

From Specialism to Amateurishness: Opening the Compass from the University to the World

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In the case of natural realities, understanding their origin helps explain their present and imagine their future. This is as true of birds, forests, and earthquakes, as it is of mushrooms, butterflies, and volcanoes. It is even truer of self-reproducing social artifacts, such as countries, institutions, and academic disciplines. A historical account of their emergence is useful to gain perspective on the life cycle of academic specialties, their metamorphoses, variations, and survival strategies. At or near the turn of the century, essays were written and sometimes discussed publicly on the past and future of Hispanism in an end-of-paradigm exercise in self-reflection. These essays explored the discipline's institutional origins and conditions, a number of them advancing proposals for adapting it to new social demands, such as incorporating sexuality and gender studies, popular culture, postcolonial studies, and literary theory, among others. I contributed my fair share to those discussions, so I can spare the reader the repetition of my viewpoint of yesteryear, although in the main I still hold it valid today, allowance made for the further decline of the discipline as it was known in the twentieth century. The immediate motif for the apparent urgency of those paradigm-exhaustion considerations was the spillover from the crisis of the humanities. Although Hispanists considered themselves immune on account of the popularity of their medium, there was widespread discomfort with the low academic status to which reliance on language for instructional appeal seemed to condemn the discipline. At the height of the rage for theory sweeping across the American campuses like a new religion, the remedy was thought to consist in the infusion of theoretical discourses, taken wholesale from the sources of prestige and applied like a band-aid on Hispanism's wounded pride. Hence the pitiful epigonism of those years.

Those were also the years when alarm was sounded about the bureaucratization of universities, in a process that has advanced inexorably since then, dismantling departments and disemboweling entire disciplines. In the spring of 1998, the journal *Minerva* published an article by Åse Gornitzka, Svein Kyvik, and Ingvild Marheim Larsen titled "The Bureaucratization of Universities," based mostly on Norwegian data but highlighting international trends. The authors found that over the last quarter of the twentieth century, in many countries

administrative expenditure grew relatively more than expenditure on teaching and research (33).

One of the reasons they found for this transformation was increased pressure to satisfy external expectations. That is, universities were increasingly asked to satisfy complex and diverse demands from outside interests. Those responsible for their guidance tended to heed the calls of resource-dependence theory, which emphasized that institutions should tailor their activities to meet the demands of those providing the resources. Another reason was the pressure to conform. Institutional theory focuses on the normative aspect of environments and organizational adaptation, that is on institutions influencing each other through the dissemination of values and notions of what is appropriate. Conformity to prevailing institutional myths is a way of obtaining legitimacy. Such myths rely on symbolic efficiency and can take the form of temporary adoption of fads or fashions. As the authors of this study point out, universities often find themselves in ambiguous situations and one way out of their quandary is to conform to current fashions (35).

The authors mention other factors in the bureaucratizing trend, but the two just mentioned seem the most influential and, in any case, the ones with the strongest impact on our discipline. Let us consider them in turn. Departments of Hispanic studies, by whichever name they go, are not recipients of significant external funding; as a result, their resource dependence may be considered negligible. But this is true only if the *raison d'être* of these departments is forgotten and their operation taken for granted. In the United States, the first chair of Spanish studies, created at Harvard, was endowed by Boston merchants who considered training in Spanish necessary for business, mostly in Latin America. This original charter remains at the core of the mission of these departments. Whatever their self-given legitimation, they owe their existence to continued demand for training in the language for professional reasons, making them in practice units for vocational training. Such form of underwriting is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because the presence of the language in the United States and throughout most of the area of US influence guarantees its demand for any foreseeable future. A curse, because this preeminent asset, for the most part detached from content and often even from context, undermines the discipline's intellectual prestige. Resource dependence, in the case of Hispanism, thus refers less to the endowing of chairs or awarding of external grants and gifts than to enrollment which, for the most part, is driven by society's demand for practical communicational skill in Spanish. Thus far universities have allowed departments to delegate this mandate to lecturers and teaching assistants, but as resource pressure increases, it often falls to tenure-line faculty to tend to those more basic aspects of the discipline. Awareness of their narrow dependence on this particular resource explains the disinclination of many departments of Spanish to follow germane departments in teaching classes in English, i.e., teaching courses where content rather than medium is the message.

