THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

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Introduction

In this provocative paper, Louis Menand seeks to address what are the "philosophical roots" of the humanistic disciplines and how—or if—those disciplines now connect to those historic roots. The complex interplay of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and what Menand calls "postdisciplinarity" is certainly one of the most striking features of humanistic scholarship today. The modern American university is only a bit more than a century old, yet we find that its basic component parts, disciplinary departments and professional schools, no longer suffice. Departments and schools must accommodate dramatic intellectual change, but those changes increasingly are incubated in centers, programs, and diverse sites that do not easily fit disciplinary models. Professor Menand sees in these trends the promise of an intellectually and socially healthy future, but he also notes the many snares on the road to realization of that hope.

Louis Menand is a Distinguished Professor in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he is also a Professor of English. His books apply a deep humanistic sensibility to intellectual history. They include *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and his Context; Pragmatism: A Reader;* and *The Metaphysical Club*. He is the co-editor of *America in Theory* and of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. He has taught at Queens College, Princeton and Columbia Universities, and served as Visiting Professor of Law at the University of Virginia. Menand is also a public intellectual, a species too often thought extinct. He is literary editor and staff writer of *The New Yorker*, associate editor of *The New Republic*, and contributing editor of the *New York Review of Books*. We are delighted that he has agreed to publish this piece as an *ACLS Occasional Paper* and to continue his association with ACLS as a member of the selection committee for the Charles A. Ryskamp Research Fellowships.

The Marketplace of Ideas*

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People say that the humanities disciplines have collapsed, but for the most part they do not say this with a huge amount of anxiety. Students continue to enroll in humanities courses, they continue to go to graduate school (even though they are often advised not to) so that they can some day teach humanities courses themselves, and a great deal of scholarship is still published. It is comforting to assume that as long as these conditions obtain, the disciplinary situation will shake itself out. I have no idea whether or not the complacent attitude will prove to be the wise attitude, though it often does. I do think, however, that the humanities disciplines are facing a crisis of rationale, and sooner or later crises of rationale can lead to crises of funding, and those, at least, are serious. The humanities occupy only a corner of the higher education marketplace, but it has historically been a very prestigious corner. Although no one is likely to take the trouble to cut the humanities disciplines off, there is some fear that the action, including the funding, is moving into areas of teaching and research that can demonstrate a more obvious market utility. The humanities disciplines don't seem to be dying out, but they do feel dislocated. They are institutionally insecure because they appear to have lost their philosophical roots. The question this paper attempts to address is exactly what those roots were in the first place.

The history of higher education in the United States since the Second World War can be divided into two periods. The first period, from 1945 to 1975, was a period of expansion. The composition of the higher education system remained more or less the same—in certain respects, the system became more uniform—but the size of the system increased dramatically. This is the period known in the literature on American education as the Golden Age. The second period, from 1975 to the present, has not been honored with a special name. It is a period not of expansion, but of diversification. Since 1975 the size of the system has grown at a much more modest pace, but the composition—who is taught, who does the teaching, and what they teach—has changed dramatically. You cannot understand the second phase, the phase the university is in now, unless you understand the first.

In the Golden Age, between 1945 and 1975, the number of American undergraduates increased by almost five hundred percent and the number of graduate students increased by nearly nine hundred percent.[1] In the 1960s alone enrollments more than doubled, from 3.5 million to just under 8 million; the number of doctorates awarded each year tripled; and more faculty were hired than had been hired in the entire 325-year history of American higher education to that point.[2] At the height of the expansion, between 1965 and 1972, new community college campuses were opening in the United States at the rate of one every week.[3]

Three external factors account for this expansion: the first was the baby boom; the second was the relatively high domestic economic growth rate after 1948; and the third was the Cold War. What is sometimes forgotten about the baby boom is that it was a period of record high birth rates that followed a period of record low birth rates—the Depression and the Second World War. When Americans began reproducing at the rate of four million births a year, beginning in 1946, it represented a sharp spike on the chart. The system had grown accustomed to abnormally small demographic cohorts.

