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Permanent Crisis

The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age

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Introduction

The term *permanent crisis* is, of course, an oxymoron, since *crisis* refers, in its classic definition at least, to a decisive moment—a turning point between what came before and what might now follow.[1] A crisis does not persist; it passes. Yet today the desire to declare every moment decisive is common. Crises roil capitalism, but they also sustain it. Long before calling for creative destruction and disruption without end became fashionable, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx expressed the hope that the periodic crises of modern industrialization would eventually be overcome through "permanent revolution."[2] The idea that crisis was to be welcomed, not feared, has taken more moderate forms as well. Jacob Burckhardt, a contemporary of Engels and Marx, emphasized the productive side of crisis, although, with the reserve he considered appropriate for historians, he preferred gradual crises over the revolutionary kind.[3] Writing in 1873, toward the end of a long, successful career as an art historian at the University of Basel, Burckhardt warned that "historical crises" could be destructive and that "artists and poets" in particular tended to go too far in "glorifying" them. But he thought they were right to claim that crises created new perspectives, new ways of seeing.

Yet Burckhardt didn't apply that logic to his own intellectual domain: the academic humanities. He was not alone in this. Many scholars prize calm and stability—Burckhardt himself preferred the serenity of Basel to the frenetic atmosphere of Berlin—and so resist conceiving of historical crisis and disorder as crucial to their professional success. But whereas Burckhardt never suggested that the humanities were imperiled by crisis, other humanities scholars have, in the subsequent century and a half, freely wielded the language of crisis to describe their institutional circumstances and standing in the broader culture. They have even tended to treat crisis as a threat to the very existence of the humanities. Around the time he com-

mented on crisis, Burckhardt heard his younger colleague Friedrich Nietzsche, whose histrionics he had begun to regard with suspicion, use the discourse of crisis in just this way in a theatrical series of public lectures. While wary of Nietzsche, Burckhardt actually shared his worry that the humanities were being Prussianized: scaled up, standardized, and pressed into state service. Burckhardt would have agreed that if there were good reason to be skeptical of crisis talk in the humanities, the same went for attempts to deflect such talk. The point still applies: in many reckonings with public debates about the humanities, today as in Nietzsche's day, crisis talk has been dismissed too quickly, sometimes by the same critics who employ it.

In a 2018 essay in the *Atlantic* titled "The Humanities Are in Crisis," the historian Benjamin Schmidt explained why, unlike so many other humanities scholars, he had long avoided the word *crisis* when discussing humanities enrollments in colleges and universities in the United States. First, he didn't think the enrollment figures were all that bad. Even in 2013, they were better than ever in absolute terms, and the percentage drops during and after the Great Recession had been gentle, worlds away from the free fall the mid-1970s had seen. But second, Schmidt admitted to a certain categorical reservation about using such language. "One thing I learned earning a history degree," he wrote, "is that people usually announce a 'crisis' so that they can trot out solutions they came up with earlier."[4] By 2018, however, Schmidt had changed his mind. New data suggested that the state of the humanities had deteriorated and, as the title of his essay indicates, now justified the use of *crisis*. History itself had pushed him into the mainstream. And Schmidt's message was clear: it is finally time for supporters of the academic humanities to worry.

The intellectual historian Stefan Collini, one of Britain's most influential commentators on higher education, persists in adhering to his stance as a holdout with regard to crisis talk. In his essay collection *Speaking of Universities* (2017), he stresses that he's no fan of the "it's all going to the dogs" discourse or "Cassandraism" that has been, in his view, a long-standing part of academic culture. As have Schmidt and countless others, past and present, Collini portrays cries of crisis in the humanities as hasty and even counterproductive. He writes that such bewailing often results from an ahistorical perspective, something that is particularly off-putting in people who claim to be historically minded. If academics were aware of how much of their crisis rhetoric repeated old laments, they might adopt a different tone, or come up with more original turns of phrase. This is important, Collini says, because thoughtful rearticulations of the university's core values matter. Edging into crisis discourse himself, Collini emphasizes that such rearticu-

lations are now urgently needed, and he challenges concerned citizens of the university to provide them.[5]

Permanent Crisis is not a call to action. Rather, we have written a work of historical scholarship and what we hope will be a clarifying and at times invigoratingly counterintuitive contribution to the debate about the plight of the humanities, particularly at US and European institutions of higher learning. Our book has two primary objects of critique: (a) how the notion of a crisis of the humanities has been invoked and (b) how it has been dismissed. We agree that even if most of the forces besetting the academic humanities aren't new—vocationalism, managerialism, anti-intellectualism—the present moment is a particularly difficult one for humanities scholars and for all who consider themselves the humanities' beneficiaries or defenders. At the same time, we think that crisis talk in the humanities is often peevish, self-serving, lacking in historical perspective, and antithetical to the careful thinking and scholarly virtues to which humanities scholars typically aspire. In uncovering the roots of the persistent sense of crisis surrounding the humanities, we highlight continuities that extend well beyond the twenty-first-century United States. We show that today's humanities scholars experience and react to basic pressures in ways that are strikingly similar to the response of their nineteenth-century German counterparts. In German universities of the 1800s—as in those in the United States, particularly today—humanities scholars felt threatened by the very processes that supplied the means for the modern humanities to flourish, such as institutional rationalization and the democratization of knowledge.

But we also emphasize the constructive side of crisis discourse. Indeed, one of our chief claims is that *the self-understanding of the modern humanities didn't merely take shape in response to a perceived crisis; it also made crisis a core part of the project of the humanities*. The humanities came into their own in late nineteenth-century Germany by being framed as, in effect, a privileged resource for resolving perceived crises of meaning and value that threatened other cultural or social goods as well. The perception of crisis, whether or not widely shared, can focus attention and provide purpose. In the case of the humanities, the sense of crisis has afforded coherence amid shifts in methods and theories and social and institutional transformations. Whether or not they are fully aware of it, for politically progressive and conservative scholars alike, crisis has played a crucial role in grounding the idea that the humanities have a special mission. Part of the story of why the modern humanities are always in crisis is that we have needed them to be.

Even humanities scholars who are determined to avoid crisis talk wind

up reinforcing it. Collini, for example, clearly didn't set out to produce a book of the same ilk as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and he didn't write that kind of sensationalizing account of the university (and especially the humanities) in decline. Far from it. In *Speaking of Universities*, Collini soberly addresses the tension between research and open-ended or liberal learning, the dynamic that, for him, remains the defining feature of modern universities and the instrumental logic governing university administrations and the societies that sustain universities. He asserts that some of this tension is unavoidable and that academics should learn to live with it—at least up to a point. Only reluctantly, moreover, does Collini admit that liberal higher education and the academic humanities have reached the crisis stage. But when he writes about what the humanities offer society, Collini makes the kind of dramatic, redemptive promises that necessitate crisis and pervade writings in defense of the modern humanities. It's not simply the case that the humanities are worth preserving in the face of pressures that make their continued existence difficult. For Collini those pressures are part of a larger social and cultural crisis that the humanities are uniquely well equipped to help resolve.

Collini suggests that the managerialism harming the academic humanities with its quantitative metrics has also damaged society as a whole, dehumanizing the workplace more broadly. Since managerialism relies on linguistic deformations and clichés, and since humanities scholars are often in the business of deconstructing such things, the humanities can militate against managerialism in their own special way. Up to this point, Collini's argument suggests that the humanities can help address a pressing sociocultural problem. This is likely to come across as a reasonable, even modest claim rather than a promise of redemption.

But as Collini lays out the value of the humanities in a time of crisis, his rhetoric intensifies into hyperbole. Referring to certain forays into public discourse by humanities scholars, he writes of how "the energy released by the collision between, on the one hand, the immovable mass of decayed half-truths and rotting clichés and, on the other, the irresistible force of genuine ethical insight functions like a prose version of the Large Hadron Collider."[6] Overwrought assertions of this kind damage the credibility of the humanities, especially when it is humanities scholars who regularly make such rhetorical intemperance the target of critique. Justifying the modern humanities by depicting them as the agent through which we will overcome modern crises of meaning has led to further problems and pressures in the humanities, beginning with crises of overpromising.

METHOD, PRACTICE, DISCOURSE

Although we focus on pervasive features of crisis talk in the present volume, we don't believe that everyone who sees the humanities as being in crisis thinks about or experiences crisis in the same way. Yet people who do invoke the notion of crisis often presume the existence of a crisis consensus, a prior agreement on what the humanities are as well as a general account of their current condition. They seldom ask with Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "Is your crisis in the Humanities, my crisis?"[7] For our part, we highlight the heterogeneity of the discourse about the humanities. Scholars and public intellectuals, as well as those who, like Collini, speak in both roles, have offered disparate and sometimes even conflicting definitions of the humanities. The humanities are a set of academic disciplines; the humanities are a form of humanism;[8] the humanities are a unique set of skills or ways of knowing;[9] the humanities are a kind of self-cultivation.[10] We will not offer another definition of what the humanities are; instead, we will show how the signifier "the humanities" came to mean and do what it does.