Thus ensues the paradox that the very bread and butter of these departments keeps them from participating at a higher level in the university's hierarchy of prestige. Failure to achieve the desired upgrade can be measured both quantitatively, in departmental shrinkage across the country, and qualitatively, in the loss

of a clear standard of outcomes apart from the language competence that summarizes the discipline's public achievement.

This is the place where institutional theory can help explain the contortions observed during the last few decades, as the discipline's outline shifted in response to normative pressures from within the university and across universities. Most of the change occurred by virtue of the tendency of scholars to mimic the current signs of success. At a certain point, almost everyone was employing some form of Marxist rhetoric. Later the emancipatory commitment turned to popular culture and cultural studies, followed by post-coloniality, women's issues, sexuality and race, immigration and border studies. A post-Castro interest in Spanish-Arabic culture arose with the rise of Islamism to the center of geopolitical conflict. Africanism is in, as are social movements, drug trafficking, the economic crisis, and current events of all kinds; anything that glitters with the promise of relevance, however fleeting. In the midst of these kaleidoscopic variations of focus, it is impossible to discern a common thread or essential core. The discipline's tectonic plates are shifting, causing entire continents to sink and new ones to emerge. If they, too, sink in turn before new life has enough time to develop, one can at least find cause for exhilaration in their infinite potential. There may be no discipline-in-itself, but there is endless phenomenal variation.

If at the end of the millennium the situation was one of theory-envy by a symbolically castrated Hispanism, years later, when the decline of the humanities had overtaken the once-powerful English departments, some placed their sights on the sciences as bearers of prestige and prime capturers of the university's resources. Of late a scientific turn in the humanities has become discernible, as if rubbing shoulders with the scientists, tapping into their vocabulary or evoking their issues could restore relevance to the humanities and raise their value in the eyes of a technology-invested society. But this is yet another will-o'-the-wisp. It is not by importing terminology or applying a patina of science that a discipline becomes scientific. For the objects of science, science suffices. It has no need of a shadow representation in the order of symbolic thought. In that realm, at any rate, the philosophy of science already exists. Thus, if a literature of science is possible, the notion of a science of literature is absurd, notwithstanding the German expression *Literaturwissenschaft*, where *wissenschaft* means something different from the English word "science." Attempts to endow literary criticism with the rigor of scientific systems of symbolization, as in structuralism, did not result in methodological continuity as exists in the sciences, where paradigm changes allow knowledge to be built up over the long term.

But yearning for theoretical legitimation can also be interpreted as an effort in self-understanding, a form of the need for reflection on the human condition and the mystery of its presence in the world. In the same way that this mystery occasioned religion and philosophy to arise, and eventually everything we subsume under the umbrella term "the humanities," the crisis-related insecurity drove Hispanism to ask the radical question about its institutional existence. When in the 1990s a keynote speaker at the MLA drew an ovation by calling for the production of a Hispanic-specific theory, most people in the audience understood it in light of the theory-envy noted above. In other words, in a competitive spirit with cognate organizational units, such as French departments with their

towering poststructuralist figures; German departments with the Frankfurt School and the Konstanz School as solid bulwarks; Slavic departments with their Formalists and their Bakhtin; even Italian departments with Gramsci and Vattimo, soon to be followed by Agamben, Esposito, and others.

There are, of course, worthy philosophers in the Spanish-speaking countries, but with rare exceptions—Ortega y Gasset being the only one ever to come close to the interdisciplinary popularity expected of a “theorist”—they have remained confined to their professional quarters, ignored by Spanish departments, let alone other academic units. The problem may lie in the nature of the demand. What the audience of that keynote speaker applauded was not a call for “theory” in the abstract, which was amply available at the time, but for theory that emanated from the character and content of the discipline, however defined. In other words, for theory that could be recognized as “ours” and over which Hispanism could assert proprietary rights.