The role played by the Cold War in the expansion of higher education is well known. The American university had been drawn into the business of government-related scientific research during

the Second World War by men like James Bryant Conant and Vannevar Bush. Conant was the president of Harvard; he had been trained as a chemist, and he became, during the war, the civilian overseer of scientific research for the military. (He was also chairman of the group that directed the production of the bomb used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.) Bush was a former vice president and dean of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the director of the government Office of Scientific Research and Development during the war. At the time of the First World War, scientific research for military purposes had been carried out by military personnel, so-called "soldier-scientists"; it was Bush's idea to contract this work out to research universities, scientific institutes, and independent private laboratories instead. In 1945 he organized the publication of a report, *Science—The Endless Frontier,* which became the standard argument for government subvention of basic science in peacetime, and which launched the collaboration between American universities and the national government. Bush is the godfather of the system known as contract overhead—the practice of billing granting agencies for indirect costs, an idea to which many humanists owe their careers. This was the start of the gravy train that produced the Golden Age.[4]

Then, in 1957, came Sputnik. Though it had the size and lethal potential of a beach ball, Sputnik stirred up a panic in the United States. Among the responses (including, possibly, the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960) was the passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958. The Act put the federal government, for the first time, into the business of subsidizing higher education directly, rather than through government contracts for specific research. Before 1958, public support had been administered at the state level (which is one reason why there are public state universities in the United States but no public national university).

After the passage of the National Defense Education Act, the main spigots from which government largesse flowed moved from the Defense Department (which, of course, continued to be a major source of funding) to civilian agencies, notably the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health. The Act singled out

two areas in particular as targets of public investment: science and foreign languages, thus pumping up two distinct areas of the academic balloon.

This was also the period, shortly after Sputnik, when economists such as Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz introduced the concept of "human capital,"[5] which, by figuring educated citizens as a strategic resource, offered another national security rationale for increased government investment in higher education. In the words of the enabling legislation for the National Defense Education Act itself: "The security of the Nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women. . . . We must increase our efforts to identify and educate more of the talent of our Nation. This requires programs that will give assurance that no students of ability will be denied an opportunity for higher education because of financial need."[6] This was the trigger for the fantastic expansion of the 1960s.

The National Defense Education Act was passed just before the baby boom kicked in. Between 1955 and 1970, the number of eighteen to twenty-four year olds in the United States grew from 15 million to 25 million.[7] The expansion received a late and unintentional boost from the military draft, which provided a deferment for college students until 1970. The result was that by 1968, 63.2 percent of male high school graduates were going on to college, a higher proportion than do so today.[8] This is the period when all those community college campuses were springing up out of the ground. They were, among other things, government-subsidized draft havens.

Then, around 1975, the Golden Age came to a halt. The student deferment was abolished and American involvement in the Vietnam War ended; the college-age population leveled off; the country went into a recession; and the economic value of a college degree began to fall. In the 1970s the income differential between college graduates and high school graduates dropped from 61 percent to 48 percent.[9] The percentage of people going on to college therefore began to drop as well, and a system that had more than quintupled in size in the span of a single generation suddenly found itself with empty dormitory beds and a huge tenured faculty. This was the

beginning of the long-term job crisis for American Ph.D.s, and it was also the beginning of serious economic pressures on the liberal arts college. Pressure on the liberal arts college translates into pressure on the humanities disciplines, for research in the humanities is essentially a by-product of the production of college teachers. When the demand for college teachers drops, the resources available for research drop as well. From 1955 to 1970, the proportion of liberal arts degrees among all bachelor's degrees awarded annually had risen for the first time in this century; after 1970, it began going down again.[10] Today only one-third of all bachelor's degrees awarded annually in the United States are in the liberal arts, and less than one-third of these are in the humanities. The most common major by far is business: twenty percent of all undergraduate degrees are awarded in that field. Ten percent are awarded in education, and seven percent are awarded in the health professions. There are almost twice as many undergraduate degrees awarded annually in a field that calls itself "protective services" (concerned largely with training social workers) than in all foreign languages and literatures combined.[11]

American higher education did grow after 1975, but much more slowly, at a rate averaging about one percent a year. And it changed, but in a different way: it diversified. In 1947, seventy-one percent of college students in America were men. Today, a minority of college students—forty-four percent—are men. As late as 1965, ninety-four percent of college students were classified as white. Today the figure for non-Hispanic whites is seventy-one percent.[12] Much of this diversification happened after the Golden Age, and a single statistic makes the point. In the decade between 1984 and 1994, the total enrollment in American colleges and universities increased by two million, but not one of those two million new students was a white American-born male. They were all non-whites, women, and foreign students. The absolute number of white American men in American higher education actually declined between 1984 and 1994.[13]

