

*The New*  
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Published on *The New Republic* (<http://www.tnr.com>)

# Humanities and Inhumanities

Anthony T. Grafton February 17, 2010 | 3:36 pm



*The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in The American University*

By Louis Menand

(WW Norton, 174 pp., \$24.95)

The last hour has come, the times are very bad. As it was in the twelfth century, when Bernard of Cluny began his bitter satire *On Contempt of the World* with those words, so it is now, in the halls of the humanities. Our space is shrinking: only one-third of American undergraduates still major in the arts and sciences, and less than a third of them in the humanities. We get no respect: the media stick to covering our dysfunctions, from the Paul de Man affair to the butchering of Robert Frost's notebooks. (All good editions are alike, perhaps, and every bad edition is bad in its own way.) But our worst enemies are ourselves: from William Chace, who argues that we helped to drive away our own students by dismembering the curriculum and substituting "for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture)," to Mark Taylor, who declares that disciplines are obsolete and that "there is no longer a market for books modeled on the medieval dissertation, with more footnotes than text," to William Deresiewicz, who complains that we cannot talk to plumbers.

Some of the complaints are silly. Chace and Taylor tell us most scholarship is worthless, but how do they know? How could they know? And why should we listen to someone who condemns whole worlds of thought and writing that he cannot possibly have examined? Some of the complaints are wrong. Dissertations with footnotes really were a product of the early Enlightenment, though they were defended in the sort of disputations that originated in the Middle Ages. But some of the complaints are squarely on target. As almost all the critics point out, we humanists are devouring our young. Graduate students in the humanities take 9.3 years, on average, to obtain a doctorate--11.3 years, if you count time off between college and graduate school and occasional leaves. After dragging their lengths through all those years of mean seminars and endless paper grading, those who finish often discover that no jobs await them. The number of tenured and tenure-track jobs--never large enough for all those with doctorates--is falling like a stone, thanks to the current economic crisis. Meanwhile, at least in my discipline, the number of new Ph.D.s is actually rising, and in other fields the numbers remain high. All over the country, men and women who starred as undergraduates and have written original dissertations, won teaching prizes, and published excellent articles as graduate students find themselves precariously employed as "visiting assistant professors" ("visiting" is a technical term for minimal benefits, more courses to teach, and no security) or flying the freeways from one school to another, working as adjuncts

for \$1,500 or \$2,000 a course.

Louis Menand has been worrying about the humanities for a long time--at least since the 1990s, when the wave of new jobs for humanists predicted by William Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa failed to materialize. And he has some useful things to say about their state in his book, which took shape as a result of his participation in Harvard's most recent effort to reform general education. At once a professor and a public intellectual, Menand examines the academic humanities with an insider's expertise and an outsider's eye. He recognizes that academic humanists, whatever their politics, are conservative and defensive when challenged, and that their ideological conformity makes the university a duller place. He also knows that young humanists of both genders have become--as the historian R.M. Douglas wrote more than a decade ago--the contemporary equivalent to the "superfluous woman" of Victorian Britain, "obliged to eke out a penurious and uncertain existence as a teacher," but without the Victorian teacher's chance of being shipped off to a larger future in Canada or Australia. His book argues that the intellectual and human miseries of the academy--and it has plenty of both--are organically connected. Yet he is less interested in denouncing than in explaining. Given the situation that Menand describes, his book is curiously apathetic, and almost complacent.

Menand focuses on the elite institutions that still concentrate on providing an education in the arts and sciences, and argues that they have failed to respond to these and other painfully obvious problems because they remain stuck in patterns that were set a century and more ago. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he explains, scholars set out to create a limited free space in which they could set standards for the fields they practiced and for undergraduate and graduate training--a professional space dedicated, like the legal and medical professional spaces that took shape at the same time, to pursuing the general good rather than personal gain.

University administrators, such as Harvard's Charles William Eliot, cooperated. They supported academic specialization, creating independent departments in which professors could pursue and pass on their research interests. They insisted that no one should enter professional study, in law and medicine as well as in the disciplines, without first having studied the liberal arts as an undergraduate. And they gave preference to Ph.D.s in hiring academic staff. These requirements created a national market for liberal-arts education of the new kind, at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels. The new-model colleges and universities--basically loose federations of associated disciplines, held together by tiny administrations--were fruitful and multiplied. Libraries and graduate schools, university presses and seminars clad in hideously distorted versions of Oxford and Cambridge, Venice and Siena, sprang up across the land in soybean fields and deserts.