At the time, no one seems to have noticed that the cultural specificity required of the theory undermined the aspiration to universal validity (and recognition). Even less was it noticed that the mirroring of other people’s penchant for “theory” reaffirmed the epigonism implicitly rejected in calling for a theory of one’s own. Still, desire for a Hispanic theory revealed a need for self-reflection. Indeed, what could a Hispanic theory be if not a theory of Hispanism? In other words, a historically grounded theory of the rise of the discipline and the functions it has served over time. It is true that the original object of study, namely a broad cultural community bonded by the Spanish language, had been “theorized,” that is to say, posited, by the Spanish Generation of ’98 and Latin American authors like José Vasconcelos. But much of the reflection on *Hispanidad* produced by Unamuno, Ganivet, Maeztu and others were theories of the nation, with a crucial element of national psychology as its cornerstone. Even someone as removed from the men of ’98 as María Zambrano was unable to escape the gravitational force of the national. In books like *España, sueño y verdad*, published in exile, she goes over the same Castilian myths and the same preoccupation with the secret of Spain, the mystery of its difference from European civilization, its “originality,” which is to say, its exceptionality, as had the authors of the Generation of ’98. She rehashed the themes of Spain’s evasion from history, its *ensimismamiento* (142), Don Juan, the Cid, Don Quixote, and other icons and commonplaces of national psychology. Zambrano approached these topics lyrically, yet in her meditations a country emerges that is forever captive of its myths. Her poetic style, possessed of sensual brilliance, detracts from the philosophical rigor without achieving historical solvency.

A properly historical theory of Hispanicity was undertaken by Xavier Rubert de Ventós in his 1987 book *El laberinto de la Hispanidad*, a reflection on Spain’s action in the New World. The inattention in which Rubert’s important work, as well as his other books on aesthetics, ethics, and politics, has been held goes a long way toward proving that the reason for the theory deficit of Hispanism was not so much scarcity of thought as a question of directionality (i.e., to what market it was oriented) and glamour. In the last analysis, it was a matter of access to the dominant markets, and Hispanists rarely participate in the most exclusive circuits of symbolic exchange. This is to some extent because early on they set house apart

and kept to their own circuits, but also because, having finally turned to “theory,” they neglect their own theorists, bypassing them in favor of the seemingly wiser masters of the roads more traveled.

One instance of theoretical deference: although the study of Hispanism always combined the study of the metropolis and its former colonies, in the last decade of the twentieth century that post-imperial paradigm was rehashed and served up as a novelty under the name of transatlantic studies. In 1993, the prestigious Harvard University Press published Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, promoting the idea of intercontinental black culture spreading from Africa to America. Race was the primary link in the proposed cultural commonality, an evident challenge to the “white Atlantic” taken for granted in the European heritage of the Americas. But the idea of transnational cultural commonality across the Atlantic, in this case through the bond of language, was Hispanism’s foundation stone. The discipline had emerged from interest in the cultural and historical links between Spain and what for a long time used to be called Spanish America. Hispanism was born, in other words, of the interest in a Spanish or Hispanic Atlantic. But by the 1990s, Spanish America was no more and the designation Latin America, originally intended to differentiate it from “Anglo-America,” was now employed to remove the former Spanish colonies from any cultural identification with Spain. By then, the intellectual cleft between the American and the European wings of the still nominally unified discipline had grown to the point of mutual indifference and even rivalry. George Bernard Shaw’s dictum about the United States and Great Britain being two countries separated by a common language had become true of Hispanism’s two sections. In that context, Gilroy’s move to introduce transcontinental Black studies at the heart of history and English departments inspired some Hispanists to rebuild bridges over the ocean in the name of epistemological commonality without according genealogical value to geography or preference to historical causality.

