COMMENTARY

Permanent crisis

The humanities in an Age of Disenchantment

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One of America's unsung rites of spring is National Humanities Advocacy Day. In mid-March, humanities professors from around the country travel to Washington, DC, not to gaze at masterpieces in the National Gallery, but to make the case for their field on the Hill. These learned lobbyists spend a day in the (outer) offices of their congressional representatives, trying to impress the value of the humanities on staffers who still look like college students. The hope is that the staffers will convince their bosses to fund the humanities.

To prepare for their mission, many of the academics attend a conference put on by the National Humanities Alliance, the organization behind NHAD. They hear success stories from deans who have devised ways of reversing, or at least slowing, declining enrolment trends, and they receive encouragement from leaders who endorse their cause. Recent speakers include Dick Durbin and Elizabeth Warren.

These days, the mood of the conference is a bit like that of a late-season pep rally for a team with a losing record and an uncertain future. Inevitably, there is talk of crisis. Attenders share tales of budget cuts; the funnelling of resources to revenue-generating fields; "neoliberal" plots to gut public higher education; trustees intent on turning their universities into picturesque vocational schools; and the entrenched perception that majoring in English means a job at Starbucks after graduation.

Not everyone agrees – these are academics, after all. Some claim that in absolute terms, the enrolment figures aren't so grim. They also describe transformative experiences in the classroom. If there is a crisis, they insist, it is mostly one of public legitimation. Still others point out that the humanities have always been in crisis.

There is certainly some truth to this last contention. The much romanticized boom years of in the 1960s turn out to have been a time when funding imbalances and external pressures led to a great deal of anxiety. Hence the popularity of books such as J. H. Plumb's *Crisis in the Humanities* (1964); though written for a British audience, its essays were widely discussed in the United States. But much earlier works, too, such as *The Goose Step* by Upton Sinclair (1923) and *The Higher Learning in America* by Thorstein Veblen (1904), were full of complaints about the corporatization of the university that seem ripped from today's (*Chronicle of Higher Education*) headlines. Indeed, the points of resemblance extend well beyond turn-of-the-century America.

"Moderne Kunst und Wissenschaft": one of twelve frieze panels designed for Leipzig University (1836–9)

In late nineteenth-century Germany, scholars in the humanities often enjoyed a fame that few of their colleagues elsewhere could dream of. It was with wonder that Mark Twain, who toured the country in the 1890s, observed tram conductors excitedly pointing out a historian whom they had spotted on the street. Yet even there, those in the humanities felt a sense of crisis. This sense was rooted in developments that contemporary discussions of the humanities have obscured. It's often said that the German university system was founded on the ideal of *Wissenschaft*, or systematic knowledge and scholarship. American universities, by contrast, were founded on a dual inheritance: on the one side, the British collegiate tradition of building character and on the other, the mission of specialized research, adopted from the German model in the late nineteenth century.

But this is a misrepresentation, because character formation had also been essential to the thinking behind the emergence of the German research university around 1800. In fact, our present-day understanding of what the humanities can do for students is much closer to that thinking than it is to the notion of moral education institutionalized at the religious colleges and universities of ante-bellum America.

The genius of the German educational reformers – chief among them the statesman and learned aristocrat Wilhelm von Humboldt – was to fuse the ideals of open-ended, rational inquiry with secular soul-making. Specialized scholarship that produced new knowledge (*Wissenschaft* and *Forschung*) went hand in hand with self-cultivation (*Bildung*), which was best attained through humanistic study. Together, specialized scholarship and self-cultivation would sustain the atmosphere of free exploration that both needed.

No slouch at lobbying, Humboldt managed to convince his fellow Prussian bureaucrats that *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* were not only interdependent, but also central to the interests of the state. If the state granted universities the autonomy they needed for scholarship and teaching, universities would reward the state with innovative research and well-formed future bureaucrats. With a little patience on the part of the state, the fruits of higher education would be much riper for the taking. Humboldt's wager was that while the university should never be fully autonomous, it could best serve the state at a remove – just distinct and free enough to constitute its own ethical and social world.

