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SEVEN SALUTARY WARNINGS FOR THE HUMANITIES
A brief glimpse into how the Humanities have fallen from grace
SEVEN SALUTARY WARNINGS FOR THE HUMANITIES
A BRIEF GLIMPSE INTO HOW THE HUMANITIES HAVE
FALLEN FROM GRACE

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I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

—Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3:18-20

Of all evil I deem you capable: Therefore I want good from you. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die.

—Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

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ABSTRACT

A decimation of the liberal arts is under way. The study of the Humanities has steadily declined globally in the past decade along with a dire combination of external and internal crisis. On the one side, the dwindling financial support and the ascendance of business and technology are playing a vital role in this ruin. On the other, the very soul of arts and culture is increasingly starved of the core values of liberal thought. The School of Humanities is being plagued by the rise of victimhood culture, crackpot cultural-Marxist theories, dysfunctional pedagogical models, and an unprecedented weakened sense of freedom of expression. Extricating the Humanities from this quagmire is no easy task, but it has to be done presently. For the supremacy of science and technology is no bill of rights for any nation. In light of that, this paper attempts to afford a brief glimpse of the main reasons why the Humanities have fallen from grace. Thereafter, concerning the potentially self-sabotaging factors, seven salutary warnings will be issued as pertinent to departmental decision-making. Chiefly, not limiting the analysis of human nature or affairs to the intersectional triptych of class, race and gender, would signify a little progress. But more drastic changes have to be made: the Field of Humanities needs, among other things, to get rid of the grand ideologies of redemption and to mitigate institutional stiffness, including liberal-conservative thinkers in the curricular material, pursuing a politically balanced faculty, and recollecting the Socratic maieutic method of learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS: Humanities; Human; World; Intellectual Ideas; Political Challenges.

INTRO

Same old story: whenever I chance to meet a peculiar type of student in the Humanities and Social Sciences, possibly a student union member, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss the dramatic escalation of Brazil’s political crisis and economic downturn, I am checked by a vague feeling of wonder. Are these comrades gaining their degrees and certifications from a 1917 Bolshevik educational establishment? Or is it that they are having too many DreherPils at Marxim? Allusions to US imperialism, the role of intervening elites, the role of mass action, and the military coups of the 1960s and ’70s in Latin America as an explanatory guide for the constitutional proceedings for trying the president on impeachment charges, will give a
picture of how their generic left-wing rhetoric sounds dated, deceitful, and detached from reality. The daily political horror we witness comes to a dead end in the academy, on the one hand, with the absence of real-life ideas to address so many significant issues and, on the other, with the overabundance of simplistic hype, mindless vitriol, and false analogies that adds to the confusion. Though everything seems to evoke a sense of escapism, not all things are far from the wider context of challenges, trivial or scary, facing Western democracies in the 21st century.

If the reader gives me a free rein, I would like to bring to completion the interweaving of the contents of my mind on those conversations with some facts and other cases involving campus life and the state of Humanities and Cultural Studies of the present.

What is noticeable from the outset is that Brazil is one of the emerging economies reshaping geopolitics and global trade, and its regional and global weight is so patent that a coup d’état down here would be more than offensive to the international community. We live in 2017, not 1964. Secondly, with the exception of autocracies, one of the iron laws of politics is that any government dragging down a country’s economy, losing popular support and facing growing parliamentary opposition, will eventually fall over the course of a crisis of confidence. It is just a matter of time. Thirdly, an attribute of mature democracies is that the political leaders have relatively less power than the sum of all parties involved. Behind that is not only an effective checks and balances system, but also a myriad of political and economic pressures. These true principles, however, can be used for both good and ill. So legality must be strictly observed. Calling a state to account is no simple matter, but the task of pulling Brazil out of this morass falls to civil society in compliance with democratic legitimacy.
Yet, in the Bolshevik’s mind, none of such concerns easily fits the politics of polarisation that has been driving the country apart. And if anyone attempts to question their certainty in the political propaganda that a “coup” is under way, they will violently object.

At times, these comrades alternate between mystical formulas and intricate dialectical contortions to suggest that—despite the massive corruption scandal engulfing the government and a series of nationwide protests calling for impeachment—the concept of “coup” has now changed. The objective, they would argue, is not to cause institutional breakdown drawing much international condemnation, but rather to step up pressure on the denial of legal rights, overturn laws, rush to quick decisions, and meet the same military’s goals of the past. I listen sympathetically. I empathize. Naturally, scorched-earth policy is as old as war. This line of argument shall by and by entail what magistrates jocularly call *jus sperniandi*—a legal banter for the right to flounce and complain. The scene, though unexceptional, never fails to leave me filled with dismay.

This curious fact is one of many puzzles that I consider in what follows. To better contemplate the problem, though, a slight digress is needed now. Let us dig up the ground where the portrait of intellectual support to revolutionary tactics and heroic visions lies.

The widespread cultural dissemination of left-wing thinking in Brazil draws upon a vast network of academics, activists, artists, and public intellectuals of a certain persuasion at the forefront, who, intuitively or not, explore interpretations of the soul of the people. All of them invariably support or consent to a fabricated and corrupt metaphysics by which political leaders who tyrannize the seeming culprits in a society to champion the cause of the working class enjoy an unambiguous role as warriors or heroes. This progressive
intelligentsia seems to still believe in the five-year miracle plan to improve people’s life tomorrow by employing today crystallized lies, corruption, and criminality. Or maybe thinking that criminal wrongdoings are something alien to the left. The left of the political spectrum is thought to be incorruptible because its concern is the greater good of the powerless. Since its leaders are pictured as closely tied to popular needs and wishes, supposedly symbolic of honesty, then the left will be honest too.

What is more, Latin American left-wingers wish to be a paradigm of ethics since they once fought back dictatorial regimes, which represent the opposite of virtue and wisdom. But their political proselytism is unable to cope with the insurmountable materiality of facts that debunk such corollary. Corruption can be so ingrained into any association’s culture and behaviour that we are all vulnerable to it.

Still, left-wingers, as penned by Roger Scruton (2015, p. 3), “believe, with the Jacobins of the French Revolution, that the goods of this world are unjustly distributed, and that the fault lies not in human nature but in usurpations practised by a dominant class. They define themselves in opposition to established power, the champions of a new order that will rectify the ancient grievance of the oppressed.” There emerges a self-view of the left as a beacon of democracy and human rights as if the very existence of the left is what justifies democracy. Democracy, however, is what justifies the existence of the left; to think it might be the other way round is to picture a delusion, which is nothing but a delusion. So what went wrong for Latin American left? Its major problem is not just to claim a monopoly on ethical politics, but to claim a monopoly on moral purity. In addition, it remained trapped in the politics of the cold war. Now it does not seem best pleased to find itself out in the cold.

Malversation is no novelty in the history of the left. My
colleagues’ line of argument is closely related to that of the post-war intellectual community who, covered in a façade of morality, refused to recognize the crimes of Stalinism for it would dash the best hopes of the working class, which could be only a monopoly of the Communist Party. Indeed, many intellectuals failed to acknowledge Stalin’s crimes and cult of personality, even when denounced from within by Nikita Khrushchev. In *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, historian Tony Judt (2011) describes the ideological acrobatics of some of France’s most influential post-war thinkers who devoted their intellectual and political efforts to whitewashing the Soviet Union, creating a blind spot to the brutal injustice of Stalinist trials, the deaths in the Gulag, and the systematic executions by firing squad. Judt relentlessly rips apart the defence-of-the-indefensible posture adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others, who kept defending Stalin long after his crimes came to light. If we treat Judt’s supercilious tone with reservations, his is a pertinent analysis of how the belief system of these intellectuals, propped up by faith in communism and the penchant for grand theory, led to the downfall of the French intelligentsia afterwards.

