

Rebuilding the Temple

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Call me cynical, but it's my belief that any effort to promote a curriculum focused on traditional values in today's academic culture will be promptly and thoroughly sabotaged by those assigned to teach it—which is why I think the best bet for traditionalists is to refocus on the Enlightenment inspired “temple of science” vision of a university, which at least has the virtue of being value-neutral.

Let's say that the American Council of Trustees and Alumni realizes one of its goals: persuading colleges and universities to make a course in American history part of the core curriculum. What sort of course will it be, given the current ideological proclivities of faculty?

Perhaps it will be like this one:

Race, Empire, and U.S. Foreign Policy: U.S. foreign policy from the 1890s to the present using the lenses of empire and race.

Or this one:

Comparative Race and Ethnicity in the United States: Examines the construction of race and ethnicity in the United States in an historical and comparative context. The foundational concept of this course is that race is

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a social construction that comes into being through both historical and continuing interaction between [*sic*] various groups within U.S. society.

These descriptions are taken verbatim from the 2011–2012 course catalog for the University of California, Merced, the newest branch of the ten-campus University of California (UC) system.¹ In an academic atmosphere like this—and UC Merced’s course offerings are unexceptionable these days—wouldn’t it be preferable to have no American history requirement at all?

Let’s turn to literature. Are students better off taking “Literature and Power: Strong theoretical frame based on Foucault and Post-structuralism, Colonial and Postcolonial studies” (more language from the UC Merced catalog) or no literature course at all?²

And what about social science? Is it better to sit through a course called “Hate Crime”—or just skip the social sciences altogether?

And even if, for example, the American history course were required to include readings from Tocqueville and the Federalist Papers, the literature course had to include Dante and Shakespeare, and the social science course were mandated to be something more than a critique of presumed racism and sexism, my bet is that the same old “empire and race,” “Foucault and Post-structuralism” would turn out to be the primary subject matter of these classes.

That is why I think our universities would serve their students better—and retain their respectability in the eyes of the parents, donors, and taxpayers who subsidize them—if they more or less forgot about the humanities and refashioned themselves into literal “temples of science.”

You can’t fudge with “race and empire” in an engineering class. Foucault and physics don’t go together unless you’re writing a parody of post-modernism, as physics professor Alan Sokal famously did in his 1998 *Social Text* article.³ In science and mathematics there is such a thing as truth—and also such a thing as beauty. You won’t be derided as “essentialist” or “belletristic” if you say so in class. And your students will have a better chance of finding a decent job after graduation.

¹“WCH 248: Race, Empire, and U.S. Foreign Policy,” “HIST 123: Comparative Race and Ethnicity in the United States,” *UC Merced General Catalog 2011–2013*, 177, 151, http://registrar.ucmerced.edu/sites/registrar/files/public/documents/UC_Merced_General_Catalog_2011_2013.pdf.

²“LIT 185: Literature and Power,” *UC Merced General Catalog*, 155.

³Alan Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text* 16, no. 46/47 (Spring/Summer 1996): 217–52.

The situation in the humanities may be changing, however, albeit glacially. My own academic field is medieval studies (I wrote my doctoral dissertation on thirteenth-century English religious poetry). Medieval studies is supposed to be the most conservative of disciplines because it requires a thorough grounding in Latin and the deciphering of medieval manuscripts. Such standards have slipped badly in many doctoral programs, and medievalist journals and book lists these days abound with “gender studies,” “hybridity,” and other poststructuralist buzzwords. The January 2012 issue of *Speculum* (vol. 87, no. 1), the premier medieval studies journal published by the Medieval Academy of America, contains not one but two entries in which English lit medievalists chide other English lit medievalists for going “belletristic” by refusing to dislodge Chaucer from pride of place in the “canon” (a dirty word among today’s literature professors). That would be Geoffrey Chaucer, one of the greatest writers in any language, but deemed too aristocratic in his tastes for today’s postmodernist levelers.

Still, a few years ago my dissertation advisor made a study of abstracts of recent medievalist dissertations in the ProQuest archives. He noticed a distinct trend away from Foucaultian and Derridean hoo-hah in favor of traditional manuscript studies and close readings of texts. This is a positive sign—although with poor tenure-track job prospects for Ph.D.’s these days, young scholars not fixated on ideology may never find permanent employment. Meanwhile, I suggest that universities focus their resources on science classes (something UC Merced already does) and that their students buy some Great Courses CDs if they would like to learn something coherent and nonpoliticized about the humanities.