

OPINION: Saving the Social Imagination: The Function of the Humanities at the Present Time

Kurt Spellmeyer

The last decade has brought the humanities to their lowest point in a hundred years. Once the largest major in the university, English is down to 3 or 4 percent, while job prospects for recent PhDs seem unlikely to improve. Trying to account for this decline, observers often note the rapid growth of the sciences and professions, but to approach the problem in this way—as a competition among disciplines—is to view them all in isolation from larger forces only partly understood when we point to the growing power of the corporations (Chace; Washburn). Corporations, after all, are nothing new: what has changed is the fading of the postwar social order and the rise of a new, seductive ethos of heroic entrepreneurs. The real crisis for the humanities is not that our students are unable to find jobs, a hurdle for graduates in many fields today. The real crisis is that our fate depends on institutions that made a place for us and that we, in turn, helped to create. The survival of those institutions, not least of all the public university, depends on our willingness to preserve a special way of seeing ourselves—a social imagination that begins with the “we” and not the “I.” My argument is that the humanities, with their liberating diversity represent the last, best hope for the continuation of this special way of seeing. No other sector of our society is so well positioned and well equipped to do this crucial work.

The university’s structural transformation has become the subject of a growing literature. Two figures who have made important contributions, Christopher Newfield and Jeffrey J. Williams, both trace the humanities’ rise back to the robust public funding following World War II, and both attribute our ongoing decline

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to the catastrophic drawdown that began with the Reagan (counter-) revolution. Indeed, Williams sees the term “research university” as a misnomer in the sense that our public mission was preeminent: it would be more accurate, he maintains, to speak of the “welfare state university” (194). But now that the welfare state is on the ropes, academia has adopted what he calls “market protocols,” among them the production of books and articles that have become “largely symbolic” (195). Newfield and Williams are agreed on another matter as well: both take pains to distance their approach, focused on social history, from largely “theoretical critiques” such as Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins*. Both fault Readings’s theory-centric approach for underplaying institutional concerns, and both accuse him, in rather different ways, of supposing our dilemmas can be resolved by an act of recognition rather than by real-world initiatives that would challenge market forces (Newfield, *Unmaking* 152–55; Williams 203–04).

What does it mean for the humanities, however, if the work of scholars is, as Williams says, primarily *symbolic*? Institutional arrangements count, but when Williams seems to view our cultural work as epiphenomenal, doesn’t he run the risk of taking to heart the very market values that he wants to resist? Along these same lines, we might ask if it makes sense for him to link the humanities’ decline to the growth of student debt and the contraction of tenured faculty—developments that affect all undergraduates and all disciplines. In a departure from this approach, I will propose that the market’s current strength follows from its *cultural* success, its depiction of society in a way that often deeply resonates even with those it disadvantages. I believe that the humanities’ canniest response is to keep offering alternatives to the prevailing market culture—a task for which our current marginality conveys a unique advantage. At the very moment when the university is yielding to the same cooptation that has overwhelmed the government, the legal system, and medicine and other professions, the humanities can speak powerfully for a counter-ethos of collective human flourishing.

THE ENTREPRENEUR AS CULTURE HERO

Cuts in funding for tuition and research alter our material reality, but they are also a consequence of prior changes in culture. One virtue of Newfield’s careful work is its attention to this reciprocity, especially the force of the “culture wars” in undercutting the humanities’ socially transformative potential. But the culture wars have never actually stopped; instead, the front has simply expanded beyond whatever happens to get taught inside universities. David Horowitz’s “Academic Bill of Rights” has become quaint and irrelevant with the triumph of an ideology that uses the language of enhanced agency to dismantle the old order on which the humanities relied.

In September 2010, New York City hosted two gatherings of international visitors. The first—and the most highly publicized—was the self-described CGI, the Clinton Global Initiative, an annual conference designed to convene the world's most powerful, wealthy, and renowned in the name of progress. The list of so-called featured attendees included the CEOs of Barclay's Bank and Cisco Systems; an assortment of prime ministers from the developing world, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe; and movie stars who have lent their names to various boutique NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). The presidents of Nike and Timberland were there; so too were Katie Couric, Demi Moore, and the ageless Ashley Judd. Tom Vilsack, the secretary of agriculture, sat beside Robert Rubin, a key architect of the near-collapse of the world economy in 2008 ("CGI: Featured Attendees"). If the list of attendees might be described as the global Who's Who, the roster of sponsors was equally impressive: Citibank, Microsoft, Duke Energy—a major polluter in North America—Chevron, and the Rockefeller Foundation ("CGI: Sponsors").

On its tasteful website, CGI describes its origins in this way:

After attending thousands of meetings during his career in which urgent issues were discussed but no action was taken to solve them, President Clinton saw a need to establish a new kind of meeting with an emphasis on results. In 2005, President Clinton established the Clinton Global Initiative to turn ideas into action and to help our world move beyond the current state of globalization to a more integrated global community of shared benefits, responsibilities, and values. By gathering world leaders from a variety of backgrounds, CGI creates a unique opportunity to channel the capacities of individuals and organizations to realize change. ("Clinton Global Initiative")

The most important word here might also be the one most easily overlooked: that word would be "leaders." The concept of leadership implied by CGI might seem completely unobjectionable until we compare that gathering to another one taking place across town during the same week. And this was the meeting of the United Nations, founded after World War II as a global parliament. What matters most in this contrast, I think, is that the concept of *leadership* has displaced the older political ideal of *representation*—a switch that amounts to nothing less than a seismic shift in the way the world is run.

