On leaving academia and the need to take refuge

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Citation

Hesselberth, P. (2020). On leaving academia and the need to take refuge. In J. de Bloois (Ed.), *Politics of withdrawal: media, art, theory* (pp. 147-160). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3243720

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3243720

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Chapter Ten

On Leaving Academia and the Need to Take Refuge

Pepita Hesselberth

ON LEAVING ACADEMIA[1]

In the early 2010s a surge of articles began appearing in Anglophone (online) magazines and newspapers such as *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, even *The Guardian*, *Vox*, *Slate Magazine*, and *Nature*, as well as on numerous personal blogs, on the topic of "leaving academia." In unison, or so it seemed, (soon-to-be) former academics—from PhDs and postdocs to adjuncts and tenure-tracked professors—began to report on why they felt compelled to leave a profession to which, in general, they nonetheless felt committed. Indeed, by the-mid 2010s, the raucous subgenre had become so commonplace in the United States that Rebecca Schuman (2013b), an academic turned freelance writer, dubbed it "quit-lit," a term that—although still used widely—is as problematic as it is catchy.[2] The precipitous collapse of the academic job market, and the changing landscape of higher education in response to neoliberal reforms, have continued to sustain this outpouring of reflections about leaving academia. I am one of this niche genre's riveted readers.

The reasons reported for leaving are manifold and often vary, but certain themes suffuse these essays. First, the working conditions: the precarity, the

1. This chapter (and book) were borne out of my project on "Disconnectivity in the Digital Age," which was supported by the Danish Council for Independent Research Humanities | Culture & Communication (grant no. 5050-00043B). I thank Joost de Bloois, Jim Gibbons, Mireille Rosello, and in particular Yasco Horsman for their productive comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2. It took me to finish this chapter to realize how much the term "quit lit" echoes "chick lit," a resemblance that, given the chapter's overall argument, should not (have) come as a surprise.

Schuman's piece on quit-lit followed her "Thesis Hatement" (2013a), a critique of higher education published just a few months earlier. She would later state that "Thesis Hatement" had been a "traumatic experience" that "burned (her) bridge with academia forever" (2016).

humiliating succession of temporary contracts, the low pay, the lack of career-development support, the insane working hours, the continual demand for relocation, the overall dearth of future prospects in the field. Second, the changing landscape of higher education itself: its ever increasing bureaucracy, its audit-culture, the erosion of resources devoted to scholarship, its management by metrics, its orientation toward research grants, and the general privileging of economic over academic values, along with the consumerism and grade inflation that now seem to lie at the heart of the academic enterprise. Third, the incentives within the university system itself, which are seen to challenge the declared principles of equality, autonomy, and self-determination for its participants, as well as the norms of appropriate assessment and behaviour. Here I would count the failures to properly address (sexual) harassment and to guarantee academic freedom in the face of financialized targets and the assertion of corporate interests.[3] Fourth, and finally, issues of mental health and general well-being are repeatedly brought up: the liminal nature of the experience in academia, the absence of a healthful work-life balance, and the constant stress and anxiety relating to everything I've outlined above; the pressure to publish, the competitive atmosphere, the acutely felt imposter syndrome, the fear of failure, and (especially, though not solely, upon leaving) the loss of identity and of peers (individual colleagues as well as the sense of belonging to a group).[4]

To be sure, there are also individuals for whom leaving is not so much about diverging from a once-chosen path or opting-out but rather about opting-in to something new, something (more) exciting, something to look forward to: a new job, a change of environment, a different lifestyle. Even as many feel pushed away from academia, others feel pulled toward some other, presumably better livelihood. As Anne Trubek (2013) remarks, contemplating giving up her tenured position in order to expand her career as a freelance writer: "It is a job, being a tenured professor. Just a job." So indeed: "Why not leave?" At times one can, as Trubek observes, detect a sense of self-importance in academics, and "a certain exceptionalism and a tinge of arrogance" in some of the essays of those who have left. A striking example here is Michael Edwards, who concludes his rant on "Leaving UK Academia" in

3. Today we could add additional political pressures, such the invocation on the right of the specter of "cultural Marxism" in its critique of higher education, though, to date, such pressures are rarely if ever mentioned in the "leaving academia" debate. See, for example, Jordan Peterson in an appearance on the Fox News program *Fox & Friends* (Peterson 2018); the "hotline" for reporting left-wing indoctrination at schools and universities of the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands (Renaissance Instituut 2019); or, for that matter, Anders Breivik's stated motivations for massacring young social democrats in Norway in 2011 (for an insightful commentary, see Wilson [2015]).

