‘At Risk?’ Humanities in the Risk Society

Kylie Message

In late May and early June this year, I attended a conference of leaders in the humanities and humanistic social sciences from around the world. Held at the University of California Berkeley under the auspices of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), the meeting’s theme was ‘… at Risk’.[1] The conference aimed to examine the multiple challenges encountered by scholars operating within increasingly polarised and hostile environments across the world. Its approach was informed by the CHCI’s commitment to recognising a

[1] From 28 May-1 June 2024, the Townsend Center for the Humanities at UC Berkeley hosted the annual conference of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI). Invitations to the conference read:

Scholars and intellectuals find themselves increasingly at risk. Globally, the number who have been forced into exile, because of war, regional conflict, or state persecution is on the rise. Authoritarians see fit to hound their critics for their intellectual and creative work, or on account of their sexual, gender, ethnic, and religious identities. In the United States, many professors struggle to do the basic work of teaching in contexts growing more hostile by the day. Some find themselves without an institutional home (or secure employment), their departments eviscerated if not outright abolished, with the stroke of a pen, from the University of Wisconsin to West Virginia University. Others find themselves navigating ever-expanding legislative and political minefields, at the ‘new’ New College engineered by Governor Ron DeSantis and Christopher Rufo, or before committees of the U.S. House of Representatives self-appointed to monitor campus policies on free speech and dissent. The CHCI annual meeting in Berkeley—… at Risk—aims to examine the multiple challenges encountered by scholars operating within increasingly hostile environments at home and abroad.

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global approach to the humanities which values global allegiances over national agendas. The global humanities prioritise the multiple histories and origins of the humanities including, but not determined by, Europe. It emphasises global interconnectedness and amplifies local and regional research to provide a fuller and more multilayered and inclusive understanding of human experience (Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes).

The intention to prioritise the global humanities was an obvious goal when the CHCI conference was being organised. At that time, the world was reeling in response to the war in Ukraine, and scholars and universities were working as nimbly as they could to help academics at risk of persecution flee the country. But, as the Berkeley conference neared, another, more domestic set of hazards (in their case) emerged, and the planning committee pivoted to integrate the acute risks being experienced by scholars, especially in the humanities, within the United States.[2] As a result, and despite initially aiming to focus on regions at risk, the conference ended up focusing very specifically on what risk means within a national—North American—context.

The enduring attachment of the humanities to local forms of regionalism was brought home to me repeatedly throughout the conference. It was most evident on the day of keynotes presented by heavyweights of global and North American academia, Judith Butler and Robin D. G. Kelley.[3] Both Butler and Kelley focused in their presentations on the campus protests against the occupation of Gaza and university investments in Israel and the response by university administrators to these actions. But while I was sitting in a grand hall of UC Berkeley, my phone was pinging with emails from colleagues in Australia about the ongoing problems facing the South Australian Museum (Daley) and the proposed axing of the museum studies program at the University of Queensland (Burton). It was a split-screen experience that produced a feeling of being 'in' two places at once.

This split-screen feeling was not unique to me. A colleague from India later told me that they found themselves having a similar experience, as they fielded constantly updated news about the national election that was currently underway in that country. Such split screen experiences are consistent with the global humanities' understanding that regionalism can exist alongside and within rather than in opposition to either nationalism or globalisation. One of the key contributions that humanities training can provide is the ability to be in more than once place at once, to understand that definitions of regionalism are relative and changing, to have empathy for difference, and perhaps most

[2] See Footnote 1.
[3] Recording of Kelley's presentation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbaeqkVHuzo>.

importantly, to recognise that, as German philosopher Niklas Luhmann said, the world has become so complex that it can that it can no longer be understood from one top-down standpoint (Hartmann 718) or, indeed, any singular disciplinary perspective.

A global approach recognises that shared or similar experiences exist across regional or local contexts. It does not conflate different regions or experiences, or different scales, disasters, or political orders, but frames discrete crises as always regional, and always symptomatic of the kinds of risks implied in and foretold by Ulrich Beck's 1992 theory of risk. The split-screen experience I shared with my Indian colleague also provides a useful introduction to Beck's ambition to explore the ways that underlying global transformations may hold 'the potential to catalyse the formation of more inclusive cosmopolitan ways of existing and acting in the world' (Mythen 386).

It was appropriate, then, that in seeking to illuminate the idea of being '… at Risk', the CHCI's conference theme encouraged discussion about how the humanities enable as well as foreclose forms of risk. It was a provocation that recognised the contribution that humanities can make to navigating a complex world, whilst simultaneously not letting us escape accountability for any contribution that our field might make to contemporary or future crisis.

