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THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION

For anyone who has come of professional age in the last ten years, as I have, the phrase "crisis of the humanities" has either become empty, or freighted in such a way as to be nearly inexplicable. Since I entered graduate school in 1990, I've witnessed the political demonization of the NEA and the NEH, the media manufacture of a 90s red scare (in the strangely named "McCarthyism of the left"), incessant carping in the media and among humanities scholars about the fashions of cultural studies and canon revision, and any number of more local skirmishes about the value of language disciplines in general. All of this is to say nothing of the more pressing and troubling corporate reorganization of our universities, which has already made an enormous difference in the way many graduate students and faculty-tenured and not-tenured carry on their everyday affairs. In short, so far as I can remember, crisis has been the order of the day.

It's not exactly crisis itself, but what's supposed to be "in" crisis that interests me, however. For it's clear that a certain sense of crisis is shared by many in modern language disciplines and the humanities in general — to say nothing of the public at large—although there is no clear agreement about either the causes or the effects of the current situation. For example, in a recent PMLA forum J. Hillis Miller suggested that the demise of academic intellectuals—and particularly those in literary disciplines — would result from the effects of media technology on the culture of the book.¹ In that same forum, Bruce Robbins argued that the crisis of the humanities ought to be viewed as part of the larger problem of the welfare state.² And Dominick La Capra and Joe Aimone both persuasively argued for an understanding of the current situation in terms of our relation to the public realm.³ I think each of these responses, in a certain way, reflects on the others, and productively addresses the current critical situation of humanities disciplines. The question I'd like to pursue here, though, would perhaps make an issue of this reflection, in the name of another: namely, what are the stakes of crisis? What is the nature of the game?

I ask this question in part because the above narratives also involve graduate students. While the belief in the crisis of the humanities has shaped the institutional trajectories of graduate students, until very recently, the MLA has done little or nothing to address the specific needs of graduate students, sped-up junior faculty, or non-tenured faculty (despite the fact that graduate students alone comprise 30% of its membership). The publicity debacle around the Yale strike also speaks volumes about the MLA's political proclivities, as does its recent refusal to open executive committee meetings to its members.⁴ However skeptical I am about the millennial talk that seems to find its way into academic as well as media outlets, in other words, there's something to be said about the current alignment of cultural, economic, and social stars such as to produce both the perception of crisis and its rather intransigent realities. That much the range of responses to the PMLA forum, the culture *kampf* begun in the 1980s, and the open crisis of the job market suggests. Given the speed and sureness with which we seem able to understand the shifting points of crisis in this complex situation, there remains much to be said, let alone done at the professional

level.

There is another reason for this question, however. About a year ago, John Guillory suggested that the politicization of humanities disciplines was a result of the social marginalization of its knowledge producers and its product — rather than the other way around. He went on to say that, given the way that political and professional desires often telescope in the desire for a job, it might be time to undertake a sociology of the professional and political desires that circulate amongst us, if only to recognize what is "merely phantasmatic" in them.⁵ While I would affirm the value of this project, and go so far as to hope to take it up here in a certain way, I'd have to express some reservation about it as well. In addition to a general question about the character of sociological taxonomies, I wonder if the practice of sociology hasn't been altered by some of the same dynamics that have affected literary and cultural studies—to say nothing of the simulacral construction of academic sociology in literary and cultural studies disciplines.⁶ More importantly, I wonder if it might not be more informative to presume that both the political phantasms and the social revaluation of humanities work derive from a common set of origins that is neither obvious nor wholly esoteric. In other words, it might be better to treat the "crisis of the humanities" as a kind of ideological formation whose realities and rhetoric don't simply refer either to the job market or the politics of our disciplines, but to another kind of social reorganization altogether.

