**Apocalypse Chic**

For some professors, a shallow, fashionable nihilism is all the rage.

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By CHARLIE TYSON

Not long ago I was at an event on literature and climate change. Like the other graduate students, all of us too fearful to sit at the main seminar table, I contorted myself into a small chair in the corner of the room. I was stuffing Goldfish crackers in my mouth, trying to silence my crunching that threatened at every moment to overwhelm the sedate banter about the Anthropocene, when one literary scholar ended his remarks with a pronouncement.

“The fight against climate change,” said the tenured professor, “is already lost. What’s left to us is to cultivate new modes of becoming.”

The audience nodded sagely and clapped. Cheeks distended with Goldfish, I clapped too.

The sharp, dark turn that closed the presentation was, I had learned, conventional. In certain corners of the academic humanities, this pessimistic certainty — the conviction that the fight for some valued object, be it the humanities or the university or the planet itself, is lost — has become a recognizable style of thought. Negative prophecy is sometimes accompanied by the promise of baroque subversions: new “modes of becoming,” new “praxes of ambiguity,” new “gestures toward the inarticulable,” that make defeat sexy and alluring.

It’s not hard to see the appeal. Being radical used to take a lot of work. Endless demonstrations to attend, tortuous treatises on the proletariat shoved into one’s mailbox. Now all one needs to do is succumb, conspicuously, to hopelessness.

After all: it’s 2019, Trump is president, the planet is on fire. What could be more fashionable than fatalism?

Like many habits of mind that circulate through academia, fashionable fatalism is hard to pin down. It enters our speech more often in conference talks, Q&A sessions, or on academic Twitter than in the peer-reviewed literature; its procedures and assumptions approach conventional wisdom in some quarters but are rarely explicitly argued for. But on many of our activities it diffuses a residue of pollen-like dust, toxic to breathe in but impossible to avoid.

A representative example will bring the contours of this style of argument into focus. To avoid putting undue pressure on an arbitrarily selected conference paper or Twitter post, I have chosen a case of a well-known scholar addressing a public audience.

Last year, soon after the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point announced a proposal (later abandoned) to cut 13 academic majors in the liberal arts (including English, history, philosophy, and political science), Stanley Fish asked what arguments, if any, might persuade a skeptical public of the value of research and teaching in the humanities.

In an essay that addresses the list of common defenses of humanistic study assembled by Helen Small in The Value of the Humanities (Oxford University Press, 2013), Fish considers various arguments used to “sell” the humanities to the public. These include the seemingly indisputable observation that humanities courses impart useful transferable skills, as well as the claim that the humanities help students build capacities that assist in democratic citizenship, such as the ability to differentiate valid arguments from raw assertions or to sympathetically adopt another person’s perspective.

He rejects them all. The popular justifications for the humanities, Fish asserts, are false, partial, or incapable of persuading people outside of the academy. (He endorses only a claim of intrinsic value — that the humanities are worth studying for their own sake.) Campaigns for the humanities that draw on the available arguments are futile. The digital humanities, for their part, are “fool’s gold” and offer no chance for a humanities revival. His conclusion is to stop trying. “If things proceed as they have been,” he warns, “in the end we’ll all go the way of Stevens Point.”

Fish’s essay is more responsible than some academic manifestations of fashionable fatalism. He considers opposing views, however cursorily. And he keeps his distance from the pose of moral superiority and self-righteousness that the fashionable fatalist is fond of adopting. He claims no leftist bona fides.

Still, his piece makes plain some characteristic features of this attitude. We see the dismissal of proposed attempts to mitigate a bad situation, as well as the light condescension toward the misguided (in his words, “delusional”) people fighting a battle they can’t win. We notice the tendency to regard political outcomes as binary (win or loss) rather than scalar (losses vary in magnitude). We also glimpse in Fish’s case some sociological pressures toward fashionable fatalism. Anyone can weaponize melancholy; but distinguished older professors who have lived through the declining prestige of the humanities and of humanistic forms of knowledge — who have seen their own power and possibilities diminish within their lifetime — may be especially vulnerable.

Fashionable fatalism is often practiced by academia’s putative leftists, whose projects of resistance have left them world-weary. But it should be clear already that this argumentative style is not just complacent but cynically conservative. By pronouncing the uselessness of action, it bows to the status quo.