Risk Society

According to Beck (*Risk Society*), humanity organised itself along national lines throughout the 'first', or 'classical' modernist period of industrialisation (that ranges broadly from about 1850 through to the end of the second world war). The nation-state was an imagined community that served strategic purposes (Anderson). As this period progressed, however, risks created by the shift from wealth distribution and inequity were superseded by those associated with managing the uncertainties created by technological, environmental and industrial advances. Unlike traditional risks which were more localised and perceptible (such as factory-related or occupational hazards or disease outbreaks), risks in a reflexive second modernity (risk society) are often global in scale, invisible and much more difficult to control (nuclear radiation, chemical contamination). Whereas, during classical modernity, according to Beck, wealthy people had an advantage in industrial society because they could relocate away from the site of risk, risk society (for example, climate change) affects everyone. Throughout 'second' modernity, risk has moved from being a negative side effect of industrial progress to the dominant product—and condition—of contemporary society (Beck, *Risk Society* 13, 23). This is why Beck defines risk as *'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself'* (Beck, *Risk Society* 21; italics in original).

Central characteristics of the period of 'second' or reflexive modernisation (the risk society) are individualisation and the decentralisation of knowledge. Both are caused by the eroding of trust in modernist institutions, technologies, and authorities. Whereas humans previously approached threats and opportunities with knowledge, beliefs and comfort taken from the nuclear family, church, or by belonging to a group or social class, they must, in the risk society, identify, interpret, and control uncertainty themselves (Beck, *Risk Society* 90; 'The Reinvention'; *The Reinvention*). Without the traditional—real or imagined—safety nets of industrial society, risk society leads individuals to question the legitimacy and prominence of the institutions that they now perceive to have let them down. This feeling leads also to what Bruno Latour, following Luhmann, describes as the heightened awareness that mastery—be it personal or attributed to existing in any institution or other context—is impossible (Latour 36).

Acknowledging that the world can only ever be known partially and never as a complete whole has 'important consequences for how we envisage the future of knowledge production and the role of universities' (Hartmann 718). Institutions that were historically valued as authoritative sources of knowledge now face expressions of doubt about their ability to prevent or manage the dangers they helped create. A decline in public confidence in expert systems and a growing tension between the scientific and political management of risk and the public's perception of those risks exists in many areas (Beck, *Risk Society* 57-8, 61). For example, understanding that risks are produced by human innovation (Beck references the 1986 nuclear explosion at Chernobyl) may lead to a loss of trust in science or technological innovation (Beck, *Risk Society* 7). It is also the case that an increasing gulf exists between expert knowledge and public perception, which in turn affects opinions about universities, which may be seen as low-trust or social value, despite the contributions they make to innovation and knowledge as well as the labour market.[4]

Beck responded to the reflexive challenge to concepts of mastery by critiquing the continuing existence of 'methodological nationalism' within the discipline of sociology (Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Condition'; Jong 2). He called for the social sciences as a field of research to undergo a cosmopolitan turn and implored the development of a new paradigm (Beck, *Risk Society* 181). This process of redevelopment would require sociologists to 'ask a fundamentally different set of questions about society and develop alternative modes of analysis to wrestle with the contradictions and dilemmas of a rapidly transforming world' (Mythen 393).

[4] For projections on how this theory might affect different aspects of academia see Dondi and Moser, and Dall'Alba.

Although unremarked upon by Beck, the humanities provide a range of sources and methods for progressing his interest in 'developing and protecting the common principles of human rights, security, democracy and justice, founded on acceptance of diversity and the embracing of "others"'. (Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Condition'; Mythen 396). This is because the humanities can contribute new ways of developing the transnational co-operation required to understand the sub-systems that Beck predicted as emerging from the cosmopolitan moment. A humanities-inspired approach can also help evidence Beck's explanation for how people form new allegiances with those with whom they may have been opposed on other matters, or with whom they have little other in common (Beck, *Risk Society* 47).

In considering the future of universities in the risk society, Abbas Jong similarly argued that there are strengths in the risk society as well as threats and anxiety (Jong). Not only is the accelerating differentiation of society the cause of some of today's risks but it is, he says, also 'pivotal for understanding current crises and how they can be solved in the light of today's complexity'. In other words, sub-systems—including, for example, this volume's focus on regionalism as an experience shared by contributors—provide pathways for individuals to 'explore the extent to which defining social forces were presenting systemic political challenges that, in turn, incited revised moral codes and fostered unique modes of sociality' (Mythen 396).

