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"Publish and Anguish: Reconsidering the Never-Ending Crisis of the Humanities"

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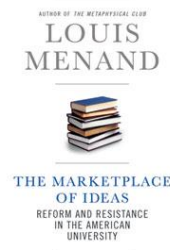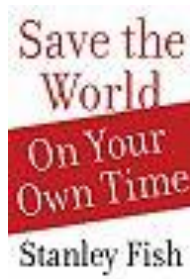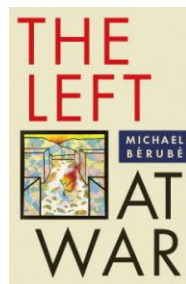
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imaginations

Publish and Anguish:
Reconsidering the Never-Ending Crisis of the Humanities

Russell Cobb

Books discussed in this essay:

ONE OF THE CENTRAL IRONIES of our times has to be that, in the midst of a deepening existential and financial crisis in humanities departments across North America, a veritable boom in publishing about this crisis has taken place. The number of students majoring in the humanities continues to decline. The trend first began in the 1970s and continues unabated today, along with the decline in new tenure-track positions.[1] At the same time, however, research in print and online has blossomed, with new online journals being launched all the time.[3] Many

of these publications—including the one you're reading now—have sought to address the crisis by appealing to new methodologies and new fields of research. In this context, the word "interdisciplinary" has assumed a sort of magical aura as scholars look for ways to build bridges between their crumbling departments of art, literature, history, and music. New departments, programs, and certificates are created in the hopes that a rebirth of the humanities will inspire a new generation of students and researchers—and maybe, just maybe, lead to an influx of funding. In light of these developments, then, I would like to consider three books by humanities scholars and public intellectuals who come at the crisis from different angles and offer different solutions.

In *The Marketplace of Ideas*, Louis Menand argues that much of the belly-aching in the liberal arts is the result of a "crisis of legitimation," in which scholars of post-structuralism or Renaissance drama are called upon by politicians, pundits, students, and administrators to justify themselves and their research. It is often a struggle. Because the larger social value of a monograph on the representations of horses in Victorian literature or a journal article on the semiotics of Jennifer Lopez's derriere are not readily apparent to the outside world, academics usually become defensive when asked to explain themselves. "The instinctive response of liberal educators is to pull up the drawbridge, to preserve college's separateness at any price," Menand writes, continuing: "But maybe purity is the disease" (55). Furthermore, academics in the liberal arts disdain their colleagues in professional schools—the Business School, the Law School, etc.—, believing that, "the practical is the enemy of the true" (Menand, 57). Menand may be oversimplifying matters, but anyone who has spent time in a large North American research institution will recognize the problem. Although the original prestige of the university resided in disinterested study of classics, history, and philosophy, the money and jobs are in the professional fields. As the august halls of the English Department crumble, a billion dollar glass house for the study of nanotechnology is erected across campus. Superstar scientists earn millions while salaries in the history department barely keep pace with inflation. How did we get here and what should be the response?

According to Menand, the seeds of the current crisis were sown in the post-Civil War landscape of the state-run university. Before the Civil War, universities still functioned in the mode of the medieval, scholastic institution, with a theological foundation. Students were, in many ways, monastics. The doctrine of *in loco parentis* meant that the relationship of students to professors resembled a close mentorship, not a professional training. This gave way to the great professionalization of the university, a model which still holds today, despite the recent trend towards a market-based—or even neoliberal—model in which

educational value is determined by the price the market will bear. While professionalization and secularism freed the 19th century scholar to pursue new lines of inquiry, new methodologies, etc., professionalization is now our central problem, according to Menand. Frustrated by a lack of respect, funding, and interest from the general public, academics try to replicate themselves in a new generation of graduate students who are kept in graduate school for, on average, an entire decade, training for jobs that no longer exist. That institutions rely on these professional students to provide cheap academic labor to undergraduates only makes the situation seems that more intractable.

The result of all this is a stifling homogeneity borne out by statistical research. Menand cites a study of the political leanings of professors in the humanities and social sciences that found that in the 2004 election, 95% of professors in the humanities at elite universities voted for Kerry, while 0% voted for Bush. The left-of-center political tendencies of professors is well-known and well-documented, although its causes and effects are still being debated. Conservatives critics have used these kinds of statistics to claim there is a liberal bias shutting out conservative voices in academe. There are mistaken, Menand says. The problem is not political, but professional. Professors seek to clone themselves professionally, and political identity is but one aspect of the creeping homogeneity.

