

# Prescription for a New Model University for the Humanities

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## Abstract

This article starts from general remarks on education which is regarded as largely a physical, interpersonal process for extending one's knowledge of our collective human repertoire and shows how that changed, temporarily, with the postmodern combination of information technology, social complexity, and cheap energy. But the first requires the other two, and as they fade, premodern forms of pedagogy and scholarship may return – unmoored (but for the Humanities) from the deep past and from professionalization's Byzantine administrative labyrinth. The next part of the essay investigates today's hegemonic neoliberal arrangements that must vanish with the market they developed to exploit; in this case, 'nostalgia' will lament the lost energy-abundance and social complexity that virtual education required. Instead, loose coalitions of teachers may form subscription-based universities where learning – not credentialling, nor capital accumulation – is central. The article finally sketches these trends and offers a general plan for a resilient, low-tech, low-energy Humanities university, as complex societies like the United States continue to reckon with the abrupt forms of decline that we call 'collapse'.

**Keywords:** Humanities, university, collapse, neoliberalism, resilience, apprenticeship

*Our age reminds one very much of the disintegration of the Greek state; everything continues, and yet there is no one who believes in it. The invisible spiritual bond that gives it validity has vanished, and thus the whole age is simultaneously comic and tragic: tragic because it is perishing, comic because it continues. (Kierkegaard, *Either / Or, Part II*)*

*Across the river,  
ledges of suburban factories tan  
in the sulphur-yellow sun  
of the unforgivable landscape.  
(Robert Lowell, in 'Mouth of the Hudson')*

## Scarcity and Abundance, in Eden and Elsewhere

As Marc Bousquet showed in *How the University Works*, a 1989 document called the Bowen Report predicted that the mid-1990s would see 'a substantial excess demand for faculty in the arts and sciences,' with five jobs open for every four applicants.<sup>1</sup> Instead,

<sup>1</sup> Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 186.

there proved to be one job for every three applicants. Let me repeat that, because for many years it remained something shocking, and because it is one of the best summaries we have of exactly what went on. *The Bowen Report predicted that the mid-1990s would see 'substantial excess demand,' with five jobs open for every four applicants. Instead, there proved to be one job for every three applicants.* We were taught that the old abundance of academic jobs that had blessed our mentors in their youth (the putative ancestor of the 1990s fictitious 'excess demand') had been based on the expansion of the American economy, and both would simply continue to the end of days. According to Louis Menand, '[i]n the 1960s alone, enrollments more than doubled, from 3.5 million to just under 8 million; the number of doctorates awarded annually tripled; and more faculty were hired than had been hired in the entire 325-year history of American higher education to that point.'<sup>2</sup> Infinite economic growth on a finite planet would remain in place as our only possible way of life, carrying us along in its cornucopian 18<sup>th</sup> century fantasia of permanent abundance, and vanishing waste.

The constraints of physical reality, however, have begun to assert themselves in the meantime, with consequences for cultural institutions between upheaval and extinction.<sup>3</sup> After diagnosis comes prescription, so this essay looks briefly at the situation of academia, and then proposes a decentralized, subscription-based, membership model of the humanities university that might prove more resilient in a world whose politics and chemistry alike are toxic. Hence the name, a *New Model University for the Humanities* – though there may indeed be little or nothing new about it, except perhaps the timing. While medieval monks found themselves saddled with the job of preserving ancient texts throughout what proved to be a long Dark Age, no one has done this outside of the Holocene – and under xenophobic demagogues in most of the English speaking world from India to Indiana.<sup>4</sup> It may be our collective *dharma* to try to do so, and though this may not end in mere fantasy, it must begin there.

When capital is liberated from almost all constraints by the Neoliberal form of political economy, it metabolizes the Earth – the living planet – into waste-products much faster. To venture a crude truism: insofar as universities can contribute to capital's efficiency, focus, technique, and so on, they can succeed in a neoliberal environment without extraordinary measures. Insofar as universities respond with critique and opposition to capital's extensions into the cultural sphere that includes them, they are at risk of decline in a hostile marketplace. Polarization of wealth shrinks the middle class so that too few paying students are able to afford a liberal education, and then to approach a viable job market in their fields outside the university, with confidence that their BA in History will help – and not hinder them with debt, nor require them to leap a mountain of anxiety that 'only a business degree can possibly help me, out there.' Humanities departments are more vulnerable in lean times, and to a degree, they can be influenced and repurposed by funds from the right; this is one way of defining 'think tank.'<sup>5</sup> Other forms of influence include the sponsorship of conferences; CIA-linked cultural foundations that give grants to departments or to the periodicals they produce;

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Menand, *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002), 108.

<sup>3</sup> Dmitry Orlov, *The Five Stages of Collapse: Survivors' Toolkit* (B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/03/'spy-schools-how-cia-fbi-and-foreign-intelligence-secretly-exploit-america's> [accessed 20 September 2020].

or direct intelligence agency funding of student organizations such as the National Students' Association.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not we concern ourselves with the abuse of the universities, we do confront the neglect of them, a malign neglect as imposed institutional starvation, that Christopher Newfield calls 'unmaking the public university'.<sup>7</sup> This was the environment in which the Bowen Report cast its rosy projection for the future of new PhD's in the 1990's; a growing university system with a growing clientele in a growing economy, forever. Some of the internalized cornucopian first-world assumptions that made it hard for citizens to see through consumerism and capitalism in general, also made it hard for professors and graduate students to see through the claims of that Report on the next academic job market we were to face. Getting a person to understand something is, as Upton Sinclair famously observed, 'very difficult... when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.'<sup>8</sup>