When a university dean, an op-ed columnist, or an English professor uses the term *the humanities*, whether intentionally or not, she is invoking a whole set of commitments, ideals, and sensibilities: qualitative over quantitative reasoning; a celebration of interpretation and a wariness toward positivism; an interest in and concern with the subject of knowledge, not simply the object of knowledge; valuation of the particular as much as the general.[11] To align oneself with the humanities is implicitly (or even explicitly) to affirm not simply a bureaucratic arrangement of departments or a set of disciplines but a particular disposition. The humanities serve intellectual, cultural, and social functions. They are, as the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey put it in 1882, a "bulwark," safeguarding something sacred or valuable against forces that threaten their very existence.[12] In the following chapters, then, instead of proceeding from a theoretical statement about what the humanities essentially are, we focus on what people do in the name of the humanities and what they use the humanities to accomplish. We consider the humanities as both practice and discourse. We devote particular attention to how people have used the humanities to stand in for or even constitute a particular ethical project or, again, a way of life. The current institutional arrangement of university-based knowledge—with its particular norms, practices, ideals, and virtues—was not necessary; it could have been otherwise. Our aim is to show how the humanities came to serve distinct functions and particular ends.

ON THE DISCONTINUITY OF THE HUMANITIES

More specifically, we are interested in the discourses and practices of what we call the *modern* humanities. *Modern* here refers neither to a distinct historical epoch or culture nor to an uncritical claim of contemporary interest but to the persistent present mindedness and situatedness of intellectuals and scholars who have tried to define, defend, and justify something like the humanities. In contrast to prior traditions of humanist knowledge, as we shall see, the modern humanities are consistently cast as a particular project to countervail against specific historical forces and problems that threaten *the human*. The *modern* humanities address not disordered desires, unruly passions, or the presence of evil but historical changes: industrialization, new technologies, natural science, and capitalism. This permanent relationship to the present links the modern humanities to the temporality of crisis. Whereas the temporality of change or development is ongoing, observable, and slow, that of crisis is decisive, exceptional, and particular. Crisis requires a language suitable for the present moment and situation, a language that communicates the transformative potential of now.[13] This is why those who claim to speak on behalf of the modern humanities often do so through exhortation and declaration.

Yet even as their defenders have insisted on the urgency of the humanities, they have just as consistently argued for the humanities' continuity across space and time. In focusing on *the modern humanities*, then, we presume the presence of a historical and cultural distinction that is crucial to our larger story. This distinction represents our interpretive point of departure, and so we want to offer an account, at the onset, of how it works and why it is significant.

Recent efforts among scholars to establish the history of humanities as a distinct field started with a question: "How did the humanities develop from the *artes liberales*, via the *studia humanitatis*, to modern disciplines?"[14] Our question is slightly different: Have the continuities linking the humanist scholarship of the faraway past to that of today been stretched thin? Or have they, or some of them, remained robust? These are, of course, big questions, and we won't treat them comprehensively, let alone try to resolve them. But we do begin with the premise that the continuities between the modern, university-based disciplines collectively known as the humanities and earlier forms of humanist knowledge such as the *studia humanitatis* have been exaggerated.[15] The modern humanities are not the products of an unbroken tradition reaching back to the Renaissance and, ultimately, to Greek and Roman antiquity. There are important discontinuities and dif-

ferences, one of which is the persistent discourse of crisis that has characterized the professionalized humanities of the modern research university as it has developed in Germany and the United States. We hope to illuminate the operations and evolution of this discourse as well as its effects on other humanist practices.

DISTANT RELATIVES

On April 26, 1336, the Italian scholar and poet Petrarch wrote a letter to Father Francesco Dionigi of Borgo describing his ascent of Mont Ventoux, in southern France. Since the nineteenth century, Petrarch's reflections have been celebrated as the work of "the first truly modern man," the product of a modern "individual personality."[16] However, the echoes of Augustine in the letter are hard to miss: the ascent, the discussion of conversion, the inner eye, and the role that reading plays in forming a self.[17] Like Augustine's *Confessions*, Petrarch's letter testifies to a life shaped by reading. He writes that he was prompted to scale Ventoux by his experience of Livy's *History of Rome*, which includes a description of the Macedonian king Philip V's climb of Mount Hemus. The rest of the letter is filled with quotations from and allusions to Cicero, Virgil, the Gospel of Matthew, Psalms, Job, Ovid—and, perhaps most famously, the *Confessions*. But unlike Augustine, who confidently took hold of his Bible, Petrarch opened the *Confessions* tentatively. It simply "occurred to" him, as he leafed desultorily through the pages of the book, to read whatever passage "chance" might lead him to.[18] For Augustine, reading was an encounter with the traces of a divine will; reading had a proper and certain end. For Petrarch, it was just as likely to be an encounter with the "surging emotions" and "vague, wandering thoughts" of an ambivalent and uncertain self—an encounter that is not with the divine but, rather with the thoughts of human authors.[19]

Augustine could neither have attended a university nor taught at one, since universities didn't exist in the fourth century, but Petrarch could have, even though he chose not to. Although he intermittently studied law at the University of Bologna from 1320 to 1326, Petrarch the humanist scholar was stridently "anti-institutional."[20] In *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others* (1367), he spun his castigation of university-based scholars and their slavish devotion to "The Philosopher," Aristotle, into an anti-institutional broadside against medieval universities. Here Aristotle stands in for a monolithic curriculum and the medium through which universities reproduced themselves: strict adherence to a fixed body of learning.[21] According to Petrarch, the university was moribund, a victim of its own institutional

success. It was limiting and uncritical, defined by intellectual narrowness and ideological conformity.[22] Universities had become sectarian institutions that mistook erudition, "adventitious ornament," for reason.[23]

Petrarch's criticisms didn't slow the growth of the university, however. By the time he died, in 1374, there were nearly thirty universities across Europe, all sharing a basic set of institutional norms and ideals. Before receiving their official papal charters, these universities had developed almost "spontaneously" out of the densest networks of traveling students and scholars who had settled around particular schools and teachers.[24] Universities declared themselves fixed centers of teaching and learning that nevertheless transcended their physical location. They institutionalized this local-universal dynamic in standard pedagogical practices—especially the lecture with the commentary and the disputation with the questions[25]—and in staples such as the sequence of degrees (bachelor's, master's, doctoral) and structures such as the four faculties: arts or philosophy, medicine, law, and theology, with the arts or philosophy faculty ranking lowest and the theology faculty highest. There were also hierarchical systems of dress (e.g., academic gowns and robes) and various other privileges for the guild-like institution that the university would remain for centuries.[26]

Petrarch and the initial generations of humanists in Italy understood their own humanist forms of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and sociability as protests against those of the university. They upheld the letter, dialogue, and oration, their preferred forms of communication, as superior to the academic *lectio* and *questiones*. By comparing themselves to the cultures and practices that dominated universities, these original humanists also fashioned the individuals they aspired to become. When fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists such as Petrarch, Leonardi Bruni, and Coluccio Salutati complained about the intellectual barrenness of medieval universities, they were, as Christopher Celenza has put it, creating a "posture"—that of outsiders resisting the dominant knowledge institution of the day.[27] When Salutati, humanist scholar and chancellor of the Republic of Florence, wrote at the end of the fourteenth century that the "*studia litterarum* has risen somewhat in our day," he meant that reading and writing in accord with the highest models of classical Latin, above all Cicero, "the prince of eloquence," had become an established practice among Florence's educated elite.[28] At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Florentine citizens, clergy, and even university teachers gathered regularly in private circles outside universities to read and discuss ancient texts, listen to lectures, and practice that most humanist of communicative forms—dialogue. These groups of educated citizens helped establish new modes of socializa-

tion that spread to Rome, Naples, Kraków, Heidelberg, Augsburg, Vienna, and elsewhere across Europe. These groups represented an alternative to the model of learned and scholarly socialization that universities provided: scholastic forms of *lectio* and *disputatio*. In this way, these congeries of educated individuals made possible the academies and learned societies that began to flourish in the second half of the sixteenth century.[29]