According to others, such as Michael Bérubé (who I will turn to in a moment), the politics of the university are not as one-sided as Menand claims. Bérubé documents in *The Left at War* the divisions within the academic Left since 9/11 have amounted to virtual civil war. Divisions between cultural studies critics, deconstructionists, and gender studies people, Menand seems to argue, do not really constitute the struggle for the soul of the academy so much as they are symptoms of a system in which academics posture to be iconoclasts and non-conformists in a homogeneous culture. In reality, political differences obscure a more pressing reality of sclerosis and professional conformity. Menand wants the professoriate to stop replicating itself when the job prospects for graduates are so dim. He also wants to shorten the time humanities PhDs spend in their apprenticeships. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Menand contrasted the amount of time the average doctor or lawyer spent in graduate school with the average English PhD:

> Now, if you think that you can get a law degree and argue a case before the Supreme Court in three years, get a medical degree and cut somebody open in four years. And there are a number of factors involved in that. One obviously is the job market. Another is the fact of part-time hiring. That is, a lot of

graduate students teach college students, and they do it quite full time for very little money because they are still enrolled as students in their institutions.[2]

While *The Marketplace of Ideas* is not a book of solutions, Menand clearly wants two things: to shorten the amount of time required for the degree, and expand the narrow definition of research in the humanities. Insisting on "pure" research is keeping professors from other work that would increase their visibility outside academia.

While I was sympathetic to Menand's argument and applaud some of his solutions, there is something missing from this book. Curiously, it the same thing missing from Stanley Fish's *Save the World on Your Own Time*: a cogent, clear-headed defense of the humanities. Both writers seem reluctant to defend the humanities while pausing to critique many of the most shopworn explanations. Sure, it may be cliché or trite to defend the humanities as a necessary tool to becoming a critical, aware citizen, or a well-rounded member of society, but what are we to say when politicians, donors, and parents ask us what it is, exactly, we do? Menand contends that universities are in the knowledge business. The job of the university, then, "is simply the production and dissemination of knowledge." Any administrator could do better than this; Menand does not address why or how certain forms of knowledge are in ascendency and some—including the traditional fields of the humanities—are in decline.

Menand adopts a disinterested and slightly bemused attitude towards The Crisis (he is a *New Yorker* writer, after all); Bérubé and Fish are grumpy, even vitriolic, at times. Both cast about for culprits and find plenty of blame to go around. The Crisis, however, is slightly different in each formulation. For Fish, the underlying problem is two-fold: on the one hand, academics—especially those in the humanities and social sciences—have forsaken their job—teaching and research—for a much larger enterprise: that of saving the world. On the other hand, non-academics—especially politicians looking to shore up populist credentials—have intruded into a world they do not understand and which does not belong to them.

For Fish, academics have brought some of the backlash upon themselves by overreaching beyond the boundaries of their disciplines. Fish boils his thesis down to the following commandment: "Do your job," by which he means: hew closely to the established—although arbitrarily constructed—strictures of your discipline. By the flip side of the same coin, Fish also admonishes faculty to "not let anyone do your job for you," by which he means: don't let administrators, politicians, or parents tell you how to obey those same established—although arbitrarily constructed—strictures of your discipline.

Fish cites many examples (although they mostly seem to come from English Departments) of scholars turning their métier of teaching and research into student indoctrination. He quotes an English professor at Kent State, Mark Bracher, extensively. He finds Bracher's views on politics and the humanities emblematic of what has gone wrong in academia. Fish quotes Bracher:

> Many literature teachers and scholars are committed to promoting social justice through both their teaching and their scholarship…But despite this commitment of critical and pedagogical activity to political and ethical ends, there is little evidence that literary study had made much difference in the injustice that permeates our world. (170)

Fish interrupts this self-critical account of radical pedagogy to make his own evaluation. "To me, that's the good news," Fish says of Bracher's admission that literary studies have not healed the world. Fish summarizes Bracher's position and then demolishes it:

> Injustice would be diminished, Bracher believes, if sympathy and compassion for others were increased. And that, he says, should be the work of the classroom…But literary study could have this effect only if it were no longer literary study, that is, if the study of stylistic effects, genres, meters, verse forms…were made instrumental to an end not contemplated by those who either produce the literature or consume it. (171)

What he seems to be arguing for then, is a sort of literary study for literary study's sake doctrine. But why study literature in the first place if it teaches you nothing about what it means to be human? To me, it seems Fish has conflated those who wish to use literature as a didactical tool to politicize students and those who wish to use literature as a critical tool to help students understand what it means to be a human being. The former see literature as a weapon in an ideological struggle and the latter see literature as a mode for self-reflection, criticism, and inspiration, an inexhaustible source for debate about our deepest conflicts and dreams.

Fish, the cranky iconoclast, questions the foundations of even the most banal, feel-good statements about the mission of higher education. He ridicules former Harvard University President Derek Bok for saying that universities should strive to "help develop such virtues as racial tolerance, honesty, and social responsibility" (11-12) Bah! Humbug! says Ebenezer Fish, who, while not advocating a ban on such topics from the classroom, would narrowly restrict them. Debates about social justice, racism, and sexism should always be, in his words, "academicized."

That is, debates about anything political should be placed within the analytical framework of an established discourse and never be endorsed nor denounced.