## Economic Decline

In reality, by the end of the 1970s, U.S. economic growth had already shifted from a real economy of manufacturing goods for export, to an economy of F.I.R.E.: finance, insurance, and real estate. As the derivatives crisis of 2007-2008 showed the world, this is ultimately a speculative economy, geared to a real economy based not on domestic production but on domestic consumption of goods produced abroad by our rightly esteemed counterparts in other sovereign polities.<sup>9</sup> Their robust productive output, crucial to their wellbeing and ours (by current materialistic notions of the good life, which are rightist in their underlying ideological commitments), is of course destroying the world, and universities are both complicit in the terrible efficiency of that enterprise, and sometimes incubators for marked improvements in current living arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes the former will present as the latter, for public relations purposes: 'greenwash.' The University of Arizona, for example, is the one from which the eminent wildfire ecologist Dr. Guy McPherson resigned a tenured position, to protest UA's unquestioning embrace of industrial civilization. That University now offers a ten-course, fully accredited, roughly \$23,000 Master's degree program in something called 'EMHS: Community Resilience.' Now, *community resilience* is language from a *de facto* group of scientists, journalists, and activists whose work – largely from the 1970s, and from a return to these issues, marked (for example) by the 2003 founding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Gates, Deputy Director, 'CIA and the University', Speech to the Association of Former Intelligence Officers National Convention, 10 October 1987; available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89G00720R000500070019-9.pdf> [accessed 20 September].

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994 [1935]), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ruppert, *Collapse: The Crisis of Energy and Money in a Post Peak Oil World: A 25-Point Program for Action* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2009). See also Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2003); and James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Grove Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Guy McPherson, *Walking Away from Empire: A Personal Journey* (Baltimore, MD: PublishAmerica, 2011).

Post Carbon Institute – developed the discourse of Peak Oil, climate change response, and grassroots social-civic planning for survival as official bodies and systems continue to deteriorate and become more militarized.<sup>11</sup> I heard the phrase ‘community resilience’ at the many conferences I attended in the post-millennium decade, for instance, the 2006 meeting of A.S.P.O. in Lisbon, Portugal.<sup>12</sup> But here is A.S.U.’s tagline for their programme, with its unfamiliar acronym: ‘The community resilience concentration of the online Master of Arts in emergency management and homeland security (EMHS) provides the knowledge, skills and abilities required to tackle current and future challenges faced by cities globally.’<sup>13</sup> The phrase ‘emergency management’ refers to F.E.M.A., the Federal Emergency Management Agency that fatefully mishandled Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and has been a nexus of civic anxiety ever since. Now, back to the story of this situation’s proximal origins.

Nixon closed the ‘gold window’ in 1971, ending the Bretton Woods Accords by detaching the dollar from precious metal and linking it to Saudi crude, which could only be bought in American currency thereafter, irrespective of the customer.<sup>14</sup> The US alone, of course, can print such dollars from nothing, rather than earn them by selling real goods and services; this is ‘petrodollar hegemony,’ whose longevity remains unpredictable but whose days are numbered. The vast deficits of the Reagan era eventually normalized unsound money backed by endless debt, so that (as Milton Friedman famously quoted Richard Nixon as saying) ‘we are all Keynesians now.’ The only choice for the participants in the global economy has been to insist (on those very rare occasions when the question is brought to bear) that we are simply betting on future economic growth to generate the vast wealth required to pay down all the interest and the principal. The need for this pretence led the national narrative (the business journalism that drives ‘groupthink,’ which itself creates ever-more-homogeneous public discourse) dangerously far from the solid ground of real economic and ecological events.<sup>15</sup>

## Humanities Professors as Invisible Contrarians

If American universities were and remain places where this critical, anti-cornucopian counternarrative has indeed been articulated, well, such teaching has mostly happened in the interstices of the system. Let me exemplify a moment: I completed my first doctorate (in English and American Literature, at Brandeis University) as a twenty-six-year-old kid, with a head full of the Bowen Report, in 1994. I was promptly slaughtered on the job market, scholarly publications in hand, eventually racking up almost a hundred rejection letters. In 1997, I got a tenure-track position at a college in rural Vermont whose monocultural, quietly rightist environment proved inimical to my well-

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.postcarbon.org> [accessed 20 September, 2020].

<sup>12</sup> This was the 5<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil, where Richard Heinberg and Julian Darley of the Post-Carbon Institute spoke. For more information on this, see also Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> See <https://publicservice.asu.edu/programs/ma/emergency-management-and-homeland-security-community-resilience-ma> [accessed 20 September 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> James Howard Kunstler, *Too Much Magic: Wishful Thinking, Technology, and the Fate of the Nation* (München: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018).

being; I resigned three years later. On returning to New York City, I began two decades of teaching as an adjunct professor at various universities, mainly majority-Black, Latinx, and Asian colleges and universities in the former industrial brownlands and outer boroughs of New York, Northern New Jersey, and (since 2005) Los Angeles.

Everyplace I taught, the hardships were of the sort commonly described by adjuncts in that position (one college even had a separate, broom-closet-sized toilet with a sign, 'Adjunct Bathroom' – particularly obnoxious for its tinge of Jim Crow). But by virtue of the same indifference, I was permitted to run amok with my teaching. I saw to it that my anti-cornucopian, anti-Neoliberal narrative bore a potent, hybrid fruit when grafted onto a humanities curriculum I typically controlled, with their perfunctory and indifferent approval. For example, among the most exciting courses I was privileged to develop was a seminar comprising four deeply harmonious texts: Milton's *Paradise Lost*; Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, and Peter Dale Scott's *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*.<sup>16</sup> The themes, speech situations, power dynamics, dialectics and (in the three poetic works) trance-inducing musical seriousness of language which united these texts proved a teeming source of insights and eventful talks. Had the administrations at those schools taken an interest in what was happening in their classrooms, they might have been dissatisfied with much of what they were paying me so little to do. Instead, with all the passion at my command I contributed at least a good *iota* to the leftward shift of political culture among my juniors.