4. The terminology used is not theoretical in intent but derives from the debate itself. For an elaboration on the term "liminal experience" vis-à-vis precarity, see, for example, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016).

"I Quit!" (2017) by stating that he will leave his privileged UK post for a position in Germany—jumping (professor)ship so to speak. "I won't gloat about the conditions there," he writes. "Let's just say it is expected of me to do my job." Some of these frustrated academics depart in silence (in fact, most of the leaving still occurs quietly), others leave with a bang.[5] And then there are those who leave one privileged position for another and still feel compelled to make a huge statement about it at the expense of those who are left behind: students, colleagues, peers. Not everyone has that kind of privilege. That, at least in part, is precisely the point.[6]

Overwhelmingly, though, for those who leave and end up writing about it, their departures are neither instigated nor followed by openings and opportunities. Rather, they are a form of retreat or withdrawal.

OED
Retreat
VERB

1. To cause to move back or withdraw; to pull back; *esp.* to pull back (an army, troops, etc.), [. . .] to fall back from a place or position, esp. after a defeat or when confronted by a superior force.

Combining incisive criticism with a strong reliance on personal narratives, today's essays on leaving academia, Grant Shreve (2018) observes, contrary to those of the 1970s, often "marshal intense feelings—of rage and grief and everything in between." Indeed, they are a testimony to the "author's desire to publicly validate their private feelings at being shut out of a profession they have spent a significant portion of adulthood pursuing."[7] The centrality of such needs explains why, as Shreve and others have pointed out, the term "quit lit" is so misleading. "I do not know one person with a PhD who is a quitter," writes Ellen Kirkpatrick (2019) in a recent post in *Times Higher Education*. She therefore proposes to call the genre "exit lit": "People are leaving academia not because they are quitters but because the system is broken."

Indeed, the real problem, the ongoing outpouring of articles seems to suggest, is (that these feelings are) systemic: the essays, I contend, take on the shape of testimonials precisely because the affective has become intertwined with the institutional.

5. Also, see, for example, Lee (2015), who on his blog makes his scholarship and teaching philosophy ("modeled on Jacques Rancière's concept of 'intellectual emancipation'") the cornerstone of his self-presentation while offering his "ghostwriting services" for full-length dissertations (n.d.).

6. As Trubek remarks in passing, most of the professors she interviewed who gave up tenure to pursue other goals were not parents of children and were therefore less risk-averse.

7. Indeed, the phenomenon is not new, Shreve points out, but dates from the 1970s, when PhDs first began to outnumber the tenure-track jobs available to them.

"This is my story," writes Sarah Ahmed (2016), announcing her public resignation from Goldsmith College, UCL in protest against "sexual harassment as institutional culture."

"It is personal.

The personal is institutional" [italics in text].

Tapping into what Heidi Hartmann has referred to as the "great thrust of radical feminist writing" (2013, 191)—i.e., the thinking coalescing around the 1960s' consciousness-raising slogan "the personal is political,"[8] as well as its rephrasing as "the institutional is political" by Gillies and Lucey (2007, 2) in the mid-2000s to call attention to the "everyday processes of negotiating institutional power relations" that generally remain invisible—Ahmed's resignation draws on a long tradition of feminist activist writing in which the personal is leveraged as a catalyst for social change.[9] "To resign," Ahmed writes, "is a tipping point, a gesture that becomes necessary because of what the previous actions did not accomplish. [. . .] *Resigning was speaking out.* It was saying: this is serious enough that I have had enough" [italics in text]. For Ahmed, then, "resignation is a feminist issue." And in this she is not alone. For Liz Morrish (2017), the emergent audit-culture was what triggered the "feminist snap—the moment at which your faith in academia finally yields to terminal antipathy." Like Ahmed and some of the other prominent voices within the leaving-academia debate, Morrish continues her activist work outside of academia, writing (and earning her living writing) on, among other topics, the state of higher education today.[10] Indeed, one cannot help but note that, unlike in the scholarly discourse on exiting—where, Sarah Sharma (2017) has rightly pointed out, contemplations regarding exiting or exodus as a form of "engaged withdrawal (or founding leave-taking)"[11] are dominated by men—most of these essays about *actually leaving* academia (with the odd exception—yes, there are a few) have been written by women.