But humanist scholars gradually abandoned their antiuniversity posture. Over the course of the fifteenth century, they sought out university positions and helped establish the *studia humanitatis* as elements of the faculty of arts in universities across Europe. They became institutional insiders. As the twentieth-century German émigré scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller showed, the term *humanist* (*humanista*) first appeared in the "slang of university students and gradually penetrated into official usage" to name "the professional teacher of the *studia humanitatis*," which comprised grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.[30] One of the first instances of *humanista* occurs in a document dated October 21, 1512, in a reference to a teacher of poetry and rhetoric.[31] As for *studia humanitatis*, the term didn't signify the pursuit of theological, metaphysical, or philosophical knowledge, or, as some contemporary commenters claim about the modern humanities, the cultivation or training of the "soul" as an end in itself,[32] but a more "modest" notion: that the kinds of technical skills and knowledge humanists taught—reading, writing, and speaking about ancient Latin and Greek texts—helped prepare students for study in the higher faculties as well for lives as active citizens, friends, and family members.[33] The fifteenth-century Florentine statesman and teacher Leonardo Bruni, for example, described the *studia humanitatis* as a "combination of literary skill and factual knowledge."[34] They were less an explicitly ideological, philosophical, or religious undertaking than, as Kristeller describes them, an "educational program" concerned primarily with "literature."[35] The aims of early humanist scholars and teachers like Bruni were more quotidian, more practical, more technical—in short, more tightly circumscribed—than later scholars have made them out to be.[36] By the middle of the fifteenth century, the *studia humanitatis* were fixed features of the arts faculties in almost every Italian university. Kristeller called Italian humanists of the Renaissance "the ancestors of modern philologists and historians," thus implying that the latter were related to the former but also distant from them.[37]

Yet Bruni's commitment to the knowledge and skills of the *studia humanitatis* was motivated by something not simply technical: a faith that the literature of a now lost world of antiquity could have an effect in the present. To read, speak, and write well meant to do as the ancient Romans did,

especially Cicero and Virgil. Renaissance humanists named certain ancient texts *literae humaniores* because they believed that these exemplary written works could make people morally better.[38]

As universities and other schools of higher education absorbed the *studia humanitatis*, they also set the conditions for their transformation. When the fifteenth-century humanist scholar Lorenzo Valla sought to systematize the *studia humanitatis* by introducing and refining technical methods, he implicitly reconceptualized the basic purpose of this endeavor.[39] Valla wanted to establish the *studia humanitatis* as a legitimate alternative to the scholastic curriculum that trained students to think in a Latin that he argued was abstract, formal, and unmoored from any historical reality.[40] Rejecting common scholastic-Aristotelian categories, Valla recast the humanist scholars' intellectual horizons of possibility. Instead of mere preparatory activities—aids that facilitated the real knowledge work in law, medicine, or theology—he held up the *studia humanitatis* as entailing more concrete ways of thinking than those currently available in universities. As the medium of all relationships—human/human, human/divine, present/past—language, especially the classical Latin of Cicero and Quintilian, provided a common practice through which people not only could interact and communicate but also think about the world. Latin, Valla wrote, was the "great sacrament, indeed, the great divinity";[41] it was not just a means of communication but a medium and resource for the highest forms of human reason and action. Many contemporaries lambasted Valla's efforts to legitimate the *studia humanitatis* as both futile and amoral. His obsession with method and system would, it was thought, sever the link between scholarly practice and moral formation that Petrarch, Salutati, and Bruni had simply assumed was the proper and ultimate end of the *studia humanitatis*.

Over the next two centuries, as Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have shown, humanist scholars followed Valla in justifying the *studia humanitatis* in terms of method rather than moral formation.[42] As scholars such as Georgius Agricola, Peter Ramus, Justus Lipsius, and Philipp Melanchthon developed increasingly detailed and explicit methods that could be repeated and successfully applied without the guidance of a charismatic teacher, they also began to treat texts as material objects to be mined for meaning in new ways.[43] Instead of merely pointing to or recounting the truth, texts could now, as Walter Ong put it, "contain truth, like boxes."[44] The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists who followed Valla treated the works of Cicero and other classics of antiquity as "clouded windows, which proper treatment could restore to transparency, revealing the individuals who had written them" and transmitting the knowledge they and generations of intermediaries had entrusted to texts.[45] Humanists such as

Valla conceived of knowledge as erudition. Knowledge was something that already existed, and it was the task of the historical and textual arts, the *studia humanitatis*, to cultivate, collect, and organize it.[46] The Renaissance humanists' conception of knowledge as erudition, as bound to human language and the material forms it assumed in texts, distinguished it from the then predominant theological conception of knowledge as metaphysical inquiry.[47] The *studia humanitatis* considered human things, which included, as we have noted, a vast array of arts recovered from ancient texts, from poetry and painting to natural philosophy and mining.[48] The *studium divinitatis*, or scholastic theology, considered the divine and reason itself. Until at least the seventeenth century, the fault line separating the study of "divinity" from, as one English writer put it in 1483, "humanity," remained the most important institutional and intellectual division of knowledge.[49]

Yet even as humanist scholars continued to justify their scholarship in terms of method, the desire to maintain the moral promise of humanist learning persisted. When Erasmus outlined the proper method for teaching students how to read a text in *De ratione studii* (On the right method of study, 1512), he assumed that adherence to and rigorous application of a humanist method would produce a reader who was not only accurate but morally sound. After conducting students through a series of exercises, the teacher, Erasmus wrote, should "finally" bring out the "moral implications" of the text at hand. Neither here nor elsewhere did Erasmus fully articulate how humanist reading practices necessarily led to virtue. Still, like the scholars who preceded him, he took for granted that humanist forms of writing and sociability, as well as humanist methods—the act of reading rigorously, carefully, methodically—produced salutary moral effects.[50] But fifteenth-century humanist scholars also raised a basic question about the ends of reading: Should readers be concerned primarily with "getting the text objectively right," or using it, as Augustine might have put it, for "obtaining what you love"?[51] These scholars' doubts about the power of reading to enable communication between minds and worlds—to relay the kinds of intention and purpose that Augustine understood to be at the core of reading and books—would only grow stronger.[52] The notion that books constituted an order or world of their own would, accordingly, grow stronger too.

By the early sixteenth century, the *studia humanitatis* had become established features of university curricula.[53] This was because their practitioners and defenders had adapted them to institutional norms and expectations: designing curricula, establishing professorships, producing textbooks, developing related institutions.[54] But as the *studia humanitatis* attained the institutional authority and legitimacy to inspire and transform individual readers—and to socialize and train European elites to enter civil

society as lawyers, doctors, politicians, notaries, and bureaucrats of state and church—they also opened themselves to wounding attacks. From the fifteenth-century skepticism toward Valla's attempts to reform dialectic to early eighteenth-century German complaints about pedantic university philologists, critics blasted textually disposed scholars for failing to model virtue and cultivate it in their students.[55]

Deteriorating institutional conditions exacerbated the problem of purpose and justification. After an initial "golden age" that lasted in some places until the end of the fifteenth century, the *studia humanitatis* suffered through more than two centuries of decline, their institutional fate being bound up with the tumult of the arts (or sometimes philosophy) faculties in universities across Europe.[56] Until at least the late eighteenth century, professors in the arts faculties were subjected to the indignities of sitting at the bottom of a hierarchy atop which, especially in northern European universities, reigned the theology faculty. Arts faculties' offerings appeared last in course catalogs; the professors themselves marched last in academic parades, and their academic robes were generally less grand.[57] As secondary schools gradually assumed the preparatory function of the arts faculties in training students in rhetoric and other areas of humanist study over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enrollments in these faculties declined precipitously. This was so much the case in German-speaking lands that enrollments approached zero at some universities.[58]

ON THE VALUE OF USELESS KNOWLEDGE

The entry for "humaniora or studia humanitatis" in Zedler's *Grosses vollständiges Lexicon* (a German-language "universal" lexicon published between 1731 and 1754) crystalizes the humanities' peculiar position in the middle of the eighteenth century: "Those free arts that prepare one for study in the higher faculties. Those typically thought to be included under the *Humanioribus* include philosophy, history, antiquities, poetry, oratory, grammar, and languages, as though they distinguished humans from other animals. Cicero pro Archia I. 3. Pro Mur. 29. *Gellius* XIII. 15. *Nouins* I. 160. *Walch* de Litteris Humanioribus. These are now understood as the sciences necessary to master the higher faculties."[59] The entry clearly identifies the *studia humanitatis* as preparatory elements in a broader university curriculum, technical skills and capacities considered necessary for all higher, professional study. The entry also notes, however, in an aside tinged with skepticism—"as though they distinguished humans from other animals"—that they are commonly thought to have a moral or transformative effect. The references to the then standard glosses of the *studia humanitatis* in Cicero,