The UN might be understood as one expression of the society that arose from the two world wars (see Harvey on "embedded liberalism," 10–11). In high modernity everything was organized along similar lines, not only nation-states but also corporations. Novels about the 1950s—Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*—together with William H. Whyte's landmark study *The Organization Man* portray the postwar corporation as a monolithic bureaucracy, and indeed, Ford, GM, DuPont, US Steel—all were massively centralized and steeply hierarchical. To varying degrees, these three defining books described with a mixture of awe and contempt the extraordinary regimentation that shaped life at that time.

But competition from overseas, beginning with the challenge from Japan and followed by a series of economic shocks, put pressures on the bureaucratic corporation it could no longer sustain. Taking their cue from the avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, the management gurus of the 1980s led the way by dismantling the corporate bureaucracy in favor of a geographically dispersed, decentered, and postmodern form of organization. The new arrangement allowed businesses to contract out core activities while shedding many of the social obligations the old vertical structure had entailed. What replaced the postwar pyramid was the horizontal network: porous, loosely organized, and constantly in flux. And just as the postwar bureaucracy had shaped higher education, so changes in the university today are part of an all-encompassing systemic shift for which *leadership* might be the best shorthand term (Arrighi 275–76; Frank; Heath and Potter 188–220).

Far from weakening the corporations, this restructuring went hand in hand with globalization and the dismantling of postwar institutions, spearheaded by a relentless attack on bureaucratic structures. “The most terrifying nine words” in English, Reagan joked, “are: I’m from the government and I’m here to help.” His closest ally in Europe, Margaret Thatcher, took this logic yet another step when she declared that there is “no such thing as society, only individual men and women” (qtd. in Harvey 23). These words set the stage for the contrast on display in New York during the fall of 2010, a contrast between social orders old and new. As Exhibit A of the failed status quo, the UN was part of the problem that week rather than a source of solutions. Councils, assemblies, committees, courts, all bound by regulations—these looked ineffectual compared to the protean CGI, whose only stated purpose was to do good things as expeditiously as possible, cutting red tape and stepping outside the box.

But does this antibureaucratic turn represent, as CGI’s website implies, the next stage along some trajectory from which there’s no turning back, or does it actually evoke a much older form of social organization? I would argue that CGI, and the world order it represents, are profoundly atavistic, reviving an image of social life that disappeared long ago. The hero trope—embodied by Bill Gates, Jack Welch, Warren Buffett, Mark Zuckerberg—has returned as a cultural ideal in post-democratic America. A recent article in the *Economist* titled “Global Heroes” blamed followers of John Maynard Keynes, allied “with big business and big government,” for thwarting the “creative destruction” on which economic health is supposed to depend. “But perspectives have changed,” the article announces, and “entrepreneurs are once again roaming the globe” unmolested.

Within the university, only the humanities have the ability to provide the context missing from the kind of stories the *Economist* likes to tell. Literary works such as *Beowulf*, the Norse sagas, and the *Táin* offer complex portraits of heroic social orders held together by charismatic leadership rather than by rules and institutions. But

perhaps the most illustrative case is Homer's *The Iliad*. Achilles and Hector represent, respectively, the fading and ascendant orders of the period—Achilles the exemplar of the warrior chief, for whom “Lead, follow, or get out of the way” are the only options; and Hector, the new man whose maturity gives rise to the city-state with its more complex, enduring way of life. The very first lines of the poem underscore Achilles's destructiveness:

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds (1:1–10)

Knowing that Achilles is a great warrior, we might have expected to hear some account of the violence launched against his enemies, but here the emphasis instead falls on the collateral damage done to his own countrymen. By contrast, Achilles's opposite, Hector, is also his city's foremost warrior, but Hector always acts as its protector, rallying the troops when he returns, consoling the wives who wait in distress for news about their missing husbands, reassuring his worried father Priam on the eve of battle—a fighter out of necessity, not choice. What matters to Hector—and to Homer as well—are the customary forms of obligation that knit together gods and human beings, mothers and sons, generals and their troops, men and women, the powerful and weak, because a reverence for these bonds is precisely what distinguishes civilization from barbarity. Yet these are the very relationships that CGI has been designed to set aside in the name of leadership. Whatever the intentions of its attendees, CGI differs from the UN in its repudiation of “the polis” as an organizing principle.

Already, by the time of Homer, Greece had begun to move away from charismatic leadership, and much the same shift took place in Jewish history, even though American conservatives seem not to have noticed. No less than *The Iliad*, the tale of Samson might be understood as a critique of the heroic social order. Samson fails to use his sacred power for constructive purposes, leaving a trail of suffering and death that culminates in his pulling down the temple of Dagon on his own head. When we meet Samson as a young adult, we learn that he has wed a Philistine, and after she betrays his confidence on the evening following their wedding, he unleashes against strangers a violence out of all proportion to the offense done to him. “He went [. . .] to Ashkelon,” the Bible relates, and “struck down thirty of [the Philistine] men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had [conspired with Samson's wife]. Burning with anger, he returned to his father's home. And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had attended him at the feast” (Judges 14:19–20 NIV). Still later, Samson binds torches to the tails of

foxes and sets them lose in the Philistines' fields to ignite a conflagration. Although Samson's superhuman strength might have been a blessing for his people, his anger makes him dangerous to the Jews, who face reprisals for his actions. Even his relation to the "spirit of the Lord" is entirely personal and contributes to his isolation. Like Achilles, he embodies the defects of an unsocialized individualism.