For the leftist intelligentsia, therefore, crime and corruption has a metaphysical dimension. The political debate concerns not just the sharing of resources and technical demands of society but it rather encompasses a larger moral landscape. Engagement with a grand—doctrinal or philosophical—belief-system is one of the justified tools for transformation. It is a shield of faith for one’s own true consciousness and moral incorruptibility. Philosophers and revolutionaries of the likes of Maximilien Robespierre, Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Sergey Nechaev, to name but a few stars in this cluster, used to ruminate obsessively over those same strategies. Marx and Lenin, two enviable masters of the theories of oppression and old resentments, failed miserably and reprehensibly in proposing solutions to abolish inequality.
through revolutionary violence. Later on, barbarian militias across the globe further incremented this revolutionary faith, spicing it with national liberation agendas, stirred-up hatred, and extremist delinquencies. Through it all, from the French Revolution to far-left random acts of terrorism, there has been an almost pathological flirtation of intellectuals with the myth of redemptive violence and utopian visions.

So I sit there listening to my Bolshevik colleagues talking about the necessity to make the creation of a new world possible here and now, albeit they can never figure out exactly what sort of world it is. Yet at times, quite suddenly, their eyes glaze with moral certainty and they try to explain it to me at length. In this new world, so the story goes, ideology is absent or, at least, it is a creed that as yet has no name, but ultimately it will be weeded out. “One thing is sure,” a familiar voice of silken warning utters, “culture will no longer warp minds and shape behaviour.” I nod vaguely, but without losing my interest. Out of the corner of my mind emerges a picture of Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novella with its motto of the World State: Community, Identity, Stability—

Overall, we tend to think that our speeches and writings are “natural” and the others’ are plagued by “rhetoric” and “ideology.” In reality, there is no such thing as a non-rhetorical speech or non-ideological writing. And that being true, there will be no such thing as a non-ideological or non-rhetorical thinking, willing, perceiving etc. No one will doubt that oratory and rhetoric are vital tools in any political dispute. Nevertheless, we humanists of the present adapt the rhetorical devices to the sweeping forces of pedantic jargon, obscure formulae, plus a crude mix of social media marketing, political propaganda, and socialist Newspeak.

After listening to the rambling communist talk of my Bolshevik colleagues, I wonder how they still keep failing to test their political thought against political reality. I take
the belief that this dereliction of academic duty to impart wisdom on the basic accounts of human nature and affairs is so tenacious and widespread in the Humanities because a highly sophisticated theoretical apparatus allows it to persist. This theoretically volatile machine combines erudition and brilliance of style but is usually built around an inexplicable shrine. It is driven, by and large, by two of the greatest intellectual bankruptcy of the post-Marxist era: (1) the assumption that the world is divided between “oppressors” and “oppressed”; (2) the belief that we are all unique fruits of culture, and thus biology and genetics play no role in our urges and behaviour, much less in economic and political development.

The first type of irrationalism justifies the fallacy in the implicit thesis that if there were less material misery, humankind would be less miserable in terms of private vices (rivalry, predation, envy, ostentatious luxury etc.) and individuals’ predilection for aggression, violence, socially deviant behaviour and so on. The amount of historical data and current affair news on the evil deeds of all sorts of tyrants, aggressors, and violators across all social groups determines the inaccuracy of such pious version, which is moreover a cowardly insult to many people who live in poverty. That same irrationalism also explains how the world’s oldest hatred can be exercised in good faith, and upon pertinent purposes, if the objective of boycotting Israeli goods has nothing to do with anti-Semitism, but rather with “anti-Zionism.” You may know nothing about the conflict—its origins, wars, peace plans and negotiations—but you are sure of one thing: Israelis are the “exploitters,” Palestinians the “exploited,” and Islamophobia the social cancer of selfish West. End of story.

The second class of irrationalism is a breeding ground for a plethora of bogus claims, such as that sex and gender is “culturally constructed.” One inherent tragic aspect of the human condition is that we have evolved in parallel with an absolute susceptibility to the contingencies of biology and
nature. Behavioural genetics findings may be frightening for some, but this is not a reason to ignore their insights. Sexuality is neither choice nor social construction but a result of hormonal, psychological and metabolic factors, beginning in the womb. Delving into the discourses around sex and gender can be valuable to decode the images and linguistic signs that surround us, but we are something far more than just images and words. As the French wisely say: *Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop.*

This sophisticated theoretical bankruptcy has been impairing the study of the Humanities. In devising the course proposals, modern conservative thinkers are ignored or cut out, classical liberal and libertarian traditions are virtually non-existent. Conversely, those syllabi have been repeatedly bound up with left-wing ideas and Marxist thinkers. Censoring books and ideas that do not fit the prevailing groupthink of what a progressive agenda should be is a recurrent sport in the Humanities Division. Much, I believe, to the discontent of a memorable left-winger, George Orwell (1968, p. 359), who once warned of the dangers of political language as it is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” In due course, the intellectual fruits that could be borne on campus out of livelier debates going to the heart of the key divergences between left-wing thought and political conservatism of the classical-liberal type are completely lost.

So I sit there pondering, is there any College of Humanities and Social Science on Earth where we can embrace subjects in history, languages, literature, the arts, philosophy, or sociology without having to be brainwashed by the moral sermons that routinely go under the banner of cultural-Marxist humanism, politically correct lunacy, and the hypocrisy of multiculturalism? The answer is...laconic... even disheartening. Judging from my own experience and the things described in books and articles on the topic, in
Europe, especially in the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States, the madhouse looks even madder than in Brazil.

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I would like to further this discussion by going on to a précis of a recent article by Nick Cohen, a journalist for *The Spectator*, in which he discusses the detrimental effects of thought policing in the academy. Cohen points out that, in the UK, the number of universities legitimately regarded as a “free space”—or a space for free debate where one can hear what one does not expect to and say whatever one wishes—is vanishing in the name of “safe spaces.”

Traditionally meant to be the place that blows away the cobwebs between the students’ ears, the university used to be a space that gives the students a sense of freedom from the pressures of conformity and old conventions. This is not so true anymore. Cohen (*The Spectator* 2016) holds that “there’s a fair chance that universities would be among the most servile and conformist institutions in Britain.” He comes up with a few examples. A lecturer at King’s College London tried to hold a debate of his own titled “Is the West responsible for Islamic extremism?” When such a question is asked, a certain margin of controversy is always expected. But what if the fate of the question is already sealed in the answer “YES,” and nothing else can be argued over it? Why having any debate at all if our most cherished humdrum values are always to prevail? Best not to confront that impossible question. The risk is high. Cohen (*The Spectator* 2016) tells us that even this familiar enough topic was under attack. The lecturer “was accused of running a smear campaign against Muslims. The accusations grew so violent that participants said they no longer felt safe taking part. One stepped down after suffering from panic attacks.” Even more worrying is that “[it is] not just a few extremists policing thought, but
the vast bulk of the student body.”

In another case, the Kurdish Society at University College London (UCL) tried to host a seminar to discuss the role of the Kurdish populations and their fight against the Islamic State. One of the invited speakers was a former student of the university, Macer Gifford, who had joined the Kurdish group YPG to fight against ISIS in Syria. Then the thought police raised voice against it. The student union decided to ban the seminar, concerned that “in every conflict there are two sides, and at UCLU we want to avoid taking sides in conflicts.” So would it not be more rational to listen to both sides? Provided, of course, that the ISIS staff—so busy carrying out killings and atrocities, rapes and rapine, abductions and beheadings—would have found time to send a guest speaker to the meeting.

At a time when the hatred of radical jihadists towards the lifestyle and core values of Western civilization flares up—with attacks targeting freedom of expression (Charlie Hebdo), individual freedom (Bataclan concert hall) and sexual freedom (Pulse Orlando)—it is no surprise that the proponents of multiculturalism acquiesce without reluctance to such a swift curtailment of free speech. Cohen depicts an ongoing inversion of values according to which legitimacy and primacy are given to obscurantist ideas, whereas any “unpleasant” opinion is tainted as the object of the communal scorn:

Human rights speakers are branded as racists and vile, whilst speakers who advocate for FGM practices and theocratic rule are applauded as intellectual heroes.

In other words, and not for the first time in history, the far left is allied with the far right, and drags the soggy centre along whimpering behind it.
It is grimly fascinating watching often angry and occasionally baffled students come to terms with the obscurantism around them....