Aulus Gellius, and others function less as evidence for the claim of efficacy and more as adages recognizable from the barest of bibliographic information. But these references also point to a series of conflations and contradictions, which, the entry suggests, characterize the *studia humanitatis* themselves. In *Pro Archia*, Cicero defends the Greek poet Licinius Archias (121–61 BCE) by expounding on the ways in which the "study of the humanities and literature" (studiis humanitatis ac litterarum) forms character and binds humans together.[60] The reference to the commonplace book of the Roman author Gellius is to *Humanitas*, which, we read, means not so much *philanthropia* (common sympathy with all humans) as *paideia* (the marker of a particular formation or education).[61] The *studia humanitatis*, then, represent not something universal but rather inculcation in a distinct cultural tradition (a canon of ancient Greek and Roman texts), a moral ideal (Cicero as exemplar), and a curriculum.[62] *Humanitas* is a virtue developed through a particular form of education and in accord with its ideal character. Yet the entry in the Zedler lexicon tells readers that a growing "prejudice" against studying anything that doesn't meet an immediate need has led people to dismiss the *studia humanitatis* "as impractical arts." For this reason, the entry continues, almost grudgingly, those who dedicate themselves "exclusively and solely" to studying them deserve "praise."[63]

In suggesting that these historical technical arts could be ends in themselves, the Zedler entry anticipates the transformation of the problem of the *studia humanitatis* (i.e., justification by method or moral edification) into that of the modern humanities. That is, it points to the growing gap between the *studia humanitatis* as a limited but necessary preparatory training for cultured elites on the one hand and the humanities as a self-sufficient moral resource on the other. Over the next half century, intellectuals and scholars, especially in German-speaking lands, sought to transform the *studia humanitatis* and all those arts that had settled into the lower faculty of the university into an explicitly moral and philosophical project, tying them to the human and reason as universals, as ends in themselves. "The human being," wrote Immanuel Kant in 1798, "is destined by his reason to be in a society with other human beings and to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences."[64] Kant and the pantheon of German philosophers, theorizers, and bureaucrats who followed him identified the university, and the philosophy faculty in particular, as the primary institution of this human development project. Whereas the higher faculties of law, medicine, and theology relied, as Kant wrote, on the "command of an external legislator" (the state and its statutory authority), the lower, philosophy faculty relied on and had access to reason itself. Its professors and students were only interested in

securing the "interests of knowledge"—in other words, in pursuing knowledge for its own sake.[65] By drawing an analogy between human intellection and the divine mind, Kant and the neo-humanists, idealists, and Romantics who followed him ascribed the capacity for spontaneous, creative reason to humans, conceiving of it in terms traditionally limited to the mind of God. In so doing, they elevated the activities and creations of the human mind above the merely technical, useful, or necessary. These intellectual activities and the objects to which they gave form became ends in themselves.

Yet around the same time, as German scholars began labeling themselves as university-based philosophers (that identity itself being a new scholarly persona), humanist doubts and assumptions about reading reached an apotheosis in German classical philology. Scholars turned practices and techniques honed in biblical criticism into advanced methods and applied them to ancient pagan texts. From the beginning, they assumed that modern philology's demand for technical mastery was compatible with ethical cultivation. "By mastering and criticizing the variant readings and technical rules offered by the grammatical books and scholia," the philologist Friedrich August Wolf wrote in his epochal *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795), "we are summoned into old times, times more ancient than those of many ancient writers, and, as it were, into the company of those learned critics."[66] The careful study of ancient manuscripts, scholia, and commentaries according to preestablished methodological conventions enabled a better understanding of the ancient world, which, in turn, facilitated an encounter with the moral exemplars of antiquity. But such study could also undercut the authority of the ancient texts, as did Wolf's conclusion that the *Odyssey* was not the work of one author, Homer, but the product of textual accretion over time—a conclusion similar to the one biblical scholars had reached about the authorship of the Old Testament. Modern readers were bound not by books or even the love of books but by technical methods. The objects of the application of these methods were fungible or even incidental.

While biblical and classical philologists were worrying about the authority of ancient texts, a new generation of scholars began to raise similar concerns about more modern ones. An important factor in this development was the destabilizing effects of the proliferation of print.[67] In 1803 August Wilhelm Schlegel, a German Romantic and one of the first scholars to approach literature—not just drama or poetry but a much broader range of printed writing, including novels—as an art, lamented the pitiful state of German reading and writing, invoking what he termed "literature proper."[68] Given the ready availability of printed texts, German readers no longer read with "devotion but rather with a thoughtless distraction." To remedy this situation, Schlegel proposed that literature be distinguished as

a particular kind of writing that had been filtered and sorted from among the surfeit of all that had been printed. In his view, literature wasn't simply a "raw aggregate of books" but the material expression of a universal *Geist* (spirit)—the expression of a common life, even a common humanity. And it was this common human spirit that gave literature its unity and made it a "store of works that are complete as a type of system." If Kant had located the historical development of human being and reason itself in "the arts and sciences," Schlegel was more specific. The "spirit," human being and reason, worked itself out in literature.

It is not incidental, then, that one of the first documented uses of the word *humanism* occurred at this time. In 1808 the philosopher and educational reformer Friedrich Niethammer coined *Humanismus* in a polemic against school reformers seeking more practical pedagogical training. "Humanism," he wrote, referred not simply to the "study of the so-called *humaniora* in the learned schools" but also to the pedagogy of antiquity whose essential feature was the elevation of a student's "humanity over his animality."[69] In a conflation that would eventually characterize the modern humanities, Niethammer further defined humanism as both a curricular program (the study of ancient texts via humanist scholarly traditions) and a moral project with an underlying philosophical anthropology. He envisioned the transformation of the *studia humanitatis* into a pedagogical project oriented toward the "idea of the human in itself as well as its vocation."[70] No longer subordinate to the professionalizing interests of the higher faculties (law, medicine, and theology) or to the confessional ends of the *studium divinitatis*, the newly conceived humanities would constitute their own institutional and pedagogical "system" that would safeguard reason over instrumental rationality, the human mind over the animal body. The modern humanities would "defend the human's spiritual nature in its autonomy, its independence from the material world, and thus assert something that is very true."[71]

Just as importantly, Niethammer, as one reviewer enthused in 1808, juxtaposed the new humanities with those "branches of knowledge such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, which are more immediately related to material production" and better suited for "material use and practical utility."[72] In a "German culture" consumed by the "drive for money and profit" and devoted to "big agriculture and forestry, manufacturing, commerce, and industrialization," knowledge as an end in itself was worth nothing, Niethammer wrote.[73] "Technical and mechanical know-how" triumphed over "pure," noninstrumental knowledge. These instrumental sciences and the technologies and historical processes they unleashed did not simply transform knowledge; they corrupted educational institutions, religion, traditions, and every

element of human "moral development" (*Bildung*).[74] In the context of such cultural and spiritual loss, the new humanities, he asserted, were needed to "exercise and form" human reason and thus ensure the "general education of individual humans" as well as the "development" of all of humanity.[75] Niethammer underscored this compensatory role by redrawing the divisions of knowledge. Instead of comparing the humanities to theology as the *studia humanitatis* or *literae humaniores* (the study of things more human than divine), as had historically been done, he pitted the humanities against the natural and physical sciences. In this sense, the new humanities were fundamentally modern because they served not some antiquarian curiosity but the explicit needs of both present and future; they provided practical moral succor for a new age. Yet Niethammer still sought to legitimate the humanities as newly understood by asserting their continuity not only with the "so-called *humanioren* as taught in the schools of the learned" but in a "more distinguished sense with the entire pedagogy of antiquity."[76] Against the onslaught of industrial and technical revolutions, the new, modern humanities would, he claimed, emerge as keepers of "humanity."[77]

Seventy-five years later, in 1883, Wilhelm Dilthey offered a more systematic account of Niethammer's claim when he argued that the modern humanities satisfied a "need" by compensating for the alienating effects of an industrial and technical modern society.[78] More recently, the German philosopher Odo Marquand has argued that the humanities compensate for the "losses" of modernization, which have been largely effected by the natural sciences and associated technological advances.[79]

Niethammer, Dilthey, and Marquand make several important assumptions and claims that recur in the following chapters as we recount the narratives that justify and defend the modern humanities. First, they presume the continuity and identity over space and time of a human essence or being that a monolithic Western modernity threatens to render distant and inaccessible.

Second, they not only describe the purpose of the modern humanities as the recovery of this human essence but also presume its historical necessity, as though the humanities were a particular form of Hegel's "cunning of reason" or Kant's "hidden plan of nature."

Third, they presume that as it erodes confessional religions and moral traditions, a uniquely Western modernity creates the very needs the humanities emerge to satisfy.

Fourth, they presume that the modern humanities did or, under the right conditions, could satisfy those distinctly transcendent needs previously met by religious and moral traditions. As reconceptualized by Niethammer and others, the humanities transformed canons of sacred texts into cultural

canons, adopted and adapted reading practices, established new forms of socialization, and institutionalized these practices and objects within the temple of Western liberal culture—the modern university. *In essence, the development of the modern humanities both depended on and played a crucial part in the rise of the modern research university*. This relationship is central to our account.

