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Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age

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BOOK REVIEW

PERMANENT CRISIS: THE HUMANITIES IN A DISENCHANTED AGE

REVIEWED BY

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Reitter, P., & Wellmon, C. (2021). *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. University of Chicago Press. Pages: 326. Price: USD 35.00 (cloth).

This book poses a bold thesis, which the authors italicize in a typographical declaration of importance:

The self-understanding of the modern humanities didn't merely take shape in response to a perceived crisis; it also made crisis a core part of the project of the humanities. (p. 3)

As the authors put it much later: "Crisis was the justification of the modern humanities" (p. 220). They insist on breaking the "common conflation, both then and now, of *the humanities and humanism*" (p. 129, emphasis in original). What they call, with such emphasis, "*the humanities*" derives from a project of American scholars who "followed their German counterparts, repeating the rhetoric of crisis that cast the humanities as both the imperilled victim and privileged redeemer" (p. 228). It is this earlier German discourse that they chronicle, starting in the 18th century, as German universities struggled to transform themselves from "intellectual wastelands blighted by the turpitude of their students and the pedantry of their professors" (p. 40). Much of the book is, therefore, taken up with seriatim descriptions of various ideas of the humanities, as championed by chronologically arranged figures in the German academic tradition, stretching from the establishment of the German research model to the Second World War. There is barely a significant German thinker that the authors do not mine for his (I didn't note any "her") ideas of the university, from Emmanuel Kant through two schools of revived neo-Kantianism to Max Weber, by way of Theodor Adorno, Karl Marx,

G. W. F. Hegel, Eduard Spranger (and the Free Student Movement), Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacob Burckhardt, Jacob Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schiller, two Schlegels, two Schellings, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher (underappreciated by contrast to Humboldt, they claim, p. 49), Heinrich Heine, Adolph Diesterweg, Herman Helmholtz, Wilhelm Dilthey, Walther Rathenau, Heinrich Rickert, Johannes Müller, and a handful of Nazi ideologues. The book might serve as a textbook for a seminar on German intellectual history, organizing discussion of the whole sweep of the period around a theme. One might object that Reitter and Wellmon ignore other intellectual contexts. The authors, however, have no reason to apologize if their project appears "presumptuous or simply provincial" when they write to their expertise in German intellectual history, and indeed they do refuse to apologize (p. 21).

Despite this focus, the authors draw parallels with "more contemporary debates," which, they note, "don't seem so novel. Indeed, their main motifs have proven remarkably consistent" (p. 18). Allan Bloom finds a predecessor in Diesterweg (p. 54), as does William Deresiewicz (p. 71). Andrew Delbanco and Mark Edmundson, arguing that students should be transformed, echo Nietzsche (p. 97). Theodor Mommsen's model of "big humanities" anticipates Digital Humanities (p. 106). Even "our contemporary system of reliance on adjunct professors and precarious labor has its roots in...earlier forms of exploitation" (p. 67). The penultimate chapter is dedicated to tying the authors' de-

scription of the humanities as in a permanent and self-described state of emergency to the current dialogue about the humanities, which they characterize by

pervasive exaggeration, a critique of cultural superficiality that is itself often superficial, a near total reliance on anecdotal evidence, and a general humorlessness. (p. 70)

Contemporary scholars maintain, they argue, the earlier rhetoric of crisis.

The authors draw their final position from Weber, who argued that professors should not set themselves up as moral guides to life in *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, which Reiter and Wellmon translate into *Scholarship as Vocation*.¹ Instead,

A form of asceticism was necessary to sustain the integrity of scholarship and, by extension, the modern university. For Weber this moral asceticism had the force of an obligation, the commitment of faith. (p. 197)

Humility is a virtue always worthy of cultivation, but I can't help but think that the authors miss the point of much of the debate they describe. "The humanities matter," they feel it necessary to admit, "they certainly matter to us" (pp. 20–21), but they seem unable to say why, except to suggest, following Weber, that their importance is a matter of faith (p. 264). Perhaps they come closest to a statement of this faith when they say that universities promote certain values tied to research ethics which might not constitute "ultimate ends or values, and yet they are ends and values nonetheless" (p. 77). In the final couple of pages, they refer, rather in the manner of John the Baptist, to a "path out of the permanent crisis of the humanities, a path that Weber could only point to" (p. 262). There's no promise of a Messiah bringing us the good news in a subsequent volume, however.

It is certainly worthwhile to question the rhetoric of crisis with which the humanities have traditionally justified themselves, but this does not show that the humanities are not actually in crisis. Perhaps they really always were, and that's why so much of the German intelligentsia was united in saying so. The authors describe, in what I find to be fascinating detail, earlier efforts to justify the pursuit of humanistic knowledge in the academic context, but they themselves

abandon the search for a true *raison d'être* of the academic humanities:

Instead of proceeding from a theoretical statement about what humanities essentially are, we focus on what people do in the name of the humanities and what they use the humanities to accomplish. (p. 5)

This methodological limitation leads inevitably to their conclusion:

Like the institution from which they emerged, the modern humanities arose as an effect of a particular time and world — not as an effect of history, reason itself, or a self-evident and stable humanism. (p. 260)

The authors reduce the problem of what the humanities are from a philosophical claim to a contextual circumstance.

Moreover, the historical situation continues. The contemporary humanities, like their German forebears, define themselves by first defining "the natural sciences" in terms of "mere utility" (p. 165). One might reply that this may have been because apparently more practical pursuits have always enjoyed greater public and political support. The call of German intellectuals to cultivate the unity of knowledge may find a parallel in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, but the declaration of Wilhelm II that "I want soldiers, not students!" (p. 89) finds parallels in any deputy minister asking about job market outcomes or university administrator asking for evidence of impact. Similarly, Ernst Haeckel's confidence in the power of the natural sciences finds a parallel in New Atheists making philosophical claims from within science faculties, or even tech bros issuing sweeping declarations about the future of humanity from Silicon Valley. Pointing out that many great intellectuals have observed for some time and mostly in German that the humanities are under threat doesn't make the claim wrong.

1 The authors refer to their own edition, translated by Damion Searles, as well as the German original (p. 299, note 43).