The most unfortunate and depressing aspect of the US vs THEM narrative permeating through universities today, is that it fails to grasp the fact that most people actually have the same goal in mind: to create a world in which no one is discriminated against for who they are. (COHEN, The Spectator 2016)

Certainly, any faculty or student is free to advocate for multiculturalism, but they should be no less than worried about the violations of intellectual freedom in higher education. Cohen is of the opinion that this is a serious issue at least for two reasons:

The idea of a university as a free space rather than a safe space is vanishing. This is a profoundly conservative development. The only people I can imagine welcoming it is the type of hard-headed businessman who says the point of education is to train the young to work not argue.

Then there is the question of what will happen to all these barking martinets when they leave and join the establishment. Whatever poses they strike now, we will find that they fit in all too snugly. (COHEN, The Spectator 2016)

Traditionally linked to oratory and critical thinking, what is the future of Humanities if the mundane interchange of ideas through the consistency of argumentation in a debate is being forbidden? This power of veto and bullying was earlier described in another article for The Spectator. In 2014, Brendan O’Neill pointed out how Stepford students were silencing different or daring thinkers at Britain’s other famously prestigious university. These fiery zealots find that they can control the world of words and ideas in which they live:

The censoriousness has reached its nadir in the rise of the ‘safe space’ policy. Loads of student unions have colonised vast swaths of their campuses and declared them ‘safe spaces’—that is, places where no student should ever be made to feel threatened, unwelcome or belit-
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tled, whether by banter, bad thinking or ‘Blurred Lines’. Safety from physical assault is one thing—but safety from words, ideas, Zionists, lads, pop music, Nietzsche? We seem to have nurtured a new generation that believes its self-esteem is more important than everyone else’s liberty.

This is what those censorious Cambridgers meant when they kept saying they have the ‘right to be comfortable’. They weren’t talking about the freedom to lay down on a chaise longue—they meant the right never to be challenged by disturbing ideas or mind-battered by offensiveness. At precisely the time they should be leaping brain-first into the rough and tumble of grown-up, testy discussion, students are cushioning themselves from anything that has the whiff of controversy. (O’NEILL, The Spectator 2014)

O’Neill warns that this might mean “the victory of political correctness by stealth,” which is a catastrophe, since the universities are being turned into “breeding grounds of dogmatism.”

On the other side of the Atlantic, we hear from constitutional lawyer Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt that “something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities.” And what is it? So they supply us with the answer up-front:

A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for The New Yorker about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word violate (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. In February, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, wrote an essay in The Chronicle of Higher Education describing a new campus politics of sexual paranoia—and was then subjected to a long investigation after students who were offended by the article and by a tweet she’d sent filed Title IX complaints against her. In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for Vox describing how gingerly he now has to teach. “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me,” the headline said. A number of popular comedians, including Chris Rock, have stopped performing on college campuses...Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher have publicly condemned the oversensitivity of college students, saying too many of them can’t take a joke. (LUKIANOFF & HAIDT, The Atlantic 2015; original emphasis)
Lukianoff and Haidt (The Atlantic 2015) bring forward the oversensitiveness of the pupils by explaining the emergence of two obscure terms in America’s campus parlance. One is *microaggressions*, which means malicious small actions or word choices like stating things such as “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job,” or asking “Where were you born?” to an Asian American or Latino American. The other is *trigger warnings*—i.e., alerts that professors should issue if some provocative content in a course programme might elicit negative emotional responses in the enrolled student. Examples? Some students may feel strong emotional arousal with the racial violence in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* or the misogyny and physical abuse in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, thus the reason for the warnings so that those who have been victims of racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid the reading assignment. Trigger warnings can also include Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* for suicidal inclinations and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* for sexual assault.

This protective academic climate bordering on a surrealist Newspeak, which is slowly being institutionalized, poses significant dangers to professorship, scholarship, and the general quality of universities. It is hard to know exactly why the phenomenon has burst forth so strongly in the past few years. In the United States, Lukianoff and Haidt (The Atlantic 2015) reckons this compulsion arises from a mix of things like changes in the interpretation of federal antidiscrimination statutes, generational shifts, zero-tolerance policies, growing political polarization between Republicans and Democrats, and social media crusaders shifting the balance of power between students and faculty.

At any rate, the authors want to focus on another question: “What exactly are students learning...in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and...conveys the sense that words can
be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities, who are expected to act as both protectors and prosecutors?" They choose to seek an answer in terms of common cognitive distortions such as fortune-telling, overgeneralizing, inability to disconfirm etc. For them, higher education is embracing “emotional reasoning” and this is dominating many campus debates. In practical terms, the Socratic method of teaching—which fosters critical thinking and discomforting thoughts—is being replaced by emotional reasoning teaching and vindictive protectiveness. This method coaxes students to think in more-distorted ways and thus prepares them poorly for professional life and engagement with ideas, values, and speech of the other side. The harm achieves not only democratic values but it is also likely to cause students emotional discomfort, depression, and anxiety.

How this rare breed of banning and bullying practices spreads on campus is a mystery. Where does the compulsion to discipline works of literature and curb the right to free expression come from?

With the birth of modern West by the end of 18th century, the principle of the rule of law only prohibits what can destroy or limit the freedom of others. Modern communitarianism seeks a balance between common good and individual rights. Our limit is the Constitution: that which is not prohibited by law is our right to do. That being so, nobody said it would be easy to live a life in a democracy. In fact, democracy is unavoidably loud, rude, and a bit bonkers too. Wearisome or not, blaming factions, scolding seditions, asking for the head of political foes, can all be seen as a legitimate part of the sport. As is well known, democracy does not end the conflict between different parties in a society; rather, democratic institutions are to defuse tensions and restrain power struggles among the groups, settling their differences through the rule of law instead of coming to blows. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke regards the toleration to
those that are of different opinions as the chief liberal value. And not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it is pure blindness. “If this be not done,” he argues (LOCKE, 1751, p. 244), “there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men’s souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth.” So what now, when these new students think their emotional feelings entitle them to invalidate other people’s lived experience and freedom of speech?

Regrettably, the mismatch of the Humanities with a more liberal political tradition exacerbates the problem. The study of Humanities has been seized by a melancholic shiver of traumas and oppression in which in-depth critical knowledge loses its evaluation, objectivity and cohesiveness to victimhood talk, wishful thinking, political correctness, and rooted anti-capitalist sentiments.

The last time there was a pugnacious air in the United States about political correctness on campus was in the late 1980s, when Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind came out. Bloom sought to investigate how higher education was failing democracy and impoverishing students’ mind. However, if the debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s concerned a stronger idea of empowerment, challenging the cannon, and greater diversity on campus, now this speech-policing phenomenon seems to be more related to human fragility, psychological frailty, and self-fulfilling prophecies. But why would a Humanities student want to shirk human fragility instead of pining it to the bones?

On top of that, the engagement with victimhood, agency, power, and oppression in today’s left-wing discourses has become a big fetish in the departments. The idea began to take shape with the 1960s deconstructive moves, which stem from the postmodern critiques of thinkers like Foucault,
Lyotard, and Derrida. These intellectuals contributed to create a conceptual paranoia about the “structures of domination” in which suspicion against traditional authority and institutions reigns. Much of this theoretical framework is devoted to deconstructing customs, values, law, hierarchy etc. Even if it has some merit, this intellectual approach cannot be and will never be the foundational basis for everything. Yet this is what mostly guides the Humanities studies today, especially in the Studies Areas.

In his 2012 homage to Bloom’s title, *The Victims’ Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, Bruce Bawer goes on a research through a miscellany of key works, curricula, and conferences in the Studies Areas. He found out that the study areas professors tend to rely on cryptic in-group language, meaningless abstract riddles, and nearly impenetrable “theory” to sound academically sophisticated. He also highlights the dull and unreadable prose, the pseudo-intellectual parlance, and the grandiose posturing that saturate these disciplines, in which grossly misleading claims are taught as facts. Today’s US academy, to put it bluntly, has become a place of reactionary ideology and political rendezvous. What has emerged from it is a troubling and hypocritical morality according to which tenured faculty members express their empty solidarity towards the wretched of the Earth. Under this morality, reasoning and science are prejudice inflicted by the dominant upon the submissive. Scholarly works, once countercultural, have now become stodgy assumptions about several forms of “oppression” in order to guide research agendas, preordain outcomes, and persuade a gullible audience. I will take the liberty to present my own summary of Bawer’s findings in the next couple of lines.