Faculty demographics changed in the same way, a reflection not so much of changes in hiring practices as of changes in the group that went to graduate school after 1975. Current full-time Ameri-

can faculty who were hired before 1985 are twenty-eight percent female and about eleven percent nonwhite or Hispanic. Full-time faculty who have been hired since 1985—that is, for the most part, faculty who entered graduate school after the Golden Age—are half again as female (forty percent) and more than half again as nonwhite (eighteen percent).[14] These figures apply only to full-time professors; they do not include part-time faculty, who now constitute forty percent of the teaching force in American higher education, and who are more likely than full-time faculty are to be female.[15] In 1997, there were 45,394 doctoral degrees conferred in the United States; forty percent of the recipients were women (in the arts and humanities, just under fifty percent were women), and only sixty-three percent where classified as white American citizens. The other thirty-seven percent were nonwhite Americans and foreign students.[16] The demographic mix in higher education, including both students and faculty, completely changed in the span of about a generation. And this change just happens to have coincided with the period, beginning around 1987, when higher education came under intense public criticism for radicalism and elitism—the period of the so-called "culture wars."

There are several reasons why more women and nonwhite Americans, not to mention more non-Americans, began entering higher education in greater proportions after 1970, but one of them is purely structural. After 1970, there were fewer white American males for selective schools to choose from. As a result, colleges and universities sought new types of students. After 1970, virtually every nonmilitary all-male college in the United States went co-ed. The system had overexpanded during the Golden Age. Too many state-subsidized slots had been created, and a much higher level of competition in college admissions was the result. There had been talk before 1975 about the educational desirability of coeducational and mixed race student bodies, but in the end it was economic necessity that made it happen.[17]

The intellectual changes in many of the academic disciplines, and particularly in the humanities, have the same etiology. This does not mean that changes in the disciplines have been triggered by changes in demographics (though this is often asserted). It

means that the factors leading to the new demographic make-up of higher education are the same as those leading to the present condition of the disciplines. The two phenomena are both fallout from the Golden Age.

The strategic rationale for postwar expansion in American higher education was geopolitical—we needed better hardware than the communists—but the social policy rationale was meritocratic. Postwar educational leaders, including James Conant and George F. Zook, were concerned about broadening the range of educational opportunity for all Americans,[18] and (as we have seen) the National Defense Education Act of 1958 was quite explicit on this point. If you seek to maximize your talent pool in the name of greater national security, or of greater economic productivity, you will not wish to limit entrants on the basis of considerations extraneous to aptitude, such as gender, family income, and skin color. Conant also believed that inherited privilege leads to class resentments, and that class resentments lead to conditions in which communism can grow. He therefore became a leader in the establishment of standardized testing: he essentially created the SATs, which he conceived of as a culturally neutral method for matching aptitude with educational opportunity.[19]

The meritocratic philosophy was accompanied by two other postwar developments. One was the belief in the importance of general education in undergraduate teaching, and the other was the dominance of the scientific model in research. In practice, most people paid lip service to general education in American universities after the war; relatively few colleges created general education curricula—that is, required undergraduates to take specified extra-departmental courses of the kind for which Columbia College is famous. But such curricula were not necessary for the idea to have an effect, since general education did receive a great deal of lip service. Most educators subscribed to the ideas that the great works of the Western tradition are accessible to all students in more or less the same way, that those works constitute a more or less coherent body of thought (or, at least, a coherent debate), and that they can serve as a kind of benign cultural ideology in a nation wary of ideology. This is the argument of the famous study Conant

sponsored at Harvard, *General Education in a Free Society,* published in 1945, the volume known as the Red Book. Conant believed that general exposure to the great books could help the United States withstand the threat of what he actually referred to as the "Russian hordes."[20]

The other critical Golden Age development, the emergence of a scientific model of research, was a reflection of the anti-ideological temper of postwar American thought—the temper epitomized in Daniel Bell's famous phrase "the end of ideology."[21] To some extent the antipathy to ideology was simply a response to global political history between 1914 and 1945, but to some extent, as Thomas Bender has suggested, it was a response to all that federal money that began pouring into universities after the war. Scholars eschewed political commitments because they wished not to offend their granting agencies.[22] The idea that academics, particularly in the social sciences, could provide the state with neutral research results on which pragmatic public policies could be based was an animating idea in the 1950s university. In the sciences, it helped establish what Talcott Parsons called the ethos of "cognitive rationality."[23] In fields like history, it led to the consensus approach. In sociology, it produced what Robert Merton called theories of the middle range—an emphasis on the formulation of limited hypotheses subject to empirical verification.[24] Behaviorism and rational choice theory became dominant paradigms in psychology and political science. In literature, even when the mindset was anti-scientific, as in the case of New Criticism and structuralism, the ethos remained scientistic: theorists aspired to analytic rigor.[25] Boundaries were respected and methodologies were codified. Discipline reigned in the disciplines. Scholars in the 1950s who looked back on their pre-war educations tended to be appalled by what they now regarded as a lack of analytic rigor and focus.[26]

