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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

There Is No Case for the Humanities

And deep down we know our justifications for it are hollow.

Gary Neill for The Chronicle Review

By Justin Stover | MARCH 04, 2018*This essay originally appeared in American Affairs.*

The humanities are not just dying — they are almost dead. In Scotland, the ancient Chairs in Humanity (which is to say, Latin) have almost disappeared in the past few decades:

abolished, left vacant, or merged into chairs of classics. The University of Oxford has revised its famed Literae Humaniores course, "Greats," into something resembling a technical classics degree. Both of those were throwbacks to an era in which Latin played the central, organizing role in the humanities. The loss of these vestigial elements reveals a long and slow realignment, in which the humanities have become a loosely defined collection of technical disciplines.

The result of this is deep conceptual confusion about what the humanities are and the reason for studying them in the first place. I do not intend to address the former question here — most of us know the humanities when we see them.

Instead I wish to address the other question: the reason for studying them in the first place. This is of paramount importance. After all, university officials, deans, provosts, and presidents all are far more likely to know how to construct a Harvard Business School case study than to parse a Greek verb, more familiar with flowcharts than syllogisms, more conversant in management-speak than the riches of the English language. Hence the oft-repeated call to "make the case for the humanities."

Such an endeavor is fraught with ambiguities. Vulgar conservative critiques of the humanities are usually given the greatest exposure, and yet it is often political (and religious) conservatives who have labored the most mightily to foster traditional humanistic disciplines. Left defenders of the humanities have defended their value in the face of an increasingly corporate and crudely economic world, and yet they have also worked to gut some of the core areas of humanistic inquiry — "Western civ and all that" — as indelibly tainted by patriarchy, racism, and colonialism.

The humanities have both left and right defenders and left and right critics. The left defenders of the humanities are notoriously

bad at coming up with a coherent, effective defense, but they have been far more consistent in defending the "useless" disciplines against politically and economically charged attacks. The right defenders of the humanities have sometimes put forward a strong and cogent defense of their value, but they have had

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little sway when it comes to confronting actual attacks on the humanities by conservative politicians. The sad truth is that instead of forging a transideological apology for humanistic pursuits, this ambiguity has led to the disciplines' being squeezed on both sides.

Indeed, both sides enable the humanities' adversaries. Conservatives who seek to use the coercive and financial power of the state to correct what they see as ideological abuses within the professoriate are complicit in the destruction of the old-fashioned and timeless scholarship they supposedly are defending. It is self-defeating to make common cause with corporate interests just to punish the political sins of liberal professors. Progressives who want to turn the humanities into a laboratory for social change, a catalyst for cultural revolution, a training camp for activists, are guilty of the same instrumentalization. When they impose de facto ideological litmus tests for scholars working in every field, they betray their conviction that the humanities exist only to serve contemporary political and social ends.

Caught in the middle are the humanities scholars who simply want to do good work in their fields; to read things and think about what they mean; to tease out conclusions about the past and present through a careful analysis of evidence; to delve deeply into language, art, artifact, culture, and nature. This is what the university was established to do.

To see this, one must first understand that the popular critiques of the humanities — overspecialization, overproduction, too little teaching — are fundamentally misguided. Often well-meaning critics think they are attacking the decadence and excess of contemporary humanities scholarship. In fact, they are striking at the very heart of the humanities as they have existed for centuries.

Overspecialization

Critics complain that, instead of traversing the length and breadth of human knowledge, today's scholars restrict themselves to little patches. One English professor might work on a single third-rate Victorian novelist; another might be content with otiose exegeses of 30-year old French theory; a third might measure his years in 17th-century typography.

But this is hardly new. The only work we have of the Roman scholar Vibius Sequester is a catalog of the names of rivers, forests, mountains, and the like in poetry. One of the most erudite men in the whole of the Middle Ages, a Master Guido, published nothing but a commentary on a mediocre Latin romance written 50 years earlier. We know the extent of his erudition only because he left a lot of notes in the margins of his dictionary. We might

expect more of a Renaissance man, yet the work that shot Guillaume Budé to fame was a tract on ancient money and measurement. The specialized and the obscure have always been with us; and they have always been criticized by those on the outside.

