

# Rage against the University Machine

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**O**NE NEEDN'T BE ESPECIALLY DEVOTED TO KEEPING informed about the state of higher education in the United States to recognize that the humanities are not faring well on many college campuses. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck fear into the hearts of university administrators, American magazines and newspapers seemed to chime in each week with more signs of woe for the modern humanistic disciplines. Looming demographic shifts have only increased the sense of dread among many humanists and their advocates.

Those worried about the state of the humanities in U.S. higher education, moreover, can point to palpable signs of trouble. Various universities and colleges across the nation have begun shuttering humanities programs. In 2020, for example, Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, announced the discontinuation of its classics, philosophy, and “great ideas” majors. In the same year, Illinois Wesleyan University disclosed the axing of its classics department and slated programs in religion, French, and Italian for the chopping block. The University of Kansas in early 2021 announced plans to eliminate its humanities program and its undergraduate degrees in humanities and visual arts education. With a post-COVID fiscal crisis rearing its head, many faculty members fear that such closures are just the tip of the iceberg. In this context, at all but the wealthiest institutions of higher learning, the humanities seem to be fighting for their survival.

This situation has understandably encouraged much handwringing from segments of the American intelligentsia. As it turns out, such handwringing is nothing new. For decades, essayists and commentators have pointed to recent bugbears to help explain the sorry state of the modern humanities. During the academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, observers often blamed the popularity of

postmodern literary theory for the anti-humanistic drift of American higher ed. In his jeremiad *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990), for example, the conservative critic Roger Kimball suggested that “the much-publicized decline in humanities enrollments recently is due at least in part to students’ refusal to devote their college education to a program of study that has nothing to offer them but ideological posturing, pop culture, and hermetic word games.” More recently, some have deemed the dominance of “woke” politics the source of the humanities’ hardships. Still others point to the rising price of college tuition in the past few decades as the chief factor compelling many students to avoid the humanities for more practical fare.

Unfortunately, though, the causes of trouble for the modern humanities in American higher education are of much earlier vintage. In fact, they owe their origins to the very creation of the modern American research university in the late nineteenth century. Prior to this time, the study of ancient Greek and Latin literary masterpieces—which was then synonymous with the humanities as a whole—dominated the curriculum of most U.S. colleges. Thanks in large measure to the intellectual and pedagogical influence of Renaissance humanism, the course of studies at the early US colleges was overwhelmingly a prescribed one. Italian humanists such as Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) had argued that students should read the great works of Greco-Roman antiquity (in their original languages) as a means to improve their character and style. Homer, Sophocles, Menander, Sallust, Vergil, and Horace—such authors, Renaissance humanists contended, provided a vision of the Good Life essential for inspiring the young to live up to their higher potentialities. Thus, the early American colleges, steeped in Renaissance humanism, required all students to engage with these and kindred writers of classical masterpieces.

American higher learning was initially conceived—in theory, at least—as a moral enterprise. This vision not only fit with the approach to elite education that had been popular in the Renaissance; it was also in tune with Greco-Roman pedagogical traditions. As far back as 62 BC, the Roman statesman, philosopher, and orator Cicero had announced that the *studia humanitatis* (“the studies of humanity”) were valuable because they instilled the crucial quality of *humanitas* (“benevolence,” “kindliness,” “humaneness”) in their devotees. Although his descriptions of the constituent elements of the humanities differed from later versions of the tradition, Cicero underscored the moral aims of education and culture. This ancient approach to pedagogy, refracted through the ideals of Renaissance humanism, was a paramount influence on higher learning in America prior to the Civil War. Indeed, classical studies played such an outsized role in early U.S. education that knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek

was the lone prerequisite for students aspiring to matriculate at the colonial colleges. Even many years after the colonial period, roughly half of the American college curriculum remained classical.

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This approach to education—dominated as it was by the classical humanities—earned many detractors over the course of American history. Why, critics wondered, did the U.S. colleges focus so much attention on the study of Latin and ancient Greek? Why didn't they train students for careers other than the so-called learned professions of ministry, law, and medicine? Among disparagers of the antebellum classical colleges were those whom the historian Andrew Jewett has labeled the first generation of *scientific democrats*. These reformers, influenced primarily by educational currents in Germany, pioneered the American research universities in the late nineteenth century, aiming to reorient higher learning in the U.S. around the natural and social sciences. They believed that the scientific method could supply the necessary tools to maintain a cohesive and robust democratic society. Thus, they endeavored to reduce the roles of the classical languages (i.e., the classical humanities) and Christian theology in the U.S. colleges.

In the late nineteenth century, these scientific democrats pushed to make the production of new knowledge the supreme goal of American institutions of higher learning. Such reformers also managed to jettison the prescribed classical curriculum of the early American colleges in favor of free choice among elective courses. No longer shackled to required coursework, at many U.S. colleges undergraduates could now pick any classes that fit their fancy.

The creators of the American research universities touted free election in part because it was a curricular system conducive to the sciences. Indeed, influential scientific democrats such as Charles W. Eliot (1834–1926), a chemist who served as the longstanding president of Harvard University, championed elective coursework as the curricular embodiment of Darwinism and laissez-faire economics. Eliot, a disciple of the British scientist, philosopher, and social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), openly advertised his pedagogical philosophy with evolutionary vocabulary. “In education, as elsewhere,” Eliot opined in an essay on the liberal arts originally composed in 1884, “it is the fittest that survives.”