## Fordism vs. Apprenticeship

There is a generational dimension to all this. It seemed to me the people doing the hiring were generally Boomers, and anti-union. They had entered the academic labour force in the 1960's, by invitation; 'you'd go to the MLA, and the English Departments would wave you over to their tables to give you an interview'.<sup>17</sup> Their own hiring practices, in turn, formed during a pivotal moment for American power which compromised the foundations on which our undergraduate and (especially) graduate education were constructed. 'The last year in which the notion of *apprenticeship* had any validity for the [academic] profession,' writes Cary Nelson in the foreword to Bousquet's book, 'was 1970.'<sup>18</sup>

In the apprenticeship model, a graduate student earns his/her doctorate by taking courses, writing a dissertation, and learning to teach undergraduates by doing so throughout her graduate education. The term 'apprenticeship' applies because after the course is complete, the fully trained PhD steps into an academic job similar to the job of the mentor who trained him/her. That presupposes a flow of interested undergraduates on one side, proportionally matched by new full-time teaching posts on the other. What has changed is not a decline in the number of college students in need of instruction (there is no shortage of undergraduates) but the way universities get their teaching done: they no longer hire PhDs and pay an adequate lower-middle class salary with medical benefits and a retirement provision, along with some basic guarantee of academic freedom. The short way to say that is 'tenure-track', but the most controversial part of

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous personal report.

<sup>18</sup> Cary Nelson, 'Foreword: Resistance Is Not Futile', in Bousquet, xiii.

tenure – the alleged lifelong immunity from being fired – is not the salient point. This is: ‘Thirty-five years ago, nearly 75 percent of all college teachers were tenurable; only a quarter worked on an adjunct, part-time, or non-tenurable basis. Today, those proportions are reversed.’<sup>19</sup> Bousquet continues:

If you’re enrolled in four college classes right now, you have a pretty good chance that one of the four will be taught by someone who has earned a doctorate and whose teaching, scholarship, and service to the profession has undergone the intensive peer scrutiny associated with the tenure system. In your other three classes, however, you are likely to be taught by someone who has started a degree but not finished it; was hired by a manager, not professional peers; may never publish in the field she is teaching; got into the pool of persons being considered for the job because she was willing to work for wages around the official poverty line (often under the delusion that she could ‘work her way into’ a tenurable position); and does not plan to be working at your institution three years from now. In almost all courses in most disciplines using nontenurable or adjunct faculty, a person with a recently earned Ph.D. was available, and would gladly have taught your other three courses, but could not afford to pay their loans and house themselves on the wage being offered.<sup>20</sup>

Bosquet was among the first, if not the first, critic of US higher education to tell the truth with the dignity of candour that alone can cut the grease of propaganda (its apologetics and its triumphalism alike). ‘Most undergraduate education,’ he explained, ‘is conducted by a superexploited corps of disposable workers [...] often collecting wages and benefits inferior to those of fast-food clerks and bell-hops.’<sup>21</sup> That bell, once rung, propagated its chilling tone across the labour force with the 2008 publication of *How the University Works*. Bosquet continues:

According to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce survey of 2000, for instance, fewer than one-third of the responding programs paid first-year writing instructors more than \$2,500 a class; nearly half (47.6%) paid these instructors less than \$2,000 per class. At that rate, a full-time load of eight classes nets less than \$16,000 annually and includes no benefits [...] Like Wal-Mart employees, the majority-female contingent academic workforce relies on a patchwork of other sources of income, including such forms of public assistance as food stamps.<sup>22</sup>

The number of incoming undergraduates in need of professorial instruction at American universities has continued to grow; so has the number of PhDs ‘produced’ by graduate programmes at the same universities. What has been radically reduced is the number of full-time tenurable faculty jobs where those PhDs can be employed to do that undergraduate teaching, since the jobs have been replaced with super-exploitive ‘adjunct’ professorships. ‘In the reality of structural casualization,’ Bousquet writes, ‘the jobs of professors taking early retirement are often eliminated, not filled with new degree holders.’<sup>23</sup> During the same period, the number of administrators and the size of their salaries grew at an alarming rate. Descriptions of the would-be new-faculty predicament were proffered by deans, department chairs, and disciplinary professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA), which ministers to English departments.

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<sup>19</sup> Bousquet, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Bousquet, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Bousquet, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Bousquet, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Bousquet, 20.

Those descriptions were articulated in a management discourse whose primary allegiance is not the university's tuition-paying clientele, the faculty, nor civil society as a whole, but capital. Its terms were those of supply and demand, production and capacity. Since this presupposes an equivalence between higher education and any other product – such as the cars Henry Ford manufactured while formulating the kernel of modern corporate management doctrine – ‘Fordism’ is the name given to the supply-side approach. The problem, *from the Fordist perspective*, is not that the good teaching jobs have been essentially stolen and alchemized into new stadiums, dorms, and Assistant Provost salaries. The problem is that too many PhDs have been ‘produced’ by graduate programmes whose size must therefore be curtailed: ‘The Fordism of the discourse surrounding graduate education is a nearly unchanged survival of the dominant interpretive frame established between 1968 and 1970, when a freight train of scholarship decrying a Cold War “shortage” of degree holders suddenly reversed itself in attempting to account for a Vietnam-era “surplus.”’<sup>24</sup> In 2017, said the National Science Foundation, ‘the humanities and the arts made up 10 percent of doctorates awarded’ in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The now-venerable Professors who had arrived in the 1960s were imprinted with (and misled by) an experience of opportunity abundance. Those hired in the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, had the false impression that the conditions of their own scary-but-successful scramble for academic employment represented the worst the profession would ever throw at any fresh crop of candidates. Since they had achieved tenure anyway, surely their students too could cry ‘We Shall Overcome’ and prove it true. These mentors and thesis advisors believed the Bowen Report’s story of an imminent 1990s job-glut for a tangle of reasons: it appealed to their conscience (without the Report’s promise of a new golden age, they would be guilty of training new PhDs for jobs that would never materialize); it appealed to their vanity (we strained uphill and made it to the heights, but you kids will sail downhill toward even greener pastures); and it concealed both the real situation and the reasons for it. Though the Fordist solution – curtail production of new PhDs by shrinking or eliminating some doctoral programmes and raising graduate admissions standards – was often discussed in meetings and in print, nobody ever took it seriously as an action programme. Why not? Might it have produced the desired parity between new job candidates and the full-time faculty lines they had spent tens of thousands of dollars and years of strenuous effort to earn? The answer is that such parity was never the real goal. Instead, hordes of earnest, wide-eyed, talented graduate students are annually accepted, educated, mentored, and released into the airless chamber of perma-temp poverty in order to create and maintain a just-in-time supply of casualized low-wage teaching labour, large enough to serve the ever-growing classes of incoming undergraduates.