Humboldt's formula achieved near-axiomatic status during the nineteenth century. But a few decades after the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, the link between *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* came under serious pressure. As the Prussian state grew in power and size, technological and scientific advances began to play a greater role in the economy. The Prussian state pressed universities for more immediately "usable" research and knowledge. Key figures in Prussian society and the Prussian government developed a nineteenth-century version of the contemporary STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) obsession; and the state awarded research support accordingly. To compete in this funding environment and ensure their own prestige, some in the humanities tried to match the scale and aspirations of research in the natural sciences, as some digital humanities researchers do today, devising data collection projects of unprecedented size – the "heavy industry of scholarship", as one practitioner put it. Others, like the Basel historian Jacob Burckhardt, wondered whether these outsized undertakings had left any room for real thinking.

The new German state recast university admissions policies and pushed for "modern" curricula (less Latin and Greek and more science and mathematics), with the result that when university enrolments began to shoot up in the 1870s and 80s, the share of students studying subjects such as history and philology declined. Meanwhile, a culture of narrow academic specialization had set in, hindering the sort of collective striving and humanistic study that Humboldt had envisioned.

Several generations of German academics across the humanities and the sciences, all of whom had studied in the classical *Gymnasien* and thus been formed according to the neo-classical ideals of harmony and unity, lived through the remaking of educational institutions and culture under the forces of modernity. The pantheon of nineteenth-century German academic heroes, from Hermann Helmholtz and Emil du Bois-Reymond to Rudolf Virchow and Theodor Mommsen, longed for the unity of knowledge and the promise that *Wissenschaft* was a resource for ethical transformation, namely *Bildung*.

But their idealism gradually turned elegiac. Mommsen, who did more than anyone to advance large-scale, thoroughly compartmentalized philological projects in which there was, as he put it, "no place for imaginative genius", also lamented that in the era of "the big humanities", scholarship had lost its highest sense of purpose. Scholars had become "journeymen who serve no masters".

Around the same time – 1872 – a young classics professor at the University of Basel named Friedrich Nietzsche declared that humanistic learning was in crisis. In the city museum, a neoclassical building funded by local citizens, Nietzsche delivered a series of lectures entitled "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions". Here, he decried an educational system given over to skills training and mocked philologists as "etymological roman candles", who had lost sight of the questions that really matter, ceding them to journalists. The modern state had placed universities under a dual and potent demand both to expand – teach more students – and to narrow, that is, teach them for one purpose: the economic interests and symbolic glory of the state.

Nietzsche orchestrates the demolition of Germany's still glittering institutions of higher learning in the form of a fictional dialogue between two fraternity brothers, a cantankerous old philosopher and his younger companion. The companion, for example, blasts what he considers the widespread predilection for practical study, which "hates any education that suggests goals above and beyond earning money, or that takes a lot of time". The most authoritative voice in the dialogue, the old philosopher, concludes that Germany's educational institutions have ceased to deliver "education in the true sense of the term". Specialized scholarship had left no time or space to shape the self though passionate, immersive, disciplined study, preferably of Greek antiquity.

Such pronouncements may make Nietzsche sound like a precursor to Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. But Nietzsche's lectures do more than present an elitist narrative of decline. Surveying the educational scene from his post in Burckhardt's Basel, Nietzsche produced one of the rare works that challenge us to think through the complex predicament of the humanities in modern society. His lectures prompt us to question how the forces that allowed for the humanities to become established and flourish in new ways – secularization, institutional rationalization, democratization, etc. – also came to imperil the best the humanities had to offer.

For Nietzsche at the moment of German Unification, perhaps the most immediate and threatening of these modernizing forces was bureaucratic rationality, what Max Weber, in the spirit of Nietzsche, would term the disenchantment of the world, by which he meant the attempt to control "all things through calculation". Like all other social institutions and forms of life, one of the West's most enduring institutions was being transformed into a bureaucratic behemoth, in which nothing remained "mysterious or incalculable" and everything could be quantified and accounted for. Since true scholarship still required freedom, one could point out, as Weber himself would, that the rationalizing efforts here were often of questionable rationality, at least from the perspective of true scholars. But this did little to stem the tide.