What all of this means is that instead of resulting in a reproduced zero-sum game where a new master narrative structures meaning in a re-feudalised world, risk society supports multiple narratives and sub-systems (which also function as 'sub-cultures'). The regional universities, cultural infrastructures, and global humanities at the heart of this volume all contribute to sub-systems that continue to hold powerful combined potential for social benefit despite the attacks against traditional institutions. This is not because they are more resilient than other systems but because they constitute infrastructures that have their own codes, values, and principles to delineate their own unity and define what counts as their environment, or context. These sub-systems can account for each other to mitigate unintended consequences in a broader shared system. Luhmann explains:

> The system of science [or humanities or any other methodology of knowledge production], the economic system, the system of mass media operate and observe clearly on a worldwide level. Each system is thus environment to the others, being observed by them along their own codes and values. (775)

This description helps us understand that cultural sectors and workers in places as diverse as the Donbass region as well as Gaza, Tallahassee, Calcutta and

Brisbane can collectively make a difference to the state of the world by addressing challenges to overarching human rights. Cosmopolitanism is also a hallmark of global humanities, which recognises that regionalism is not subsumed nor negated by risk society. Today, understanding difference and being comfortable with uncertainty are critical skills for any individual seeking to navigate their way through multiple sub-systems, whichever region they live in. An open letter penned by a group of North American scholars condemning Israel's systematic targeting of academics, students, educational institutions and cultural heritage sites in Gaza (Allen; Open Letter) described clearly the cosmopolitan goal of achieving solidarity across regional or disciplinary sub-systems. The letter articulates the importance of an allegiance produced out of a commitment to 'the betterment of society and to the broad values of social justice' despite different regional conditions and challenges.

The War Against the Humanities

The conditions of reflexive second modernity (risk society) will be very familiar to anyone working in the academic and public humanities as well as in universities and the cultural sector. In the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States, Europe, India, China and many other places, there has been an expansion of 'anti-intellectual' attacks against universities (Cineas) that have sharpened decades of culture wars activities around art, museums, literature, and university curricula (Message, 'Look Left and Right'; Message, 'Making History'). Public distrust, and government responsivity to it has, in recent decades, become known as 'the war against humanities' (Preston; Clausen; Majumdar; Mansouri). These campaigns have long tails of destruction, a point made in a recent article about the devastation that cuts in the humanities would have for the nation's future generations (Weale).

In his conference presentation, Kelley similarly suggested that while specific crises will have acute regional impacts, connections exist between international and national events because—more than the destruction of specific physical infrastructure—attacks on culture are a destruction of collective futures. Central to his argument was his use of the term 'scholasticide', which refers to the systemic destruction, in whole or in part, of the educational life of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group (United Nations). Acts of scholasticide are premised on understanding the central role that culture plays in building collective futures. In Gaza, places of learning, including libraries, archives, and laboratories, as well as facilities supporting the educational process such as playgrounds, sports fields, performance venues, cafeterias, and residence halls—all inherently cultural

places or processes—are targeted by acts of scholasticide.[5] Framed through Beck's notion, the information, knowledge and freedom that education generates for a population is considered an intolerable risk for the perpetrators of the scholasticide. This tells us something about the value of cultural networks to political futures, but it also demonstrates Beck's argument that the essence of risk is not that it *is* happening, but that it *might be* happening (Adam and van Loon 11). It means that supporting sites have all been attacked *because* they are extensions of universities and schools, as places that teach Gaza's people how to think independently and create their own futures.

The collective futures that education and cultural life enable are also 'at risk' in many other places around the world. In the United States, a systematic attack on education and free speech has culminated in police attacks against staff and students participating in pro-Palestine and anti-Israel investment protests. Kelley recounted the arrest of Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, who is a Professor of Global Studies at the University of California Irvine. As she was led away, handcuffed, from a pro-Palestine solidarity encampment, Willoughby-Herard said to the reporter who asked if she was concerned that the arrest would jeopardise her career prospects: 'What job do I have if the students don't have a future?' ('UC Irvine Professor'). The point that Kelley was seeking to make was the high cost of policing the humanities—including the infrastructures, cultures, systems for teaching and learning, and the freedom to speak.