The traditional college and university reached its peak after World War II, thanks to the baby boom and the Cold War. Graduate education grew even more quickly than undergraduate education, as universities expanded thanks to showers of federal and state money. But the peak was sharp as well as high, and by the 1970s the ground beneath it began to shift. In some respects, the results were positive: as the baby boom ended and colleges had too many places to fill with white males, they opened up to women and non-white people of both genders. But the financial crises of the time set limits to what had looked like permanent expansion, and the massive group of faculty who obtained permanent positions in the 1960s suddenly had few jobs to offer their successors. With stunning speed, the Land of Cockaigne became the Slough of Despond.

Wracking intellectual crises followed these social and institutional changes. Critics--Kuhn, Geertz, Rorty, White--reared in the old disciplines taught generations of younger scholars that the boundaries of their fields were arbitrary. By doing so, they helped to create Theory--even if a number of them felt, when they saw what became of their ideas, like Milton's Sin after she gave birth to Death. Meanwhile, younger scholars and students insisted on exploring and settling new territories: social history; literature by women, by people of color; the collaboration of social scientists with government. By a familiar paradox that Menand nicely brings out, the harder anyone tried to defend the old boundaries of the disciplines, the more arbitrary they now appeared. Innovation took root outside the disciplines--in programs and centers, rather than departments--places where scholars from varied disciplines could meet, teach, and debate, and that were vested with glamour and drama, but usually did not become power bases with jobs to fill. And after the anti-disciplinary revolution came the settlement: a mixed one, with interdisciplinarity reigning in English, an eclectic postdisciplinarity in anthropology, and many flowers blooming in history--and traditional rigor in philosophy.

**Menand's account is** consistently even-tempered, and he resists all temptations to succumb to nostalgia or to launch jeremiads, even when both might be appropriate. He does not portray the university in the age of New Criticism as a paradise of Serious Reading, or denounce the new forms of scholarship that have grown up more recently as one great betrayal of truth and high standards. Instead he sings a song of sclerosis. Through all these changes, he writes, the basic system of disciplines and departments remained intact--a hard and confining carapace that proved impossible to break, however humanists squirmed and pushed.

Efforts to create new forms of general education foundered because general education was aimed at preparing students for the world outside the academic walls. Nestled in their disciplinary armor, the professors--the descendants of those late-nineteenth-century reformers who created the university in the first place--distrusted, and resisted, the idea of training people for practical affairs. Interdisciplinarity hit its natural limits fairly soon. Administrators often liked interdisciplinary programs, since they sounded exciting, and staff could sometimes be appointed without deferring to departmental power, and they were cheap--but for the most part, though, the disciplines remained intact and in charge, and interdisciplinarity actually reinforced their authority. In theory, as Menand shows in a fine bit of academic comedy, interdisciplinary courses meant enabling two people from different disciplines to teach together: this would lead to productive collisions, which would in turn show faculty and students the limits of their perspectives. But in practice the faculty tended to go awry with highly idiosyncratic versions of their colleagues' disciplines, while their students sank into paralytic bewilderment.

Given these conditions, Menand believes, stasis is natural. Demands for general education have foundered on the reef of professionalism. Calls for interdisciplinarity serve mostly to make humanists nervous, since disciplinary structures have not only remained intact but grown stronger. I am not so sure that these explanations are complete or satisfactory. Natural scientists practice historically distinct disciplines that impose a high price of entry, that recognize tightly bounded communities of the competent, and in which error can have dramatic consequences--yet they seem to be designing courses to produce engineers and applied scientists who can do all sorts of jobs in the real world and to be forming interdisciplinary teams and institutes in every crevice of my university. Maybe the causes of the failure of the humanists to rebuild curricula and create new forms of academic work and teaching lie a bit deeper than the surface, the structural level, at which Menand works.