Other scientific democrats took the lead in enshrining specialized scientific-style research as the main goal of the American

professoriate. Soon, rigorous but narrow graduate training became de rigeur for aspiring faculty members; advancement within the profession now hinged on the creation of esoteric research impenetrable to educated laypeople. This reorientation of professorial priorities also helped minimize the influence of the classical humanities on U.S. higher education. Specialized scholarship encouraged an academic ideal of knowledge for its own sake. This marked a profound shift from the spirit of Renaissance humanism, with its focus on transmitting the received wisdom of the ancients.

Although they originally met with much resistance, the reforms pushed by the scientific democrats managed to revolutionize higher learning in America. The attacks on the spirit of Renaissance humanism in the U.S. colleges were so successful, in fact, that proponents of the classical humanities—recognizing the dismal fate for the collegiate study of Latin and ancient Greek—reconceptualized the humanities in the late nineteenth century. Since the Renaissance, the *studia humanitatis* had referred to the study of the literary masterworks of ancient Greece and Rome; American humanists now saw fit to expand the humanities to include a broader array of subjects. English literature, art history, philosophy, French, and German—these and kindred disciplines were granted a power previously bestowed on the study of classical authors alone. The *modern humanities* were born.

As those attuned to more recent educational history will note, in the U.S. these days the modern humanities aren't faring much better than did the classical humanities in the late nineteenth century. And no wonder: the educational vision of the scientific democrats still dominates American higher learning and thus the marginalization of the humanities has continued apace. To be sure, most U.S. colleges and universities no longer boast completely elective curricula. But their modest attempts to tame curricular election—mostly through the creation of the major/minor system and the inauguration of so-called distribution requirements—leave the pedagogical goals of the scientific democrats undisturbed. Indeed, one might even suggest that the character-building function so key to the humanist project since antiquity has disappeared from American institutions of higher learning. Colleges and universities in our nation no longer advertise themselves as conduits for the moral improvement of the young; rather, they stress the ability of their scientific-style researchers to improve the material conditions of society and to instill in students an array of job-ready skills.

Since the late nineteenth century, then, the very system of American higher education has by design fought against humanistic values and rendered it well-nigh impossible for the humanities to flourish. Even in the early twentieth century, the scientizing of the U.S. colleges was so manifest that the Harvard comparative literature

professor Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) could charge many of his colleagues in the humanities with abandoning humanism in favor of the pseudo-scientific investigation of literature. No longer did such professors examine great works of art, music, philosophy, literature, and religion to determine sound ethical standards and answers to life's enduring questions. Rather, they reveled in minute research that—like the work of the scientists on their faculties—would supposedly lead to the inevitable march of progress. This scientific approach to the humanities, already apparent in the early twentieth century, has become even more dominant since then.

Although they would seldom self-identify in this manner, most humanities professors now comport themselves as scientists. Hence, many of them will not vouch for the importance of *any* humanistic content in a general-education curriculum. Plato, comic books, Confucius, pornography—all are just humanistic “texts,” prime fodder for the recondite analyses of the professor. Such an outlook remains distinctly anti-humanistic: since antiquity, genuine humanists have believed that *particular humanities content* was key to perfecting the individual.

Disdainful of such a perspective, humanities professors now lamely suggest that their courses are essential to their institutions because they supposedly provide students with skills in “critical thinking.” Unfortunately, their colleagues in the physical sciences, social sciences, and vocational disciplines make the same claim about their own classes. The humanities, consequently, have lost any unique sense of purpose: they purportedly offer students the same aptitudes that all other subjects provide. Formerly seen as the means through which students may live up to their higher potentialities, the humanities have degenerated into an exercise in mere mental calisthenics. Many humanities professors, oddly enough, appear not to recognize the crucial role of the imagination in human flourishing, oblivious to the fact that literary and artistic masterworks help us grapple with questions surrounding the best ways to live.

What does this tell us about the likely fate of the humanities in America? In the realm of higher education, the outlook is not rosy. To help their disciplines thrive on campus, humanities professors must fight against all the pragmatic incentives of American academia. Circumscribed, discipline-specific graduate training encourages prospective professors to research and write esoteric academic books and articles guided by an anti-humanistic spirit of scientism. The desperate need to publish such research to have a chance to find gainful employment and advance through the academic *cursus honorum* forces graduate students and young professors to fetishize narrow scholarly publication over other aspects of their jobs. And the free-market curriculum that dominates American colleges and universities suggests to students that they have little or nothing to

learn from the past. Without a radical break from such a system, the modern humanities will continue to wither.

Although the U.S. is also home to colleges that demonstrate a more robust commitment to humanism, these institutions, unfortunately, are few and far between. Even the conservative founders of the fledgling University of Austin, who heavily criticized the vicissitudes of U.S. higher ed, seem oblivious to the broader problems for the humanities; thus, they championed “Entrepreneurship and Leadership” as their institution’s inaugural program.

In these circumstances, the future of the humanities may depend chiefly on institutions beyond academia’s orbit. The recently founded Catherine Project—which sponsors free, online tutorials and discussion groups focused on important books of the East and West—could help revive a spirit of humanism absent from most American institutions of higher learning. The early Renaissance humanists, it should be noted, originally spread their pedagogical vision outside of Europe’s universities; the same could hold true for a rejuvenated humanist movement in the contemporary U.S.  ■