Because public money was being pumped into the system at the high end—into the large research universities—the effect of the Golden Age was to make the research professor the type of the professor generally. This is the phenomenon to which Christopher Jencks and David Reisman referred as "the academic revolution":[27] for the first time in the history of American higher education,

research, rather than teaching or service, defined the paradigm of the professor—not only in the doctoral institutions, but all the way down the institutional ladder. This strengthened the grip of the disciplines on scholarly and pedagogical practice. Distinctions among different types of institutions, so far as the professoriate was concerned, began to be sanded down. This is how it was that the system of higher education became more uniform as it expanded between 1945 and 1975. The Cold War homogenized the academic profession.

This is the wind my academic generation inherited. It now seems obvious that the dispensation put into place in the first two decades of the Cold War was just waiting for the tiniest spark to blow sky-high. And the spark, when it came, wasn't so tiny. The Vietnam War exposed almost every weakness in the system Conant and his generation of educational leaders had constructed, from the dangers inherent in the university's financial dependence on the state, to the way its social role was figured in national security policy, to the degree of factitiousness in the value-neutral standard of research in fields outside the natural sciences.

Then, after 1970, as new populations began to arrive in numbers in American universities, the meritocratic rationale was exploded as well. For it turned out that cultural differences were not only not so easy to bracket off as men like Conant had imagined; those differences suddenly began to seem a lot more interesting than the similarities. The trend was made irreversible by Justice Lewis Powell's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke,* handed down in 1978.[28] Powell changed the language of college admissions by decreeing that if admissions committees wanted to stay on the safe side of the Constitution, they had to stop talking about quotas and begin talking about diversity instead. Powell's opinion blew a hole in meritocratic theory, because he pointed out what should have been obvious from the beginning, which is that college admissions, even at places like Harvard, have never been purely meritocratic. Colleges have always taken non-standardized and non-standardizable attributes into account when selecting students, from musical prodigies to football stars, alumni legacies, and the offspring of local bigwigs. If you admitted only students

who got top scores on the SATs, you would have a very boring class. "Diversity" is the very word Powell used in the *Bakke* opinion, and there are probably very few college catalogues in the country today in which the word "diversity," or one of its cognates, does not appear.

As the homogeneity of the undergraduate student body broke down during the period of diversification, and the homogeneity of the faculty began to break down with it, the disciplines themselves underwent a series of transformations. These shifts are visible today at the level of the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum in a new emphasis on multiculturalism (meaning exposure to specifically ethnic perspectives and traditions) and values (an emphasis on the ethnical implications of knowledge); in a renewed interest in service (manifested in the emergence of internship and off-campus social service programs) and in the idea of community; in what is called "education for citizenship"; and in a revival of a Deweyite conception of teaching as a collaborative process of learning and inquiry. The landmark study identifying this shift is Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered,* published by the Carnegie Foundation in 1990. Boyer's findings have been confirmed by others, including Bruce Kimball in his study of changes in the liberal arts curriculum.[29]

This transformation in the undergraduate curriculum is clearly a reaction against the model created by the Golden Age and the academic revolution: the model of disinterested research and the core curriculum. The vocabulary of "disinterestedness," "objectivity," "reason," and "knowledge," and talk about things like "the scientific method," "the canon of great books," and "the fact/value distinction," have been replaced, in many fields, and especially the humanities, by attention to "interpretations" (rather than "facts"), "perspective" (rather than "objectivity"), and "understanding" (rather than "reason" or "analysis"). An emphasis on universalism and "greatness" has been replaced by an emphasis on diversity and difference; the scientistic norms that once prevailed in many of the "soft" disciplines are viewed with skepticism; context and contingency are continually emphasized; attention to "objects" has given way to attention to "representations." The field in which these transformations have been most emphatic and, seemingly, irreversible is my own, English, where much of the theorizing of this

phenomenon has taken place; its influence has spread, though, across the humanities disciplines.

