

## The Life and Death of the University

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In the last few weeks, much emphasis has been placed on the impact that the unprecedented increase in tuition fees will have on the life of the university and, beyond the university's boundaries, on the life of future students themselves. But oddly it seems that the real import of the cuts to Higher Education proposed by the current government will remain hidden, or is dissimulated, as long as we do not take on board the reason why student fees are to be raised so significantly. This is because the Arts, the Humanities and the Social Sciences will no longer receive teaching grants from the government. It is the privatisation of an essential part of the university that leads to the proposal that tuition fees should be raised. So by dividing or splitting it up, the government and all who support its policies in matters of Higher Education, are destroying the life of the university, are putting the university to death. When students say that the university is going to die, when, symbolically, they carry the university to its grave, they are only showing what the government is doing to the university, they are denouncing the violence that is threatening the university's life. The students are calling things by their names instead of pussyfooting around the death of the university, and they are doing so because they want the university to remain alive.

Everybody knows that fees alone cannot sustain the Arts, the Humanities and the Social Sciences in the university, and that in a situation of total competition for money, whether it comes from fees or from private funding, the university cannot survive. Where it survives, its life will be transformed radically: it will survive only as a simulacrum of life, a death worse than death, a life of zombies, with students no longer being students but clients and consumers, and with academics no longer being academics but replaceable entities in a service industry designed to satisfy the desires of clients and consumers who pay a high price for such satisfaction. Today, the value of an academic is already measured against his ability to provide money by being successful at getting enormous grants. The model of the academic is the networker and the lobbyist, not the researcher and the teacher.

What is happening now should not come as a surprise. It is not a sudden and unexpected development. Rather, it is the end of a process which has been in place for a long time. What is happening now is only the final takeover of administration. Everybody knows that for more than twenty years now, administration has been taking over the university, in the UK perhaps more so than elsewhere in Europe. For when the Arts, the Humanities and the Social Sciences can exist on the basis of fees only, we have a situation of total accountability. The more the administration takes over the university, the more it subordinates the life of the university to the principle of accountability. Universities must be profitable and sustainable. With the withdrawal of teaching grants, this principle sways over the life of the university and substitutes a university that is actually dead for a university that is truly alive. Given how long the process has lasted, given how much academics have become used to it as if it were the most normal thing in the world that the principle of accountability reigns supreme in the university, one should not be too surprised at the fact that many academics prefer not to speak out in the face of cuts that will amount to an undermining of the university: be it out of fear for their jobs, or out of conformism, opportunism, and personal interest, or even out of a conviction that there can be no other university. The life of the university depends ultimately on an idea, on an idea that was conceived in the Humanities, precisely. It

depends on the acknowledgment that the university is that rare and strange place where things can be taught, where research can be conducted, that cannot be accounted for, not immediately and perhaps not even in the long run. What politicians and their accomplices in the university seem to forget is that unless there is such a space, the life of the society, social life itself is destroyed. If it is to resist death, life depends on a surplus, on the superfluous and the excessive, on what cannot be measured, calculated, integrated, put to work.

As always, the deadly risk that we run when faced with a deadly prospect such as the final takeover of the university by administration, by the principle of accountability and sustainability, is to forget that it is in a time when everything seems to be at stake that everything must be staked. The life of the university must be vouchsafed by students and academics reclaiming the university, reversing a political process that will result in the death of the university: the process which submits the university to the administration, to total accountability. Why is this a time when everything is at stake? Because the arguments, including the ones I have sketched out here, are all well known, and still are not heard anymore.

The university is the place of students and academics, and it is they who must run it.

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