In Nietzsche's day, the disenchanted university was embodied by government incursions on academic freedom and self-regulation, as well as by "big humanities" projects, which cast scholars as "Arbeiter" and employed management-speak and principles in establishing both the project goals and the relationships among its participants. Fifty years later, Weber complained about assessments of teaching efficacy that relied chiefly on enrolment statistics. Today, on both sides of the Atlantic, assessment regimes and academic analytics, which obviously pose special challenges for scholars working in the humanities, are the mechanisms of disenchantment. In American universities and colleges, the pressures to assess, analyse and quantify everything from "learning outcomes" to faculty "productivity" have led to a proliferation of local schemes, metrics and rubrics. But the Obama administration wants to change that, or really to rationalize the rationalization, by standardizing the system of measurement with a university "report card". In the UK, however, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has since 2007 been a national quality testing system, designed to "produce indicators of research excellence" and used to distribute funds. In 2014, the study included over 191,150 "research outputs".

In both the UK and the US, these forces of rationalization and bureaucratic control have been identified as effects of neoliberalism, a supposedly external threat to the university. But as Nietzsche warned his Basel audience, while Humboldt's university, which the University in Basel took as its model in 1818, was itself a product of rational reorganization (of the more enlightened kind), the process of modernization had turned it into something new and different, with specialized scholarship, particularly in classical studies, acting as a willing and necessary accomplice.

Taking up Nietzsche's challenge won't be of much use to humanities teachers and scholars lobbying each spring on Capitol Hill. Yet it should help us better to understand how we got here. It will deepen our reflections on our place in the world, which is no small part of our calling.

FREELANCE

THOMAS MEANEY

A magazine or a newspaper is a delicate organism that can die a variety of deaths. It can shed readers and staff slowly over decades, or it can implode all at once like a supernova, shooting its parts a very far distance. Walking around Brooklyn, when I see a journalist I know on the street, I sometimes try to call up any dead magazines they once belonged to. *Lingua Franca* and *FEED*, two incarnations from the 1990s, were training grounds for a surprising number. The castaways of the Wreck of the *New Republic* still seem to turn up all over. My old neighbourhood of Brooklyn Heights is a special haunting ground of the newspaper where I first worked, the *New York Sun*. On Hicks Street, I see Jill Gardiner who used to report on Mayor Bloomberg's activities for the paper. In my old apartment on Remsen Street is Christian Lorentzen, now a writer for the *LRB* and *New York* magazine, who worked the night shift as a copy editor in the *Sun* newsroom. At the Pain Quotidien on Montague Street at dawn, there is Seth Lipsky, our former ancient mariner-editor, digesting his second round of morning papers, willing to tell the tale of the paper to anyone who lingers long enough in range.

The *Sun* was a feisty little paper that liked to think its influence outweighed its circulation of 90,000. Its offices were in the Cary Building, an Italian Renaissance wedding cake revival on Chambers Street. With its easy access to City Hall, Chambers was once known as newspaper row, and housed several New York papers, including German-language papers and (at least two) Yiddish dailies. The *Sun* often felt like a Yiddish daily that had been translated into English. Founded by Lipsky, a widely admired editor at the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Forward*, the paper was financially backed by the New York hedge fund managers Michael Steinhardt and Roger Hertog, along with Conrad Black. It was neoconservative in politics, and its first edition appeared in the week of 9/11, which made it something of an ideological lodestar during the Bush years.

I remember coming in to interview for the job as books editor. I sat on a stack of papers in the makeshift waiting room. Next to me waited an expansive Lubavitcher Rebbe in black. I was shown an office that already felt on the verge of extinction, humming with people, all speaking over each other, with pencils uncannily behind the occasional ear.