Fish, in other words, is in the unenviable—and unpopular—position of sticking up for everything that Menand diagnoses as sclerotic and reactionary about academe. From an intellectual conservative—Allan Bloom, say—Fish's position would be understandable. He is, after all, simply defending the institution to which he has dedicated an entire career. Nevertheless, this is the same Stanley Fish who was at the center of the debate about postmodernity and cultural relativism when the topics first appeared on the scene a few decades ago. This is odd since a younger Fish might have concurred with Menand that debates about disciplinarity, core education, and, indeed, the very purpose of higher education, change all the time. For Fish, however, the job of the English Department has always been, and forever shall be, the study of meter and narratology in Milton and Shakespeare. Fish, whose name was once synonymous with anti-foundationalism, is now asking us to accept the status quo as a fixed, atemporal Truth. Of course, finding the Truth is the self-assigned task most universities seek to achieve. And here we come to one of the defining paradoxes of modern academic life in the humanities and social sciences. Since the 1960s and the waves of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and post-modernism, Truth—objectively verifiable conclusions we can come to about a text, a culture, an historical event—is increasingly bracketed off by Context. We don't so much seek the Truth so much as we seek to understand the construction of truths, a pursuit perhaps not as noble as Truth-seeking but every bit as necessary and much more honest.

Michael Bérubé in the *Left at War* is not so much concerned about the relationship between academics and the wider world as he is with a certain strand of leftist thinking that, while not exclusively academic, has sought refuge within the doctrine of academic freedom to nurture itself. In a way, Bérubé's book is a bit of an outlier in this debate; it is primarily concerned with the discourse of the Left as a reaction to the policies of the Bush Administration. Bérubé's book is an invaluable and compelling guide to the cultural politics of the academic Left in the past decade or so, but it is as exhausting as it is exhaustive. Furthermore, it is really two books: one about the reaction of what he calls the "Manichean Left" to the policies of the Bush Administration and another about the valuable lessons cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall has to teach U.S. academics about the relationship between the marketplace and cultural production. Yes, Bérubé does valiantly attempt to pull these two themes together, but it is in vain.

There is a certain righteous indignation in the *Left at War* that becomes tedious—even to someone (such as this writer) who agrees with Bérubé politically. At the

heart of this indignation is the reaction among the radical left to the attacks of 11 September 2001. Some of the names—Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek—will be familiar, while others are quite obscure. Almost all of them occupy academic positions and Bérubé takes great pains to offer elaborate deconstructions of their arguments. What bothers Bérubé is that the radical Left—the Manichean Left, in his words—fails to distinguish between the neoconservatives of the Bush Administration and moderate, social democratic leftists like himself, who are part of a "loyal opposition." Any attempt to distinguish between the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, indicates that someone is a lackey for Empire. While some conservative critics have called this faction of the Left the "academic Left," Bérubé points out that many figures associated with this school of thought have "nothing but contempt for the kind of poststructuralist theorizing common to the properly 'academic' left" (7). Robert McChesney, for example, spent much of the 1990s attacking the cultural critic John Fiske, who had claimed that consumers could resist the hegemony of mass media by creating their own meanings in a Madonna song or the space of a shopping mall.

By the time Bérubé cites a Lawrence Grossberg essay called "Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anyone Else Bored with This Debate?" my initial enthusiasm had worn off and, indeed, a certain amount of boredom crept in. There were, however, still a few more chapters to go: a few more detailed critiques of Chomsky's Manichean views of U.S. foreign policy, a few more declarations of Bérubé's faithfulness to the core of Leftist values, a few more hand-wringing defenses of the initial invasion of Afghanistan. Bérubé is a wonderful writer who churns out the occasional witticism worthy of *The Daily Show*. He is more engaging than Menand and more subtle than Fish; still, one is left feeling completely worn out—indeed, bored—with arguments about whether it is possible to resist consumer capitalism or whether any belief in resistance is indicative of false consciousness. And, regardless of what one thinks of the radical Left of Chomsky, et. al., it bears remembering that its influence is so small, so marginal in terms of the larger political debates in the United States, as to be inconsequential. Indeed, the presence of a radical critique of culture and politics would enliven the public sphere. Surely, a social democrat like Bérubé would agree that including voices of anti-capitalist thinkers on cable TV would complicate and enrich discussions about topics like the financial crisis and the state of constant wars. But that would mean doing someone else's job, something that Stanley Fish would rather leave for the Glenn Becks of the world.

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Endnotes

1 See William Chace: "In one generation, then, the numbers of those majoring in the humanities dropped from a total of 30 percent to a total of less than 16 percent; during that same generation, business majors climbed from 14 percent to 22 percent. Despite last year's debacle on Wall Street, the humanities have not benefited; students are still wagering that business jobs will be there when the economy recovers."

2 See Mark Bauerlein, Mohamed Gad-el-Hak, Wayne Grody, Bill McKelvey, and Stanley W. Trimble.

3 "Author Louis Menand On Reforming U.S. Universities," *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 18, 2010.