Theory had come and gone without producing any major transformations in the classroom. Since that obscure object of desire was nothing if not an instance of Lacanian lack, it could not backstop the discipline’s ontological deficiency and gradual deflation. In this environment, Iberian studies was a half-baked attempt to promote inclusiveness in the study of the Iberian Peninsula and the cultures it had spawned. Since its emergence as a paradigm in the early years of this century, political developments have justified the call for a broader and deeper understanding of Iberian diversity by studying the inextricable relations among its various cultures. I have said that implementation was half-baked, because, although the concept gained currency through the decision of many departments to rename themselves or their programs, a good number of them merely changed the label without replacing the contents. As had happened in the past with the term “Spanish,” which had once included all the languages and cultures of the Iberian Peninsula, the dominant culture again appropriated the general term for its particular purposes. Complexity was once more reduced without visible consequences.

It follows that the deeper sense of a culture must be grasped in terms of what it suppresses, i.e., of what it does *not* want to be, and in this vocation for exclusion and its denial may lie the reason for Hispanism’s insufficient reflexivity, in short

for its deficit of theory. And since only like can understand like, a theory of Iberian studies from the viewpoint of Hispanism would be blind. Such a theory and the attendant practices can only arise from engaging with the object itself. It requires considering the data from the perspective of the other parts of the intercultural system. Ultimately, though, Iberian studies can neither solve Hispanism's problems nor, seemingly, reject its legacy. Because of its institutional location, it remains in thrall to the Spanish language's vocational appeal, which reduces the scope of the intercultural system for students and faculty alike. Iberian studies came too late upon the scene. If it had arrived during the expansive 1960s, it might have taken root and developed an institutional structure. But arising when the decline of the humanities was well underway, it met with double adversity in the retrenching of the disciplines in general and the inertia when not open hostility from Hispanism in particular.

Everywhere humanities departments are scaling down or disappearing both in private and public schools, constrained by society's demand for practical, job-oriented education as a commodity purchased with high tuition dollars. No project adding cultural and linguistic complexity can thrive in an environment of lowered curricular expectations. The present horizon of nominal implementation in the few departments where, by chance more than by design, individual faculty happen to be attracted to the idea, may be the upper limit for that well-intentioned paradigm.

Attempts have not been lacking on the part of humanities faculty to defend their disciplines against the alacrity with which administrators, boards of trustees, and legislators have deprived them of resources to invest them elsewhere. In *The Fall of the Faculty*, Benjamin Ginsberg details how many schools have reduced liberal arts core requirements by significant percentages in response to students asking to be allowed to concentrate more on vocational or professional programs, limiting or entirely eliminating their exposure to the general education that used to be the mark of quality education and the gateway to responsible citizenship (172–79). Foreign languages and the associated content courses are among the most dispensable objects when curricular planning shifts to “skills,” as defined by employers. Job-specific training in lieu of training in expression, cultural nimbleness, and comprehension of unfamiliar ways of thinking may in the end not only turn out to inhibit the growth of character, but also may render such pedagogy vulnerable to obsolescence in a swiftly changing job market. Iberian studies, perhaps counterintuitively, envisioned enhanced cultural flexibility and the ability to switch points of view within a kaleidoscopic foreign culture seemingly fragmented but held together by strong historical, cultural and political bonds.

Over the long term, Hispanism could be replaced by some form of language training for the professions decked out with frills. In the meantime, those who, like the wise pig, took up residence in the brick house of Latin American studies may not be concerned about the fate of the straw hut of their post-imperial partners. But only time will tell if their seemingly solid roof is not leaking also. Consolidation being the current watchword and tenure-track lines disappearing fast, a time might come when only a few lucky people will teach samples of Spanish or Latin American themes chosen for pleasure and ease in departments of general

culture. Specialties will be remembered as regions of a fabled continent once inhabited by an extinct species of scholars.