Finally, as described by Niethammer, Dilthey, and Marquand, the modern humanities are an epiphenomenon of a modernity in which they have fixed functions. Chief among these functions is "the historical transferal of faith" and moral power away from established forms of religion, especially Western forms of Christianity, to the canons, ideals, practices, and institutions that emerge to legitimate the modern humanities' compensatory claims.[80]

Just over thirty years after Niethammer made his case for the compensatory role of the modern humanities, however, the very premise of his functional, ideologically committed conception of the modern humanities seemed in doubt. Their sacred power appeared already to have eroded. The teacher and educational reformer Friedrich Diesterweg called the behavior of "the humanities professors" of the 1830s "a scandal," characterized by "scuffles, malicious attacks, spiteful remarks, effeminate passion for gossip, deceitful backbiting, constant factiousness and us-against-them mentality, and just plain hubris."[81] In particular, Diesterweg bemoaned the proclivity of modern philologists and philosophers to engage in acrimonious debates over competing "ways of reading and interpreting" a text or to get into defensive arguments over Kantian or Hegelian systems instead of studying and celebrating what is simply human. The force of Diesterweg's portrayal of the German humanities professoriate derives from a contrast with what he presumed to have once been. Who could legitimately teach the humanities, since scholars had ceased to embody them? The modern university had deformed those moral exemplars of humane virtue into self-seeking specialists trafficking in the "lifeless details" of pedantry. Humanities professors no longer believed in the power of the sacred objects they had been called to tend and teach. They had lost faith in the historical task of the humanities to maintain the human.

By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals and scholars in the United States would claim that German ideas about knowledge, research, and universities had infected American higher education with a desire for specialized and technical expertise. As Diesterweg and his contemporaries demonstrate, however, nostalgia-laden declensional critiques of a modern, disciplinary knowledge had been a key element of the German discourse around higher education since the 1830s.

That the modern humanities have been in permanent crisis, then, stands to reason. They have repeatedly failed to do what has been promised of them. More contemporary debates (i.e., dating from about 1980) about the state of the humanities, their relation to society, their moral and pedagogical value, their institutional shape, and other points of contention, when considered in light of these nineteenth-century German debates, don't seem so novel. Indeed, their main motifs have proven remarkably persistent.

CRISIS AGAIN

In 1929 Eduard Spranger, a conservative nationalist who was, at the time, Germany's leading scholar of neo-humanism, gave a lecture on the "crisis of the humanities." Speaking in Berlin to the German Academy of Sciences, he situated the crisis historically. As both a cause and an effect, it was connected, he said, to a larger cultural crisis that stretched back over centuries in which the "positivist" ideals and methods of the natural sciences had infiltrated the humanities.[82] Recently, however, things had reached a breaking point. Scholarship and science were now thought to be, in a way, meaningless.

In Spranger's view, one shared by many others, the German sociologist Max Weber bore much of the blame for this loss of meaning. Ten years earlier, Weber had published *Scholarship as Vocation*, a book based on a speech he delivered in Munich in 1917 that had provoked an immediate outcry. Many intellectuals and scholars objected to what they considered the main claim of that now famous lecture: that disciplinary knowledge is tightly limited in the kinds of questions it is equipped to help answer, and that, to the extent possible, it should be conducted value free, without moral presuppositions.[83] Neither Spranger nor most any other German interested in such questions would have objected to placing such restrictions on the natural sciences. In the Germany of the 1920s, the persona of the natural or physical scientist largely remained that of the second half of the nineteenth century: an individual committed to a brute mechanistic understanding of nature and the pursuit of the invariant structures of the natural world so as to project future conditions. Concerned only with what was or what rationally could be, this scientist had little interest in what *should* be. Thus, he had nothing to say about how one *ought* to live and believed as a matter of principle that he should refrain from projecting his necessarily human *values* onto the natural world.

What Spranger and many of his younger contemporaries rejected, however, was the extension to the humanities of Weber's scholarly norms, which, in their understanding, were the same as those of the natural sci-

ences. Pushing against the position they attributed to Weber, they insisted that worldviews and value claims were the very "roots of the humanities."[84] What scientists dismissed as prejudices and biases scholars in the humanities embraced as meaningful and orienting values. In taking this stance, Spranger nonetheless worried that having reasserted their humanism in the face of Weber's asceticism, the humanities now seemed doomed to a "Babylonian" conflict of values and worldviews.

Like many other German intellectuals and scholars, Spranger saw two paths out of what Weber himself had called the "polytheism of values." One led to a "new" humanities. Favored by younger participants in the debate, this path ultimately led to abandonment of the epistemic and ethical ideals that had oriented the German research university for a century: the pursuit of the unity, integration, and consilience of knowledge to be achieved through the practices of university-based scholarship. Universities would be replaced by "Weltanschauung academies"—institutions of higher education defined by an explicit and comprehensive worldview and distinct moral framework. These institutions would usher in an era in which the conflict among values and traditions would play out neither within individual institutions nor across and among disciplines but through conflict-prone encounters between and among institutions defined by their distinct Weltanschauungen.

Spranger preferred the second of the two paths, which he called "scholarship squared." By this, he meant knowledge that—owing to a redoubled commitment to discipline, self-critique, shared purpose, and truth—would ultimately bring about a historical resolution of the conflict of values, worldviews, and cultures. The author of countless hagiographic essays and books on Germany's neo-humanist heroes such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Spranger considered the humanities wholly continuous with the tradition of disciplinary, university-based scholarship. Central to this tradition was the belief that disciplinary scholarship was the most developed form of human reason and was capable of reconciling conflicting worldviews and ultimately realizing the unity of reason in history. The humanities themselves would solve the crisis of culture and with it the long-standing crisis of the humanities. Weber had tried to deprive the humanities of their world-historical mission. Spranger reasserted it. For him, the humanities had a historical and metaphysically infused task: to save people from an untenable condition, "the eternal discontent of the unresolved dialectic."[85]

In the penultimate chapter of *Permanent Crisis*, "Max Weber, Scholarship, and Modern Asceticism," we reckon at length with the debate unleashed by the publication of Weber's *Scholarship as Vocation* in 1919. The chapters preceding that discussion focus on the period between Niethammer's 1808

polemic on humanism and the lecture by Weber that formed the basis for his book. Over the course of the long nineteenth century, the modern research university arose across Germany and created the conditions for the modern humanities to be institutionalized as something approximating the self-understanding of the academic humanities today. Amid growing pressures and related social, institutional, and intellectual transformations, the humanities took on the constellation of expectations that continues to define them and to produce the crisis discourse that has, in a kind of feedback loop, helped shape those expectations. It is emblematic of this circular thinking that the persistence of a diagnosis of crisis has long been read as a sign of the humanities' durability.

At the core of the conceptualization of the humanities as university-based forms of disciplinary knowledge is a deep ambivalence about values, notions of the good, and morality itself. The gap between what the humanities promise and what they do most readily in the context of institutions of higher learning should be plain to see. Yet it hasn't received the attention it deserves. Although the observation that the humanities are perennially in crisis is now a standard feature of discussions about American higher education, much of the discourse about the humanities tends to obscure important forces that have created and widened this gap. It diverts attention from persistent contradictions and problems by sounding familiar rallying cries: The humanities are in crisis because modern society has lost sight of what really matters in life; the humanities are in crisis because universities are managed like corporations; the humanities are in crisis because humanities professors subscribe to theories that encourage hostility toward or suspicion of art and literature, and so on.[86] When people reckon with ongoing crises—and more specifically, ongoing crises that threaten them in basic ways—they often look for one dramatic, all-encompassing cause: the Great Recession, our xenophobia-tinged STEM obsession, neoliberalism, the coronavirus. Identifying a situation as a crisis can foreclose the possibility that it came about not because of an unexpected, sudden event but because of chronic, even structural conditions.

Assertions of their inherent goodness are often made to add urgency to declamations that the humanities are in crisis. Both self-consciously conservative and progressive versions of this assertion have promoted a crisis consensus that encourages people to defend the modern humanities with nostalgia while obscuring what ought to be restored and why. The unceasing reiteration of the imperiled virtue of the modern humanities has made for exhausted self-justification and institutional inflexibility. The humanities matter; they certainly matter to us. But how well served are they by "the humanities," whose modern meaning was born of crisis and is freighted

with defensiveness, overpromising, and other concomitants of crisis talk? If this question sounds blithe, we hope that by the end of this book we will have answered it in a serious way.