Turning to *The Iliad* and the Book of Judges for an understanding of our time might seem to violate common sense, but once we start exploring connections of this kind, we are thinking in a way that is unique to the humanities. When in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno invoke Book XII of *The Odyssey*—the binding of Odysseus to the mast as his ship rows past the Sirens—they enact a specific form of critique based on a human solidarity imagined as reaching across time (25–34). Such thinking preserves historical memory, but it does so in a special way; the past is allowed to claim equality with the present "as something living"—and this juxtaposition exposes the "real" as thoroughly contingent and only one of many possible worlds. Such a deployment of collective memory seems especially crucial now if neoliberalism, as Pierre Bourdieu contends, is a "desocialized and dehistoricized [. . .] 'theory'" that has "the means of making itself true and empirically verifiable." We need the past—we need the humanities—in order to doubt precisely what has come to appear self-evident. And this doubt in turn clears a space for ways of knowing, long forgotten or repressed, that could provide the materials for new and more humane forms of community. To see the cult of the entrepreneur as a return of the archaic, or to read the so-called war on terror through the framework of the Samson narrative, is to understand already the persistence of an opportunity for something else, something better.

SHADOW ELITES VERSUS ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE

CGI might be understood as the quintessential neoliberal institution, its real power carefully masked by a refreshing openness and informality. The anthropologist Jeanine Wedel suggests that in the emergence of such conclaves, we are witnessing a new form of domination by "shadow elites" who colonize public institutions. Her work meticulously documents the massive scale on which the government has been surreptitiously privatized—even space travel is shifting from NASA to private industry—as officials shuttle back and forth from investment houses to the US Treasury, or from corporations to ambassadorships, or from the military to the evening news. Wedel chronicles, for instance, the facility with which the neocons manipulated Washington and the media to foment the war with Iraq. Not only did they have a financial stake in a post-Saddam oil industry, but they fielded spokespeople—ostensibly independent journalists or impartial academics—who concealed their actual interests. To call this "corruption" is to miss the thrust of Wedel's argument, which

describes practices that unweave the social fabric without needing to break the law. The *flexian* is the term Wedel has coined for a new breed of privileged actor who can move from one sector to the next with an ease almost impossible to track. Needless to say, this flexibility plays out very differently for those who occupy the bottom rungs of the economic ladder, where the dismantling of postwar institutions has produced even greater inequality.

Like Davos or Aspen, CGI might be understood as a global conference for the elite flexians—an opportunity for them to create and enhance the extramural affiliations that Wedel calls *flexnets*. The self-serving and exclusionary nature of these far-flung nets is so hard to recognize because their real activity takes place outside the old structures, legitimized by the rhetoric of service to humanity. In 2008 the blogger Dave Johnson attended CGI himself. One of the panels he witnessed was titled “The Global Impact of Rural Innovation,” and it included Jacques Aigrain of the bank Swiss Re; Wangari Maathai, winner of a Nobel Prize and spokesperson for Kenya’s Green Belt Movement; Elsie Meeks of First Nations Oweesta Corporation; the evangelist Rick Warren of Saddleback Church; Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank; and the moderator, Steve Gunderson, of the Council on Foundations. Most of the panelists had solid reputations for their work on global development, and their discussion centered, fittingly enough, on education as a response to rural poverty. “But there was,” Johnson writes, “a point in the discussion [when] I started to react in a very negative way” to the language of finance—the language of ‘investments’ and ‘returns’—that overwhelmed the discussion. Once his initial enthusiasm faded, Johnson saw that the money talk was inescapable given the situation of the panelists, who were in effect selling their ideas to potential patrons.

Only a forgetfulness of history can prevent us from appreciating the significance of this account. As we dismantle the remnants of the postwar bureaucracy, we have set the stage for what Jürgen Habermas described as “refeudalization,” and what Chris Hedges more recently referred to as “neo-feudalism” (Habermas 141–80; also see Kellner; Hedges 1). The interactions between Johnson’s panelists and their rich, powerful auditors have become increasingly typical of many social settings—the university not least of all—and quite distinct from those of citizens engaged in collective deliberation. Inequality circumscribes what can be said in a way that no amount of reasoned dialogue has the power to overcome. In this sense the panel was pure spectacle, preserving the appearance of equality while the real dynamics have changed. And just as at the end of the classical world, the emergence of feudalism is advanced not by overt oppression, but by the spread of unsayability: it becomes nearly impossible to value certain kinds of things because the languages in which they might be described have become effectively unspeakable. The consequence of this slow, discursive violence, which Clive James has described as “cultural amnesia,” can hardly be overstated. No matter what problems we look at today, there are

always multiple frames through which they can and should be viewed. Indeed, this multiplicity is essential to human flourishing.

The persistence of rural poverty almost everywhere in the world might be caused by a lack of access to opportunities readily available in many urban areas, in which case the solution pursued by Meeks would be the most appropriate—bringing training and investment opportunities to isolated populations. But then again, the local people might possess on-the-ground resources they can mobilize if they are only offered microloans modeled on Yunus’s Grameen Bank. Alternately, rural poverty might result from the environmental degradation that is the ongoing legacy of the colonial past, an argument made by Maathai. The problem of underdevelopment can be viewed through other frames as well. We might turn to culture as the key, or to religion, public health, even gender relations, and all can be seen as creative responses to human needs at different times and places. But once we have destroyed the diversity of knowledges created by the old social order, what we will get is the hegemony of one discourse in particular: economics (see Bourdieu). By giving economics the last word, CGI forecloses on a process of deliberation that would include a real diversity of perspectives and explanations. In forums such as Clinton’s CGI, this diversity is understood to be a problem that hopelessly entangles conventional institutions like the UN. CGI’s pragmatic appeal to “results” sweeps all of the complexity away by privileging the language of the marketplace as though it were value neutral and uniquely efficacious.