The occasion for my suggestion about the cultural and institutional crisis of the humanities is the coincidence of two apparently unrelated media spectacles — namely, the Gulf War and the political correctness debates. It was, after all, easy to miss the way this decade's announced crisis of humanities coincided with early maneuvers in the Persian Gulf War and the announcement of the "new world order." By the time George Bush delivered the commencement address at Michigan in 1991 and denounced political correctness, we might have known something was up. While any president who had proposed a constitutional amendment banning desecration of the flag would normally face a yawning credibility gap if he later defended free speech, virtually no one put the question to Bush.⁷ By that moment, the manufacture of the myth of a tyrannical campus left was more or less a *fait accompli* — and remains so, despite excellent work to dispel this fiction.⁸ For the most part, the mainstream press had uncritically parroted a cultural agenda crafted by the right in the mid 1980's. Indeed, Stephen Balch and Herbert London's 1986 article on "The Tenured Left" in *Commentary* inaugurated the genre later to become a staple of media coverage of academia. But another, somewhat more distant precedent for the political correctness scare comes to mind: namely, the trilateral commission's 1975 report on the problems of democratic governability. The report was completed by a set of nominally private actors — "private," like Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example—from Western Europe, Japan and the United States, who, as Alan Wolfe observed some years ago, acted on behalf of what he called the "transnational state."⁹ The part of the report about North America, penned by 70's neoconservative darling Samuel Huntington, evinces a sense of disaster for democratic culture at the hands of the welfare state. While a certain pessimism was *de rigueur* in the era of intransigent fiscal problems and the Watergate disaster, Huntington's dismay with the fortunes of democracy stems from the way that the welfare state had encouraged the politicization of everything on the assumption that all political matters were to be handled by the state. Indeed, he signalled this anxiety by suggesting that there were "desirable limits to the extension of political democracy."¹⁰ The state's inability to meet growing expectations would lead, in Huntington's eyes, to a crisis of "governability" for liberal democracy and, more importantly, for global capital. So he and the rest of the commission argued for state control of the economy: this, they believed, would make for enough economic comfort to induce the political apathy necessary to maintain the global economic and social status quo. The commission's final recommendations urged curtailment of education on the fear that it would make both for more politically engaged citizenry and unrealistic social expectations, given the economic realities of the moment.

Bush's concerns were no doubt not simply his own — any more than were his millenarian hopes for a new world order. The defense of "free speech" against what D'Souza called the "Visigoths in tweed" matched

up both with the longstanding conservative antagonism toward anything that diminished the expressive aura of a "free," meritocratic social order and with the particular agenda for "cultural conservatism" announced by Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation in the 1980s.¹¹ "Free speech" immediately became one of the rubrics used to discredit academic culture during the political correctness scare, as it made public issue of the unpopular consensus among humanities scholars that cultural traditions are forged by political — rather than aesthetically neutral — means, and that one of those means was formal education itself. By targeting this consensus, rather than the historical or theoretical evidence used to support it, the anti-political correctness warriors turned a particular linguistic market into evidence of collusion by the so-called multicultural left and the affirmative action state.¹² This sentiment was perhaps best embodied by Richard Bernstein's horror at what he called the "growing multiculturalist bureaucracy" on campus.¹³ But the effect of this belief was to provoke paranoia about both the scope and durability of academic power. At the same time, Weyrich's concern and the work of right-wing think tanks, training programs and foundation money in the 1980's facilitated a growing recognition that the right could not produce political consent by economic and social measures alone. They also had to get some measure of influence over the "intermediate institutions" between the state and capital. The well-orchestrated political correctness attacks were only the most spectacular of the results of these efforts, carried out *pro bono* by the media and joined enthusiastically by the NAS and President Bush.

Throughout all of this, the somewhat obvious fact that the university has typically served a mediating function between the liberal state and capital was lost on Bush, D'Souza and Co. But, then again, it had also been lost on lots of academics for whom the university was a place that they could take on a whole political order by shadow-boxing with phallogocentrism and the other bogeys of western metaphysics. If the trilateral commission saw democratic culture as threatened by both the welfare state and unfettered capitalist accumulation, the anti-political correctness warriors saw political and cultural hegemony as wrought by the invisible hand of the "free market" of cultural ideas. But the institutional meaning of that conservative shibboleth came into sharp focus in Mike Novak's political correctness editorial in *Forbes* late in 1999. Novak concluded that the only remedy to intellectuals' incorrigible leftism was a polite mixture of "dialog" and financial coercion, civility and capitalist muscle: "Universities could not survive," he wrote, "without endowed chairs, corporate matching grants, privately raised scholarship funds, gifts, endowments. The relations between universities and the business world should be much more than financial. No money should pass hands until reasoned argument is also publicly exchanged."¹⁴

The political correctness scare, in other words, reformulated longstanding antagonisms over the function and placement of the university — and, in particular, academic speech-in a nominally democratic state that had also to attend to the geopolitical necessities of capital. Bush's declaration of a new world order signaled less the actual immanence of a world "freer from the threat of terror, stronger in pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace" as it reiterated a longstanding desire for a cultural and institutional realignment of the state — a desire especially intense after the fall of the Berlin wall.¹⁵ Although the on-the-ground realities of the new world order have been quite like those of the old in many ways,¹⁶ something has indeed changed, not at Bush's behest, and not as a result of the pc scare, but as a result of the tensions between a state anxious to preserve at least an image of being democratic and the "necessity" to pull cultural institutions of the state into line with the needs of global capital.¹⁷

