Permanent crisis

The humanities in an Age of Disenchchantment

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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 that German universities were the only ones in Europe where one could have a complete and thorough education. The German system was highly respected throughout the world, and German scholars were considered to be among the best in the field.

In the 1960s, however, the humanities began to lose their prestige. The rise of the sciences, particularly in fields such as physics and mathematics, led to a decline in the importance of the humanities. This was particularly true in Germany, where the humanities were already at a disadvantage due to the emphasis on science and technology.

In many ways, the decline of the humanities in Germany was a reflection of the broader decline of the German Empire. The Second World War had left Germany in ruins, and the country was faced with the task of rebuilding itself. The focus on science and technology was seen as a way to achieve this goal.

The rise of the humanities in the 1960s was a response to this trend. The humanities were seen as a way to provide a broader, more holistic education, and to reassert the importance of the humanities in society. The rise of the humanities in Germany was also a response to the rise of the sciences, which were seen as a threat to the humanities.

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COMMENTARY

But their idealism gradually turned elgac. Momentum, who did more than anyone to advance large-scale, thoroughly commis- sionalized philanthropic projects in which there was, as he put it, "noplace for imaginative giving," also lamented that in the era of the "big humanities," scholarship had lost its highest sense of purpose. Scholars had become "jour- neymen 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 fluted by local citizens, Nietzsche delivered a series of lectures entitled "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions." Here he decried an education system given over to skill training and mock philologies as "skeletomusical roman capers," which had lost sight of the questions that really matter, ugly them to journalism. The modern state and affiliated universities were a dual and potent demand both to the grand—more student—and to narrow, that is, teach them for one purpose: the economic interest and symbolic glory of the state. Nietzsche orchestrates the demolition of German intellectual life. Education was made into a process of learning in the form of a fictional dialogue between two frenemy brothers, a counterpoint to the philosopher and his younger companion. The company, for example, blasts what he considers the widespread pedagogical practice of pre- dictive study, which "taxes any education that supp- orts goals above all and earning money, or that takes a lot of time."
The most ambig- uous voice in the dialogue, the old philosopher, concludes that Germany's educational institu- tions have ceased to deliver "education in the true sense of the term." Specialized scholarship had left too little or space to shape the self through passionate, intense, disciplined study, pre- ferably of Greek antiquity.

Such pronouncements may make Nietzsche sound like a precursor to Atlas Bloom in The Curing 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 Borchardt's Basel, Nietzsche produced one of the rare works that challenge us to think through the complex pre- dicament 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, intellectual rationalization, democratization, etc.—also conspired to imperil the humanities so that the task was how to preserve it.

For Nietzsche at the moment of German Unification, perhaps the most disturbing and threatening of these modernizing forces was bureaucratic rationality, what Max Weber, in his essay on "The Bureaucracy" in The Re- formation of the World, by which he meant the attempt to control "all things through calcula- tion," 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 "mystical or inescapable" and everything could be quantified and accounted for. Since true scholarship still required free- dom, 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 stifle the tide.

In Nietzsche’s day, the disenchanted university was embroiled by government humanities on academic freedom and self-regulation, as well as by "big humanities" projects, which cast scholars as "Arbeiter" and employed management-speak and prin- ciples in establishing both the project goals and the relationships among its participants. Fifty years later, Weber complained about the "condition of teaching efficacy that relied chiefly on enrollment statistics. Today, on the first pages of the Atlantic, assessment programs and academic analytics, which obvi- ously pose special challenges for scholars and college administrators, are the most popular "dis-enchanted" in American universi- ties and colleges, the pressures to assess, operate on the scale, carefully measure everything from "learn- ing outcomes" to faculty "productivity" have led to a proliferation of local schemes, metrics and rubrics. But the Obama administra- tion wants to change that, or really to rationalize the normalization, by standardizing the system of measurement with a uni- versity "report card." In the UK, however, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) busi- ness since 2007 been a national quality testing system, designed to "produce indicators of research excellence" and used to distribute financial 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 an Nietzsche warned his Babel audience, while Humboldt's university, which the Uni- versity in France, as its model in 1810, was it self a product of rational reorganization (of the more enlightened kind), the process of rationalization "turned it into something new and different, with specialized scholar- ship, particularly in classical studies, acting in a willing and necessary accomplice.

Taking up Nietzsche's challenge won't be of much use to humanities teachers and schol- ars. Instead of excluding each other to help build a "disenchanted" world, 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.

THOMAS MEANEY

Freelance T-shirts who turned out to be the beating heart of Solidarity. I worked for a week at my desk in full body armor for a mandated day of "solidarity" with US troops in Iraq. At one of the morning editorial meetings I attended, Lipicky and his deputy, Im Stoll, debated how thick the black border around Milton Friedman's front-gage obituary should be. Our style guide was legendary.

"KEVELATION: The only good speeder in fastening to the rhythm and melody is a way of life."

SNEAK SHOT: The Cold War hero- in. Note the spelling of her name. MILI- TANT: say milit-ent. CENTILE: Not Jewish or gentile. COMMUNIST SOCIALIST: See AP stylebook. Any favorable reference to a commun- ist must be shown to either the editor at 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 cycle 1947 this week? 1967? But of course: it was 1968, 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 were, to my mind, the arts staff, who were very little and more less did as they pleased. I assigned whatever books I chose, to whomever I could get. Our chief book critic, Adam Rirsch, was a prodigious talent and could review a book in a day. If he was in his own devices, our lead fiction reviewer, a lanky anorak from Oklahoma named Ben Lytal, would begin reviewing the entire catalogs of small presses. Eric Orange would take on scholarly editions, while Arabic texts or anthologies of German memoir. Gary Shapiro, the soul of the office, reported on any cultural event in New York of interest to the editors. Perpetually blanking, he sometimes looked as if he'd just come up out of the ground to have no closer look at Earth. I remember once seeing him putting on black tie on the subway at if it were his personal changing room, with a flash into the glass door when he got his tie fixed in place.

There was always a sense that we were doomed. Lipicky's paymasters kept tabs on us, and they wanted profit. Disagreement in the newsroom once broke out when the chief Arts editor, Robert Messenger, distanced from Lipicky's programmatic and made the case that the paper should concentrate on what it did best: covering local New York politics and arts, who from the paper's perspective were the "local institutions," and our war chest of Pilots never diminished. Those were the golden days of Nan, when the editors walked by our desks. It seemed almost silly to be in another business.

The paper clutched in 2008, the year after 9/11, when the editors ripped up the newsroom and sent the staff meeting in the newroom. Now and then, we chat at our own local bakery, where time seems beautiful if we think back to the rushing days before deadlines. He mentions that if his book was a bit more clear, the paper would "surely a mystery. They would have still had billions!," he says. He is happy to hear where one of his former staff has gone to greater glory at another newspaper — it doesn't matter which one. But notitia: it is anachronism to the reporter, or as Lipicky calls it, "the vocabulary of the newspaper."

Nowadays, when I pick up a paper, I feel as if I'm holding a scrap of serious dreaming. What room full of narratives and imaginary constructs, my friends and families, has pro- duced the object held in my hands? A newspaper is like a university with an built-in function. There are no reactions to the phones. When they finally go out, they leave no runes behind: only ever-gloriously connected.