Identity studies courses are taught according to one or more of the following types of tutorial: (1) *Race*, or Chicanos/Latinos/blacks vs. racist whites/capitalist structure. But no
mention of the many scientifically-based studies revealing our predisposition to segregate, as well as the artificiality and insignificance of the divisions we create in our own minds to put that to practice; (2) Gender, or women vs. patriarchal, macho, sexist men; (3) Class, or enthusiasm for second-hand Marxism. The Marxist dialectical materialism, though obsolete and lacking vitality, is being mixed with samples of Adorno, Foucault, Bourdieu and others, to inspire a new generation of thinkers. But no mention is made of the estimated 100 million victims crushed under the juggernaut of communism in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe; (4) Disability, not from a physical or biological but from a rights standpoint. As the author explains, “what disables disabled people isn’t their disabilities but white men, capitalism, and all the other usual suspects” (BAWER, 2012, p. 309); (5) Sexuality, mostly gender minorities and queer-related topics. In time, it is necessary to “deconstruct” heteronormativity since heterosexuality is a “norm” imposed by sexist society; (6) Fat Studies, for beauty is yet another socially constructed form of oppression, and the idea of an obesity epidemic is a creation of irresponsible media, and so on. One can get a PhD degree in many of these areas and sub-areas.

Taken to extremes, this leads to what critic Camille Paglia (Everything’s Awesome 2015) calls “institutionalized whining”—you can say playing the victim’s card and blaming Western civilization and capitalism for utterly everything seems to be a common denominator in these fields of studies, a conclusion which makes them pointless. Under the spell of this wretched influence, I have witnessed Humanities students in Brazil branding authors like Gilberto Freyre and Monteiro Lobato as “racists” without having read a single line of their work. Avoiding this myopic monomania, and agreeing with Paglia that the political reading of social structure through the lenses of class, race and gender—a kind of holy trinity in contemporary human sciences—falls too short to adequately grasp or explain all of human life, requires recognising that
these tools of social analysis can be useful to a certain degree, but they are too precarious and much limited as a metaphysical system for sorting out values, traditions, conflicting issues, and fundamental philosophical questions. The race-class-gender trinity has become a misplaced religion or a form of self-help and it is now obliterating an in-depth and balanced appreciation of sociocultural and historical events. In sum, as the study of the Humanities has become ever more fragmented, a comprehensive vision of history and society was lost somewhere, and the inability to meditate upon the moral and ethical needs of a community in a given moment became more chronic.

This intellectual downfall is an open flank to many political attacks and lesser funding opportunities. The rise of victimhood culture, oversensitivity paranoia, and shallow intellectual eddies on campus coincides ominously with a cycle of negative news coverage for the Humanities, which have seen their status, financial support, and student enrollment steadily fading around the globe in the past decade (COHEN, 2009; DELANY, 2013; LEVITZ & BELKIN, 2013; LEWIN, 2013; BUSL, 2015). In Japan, more than 50 universities are to close or downsize their Humanities and Social Science sector in order to offer a “more practical, vocational education that better anticipates the needs of society” (DEAN, 2015). With that, I am not affirming that the self-sabotaging practices in the Humanities Division is a ripple effect of the current predicament or vice-versa. Nor am I comparing, in the whole, present-day study of the Humanities to some prestigious glory days of yesteryear. There is no earlier golden age. However, for all intents and purposes the plight of the Humanities is real, financially and epistemologically. But this dimension of the plight is relative, not absolute. And if the financial thing may be out of our sphere of influence and we cannot do much to manage it, at least with respect to the home-grown problems, we can fix most of them. Without new strategic directions, many distinguished Humanities departments will
continue to see their status going downhill.

From the above paragraphs, I hope that the reader will understand that it is not my goal to sound alarmist about this decline. Though it is getting a lot of attention now, the despondency about the future of Humanities and Creative Arts go far back in time, and there is nothing new about it. Paul Benneworth (2015, p. 3-8.) dates the origins of a “crisis” in the Humanities to 1964, when the chronic symptom of the “two cultures” of arts and sciences, brought about by Charles Percy Snow, has played out across campuses globally. Authors such as Norbert Elias (1897-1990) were already concerned about the irrelevance of social sciences, since it is so incapable of addressing real-life problems. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was persuaded that Europe had by his time entered a profound state of “crisis,” not just as a geographical location but also as a discipline dealing with a rationality and a culture (HUSSERL, 1970, p. 17). And a bit farther back in time, Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was already labelling as “closet theories” the grand ideologies and humanist penchant for unrealistic formula of political redemption. In A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly (2006 [1791]), he chastises Jean-Jacques Rousseau for his faith in the natural goodness of man. For Burke (1792, p. 351), Rousseau’s doctrines “are so inapplicable to real life and manners, that we never dream of drawing from them any rule for laws or conduct.” Burke dubbed Rousseau as a “founder of the philosophy of vanity” and “a lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred” (BURKE, 2006 [1791]; original emphasis). Such epithets were not chosen in vain. Rousseau failed to bring up his own children and deposited all of them at a foundling home soon after birth.

These things being thus disposed, I would like to proceed, in the next place, with seven salutary warnings for the Humanities of the present. These are not to be a code of ethics, but a collection of words of advice to inspire the quest
for a politically balanced faculty and to shift the balance in a more liberal direction for rationality, free speech, and open debates on campus. Just enough if it be cultivated, and yields fruits.

(1) On the Grand Humanitarian Project and Redemption Cult

We humanists are heirs of an engaged philosophy. Franco-Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a key thinker and contributor to a re-reading of the myth of the Fall, according to which humans used to live harmoniously in Nature and the emergence of private property put an end to that bliss (the tabula rasa thesis). The Humanities have thus inherited a romantic aesthetic thought that attributes to arts a universal ground from which social criticism departs. The arts are supposed to engage with and commit to a capable change to free and emancipate the human being. Here comes the question of the “subaltern.” Does anyone speak for, emancipate or free someone else? Is there a need for an “anointed” minority to speak for an “unenlightened” majority? Does anybody/any group save the world? Will the world ever be saved? Even if one rightfully wished to emancipate or speak for somebody else, whether “subaltern” or not, could it be done with commitment to honest criticism and intellectual penetration? Why is it that the Liberation Theology took up the preferential option for the poor, and yet the poor chose to be converts to one or other variant of evangelical Protestantism, which preaches the “theology of prosperity” and stages melodramatic exorcisms for chanting believers?

In redemption politics, the collective always plays the redemptive role in grand designs. However, the collective thought and action, as the 20th-century history portrayed in the crudest possible way, is always ruthless. We humanists have read much a tradition of intellectuals who follow
Rousseau’s trail, linking politics to a redemptive future or a mythical past, while authors discussing de facto politics (management of power) have been much ignored. In so doing, our emancipatory theses have become an articulated collective delirium, whose relevance speaks more to a grand ethical project or a deontological gesture—in the sense of worshiping what it should be—than to an ontological one—in the sense of realizing what it is. We need to read more Machiavelli and watch more John Ford.

(2) On the Victimhood Narrative and Tribalization of the Mind

To dole out equal justice, one oppression is solved with another inversely and directly proportional to the gravity of the crime. An eye for an eye. While discussing America’s racial issues in an interview (WOOD, *The Daily Telegraph* 2015), Toni Morrison stated that she wanted to see “a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back.” How much more fortunate would the Nobel Prize winner have been if she had pleased us with something like the introductory lines for one of the Sly & the Family Stone’s songs: “Don’t hate the black/ Don’t hate the white/ If you get bitten/ Just hate the bite.” Instead, facts are distorted, fallacies defended, and obscure prose spread—now I think of Gloria Anzaldúa’s mythopoeic narrative with historical dishonesty and of Judith Butler’s mind-bogglingly cryptic meditation on sex and gender.