Why does graduate student Jane Doe willingly enter what often turns out to be a lifetime of teaching for sub-poverty wages, with no benefits, no office, no telephone, no photocopy privileges, and no respect? Because at each stage, it appears to be in her rational interest to do so. At first, she accepts it as a matter of course, because she is still a mere graduate student with no rank, who needs to teach in order to become experienced. This is the apprenticeship model she carries in her head; it is the basis of her dignity and is not easily discarded. Then, some of her classmates quit, often for lack

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<sup>24</sup> Bousquet, 190.

<sup>25</sup> See [https://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=297405](https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=297405) [accessed 20 September 2020].

of money to complete their studies; these continue to teach as adjuncts because they lack the PhD which the good jobs require. Ms. Doe completes the PhD. She continues to teach as an adjunct because in order to reach the eventual holy grail of a tenurable job, she must continuously keep a hand in the profession by teaching one course or more at all times. After a few years of relentless rejection for the scarce (or fictitious) tenurable jobs, Dr. Doe will continue to teach as an adjunct because (as even the most obtuse idealist will have realized) it is the only remaining way to continue teaching in current conditions. Search committees that operate to fill the few real job openings (although sometimes the funding falls through and the job proves illusory) tend to prefer the relative naïveté and boundless energy of the 28-year-old *gente nuova*. In contrast, the 42-year-old candidate has fifteen years of adjunct teaching experience, three or four scholarly books (though none perhaps from university presses, which tend to prefer authors who hold tenurable academic appointments), and a sheaf of peer evaluations: but her PhD is fifteen years old. Like a tragic hero, Dr. Jane Doe discovers that the very credentials she worked so hard to achieve have become not only useless, but disqualifying. Yesterday's groomed *wunderkind* is tomorrow's overqualified cynic.

## Diagnosis

### The Faculty's Predicament

In the past 30 years, a caste of administrators has usurped control of higher education. There are myriad well-meaning administrators trying to steer their schools in democratic directions; nevertheless, the nature of the job is to divert resources from instruction to various anti-democratic forms of capital accumulation. Using the ideology of free-market fundamentalism, cadres of management professionals have furnished themselves and their allies with the lion's share of revenues (from skyrocketing tuition costs, which these same admins initiated), and political influence (from contributions, corporate partnerships, and cronyism). Some distance learning programs (but by no means all distance learning programs) have contributed to the outsourcing, downsizing, de-skilling, and degradation of the professoriate. These are based on the use of mandatory pre-recorded courseware content; over-regulated syllabi; and wages that are even further below the poverty line than those you're paid for teaching in person.

### The Students' Predicament

In 'good' schools, as few as 10% of those who teach undergraduates are tenured faculty; since tenure is a vetting process, this seems disadvantageous to the clientele who pay a premium price. Many of these teachers do not have a PhD and are quite new (sometimes, utterly new) to teaching. Wherever you go to college, online or in person (but especially in person), the cost is enormous. Little of it goes to the people who do the actual teaching; it goes to pay enormous salaries to presidents and provosts and deans. Their job is to raise money and spend it on everything and anything: construction projects, stock schemes, personal enrichment, sports arenas, endowment building; but rarely on faculty compensation or to subsidize tuition. This is one of the reasons why tuition costs continue to devour the wealth of generations.



## Prescription: A New Model University for the Humanities

Having ventured a critique of American academia, I'd like to suggest a potentially helpful countermeasure that I've been mulling over for years. Not particularly original, it is a slightly formalized description of what can 'happen anyway' when people gather in earnest to fulfil a need for education in the absence of resources and existing workable institutions. Similarly, when a day-care centre is designed, the design may make use of contemporary research, but so long as the budget is low and the institution relatively fluid (that is, not already saturated with the Weberian rationalization that reduces everything to numbers), the designers are simply trying to replicate what already happens in ordinary village life, uninterrupted by capital, centralization, standardization, and the meat-grinder of professionalization and credentialing.

The idea for a New Model University for the Humanities occurred to me some time after I recognized that higher education in America had become a Ponzi scheme. Marc Bousquet's work clarified for me the experience through which I was already living. Straight out of college, at age 26 I had entered graduate school at Brandeis University in 1989, where I earned a PhD in English and American literature as I heard, and believed, the optimistic predictions I have described here. Defending my dissertation in December 1994, I then entered the marketplace with several top-flight scholarly publications on my CV, and some robust letters of recommendation. Like many of my classmates, I was rejected from approximately one hundred academic jobs, including places so obscure I hadn't realized they existed (the University of the Ozarks comes to mind, bless their hearts!). I taught in New York and New Jersey as an adjunct for a few years, then worked tenure track in rural Vermont from 1997 until 2000, when I left for personal reasons, and then returned to adjunct work. Eventually I changed careers and became a psychotherapist while continuing to write and to practice other art forms, like sculpture and acting.