The *Sun* was perpetually understaffed, which meant people were too busy to bother me at my books desk, where I erected a giant wall of advance review copies to work behind. The only exceptions were during Lipsky's daily patrols around the office in his trench coat, when he would police headlines and leads for vitality. "Tom", he would peer through my book wall, "what are you doing with the Sharon biography?" "Tom, we're thinking of having a new column – 'Prison Diary' – by Conrad Black that will run in your pages." At Lipsky's behest, we reviewed books weeks before they came out. "Tom, let's run a review of Tina Brown's *Diana Chronicles* in Wednesday's paper." "But the book isn't out for a month." "See if we can get a copy of from one of our contacts inside at Random House." And so we did.

The paper was often spoken of unironically as a weapon. When Christmas cards arrived at the office, they included one from Edward Luttwak standing with his wife atop a menacing super-yacht. Lipsky spoke of Cold War exploits, as when he was instructed at the *Wall Street Journal* Europe office to provide computer equipment to a group of grizzled Poles in T-shirts who turned out to be the beating heart of Solidarity. I worked for a week at my desk in full body armour for a mandated day of "solidarity" with US troops in Iraq. At one of the morning editorial meetings I attended, Lipsky and his deputy, Ira Stoll, debated how thick the black border around Milton Friedman's front-page obituary should be. Our style guide was legendary.

> REVELATION: Use only in quoted matter or when referring to what happened at Mount Sinai. DECTER, MIDGE: The Cold War heroine. Note the spelling of her last name. MILITANT: say terrorist. GENTILE: Not Jewish or genteel. COMMUNIST / SOCIALIST: See AP stylebook. Any favorable reference to a communist must be shown to either the editor or the managing editor of the *Sun* before publication. SEPTEMBER 11: Always "the attacks of", never "the events of".

At night, when I would periodically get locked out of the building, I had to spool back through Israeli history to get back in: was the building code 1947 this week? 1967? But of course: it's 0586, the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem by the Babylonians!

There was a divide in the office between the news staff, who covered politics and wore suits, and the arts staff, who wore very little and more or less did as they pleased. I assigned whatever books I chose, to whomever I could get. Our chief book critic, Adam Kirsch, was a prodigious talent and could review a book in a day. If left to his own devices, our lead fiction reviewer, a lanky aesthete from Oklahoma named Ben Lytal, would begin reviewing the entire catalogues of small presses. Eric Ormsby could take on scholarly editions of Arabic texts or anthologies of German verse. Gary Shapiro, the soul of the office, reported on any cultural event in New York of interest to the editors. Perpetually blinking, he sometimes looked as if he'd just come up out of the ground to have a closer look at Earth. I remember once seeing him putting on black tie on the subway as if it were his personal changing room, with a wink into the glass door when he got his tie fixed in place.

There was always a sense that we were doomed. Lipsky's paymasters kept tabs on us, and they wanted a profit. Disagreement in the newsroom once broke out when the chief Arts editor, Robert Messenger, dissented from Lipsky's programme and made the case that the paper should concentrate on what it did best: covering local New York politics and arts, where national papers could not compete. But we pressed onward, covering the United Nations, and our war chest of Pilot pens never diminished. These were the golden days of New York journalism before 2008, when it seemed almost silly to be in another business.

The paper collapsed in 2008, the year after I left. Lipsky declared the end at an all-hands staff meeting in the newsroom. Now and then, we chat at our ersatz local bakery, where time seems bountiful if we think back to the rushed days before deadlines. He mentions that if his backers had had a bit more faith, the paper could have survived. "They would have still had billions!", he says. He is happy to hear when one of his former staff has gone to greater glory at another newspaper – it doesn't matter which one. But nostalgia is anathema to the reporter, or as Lipsky calls it, "the vocation of the newspaperman". Nowadays, when I pick up a paper, I feel as if I'm holding a scrap of a secret drama. What room full of anxieties and ambitions, betrayals and friendships, has produced the object I hold in my hands? A newspaper is like a university with an in-built fuse. There are no reunions or buildings to go back to. When they finally go out, they leave no ruins behind; only ever-ghostly connections.