In fact, in its urbane rejection of constructive impulses, fashionable fatalism resembles nothing so much as a classic piece of right-wing rhetoric: what the great economist A.O. Hirschman identified in his Rhetoric of Reaction (Harvard University Press, 1991) as the “futility thesis.” The futility thesis claims that any attempt to change society — by implementing universal suffrage, or delivering goods to the poor through the apparatus of a welfare state — will be, at best, cosmetic. The deep structures of society remain untouched. Thus, progressive reform is futile. (Think about contemporary American arguments about laws regulating guns, and conservative declarations that gun control will not diminish violence.) Dead-end pessimism about social change is not always purveyed by conservatives. But it is almost always reactionary.

The fashionable fatalist knows a few things you and I don’t. Above all, he knows that the political and economic structures that shape our lives are too big to flip. Therefore, any attempt to improve material conditions for real people — short perhaps of revolution, to which he will sometimes gravely allude, as if he has a meeting with left-wing militias scheduled after his office hours — is futile. People who strive to mitigate human misery by winning attention for chosen causes or conducting campaigns for political and legal reform reveal at best their ignorance and naïveté, at worst their complicity with the system. There is something ridiculous, after all, about striving.

What remains for us, then, in the way of political action? Just the knowledge of sure destruction, and the sense of superiority that accompanies cynical prophecy.

Quite often, the fashionable fatalist is comfortably insulated from the plight to which (he assures you) there is no solution. Perhaps you have met other distinguished senior professors who, like Fish, declare that there is no institutional future for the humanities, and thus no reason to try to persuade detractors of their value. (Presumably the exact death date of humanistic study will coincide with the retirement of these great gentlemen.) Other variations occur as well, all involving blithe apocalyptic speech made from a position of security. Take for instance the historian-editor of a hip, leftist journal who asserts that “there is no ground … that would permit us to believe the human species can survive the impending disaster” of climate chaos. Or a group of scholars who, from the safety of their tenure-track positions, wonder if the academic jobs crisis might not be a “cleansing flame.”

Now, cynical passivity is not peculiar to academia. In an age in which the American political system has become increasingly remote from, and unresponsive to, the needs of the public, scholars are by no means the only constituency of the democracy who feel disempowered.

But fashionable fatalism as a sensibility has found a hospitable home in the university, especially in the humanities. Why? There are some intellectual and attitudinal affinities between fatalism and the traditions of critique and negative skeptical assessment as developed in literary studies and related fields. Fashionable fatalism, however, is not just a deformed offshoot of critique. Here institutional conditions explain more than internal intellectual trends. Professionals in the humanities are demoralized by dwindling undergraduate enrollments, declining public respect, right-wing attacks that caricature humanistic study as evidence-free ideological indoctrination, and a lack of jobs even for the most promising researchers in the field. In what looks like a losing battle, hopelessness becomes a form of armor. As a style of argument that always reaches the same mournful conclusions, fashionable fatalism harnesses the academy’s ambient despair.

That despair is widespread in the humanities should be no surprise. The collapse of undergraduate humanities enrollments and the Ph.D. job market, Eric Hayot wrote last year, has led “to a kind of learned helplessness” among professors watching their disciplines die, thinking: “There’s nothing I can do. At least I’ll be dead before it’s all over.” Such attitudes are unhelpful, but perhaps understandable. But fashionable fatalism is different from genuine despair. It involves pessimism shot through with condescension, joined with the reflexive dismissal of proposed remedies. The fashionable fatalist does not undertake a careful examination of worrying trend lines and decide that giving up is, in some specific case, the most rational course of action. Instead, she derives narcissistic solace — the thrill of martyrdom — from her unshakable certainty that matters can never improve.

Though a familiar pose, fashionable fatalism remains a minority taste. And fatalism has its uses: a dose of astringency can be a needed credibility check against blinkered optimism. But in some regions of the humanities, a certain style of smug resignation — a knowing quietism that applauds its own radicality — has become the default way of dealing with problems and difficulties.

Anna Kornbluh, of the University of Illinois at Chicago, recently called on her colleagues in literary studies to “get building” — to create compelling stories linking the university to the advancement of general human interests, and to strengthen the institutions in which we work. That’s exactly right. Vicious cycles of ironic passivity offer some shallow comfort. But fashionable fatalism is a snare. In colleges and universities across the country, energy is gathering for something more — signaled, for one, by a wave of unionization movements among graduate students.

In the end I can’t bring myself to judge the fashionable fatalist too harshly. Systemic conditions in academia have enlarged some of our worst qualities: resentment, fear, resignation. But I don’t think we should listen to him, either. The feeling of helplessness in matters of grave importance is not a problem faced just by academic humanists. It is a universal human predicament. How we respond may teach us something about ourselves.

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