Faulty past agents or events are always to blame for the present conditions of my beloved tribe. In the opening of 2015, Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe’s divisive president and despotic pariah responsible for countless human rights abuses, assumed as chair of the African Union. By that same time, Evo Morales—dressing a fine vicuna-wool tunic embossed with gold and silver whose cost amounted to 27,000 Boliviano ($3,922)—was inaugurated into his third term as president
of Bolivia in a traditional ceremony in the pre-colonial city of Tiwanaku. A tribal inauguration is definitely an innovative populist platform to conceal political manoeuvres, deceive, and secure power. In both events, these righteous leaders delivered full anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist acceptance speeches that would have gladdened the hearts of many postcolonial theorists.

Ideological blindness, escalating systemic corruption, and high levels of ill governance continue to plague the world, but countless intellectuals and academics keep tactlessly endorsing much of it, no matter how much counterfactual evidence surfaces. The practical consequence of so many biased narratives and political lies can be fatal, especially for the lower-income families who are more dependent on public services and assistance. The victimhood culture is the new intellectual panacea for the redemption of all the sins of the world. And its advocates, hiding behind volatile tales of oppression and nebulous arguments dressed up in fancy words, look like the new wolves in sheep’s clothing (i.e. in tribe’s clothing).

Motto: my tribe, my rules.

(3) On the Contempt for or Ignorance about the Human Universals

The visionary search for a “better world” has been a top political fetish in the last two and a half centuries. Troops of intellectuals and armed revolutionaries have thenceforth tried to build an ideal world in many ways. The outcome has invariably been something much worse. To change or improve something, it takes at least a previous thought on the basic blueprint of such thing. But to push a conceptual distinction of human personalities and connote socio-political differences in character or culture (Westerners, Easterners,
Arabs, Chicanos, Indians etc.), the notion of human nature as well as the well-researched lists of hundreds of human universals have often been discarded or ignored.

Given that evolution has endowed us with mental faculties and bodily capabilities to survive and reproduce all over the globe, it makes sense that humans share a lot of features and traits across the miscellany of cultures and societies on Earth. This also points to a strong evidence that all these cultures share an evolutionary trajectory with common ancestors. “Human universals,” as defined by anthropologist Donald Brown (1991, p. 382), “comprise those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no known exception to their existence in all ethnographically or historically recorded human societies.” These universals can be thus conceptualised as timeless commonalities for they are phenomena occurring in all known human cultures throughout space and time. The adoption of basic human universal principles by humanists across the board would help slow down the flood of crackpot theories and misleading claims in the academy.

In one of her textual reveries, Donna Haraway seems to be unacquainted with a simple element of human universals:

I will argue below that work, use, and instrumentality are intrinsic to bodily webbed mortal earthly being and becoming. Unidirectional relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure of hierarchy, are quite another matter. Such self-satisfied calculation takes heart from the primary dualism that parses body one way and mind another. That dualism should have withered long ago in the light of feminist and many other criticisms, but the fantastic mind/body binary has proved remarkably resilient. Failing, indeed refusing, to come face-to-face with animals, I believe, is one of the reasons. (HARAWAY, 2008, p. 71-2)

In this passage, Haraway’s discernment of mind and body is deceived by a mirage when she argues that such “dualism
should have withered long ago in the light of feminist and many other criticisms.” Taken literally, this excerpt reads either as a conceptual oddity hoping for the triumph of ideology over reality, or as a wishful thought that cannot talk to the unsurmountable limitations weighing heavily on the human condition. Neither will Haraway’s faith in the face-to-face contact with animals nor any sort of “criticisms” ever do away with this or any other dualism. The reason is simple: dualisms are part of the human universals. Binary distinctions, whether natural (life/death, hot/cold) or constructed (good/bad, right/wrong), have deep symbolic significance in all human cultures. In fact, the human brain is equipped with binary cognitive distinctions. Antonyms are present in all known languages to the same extent that ambivalence and the capacity to distinguish one social group from another are embedded in our psychological traits. At the social level, private/public, legal/illegal, winners/losers pair up to each other in the timelessly endearing tales which rest on affairs of the emergence of the mysterious, nebulous constructs that compose the social fabric of all human life. Only Newspeak can forbid or deconstruct such concepts.

It is not my frame of mind, however, to claim that dualisms are the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Yet they are here to stay. And to emasculate theory with verbiage aiming to deny, say, the split between body and mind, or life and death, or maybe the dualistic cycles of nights and days, is far from being a serious approach to reality.

Note, above all, the dualistic or metaphysical mode of conception in the pursuit of knowing what is the human existence. Perhaps we do not know how to determine the human existence or make sense of what it is. But certainly there is something out there in the mix of instinctive feelings and conscious reasoning that does have humans get in touch to each other, recognize their own existence, their own self, their communion with other members, their
interdependence with the natural kingdom and so on. We know what the human awareness is and what the human point-of-view is; we know humanity operates by contagion, contamination, and assimilation of cultures; we know that we are dependent on technical skills and natural resources. The quest for wisdom in many traditions begins with this insight. Nevertheless—and here begins the difficulties in the pursuit of knowing what the human phenomenon is—not all humans provide us with the same definition of what is the human existence. That is, what we deem to be human existence can be vastly different from the concept of human existence that many other humans have framed. This poses an everlasting rock on the path of philosophical or cultural dialogue, as all existing cultures and philosophies inevitably depart from an essence of what the primordial human would have been and how it has fed into the determinations of what we are today. If the life-and-death problem is a human universal—i.e., no known human culture is unaware or unconcerned about it—the kinds of questions that that duality raise in different human societies are not necessarily the same. The same rule goes for the thought-reality, individual-community, male-female, cognition-practice, fact-volition, happiness-misery, duty-desire, and such-like dualisms. The different ways of presenting, representing, and knowing the same problem are exactly what distinguish one culture from another. If life-death is neither lived nor conceived in the same way, then the source of the same nuisances that plague different societies can be ascribed to different loci and different sets of values. There arises one of the main reasons for the much said but little practiced “intercultural dialogue.”

As a result, our brains take delight in conflating patterns of dualistic thought; even though dualisms and dichotomous thinking hardly provide us with a decent description of reality (here perhaps lies the oasis that prompted Haraway to chase a mirage). Alas, this is a fault from which human affairs can perhaps scarce ever be perfectly freed. From this, it follows
that the idea of human universals should be read not as an absolute and peremptory decree, but rather as a meditation upon the contingencies of tangible reality (body) and moral torments (mind) that afflict all of us, everywhere, every day. Thus, the attempt to establish a dialogue between the multiple experiences of people who have participated in a given social reality at a certain portion of the long path of humankind is always an edifying thing.

A humanist worthy of full-fledged appellation is the one who leads the Humanities student to question everything, to the point where everything should be questioned—in most cases, it would be a waste of time to question a mathematical axiom. Surely, human behaviour has multiple dimensions that can never be reducible to mathematics. Still, it is useless to try to jettison or deny the existence of dualisms among us as they have always accompanied human cultures across space and time. Whoever tries to prove the opposite will be at the mercy of a predictable failure. Thus, both the didactic activity and the intellectual pursuit, in their highest expression, have little to do with indoctrination, or proselytism in favour of a cause. Even if it is a good cause.

In a great deal of aspects, this world is consistent, and so are we.

(4) On the Distorted Evaluation Criteria, Publish-or-Perish Mantra, and Lack of Intellectual Rigor

In a recent interview (LOPES, Folha de S.Paulo 2016), neuroscientist Suzana Herculano-Houzel, who pioneered a fast and accurate technique to count brain cells, voiced her disappointment over Brazilian universities, which, according to her, are attached to a model of engessamento [inflexibility]. As is well known, this rigid model is real and it helps neither reward the best scholars for outstanding merit nor punish the
unproductive ones much more geared to job stability than to efficiency. This inflexibility is also accounted for bureaucratic shackles on the finance of research inputs and equipment, teaching aids, library facilities, and difficulties getting foreign teachers hired as well as getting research grant support from foreign organizations, apart from the near-absence of academic subjects in English. This gloomy scenario heavily influenced Herculano-Houzel’s decision to leave the Institute of Biomedical Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and move to join Vanderbilt University, in Nashville.