If anything, contemporary scholarship is insufficiently specialized. Scholars are expected to have mastered not only one small, well-defined subject area, but the whole of 20th-century literary theory along with a comprehensive understanding of the issues du jour in race, class, and gender. It is astoundingly ambitious that one author should not only provide a detailed explanation of clothing in French literature between 1650 and 1699, but also then situate that scholarship in a vast sea of literary theory and provide an analysis of the related issues along the cultural fault lines of our own day. Should a scholar defy such expectations and produce something valuable — like a study of etymological theory in 17th-century Italy, or of word order in the Greek novel, or of birds in Flemish painting — he or she should expect the disappointed tsk-tsking of reviewers, who will sadly note that it is "undertheorized," "a missed opportunity," "marked by a failure to engage."

Overproduction

Not only is scholarship in the humanities obscure, critics continue, but it is produced in such volume, churned out in monograph after monograph, article after article, that it is destined never to be read by more than a handful of intrepid souls. This is true in a trivial sense: There is more scholarship produced now than ever before only because there are vastly more academic institutions, hence vastly more academics. The claim is false in every other sense.

Aristotle offers the key of wisdom, wrote one despairing 13th-century scholar, but he hid that key in so many books. From that period on, for two centuries, to become a reputable teacher of theology, you needed to produce hundreds and hundreds of pages of densely argued commentary on the *Sentences*, a 12th-century compendium by Peter Lombard. Tens of thousands of these commentaries weigh down the shelves of European manuscript libraries, many of them very likely unread in the 700-odd years since they were written. Master-of-arts candidates wrote commentaries on Aristotle that number in the thousands. There are so many that we do not even know how many still exist, much less what they actually say. Charles Lohr's magisterial *Latin Aristotle Commentaries*, which simply provides a list of authors, works, and manuscripts, is in five hefty volumes. This is the period in which the university was born.

Academic overproduction has always been a feature of the university and always will be. It is structural. Academic works are written for many reasons — for qualification, for institutional and personal advancement, even to be a lasting contribution. But they are not written to be read, at least in the normal sense of the term.

Too Little Teaching

Professors nowadays, critics aver, do not spend their time and energy teaching students — a dereliction of the university's primary duty. These critiques betray a rather limited imagination. They see the university as a vendor hawking knowledge. The irony of these

critiques is that it is precisely this which has always separated the university from other educational bodies and initiatives. A school — be it a Gymnasium, a *Realschule*, a *lycée*, a grammar school, or a public school — exists to teach. The university is a different kind of thing. It was founded as a corporation or union of masters, both to allay the pernicious effects of competition for students and to exercise some sort of quality control on the doctrine propounded. It channeled what was once a competition for students into what we would now call research.

But in the general atmosphere of an ancient university, of which one can now catch only hints and glimpses, students and their education were hardly the sole focus. Indeed, some universities, like Cambridge, supported a vast ecosystem of teachers who played a vital role in the actual education of students (for pay), but who had no formal connection to the university itself. The contemporary explosion in the tutoring industry, the test-prep cartel, and the paper-editing racket, is perhaps a distant echo of this same phenomenon.

The cure proposed for the crisis of the humanities is worse than the disease. It seeks to save the humanities by destroying the conditions under which they thrive. If scholars in the humanities stopped researching arcane topics, stopped publishing them in obscure journals that nobody reads, and spent all their time teaching, the university itself would cease to exist. We would have just high schools — perhaps good high schools, but high schools nonetheless.