The belief circulated in the political correctness wars about academic culture may in the end be less important than the institutional forms that humanities disciplines must assume in order to maintain a location in the university. As John Guillory's argument makes clear, the cultural separatism of the erstwhile cultural left was damaging precisely to the extent that it ignored the social relations in which cultural transmission happens: namely, the relations of capital production and exchange.¹⁸ But the widespread dissemination of this belief has effectively set the stage for more recent struggles over the way those relations will be understood and administered locally. Such relations take shape and change, I'd argue, in large part because of the forms that universities have had to assume in order manage very public claims to

cultural-political legitimacy as well as the fiscal realities of the state. Those are some of the forms with which we must tangle, intellectually and politically; and, for the moment, they are some that are currently disposed to intervention.

Although it's true that the "welfare state" is in most ways dead and buried, the neoliberal state has not, for all the talk since the Reagan years, reined in its budget or done away with forms of subsidy, as Robert Reich's famous example of "corporate welfare" showed. What's notable about the current arrangement are the ways that priorities are justified and that subjects and institutions have been called into place in order to manage crisis tendencies that bug this relationship. In brief, I'd argue that our current arrangement can be understood as a response to the crisis of Fordism, and narrated as a general problem of the mode of the social regulation of capitalist accumulation. According to accounts of this history offered by the regulation school, the fiscal crisis of the seventies (in which Huntington found himself, for example) was in large part due to the inability of Northern capitalist countries to maintain high rates of profit and Keynesian welfare state policies that managed demand at the same time. The results, whose forms have only fully crystallized in the United States in the last seven years or so, have been felt at every level of social, political and private life, though I'll mention here only three. In the labor process as a whole, "flexible specialization" and regional economies of scope have come to replace homogeneous semi-skilled labor and national economies of scale. In the social sector, Keynesian welfare state policies, which guarded against a drop in aggregate demand in the event of economic downturns, have been replaced with supply-side economics and monetarist policy. And, much as a result of the first two, both civic and cultural activities once the domain of the public sector have come under the increasing dominance of relations of consumption.¹⁹

While the trends of neo-Fordism that I've mentioned here have been realized in uneven fashion, I'd say there are two reciprocal ways that they have affected the relation between universities and the state: the reorientation of the university's corporate ideal, and significant change in the share out of private costs. Clyde Barrow has lucidly argued that the university system as we know it today was constructed according to a corporate ideal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That corporate ideal solved the contradiction between demands for social equality and economic efficiency by nominally separating the administrative apparatus from the political field, and installing intellectuals in the university as self-governing "scientists." Barrow, however, finds that the composition of governing boards and their management practices impinged on intellectuals' presumed autonomy, indeed, in such a way as to make universities little more than a "cultural component of the Industrial Revolution" and its concomitant assertion of industrial and finance capital hegemony.²⁰ Barrow's argument clarifies for us that a compromise arrangement between the state, capital, and universities is not in any way novel, but represents a longstanding state of affairs. What's particular, I would argue, is the way our universities have been inserted into the mode of social regulation.

This is particularly evident if we examine the share out of costs and principles of self-management that attend university reorganization. While federal and state spending on education has increasingly been outpaced by spending on medicaid and prisons in recent years, the share of costs borne by students has gone up, as have the amounts disbursed in financial aid programs—and especially loan programs.²¹ In 1996, the General Accounting Office reported that college tuition costs had risen three times as fast as the consumer price index over the previous 14 years.²² We might trace these trends back to the fiscal crisis of the state in the 1970s when, according to Michel Aglietta, the falling rate of return on capital investment was in large part due to the accumulation of social costs of industrial production. Universities occupy a slightly ambiguous place in this narrative, as they fall under the rubric of collective social services and organization of scientific research. But Aglietta's contention was that collective services such as education in the public sector would have to be defunded and developed as commodity relations, if only to buffer the effects of falling rates of profit.²³ This part of his prognostication would appear to have come largely true, as demonstrated not only by these reports, but also the experiments with privatizing public primary and

secondary education, and by the use of prisons as a source of cheap labor for corporations and of state revenue.²⁴ Moreover, insofar as the university has been a place for scientific research, it has had to retool in order to match work priorities with timelines for bringing research to commercial application, not only as a matter of pragmatics, but also of fiscal necessity.²⁵