As opportunity fled, demands rose. Despite all the denunciations of the barbarians at the gates, academic standards have become higher in the last few decades. In the age of poverty that began in the 1970s and has continued to the present, under-funded humanities departments all over the country could hire first-rate young faculty and aspire to be centers of innovative research, writing, and teaching. Professors, graduate students, and prospective employers all came to see the doctorate not as an academic exercise but as the draft for an ambitious book--the book that one would have to write in order to earn tenure at institutions where some older faculty had never published anything.

At the same time, though, other, and stronger, forces pushed downward. The cheaper the crook: every president wanted to make his institution a prestigious research university--though many could not or did not provide the resources to support scholars and teachers. Doctoral programs continued to open even as the number of jobs for their products decreased. There were lots and lots of graduate students, lots and lots of Ph.D.s, many of them in debt up to their eyeballs because they had not received fellowship support. Eventually, departments at some elite private universities cut student numbers, accepting only those whom they could more or less support. But far more universities supported students by setting them to work as teachers than by offering full fellowships. The need to staff undergraduate sections and courses, and not the realistic chances of graduate placement, often determined admissions policies. In most years, new Ph.D.s--to say nothing of all qualified job seekers--outnumbered new jobs. No wonder, then, that the time to degree grew longer and longer, as students clung to subsistence incomes in the pleasant cities and college towns they already knew.

Administrators, meanwhile, began to treat systematic underemployment as a feature, not a bug, and made of it a management tool. They realized that they could finance elementary teaching by taking in large numbers of graduate students, keeping them at work for eight or nine years on low pay, running sections and occasional courses, and then spewing them forth unemployed or

re-employing them as adjuncts. Though Menand's emphasis lies elsewhere, he acknowledges these awful conditions--and suggests that they help to explain the homogeneity of those who actually survive the training and remain to teach.

## II.

**As a structural** account of (to quote the title of an important book by Marc Bousquet) how the university works, *The Marketplace of Ideas* has much to recommend it. Young humanists--especially would-be graduate students--should read it in order to gain some sense of how their institutional world is embedded in history. But it is an odd book, and as it moves from description and analysis to suggestions for reform, it goes off the rails.

Menand describes the university in generalities. Many of them strike one as true, but some of them seem to reflect a much narrower experience even than he has had, and imply a surprisingly reductionist perspective. Early on he notes that, once upon a time, being a professor meant having a vast fund of esoteric knowledge that the ordinary person could not match--but now, Menand smugly observes, "most of that esoterica is available instantly on Wikipedia." What?! If the esoterica in question have to do with Britain and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and even there I have my doubts), maybe. But how many humanities professors and students are prepared to make do with Wikipedia's "esoterica"? They interpret Chinese classics that have to be pieced together from bamboo strips, or they reconstruct Greek texts from fragments preserved in garbage dumps and mummy wrappings, or they record and interpret religious ceremonies in India and Nepal. You cannot do those jobs without esoteric knowledge. You cannot Wiki them.

Such slips are not minor. They are not even slips. They reveal an error of principle. Menand's statement that graduate students do not need specialized knowledge is an astonishing and terrible concession: taken literally, it defines the humanities as a realm of simple problems simply solved. No sweat, no dust, no romance, no struggle. But the great humanists are furious, passionate giants who heave one mountain onto another as they stage their attacks on Olympus. At its Faustian and demonic peaks, the tradition of modern humanism includes Benjamin on the Paris arcades and Scholem on the Kabbalah, Fraenkel on Greek and Latin literature and Weinreich on the Yiddish language, Neugebauer on ancient science and Kantorowicz on law and political symbols and Klemperer on the language of the Third Reich, Wittgenstein and Curtius, Kristeller and Panofsky, Syme and Momigliano, Arendt and Colie. Merely to mention these names is to see the inadequacy of Menand's analysis.

Most of us, and most of our students, are in no danger of performing at that august level. But when we enter on our studies, we take unto ourselves these and other masters, and we sprinkle ourselves with their dust. Anyone who has watched humanists work over the last generation or two has seen new masters take the places of the ones who came before them, and has marveled as they restored new ideas, voices, songs, and images to our records and our canons. We still climb the mountain, or at least we try. But Menand doesn't think we even need to build base camps anymore. He is post-grandeur. To accept this view is to transform the Faustian magic of high scholarship into the sterile performance of drab professional duties. We will have no place to stand against the administrators who want to eliminate our fields because we bring in no money and the critics who insist that we are charlatans. More important, we will have only stones, not bread, to offer hungry readers and students.