The six chapters that follow this introduction focus on nineteenth-century German figures and institutions. Given that, it might seem presumptuous or simply provincial of us to refer to *Permanent Crisis* as a book about the self-understanding of "the humanities." Myriad knowledge practices that contemporary scholars would probably identify as part of "the humanities" do not fit within the historical and geographical framework of this book. Scholarly traditions devoted to preserving, interpreting, and transmitting all that is written, for example—what some might call textual or philological practices—flourished not only across early modern Europe but throughout the world.[87] The history of the book and reading in Africa long predates the spread of education under European colonialism.[88] Textual practices and knowledge thrived in the Indo-Persian world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and long before.[89] In short, any study concerned in particular with the history of textual practices and literary knowledge should not be limited to European ideals, much less nineteenth-century German models.[90] Neither should such a study presume that the conflicts and contradictions of nineteenth-century German scholars and educated elites can be transposed onto different places and times without significant misunderstandings. Yet this is just what some scholars have done in the name of the "truly globalized university" when suggesting that disputes among nineteenth-century German scholars—"the struggle between historicists and humanists, *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, scholarship and life"—exemplify something universal in a tradition of knowledge and learning they presume to be global and continuous.[91]

Nonetheless, the modern humanities emerged from these more proximate conflicts and contradictions, which lent them the sense of crisis that would come to define them. In order to understand the formative attempts to define the purpose and practices of the modern humanities, it is necessary to understand these relatively recent and distinct conditions from which they developed. Germany, of course, was not the only site of such conflicts, and at times we turn our attention to France and England in the nineteenth century—to figures like Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill. But nineteenth-century Germany was where and when the "crisis" system of the modern humanities first took shape. It was there and then that wide-ranging and multifarious scholarly traditions and forms of learning were first crafted into a relatively stable system and set into a structure of epistemic and ethical norms rooted in a new institution: the modern research university. It was then that the humanities were modernized.

In our final chapter, "Crisis, Democracy, and the Humanities in America," we shift our focus to the United States and follow administrators and scholars as, starting around 1870, they adopted and adapted the German ideal of the research university for their own purposes. Among other things, we rewrite one of the master narratives of American higher education. According to this account, German academic culture helped modernize humanist scholarship in the United States by providing models for the systematic study that began to supplant connoisseurship at American colleges and universities in the late nineteenth century. This isn't wrong. Thousands of American scholars *did* spend time at German universities during the nineteenth century, including most of the people who led the transformation of American higher education, such as Henry Tappan, Andrew Dickson White, and Daniel Coit Gilman, all of whom tried to foster the culture of German disciplinary scholarship, or *Wissenschaft*, as they helped to create America's first research universities. Yet it wasn't until the twentieth century—with its world wars, economic upheavals, and technological transformations—that the humanities in the United States developed their modern sense of purpose, their modern self-understanding as "the humanities." When they did, they were profoundly influenced by a different strain in German academic culture: not so much an outright rejection of the research ideal as a movement to transcend it. Culture was in crisis because there was too much technology, too much *Wissenschaft*, and the mission of "the humanities" was to be the "new *Wissenschaft*" that might redeem it. The United States, too, saw the modern "humanities" given birth by the spirit of crisis.

CHAPTER ONE

The Modern University and the Dream of Intellectual Unity

In the fall of 1903, the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg issued a programmatic statement about the unity of knowledge. The occasion was the upcoming St. Louis Congress of the Arts and Sciences, which would bring together European and American academics in an event marking the centenary of the Louisiana Purchase. Asked to be one of the conference planners, Münsterberg threw himself into the role. He was German—William James had lured him to Harvard—and he helped ensure the participation of such luminaries as fellow German social scientists Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber. Münsterberg hoped to make the event in St. Louis a point of convergence not just for eminence but also for what he portrayed as an intellectual movement arising from the "growing feeling of over-specialization in the sciences today."[1] Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Münsterberg enjoined all those scholars participating in the conference to "strive toward a unity of thought . . . instead of heaping up once more . . . scattered specialistic researches." "Such disconnection," he conjectured, wouldn't go over well "with the American nation," with its "instinctive desire for organization and unity in work." Münsterberg thought the Midwest would be the perfect place to begin a concerted pursuit of intellectual unity in America.

But several American scholars spoke out against his plan, objecting not so much to the goal of unity as to how he construed it, which they saw as constraining rather than liberating. They had a point: Münsterberg had developed a narrative in which the flawed unity designs of nineteenth-century materialists—flawed, in his view, because they reduced life to passive, inert mechanism—had given way to the dualism of the natural sciences and the modern humanities. A new "idealism" was now, in turn, overcoming this dualism, and would, he thought, preserve differences between values and physical facts while allowing for unity by means of unspecified common philosophical principles. The result would be an ordering of the academic

world in which "every theoretical and practical science would find its exact place."

John Dewey complained that Münsterberg's proposal ran counter to "the live-and-let-live character" of contemporary "science," enshrining as the ultimate authority "a particular methodology emanating from a particular school of metaphysics." William James criticized Münsterberg's "resolute will to *have a system* of absolute principles and categories." Such a system might, paradoxically, lead to silos of knowledge rather than consilience, James warned.[2]

Another reason for the wariness may have been that in late nineteenth-century America, the ideal of the unity of knowledge had been vigorously invoked in attempts to preserve the broadly Protestant basis of the traditional American college. Institutions such as Princeton, Yale, and William and Mary designed their curricula and structured student life around the notion that scientific and theological knowledge were mutually enhancing and that moral philosophy could synthesize them in a grand unity.[3] Münsterberg's attempt to link institutional design and aspirations to unity, however, came out of a different tradition of unity thinking, one that rose to prominence in Germany in the age of idealist philosophy and played a central part in discussions of higher education in general and the humanities in particular, contributing vitally, and in ways that may seem surprising, to a persistent sense of crisis in the humanities. Indeed, in order to understand how that sense of crisis developed in nineteenth-century Germany, we must examine how unity thinking became so important there—important enough for Münsterberg to have staked his career on bringing it to the United States.

ON THE USES OF AN IDEA

To be sure, the dream of the unity of knowledge isn't an exclusively German phenomenon. It stretches back at least as far as the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus and the emergence of the first monotheistic religions, and it has found purchase in a variety of places and times. Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston have made the case that the ideal of unity found a special resonance in nineteenth-century Germany. This, according to Galison, was where the ideal began its career as a "regulative part of scientific theorizing." Although German idealist philosophers created the necessary foundation in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was only with "the so-called 'Professors' Revolution' of 1848," Galison maintains, that the unity-of-knowledge principle became a frequently invoked tenet across the sciences.[4]

For German natural scientists of the nineteenth century such as Hermann Helmholtz, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, and Rudolf Virchow, all of whom wanted to see the German territories unified under a modern constitution, there was a political resonance to the epistemology of science and an epistemological resonance to the politics of nation building. When the push for unity in 1848 failed, they found compensatory purpose and satisfaction in continuing to advance the cause of scientific unity.

Similarly, Daston maintains that German intellectuals and scholars of the late nineteenth century embraced the unity ideal most forcefully. That context was "the place and period during which the contradiction between the ever finer division of labor in the sciences and the striving toward the unification of the sciences was felt with unprecedented intensity."[5] In explaining how this special situation took shape, Daston, too, underscores the importance of both German idealism and the question of German political unification.[6] As scholarship became more fragmented in the late 1800s and as the quest for the unity of knowledge seemed, accordingly, to grow more quixotic, scholars with liberal commitments, such as the historian Theodor Mommsen, expressed a sense of disappointment most sharply. Disillusioned with political unification under Bismarck, they had found solace in the pursuit of intellectual unity, and now even that wasn't turning out as they had hoped.

Certainly, in discussions of German versions of the unity-of-knowledge dream, idealist philosophy has loomed large. When they spoke of the ideal, Friedrich Schleiermacher, J. G. Fichte, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Schelling may not have meant the same thing, but all four thinkers—and others as well—relied heavily on the notion of an ultimate unity of knowledge. It figures prominently, for example, in their writings on university reform, which is what concerns us here. They invoked the unity of knowledge as a regulative ideal in making the case that the modern university should be a *free* community of scholars and students pulling together in the pursuit of liberal learning and pure scholarship with philosophy at the center of the undertaking.