The change in the state's relation to education has been accompanied by a concomitant shift in the espoused corporate ideal of education. In addition to all kinds of public talk about "partnerships" between the university and the private sector and the public hostility toward faculty self-governance and tenure, the new ideal is rather unwittingly embodied—for humanities disciplines, in any case—in arguments such as Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*. Readings suggests that the days when the university had an historical mission of producing cultured subjects is over, and its new regulative ideal is the post-ideological dream of "excellence." As Readings imagines it, economic globalization and the decline of the nation state have made political activity and culture meaningless, so he espouses communicational pragmatism as the pedagogical and theoretical orders of the day.²⁶ My point here is not that this historical narrative of the situation of the university is *prima facie* false—although it relies on a rather credulous reading of narratives of economic globalization — but that it doesn't say anything about the reconfiguration of the division of academic labor under such an ideal, or evince any awareness of the ways that this particular kind of pragmatism lines up rather nicely to justify, rather than point out, the contradictions of the neoliberal order.

That's not to say that the prospect of enunciating a new ideal in these conditions remains easy or uncomplicated, nor that a certain pragmatism isn't called for. But there's much to be said about the self-evident fact that the fiscal cramps on access to university education make the claims to a meritocratic social order somewhat fragile, to say the least. Moreover, the increases in financial aid funding make the state particularly liable to a crash in the value of educational resources, should the technical requirements of global and regional competition shift very quickly. We should, of course, point out that the state and the university have cobbled together supply side policies for an institution not particularly suited to them, or only belatedly so, and that such policies—as in the Reagan era—will in the end produce a frightening new social geography within the university itself.²⁷ In addition, I'd say one durable public response to the crisis would be to hammer away, with strategic rhetorical emphasis, at the contradiction between the still nominally democratic state and the large scale refashioning of political and social fields at the behest of capital. Now that the ideal of universal access has evidently been detached from the contradictions of the welfare state, it can and should be brought to bear — "flexibly," of course—on the politics of neoliberalism and the new organizational requirements of the university. Or, to put this another way, if I were going to examine the political desires that saturate graduate students' professional narratives, I'd begin by taking into account the ultimately political function of academic culture and the humanities in reproducing a particular set of social and political relationships — both before and after the most recent fiscal crisis of the state. Our political fantasies, I'd argue, even if evidently misplaced or naive, derive from a set of publicly affirmed expectations and narratives that have, to one degree or another, served to align the academy with the smooth functioning of the relation between capital and the state; those narratives have recently been revised, and not out of any sense of "fairness" or any reasonable public account of causal relationships that require such revisions. Rather, they have been revised in an entirely *ad hoc* fashion, and frequently with the mystificatory rhetoric of economic necessity or, within the profession, by means of ridiculous tautologies such as "the job market moves in cycles" or "the market has always been arbitrary."²⁸ In the end, even if grad students' political fantasies are "symptomatic" of something else, their durability and their widespread character ought to prompt questions not only about whether they are merely fantasmatic, but whether there aren't material grounds for such fantasies, and whether we might do something to alter the effects of their causes.

The window of opportunity for hitching our disciplinary fortunes onto those of higher education in general will likely be narrow, as the alignment of a crisis in the humanities with the enduring fiscal crisis of the

state will no doubt rapidly come undone. Indeed, the press is already trotting out rosy bromides about the new wave of economic prosperity heralded by low unemployment and modest wage gains in North America, and as many as 25 states are considering tax cuts on this year's revenue surpluses. In any event, we can't depend on either the rhetoric or the realities of crisis to prompt spontaneous political mobilization by the profession, or the public at large, as the conditions in which we find ourselves will all too soon be normalized in public discussion. Such politicization will be a long-term project for us to undertake. It would be nice to say that this project will make our intellectual work really worthwhile. For the time being, it probably only makes it possible.