To talk about the crisis of the humanities is to consider the survival of the university itself. The heart of the university is the arts, understood broadly. For the first centuries of the institution's existence, every student had to traverse an arts curriculum before going on to achieve an employable degree in law, medicine, or theology. At any given time, the arts faculty and students would have formed by far the largest bloc in any university — the fact that students are still awarded B.A.s and M.A.s is an indication of their centrality. The arts were, in theory, the seven liberal arts, although in practice primarily grammar (including what we now call literary studies) and logic. The seven liberal arts had a wide mandate covering most of what we consider the humanities, as well as mathematics in all its branches and the physical and natural sciences. Alongside the arts were the three higher — theology, law, and medicine — which had a more professional orientation and sat in an occasionally uneasy truce with the arts.

What has happened relatively rapidly is the absorption of all areas of human endeavor into the university. One of the premises behind the land-grant universities dotting the American landscape is precisely that they could foster progress and innovation in agricultural science. That may well have been a fine idea, but there is no particular reason that you need a university to improve yields and reduce livestock mortality. When Illinois Industrial University was established, in 1867, it was supposed to be a purely

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technical institution. In 1885 it became the University of Illinois, and within decades, its presidents realized that they needed to build a proper humanities core to justify being a premier public university. The first decades of the 20th century saw both its departments of classics and English literature become leading American centers. As recently as 1992, a whole cadre of British polytechnics were officially dubbed universities. Some of them — Lincoln being one example — responded by building up a humanities core.

In short, the contemporary university is a strange chimera. It has become an institution for teaching undergraduates, a lab for medical and technological development in partnership with industry, a hospital, a museum (or several), a performance hall, a radio station, a landowner, a big-money (or money-losing) sports club, a research center competing for government funding — often the biggest employer for a hundred miles around — and, for a few institutions, a hedge fund ("with a small college attached for tax purposes," adds one wag).

Unbundling may well happen. If it does, where will the university be found amid the wreckage? Where it always has been: with the people who read stuff and think about it. What is fascinating and perverse about the current situation is that what was once peripheral to the university — engineering and technology — is now at its center, and what was once its center has been reduced to the margins and forced to make a case for its continued existence.

We are often told that we need to articulate the case for the humanities to survive the current budgetary and political landscape. We stutter and stumble when confronted with such requests, mumbling some phrases involving "skills," "relevance," "a changing economy," "engagement," or "values." The reason it is hard to articulate is that the ideas behind the words are hollow, and we know it. Somewhere inside we all know that there is no case for the humanities.

What have the humanities ever been for? Some might say, as one humanities dean put it, that the humanities teach us about how to express our ideas and unleash our creativity. That case barely needs refutation. The puzzled glances of actual artisans, writers, and artists — who historically have had little university training — should be enough to disabuse us of the notion that "Introduction to Food Studies" is a necessary prerequisite to making pottery or writing novels.

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Another says that the humanities is about the search for values. But "values" is a hard thing to put in a diachronic frame because it is not clear that there is any analogous notion in any culture besides our own. Values can hardly be a necessary component of the

humanities, as there was no notion of them for most of the humanities' history.

Furthermore, making values, however specified, tends invariably to privilege certain disciplines over others. Values might have a lot to do with Spanish Golden Age literature, but

what have they to do with historical linguistics?

A supposedly related goal for the humanities is that of ethical training. Indeed, the humane letters have long been regarded as imparting some sort of moral education. But do they? An informal survey of humanities scholars might not lead one to optimism on that score. Even then, incommensurate paradigms pose a challenge. A polyamorist who volunteers for Greenpeace may be one person's ethical paradigm; a staunch monogamist who happens to drive an SUV is another's. But they are not obviously compatible with each other. Which one would a humanistic education produce?

Another argument holds that the humanities are about truth. This is a slippery argument: Many things are true in one sense or another, and certainly most such things do not fall under the remit of the arts. Now, maybe there are truths that are more important than other truths, but that can be delineated only within a particular framework. For some, theology might provide that framework; for others, technology. Humanists obviously have their own framework, but the humanities are that framework. Hence, a *petitio principii*.