To be sure, my own errors and limitations were important factors in the professional disappointments I experienced while in academia. But thanks to my education and a bit of social luck – the warmth and intellectual depth of some of the men and women I knew – I was able to make enough of a break with American hyper-individualism to ask questions about the national and global context in which those setbacks took place. I learned how to supplement the explanation from personal responsibility ('I screwed myself') with a complementary explanation from social and cultural forces ('American higher education has been under attack for some forty years, and is now caving in on itself'). My intention here is to help others make a similar interpretive move for themselves, to their own relief. Note that there may be alternatives to the usual pair of roads ahead: compliant dejection in a corrupt system, or Sisyphean straining toward reform of that system, despite powerful entrenched interests. Alternative educational arrangements might be imagined into place.

No Degrees = No Accreditation = Minimal Administrative Costs.

Neither conferring degrees nor seeking accreditation, the New Model University of the Humanities requires minimal administrative staff. Members pay dues on a sliding scale; it is not structured like a degree-granting university, nor like a corporation, but like a local religious institution; or a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) collective, based on a particular piece of land; or like a non-profit psychotherapy clinic that doesn't require health insurance. Administrators keep today's universities going in

several ways, chiefly by keeping them accredited, so as to add value to the degrees they confer, maintaining the demand for what the university is selling. Most employers now only consider potential employees with such college degrees. But the jobs – in these days of expensive energy, automation, labour arbitrage, NAFTA, financial collapse, and disruptions from climate change – have become few and far between compared to the number of graduates, so that the average value of a degree has decreased. That value may, in some cases, even be negative, given the enormous debt that comes with a degree.

#### Emphasis on High-Quality Teaching.

Since the quality of the teaching is the whole point of the New Model University of the Humanities, it strives to employ dynamic teachers with broad knowledge in more than one area; a special brilliance in the classroom; a passion for *some sets of texts* that he or she or they *loves to teach*. Web video clips convey this to the public at large (should the Internet fail, reputation reverts to word-of-mouth and personal experience). For the first generation of faculty hiring, PhD holders will be preferred at NMUH; first, because within the current state of affairs the PhD is (still) an effective vetting mechanism in that it represents a quantity of work, stamina, commitment, interest, and knowledge within a subject. Second, many of those who hold a PhD were, in various ways, misled into believing that an eventual tenure-track job would redeem the huge cost of the degree. Such jobs often no longer present themselves, and many existing ones are being phased out. So, the doctoral degree is part of a current unjust system with diminishing returns, an old system that is breaking down. Later in the process, NMUH's faculty recruitment policy will drop the PhD requirement when other criteria emerge.

#### Non-Profit with Maximum Revenue-Sharing.

Chief expenses are faculty salaries, other staff, rent, heat, telecom, supplies, and insurance. As a non-profit, NMUH can apply for grants, find individual donors, and fundraise using events and so on. NMUH would also calculate price points effectively and invest in social network advertising instead of agency ads and broadcasting. 'We offer a deep humanities education,' an ad might say, 'at a fraction of the price you'd pay for a comparable experience at a degree-granting institution.' If and when the economy crashes to the point of becoming de-monetized, NMUH might find alternative practical ways to pay staff, such as with food – like Steinbeckian rural doctors of the 1930's, your professors might prefer cash, but would perhaps accept a few good egg-laying hens.

#### Academic Freedom.

The word 'academic' comes not from RAND corporation or Harvard but from Plato, who gathered with his contemporaries and students in the sacred grove of Academus to talk and think together. Faculty should have the opportunity to teach whatever texts they find rewarding and appropriate, with a central collection of 100 books\* from which teachers will be encouraged (but not required) to draw.

#### Live Education.

Unlike even the best distance learning program, NMUH provides the embodied experience of fellowship in study. By gathering to honour a text with interpretive attention, we help to fulfil the unconscious social needs of the primates we are, to be in the presence of other human beings as we grow and learn. It also permits the professor

to model for the students the figure of the lifelong learner, who is motivated by sheer fascination. If pandemics prohibit this, then online will have to suffice.

#### No Grades.

Assignments are made available, students are free to do them, and teachers are happy to grade them; but they aren't required. For students, this means an end to deadline anxiety and the pressure of competition. For the faculty it means grading papers fewer in number and higher in quality, with no more vacant papers written under duress.

#### Flexibility for Students.

All access. No registering for courses. The courses are chosen by the faculty, generally within a group of 100 texts; the current courses and texts are posted online and on the premises. Visitors pay a small per diem admission fee; members pay monthly dues on a sliding scale. Students simply show up (on time, if at all possible) at any course the university has going, for whichever class sessions they choose. Once a student has studied the 'Core Hundred', his or her membership is free. Naturally, only a fraction of the people who come through the door will be trying to read the full hundred.

#### Flexibility for the Faculty.

The faculty will teach at least one text from the 'Core Hundred' per course. Beyond this, teachers are at liberty to add whatever texts or other instruction they choose.

#### Goal-Available, Not Goal-Driven.

Students who have completed the study of the 'Core Hundred', and written a thesis, are offered the opportunity to apply for a teaching position.