NOTES

1. J. Hillis Miller, response, *PMLA* 112.5 (1997): 1134.
2. Bruce Robbins, response, *ibid*: 1135-36.
3. Dominick LaCapra, response, *ibid*: 1133-35; Joseph O. Aimone, response, *ibid*: 1136-37.
4. See, on this Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 194-216.
5. John Guillory, "Preprofessionalism: What Graduate Students Want," *Profession* 1996 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1996): 98.
6. On sociological concepts, see, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, "The Paradox of the Sociologist," *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993): 54.
7. Except C. Vann Woodward, in "Freedom and the Universities," rev. of *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, by Dinesh D'Souza, *New York Review of Books* 18 July 1991: 32.
8. There are too many examples to name here. See, for example, Catharine Stimpson, "New 'Politically Correct' Metaphors Insult History and Our Campuses," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 29 May 1991: A40; Christopher Phelps, "The Second Time as Farce: The Right's 'New McCarthyism,'" *Monthly Review* 43.5 (1991): 39-57; Michael Borubo, "Winning Hearts and Minds," in *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994): 59-85; Jeffrey Williams, ed. *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 1995); see especially Williams' introduction and Jim Nielsen, "The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right," and Christopher Newfield, "What Was 'Political Correctness'? Race, Right and Managerial Democracy in the Humanities," 60-89, 109-145; Tim Brennan, "'PC' and the Decline of the American Empire," *Social Policy* (1991): 15-40.
9. Alan Wolfe, *The Limits of Legitimacy: Political Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Free Press, 1977): 325.
10. Samuel Huntington, "The United States," *The Crisis of Democracy*, Michel Crozier et al eds., (New York: Trilateral Commission, 1975): 62.
11. On "cultural conservatism" and the work of the right, see Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Higher Education," *Social Text* 36 (1993): 45-51; and Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 28-68. Dinesh D'Souza, "The Visigoths in Tweed" *Forbes* 1 Apr 1991: 81-86.
12. On linguistic markets, see Pierre Bourdieu, "Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits," *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991): 66-89; on linguistic markets and pc, see Glenn C. Loury, "Self-censorship," *Our Country, Our Culture*, Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips eds. (Boston: Partisan Review Press, 1994): 132-144.
13. Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994): 62.
14. Mike Novak, "to School," *Forbes* 2 Sep. 1991: 132.
15. George Bush, "Gulf Crisis an Opportunity For a 'New World Order,'" *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 15 Sep 1990: 2953.
16. Noam Chomsky commented that U.S. foreign policy in the new world order seemed much like that in the old, but for two things: "there was no concern over Soviet reaction, and novel pretexts had to be

- conjured up." See Noam Chomsky, "Brave New World Order," *New Statesman and Society* 20-27 Dec. 1991: 20.
17. I leave to the side the relation between the gulf war and North American economic and cultural interests. For compelling accounts, see Alain Lipietz, *Towards a New Economic Order: Postfordism, Ecology and Democracy*, trans. Malcolm Slater (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 164-82; Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams: Culture and Capital in the North* (New York: Verso, 1997): 188-213.
 18. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: the Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); see especially chapter 1.
 19. The literature on the regulation school is prodigious, and some of it highly contestatory. Its central text is Michel Aglietta's *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: the U. S. Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 1987); other helpful accounts of the crisis of Fordism are Alain Lipietz, *Mirages and Miracles: the Crises of Global Fordism*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 1987); idem, *The Enchanted World: Inflation, Credit, World Crisis*, trans. Ian Patterson (London: Verso, 1985); for some more critical accounts that draw helpful connections between the regulation school and economic geography, see Michael Storper and Allen Scott eds., *Pathways to Industrialization and Regional Development* (New York: Routledge: 1992).
 20. Clyde Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990): 14.
 21. "Financial Aid at Record High, But Shifting toward Unsubsidized Loans," *College Board Review* 179 (1996): 24; Karen W. Arenson, "Aid Cuts Put College Education Beyond Reach of College Students," *New York Times* 27 Jan. 1997: B1+.
 22. "State Tuition Rose Faster Than Inflation," *Associated Press* 19 Aug. 1996: A10.
 23. Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*, 235ff; 383-87.
 24. See, on this point, Phyllis Vine, "To Market, To Market . . . : The School Business Sells Kids Short," *Nation* 8/15 Sep 1997: 11-17; on outsourcing prison work, see Christian Parenti, "Making Prison Pay," *Nation* 29 Jan 1996: 11-14; idem, "Life in Prison: Pay Now, Pay Later," *Progressive* 60.7 (1996): 26-29.
 25. Clyde Barrow, "The New Economy and the Restructuring of Higher Education," *Thought and Action: the NEA Higher Education Journal* 12. X (1996): 37-54.
 26. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1996): see especially 1-53.
 27. On supply side policies in education, see Gary Rhoades and Shiela Slaughter, "Academic Capitalism, Managed Professionals, and Supply-Side Higher Education," *Social Text* 51 (1997): 9-38.
 28. Kevin Sack, "Eager and Flush, Many States Plan Yet More Tax Cuts," *New York Times* 4 Jan. 1998: A1+.

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