

Outsourcing humanities

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In a highly uncharacteristic piece of inserted polemic in Michael Crichton's final book, *Next*, an impish figure is brought in to condemn the type of science now conducted in the universities, effectively condemning them for eschewing 'blue skies' research for the more lucrative demands of industry. We might conclude from this that at least some part of the universities are doing something that is useful to someone. The situation is less clear for the humanities, however. Recent trends are indicative of their underlying function. The worldwide financial crisis has caused a significant rise in applications to study at university, the vast majority of applicants seeking places for various 'soft' subjects. This can only happen because the money to pay their fees is being borrowed against their putative future earnings. If it were the case that these applicants were judging the value of the loan on a rational cost-benefit basis, it seems hard to know why they would invest in this way. But just as people willingly pay future money they don't have for sofas they don't need, so they borrow to engage with leisure studies or popular culture, philosophy or English literature, regardless of the likely benefit to their career.

The reason they are encouraged to do this, is certainly not that government considers it would be desirable for the population to be better educated. Clearly, the more docile and drugged the electorate is the better, as far as government is concerned. But government has now clearly understood that universities are no longer any sort of hotbed of radicalism, and the thinking that comes out from them no threat to the established order. Having young people 'studying' is clearly better than having them unemployed and roaming the streets. And if in the end they don't repay those loans, it will still have been cheaper than locking up feral youth for random destructive rampages.

The usual defence of the humanities seems to involve some guff about enriching the human spirit, the legacy of our culture, the importance of our heritage etc. This may or may not be true, but it is certainly true that whatever is done in the humanities departments of universities no longer contributes to these goals in any way. There may have been a time when these disciplines had a value, when it was worth digging out and dusting off old manuscripts to make sure they remained accessible, to study housing estates and remote tribes and languages to ensure their mores were logged in the great encyclopaedia. But that era has come and gone. The stuff humanities departments do today is of no more relevance and value than the disputations of medieval schoolmen, considering whether the existence of God could be proven by logic.

What seems to have happened is that the seminar room has taken on a life of its own; that topics are established and debated, regardless of any empirical reality. And that hypotheses evolve through a type of arms race; each one has to be more bizarre than the last to attract attention. The larger the constituency, and English literature is the largest of all, the more like an ants' nest the competition. Only the weirdest survive. Similarly with linguistics; perhaps less than a twentieth of all linguists do anything that could really be described as empirical investigation and tiny fraction of that pays attention to little-known languages.

But should the universities be thus engaged? There is a great deal of evidence that in the field of humanities, there are plenty of people outside the system willing to direct their time and energies to debate, literature, language, philosophy and related issues. And no evidence that closing down all the departments of humanities would make any difference to the intellectual engagement of society in these topics. The internet would rapidly pick up the slack, probably with the plus that the type of incestuous nail-biting that characterises university scholarship and the difficulties in getting a hearing for ideas that do not conform to the current paradigm would be reduced.

So why not think of only supporting those branches of humanities that can demonstrate they contribute to the advance of knowledge through investigation of the empirical? Support archaeologists to dig things up but not to engage in vague theorising, linguists to describe unknown languages, musicologists to interpret the music of other cultures and the like.

And the large number of people who would be thrown on the labour market? Let them contribute to the coming world food crisis by tending their gardens.