Finally, we are most commonly told that the humanities are about skills. There is something valid about this argument: learning to parse Sanskrit undoubtedly entails some general cognitive benefit. But those benefits are always byproducts. No one wants to learn Sanskrit because it will give them a leg up in a fast-moving economy. It will never be a compelling case for the humanities that they are like a gym for the mind. Forget about attracting administrators — that argument will not even get you any students.

The reality is that the humanities have always been about *courtoisie*, a constellation of interests, tastes, and prejudices that marks one as a member of a particular class. That class does not have to be imagined solely in economic terms. Indeed, the humanities have sometimes done a good job of producing a class with some socioeconomic diversity. But it is a class nonetheless. Roman boys (of a certain social background) labored under the rod of the *grammaticus* because their parents wanted to initiate them into the community of Virgil readers — a community that spanned much of the vast Roman world, and which gave the bureaucratic class a certain cohesion it otherwise lacked. In the Middle Ages, reading Virgil, commenting on Aristotle, participating in *quaestiones disputatae*, writing *chansons de geste* and romances — these set apart scholars — bachelors, masters, and doctors alike — as an international community.

So, too, the humanists of the 15th and 16th century — the ones who helped ease us away from the arts to the *studia humanitatis*. They formed a certain class marked by a certain set of tastes and interests, entangled with church and state, but notionally with some sense of identity as being part of something else as well — as, too, did the Republic of Letters of the 17th and 18th centuries.

This remains true today. Deep down, what most humanists value about the humanities is that they offer participation in a community in which they can share similar tastes in reading, art, food, travel, music, media, and yes, politics. We might talk about academic diversity, but the academy is a tribe, and one with relatively predictable tastes. It does not

take a particularly sharp observer to guess whether a given humanist might be fond of some new book reviewed favorably in the *LRB* or some new music discussed enthusiastically on NPR. The guess might not always be right, but if even odds are offered, our observer could get away with a tidy sum. If the bet were on political affiliation, the payoff would be almost guaranteed.

As teachers, what humanists want most of all is to initiate their students into that class. Despite occasional conservative paranoia, there is not some sinister academic plot to brainwash students with liberal dogma. Instead, humanists are doing what they have always done, trying to bring students into a class loosely defined around a broad constellation of judgments and tastes. This constellation might include political judgments, but it is never reducible to politics.

It is also susceptible to change. For 200 years or more, European universities were deeply enmeshed in the intellectual fad of Ramism, with Ramist professors installed across Europe in any number of the humanistic disciplines. Eventually it dissipated, and today, the celebrated method of Ramus holds little more than antiquarian interest. We should not assume that the current modes and fashions of the academic class are permanent. But if they are to change, that change will come from the inside.

The mere existence of a class is, however, not a case for its existence in society as a whole. Telling the state and the public that they should support higher education in order to turn out more people like the professorial class is unlikely to generate any enthusiasm. But it goes further: Justifying the tastes and prejudices of that class without reference to the internal logic of the arts themselves is impossible. The *courtoisie* justification for the humanities makes sense only within a humanistic framework. Outside of it, there is simply no case.

Still, whatever administrators and legislators might think, the fact that there is no case for the humanities is irrelevant. The humanities do not need to make a case within the university, because the humanities are the heart of the university. Golfers do not need to justify to their foursomes the rationale for hitting little white balls; philatelists do not need to explain to their stamp-collecting societies what makes them excited about vintage postage. So too, for humanists: The university can be many things, but without us, a university it will not be.

The humanities have always been, just as their critics complain, self-contained, self-referential, and self-serving. Those tendencies are exactly what enabled the humanities to create a class that continued to demand them. People have read Virgil for two thousand years, and people have built institutions designed to facilitate the reading of Virgil. For reasons high and low, people long believed that the one qualification truly necessary — for civil service, for foreign service, for politics, for medicine, for science, for law, for estate management, for ecclesiastical preferment, for a life of aristocratic leisure — was the ability to compose good Latin hexameters. They were not looking for skills or creativity or values. They did believe that conjugating irregular verbs would mysteriously produce moral improvement (perhaps it did), but they were not too concerned about how.

