

It's Too Late, Baby, Now, It's Too Late—Losing Sleep over Late Capitalism and Higher Education

Michael Thomas

Academe in Late Capitalism

Jonathan Crary's polemic on *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2014), examines the extreme consequences of ubiquitous techno-capitalism that has seemingly succeeded in monetising every waking moment of every day—so much so, in fact, that it encroaches on the healthy rhythms of a person's sleep. To illustrate this point, Crary describes Joseph Wright's painting from 1782 entitled, *Arkwright's Cotton Mills by Night*, which shows a stream of light emanating from each window of a five-storey industrial mill, powerfully illuminating the darkness as workers labour tirelessly through the night, moving to the noise of their new mechanical looms. The painting reminds me of a scene I encountered in Japan while walking through a city at 2am. Out of the darkness shone the '24/7' sign of the local convenience store, like a cube of incandescent white light, the shapes of the shop assistants clearly visible within, and the rows of neatly parked night workers' cars queuing outside.

While in Arkwright's painting, which contrasts the light in the centre of the image representing the new industrial age with darkness in the foreground, representing the passing age of agrarianism, might be described as a showcase of the transformative power of the industrial revolution, Crary interprets it as symbol of the new temporality of the mill which has invaded the collective physical and psychological landscape. Divided into two 12-hour rotating shifts of workers, the mill represents the erosion of pre- and post-industrialisation modes of time. In the dark foreground of the painting, a

farmer walking on foot is transporting his goods to market via a packhorse. In the lighter background, the mill at Cromford, which was the first water-powered cotton spinning mill in England in 1771, represents the promise of the new industrial world replenished by the whirling machines and endless cycles of productivity. By implication, today's commodity capitalism, driven by the rhythms of post-industrial digital culture in Crary's other examples, eats into the body's natural cycles of sleep, rest and recovery, making every moment an opportunity to be productive 24/7, with little time for non-productive time, thoughts, reflection or recovery.

The term 'late capitalism', which epitomises the development of nonstop global capitalism in the two centuries since Wright's painting, has evolved over the course of the twentieth century. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson read late capitalism through the lens of postmodernism, not only as an economic but as a cultural aesthetic. According to Jameson, "What 'late' generally conveys is ... the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive." Economically this has led multinational corporations to become transnational, spanning national borders and employing flexible labour from around the world as a result of globalisation. They are driven by the need for constant innovation, greater efficiency, constant production and endless growth, come what may. No longer content with working in the factory, post-pandemic home-working has blurred the physical and mental relationships between work, leisure and family times, as people now 'live at the office'.

This spirit of 'late capitalism' has deeply affected the commodification and internationalisation of higher education, making it subject to the whims of the market. So far this year, reports Tom Williams in "Universities 'Risk Grinding to a Halt' as Job Cuts Deepen" (2024), over 50 UK universities have announced redundancy packages for academic and/or professional service staff. In recent years several largescale events have affected higher educational institutions, including Brexit in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-22, and most recently, the downturn in international student enrolments. However, the undercurrent of these changes can be associated with the shifting landscape of higher education, as the traditional values of scholarship and critical enquiry have given way to those of marketisation, competition and cycles of boom and bust. Marketisation, the argument goes, will automatically lead to competition and, as if by magic, produce efficient educational systems that recognise and promote diversity of thought. However, with the bureaucratisation of staff time and the digitalisation of processes, says Williams in "Research Time at Risk as Nine in 10 Post-92 Universities Cut Jobs" (2024), the ever-greater desire for efficiency, productiveness and quality, may also eliminate rather than preserve opportunities to think differently within the system.

The anticipated decline in international student numbers in the 'UK market' has been a consequence of a changing post-Brexit government rhetoric on issuing visas to international students and a clampdown on immigration, which has risen sharply in recent years. As universities seek to make savings, Arts, Humanities and Social Science subject areas in particular find themselves once more in the firing line, particularly those offering what the Government continues to call, but has as yet not identified, 'Mickey Mouse' or 'rip off' degrees. For this, read those degrees that do not offer the

possibility of obtaining graduate level jobs or an effective return on the now substantial investment required to undertake undergraduate courses. 'Value for money' and 'employability' lie behind the focus on STEM subjects as universities try to sell their products in an increasingly unforgiving marketplace for students and staff alike. The separation of the arts and humanities from more technical and vocational subjects, argues Jeffrey Di Leo in *Catastrophe and Higher Education* (2021), has meant that critique and critical thinking are perceived as dangerous skills rather than those that protect free speech. Managerialism driven by a consumerist logic has turned universities into factory production lines for vocational subjects. The right to study has been replaced by a private investment in a future job. Universities compete on everything from food to the largest and most spectacular buildings to attract and retain their market share and customer base. Students approach university courses now, says Di Leo in *Selling the Humanities* (2023) as a commodity or service that they have bought and which entitles them to attend or not as they wish and to seek an instant return on investment.

Another cause of the current crisis is the perceived freeze on undergraduate tuition fees, which according to employers, no longer cover universities' costs, having not kept pace with inflation since 2015. Thousands of academics face the prospect of crisis and emergency meetings over the coming summer months. While the research-intensive universities, by which we mean the more selective institutions which require higher entry grades, and who at the same time admit a much greater number of privately educated undergraduate students, have been able to benefit from the government's decision to remove the cap on students numbers in 2019. This has meant that they have in many cases been able to increase the number of students, while

modern universities have felt the squeeze, as they have lost students who would otherwise have chosen them, and they are no longer able to offer arts and humanities subjects to their students who come from predominantly working class backgrounds. Arts and humanities subjects are being concentrated in the elite and selective universities. Widening participation institutions can no longer offer them and their students no longer study languages and literature, history, religion and philosophy, which among other subjects, are surplus to requirements and the preserve of the middle classes.