This trend is essentially a backlash against the scientism, and the excessive respect for disciplinarity, of the Golden Age university. I don't attribute it to demographic diversification, because most of the people one would name as theorists of this development are white men, and because the seeds of the undoing of the old disciplinary models were already present within the disciplines themselves. The artificiality of those Golden Age disciplinary formations is what made the implosion inevitable. Thomas Kuhn, Hayden White, Clifford Geertz, Richard Rorty, Paul De Man, Stanley Fish—these are the people associated with the demise of disciplinary integrity, and it is not a group that any contemporary college catalogue would feel comfortable naming as a diverse selection of humanity.[30] And, their work, for the most part, took place entirely within the disciplinary frameworks in which they had been trained. De Man's work was in many respects the culmination of the New Critical tradition of ahistorical rhetorical analysis, just as Fish's was the culmination of the reader-response approach pioneered by two of the founders of modern English studies, I. A. Richards and William Empson. Their work, though, helped spell the end of the conception of literature as an autonomous field of academic inquiry. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Rorty's attempt to put an end to (or to transcend) the analytic tradition in philosophy, constructs its argument entirely from within the tradition of analytic philosophy, just as *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* Kuhn's revisionist interpretation of the history of science, is a perfectly conventional work in the philosophy and history of science. But there is also no question that the turn in the intellectual dialectic exemplified by these works fed into the collapse of the color- and gender-blind ideal of meritocratic educational theory, and that it gave members of groups previously excluded from or marginalized within the academy theoretical equipment for the business of critiquing the traditional forms of knowledge. Kuhn's book is emphatically not a work of science studies, but science studies is what it gave birth to.

The turn Boyer and Kimball have described at the level of the undergraduate curriculum does not seem really to describe what happened at the level of scholarship within the disciplines. Talk about "values" and "civic education" is still mostly deanspeak; it's the philosophical padding for certain intellectual changes for which no one has yet devised a very coherent public-relations-tested rationale. What happened to the humanistic disciplines happened in two stages, and we are just emerging (if we are in fact to emerge) from the second stage. In the beginning, what took place was not a redefinition of disciplinarity so much as a kind of antidisciplinarity. Academic activity began flowing toward paradigms that defined themselves essentially in antagonism towards traditional disciplines.

It would be simple to name these paradigms as Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, Science Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and so on, all of which are nondepartmental by bureaucratic design (that is, they generally do not have their own faculty lines or award terminal degrees) and interdisciplinary by definition. But the general trend is much broader. It consists not so much in an identification with a particular group—women or gays or postcolonials—as in a widely diffused skepticism about the universality of any particular line of inquiry or pedagogy, and a rigorously enforced suspicion of the notion of "rigor." In English, the discipline that seems, to its own practitioners and to others, the most thoroughly at sea, the mood is more of bewilderment than anything else. As my colleague David Richter has put it, "Once I built a railroad, now it's done. Buddy, can you paradigm?"

Antidisciplinarity arose from the marriage of the theoretical position that the disciplines are arbitrary (or at least limiting and artificial) ways to organize knowledge, with the institutional failure to integrate new areas of inquiry adequately into the traditional disciplines. Women's Studies departments came into being because English and history and sociology departments were at first not terribly interested in incorporating gender-based courses into their curricula. The fundamental rationale for Women's Studies was the perception of a gender bias in the disciplines: that is why its spirit was, in the beginning, fundamentally antidisciplinary. People

flocked to the new, nondepartmental centers because the traditional disciplines, staffed largely by Golden Agers, did not recognize gender or ethnic identity as valid rubrics for teaching or scholarship. Outside the discipline became the good place to be, and there was a period in the 1980s and 1990s when many disciplines were almost defined by the internal criticisms they generated. The stars were the people who talked about the failures and omissions of their own fields.

When it became clear in those years that a split was developing between Golden Age and post-Golden Age approaches to inquiry, it was common to argue for a teach-the-conflicts resolution—an idea championed most notably by Gerald Graff.[31] The notion was that professors might neutralize the divisiveness within their own disciplines by making divisiveness the subject of their teaching. But this teach-the-conflicts approach now seems otiose; although there are certainly conflicts between disciplines, there are no longer conflicts *within* most of the disciplines—not, for example, within most English departments. The traditionalists have been co-opted. And so, in a way, have the iconoclasts. They have awakened to find that history, in its cunning, has made them the rulers of the towns they once set out to burn down. A certain nostalgia for the culture wars is even starting to be felt: at least they provided a context for debate, something against which professors could define themselves. It's a little like the way Samuel Beckett described what we will do in the afterlife: We'll sit around talking about the good old days, when we wished that we were dead.