Menand's loss of patience, or faith, or interest, in specialized knowledge actually underpins his major proposal for reform. Toward the end of his book he suggests--and not for the first time--that universities could ease the misery of doctoral candidates in the humanities by radically shortening their programs. Abridgement, Menand argues, would not cause serious intellectual problems. After all, "normally a dissertation in the humanities does not require extensive archival, field, or laboratory work." What on earth is he talking about? The students I know in English departments--admittedly, most of them concentrate on the period from 1500 to 1800--learn the languages and literatures that the English writers whom they study knew and emulated, and discover new and gripping texts in manuscripts, and reconstruct the institutions of publishing and literature from the archives, and think hard about hard texts. All this takes time. In history--a field which awards as many Ph.D.s each year as English--you certainly cannot write a dissertation without doing archival work or fieldwork or both. In classics or German or East Asian studies, you must master not only languages but also cultural canons--in addition, these days, to the works outside the canon that

have suddenly revealed their interest. And then there is musicology, where you need the languages, and the archives, and the music. Anyway, there already exists a way to do a limited amount of reading and a short piece of research in complex, demanding fields like this: it's called an M.A. Making M.A. programs take longer and rechristening them as Ph.D.s is a bit like chaining buses together, putting them on tracks, and calling them a train.

**In the end**, though, the deepest problem with Menand's approach is precisely that it is structural: he deals with institutions and disciplines, in the way committees and reports do. But it is only when you leave the thin air of Big History and climb down to the local and the personal that you remember some of the vital things that a structural account omits. Menand is right to argue that problems built into the university system as it took shape before 1900 and as it expanded in the 1950s and 1960s have helped to make the current situation as bad as it is. But he nowhere tells the reader what every academic of his (and my) age knows, at least anecdotally: the academic humanities were not a featherbed for the repose of sluggards in the old days, either.

Most male assistant professors, back when Menand and I were young, had risen to glory, carried by cherubs, in the happy 1960s, the one brief period when going to graduate school, like having sex, was relatively safe. They knew, and they told us, that academics had never had it so good. Their own teachers, the men (mostly) who ran the '60s universities, had had to fight their way in. Only the G.I. Bill enabled many of them to go to college at all. Aspirations to graduate school were met with warnings. You had to be an Aryan from Darien with a private income or you could not hope to get work. Even if you did find a job, the pay would be miserable. Undergraduates who babysat in academic homes before the Great Expansion sometimes saw their professors moving unpayable bills around their kitchen tables in a weird and hopeless version of gin rummy. Women had it much harder than the boys did: for generations there were not even words to name the intellectual and personal injustices they suffered. And scholars of color put up with indignities that make one ashamed for the professors and universities that inflicted them.

Why did anyone begin work on a doctorate in the humanities in those days? Why does anyone do it now? They did it in the past--and their academic grandchildren do it now--for reasons that are not dreamt of in the philosophy and theology of the market. Becoming a humanist, let us remember, is not just signing up for a job. It certainly does not open the way to power or wealth: scholar has never rhymed with dollar. To become a trained humanist, rather, is to join a tradition, which has usually been embattled, while parents scream "No, for God's sake go to law school!" (That is what Petrarch's father said to him, thereby inaugurating a great tradition.) In the old days, a professor did not receive a job offer, but a "call"--as ministers and rabbis did. To enter this tradition, you have always needed intellectual ability and technical skills, but even more you need conviction and passion and determination. One might say that you need a vocation. And the vocation of scholarship is hard, as Weber warned in times worse than these.

One reason graduate school demands so much time, so much effort, and so much difficulty is that it is designed--badly, and clumsily, but not insanely--to attract and then to test people who think they have this sort of calling. Graduate study is nothing less than a quest--and you cannot undertake a meaningful quest without trials. Menand does not grasp this existential reality. As long as graduate school is this sort of place--and it still is, and it still has to be, or the traditions that it preserves will wither and die--its intellectual demands will be high, and its psychic ones higher, and it will require long years of study.