In what is perhaps one of the most often read, quoted, and indeed echoed contributions within the leaving-academia debate, eloquently entitled "The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind," Erin Bartram (2018) strikes a somewhat different chord. Adhering to the same tradition of feminist activist writing discussed above, the essay opens with Bartram's final job rejection. Contemplating the "abundance of quit-lit out there," she observes that

8. The slogan was popularized by Carol Hanisch in her 1969 essay of the same title republished on her blog (2009).

9. Key texts in this tradition of (feminist) personal criticism include, besides Ahmed's own work (and most notably *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [2004]), Haraway (1988), Miller (1991), Freedman et al. (1993), Gallop (2002), Hirsch and Smith (2002), Hirsch (2012).

10. See, for example, Morrish's blog and ongoing book project "Academic Irregularities" (e.g., 2019). Other examples, besides Ahmed, include Schumann and Bartram to whom I will turn below.

11. The phrase is Virno's (date unknown), but the examples are myriad.

> [t]he genre is almost universally written by those leaving, not those left behind, a reflection of the way we insulate ourselves from grappling what it means for dozens, hundreds, thousands of our colleagues to leave the field.

Situating herself as someone who, despite her immanent departure, is still an insider in the world of higher education, Bartram invokes here the grief of the leaving and the left behind—a rhetorical choice that clearly plucked the heartstrings of many readers, judging by the massive outpouring of responses, of the leaving and the left behind alike, after the essay's publication.[12] Bartram's essay is conspicuous in its acknowledgment of the "disavowed work of mourning" that comes with exiting.[13] With Bartram, then, the "leaving academia" debate quickly went from "it's ok to quit" (no, you are not a failure) to "it's ok to grieve" (and if you are not grieving, perhaps you should be). Yet the essay also warrants some caution, powerful though it may be. Critics have pointed out that its undergirding grief (Shreve), nostalgia (Pryal), or melancholy (in line with Joost de Bloois's contribution to this volume) reveals Bartram's inability to detach herself from the object of loss in the present, i.e., the myth of the academic good life (once a potential, now lost). "No wonder [the essay] was so appealing to so many," writes Katie Pryal, author of *The Freelance Academic* (2019): "even while forced out, Bartram still looks upon the field with love" (2018). "This," Wendy Brown (1999, 20) suggests in "Resisting Left Melancholy," "is what renders melancholia a persistent condition, a state, indeed, a structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss." As such, Bartram's calling upon the grief of the left behind, Shreve points out, possesses as great a potential to reinforce as to dismantle the (academic) status quo.[14]

Yet it would be a mistake to accuse Bartram, as Pryal does, of failing to provide a genuine critique of academic labour. Quite the contrary. In Bartram, I argue, labour precarity, perhaps for the first time, takes on the form we fear the most: the exhaustion and annihilation of our productive labour powers, and the (feared) reality of no future, no identity, and—above all—no wage. Resignation here still features not as a last instrument of empowerment but rather as the ultimate sign, and materialization, of disempowerment: her surrender. "[B]uy me a cup of tea," reads the essay's final, uncomfortable words.

Now tea is not a wage. Buying someone a cup of tea is an alter-economic transaction, a form of bonding in friendship or, as perhaps in this case, solidarity. Yet at the same time, caffeinated beverages such as tea and coffee

12. On the essay's critical reception, and Bartram's response to it, see, for example, Brown (2018).

13. See Joost de Bloois's contribution to this volume on "Melancholic Retreat," 69–84.

14. Indeed, as Shreve points out, the essay has already been repurposed along these lines (e.g., Cassuto 2018).

are work-related stimulants par excellence, in the sense that they help make the exhausted body productive again. The same can be argued in relation to Bartram's blog and of the "leaving academia" blog more generally: publicly saying goodbye to academia de facto figures as an instance of self-promotion, which makes the author's labour productive again as a "knowledge worker" (to be) employed outside the academic realm.