Once the antidisciplinary stage had passed, the academy entered into a different phase, which might be called the phase of postdisciplinarity. Some professors now establish themselves as stars not by attacking their own disciplines, but by writing books on subjects outside, or only tangentially related to, their disciplines. That is one meaning of postdisciplinarity. More often it simply means a determined eclecticism about methods and subject matter. Of course, across-the-board generalizations about this phenomenon are not completely helpful. Some fields have been transformed and some have not. Anthropology, for example, has become more postdisciplinary; sociology has not. English has become

almost completely postdisciplinary; comparative literature, a field that has always been "definitionally challenged," seeks a heightened sense of disciplinarity. History, for the most part, has been accommodating to the new dispensation; philosophy, for the most part, has not. The existence of incompatible scholarly standards and assumptions across the different liberal arts is part of the problem the humanities face.

The purpose of this paper has been to suggest a genealogy for the current state of the humanities that avoids the following narrative: when more women and nonwhites came into the system, traditional notions of scholarly rigor disappeared. My argument is not that this narrative is undesirable—though, amazingly, one often hears proponents of academic diversity reiterating a more upbeat version of it. My argument is that the narrative is incorrect. My purpose has also been to suggest that within the history of higher education in the twentieth century, the Cold War university is the anomaly, and that what are criticized as distortions in the present system are largely reactions against that earlier dispensation. Beyond this analysis, I do not have much to say in the way of prescription or prophecy—since, as I have been trying to show, changes in higher education appear to be driven much more by external contingencies than by deliberate planning or an orderly and progressive evolution of ideas. It is possible, though, to examine a few tensions within the present system.

In trying to imagine the future of disciplinarity, it is worth remembering that the disciplines are not actually very old themselves. Most of them came into being between 1880 and 1910, when larger, more holistic organizations, such as the American Social Science Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, broke up into smaller and more specialized professional associations, such as the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association, and so forth. It was during this period, around the turn of the century, that the department first established itself as the basic unit of academic organization.[32] When we talk about "the disciplines," then, we are talking about a bureaucratic arrangement whose history is not very long.

People refer to the new organizations of knowledge as "interdisciplinary," but this seems mistaken. The collapse of disciplines must mean the collapse of interdisciplinarity as well; for interdisciplinarity is the institutional ratification of the logic of disciplinarity. The very term implies respect for the discrete perspectives of different disciplines. You can't have interdisciplinarity, or multidisciplinarity, unless you have disciplines. There is more interest on the part of administrators in interdisciplinary work, and some college catalogues now feature interdisciplinary majors, but there is nothing terribly new or anti-foundational about it. Interdisciplinary scholarship or teaching simply means the deployment of professional expertise in two or more disciplines. That is not the same phenomenon as postdisciplinarity.

At a recent conference at the Stanford Humanities Center, one of the directors read the titles of projects of applicants for fellowships at the center and asked the audience to guess the field of each applicant, the idea being that scholars' projects often bear no obvious relation to the discipline to which they belong. The only time the audience was right was when they guessed that an applicant whose project was about politics must be from an English department. In English today, the pattern for success seems to be to produce a doctoral dissertation in a traditional period of literary history (since it is by historical period that most entry positions continue to be advertised), and then to produce a second book on some completely nonliterary subject, like the history of carrots, written in the first person. An indifference to traditional professional boundaries demonstrates that you are a serious professional.

One can pick up evidence of the decay of disciplinary integrity more readily from undergraduate catalogues than from the subjects of doctoral dissertations, which are, after all, the most traditional of academic genres.[33] The biggest change in college catalogues between 1970, the height of the Golden Age, and 1994 is an enormous increase in the number of offerings, even in departments whose enrollments have remained constant. At the same time, courses have become much more specialized. This seems to be a symptom of uncertainty about the essential character of the disciplines. In the catalogue for Trinity College, for example, the

philosophy department's announcement asserts: "A good philosopher should know at least a little something about everything." The department then recommends the study of a foreign language, but only because it "encourages the habit of careful attention to a text." It recommends a "broad understanding of modern science," but suggests that "any good science course . . . is suitable." It goes on to recommend courses in history, literature, and the arts, but advises that students generally select courses in these fields according to the amount of reading assigned (the more reading, the more desirable). It ends by saying what was already clear enough: "We require no particular nondepartmental courses as part of the major." The next section, entitled "Introductory Courses," begins: "There is no single best way to be introduced to philosophy."[34] One is reminded, by way of Golden Age contrast, of Quine's classic remark: "Philosophy of science is philosophy enough."