#### The Faculty Hiring Process: Open, but with Quality Control.

Can a potential teacher attract students to NMUH? Anybody who can pay the bills by bringing in new members and/or guests, so much the better! If not, 'no harm, no foul.' This is not a competition, though it does work like a marketplace in that tuition money is to be secured by word of mouth, advertising, networking, the faculty's ability to promote their own brand – and the NMUH brand – and the faculty's ability to earn contributions from the attendees and members by delivering compelling lectures; asking interesting questions; treating everyone with the utmost courtesy at all times; and answering student questions with knowledge and enthusiasm. The 'Core Hundred' might be selected using the following process: a group of people who want to launch and operate the New Model University for the Humanities assembles and each professor brings a list of hundred texts he or she most wishes to teach. The hundred texts with the most nominations become the current 'Core Hundred'. Every four years a new text election will be held, resulting in a new list that reflects the will of the current faculty.

In Late Antiquity, after several centuries of military dictatorship, the Romans noticed that they had depleted to exhaustion the topsoil and the manpower of their Imperial periphery. The Roman state began to fail at meeting the needs of its domestic population. After a certain historical inflection point whose date I am not equipped to specify, people living in the Roman world could no longer stake their hopes on a futile civic power struggle against the military, on the reform of the impotent Senate, or on the

restoration of the vanished Republic of bygone centuries. Instead, the peoples of the Italian peninsula participated in thousands of tiny new community organizations (mostly Church-related) that sprang up across the landscape as stopgap measures for meeting needs the state could no longer meet. What could not be reformed among the giant, complex institutions of a collapsing Imperial civilization had to be supplemented by simple, improvised, low-energy, local alternatives. That is the spirit in which I imagine and propose this new model university for the Humanities: to keep the pages turning, and the conversation flowing, as the Dark Ages return.

In a 2013 editorial published in *The American Interest*, Nathan Harden warned:

The higher-ed business is in for a lot of pain as a new era of creative destruction produces a merciless shakeout of those institutions that adapt and prosper from those that stall and die. Meanwhile, students themselves are in for a golden age, characterized by near-universal access to the highest quality teaching and scholarship at minimal cost [...]<sup>26</sup>

The neo-liberalization Harden decried has, of course, been consolidated into a hegemony so stable it seems as indestructible as the USSR once seemed. But far greater forces than those loosed on the world by the financial crisis of 2008 are bringing globalization to a slow, screeching halt.<sup>27</sup> Early enough in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ‘nostalgia’ might be a wistful luddite yearning for the lost days of analogue, brick and mortar, before neoliberal hegemony. But soon enough, nostalgia will be concerned with the lost conveniences of cheap energy and fiat money, while older, simpler, slower forms of education return in force – regardless of our preferences and views, be they ever-so cynical or idealistic. Harden, with an eye to the more familiar nostalgia, lamented the inexorable automation and casualization of academic labour:

But nostalgia won’t stop the unsentimental beast of progress from wreaking havoc on old ways of doing things. If a faster, cheaper way of sharing information emerges, history shows us that it will quickly supplant what came before. People will not continue to pay tens of thousands of dollars for what technology allows them to get for free.<sup>28</sup>

‘Nostalgia, the pain of (longing for) homecoming,’ is what Odysseus’ men felt when he told them they must together go down to the underworld, to consult the prophet Teiresias: ἀλλ’ οὐ γάρ τις πρῆξις ἐγίγνετο μυρομένοισιν (*But nothing [‘no praxis’] came of their crying.*)<sup>29</sup> The tables have turned, however, and these tears may now have practical consequences. Call to mind the predictions of Richard Heinberg about energy scarcity, and those of Guy McPherson or James Lovelock on climate change, and the passage can be rewritten with an almost opposite effect to that of the original:

But nostalgia won’t stop the unsentimental [reversal] of progress from wreaking havoc on [recently new] ways of doing things. If a faster, cheaper way of sharing information

<sup>26</sup> Nathan Harden, ‘The End of the University as We Know It’, *The American Interest* (‘Virtualized: The End of the University as We Know It’) 8.3 (2012): NP; available at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/12/11/the-end-of-the-university-as-we-know-it> [accessed 6 October 2020].

<sup>27</sup> Richard Heinberg, *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality* (B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Harden.

<sup>29</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey* xi, line 568, in W.B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), my translation.

[fails with the grid], history shows us that it will quickly [be supplanted by] what came before.

People will not be able to pay-in energy (i.e., labour as purchasing power) for what energy-scarcity forces them to get for free (relative to the costs of the same services pre-collapse). Once it becomes prohibitive to fuel and maintain the vast server farms in the desert, education will become increasingly local once again, until one day, all of it will be. According to the *Internet Health Report* for 2018, ‘The Internet’s data centers alone may already have the same CO2 footprint as global air travel.’<sup>30</sup> In their ‘estimation of the global electricity usage that can be ascribed to Communication Technology (CT) between 2010 and 2030,’ Anders Andrae and Thomas Elders (2015) expect ‘...for the worst-case scenario, CT could use as much as 51% of global electricity in 2030.’<sup>31</sup> This would represent only ‘23% of the globally released greenhouse gas emissions in 2030’ if current growth in renewable electricity continues, but even this is a daunting figure – not least because current warming is due to greenhouse gas emissions from one or more decades ago.<sup>32</sup> *People talking in a room with books* is mocked as an obsolete fantasy, even while its triumphal plug-and-play replacement slides toward the dustbin of history. Face-to-face, low-budget, local education is the future, because abundance is the past.