ON THE NEED TO TAKE REFUGE

If the "leaving academia" debate strikes deep chords of recognition, I suspect it does so because it speaks to affective embodied experiences that impinge on the leaving and the left behind alike: all those feelings of exhaustion, precarity, stress, anxiety, overload, anger, shame, competitiveness, grief, guilt, and so on—experiences which the sociologist and feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill (2013) calls the "hidden injuries of neoliberal academia." What Gill's ruminations suggest is that the "leaving academia" debate reflects more than an upwelling of the wretched or courageous few, i.e., the departing—rather, it points to a permanent state or condition. While, for those working in academia, such experiences are "at once ordinary and every day," Gill observes, "at the same time [they] remain largely secret and silenced within the public spaces of the academy," where they lack "'proper channels' of communication." Indeed, Gill writes, "[f]or all the interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the experiences of academics have somehow largely escaped critical attention."[15] Instead,

> [t]hey are spoken in a different, less privileged register; they are the stuff of the chat in the corridor, coffee break conversations and intimate exchanges between friends, but not, it would seem, the keynote speech or the journal publication, or even the departmental meeting. (229)

The "leaving academia" debate is so compelling precisely because it unveils some of these "hidden injuries" and "gives voice" to affective embodied experiences that hitherto were hearable only "as a 'moan,' as an expression of complaint or unhappiness, rather than being formulated as an analysis or a (political) demand for change" (Gill, 230).

What Gill's reflections on the "hidden injuries" of working in academia thus make clear is that the very predicament that makes people leave academia and then write about it is practically indistinguishable from what enables them to work and *survive* working in Higher Education during times of radical uncertainty in the first place—in a nutshell, our passionate attachment to the work on the one hand, and, on the other and often simultaneously, our attuned withdrawal from it through various forms of resignation (fatigued, triumphant, defeated, infuriated, subdued, and so on). Such, writes Lauren Berlant, is the "cruel optimism" of the (academic) good-life fantasy: it is what enables us to endure all the uncertainty and (self-)exhaustion, and what binds us ever more tightly into the neoliberal regime.

15. Since the time of her writing, things have slowly started to shift, not least due to Gill's own critical interventions (see for example, Gill 2014; and Gill and Donaghue 2016). Other notable examples include, to name but a few, Berg and Seeber's *The Slow Professor* (2016) and De Coster and Zononi's "Governing through Accountability" (2019).

Well acquainted as I am with the various forms of enervation and uncertainty that come with working in academia, and no stranger to the need to take refuge, what has always stuck me most powerfully about the "leaving academia" debate is its call to action. This rallying cry at once invigorates me (indeed, to the extreme) even as it ultimately tends more to exhaust me than to give me strength. For if invigoration leads to the realization that the only logical conclusion to mounting concerns over precarity (in academia) is to resign, or else become complacent toward a system that is broken, then, it seems to me, we are trapped in a political double-bind. I have often wondered, therefore, what a less precarious take on the need to take refuge, or withdrawal, in academia might entail, other than, say, "speaking out" by quitting—which for many of us (academics) still boils down to depriving oneself of one's source of (joy and) livelihood. Moreover, I wonder if a "politics of withdrawal" is (still) even possible *within* an academic context (and if so, to what extent), if *writing* about withdrawal, politically, is so clearly at odds with *acting out* the gesture of withdrawing itself, here understood as opting-out of the neoliberal university's "pressure vessel" (Morrish 2019), where the only way to "elude control" and evade some the aforementioned pressures and uncertainties may be, to speak with Deleuze (2011), the creation of little "gaps of silence" and "vacuoles of non-communication." Such a speculation brings me to the OED's second definition of retreat:

> OED
> **Retreat**
> VERB
>
> 2.
> a. To withdraw into a place for safety, seclusion, or privacy.
> b. To withdraw mentally or emotionally (*into* oneself, silence, etc.); to go into a state of uncommunicativeness or introspection.

To the point: my intention here is not to downplay or trivialize the importance of "speaking out" or "breaking the silence" but rather to call attention *to the differences and congruity among various gestures of withdrawal, as*

well as between, on the one hand, our attachment to academic work and, on the other, our need to withdraw from it, so as to underscore the political weight of the latter.

As Berlant writes in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), "[a]ll attachments are optimistic" (23), if we understand optimism to be a structure of relationality or bonding that is invested "in one's own or the world's continuity" (13). Optimistic relations are "not inherently cruel," Berlant insists, but rather "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1)—as with, in our case, the promises of upward mobility, of autonomy and personal growth, of societal relevance, and so on. For Berlant, more important than the *experience* of such optimistic attachment (whatever its content) is its *affective* structure: the continuity of the form is what "provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (24). The condition of cruel optimism, then, differs from melancholia in that it is not "backward looking" (W. Brown 1999, 22) but is rather invested in the historical present, bound to the here and now.