Perhaps we are ill-equipped to deal with this change because we never learned to appreciate what higher education has already achieved. Observing the apparent disorganization of the old curriculum, critics of the postwar university decried the lack of any overarching rationale. Generations of conservatives have called for a “return” to the Great Books or a self-conscious attempt to embrace the West’s “essential” identity. But instead of viewing the curriculum’s lack of any “center” or “core” as symptomatic of our failure, we might understand it as a sign of extraordinary cultural health. The wide-ranging, centerless curriculum can be compared to a climax forest in which we find a diversity of species that are the work of many thousands of years. If we think of culture in evolutionary terms, an ongoing project much like nature itself, then the diversity we find in academic knowledge is just what we should expect and hope to preserve. The idea that all knowledge must support a single way of thinking—what Vandana Shiva calls a monoculture of the mind—has been the exception historically, and one pursued most assiduously by totalitarian regimes.

Without being able to prove it, I would like to make the claim that the rich diversity on display among Johnson’s panelists was prepared for by the humanities’ influence over our culture as a whole—and, in particular, by the humanities’ long association with the arts. Not only did the arts sanction such diversity, but they actively encouraged it in ways often overlooked even by the arts’ contemporary

champions. Reacting to the growing marginality of the humanities, Elaine Scarry stakes their claim to relevance on a connection between beauty and truth. Beauty, she writes, “ignites the desire for truth by giving us [. . .] the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error” (52). But surely many forms of apperception can stimulate the desire for truth, and no field—from physics to exercise science—is unschooled in the dialectic between conviction and error.

Instead, what seems distinctive about the arts is their willingness to suspend the imperative of truthfulness, and here again work done by the Frankfurt School might prove useful to us now. The relevance of the arts, Adorno suggests, lies in their promising of “what is not real” (122), and this openness sets the stage for an experimental “heterogeneity” tolerated less and less everywhere today except in the humanities, where it is actually prized (132). Precisely because of this ability to occupy the liminal space between reality and representation, the arts and the allied humanities—English in particular—are the social sites best positioned to preserve the diversity now under siege. Indeed, the unique value of the humanities lies in their power to transform the allegedly “real” into the symbolic: even economics can become a “way of seeing,” metaphorical through and through, that no longer commands from us our unreflecting acquiescence. When truth, unchanging and objective, has been exposed as only a representation, the question of value rushes in to take its place: not how we *must* live, but how we *should*.

ACADEMIC FLEXIANS

Just as flexians have colonized institutions such as NASA, the US military, and the State Department, so they are turning to the university. In 2010 an “initiative” that described itself as the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) issued a request for proposals (RFP) announcing the following goals and methods:

NGLC seeks to dramatically improve college readiness and completion in the United States through the applied use of technology, particularly among low-income young adults. The program provides investment capital, builds evidence, and fosters an active community of innovators and adopters in pursuit of this goal. [. . .] NGLC believes that real progress on measures such as student readiness and completion requires substantial reshaping of the currently fragmented, sub-scale markets for solutions as well as the imperfectly aligned incentives facing administrators, faculty, students, teachers and learning solution providers. The NGLC [is focused] on supporting disruptive change in both the supply and demand for effective solutions to problems of student persistence and completion. (Educause, “Next Generation” 1)

Even a careless reader might appreciate two features of the passage. First, it represents a criticism, even an indictment, of the university in its present form. That university, it alleges, has failed to find “solutions to problems of student persistence

and completion,” especially among “low-income young adults.” This accusation is allowed to stand without any supporting evidence even though colleges and universities have worked with great determination to support exactly such students through developmental programs in English and math, the Educational Opportunities Fund, special scholarships, and countless other innovations. As a result, retention has improved dramatically since the time before such reforms were first undertaken during the 1970s. But rhetorically, the charge of failure justifies an intervention from outside, which sounds all the more necessary because the target population is described as uniquely vulnerable. And this brings us to a second feature of the passage—how NGLC proposes to succeed when the university has “failed.” Ostensibly the solution is technology, but in fact the university has never been a stranger to high tech. The real change at stake is cultural instead: if it succeeds, NGLC will bring to higher learning the language and spirit of the entrepreneur. From now on, faculty and administrators need to think in terms of “markets,” “supply and demand,” and “investment capital.” In this passage we can see the same foreclosure on complexity that Johnson observed at CGI.

But who or what exactly is NGLC? On what authority is it entitled to make so sweeping an intervention? It might help to know that NGLC was launched by an entity called Educause, which was funded—with \$20 million—by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, whose motto is that “Every person deserves the *chance* to live a healthy, productive life” (my emphasis). Through one or another of its surrogates, which it refers to as “advocates,” the foundation has already floated similar initiatives in precollege education here in the United States and across the world. One of those initiatives is Teach Plus, whose recruits recently played a role in convincing Indiana’s legislature to eliminate the practice of seniority-based layoffs in the public schools.