This stymied progress is rooted in the monstrous hypertrophy of Brazil State’s apparatus, including corporatist practices, patronage, the commitment to state ownership, and crony capitalist bureaucracy, all of which contribute to undermining, among other things, scientific research and academic innovation. The opportunity costs due to such stiffening forces are hard to quantify, but they are likely to be vast. It is tempting to see this engessamento as an isolated case in the area of sciences. To think so is to place a bet on the unproductive opposition between the Humanities and Natural Sciences.

At liberal-arts colleges in Brazil, it is nearly impossible for a scholar to stop publishing for a long while and keep pace with a relevant book-length study, which could be more compatible with the public interest. A truly first-rate political or philosophical work may take years to be set down on paper. Yet such a time-consuming project—furthering our understanding of the germane principles and enduring values of human knowledge and welfare—is unthinkable with such bureaucracy. Hence humanists need to have their achievement recognised through a different set of standards, one that is more in line with the specific requirements of the liberal arts. The Humanities are not an exact science and therefore should not meet the same skills standards and assessment framework. If funding bodies are to press
faculties for researching in ways that ensure immediate return, then it will become increasingly difficult to undertake Humanities research. If Humanities research is supposed to be measured, then what is actually valuable or quantifiable about its impact? Are we looking for value in the right place?

The outcome of such research is on fielding cumulative questions about our existence, assumptions, and worldviews, as well as on registering the impact of human developments in the world around us. All of which is located in the mammoth bulk of sociocultural critique. But then, to encourage scientists and intellectuals to be “productive” and “innovative,” government and market place a bet on the divide-and-conquer strategy by any means necessary—i.e. a longer-term work is required to be divided into several short articles and essays so as to have them published as many times as possible in whatever scholarly journal on Earth. We humanists waste too much time with an innocuous productivity on behalf of the two major higher education funding agencies, Capes and CNPq, or insisting on writing esoteric papers about non-existent human beings. The demand for a wide-ranging, bureaucratically structured lattes curriculum in Brazil together with the endless layers of research red-tape is defeating. Bureaucracy reigns in academic administration as well as in Capes and CNPq grant forms and applications.

One unfortunate consequence of the widening chasm between the hard and soft sciences—a divorce which, according to Isaiah Berlin (1974), took place in the early 18th century—is that the School of Humanities has been relentlessly pushed into an explosive, and thus sterile, production of articles, essays, and anthologies to justify its own existence. The vast majority of such articles and essays, naturally, are not meant to be read, nor studied, nor discussed by anybody, anywhere. They are just to be published in journals that, in turn, award the authors some medals for career advancement. Hence, the publish-or-perish mantra has come to rule over academic
life and it is now a household motto for any research centre. It helps keep ineffective but prolific faculty. All at once, any university today will most probably sack the faculty member whose sole aim is to teach well. After all, to further an academic career today means to get a steady stream of humdrum papers published in “prestigious” journals. On top of that comes the low quality of humanistic-burden literature and the general state of publications.

Over the past decade, questionable scholarly open-access journals, driven by author publication fees rather than the traditional publishing subscription model, have mushroomed into a worldwide business. In the meantime, younger scholars and senior faculty members have all ended up being hostages and accomplices of these predatory publishers, doing little or nothing to change this academic research culture. The publication of scholarly articles with little or no discretion reaches dozens of articles in different journals with other dozens issues per year. These journals’ editors and advisory board members usually do not call any attention at all to a paper’s potential flaws and conceptual problems.

In the summer of 1996, Alan D. Sokal, a particle physicist at New York University, concocted a spoof paper to humorously deconstruct the deconstructionist politics dressed up as scholarship in the Studies Areas. Sokal submitted his parody article to Social Text, a prestigious cultural studies journal published by Duke University Press covering subjects on feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, neoliberalism, queer theory, and popular culture. The text, dealing with “a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity,” was a publishing hoax, now known as the “Sokal affair” or “Sokal hoax,” intended to test the journal’s intellectual rigor. The physicist later explained his purpose as follows:

[T]o test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment:
SEVEN SALUTARY WARNINGS FOR THE HUMANITIES
A brief glimpse into how the Humanities have fallen from grace

Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies—whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross—publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions?

The answer, unfortunately, is yes...

Social Text’s acceptance of my article exemplifies the intellectual arrogance of Theory—meaning postmodernist literary theory—carried to its logical extreme. No wonder they didn’t bother to consult a physicist. If all is discourse and “text,” then knowledge of the real world is superfluous; even physics becomes just another branch of Cultural Studies. If, moreover, all is rhetoric and “language games,” then internal logical consistency is superfluous too: a patina of theoretical sophistication serves equally well. Incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors and puns substitute for evidence and logic. My own article is, if anything, an extremely modest example of this well-established genre....

The results of my little experiment demonstrate, at the very least, that some fashionable sectors of the American academic Left have been getting intellectually lazy. The editors of Social Text liked my article because they liked its conclusion: that “the content and methodology of postmodern science provide powerful intellectual support for the progressive political project.” They apparently felt no need to analyze the quality of the evidence, the cogency of the arguments, or even the relevance of the arguments to the purported conclusion. (SOKAL, 1996, p. 62-4; original emphasis)

Two decades after the Sokal affair, I see a train wreck looming. Over this stretch of time, we have the same relatively unchanged Humanities. A decimation of the liberal arts is in motion and it will not bode well for future. The Humanities face a perfect storm right now. It stems from this dire combination of external impacts, such as budget cuts for research and the ascendance of Stem subjects, and internal ones, for which the departments are to take full responsibility, such as the rise of victimhood culture, crackpot theories, dysfunctional pedagogical models, methodological gaps, and a weakened sense of the common good and liberal values. The room for context, purpose, understanding, debate, disagreement, and compromise is being fenced in and eroded down from above as well as from below. The complacent humanist may still
argue that the Sokal affair is by now water under the bridge. He or she will possibly refer to the heated debates that followed up, with different views on the issue, many of them published in the collection *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy* (2000). Nevertheless, as we have seen so far, the Humanities Division is facing daunting challenges at present, and will pay a big price if not reinventing itself. Steering the Humanities back on track is not so easy, but all the hard work for it has to be done presently. The Humanities have helped change the world. Now they need to change themselves.

From all this, a couple of questions follow. What if we could publish less but more substantial papers and preferably in the most enlightened journals? What if critical acclaim and post-publication evaluation could do much more to advance a lecturer’s career? How about including lecturing performance as a criteria basis for tenure and promotion? How about getting rid of thought policing, Newspeak, and *ad hominem* reasoning, and instead promoting taste for self-policing, quality control, verification, in order not to let dubious claims and fundamental flaws live on to mislead? The peer-review multiple failings would matter less if, in the lecture halls, the mechanism of critical thinking, understanding both sides of an issue, self-correction and teacher-correction were in working order.

(5) *On the Moral Obligations of the Educator in the Lecture Hall*

Not to abuse the audience of students. Not to spread any kind of political party propaganda. Not to favour or harm students for their political, ideological, religious or moral convictions. To be skilled in fostering the free flow of ideas and essential information among persons of different worldviews. To know that one cannot learn or teach only with ideas, and
that there is something out there called Nature that has its own laws and is coldly indifferent to human ideas and wishes.

When dealing with controversial issues, to introduce to the class the main theories, versions, and competing perspectives on the topic. Not to commit with currents of thought, but with the higher quality and reputation of the study of the Humanities. To question himself and challenge his own views. To know that the genuine and warm dialogue exists only where divergence arises and is therefore expected to be so—as the alternative to it borders on subjection, either imposed or voluntary. To raise concerns about the cant of the ideological hypocrite whether in the clergy or in the laity. To bear in mind that taboos are marked fears about real or imagined situations in life. The policing of a taboo and the chief category of profanity vary from time to time. In medieval era, it was the wrath of God for taking the Lord’s name in vain; by the late 18th century, sexual activity, excretion, and the bodily parts; today, the slandering of certain groups. Sex or religion is no longer regarded as truly profane, but present-day profanity consists of the defamation of groups, especially those historically discriminated. Thus, for better or worse, we are not much different from our ancestors in terms of word taboos. To bear in mind that the a priori assumption of political correctness has been used, in some cases, as a trench for hypocrisy and idiocy.

