discussion in order to *unsettle* interlocutors so that they might address the field of social action instead (or at least disabuse themselves of the pretensions of cultural critique to adequately engage the problem). While this might be the Modernist *intent* of Marxian critique as a pedagogical exercise—reformist, morally compelling—in practice (and especially under the affective regimes of neoliberalism) this sort of baited conclusion tends to simply justify a fatalistic pathos through energising debate on a narrative terrain it has set up to fail (it seems very much like a manifestation of Sloterdijk’s ‘cynical reason’ in this regard). This terrain isn’t so much political economy, as a specific style of interpreting political economy *for the humanities*, one that formally denies the efficacy of any other mode of inquiry. (I say ‘formally’ as it is never consistently applied, as when During casually suggests the welfare state was partly a product of the ‘intense communalism’ that was sparked by the experience of the Great Depression, or that social capitalism was guided by the concept of totality.) The problem isn’t this historical narrative as such so much as the role it is asked to play. No doubt a series of structural transformations in global capitalism since World War II, such as declining rates of return to western economies and a series of responses to this, such as the turn to inflation targeting, the rise of state-backed ‘creditism’ and the shift from full

employment to 'employability' policies since the 1970s (as William Mitchell usefully describes it), are key economic drivers of the emergence of economic precarity in developed countries. Such an economic history is crucial to the continuing push for labour market deregulation, and the consequent massification of higher education in the context of declining graduate returns. All of these factors represent the real world referent of the ideology of a 'knowledge economy', and the rise of a 'cultural' or 'creative' economy subsidised by underemployed and overeducated labour can be explained in terms of these developments (Brook).

So my objection isn't to the use of political economy for thinking about precarity. Rather, it is simply that During's agenda with this sort of history *isn't* to highlight any set of problems in countries like Australia (as it is for economists like Mitchell) capable of being addressed by general and industry-based campaigns for secure work, a social wage, or a more plausible account of the role of student debt in funding the Creative Industries. Rather, for During, the point of this history is to *deflate* the significance of such grievances *and* the opportunities for critique they afford by resituating them as (in the final analysis) symptoms of western bourgeois decline. In line with the pedagogic move noted above, historical-genealogies of past moments in which literary bourgeois precarity 'intersects' with non-existential, working-class precarity would be a means by which humanities scholars might overcome their class solipsism.

But it is at this point that the moral imperative of this kind of critique parts ways with the empirical imperative of economic explanation. During *knows* that material precarity in advanced capitalist economies isn't simply a bourgeois problem (for example, in Australia underemployment and insecure work affect those *without* tertiary qualifications in low and unskilled work more than they do qualification holders; see Wilkins; Richardson and Law). But such facts are sidelined in order to resituate precarity as a symptom of the decline of western middle classes in a larger process of global redistribution. As in the popular media, it is this deeper moral story that accounts for the presence of irritating generalisations about the positive impact of economic globalisation on developing countries, or outright clangers such as During's claim western nations 'abandoned' racism in official policy from 1945.

The practice of humanities scholarship is, of course, deeply pedagogical in relation to ethical being, as Ian Hunter has taught us, so it is no surprise to find that such charismatic modes of cultural critique will survive into the twenty-first century. Such a claim about the instrumental value of the humanities is not symptomatic of neoliberalism, as During suggests, but is an evidence-based claim drawing on the historical archive, as well as empirical studies of educational practice, policy and labour market outcomes for graduates (King; Hunter; Smith;

Meredyth; Patterson). It is for this reason that the academic humanities are in fact well placed to adjust teaching and research to better support graduate outcomes for a range of arts faculty disciplines. But paradoxically (and as the success of these studies demonstrated), it turns out that this expertise in ethical techniques of the person was only ever part of what the humanities had to offer as a set of knowledge disciplines. While the topic of precarity is well placed to further enable humanities scholars to contribute to empirical and intellectually advanced research on a topic of major significance for arts faculties, they should not redress their increasingly precarious institutional situation through a withdrawal into intellectual dogma and disciplinary closure, however exemplary these gestures of resignation appear.

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