The power of literary texts to meet the needs of a population in crisis is compromised by ideologies which keep the texts captive to old ‘structures of feeling’ and obsolete values, such as capital accumulation or nationalism.<sup>33</sup> Georgian Britain’s use of the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, and Shakespeare’s *Henry V* to inculcate respect for imperial militarism exemplifies the dead hand of what ‘humanism’ typically means to postmodernists. Future deployments of the same texts need not suffer from these same blind spots; they will have their own to contend with. This critique has been made before, not least in the pages of *Word and Text*. Thus, writes Stefan Herbrechter, in ‘The Posthumanist University,’ his review of Thomas Docherty’s 2011 book *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution*:

The loss of (national-hegemonic) culture is perceived as a deligitimating threat, especially in the humanities. The current thoroughly managerialised and corporatised university no longer participates in the humanistic project, which plunges the entire canon of humanistic values into deep crisis [...] Instead the ‘post-historical’ (or post-ideological) university witnesses the end of the classical liberal education based on the German, Humboldtian, model, with its principles of the autonomy of knowledge, Kantian critique, Enlightenment reason and the Cartesian subject. The change is evident for example in the shift from the professor to the administrator as the central figure in the new, corporate, university.<sup>34</sup>

Herbrechter seems to suggest that the continued primacy of the faculty would have required an impossible longevity for an intellectually doomed paradigm, the ‘Western Civilization’ dreamed up by Harvard University’s Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908) –

<sup>30</sup> See <https://internethealthreport.org/2018/> [accessed 20 September 2020].

<sup>31</sup> S. G. Anders Andrae, and Tomas Edler, ‘On Global Electricity Usage of Communication Technology: Trends to 2030’, *Challenges* 6.1 (2015): 117; available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2078-1547/6/1/117> [accessed 26 September 2020].

<sup>32</sup> Andrae and Edler, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond Williams, and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954).

<sup>34</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, ‘The Posthumanist University’, *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, Special Issue: ‘Mediocrity’, eds. Ivan Callus, and Arleen Ionescu, 3.1 (2013): 122.

but that the new dominance of Deans and Provosts does not. As for administrative hegemony over faculty and students, this may be the last lucrative phase of higher education in America that climate change, financial gravity, ‘civil unrest’, and energy scarcity (to say nothing of emerging diseases) will permit. In it, Neoliberal wealth-extractors are still so firmly attached to the available resources that we often forget what keeps them there. Once the wealth to be exploited is sufficiently drawn down, those whose *modus vivendi* is extraction (whether of petroleum from shale, speculative derivatives from existing money, or surplus value from labour) tend to seek greener pastures elsewhere.

The wealth in higher education that attracts administrators consists in the goldmine they maintain by effectively managing their school’s capacity to grant accredited degrees, at tuition prices limited only by what the market will bear (itself geared to the availability of credit, often at usurious interest rates), with prohibitively low teaching pay. When the roles of student-customer and faculty-employee are each sufficiently disincentivized, the engine will seize up and the money will go away. As inevitable as this seems, and as imminent as it sometimes appears, it has not yet fully happened: corporate universities are still paying little to a defeated faculty, while charging vast sums for degrees, which undergraduates are still buying with debt, selling off their financial future. Academic degrees require vast loans from predatory banks, working with government infrastructure in a harmony comparable to the Federal Reserve; in return for taxes, the state provides little for education or healthcare, preferring a global empire of military bases and a domestic network of heavily armed police installations. Of course, as Arizona State’s ‘EMHS’ programme shows, undergraduates interested in jobs will find many opportunities to participate in that expanding security apparatus.

### **Neoliberal Post-Modernity: Anti-Contextual and Cornucopian**

Standardized testing has done to education what cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) has done to mental health treatment. Like drugs and oil, these neoliberal replacements for education and psychotherapy create an illusory freedom-from-context. As manualized approaches, they leave little room for an individual personality or its specific circumstances and history.<sup>35</sup> What is neither cognitive nor behavioural – namely, feelings – disappears behind the tallying of undesired cognitions and behaviours. The client is a black box with no significant interior, like the interchangeable rats and pigeons of behaviourism’s founder, B.F. Skinner, who saw those animals as generic organisms without any ethology or evolutionary history, let alone individuality.<sup>36</sup> John Doe must get back to work making widgets, as soon as possible. If role-defined ‘functionality’ is paramount, why should the ‘clients’ and ‘end users’ of these systems persist in the struggle to make meaning out of experience? Shouldn’t they be cured of their obsolete affectivity so that they, too, can make money out of time, instead?

Like science, bureaucracy is morally neutral, no more inherently malevolent than the mathematics on which it relies. In the absence of rules that apply only to

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph P. Farrell, *Rotten to the (Common) Core: Public Schooling, Standardized Tests, and the Surveillance State* (Port Townsend: Process Media, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> B. F. Skinner, *The Shaping of a Behaviorist: Part Two of an Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

specific classes of persons, bureaucracy facilitates the equal treatment of individuals under universal rules. But this same value-neutrality renders any bureaucracy highly susceptible to contamination, by whoever manages to commandeer access to the power which bureaucracy exists to administer and enforce. Max Weber famously praised bureaucracy as the only means of maintaining the highly efficient, systematic, and consistent administration which large populations require. He saw its expansion into every domain of human life as both inexorable and disastrous, famously calling it ‘an iron cage,’ and ‘a polar night of icy darkness and hardness [...]’.<sup>37</sup>

Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism.<sup>38</sup>

Communism, of course, shares this position, as well as the goal of endless growth in material production and consumption, on a finite planet. Though the ancient world had its carnage, its organizational hierarchies, and its draconian autocrats, what it lacked was modernity’s explosive mixture of abundant *energy* (cheap fossil fuels), to power *technology* (of force and control), rendered legitimate by *ideology* (entitlement to all available resources in the name of some principle or other), implemented by *bureaucracy* – which absolves those whose energy, technology, and ideology enable them to execute their own decisions about just who is human.<sup>39</sup> Note that Harvard’s 23<sup>rd</sup> President, James B. Conant, was influential in the development of the atomic bomb and of the Scholastic Aptitude Test; as Louis Menand points out, ‘Americans born after 1945 were raised in the shadow of both.’<sup>40</sup>

To the timber industry, there is little difference between a million clear-cut trees of twenty different deciduous species, and the million generic conifers planted to replace them: ‘we replace every tree we harvest.’ Genocide and ecocide alike require the erasure of context and alterity, otherwise their doomed inputs might be recognized as unique (rather than interchangeable units), which might trigger those contemptible old impediments to efficiency: empathy and guilt.<sup>41</sup> With solar and wind power, energy is no longer a stably stored resource lying ready in the ground or the tanker, but a relationship arising within a cosmic system; the wind and the sunshine flow through the universe, and those who would make use of them must join in those larger processes of circulation, interposing their energy-gathering equipment into a vast system of wild, active forces. Correspondingly, the subject of relational psychoanalysis is part of, and even constituted by, a web of relationships that comprise an enviroing field – like the photosphere of the Sun or the atmosphere of the Earth, tapped into by PV cells and wind turbines, respectively.