Lecturing in 1808 Schelling claimed that "philosophy, which apprehends the whole of the human and touches upon all aspects of his nature, is even better suited [than mathematics] to free the mind from the limitations of a one-sided education and raise it into the realm of the universal and absolute." Expanding on the connection between intellectual unity and human freedom—again, a key element in German idealism—he went on to say that "knowledge of the organic whole of all sciences must therefore precede a particular education focused on a single specialty. Whoever devotes himself to a particular science . . . must know how he should relate this particu-

lar science to himself so as to think not as a slave but as a free man, in the spirit of the whole."[7]

Despite the salience such rhetoric enjoyed, the "unification enthusiasm" of Schelling and other reformers has received little sustained attention. The entry for "The Unity of Science" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* discusses some of the thinking that underlay the reformers' passion, namely, Kant's conception of knowledge as "a whole of cognition ordered according to principles."[8] The entry says little, however, about the unity ideal in later idealism. Nor do any of the works in its lengthy bibliography focus on the importance of the ideal there. Perhaps the mantra-like character of unity claims such as Schelling's has discouraged fine-grained analysis of the type that Karl Lamprecht's specific plans for achieving interdisciplinary unity have attracted.[9] In short, scholars have tended to speak about the rise of the unity-of-knowledge ideal around 1800 in broad terms even when their subject is the discourse of university reform in which the ideal played such a vital part.

This is indeed the case in two of the most important works on the formation of the modern university produced in the last fifty years—R. Steven Turner's "The Prussian Universities and the Research Imperative, 1806–1848," and Thomas Albert Howard's *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern University*. Turner addresses the unity-of-knowledge ideal at length, but the point of his observations isn't to explore why the university reformers were so profoundly invested in it. Turner's goal, rather, is to distinguish one notion of unity—the synthesizing notion of the idealists—from another—the analytic notion of the philologists and historians who helped initiate a kind of empirical turn in the 1830s.[10] The analytic conception, Turner says, was articulated best by the philologist August Boeckh, who extolled the individual scholar capable of recognizing "in the depths of his limited object the idea of the whole in microcosm."[11] For his part, Howard repeatedly remarks on how Schelling and Schleiermacher appealed to the principle of the unity of knowledge in their discussions of university reform, but his observations in this regard are mostly summaries and paraphrases. Like Turner, Howard doesn't fully consider the intellectual, political, and social purposes served by the unity-of-knowledge ideal.[12]

Yet the unity ideal invites political interpretations, and not just because of the connection Galison, Daston, and others have stressed. If a synchronous relationship between scientific unity and political unification could be posited, could there not also be a similar relationship between intellectual totality and totalitarianism? After the Second World War, a number of writers pointed to such a link. In *Minima moralia* (1951), his "reflections"

from a life damaged by fascism, Theodor Adorno claimed that "the whole is false," thereby inverting Hegel's dictum "the true is the whole."[13] Writing with Max Horkheimer, Adorno had gone at least as far in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). There Horkheimer and Adorno identified a causal relation between the Nazi hatred of "foreign elements" and hostility to difference on the part of philosophical systems that operate according to the logic of conceptual understanding.[14] Elaborating this thought in *Minima moralia*, Adorno condemns Friedrich Schiller for wanting to derive social reality from just "one principle" and speaks darkly of the mindset that characterizes such a desire: "In the innermost chambers of humanism, as its actual soul, an anger rages in its imprisonment; as a fascist, it turns the whole world into a prison."[15]

Writing less epigrammatically, the historian of science Anne Harrington has traced the lines of "holism in German culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler." Her goal isn't to show that German holism necessarily culminated in the Nazi variant of it, but neither does she portray that variant as unwarranted. Nazism is a part of German holism, which Harrington follows back to Goethe's "vision of wholeness"—a "science of life" in which "the products of nature and art [were] treated one as the other, aesthetic and teleological judgment mutually illuminating each other."[16] The association is of course suggestive.

Although she emphasizes the diversity of holism in Germany, Harrington views German holism more generally as a hostile response to what were taken to be Newton's atomizing, mechanistic theories. The writings of late nineteenth-century German university professors offer a treasure trove of general support for this perspective. "Almost everybody [in the academic community] by 1900 complained of the decline of the unity of science and scholarship," Charles McClelland has observed.[17] More specifically, many intellectuals and scholars associated threats to the unity-of-knowledge dream not only with increasing specialization, as Mommsen and other liberal scholars did, but also with what they regarded as the nightmarish aspects of modernity: the growing domination of technology in nearly all areas of life, democratization, social fragmentation, materialism, rootless individualism, and so on. They mixed an epistemological lament with conservative social theory. Intellectual culture—and society along with it—was succumbing to centrifugal forces, which remained ominously abstract but for their devastating effects.

For decades, educated elites repeatedly argued that what was needed was a recommitment to the whole for which the unity-of-knowledge ideal provided the best model. Devotion to intellectual unity became a symbol

signifying an allegiance to "true learning" and much more: the deeply held spiritual values that distinguished German *Kultur*, despite its present condition, from the mere "civilization" of the West. In 1914 German academics and intellectuals celebrated the outbreak of war in just these terms. The philosopher Alois Riehl, for example, wrote, "The belief in the reality of the intellectual and spiritual world, in the life of the whole which transcends the existence of the individual, this belief, which awoke in all of us during the early days of August, must never more die out."[18]

Political and social conservatives weren't alone in worrying about the modern German university. Its capture by capital and an ever-expanding state bureaucracy and the splintering of their research structure—trends accelerated by the tumult of the Weimar Republic—threatened cultural coherence and social stability. And philosophers, philologists, and historians weren't the only ones to appeal to the unity ideal. Well into the twentieth century, German natural and physical scientists (as we will see in later chapters) regularly invoked it as well, often when in roles of institutional leadership, as an orienting and definitive ideal for all German scholars and universities.

The links between the discourse of unities and wholes and reactionary dispositions, however, are clear enough to have led to forms of what Michael André Bernstein calls "backshadowing." This, as its name suggests, is foreshadowing in reverse.[19] When discussing how figures like Humboldt understood and used the unity-of-knowledge ideal, prominent intellectuals and scholars projected backward the use of neo-humanist tropes in the reactionary discourse that flourished around 1900, making the early neo-humanists sound like fretful late nineteenth-century mandarins. Some of Humboldt's most influential writings on university reform weren't discovered until the 1890s, and it was not until the early 1900s that the myth of Humboldt as the founder of modern higher education was constructed by men like Adolf von Harnack and Eduard Spranger, both of whom were quite selective in their exaltations. The centenary celebrations for the University of Berlin around 1910 provided an international platform for the creative reimagining of German neo-humanism.

Having been established in the early twentieth century, this reinvented neo-humanist tradition became the prism through which later scholars understood nineteenth-century concepts and institutions now primarily associated with Humboldt. Anthony La Vopa, for instance, has claimed that Humboldt conceived of his proposal to "unify all branches of knowledge" as the "unitary antidote" to the "modern" ill of "specialization."[20] In his account of Humboldt's reform efforts in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979),

Jean-Francois Lyotard focuses on what he takes to be Humboldt's most important suggestion—that philosophy "must *restore* unity to learning" (emphasis added).[21]

The unity-of-knowledge ideal elevated the pedant to a priest and the student to a scholar by endowing learning with a systematic, almost holy end: the promise of coherence and a higher calling. Not only would those engaged in pure learning hover above mundane vocational study; they would be doing so in the service of a grand objective that required systematic thought yet had a sacred, Romantic resonance. In addition, the unity-of-knowledge ideal played an important role in the struggle to overturn the well-established hierarchy of the faculties in universities, which situated arts and sciences below the professional faculties. What Turner calls the synthesizing version of the unity ideal claimed a privileged place for philosophy in the university. As Kant stressed in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), an essential text for neo-humanist reformers of higher education, philosophical thinking could be brought to bear on any area of knowledge; thus, it allowed for meaningful exchange among different fields. No mere preparatory discipline, philosophy, as the idealists conceived of it, was, in Frederick Beiser's phrase, the "foundation of all knowledge."[22] When practiced well (or "critically"), philosophy could sustain meaningful thought and communication across university fields; it could unify a notoriously hierarchical and, for many, archaic, guild-like institution.[23] More, too, than a regulative ideal for the organization of the university, the notion of the unity of knowledge had direct implications for the practice of scholarship. Scholars from across the university used the ideal to define their once diffuse domains of scholarly interest as distinct and valuable disciplines.[24]

Fittingly, the unity-of-knowledge ideal also brought together some ideas and values that both antimodern and progressive discourses appropriated, such as the veneration of community. In part, the ideal's conceptual and semantic flexibility gave it widespread traction and became a core component of the modern research university. But if the unity-of-knowledge ideal was an epistemological value, an organizational principle, a piece of ideology, and a Romantic trope, it was also something more. Or rather, being all those, the unity-of-knowledge ideal early on became a rhetorical flashpoint: a privileged vehicle for articulating crucial anxieties, fears, and hopes. Indeed, in marshaling the unity ideal, neo-humanist educational reformers of the early 1800s express a motif central to *Permanent Crisis*: the idea that the processes of democratization, secularization, and bureaucratic rationalization make liberal education possible even as they imperil it. This, we believe, is what accounts for the extraordinary force of the unity-of-knowledge ideal and why,

even after idealist philosophical systems lost much of their influence, the discourse surrounding the ideal remained crucial to the debate about the well-being of universities in the context of distinctly Western modernity.