Still, one also finds departmental self-descriptions of a different sort, and this is one of the clearest indications of a collapse of consensus about the humanities curriculum. Compare, for example, the English departments at two otherwise quite similar schools, Amherst and Wellesley.[35] English majors at Wellesley are required to take ten English department courses, eight of which must be in literature. (Wellesley's English department also offers a number of courses in film.) Basic writing courses do not count toward the major. All English majors must take a core course called "Critical Interpretation"; one course on Shakespeare; and at least two courses on literature written before 1900, one of which must be on literature written before 1800. Cross-listed courses—that is, interdisciplinary courses—are, with one exception, not counted toward the major. The course listing reflects attention to every traditional historical period in English and American literature.

Down the turnpike at Amherst, on the other hand, English majors have only to take ten courses "offered or approved by the department"—in other words, apparently, they may be courses in any department. Majors have no core requirement and no period requirements. They must simply take one lower and one upper level course, and they must declare, during their senior year, a "concentration," consisting of three courses whose relatedness they

must argue to the department. The catalogue assures students that "the choices of courses and description of the area of concentration may be revised as late as the end of the add-drop period of a student's last semester." Course listings, as they appear online, are not historically comprehensive, and many upper-level offerings focus on such topics as African (not African-American) writers. At Amherst, in short, the English department has a highly permissive attitude toward its majors. I'm sure if you asked why, the response would be that English represents more an intellectual approach, a style of inquiry, a set of broad concerns, than a distinctive body of knowledge. At Wellesley, the department obviously holds an opposing view, envisioning the field more substantively and concretely. What this contrast suggests is that there has been a great deal of paradigm loss within the humanities disciplines, and that this loss is manifesting itself at the undergraduate level, as well.

One obstacle to a positive redefinition of the forms of knowledge is the prevalence of negative definitions. The spirit of antidisciplinarity persists in many places. In 1999, the *New York Times* reported that Smith College was introducing engineering into its curriculum. The paper quoted the rationale being offered by the administration and the faculty. Smith wanted to build an engineering curriculum, they explained, in order, first, to attract more nonwhite applicants to Smith. (Although nobody said so, Smith also wanted to maintain selectivity by broadening the pool of potential applicants, a special problem at a single-sex school.) Secondly, the institution also wished to integrate an overwhelmingly male profession; and thirdly, it hoped to expose the field of engineering to critical theory. The vice-provost of Smith was quoted as follows:

> Diversity is a concept that humanists have the words to debate, but engineers cannot even begin that discussion. Engineers, particularly engineering faculty, are nearly a homogenous group in thinking and attitudes. Smith has a unique opportunity to create a really forward-looking engineering experience, avoiding the stereotypes of the past

> and incorporating language and cultural studies, ethics and so on.[36]

Engineering enlightened by cultural studies: this is the new deanspeak. No one said, simply, Smith is adding an engineering program because it wants to train excellent engineers. Diverse engineers, critically thinking engineers, gendered engineers, ethical engineers, yes, but not just excellent engineers. Excellence, the golden word of the Golden Age, is no longer part of the vocabulary. One enters a discipline in order to reform it.

One of the institutional implications of postdisciplinarity concerns studies centers. Scholarly action is clearly gravitating toward the kind of work represented by the studies centers; at the same time, though, the intellectual authority of the centers themselves is waning. As their concerns have become mainstream, they have begun to lose their focus. This has certainly happened in the case of Women's Studies—a field whose impact on the university since 1975 has been enormous. Just as the *New York Times* reported, in 1997, that courses on gender and sexuality could now be found in virtually every liberal arts college catalogue in the country, the feminist journal *Differences* published a special issue entitled "Women's Studies on the Edge." Feminism still commands tremendous graduate student loyalty, but the field itself has become somewhat inchoate. The area known as "Cultural Studies," though it is plausibly the name for something many people do—that is, examining the political implications of culture through the study of representations—has always been narrow and exclusionary, driven by a set of specific theoretical and ideological assumptions. For many people, it has been more comfortable to undertake cultural studies outside a Cultural Studies program. And Science Studies, or at least the wing of Science Studies associated with Cultural Studies, suffered a serious blow from the publicity surrounding the Sokal hoax.