But the Gates Foundation’s reach extends far beyond policies of this kind, intruding directly into curricula. As the journalist Sam Dillon recently reported, the foundation has dispatched “Harvard-trained data specialists to work inside schools, not only to crunch numbers but also to change practices.” At the same time, Gates has funded a number of the Washington “analysts” who are customarily tapped by journalists to explain education policy. The foundation has given grants, as well, directly to media outlets. In other words, Gates has set out to transform not only those who teach, but how and what they teach, while at the same time working to control the outlets that shape public opinion. And, of course, the foundation enjoys access to financial resources no one else on earth can rival. In 2009 it spent \$373 million on education, while over the next five or six years, the plan is to invest \$3.5 billion. In the words of Bruce Filer, a professor of education at University of California–Berkeley, “It’s Orwellian in the sense that through this vast funding they can change how we tacitly think about the problems facing public education” (qtd. in Dillon). But actually, “Orwellian” is not at all apt. George Orwell’s 1984 imagines a

society in which the government—the Party as it is called—controls every aspect of society. In our time, by contrast, what we see is a heroic form of domination that has allowed private figures like Bill Gates to claim prerogatives that formerly belonged to elected governments. David Sirota has suggested that such a strategy might be seen as a version of the “shock doctrine” described by Naomi Klein, a tactic employed by international financiers to dismantle and privatize a defaulting nation’s public sector after a financial emergency (Klein; Sirota).

At the same time that this assault is unfolding outside the university, other systemic changes are underway on the inside as well. In the summer of 2010, the *Ann Arbor Chronicle* featured a story on one of the city’s most dynamic residents, Ann Marie Sastry, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Michigan and the winner of numerous honors, including the National Science Foundation’s Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers. The article describes her new company Sakti3, which she launched with the help of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and the venture capitalist Vinod Khosla:

University of Michigan engineering professor Ann Marie Sastry—CEO and co-founder of a hot, new automotive battery development company—sits shivering in her overcoat in the cold [. . .] basement at the Detroit auto show. But Sastry and her company [. . .] [are] far from “out in the cold.” They are in the auto business for the long haul and do not plan on being relegated to a basement booth forever. Eventually, if all goes well, her company’s battery technology will be powering electric cars upstairs on the main show floor’s Electric Avenue. (Lovy)

Later, the reporter describes a moment when Sastry apologizes for the need to keep her company’s secrets under wraps, because the winner of this contest could walk away with profits so enormous they might rise to the stratosphere of IPOs—“public offerings”—like Google’s and Facebook’s. “We’ll duke it out,” Sastry says, “in the marketplace,” even though, as the article concedes, “that kind of unabashedly capitalistic [. . .] talk would have been practically unheard-of coming from a university professor in eras gone by—when professors were supposed to be in research for purely academic reasons.” The report goes on to quote David Cole, head of the Center for Automotive Research, who recalls a time in the 1970s when commercializing new technology coming out of academia was still considered a “dirty secret.”

Sastry belongs to an emergent breed of flexian academics. Both she and Cole feel the need to comment on the new regime because its emergence marks a sharp break with the past. In the article, Sastry describes a crossroads in her own career after her research had begun to move into areas she recognized as potentially revolutionary. “We could,” she observes, “absolutely write more papers on this subject and [. . .] focus on this as an academic exercise or we could [. . .] go down another road, which is to take what we have and see if we can build it in the steps required for commercialization.” Framed in these terms, the choice seems obvious. “Academic”

becomes synonymous with “world-evading” or “ineffectual.” As Sastry assures the reporter, “The culture [here] has completely turned around” thanks in part to leaders like University of Michigan’s new president, Mary Sue Coleman: “Our president has been very specific. She believes that we need to enable tech transfer” (Lovy).

Operating in such an atmosphere, professors increasingly think and act as independent entrepreneurs at a time when public funds are drying up. The draconian cuts delivered last year to the California public system triggered a migration of top academics, especially in the sciences. One story in the *Los Angeles Times* describes the departure of a research team at University of California–San Diego (Gordon). The three scientists, all engaged in cutting-edge cancer research, were offered positions at Rice University, a private institution buoyed by a \$5 billion endowment. Not only did Rice increase the professors’ salaries by 40 percent, but it offered them state-of-the-art labs and a steady flow of financial support. Such migrations also exacerbate a trend noted by AAUP: the salary gap between publics and privates has widened from 8 percent thirty years ago to 25 percent today (AAUP). And predictably, professors leaving the University of California tend to go to private institutions such as Stanford, New York University, Columbia, and Harvard.

Another professor featured in the *Times* article, the political scientist Wendy Brown, describes her reluctance to turn her back on her own public institution, Berkeley, after twenty years in the California system, but she also voices her premonition that further budget cuts will turn schools like hers into education “factories.” Other universities, she adds, are taking advantage of the state’s worsening financial crises: “I think they believe UC people are not barnacles attached to the ship anymore.” And indeed, no one is “attached” in the old way, unless they are unable to leave.

Precisely because the university in times past still maintained a distance from the market, commercialism had to remain not just a dirty secret, but a potential violation of ethics. Now, as the old ethos fades away, faculty are caught between conflicting loyalties. Should researchers serve the “public good,” or are they obligated to repay the commercial entities on which they have come to rely for their success as researchers? When a gifted scientist like Sastry finished her graduate studies, she could have gone to work for industry, but she made a conscious decision to pursue an academic career. Yet once she finds investors for Sakti3, everything will be different. Even if her partners are honest, circumspect, and committed to transparency, investment by its very nature cannot be truly disinterested. Nor can an IPO actually extend its benefits to the entire public. To serve both commerce and knowledge faithfully is probably impossible, and the more exorbitant the money at stake, the less respected the old strictures will be.