The expansion of the universities in the 1960s permitted the creation of out-sized departments with large graduate programs to service the demand for lower division courses, including well-enrolled language courses. In trickle-up effect, recruitment of graduate students to staff language programs required an increase in faculty lines to service those students' plans of study. In recent years, the steep drop in the number of humanities majors, combined with a rise in the hiring of adjuncts, has severely cut the tenure-track faculty lines, in turn impacting the size of graduate programs across the board. An academic market saturated with PhDs competing for a dwindling number of jobs raises ethical questions about admitting graduate students with virtually no employment prospects in academia. And as departments come to grips with the reality of divestment in their programs and the drying up of positions for their PhDs, they find themselves treading unknown territory as regards coverage requirements and the purpose of a graduate degree. The disappearance of the specialist is already established fact, and now the requirement of extreme flexibility and unlimited adaptation spells the demise of the scholar. The future belongs to the dabbler.

But as with every crisis, the current impasse is also an opportunity to reinvent the role of the professor and the purpose of academic life. The wholesale elimination of entire periods, regions, languages, traditions, and even programs in the name of efficiency means that an ever-smaller forum will remain available for the dissemination of research in those areas. The disappearance of the audience can only lead to the disappearance of the discourses developed to communicate with that audience. One need look no further than the press catalogs to observe the general absence of books on the Iberian peninsula. This absence, with very few relevant exceptions in the US, reveals the lack of infrastructure supporting the field. The paucity of venues detracts from visibility, impacting the conditions for tenure and promotion, and inviting potential adherents to redirect their energies elsewhere.

Shrinking audiences, whether in the seminar room or in the library, set the mark of the profession's significance rather low. And because social pressures are responsible for the downturn of the disciplines and the vanishing of their former prestige, the way forward must be to engage those pressures where they originate, namely in society itself. Hence, the incentive for the scholar to once again leave the confines of the ivory tower to become a public intellectual. Dusting off a role fallen into disrepute when the universities were expanding and intellectuals professionalizing entails relinquishing the snug safety of academic settings and risking one's reputation in the great outdoors of opinion, where instead of collegial and, at any rate, restrained referees, thousands and even hundreds of thousands of opinionators of all colors and stripes determine the value of ideas.

Writing for non-specialists is the reverse side and also the logical effect of social opinion impinging ever more bluntly on the shape and purpose of education. For decades, the figure of the intellectual was as described by Edward Said when he wrote that "today's intellectual is most likely to be a closeted literature professor, with a secure income, and no interest in dealing with the world outside the

classroom” (70–71). Seclusion in a cozy atmosphere protected from social upheavals ended up breeding self-righteous thinking, made possible by the university’s relative defense of its autonomy. A bizarre consequence of seclusion was the development of a convoluted and largely unintelligible prose which, unchecked by candid readers, worked like the emperor’s clothes on fawning admirers. The discredit was temporarily postponed by shameless attacks on common sense, until the Sokal scandal pulled the plug on the charlatans.

Said identified the problem in the behavior academics are proud of, namely professionalism, by which he meant careerism. He described such behavior as advancing one’s personal agenda, thinking of one’s work as something one does for a living, “with one eye on the clock, and another cocked on what is considered to be proper, professional behavior—not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and ‘objective’” (74). Said’s counterproposal was amateurism, meaning “the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession” (76).

Many identify with such breadth of vision and most would probably lay claim to the non-philistine respect for the life of the mind implicit in Said’s description of the amateur, that is the lover of ideas before and beyond their ensnarement in the nets of a specialty. Yet amateurishness can run afoul of the precepts that regulate advancement in the institutional ladder. What the institution imposes at any time in the form of regulated opinion, asserted by peer pressure and administrative oversight, may run contrary to ethical judgement on the basis of intellectual freedom and commitment to the truth. In today’s devastated humanities, with tenured positions becoming more the exception than the norm across the American campuses, it may be too much to ask of the would-be-scholar that thinking and writing not be motivated by reward. But it may be possible, in the university’s growing de-professionalization of the humanities, to go beyond the ever-more-diffuse and arbitrary restrictions of the disciplines, crossing the lines in pursuit of ideas and of the larger picture, wherever they can be found.

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