Late Style

The idea of 'late style' as a distinctive period in an artist's life continues to be influential. It describes an approach, typically the result of reflection or a response to significant change, that describes an artist's final years. More so than the changes that might distinguish any other period in an artist's life, a 'late style' is often perceived to relate to a crisis that results in a sudden re-evaluation of all that went before, or a deepening of particularly important aspects of earlier works, which now receive more prominence. 'Lateness' might be distinguished by melancholy or anger or a range of complex emotions. It might be the consequence of reflecting on a life finally cut free of restraints, or a reorientation that focuses on what really matters in an unfettered and unconditional form, expressed with an earlier or youthful spark of creativity.

Near the end of his own life, Edward Said (2006) reflected in *On Late Style* (2006) on what he calls a "new idiom", namely "the late period of life, the decay of the body, the onset of ill health or other factors that even in a younger person bring on the possibility of an untimely end." Said asks whether this late style enables one to "grow wiser with age, and [if] there [are] unique qualities of perception and form that artists

acquire as a result of age in the late phase of their career?" Referring to late Shakespearean works such as *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Said identifies a spirit of "maturity", "reconciliation and serenity", or even "holiness" and "resolution." Evidence of this sense of mature resolution are also evident, he argues, in the later works of Rembrandt, Matisse, Bach and Wagner. With Verdi's later works of *Othello* and *Falstaff*, there is an "almost youthful energy that attest to the apotheosis of artistic creativity and power." Similar evidence is found in Rembrandt, Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But this sense of a final period of life which results in resolution, harmony and solace may amount to nothing but a form of contrived false optimism in the face of unreconcilable contradictions.

In opposition to this, what is fascinating to Said is the idea that age and ill health do not produce a late style based on resolution or reinforce humanistic ideas of age, wisdom, growth and maturity. For Said, lateness may also manifest itself as "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradictions." This new idiom is also perceived in the late Ibsen, who turned away from serenity with anger in works such as *When We Dead Awaken*, "to stir up more anxiety, tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before." This results in a "nonharmonious, nonserene tension ... a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*." Taking his cue from Adorno, late style may not demonstrate ripening as a natural process, then, but as Heike Hartung argues in "Late Style as Exile: De/colonising the Life Course" (2016), manifest itself as a "negative aesthetics, described as an elliptical style that rejects closure, indicated in Said's own style by the unfinished sentence of 'going against.'" Said's concern with lateness

reveals not only a concern with lateness as an ending, but lateness, as he maintains in *Beginnings* (1975), as an opportunity to explore one's beginnings.

While this notion of late style has been explored in relation to the works of individual artists, do academics or academe have a late style? Prominent critiques have been aimed at neoliberalism from all quarters, including Stefan Collini's *What are Universities For* (2012) and *Speaking of Universities* (2017), and Thomas Docherty's *For the University* (2011) and *Universities at War* (2017), often from academics in the later stage of their careers, such as Henry Giroux's *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (2014) and *On Critical Pedagogy* (2020), or those emeriti nearing or post-retirement. And yet, the spirit of neoliberalism easily consumes these products—eats them for breakfast in fact—nonchalantly integrating and parading them from within their own research excellence exercises, draining them of their power of critique, and even celebrating their achievements; all the while, not changing one iota, but growing stronger from them. While countless waves of neoliberal critique have persuasively diagnosed the ills of the unhealthy 'late' academic body, few have been able to outline a cure, and fewer cures to the maladies still seem to interest the patient.

Losing Sleep

My head aches in the centre of my brow and I feel numb. I wake at 03:49am. It's not unusual these days. The first light of dawn is already breaking through the narrow gap between the curtains. As I poke my head out from under the blankets, I'm already thinking about the day ahead. Feedback to several PhD students by late afternoon. Chase up finance about an invoice payment for a project. A grant application is stuck in the approval system. Several writing commitments, articles and book chapters, including this one, linger on the horizon. I really shouldn't have said yes. Fear and

weariness keep me going. Academics I know have just told me their department is ‘at risk’ (again) due to spending cuts and another round of redundancy has just begun. I’ve lost count but it must be four rounds in the last 10 years. Redundancy is becoming the norm of academic life. Some universities appear to have a form of ‘perpetual redundancy’, cutting departments and staffing when times are bad, and taking on flexible part-time staff when student numbers go up. It’s a vicious cycle. It’s brutal. The system pits ‘at risk’ colleague against ‘at risk’ colleague, ‘at risk’ team against ‘at risk’ team. It is not unthinkable, maintains Williams in “Universities “Risk Grinding to a Halt as Jobs Cuts Deepen,” that a public university may go bankrupt this year or next.

It’s difficult to navigate this landscape as I near the last decade of my career. For some, half in love with the idea of an easeful retirement, leaving such strife might seem attractive. Now more than ever. For some, this ‘late period’ may lead to new life and reconciliation or to anger and disharmony. Or, taking my cue from Said, it may lead to a “sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*.” An opportunity for a new beginning. Do we wake or sleep?

Michael Thomas is Professor of Education and Social Justice and Director of the Centre for Educational Research (CERES) at Liverpool John Moores University in England. His primary research focus is on social justice across a range of sectors from higher education to schools. His current externally funded projects explore inequalities related to gender, social class, disabilities and digital technologies in Ghana, Botswana, South Africa, Nigeria and China.