Recent reporting, for example, has brought to light the influence of big drug companies on medical research. Dr. Marcia Angell, whose criticism of this trend led to her removal as the editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, recently

reviewed the mounting evidence of public-private “synergies” much like the ones Wedel describes. One researcher Angell discusses was the subject of Senate hearings: Dr. Joseph L. Biederman, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and chief of pediatric psychopharmacology at Massachusetts General Hospital. Angell contends that because of Biederman’s research, “children as young as two years old are now being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and treated with a cocktail of powerful drugs, many of which were not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for that purpose and none of which were approved for children below ten years of age.” Senate investigations later disclosed that Biederman had received \$1.6 million in “consulting and speaking fees” between 2000 and 2007.

Angell goes on to observe that such abuses, widespread in psychiatry, may have caught the attention of the press, “but similar conflicts of interest pervade medicine” more generally. Most physicians, as a matter of fact, accept money or gifts from drug companies. Many act as paid consultants, speakers at corporate-sponsored gatherings, and authors of “scientific” publications actually composed by the drug companies or their hirelings. At the same time, the companies not only fund research directly, but endow prestigious chairs and finance major construction on campus. It’s possible to argue that universities are simply no match for such overwhelming power, but the academy has made things worse by pushing the humanities to the margins of the curriculum.

Though medicine would seem to be uniquely vulnerable, any discipline can be appropriated in much the same way. Consider the case of Joseph Nye, a distinguished professor at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. In 2007 he helped launch the rehabilitation of the once outré Muammar Qaddafi with an article, “Tripoli Diarist,” published in the *New Republic*. Invited to meet with the colonel by the Monitor Group, an international public relations firm, Nye represents himself as skeptical at the start, but the portrait of Qaddafi he paints is extremely flattering in spite of its winning gestures toward hesitation and self-questioning:

Three years ago, I wrote a book called *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, and I have written often about the subject over the years. Was that why Qaddafi wanted to talk to me? I could not be sure, but the possibility did raise other questions. How serious was Qaddafi about exercising soft power? And just how different was this new Qaddafi—with his preference for diplomacy over weapons—from the old? On a cool February morning, a car whisked me to a compound in the middle of Tripoli that was fortified with multiple layers of green metal gates. Inside the gates stood several large tents. Qaddafi greeted me at the entrance to one. He wore his trademark hat as well as two cloaks—an outer black embroidered one, and a plain tan one underneath. He was both tall and handsome in a craggy sort of way. He moved with ease and spoke softly. Occasionally, he used English, but he was clearly more comfortable speaking Arabic with an interpreter. We sat in plastic chairs by a table on which five of my books were spread out—including *Soft Power*. Sure enough, a half hour into our conversation, he asked how Libya might increase its soft power on the world stage.

Rhetorically the account operates on several levels at once, confronting Qaddafi's past quite openly and allowing the author's doubts, which stand in for the reader's, to remain hanging in midair like smoke. But concurrently the author weaves a kind of spell, inviting us to experience the Man as the embodiment of our fantasies, right out of Indiana Jones or Lawrence of Arabia. Whatever doubts about Qaddafi we might have harbored, his interest in the idea of "soft power" actually functions as a surrogate for something else—loyalty to the politics of the West. And Qaddafi offers evidence of his loyalty in the form that Western intellectuals are likely to appreciate—: a small library of scholarly books. Qaddafi, it turns out, is a reader just like us, even a would-be intellectual, a leader to be sure, but a leader prepared to be tutored by Professor Nye. So skilled is Nye's rhetoric that by the article's close, most readers might be willing to concede that Qaddafi has been sorely misunderstood, and that we have treated as a Caliban someone who comes closer to Prince Hal.

As always, the rest is indeed history, but not the history that Nye's account might have led us to expect. When the Arab Spring riots crisscrossed Libya, the Colonel unleashed a pitiless campaign of mass murder and rape. Nye, it appeared initially, had been seduced by his disingenuous host. But then research done by David Corn of *Mother Jones* broke the backstory that the Monitor Group had been paid \$3 million "to enhance the profile of Libya and Muammar Qaddafi" in the English-speaking world ("Monitor Group"). And Nye was not the only one involved. No less a figure than Anthony Giddens had been induced to do a public rethink in the pages of the *Guardian*, as did Benjamin Barber, one of the world's foremost theorists of democracy, in the *Washington Post*. While admitting that Qaddafi remained opposed to representative democracy, Giddens foresaw that with the right reforms, Libya could emerge in a few dozen years as "the Norway of North Africa" (Giddens). Titling his contribution "Gaddafi's Libya: An Ally for America?" Barber wrote with special warmth about "Gaddafi's gifted son, Saif al-Islam," who had taken a PhD at the London School of Economics (Barber). In defense of democratic ideals, Nye, Giddens, and Barber have long, distinguished records. Yet real money did change hands, and all three eminent intellectuals benefitted personally by playing advocate. In the *Nation's* subsequent exposé, historian Jon Wiener was fully justified in his choice of bylines: "Professors Paid by Qaddafi."