(6) On the Humanities’ Flaws in Face of Verifiable Scientific Evidence

Hans-Georg Gadamer (in line with Heidegger) once lamented the fact that the human sciences have tried to mirror themselves in terms of method on the hard sciences (GADAMER, 1982, p. 5-10). Along this disruptive epistemological battlefield, the natural or physical sciences have proved more often than not to rely on more serious and respected methods and publications. Hard sciences
generate technical products that are verifiable and testable, whose errors are more easily identifiable. If it is not always so, the underlying cause is usually defective external factors (political, economic, psychological etc.) unrelated to the scientific method itself. Putting together a picture of how to open the Humanities’ theoretical black box when we attempt to verify and test the real-life effects of ideas is notoriously more complicated. In addition, the intellectual’s main tasks—reading, writing, lecturing, guiding research, engaging in public debate etc.—always run the risk of being contaminated by his or her own obsessive worldviews, regardless of whether such views are intellectually respectable or morally right.

In *Intellectuals and Society* (2009), Thomas Sowell has attempted to get a better idea of what the delusions of conceptual grandeur may signify in practical terms. Intellectuals (or the “anointed” as Sowell calls them) think they understand the world better than those people who have been sustaining them for millennia. In continuing this wishful pursuit of rearranging the world according to their own particular witticism and design of progress, humanists have many times signed a declaration of intellectual bankruptcy that has become a significant part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. As a result, Sowell is mainly concerned with the verifiability of ideas as “[t]he impact of ideas on the real world can hardly be disputed” (SOWELL, 2009, p. 7). He notes that the application of many visionary thinkers’ ideas (Rousseau, Marx, Engels, Galbraith, Keynes and many others) have led to dire consequences and negative effects but those ideas did not lose credibility among their intellectual peers or target audience. Such intellectuals, whether in the media or academia, are “unaccountable to the external world,” and such unaccountability has become “not simply a happenstance but a principle” (SOWELL, 2009, p. 8). With sundry examples of how many high profile intellectuals have been associated with the relentless use of abstractions and empty arguments, Sowell builds a devastating case against
the political and intellectual establishment who is immune from sanction or loss of reputation after having been proven wrong.

Historically, intellectuals have been at times monstrously vain, conceited, and undemocratic. They love power and find themselves morally superior to others. Sowell makes the point that:

The revealed preference of the intelligentsia—whether the specific subject is crime, economics or other things—is not only to be conspicuously different from society at large but also, and almost axiomatically, superior to society, either intellectually or morally, or both. Their vision of the world is not only a vision of causation in the world as it exists and a vision of what the world ought to be like, it is also a vision of themselves as a self-anointed vanguard, leading toward that better world. (Sowell, 2009, p. 314)

The head-scratching explanations for political scandals that the intelligentsia have colluded with by defending all forms of violence (be it creative or not) since the 18th century are fully detailed and made available. Yet it continues to be not a surprise if the last place one can find a flexible and democratic leader were the School of Humanities. “This vision of the anointed represents a huge investment of ego in a particular set of beliefs, and this investment is a major obstacle to reconsideration of those beliefs in the light of evidence and experience” (Sowell, 2009, p. 314). By contrast, the much-privileged status of science, as one editorial (The Economist, 2013, p. 11) reads, “is founded on the capacity to be right most of the time and to correct its mistakes when it gets things wrong.” This is a valid conclusion even at a time when so many scientists are calling attention to the poor state of current scientific research.

In recent years, the prevailing spirit in the Humanities
is that emotional reasoning and conceptual, abstract, and intuitive knowledge overcomes concrete and verifiable information. The humanist pursuit of didacticism, discipline, and uniformity of methods seems to be no longer a cause for concern. Immersed in this fantasy, the risk of losing sight of a sense of purpose and meaning in the research and lecture hall activities is high. This is not to weave praise to scientism or authoritarianism in the Humanities. However, respect for flexibility and autonomy is not to be confused with theoretical sloppiness and methodological laxity—from which emerges, in the Humanities studies of the present, a cascade of teaching methods and research framework based on a generalized emancipatory delusion about othering, subalterns, victims, and oppressed. So what should be high quality research for the Humanities?

First, this seems to me a half-finished question. Why not ask, how much effort have we put into demonstrating what purpose our work may have beyond the seminar rooms, the campus walls, and the scholarly journals? How often do we explore popular venues for our work? What is the public knowledge of and response to the mass of our work? Is it doubt, disdain, indifference, or interest? And how are we developing students’ professional and social skills?

Then high quality research is mostly valid, reliable, and generalizable. It plays a large role in the reassurance dimension. But the inward-focus of Humanities scholarship and its failures to dislodge entrenched ideas have left an open flank for common errors of validity. Among them are unsubstantiated observation, speculation, straw-man fallacy, overgeneralization, false-positive and false-negative conclusions etc. Relatives should not be confused with absolutes. Common pitfalls are token literature review, premature theorizing and, results “based on a gut feeling,” in addition to the pervasive bias favouring the publication of victimhood claims. Not only scientific findings but also ideas
should always be subject to challenge from evidence and experiment. All knowledge begins with the hypothesis that a proposition is false until proved true through convincing demonstration.

Philosophy and science are innately linked to each other, and must remain so.

(7) On Faculty Diversity, Fewer Intellectuals, and More Educators

In the world of the Humanities, the contingent speaking for academia’s liberal and conservative viewpoints is a cruelly curbed minority. If liberal and conservative politics were not exempt from academia’s diversity, the political and philosophical debate on campus would be more critical and less redeeming. If the goal of recruitment for academic posts is to contribute to the college’s diversity, this should become a code not only for ethnicity or gender but also for political and intellectual diversity, and for a well-balanced curricular material and education, too. The assembly of a more politically diverse faculty in the Humanities and Social Sciences departments would fully serve the goal of promoting greater commitment to more spirited public debate on campus. For far too long, the Humanities Division has been a politically unbalanced territory where ideological monopolies bloom.

And humanists need to be more sceptical about the political redemption and social engineering inherited from Marx and Rousseau, and stop thinking that Nature or the existence of this world is dependent on what we think of it. The failure of many academics is therefore not intellectual, but ethical. Socrates has taught us that the problem of knowledge is, above all, ethical. For him, knowledge is to discover one’s own ignorance. The only true wisdom is in knowing you know
nothing: the more I know I know, I know the less. So is the ethical attitude that defines the subject of knowledge in Socratic maieutic. The true value of studying the Humanities, if any, is that they teach us how to think properly and more effectively and how to critically assess other people’s opinions and reason by encouraging the Socratic approach to questioning. But what would Socrates say about a Humanities education that moves away from asking the fundamental questions that philosophy poses? Over the centuries, moral dualities and character flaws have been contaminating the public debate. Today’s academic discussions, on the other hand, became a worthless exercise, for humanists chose to look at the world from the oppressor vs. oppressed dichotomy as well as from the social constructivist viewpoint, rather than employing a miscellany of disciplines combined with a plethora of grounded research methods to critically examine conflicts and their possible resolution. In so doing, we have created wet and muddy conditions that not only destroy all “dangerous” ideas, but also murder all divergent opinions.

What we need in the Humanities is fewer thought police, fewer intellectuals, and more educators. Educators are prone to seek the light of understanding and reason, and to learn how to teach and apprehend, questioning their own ideas to improve them. The Greek philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis (Adithan, 2014, p. 65) once suggested that “Ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own.” This pairing of teachers and bridges resonates well with Lukianoff and Haidt’s proposal that “colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control” (The Atlantic 2015). But faculty and university administrators seem to be taking a step in the opposite direction now. The illimitable freedom of the human mind as a pedagogical attitude seems to be outdated. It is for the good educators to raise consciousness...
about the need to balance freedom of speech with the need to make students feel willing to engage in public debate and welcome to discuss “inflammatory” ideas.