They simply believed in the humanities and knew from experience that the disciplines would bring students above the categories of nation, vocation, and time to become members of a class constrained by no such boundaries.

For a variety of reasons, that vision has split apart on all sides, and especially at the home of the humanities — the university. The world has seen an explosion in the number of universities in the 20th century. The vision driving this expansion, however, has been the notion that universities can become science labs, innovation

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incubators, professional schools, engines of meritocracy, agents of social change, and guardians of equality. Praiseworthy those may be, but they are tasks for high schools, research labs, institutes of technology, apprenticeship programs, activism workshops, and the like. They have no essential connection to the university but are simply wedded to it out of convenience. Even so, it is those roles that hold the position of greatest influence in the modern university.

For now, at least, the humanities are permitted to retain a much-diminished place. The most prestigious universities in the West are still those defined by their humanities legacy, which surrounds them with an aura of cultural standing that their professional purpose no longer justifies. The humanities continue to lend cachet to educational credentials, granting an elite status worth far more than any "marketable skills." That is why every technical institute with higher aspirations has added humanities programs: Accounting or law or engineering can be learned in many places, but *courtoisie* is passed along only in the university, and only through the humanities — and everyone knows it.

Meanwhile, the humanities provide cover for the economic engine that the contemporary university has become. The holder of an endowed chair would prefer not to think of himself as an accreditor of the next generation of corporate consultants, hedge-fund managers, and tech CEOs — even though that is the most socially "relevant" and visible effect of his work today. It is the lingering presence of the humanities that allows the modern university to think better of itself, and to imagine itself to be above commercial or political vulgarity. This "case" for the humanities is implicit in every glossy flier produced by a university development office, but no one could state it without blushing.

The confusion over the purpose of the humanities has nothing to do with their relevance. The humanities are no more or less relevant now than they ever were. It is not the humanities that we have lost faith in, but the economic, political, and social order that they have been made to serve. Perhaps we demand a case for the humanities only because we cannot fathom having to make a case for anything else.

Courtoisie may be powerful, but it is hard to imagine how something so thin as the contemporary variety can sustain the humanities much longer. The historical allies and protectors of the university are beginning to abandon it. The alliance between state and

university continues to fray because of budgetary pressures and ideological conflicts. Industry, too, is a fickle friend. While so-called public/private partnerships are still burgeoning, signs are emerging that our corporate masters are beginning to lose patience with the academy.

That is the current state of the humanities: derided by the public, an easy target for lazy attacks by politicians, a scapegoat and straw man for left and right alike, considered useless by industry, divorced from its historic patrons in the church. Platitudes will offer no shelter for the coming storm.

But this is no counsel of despair. In 1773, Samuel Johnson visited the University of St. Andrews on his journey to the Western Isles of Scotland. St. Andrews is an ancient institution, one of the 25 or so oldest universities in the world, and yet 350 years in, it had evidently fallen on hard times. Fewer than 100 students remained, and one of its old colleges had been dissolved. "To see it pining in decay and struggling for life," Johnson noted, "fills the mind with mournful images and ineffectual wishes." He was under no illusion as to where the blame lay: "It is surely not without just reproach, that a nation, of which the commerce is hourly extending, and the wealth encreasing ... while its merchants or its nobles are raising palaces, suffers its universities to moulder into dust."

And yet St. Andrews survived. Today it has roughly 10,000 students and is highly regarded, particularly in the humanities.

The humanities and the university do need defenders, and the way to defend the humanities is to practice them. Vast expanses of humanistic inquiry are still in need of scholars and scholarship. Whole fields remain untilled. We do not need to spend our time justifying our existence. All we need to do is put our hand to the plow. Scholarship has built institutions before and will do so again. Universities have declined and come to flourish once more. The humanities, which predate the university and may well survive it, will endure — even if there is no case to defend them.

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