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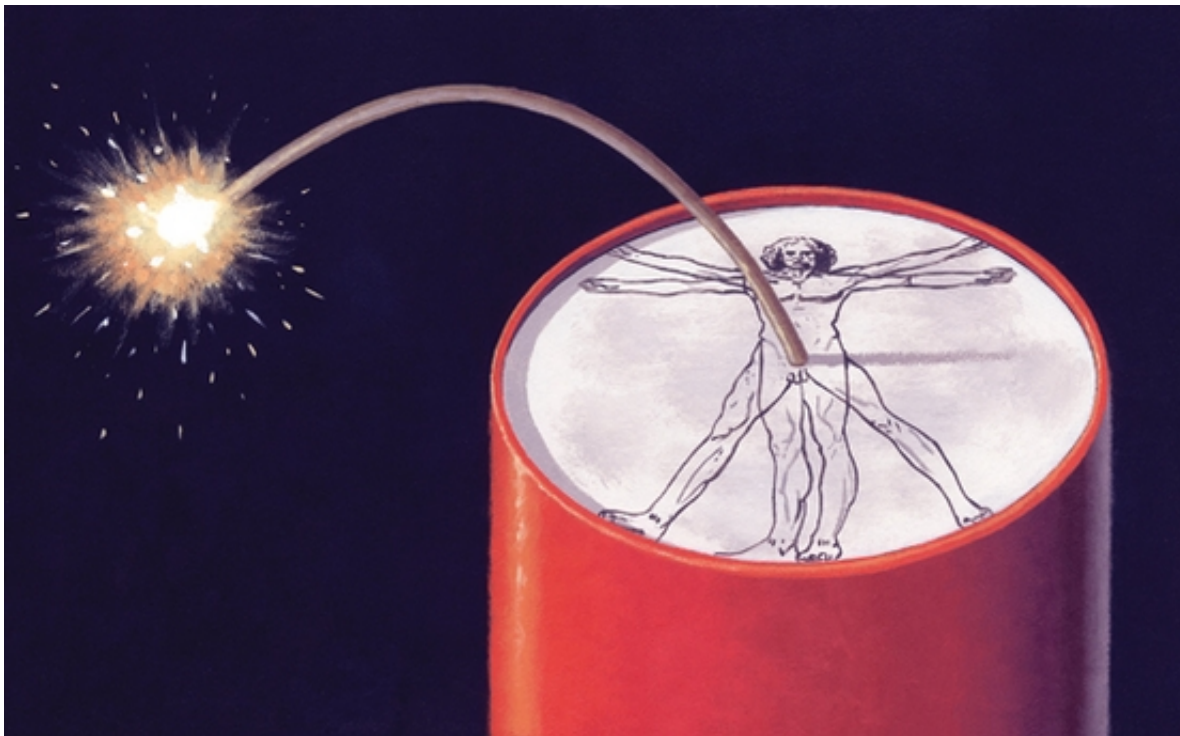
# Strategy for American humanities: blow them up and start again

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A declining, out-of-touch discipline and its vocational counterpart must merge to offer a thriving third way, argues Toby Miller



Credit: James Fryer

The humanities in the US are finished. They are unpopular with students, politicians and bureaucrats.

Students vote through enrolment. The humanities' share of majors stands at 8-12 per cent of the nation's

undergraduates. That's less than half the figure in the 1960s and the lowest point since the Second World War, apart from Ronald Reagan's recession.

Between 1970-71 and 2003-04, English majors declined from 7.6 to 3.9 per cent of the national total, other languages and literatures dropped from 2.5 to 1.3 per cent, philosophy and religious

studies fell from 0.9 to 0.7 per cent, and history decreased from 18.5 to 10.7 per cent. By contrast, business enrolment increased by 176 per cent and communication studies shot up 616 per cent.

The government's view? President Barack Obama's 2011 State of the Union address called for increased expenditure on mathematics and science. It did not mention the humanities. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided not a cent for humanities research: science received \$3 billion (£1.9 billion). The Republican Party has announced its desire to exterminate the National Endowment for the Humanities.

And administrators? They cut and cut.

Compared with other fields, the chances of tenure are poor: tenure-track hiring in language and literature occurs at two-thirds the national average. In 2009, just 53 per cent of humanities faculty were in full-time employment. An even smaller proportion had tenure.

Most people teaching the humanities work full-time in second-tier schools with gigantic course loads, often on limited-term contracts, or as "freeway professors", driving feverishly between jobs to cobble together a living.

And their worth is diminishing all the time. In 2003, health academics were paid on average \$6,000 more than in 1987, during which time the humanities average declined by \$1,000; in 2005-06, a business academic cost twice as much as a humanities one, compared with one and a half times as much 20 years earlier.

How did this happen? The turn away from the humanities is principally due to enrolment surges in public universities. The vast growth in higher education from the 1970s has taken place among the lower middle and working classes. They enrol in state institutions that are more vocational than private ones, with supply and demand far distant from narcissistic fantasies of small seminars and ethical self-styling.

Fifty years ago, the great political theorist Ralph Miliband, father of Labour's lugubrious twosome, addressed the state of the humanities in the US. He found a bizarre mix of "the hierarchical graces of Europe" and a "romantic vision of vanished America, rural, small-town, face-to-face" - something that never was versus something quickly lost. How right he was to identify the contingent nature of this fantasy.

There are two humanities in the US. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history and philosophy on one side (Humanities One) and communication studies on the other (Humanities Two).

Humanities One resides in fancy private universities, where the bourgeoisie and its favoured subalterns are tutored in finishing school. It is venerable, powerful and tends to determine how the sector is discussed in public - but almost no one studies it. Humanities Two is the humanities of everyday state institutions. It is focused more on job prospects but has no media profile. Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically.

This is a class division in terms of faculty research as well as student background, which corresponds to the way that federal funding fetishises the two humanities. It has to end.

The two humanities must merge if they are to survive and thrive. How? I suspect that the intellectual core of both is the struggle for meaning - what it is and how it is established and disestablished. This is central to historical interpretation, philosophical speculation, textual

analysis, linguistic training, legal precedent, political theory, religious superstition, cultural production, interpersonal communication and sociocultural organisation.

Synthesising and highlighting these commonalities inside a more comprehensive and materialist method could equip US students for contemporary citizenship and work. It would be Humanities Three: how meaning is made, circulated and received by the media, from plays to telenovelas. Traversing science, capital, fiction, sport, news, history and politics, it would focus on business, government, labour and demography.

The humanities in the UK operate differently, as does higher education in general. People here are channelled much more tightly into majors, while universities have very hierarchical decision-making and offer minimal autonomy from managerialism.

This is not liberal education in the classic US sense. The authoritarian attitudes to students here, and the narrowness of undergraduate education, offer striking contrasts.

In both countries for different reasons, blowing up the humanities may be necessary. But does that mean using an incendiary device or reinflating them as a *ballon d'essai*?

Postscript :

Toby Miller is professor of cultural industries at City University London and author of the newly published *Blow Up the Humanities*. He previously worked at the University of California, Riverside.