THE CAREERIST SCHOLAR VERSUS THE PHILOSOPHICAL MIND

If Max Weber delivered the requiem for the ideal of the unity of knowledge in the 1917 lecture that became the book *Scholarship as Vocation*, then Friedrich Schiller announced the advent of the ideal in 1789 with his inaugural lecture at the University of Jena, "What Is Universal History and Why Study It?" When he accepted a faculty position at Jena, Schiller probably had few illusions about university life there. He had visited Jena two years earlier and written to a friend that the students, almost a fifth of the city's population, smoked in the streets, brawled in the pubs, and emptied their chamber pots out of their windows and onto unsuspecting pedestrians. "The students delight in terrorizing honest citizens," he wrote.[25]

But in his inaugural lecture, Schiller used the study of history to consider a different threat facing the university: an instrumental and utilitarian relationship to education and knowledge among students—and faculty. In so doing, he helped standardize some of the idioms that would characterize German debates about university reform and intellectual vocation for the next century and more.

Addressing a crowd of more than four hundred students and faculty, Schiller began by describing the wrong and right attitudes toward the study of universal history, a prominent topic among late eighteenth-century German intellectuals, who, like their Scottish contemporaries, sought meaning and reason in history, not just singular events. To grasp the unity of the past and understand its relationship to a meaningful future required not only what Kant had called an "idea" of a universal history but also a hopeful and expectant disposition.[26] The wrong disposition, said Schiller, is that of the "careerist scholar" (*Brotgelehrte*). The careerist, evidently a pervasive figure at German universities, cares about getting the maximum reward, in terms of money or prestige, from the smallest investment of time and energy. Uninspired and therefore uninspiring, lazy but also competitive, he seeks to protect his expertise by insulating it from other fields and from new knowledge and by impugning whatever might force him to expand or revise his learning. "There is thus no more implacable enemy, no more small-minded bureaucrat, no one more willing to excommunicate their foes" than a careerist scholar.[27] To label someone a careerist scholar was to render an intellectual and a moral judgment against him as not only a bad scholar but also

a bad social actor, an impediment to the communal striving after the whole of knowledge.[28]

But the careerist scholar is also a tragic figure. "It is an unfortunate man," Schiller claims, "who works with the noblest of all tools—science and art—yet wants and achieves nothing greater than the day laborer with the most common tools! Who roams the kingdom of the most perfect freedom bearing with him the soul of a slave!"[29] This, of course, raises the question, How is it that the careerist scholar comes by his low soul? Like all too many people, he puts crude and immediate gain over the higher reward. His doing so is particularly sad, since the higher reward in his case is the highest reward, namely, "the most perfect freedom." But the general phenomenon is clearly widespread. Not everyone can be like Schiller, who forsook economic security and risked incarceration to pursue his calling of artistic creation and open-ended study.

Though he doesn't rule out the possibility that his lecture might convert the careerist scholar to his own higher account of the scholarly life, Schiller seems more concerned about the "young man of genius" who begins to act like a careerist scholar, someone who

> lets himself be talked into gathering knowledge with a wretched fixation on his future profession. His professional scholarly field will soon disgust him as a piecemeal patchwork; desires will awaken within him that he cannot satisfy; his genius will rebel against his destiny. . . . He will see no purpose in his work, and yet he will not be able to bear the absence of that purpose. The arduous labors and insignificance of his professional activities will crush him, because he cannot oppose to them the cheerful spirits that accompany only keen insight and the prospect of completion. He will feel cut off, torn away from the context of things, because he has failed to connect his efforts to the great totality of the world.[30]

How is it that the young man of genius "lets himself be talked into" vocationalism, that "wretched fixation on his future profession," in the first place? At this point, what might have come to mind among Schiller's listeners was the campaign for utilitarian education that had recently led to the founding of professional academies for mining, medicine, and other fields, as well as the popularity at German universities of "cameral studies," basically professional training for aspiring bureaucrats.[31]

Although Schiller moves on from the anatomy of the careerist scholar, the second part of his lecture might have prompted his audience to consider further why a young man of genius would opt for isolation over "completion," meaning, and "intellectual community." For in this section, Schil-

ler offers big-picture ideas that suggest what might be motivating the gifted careerist. With news of revolutionary activity in Paris creating much excitement among Jena intellectuals, Schiller laid out nothing less than a vision of historical progress. He describes how the supplanting of the rule of superstition and ignorance by a rational order has created peace and security (where there had been endless war), tamed the environment, led to the promulgation of "wise laws," and brought about an ever-greater measure of "truth, ethical development, and freedom." Humans had "fled from the blind compulsion of accident and poverty to the gentler rule of contracts, and given up the freedom of the beast of prey to salvage the nobler freedom of humanity."[32]

Unlike Rousseau, who had portrayed humans in their precivilized state as superior to their descendants, Schiller characterized early humans as creatures at the mercy of their own fears and hatreds who in many cases "had barely raised their language from animal sounds into a system of comprehensible signs." Even the classical world looks bad in comparison with the present: "The shadow of a Roman emperor, persisting on this side of the Apennines, does infinitely more good now than the terrifying original did in ancient Rome, for it holds a useful state system together through concord, while the earlier one crushed the most active human powers into a slavish homogeneity."[33] According to Schiller, human reason, indeed, reinvents institutions built in less rational times: "It is true that some barbaric remnants of previous ages have made their way into ours as well—the products of chance and violence, which should not be perpetuated in the age of reason. But what shape has human reason conferred upon even this barbaric legacy of antiquity and the Middle Ages! How harmless, or even useful, reason has often made what it has not yet dared do away with!"[34]

Anticipating the accounts of a modern society he would offer in *On the Aesthetic Education of Humankind* (1794) and *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), Schiller suggests in the inaugural lecture that this historical process of rationalization, however salutary, has fragmenting effects. He also implies that the world of "bourgeois advantages" produced by rationalization is one where self-interest largely reigns. Indeed, culture itself is a function of the desire for status. One critic has even written that in the inaugural lecture Schiller conceives of culture as "nothing other than the drive for distinction."[35] In certain areas, our "wise laws" push back against the inequality to which this drive leads. In others, self-interest itself helps ensure the smooth functioning of those laws—for example, treaties that aim at keeping world powers from going to war. Yet self-interest and the drive for distinction also compromise our use of the "nobler freedom" of thought that rationalization has allowed for (by clearing away superstition and lib-

erating so many of us from the constant struggle with necessity). "Narrow judgments stemming from self-interest" foreshorten our understanding of world history, with the result that we see ourselves merely as "individuals" rather than as parts of a meaningful whole: "the species."[36]

Here, then, Schiller offers an implicit explanation for why even those young men of genius fated for nobler freedom allow themselves to be talked into going the way of the careerist scholar, who chases "praise from newspapers" and "honorary professorships" more than truth—and often at its expense. In gesturing toward such a dynamic, Schiller could have been thinking about the University of Göttingen, at the time the most prestigious university in the German territories and the prime example of academic mercantilism. Founded in 1737 under the direction of Karl Friedrich Hieronymus Münchhausen, it was explicitly established to make money for the state, which is why some of the university's own faculty referred to it as "a big commercial enterprise." It is also why satirists—much as some do in the United States today—had fun with the idea that higher education had become a service set up to attract paying customers (especially wealthy young Englishmen looking for a continental adventure) whom it brazenly catered to in its course offerings.[37]

But while Göttingen was known for its emphasis on cameral studies, it was also famous for its strength in the liberal arts, and a much higher percentage of students enrolled in the arts and philosophy faculty than at other German universities. Münchhausen had decided that hiring star academics in the liberal arts and sciences would attract wealthy students from out of state, who had to pay higher tuition than their local counterparts. Not only that, Münchhausen designed a university that encouraged his famous employees to burnish their reputations further and thus increase their appeal in the eyes of young aristocrats looking for a fashionably well-rounded education. (This was a courtly trend that existed alongside the Enlightenment preference for utilitarian schooling.) In 1789 the University of Göttingen library held thirty thousand volumes, far more than its competitors. And Göttingen's many luminaries—for example, the philologist Christian Heyne and the biblical scholar Johann Michaelis—had more freedom to study and write as they chose than humanists elsewhere. The theology faculty's power to censor the faculty of arts and philosophy—a fact of life at German universities at the time—was greatly reduced at Göttingen.

Many Göttingen scholars used their freedom to good effect. Yet Münchhausen's rationalizing of a ("barbaric") medieval institution, which involved steering it away from the old guild ethos, didn't facilitate intellectual exploration alone. Göttingen's emphasis on scholarly productivity and reputation—and the financial rewards the university offered for these things—