Both the "leaving academia" debate's call to action and Gill's demand that we "break the silence," I argue, are driven by optimistic attachments. But—and this is important—so are complaints and moans about the "hidden injuries" of working in neoliberal academia themselves. These gestures converge in that they can all be seen as forms and modes of surviving the affective labor of cruel optimism in our present moment, which—Berlant stipulates time and again—is a time of ongoing crisis (a crisis of the ordinary). Although the cruelty of these attachments usually remains unstated, Berlant observes, it is experienced when we are faced with "a sudden incapacity to manage startling situations" (24)—as occurs when driven out of the university, or during *any* situation producing the aforementioned "hidden injuries" or "reasons for leaving" cited above. What we fear, then, is that "the loss of the scene of optimism" (here: the academic good-life fantasy) "itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything" (24), at which point the fantasy starts disciplining us to keep on investing, as Gill asserts, "with ever growing costs, not least to ourselves" (236).

As an affective structure, Berlant points out, cruel optimism "involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy" (2). Significantly, the scene of fantasy to which the "leaving academia" debate's call to action and Gill's plea to "break the silence" time and again return, I contend, is twofold: it entails both the academic good-life fantasy and the fantasy of a particular model of political action, rooted in dialectics. It is the latter that holds my attention here. For, as Darin Barney points out in a somewhat different context in this volume, it is in upholding dialectics as a model of political action that

the "leaving academia" debate's call to action and Gill's plea to "break the silence" risk "reproduc[ing] a set of normative expectations about politics—i.e., that it consists of willed, intentional public actions" (Barney 2020, 122) that *must* be outspoken to be recognized as such. This necessity, in my view, raises the question, precisely, of what transpires in silence and in what is silenced: in "the rolling everyday" of academia, the chats in the corridor, the intimate exchanges; in the moan, the complaint, the unhappiness; in the quiet departure and silent surrender; in the retreat to recompose—that is, in all those (little) gestures of withdrawal understood as "resignation, directed nowhere" (Barney 2020, 122) that arguably *precede* resignation as "event"—for some, *ad infinitum*.

If I make a point of being explicit here I do so because of the sense of envy and at times (unspoken) guilt one can detect in the "leaving academia" debate, where the online comment sections, Ian Saxine (2018) observes, tend to be remarkably thoughtful and un-horrifying (even if gloomy). Indeed, Anne Trubek remarks, the news of people leaving their tenured jobs is commonly "received with congratulations and often envy," both in real life and in the online echo chambers. Guilt, another one of Gill's "hidden injuries," also figures—not just the kind that is often said to "guilt-trip" especially young academics into staying (i.e., the kind of guilt Lobo [2015] calls "academic guilt": the sense of failure to get work done and/or appreciate the opportunities one is given),[16] but more specifically the kind of guilt that Sally Racket (2011), using another war metaphor, calls "survivor's guilt": the sort of guilt that comes from *not leaving* and obtaining that tenured job that others didn't get, as well as from the fear (and reality) of being or becoming complacent toward a system from which one nonetheless feels progressively alienated and within which one is in fact struggling to survive.

OED
Retreat
VERB
[. . .]

c. To move, go, or draw back or further away. Also *figurative*: to withdraw or back down from an attitude, idea, etc., esp. when faced with difficulties or disagreements.

From the point of view of cruel optimism, then, the gesture of withdrawal, however it manifests itself—to leave, to write, to speak out, to resign, to remain in silence, to complain or to moan, to feel disheartened or depressed,

16. On being guilt-tripped into staying, see, for example, Keenan (2014), Dwyer (2015), Phadke (2017), Green (2019), and the r/LadiesofScience channel on Reddit (2013).

to retreat or seek refuge—always signals fissures in the world that once was, a world organized and disrupted by the neoliberal capitalist regime, as prior phantasmatic structures continue to exhaust and restructure our sensorium, with no genuine alternative to speak of. Cruel optimism's activity, its work so to speak, Berlant maintains, is one of (self- or world-) maintenance, not of making; its temporal structure that of the impasse, the cul-de-sac.[17]

"In a cul-de-sac," she writes, "one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*" (199; italics in text). Berlant is worth quoting at some length here:

> Whatever else it is, and however one enters it, the historical present—as an impasse [. . .]—is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape. [. . .] It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. People are destroyed in it, or discouraged but maintaining, or happily managing things, or playful and enthrall. (200)

Framing academia's hidden injuries and the overall leaving-academia debate in terms of Berlant's reflections on cruel optimism is illuminating, then, because to do so helps shed light on why we remain attached to something that is not working, as well as on our need to protect such optimism in the face of being defeated.