Rather than flattening all forms of risk into the same shape, a discussion of different global examples draws attention to a key characteristic of the risk society. This characteristic is that divergence in perceptions of risk (resulting from individualisation and the decentralisation of knowledge) reflects a larger crisis of legitimacy for scientific and political institutions which are seen as both producers of risk and inadequate managers of its consequences. In the risk society we occupy a continuous and ubiquitous state of worry about the future. This does not just affect individuals, but the institutions of modernity themselves, like universities, which go to ever greater measures to safeguard their authority against the hazards that might arise from student demonstrations. Columbia President, Minouche Shafik, defended, for example, her call to invite the police force onto campus because demonstrators had 'created an "intolerable level" of safety risks for the community' (Bohannon). In the risk society, risk aversion becomes the primary motivating factor in decision-making processes, as Gabe Mythen explains:

[5] 'Scholasticide' is the term used to describe the processes whereby hundreds of schools and all 12 universities in Gaza have been destroyed ('How Israel Has Destroyed Gaza's Schools and Universities') in addition to the nearly 200 sites of historical importance destroyed or damaged since the war commenced (Farazi Saber).

> In a world which has become so saturated with the language of risk – in terms of the environment, the economy, personal wellbeing, relationships, job security and media discourse – it is easy to forget that it wasn't always thus. (Mythen 391)

It is, then, perhaps unsurprising that a world dominated by the systematic reproduction of uncertainty results in a society focused on the possible effects of an anticipated catastrophe.

Australia

Attacks against sites of knowledge production and dissemination evidence the crisis of legitimation of modern institutions like the twentieth-century public university or nineteenth-century public museum. Perhaps paradoxically, these institutions are both victims of the growing lack of public trust in expertise or 'science' described by Beck (*Risk Society*) and simultaneously criticised for failing to produce the imagined safety nets that were perceived to be provided by traditional institutions like the nuclear family. Whereas risk society always reverts to its mean of institutional domination, a 'risk culture' that embraces all kinds of residual and marginal forms of sensemaking practices continue to exist (Beck's 'sub-systems') (Beck, 'The Reinvention of Politics'). The temptation to identify forms of resistance in these cultural practices is complicated, however, as Barbara Adam and Joost van Loon explain, because the risk society is non-binary:

> [R]isk cultures are marginal counter-discursive articulations against the dominant risk-aversion culture of the sub-politics of expertise and commerce. Likewise risk society constitutes an institutional articulation against the main institutional forms of risk-aversion society that we currently live in. There is no point in defining risk culture and risk society as opposites, nor is there much to be gained by seeing them as one and the same; they refer to different modalities of sensemaking. It is in their supplementary relationship that we may begin to make sense out of their effect on everyday life in the contemporary world. (Adam and van Loon 14)

It is not just specific institutions that are threatened within the risk society, but, as the term 'scholasticide' indicates, the broader modalities of sensemaking through which they gain credibility. What this means is that a risk (that may be perceived as a potential strength but is usually presented as a weakness) reproduces in another part of the system as a crisis. In the case of the humanities and the extra-university cultural sector, the risk society's dominant precautionary culture can become a rationale for inaction or for governmental funding decisions. Even

where course corrections have been attempted,[6] universities and funding regimes typically revert to the 'methodological nationalism' of the earlier era instead of exploring the potential of reflexive analysis and challenges to singular forms of mastery that are possible within the risk society. This means that the traditional public university model simply is not able to react to the kinds of crises that it has institutionalised or the new risks that it continues to simultaneously produce and be subject to today.

Of course, hazards are not spread equally across the sector. As contributors to this volume demonstrate, they are most keenly felt within regional universities and the communities that they are often considered as 'anchoring' (Orphan and McClure). Many of the risks facing the cultural and higher education sectors in Australia have arisen from and been compounded by decades of under-funding of core cultural and educational infrastructure. Despite representing itself as a remediating progressive force since being elected federally in 2022, the Australian Government's impact has been limited and patchy (T. Burke). Other factors, including waning support for their public value propositions, have contributed to an institutional decline in confidence in the South Australian Museum (Parliament of South Australia) and the projected closure of University of Queensland's museum studies program (Burton).[7]

Without a doubt, inadequate funding for core business remains the primary problem, but the risks articulated are, if not *manufactured* for political or economic purposes, designed to justify actions like program reviews or funding cuts. One case in point is the South Australian Museum, about which CEO David Gaimster defended the institution's proposed removal of research capabilities in favour of public engagement on the grounds that the museum is 'not a university' (Finkel; Robinson) instead of addressing rising costs and inadequate government funds. The reasons given by the University of Queensland for the phasing out of its coursework postgraduate programs in museum studies are 'challenges relating to enrolments, staffing and market differentiation'. In a context of escalating living costs, the reduction of enrolments in one and a half year Masters programs that in

[6] I have written previously about the 2023 cultural policy Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place and the provisions included in federal budget 2023-24 for the cultural sector (Message, 'From COVID-19 to National Cultural Policy'. See also Australian Government).