If men of such intelligence and goodwill can go wrong so thoroughly, we need to ask ourselves what might transpire in other, less visible arenas. Many leaders in genetic science have started businesses from which they stand to make millions. In May 2010, J. Craig Venter's team of scientists managed to construct a bacteria genome, and then to insert it into a cell, producing what his press release touted as the world's first synthetic form of life. An article in the *Guardian* quotes a breathless Julian Savulescu, an ethics professor at Oxford, describing the achievement this way: "Venter is creaking open the most profound door in humanity's history. [. . .] He

is not merely copying life artificially [. . .] He is going towards the role of a god: creating artificial life that could never have existed naturally” (Sample). Even if this assessment is hyperbole, surely it should give us pause when Venter sees himself as an entrepreneur whose most immediate goal is not a purely altruistic service to humanity. Indeed, his self-professed objective is to become the Bill Gates of genetics. Nor was service to humanity the point when, in the 1990s, his company, Celera Genomics, applied for more than 300 patents on the basic building blocks of life—a monopolistic effort that failed only because the Human Genome Project beat him to the punch by placing that genome in the public domain.

And Venter is no different from the Gates Foundation in seeking to control the way his activities are perceived. In collaboration with MIT and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Venter Institute developed a policy paper on the implications of the new technology. Released in 2007, it is titled “Synthetic Genomics: Options for Governance”—an unintentionally ironic choice of words because governance in the usual sense is the last thing Venter wants to see (Garfinkel). Indeed, the report is primarily concerned with avoiding accidents, minimizing costs, and maintaining adequate security. The report might be understood as an attempt to make routine the private control of a technology that could potentially imperil everyone on the planet.

It’s instructive to contrast this state of affairs with atomic science during World War II, when figures such as Oppenheimer, Einstein, and Fermi would never have dreamed of trying to cash in on the discoveries they made. This was, of course, because they still thought of themselves in terms defined by the Enlightenment, but also because atomic science belonged to the state, not to private industry. Yet now, with the attenuation of the state and the public culture it protected, the sciences have come to play a central role in an economy tied to innovation. No one would tolerate private citizens exploding uranium cores in the deserts of Utah and Nevada, but even though the new technologies might prove as dangerous as thermonuclear war, the hegemony of the marketplace has placed such objections out of bounds. This development we should recognize as a version of what Giorgio Agamben has called the “state of exception.” While Agamben is primarily concerned with the power of government actors to suspend all laws and exert control over life and death, here in the United States we find that corporations are laying claim to that same awesome power.

FLOURISHING TOGETHER

In accounts such as these, we are witnessing a cultural failure whose ramifications were displayed most dramatically in the near-collapse of the economy in 2008. So widespread are those ramifications that they might appear to underscore the humani-

ties' insignificance, but it's important to recognize that none of the major problems of our time—global climate change, neocolonialism, the mass extinction of species, spreading economic inequality—can be solved by CGI and other informal networks of elites. Nor can they be solved by NGOs, well-intentioned “social entrepreneurs,” or an anarchist multitude (see Bull). Only formal institutions such as the UN and the old welfare state can return us to anything like the orderly, prosperous postwar world. And the resurgence of those institutions will not happen unless we help to preserve a different way of thinking. The good news is that we aren't alone in our dissatisfaction with the status quo.

When a recent poll asked respondents to rate the professions on the basis of their honesty and ethics, slightly more than 50 percent rated professors “very high/high,” as compared to bankers (19 percent), senators (11 percent) and stockbrokers (9 percent) (Jones). Nurses scored highest on the survey (80 percent), while those in finance wound up at the nether end. But what does the university offer—what trait or traits have put us close to nurses on the spectrum of the public's respect? Surely the first among the reasons would be a long-standing commitment to the public itself. And this commitment to public-ness—to a “we” and not an isolated “me” or an exclusionary “us”—gives the humanities a special role within the university and within our society as a whole. Habermas and Benedict Anderson both broke new ground by exploring the links between literature, language, philosophy, journalism, and the emerging public sphere (Anderson). That this sphere was deeply flawed at its birth by a whole series of exclusions, these thinkers, and countless others after them, have helped us to confront. And far from discrediting public-ness, much of the last half-century of work in the humanities, work in which English often led the way, has served the purpose of making public-ness more open, complex, and diverse than ever—and for this very reason more fully “ours,” at least potentially. That the “we” remains an unfulfilled ideal instead of a finished achievement does not diminish its centrality (Pratt).

Our allegiance to the public sphere operates on a deeper level as well. One has only to consider the phenomenology of the literate practices we teach every day in courses ranging from developmental English to senior seminars. Whether or not one accepts the proposition that we are all co-creators of the text, reading, writing, and pedagogy as we have imagined them are fundamentally dialogical and dependent on the activity of everyone involved. Indeed, our commitment to dialogue runs much deeper than most non-humanists will probably ever recognize because our version of the “truth” cannot exist without being understood. To imagine *The Iliad*, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or *Glas* in a world where human beings have gone extinct brings the mind to an abrupt full stop because the whole point of the humanities is to produce a lifeworld that allows the fullest possible development of human potentialities.

Even though the sciences in practice are no less dialogical than we are, and even

though scientific knowledge is a collective achievement just like ours, science does not normally accept the creation of a shared lifeworld as the ultimate goal. The “truth” of science purports to exist completely independent of anyone’s particular biography, history, or culture. But for us, shareability is everything. Though it’s true that in our scientific age, “culture” itself has come to denote a structure that precedes us, often operating behind our backs, the word originally described a process of self-cultivation through which individuals could become more intelligent, more sensitive, more aware, more compassionate (Velkley 11–30). This older notion of culture placed human flourishing at the center—even when it came attached to invidious distinctions based on class, race, gender, and other forms of prejudice. Elites have certainly fashioned the “we” into an instrument of domination, but as Anderson demonstrates, this turn to the “we” set the stage for subsequence reversals and challenges from outside and below. Human flourishing is a contagious ideal, as we saw once again in the events of the Arab Spring (Nussbaum; Sen).