CODA

These reiterated warnings are not to be a mantra to the ears of the reader, nor to prescribe solutions or templates for the future of the Humanities. I only hope they may help inspire a communal pursuit of wisdom, creativity, questioning, free spirit, and critical ideas on campus and beyond its walls, in light of the best liberal values of the West. A respectable humanist is the one who criticizes his home thanks to what he learnt on campus, and his campus thanks to what he learnt at home. With this flow of critical thinking in education, an initial problem floats up again: to the same degree that there is no non-ideological writing, there is no non-ideological education either. A thorny problem for any initiative that tried to banish ideology or “discomforting” thoughts from education is that, if implemented to the letter, it would banish communication itself. Such is the tricky tightrope on which the speech police stand.

This censorious trend, on the other hand, should receive a warm welcome. At least it is one more solid proof that the academy is not the place of the “anointed,” nor the “enlightened.” It can also incentivise lecturers to push more “disturbing” subjectsthat confront comfortable understandings of ourselves and this world. Without that in mind, what is the use of graduating in any field of the Humanities and Social Sciences? To the same extent that I refuse to be indoctrinated into Marxism (be it first-hand, second-hand, or whatever), I believe it would be unfortunate to ward off a trend of thought that was the cradle of the revolutionary ideas and cultural movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Neither wish I to be indoctrinated into a literal interpretation of the Holy Bible.
(nor the Noble Qur’an, nor the Bhagavad-Gita, nor any other religious text), but it would be unacceptable to me to use this argument as an excuse to neglect a book that is a source of reference for Judeo-Christian values and a permanent feature of Western civilization. Far from adhering to one ideology or another, it is precisely in the bitter disagreements that we learn more, further refine our ideas, and gain more analytical skills. How rewarding it would be to attend a class in which everyone could freely discuss, for instance, Weber’s reading of the state as the legitimate source of the use of violence set against Marx’s view of the state as a political representation operating historically to own the means of production through the coercion of the weak by the strong.

A propos, insofar as the economic exploitation of the weak by the strong in a capitalist society is always the order of the day in the Humanities, and that right now there is no practical alternative to this system, I would like to add a few closing lines to this discussion.

As capitalist society is what it is—a paradox of distribution and concentration of wealth, goods and commodities looming over and controlling our lives, endless exploitation and creation of opportunities, recurrent financial crisis, daily competition of all against all—the will to fight it back is objective. It can capture both the heavy heart of an illiterate Muslim marginalized on the outskirts of Europe as well as the mind of a young university-educated Englishman. For better or worse, the way social injustices are viewed and taken care of can be a great catalyst to impose a shift in the ethos of a society. Both Stalinism and capitalism castrated the revolutionary impulse of modern philosophers. The impetus for creating a revolutionary society was locked into an inward-looking pattern of development, and then annihilated by twisted reactionary practices. Does this represent a dead end?
Towards the Caribbean, the Cuban guerrillas—once charismatic, adventurous, anti-bureaucratic revolutionary leaders—have turned themselves into...bureaucratic leaders. All those romantic ideals have long since rotted away. The now-dying dictatorship of the Castro brothers, or a state-sponsored prison island controlled by incompetent loyalists, is engulfed in economic woes. The regime is becoming ever more fickle due to the increased opportunities stemming from... the free market. The paradox of wealth distribution reigns again. Down south, Venezuela is racked by hyperinflation, shortages of essential goods, rampant unemployment, and thuggishness. The bankrupt and autocratic Bolivarian socialism descends into chaos and cannot pay its bills. A scenario similar to that Zimbabwe went through in the early 2000s. The two regimes are indeed alike in their economic ineptitude and lack of political adroitness. Lost in-between the armed revolution utopia and the Bolivarian dream-sequence of ruin, Latin American left have embraced populism as the last hope of salvation. In Brazil, the nostalgic left has begun a quest for the lost dictatorship to escape the current dilemmas. Misstating the outcome of impeachment proceedings, starry-eyed leftists dig into the past to resurrect the spectre of 1964 and decry a “coup,” turning their eyes away and carefully avoiding any encounter with reality. What a shame! Latin America needs the voice of lucid libertarians cured of this sleepwalking curse.

The forces of capitalism, in contrast, can both produce and destroy, predate and create, but it is a dynamic force capable of amending its ways. By using the rapacious predator locust and the creator busy bee as a symbolic expression of the worst and best side of capitalism, Geoff Mulgan (2013) has dug into the history of capitalism across the world to show its incredible ability to colonise, adapt, regenerate, and mutate. From animating ideas and creative power to utopias and dystopias, new political settlements have always reshaped capitalism and this is likely to happen again. Its future lies, as
Mulgan (2013, p. 172-97) believes, in healthcare, education, entrepreneurship, multiple currencies, green industries, more relationships than commodities and so on. It is a plausible possibility. I am not altogether sure whether Mulgan is right or wrong. But as far as practical and political matters are concerned, capitalism is the only game in town. Heaven knows where capitalism might be heading next, or where the world might be heading next. It is for the potential humanist of the future, who survives the “PC gone mad!” brigades, to decide whether it is worth asking why and delving into it.

When I say things like this to my Bolshevik acquaintances, they tell me that my sole objective is to lambast the worst of the “left.” No, this is far from being a priority to me. To begin with, I have been calling it “left” because it has identified itself as such, though the very idea of “left” and “right” as a single dimension of factions and opinions within every political order is unacceptable to me. Nor is it just about raging firestorm over bigotry in the left-leaning academy. The point is that the “left” is usually happy enough with all forms of censorship and thought policing whenever it is convenient to push “leftist” agendas. And unless we challenge this thought police trend in the most robust possible way, whatever kind of university (or country) we end up choosing to live a life is unlikely to be a free space. Even after the downfall of all grand ideologies of redemption, the romantic leftist still falsely believes that the warm milk of kindness and morality is poured down democratically at birth.

An invigorated revision of both the left and the Humanities is necessary, therefore. Brazil, in particular, with its concentration of wealth and power, needs an effective left. What do I mean by an “effective left”? One that is able to cut off the visionary sleepwalking and engage with core messages and real-life endeavours. One that does not claim a monopoly on issues that people of all sorts care about, like inequality and climate change. One that is free from fundamentalist
bitterness, free from focusing single-mindedly on lost causes (like Bolivarian socialism). Free from stifling self-victimization and from intellectual swindles. And free, above all, from veering off laudable political goals into a witch-hunt. One that stands up to itself and sees it has no God-given right to power. A pragmatic left that has its own ideas and is wary of too intellectual, too theoretical approaches.

One glaring leftist error at present is the attitude of locking the Humanities down on to a one-way road of thinking about human life. Rather than leading us out of the current impasse, a single-minded pursuit of ideas is a symptom of what has gone wrong in the Humanities. From these errors stems a long, dysfunctional chain of misunderstandings. By succumbing to the demands and threats of the cult of victimhood and political correctness, by endorsing a syllabus that gives expansive exposure to radical social constructivism, recognizing no reality outside language and narrative, the Humanities departments cannot entirely escape responsibility for this situation. On the contrary, for breaking away from the mundane conflicts between conscience and desire, virtue and temptation, or simply good and evil—key drivers of the human moral drama—the Humanities Division has helped reduce the intellectual landscape of the human sciences. Eventually, and sadly, it shrinks away from the edges of the ancient swamps that surround all human beings, thereby understanding less and less of the very human condition.

It would be nice, therefore, to have a Humanities Division that could look at human strengths, shortcomings, and dysfunctions on a scale of millennia, rather than years or decades.

When life hurts, it is better to make war upon our own lusts and vices and bargain with our own demons than to run into “safe spaces.” For wisdom is gained by experiencing different things, including our cruel share of winters. Once it
is gained, then it is handed down. This is exactly what the Humanities should strive for.

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