**I do not** mean that graduate training cannot, or should not, change in the future--as it changed, glacially, in the past, to admit those it had once excluded. Humanists should be humane--and you need only set one virtual toe into the academic blogosphere to learn that many of us fail at that elementary duty every day. Universities should treat graduate students decently: one reason that humanists take so long to earn their doctorates is, quite simply, that they are paid so little, and have to spend so much on obligatory health insurance, that they have to take on other work. Humanities professors must work out how to compromise: watch us discussing proposals for general education or new interdisciplinary programs, as Menand shows, and you will find yourself thinking that the Senate really is a serious deliberative body.

Many of our disciplines and practices are indeed in need of refinement and improvement. We and our students must learn how to use--and to create--new digital tools. These have already democratized the world of learning by giving free access to millions

of sources that were once available only to the privileged. They have provided new and effective ways to present and analyze much of the greatest art of the last century and this one. And they are quickly engorging the world of writing and reading. Humanists must enter this new country, as our predecessors entered the new country of print in the fifteenth century, and settle and cultivate parts of it. By doing so we will reach not only our own students, but larger and larger audiences around the country and the world. And going digital also means working out how to collaborate, with other humanists and with specialists in technology, and allocate credit in a fair way. This will yield benefits of many kinds. Collaboration is the thief of academic time, but it is also a delight.

So there are new pleasures in store for humanists in the next couple of generations. But we cannot make digital humanists at the cost of losing humanists who know languages, and methods of interpretation, and the other tools forged by the generations--the tools that one masters only by applying them. Graduate study in the humanities should become more varied and more social in the decades to come, but it is still going to be hard--in fact, it is going to be harder, since it will require even more skills than before; and it is still going to be for those who care so much for it, as a matter of principle and feeling, that they cannot do anything else.

Year after year, undergraduates and M.A. students find themselves on fire to do research and to teach. Some of them burn for other things as well, and follow other paths. Some discover that their vocations are not deep enough to last out the process of testing. But many stick it out--and finish--only to find that the completed quest leads into Rats' Alley. These are the people whom our system is now chewing up. It is hard to keep that pure light burning while you serve as cheap labor in graduate school; and harder still if you join the reserve army of even cheaper labor when you finish; and bitterly hard, in another way, when you actually find a job and then see your aspirations to create a new, more enlightened curriculum crushed by the constraints of professionalism.

The old system sinned by exclusion: of Jews and Catholics, of women, of people of color. In recent years those barriers have fallen away. But new ones have replaced them. The English professor William Pannacker has written movingly and accurately about the plight of young humanists. He recently suggested, with justified savagery, that only those who have private means and backing from elite academics should enter doctoral programs in the humanities. As it was in the beginning, apparently, so it is now: if not back to the Aryans from Darien, then back to the more varied, but still minute and privileged, group who have trust funds and cultural capital. In fact, the authors of a 2004 study of graduate training in history already noted that top programs tended to admit the undergraduate products of elite private universities. So much for most of the progress we thought we had made in peopling the humanities with new kinds of students and teachers. It is a truly dreadful prospect. Yet when a young person with a passion for scholarship comes into your office and asks about graduate school, this is the general situation that you should responsibly sketch for him or her.

But thinking about the academy only, or mainly, as a market is another matter. As Menand unwittingly shows, it narrows the field of vision. The humanities need reform because their traditions are confining and their job market is a catastrophe, but reform cannot mean surrender, or dilution. It means finding out how to do what the scientists have already done: how to combine the rigor of tradition with experiment and innovation--but without replacing hordes of underpaid adjuncts with hordes of underpaid post-docs, as the scientists have. More generally, it means finding creative ways to make life instructively hard, for a few years, for the broadest range of talented people of all sorts and conditions whom we can educate and then employ productively and decently. What makes reform urgent is the passion, the erudition, and the intelligence of those whom the academy is now failing--the sheer destruction of talent and love and energy, of the traditions of deep learning, over which we humanists are presiding. The masters of the next generation are still knocking on our doors, but most of them find themselves too busy speeding down the freeway to their next campus, grading stacks of papers, and worrying about their debts to learn as they wish to learn and as we need them to learn. They are missing from Menand's cool, lucid, and limited book, as they are from so much of what is thought and written about us humanists in these bad days.

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