Yet human flourishing is not the goal of the market’s world hegemony. Gilles Deleuze, in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” makes a crucial point about differences in forms of domination, then and now. He speculates that power in the nineteenth century was based on “enclosure” and “concentration” (3–4). Concentration, Deleuze argues, was the internal logic of the state as well as the factory. But social control in our time has become “essentially dispersive,” depending on a fragmentation sustained by failures of mutual acknowledgment that have been systemically produced (6). In other words, the undoing of the “we” has become a crucial tool of hegemony. Deleuze concludes his postscript by arguing that any resistance to the dominant must address the problem of this fragmentation, although he admits that the way forward still remains obscure.

Another observer of the same dilemma, Masao Miyoshi, argues for the pursuit of what he calls an “inclusive totality,” by which he means a commitment to a “we” based ultimately on our common fate in the face of an environmental crisis, with the attendant threat of social collapse (293–96). One might or might not agree with Miyoshi about the importance of this problem, but his call for the constitution of a new “we” presupposes that the humanities are inextricably connected to the survival of public-ness, now understood to include the whole planet. Miyoshi’s argument, in turn, inspired Edward Said to make the claim that the humanities’ decline can be traced back to their abandonment of the public sphere in favor of coterie languages. In effect, Said alleges, the humanities revoked their contract with the body politic (1–29).

Whether they define themselves as Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, many of our nation’s “thought leaders” regard human flourishing as a reward, not a fundamental right. But this means that the humanities have the opportunity to take on a new pertinence. The market may be powerful, but it can’t claim the public’s trust, even after spending countless billions on advertising and other forms

of spin. As we contemplate our response to the seismic shift I have described, it's important to recall that market contradictions nearly destroyed the global economy just four years ago. Precisely because our best economists don't really know what they're doing, the continued dominance of their modes of thought perpetuates an incoherence that most Americans experience as pain, uncertainty, danger, and defeat. We humanists make an enormous mistake when we interpret mass passivity as a sign of mass consent. In a 2009 Rasmussen survey, only 52 percent of respondents saw capitalism in a favorable light—the lowest level since World War II—while 29 percent looked positively on a socialist alternative, a figure that rose to 37 percent in a Gallup poll the following year (Montopoli; Newport). According to research done in 2010 by Michael I. Norton of the Harvard Business School and Dan Ariely of Duke University, 92 percent of Americans would prefer to live in a society with an income distribution similar to Sweden's (10). Still more recently, inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, a majority in a *New York Times*/CBS poll expressed their support for greater income equality—the first time since the Great Depression (Reich).

People might not grasp the system's incoherence on the level of theory, but they still experience it in the form of unmet existential needs—for security, respect, a sense of genuine agency, and, most of all, an end to the isolation produced by a constant struggle to survive. That's where we come in. Where else except in the humanities can our students find the languages that will allow them to recognize, articulate, and act on a widely shared sense of discontent? Will they find those languages in marketing class? On television or in *People* magazine? None of these outlets has a memory, and therefore none is capable of preserving genuine alternatives to a status quo that seems less and less capable of keeping its promises. When Venter declares it his goal to sell the building blocks of life in the same way that Lowes sells two-by-fours, the invisible hand has overreached. Even now, implicit in the arguments offered by Venter, CGI, and the Gates Foundation is an appeal to something else besides sheer productivity. But what exactly that “something else” might be, the market is powerless to spell out.

By contrast, the humanities still preserve worlds of value to which we might turn as our society is forced to deal with unprecedented challenges, most of them created by the market itself. Because these worlds of value can provide deeply resonant alternatives to the usual pieties, we throw away our greatest asset when we try to defend ourselves in the argot of investments, profitability, and benefits. And this holds true especially today. At a moment when good jobs have grown scarce, and when the cost of education requires millions of graduates to begin their adult lives in debt, the promise of work has gained a talismanic power, and yet the question of how to live hasn't been resolved once you're hired. Over time, the doubts are sure

to grow more urgent as the prospects for a “good life” becomes increasingly remote.

The university has always played a double game—appeasing wealth while sheltering alternatives to the status quo. But as Newfield suggests, this double game has decisively shaped the consciousness of the middle class itself (*Ivy* 3–14, 214–27). Even though professors were often held to the same standard of “productivity” as the business culture outside, the university tried to mediate between the larger society and a “life of the mind” imagined as a realm of freedom counterposed to a realm of brute necessity. To preserve the freedom at the heart of this life was the unique vocation of humanists, and their sense of vocation made the university a training ground for the rising middle class, one so perfectly suited to the task that no other institution played a greater role in its development. And because professors often cast a jaundiced eye on the habits of the bourgeoisie, their suspicions helped produce a self-critical double-consciousness in the minds of countless undergraduates.

The growth of the middle class went hand in hand with the rise of the university, not simply because a bachelor’s degree conferred some sought-after distinction, but also because the middle class defined itself in ambivalent opposition to a marketplace where it had to struggle to survive, caught between the power of a heartless elite and the subjection of the workers. Indeed, we might understand bureaucracy as the offspring of that double-consciousness, carving out a space for greater freedom with the instruments of constraint. For generations of Americans, college was a special place, and they saw their professors as the embodiment of values that challenged the servitude which ruled everywhere outside. The academy’s otherworldliness was actually the source of its greatest strength, and the bleakness of the world today makes that otherworldliness essential to our shared pursuit of a better life.

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