The only thing that will save the studies centers from redundancy is to transform them from programs into departments, or the institutional equivalent of departments. Right now the traditional disciplines still control the production and placement of new

professors. They possess the credentialing and hiring power. Still, however little the disciplines are respected intellectually, it is not clear that it is in the faculty's interest to let them wither away, since one of the functions they perform is the preservation of academic freedom.[37] The discipline acts as a community that judges the merit of its members' work by community standards. When professors are hired on an ad hoc basis by academic administrators, or when they are not professionally situated in particular departments, they lose this protection, and their status becomes a function of lines in a budget. Administrators would love to "melt down" the disciplines, since that would allow them to deploy faculty more efficiently—and the claim that disciplinarity represents a factitious organization of knowledge is as good an excuse as any. Why support separate medievalists in your history department, your English department, your French department, and your art history department, none of them probably attracting huge enrollments, when you can hire one interdisciplinary super-medievalist and install her in a Medieval Studies program, whose survival can be made to depend on its ability to attract outside funding?

Another danger of postdisciplinarity, as many people have remarked, is the devaluation of expertise. In a professionalized economy, in which specialists are more highly rewarded than generalists, the devaluation of expertise leads to economic vulnerability. To a degree this has already happened, which is why the university humanities professor is a vocation that simultaneously appears too professionalized in its self-conception and insufficiently professionalized in its public image. Lynn Hunt has even suggested that the decline in the professional reputation of academic work in the humanities is a consequence of the increasing feminization of both faculty and students in these fields.[38] Excellent work in the humanities and the liberal arts generally is still produced, but for that to continue it is necessary for disciplines to justify themselves in terms that make sense to the rest of society. The fate of the National Endowment for the Humanities is a pretty good signal of what can happen at all but the best-endowed institutions when such justification is lacking. It is an assertion with an entirely impressionistic basis, but the universal word of praise in

humanistic scholarly circles seems to have become "smart"—a term that sidesteps any implications of knowledge production, or even disciplinary continuity. To the extent that funding depends on a demonstration of social utility, "smart" is unlikely to do the trick.

The transformation, or dissipation, of the humanities disciplines is happening in two places in the higher education system: at the high end of scholarship, where the most prestigious older scholars and the most ambitious younger scholars make a point of transgressing disciplinary boundaries and assumptions, and at the mid-level liberal arts college, where the competition for students makes curricular innovation not only attractive but necessary. But it is not happening within doctoral programs: graduate students are still being trained as specialists, and for a scholarly and pedagogical world that is rapidly ceasing to exist. Doctoral programs are, of course, the most conservative bastions of an institutionally conservative profession. (As Cornford pointed out long ago in *Microcosmographia Academica,* the basic rule of faculty governance is: "nothing should ever be done for the first time."[39]) But, at some point, graduate programs will have to produce the generalists and postdisciplinary teachers American colleges are demanding. Doctoral students are still being trained, at an increasingly enormous expense of time, as though they were about to enter research institutions. Most, however, are not.

My own view is that the academy is well rid of the Golden Age and its disciplinary hubris, but that it is at some risk of sliding into a predictable and aimless eclecticism (as opposed to an imaginative and dynamic eclecticism, which I support). In a perfect world, which is to say in a fully funded world, the intellectual uncertainties caused by the collapse of the disciplines would eventually shake themselves out. The good ideas would drive out the bad. People would find a way to separate what is worth studying and teaching from what is trendy or meretricious. But the world is not fully funded. Funding is, alas, a function of the cogency of the work as it exists right now, and this cogency has become, for reasons I have tried to explain, very difficult to articulate. A lot has changed in higher education in the last fifty years.

What has not changed, though, is the delicate and somewhat paradoxical relation in which the university stands to the general culture. It is important for research and teaching to be relevant—for the university to engage with the public culture, and to design its investigative paradigms with actual social and cultural life in view. That is, in fact, what Golden Agers tried to accomplish, and it is what post-Golden Agers are trying to accomplish. To continue to be relevant today, I believe academic inquiry ought to become less specialized, less technical, less exclusionary, and more holistic. I hope that this is the road down which postdisciplinarity is taking us. At the end of this road, though, there is a great danger, which is that the culture of the university will become just an echo of the public culture. That would be a catastrophe. The academic's job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the questions the public does not want to ask, by investigating the subjects it cannot or will not investigate, by accommodating the voices it fails or refuses to accommodate. Academics need to look to the world to see what kind of teaching and thinking needs to be done, and how they might better organize themselves to do it; but they need to ignore the world's insistence that they reproduce its self-image.

Notes

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34. <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/major.html>. It might seem that this catalogue description is only a Socratic definition of philosophy as open-ended inquiry, and therefore perfectly traditional. I was told by a member of the Trinity department, though, that it was, in fact, designed to avoid the suggestion that philosophy is an autonomous discipline.

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