[7] My intention in this article is to complement and scaffold the case studies presented in other parts of this journal by offering some thoughts about the broader infrastructure that connects universities and the cultural sector across regions, be they local, national, or global—without seeking to conflate or flatten their differences. I make my case by discussing the recent threats made to the South Australian Museum (Daley) and the museum studies program at the University of Queensland. While there are numerous other case studies that could be explored, it was updates about these institutions that were my main concern during the global humanities conference that prompted this article. These examples are also useful for demonstrating the interconnected nature of attacks on culture in the risk society, whereby the institutions of learning (universities) and cultural knowledge sharing (museums) are both targeted.

2024 have tuition costs of $34,000 for a domestic student and AUD $61,680 for an international student, is hardly surprising.[8] But rather than re-assessing the conditions that create the conditions for the existence of risk, institutional activities or strategies are targeted as the cause of the problems.[9]

Threats of cuts and closures are too infrequently understood to represent the much larger systemic failure of governments to support cultural and tertiary education infrastructures in regional Australia. Even though regional higher education is articulated as a priority area for this year's Universities Accord, and even though regional universities are regarded as engines of their community (Australian Government, *Australian Universities Accord*), Victoria Kuttainen argues that:

> Regional university arts and humanities programs have been gutted by decades of underfunding, by a revolving door of institutional restructures and degree makeovers … and by the broader government diversion of funding and resources to larger metropolitan institutions. (Kuttainen)

Beyond the immediate impact that the University of Queensland proposal may have on future workforce development for the state is a subsequent problem of research training. Museum studies is not exclusively a skill-based course. It is an interdisciplinary research field that emerged out of humanities disciplines including anthropology, history and literary studies. It shares with these fields the commitment to provide critical and creative thinking skills that are required for higher degree scholarship and research programs including the PhDs that generate the knowledge required to explore and ensure national futures (Message, 'Recognising Research Training'). Museum studies scholars recognise that museums, like universities, are key sites of research and innovation. This sentiment is reiterated by internationally renowned Australian scientist Tim Flannery, former director of the South Australian Museum (1999-2006). He put it bluntly when he said 'the collections are there for research, and without research, the collections wither and die, and with that the museum withers and dies' (Gilchrist). As with the cuts in the humanities jobs resulting from the 'war against

[8] At the time of writing the course closure had been confirmed and the websites referenced in this article no longer active: <https://study.uq.edu.au/study-options/programs/master-museum-studies-5343>.

[9] Proposals to make cuts at the University of Queensland and the South Australian Museum are not isolated examples. In Queensland, 2023 saw (successful) proposals to shutter James Cook University's Creative Arts program and an (unsuccessful) attempt to close the Griffith University Art Museum (Siemienowicz; Hobday, 'Jobs On the Line'). Previous cuts had already occurred at Queensland College of the Arts. Immediately south, in NSW, Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney has been facing and protesting consistent underfunding, restructuring and cutbacks for years, while Macquarie University's museum studies programs were closed a decade earlier (K. Burke; Muir de Moore; Simpson).

the humanities', and the acts of scholasticide that target places that support learning, this decision has significant implications for the nation's future generations.

Conclusion

I have sought, in this article, to collect and make sense of preliminary thoughts on the systematic chipping away of humanities and cultural infrastructures around the world through the lens of Beck's theory of the risk society. I have described how risk society theory can be applied to explain social and cultural infrastructures, practices and politics, as well as human experience in our contemporary world. To do this, I have presented a brief picture of what risk looks like for educational and cultural life in some parts of the world and explained some of the implications these actions are likely to have for collective national futures. I have sought to complement the argument put forward by other contributors in this volume that, as institutions that 'anchor' their communities (Orphan and McClure, 2019), cultural institutions like universities (and museums)—regardless of their location—have unique value that is underappreciated and increasingly acutely at risk. I approached this task by beginning with an introduction to global humanities, which I applied to a discussion of the risks facing humanities in a broader international socio-political context. The article's main contribution is its identification of the consequences and opportunities that arise for universities and cultural institutions regardless of their regional location in a globalised risk society where the ability to avert risk is highly dependent on access to knowledge and information.

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