Significantly, the myth of the academic good life is not monolithic but manifold: it entails a patchwork of different, at times competing flights of the imagination, varying from dreams of fame and respect (or just the security provided by tenure), to the aspiration to engage in intellectual exchange or to escape from the straightjacket of 9-to-5 waged labor. The sanity of most academics, indeed, seems to rely on their faith that their "moment" is (still) to come. What the "leaving academia" debate and Gill's "hidden injuries" make clear, is that the myth of the academic good life, itself, entails a fantasy of retreat: it *is*, in many ways, a gesture of withdrawal. Take, for example, Ahmed's "resignation": well before it becomes "a giving of notice," it involves first and foremost a vision (an idea and an ideal) of "the university" as a counter-normative, utopic, feminist, indeed a queer space—a place of safety into which one can withdraw to investigate, contemplate, resist, and challenge the normative identity politics and overall logics of neoliberal capitalism and its dominant modes of governance. Only when this fantasy of the university as a place of withdrawal starts to break down

17. In a later piece of writing, leading up to her forthcoming book *The Inconvenience of Other People*, Berlant (2016) uses the term "glitch" to expand on the ongoing crisis of the ordinary that marks our present moment. See also Barney in this volume.

does Ahmed decide to retreat, once again, by giving notice, so as to continue her work outside of academia.[18]

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the leaving-academia debate for the most part seems to unfold on personal blogs, an intermediate form *par excellance*, situated between an "intimate" and a public discourse. The *academic* blog is preeminently an "intimate" public space. As such, it is as much a response to the problem (i.e., the evaporation of the boundary between public and private, work and leisure) as it is a symptom: it consists of "discrete, often informal diary-style text entries" (Wiki) written "for fun" even as it figures as a stage for the continuous self-promotion of the academic, necessitated by the conditions of labor precarity. At the same time, the genre also makes it possible for (former) academics to criticize precisely the intimate intertwining of the personal and the institutional. The "leaving academia" debate's "speaking to the choir," therefore, Berlant insists in a somewhat different context, should not be undervalued, for "as a world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness, it is absolutely necessary to do" (238). But again, the same holds true for the complaint and the moan, and all the other gestures of ordinary withdrawal instilled by the hidden injuries Gill speaks of. Together, these gestures signal a collective dis-identification with the state of higher education today, a search for a new "scene for being together in the political" beyond normative politics, in a community bound (as it formerly had been) through critique. To complain (or moan, or just to be unhappy), in this context, is a way of "bargaining with what is there," a performative plea that "implicitly holds no hope for change in the conditions . . . apart from whatever response the complaint itself might elicit" (2008, 31). In times of radical uncertainty, which is how Berlant describes our present times, the personal is a collective rather than an individual experience. "The personal is the general," she writes in *The Female Complaint* (2008, vii): "publics presume intimacy."

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Chapter Eleven

Detox Politics

Thinking-Healing the Retreat of the Public

Gerald Moore in conversation
with Bernard Stiegler[1]

Translations from French by Joost de Bloois

Gerald Moore: We've been given the brief to talk about contemporary politics, a withdrawal from politics, disillusionment, retreat in the political sphere, which, in turn, links to questions of demotivation and voter apathy. I think we can enlarge that frame of reference and make some connections with fake news and the structuring of the technology market that underpins our contemporary political discourse. That will bring us back, in due course, to a particular question that I've been working on with regard to technology addiction.

Perhaps it would be useful to start this question by asking what we mean by politics and the public, the sphere from which we might retreat into a space of withdrawal in the first place. I remember thinking, when I first read your two-volume *Symbolic Misery* (2014; orig. French 2004 and 2005), that this is ultimately a kind of response to Jacques Rancière's *Le Partage du sensible* (2000; English translation 2004), which you confirmed to me. Why that becomes so important is because one of the fundamental (though not very explicit) ideas in Rancière's essay is that, for politics to take place, there has to be a basic agreement in place about what it is that a given population is experiencing. Rancière calls this a "common *aisthesis*" (see Rancière, Panagia, and Bowlby 2001). Community, in other words, is organized around a sharing of experience. We can differ, to some extent, in our interpretations of what exactly that experience consists in, and Rancière is emphatic that dissensus is even necessary. But—and he doesn't really make this point himself—there has to be an object, or as Bruno Latour (2017) has more recently put it, there has to be a shared world, common to all involved, for some kind of commensurable dialogue to emerge between differing perspectives.

1. This article forms part of a bigger research project on "Real Smart Cities," which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research Innovation and Staff Exchange programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No.777707.