A de-virtualized university would be re-localized in all its functions: from the ‘physical plant’ of campus and buildings to the surrounding foodshed, watershed, and

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<sup>37</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Gerth, and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1946]), 216.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, 216.

<sup>39</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Menand, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Derrick Jensen, and George Draffan, *Strangely like War: The Global Assault on Forests* (Hartford: Chelsea Green, 2003).

energy sources. Local expertise and ‘situated knowledges’ will likely emerge as globalism fades, and its vast energy-appetite goes unsatisfied. On this note, let’s return for a moment to Stefan Herbrechter’s ‘The Posthumanist University’:

There is no longer any centred (or unified) subject who could feel addressed by the traditional narrative of liberal education; instead students and increasingly teachers as well, in their postmodern environment, construct their identities from the sum of their roles and experiences and are thus better understood, following Deleuze and Guattari, as either ‘rhizomes’, ‘haecceities’, or indeed ‘networked individuals’. The anti-universalist liberation and the anti-humanist theory movements of the second half of the 20th century have shown that the universal liberal and rational subject was in fact always inhabited (and split) by other categories like gender, race, class and, as highlighted by recent posthumanist or postanthropocentric approaches, by human ‘speciessism’ or unfounded exceptionalism.<sup>42</sup>

This emphasis on the ‘rhizome’ and distributed networks as the scaffolding of contemporary selfhood is very well, but its link to current conditions is tenuous. It has the Internet as its implicit model (just as biology has always conceptualized the psyche in whatever terms were suggested by the technology of the time – hydraulics, magnetism, electricity, computation). When the Internet contracts or fails, the human subject may revert to a centeredness and concretion enforced by provincial, situated needs that make postmodernism an absurd fairy-tale as jejune as the nationalism of a defunct polity.

In a single breath one can herald the death of a ‘humanism’ based in nationalist myth, as Docherty and Herbrechter have each done, while burying in the same grave the atheist ‘humanism’ that Paul Kurtz defended and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn condemned.<sup>43</sup> What remains of the humanities, when national culture and revealed religion have faded? Plenty. Suppose we do as Aristotle did, and take for our type specimen Sophocles’ *Oedipus the Tyrant*. Its author’s reverence for Apollo can be felt in the drama’s every line. Though ancient Athenian religion be defunct, the text continues to instil awe for the mysteries on whose surface we move and have our being. It presents hubris and nemesis, regardless of how today’s reader construes Apollo – as a living God, as karmic justice, or perhaps as the perverse, merciless curvature of fate.

The uses we make of the ancients change all the time, but the humanities remain our major connection to the sources of culture and, indeed, of the world it configures. The collapse of the United States will do no more to diminish the significance of Sophocles than did the Soviet Union; both, of course, did much to amplify the Sophoclean lesson that a union of intellect and force, unhallowed by thoughtful humility, is enough to destroy everything. When large and complex systems fragment, there can arise smaller, simpler alternatives that reactivate discarded forms of life and praxis to adapt to new conditions of scarcity. A subscription-based model for humanities education, freed from the burdens of degree-granting, could prove resilient as climate change and inequality exert further pressure on universities, not least in what remains of the United States.

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<sup>42</sup> Herbrechter, 122-3.

<sup>43</sup> See Paul Kurtz, *Embracing the Power of Humanism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Harvard Commencement Address, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1978: ‘A World Split Apart,’ available at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsynharvard.htm> [accessed 20 September 2020].



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## Rețetă pentru un nou model de universitate în Științele Umaniste

### Rezumat

Articolul pornește de la remarci generale asupra educației, care e considerată, în mare parte, un proces ce presupune interacțiune fizică și interpersonală care poate spori cunoașterea din repertoriul nostru colectiv, pentru a arăta cum această interacțiune s-a schimbat temporar odată cu amalgamul postmodern al tehnologiei informației, complexitatea socială și energia ieftină. Dar prima dintre aceste componente necesită existența celorlalte două, și pe măsură ce acestea sunt în declin, forme premoderne ale pedagogiei și cercetării se pot întoarce, toate detașate (cu excepția domeniului Științe Umaniste), din trecutul îndepărtat și din labirintul administrativ întortocheat al profesionalizării. Următoarea parte a articolului investighează aranjamentele neolibérale hegemonice de astăzi care trebuie să dispară împreună cu piața pe care au creat-o pentru a o putea exploata. În acest caz, „nostalgia” va deplânge abundența de energie pierdută și complexitatea socială de care a avut nevoie educația virtuală. În locul acestui scenariu, profesorii pot forma coaliții fără o structură fixă, prin care să întemeieze universități pe bază de subscripție unde învățarea devine centrală, fără a pune accent pe credite sau pe acumulare de capital. Acest articol schițează aceste curente și oferă un plan pentru o universitate umanistă rezistentă, de tip „low-tech”, care are un consum energetic mic, întrucât societăți complexe precum cea din Statele Unite ale Americii continuă să înregistreze un declin abrupt pe care îl numim „prăbușire economică”.