

The Slow Death of the University

By Terry Eagleton

(Article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 21st, 2015)

A few years ago, I was being shown around a large, very technologically advanced university in Asia by its proud president. As befitted so eminent a personage, he was flanked by two burly young minders in black suits and shades, who for all I knew were carrying Kalashnikovs under their jackets. Having waxed lyrical about his gleaming new business school and state-of-the-art institute for management studies, the president paused to permit me a few words of fulsome praise. I remarked instead that there seemed to be no critical studies of any kind on his campus. He looked at me bemusedly, as though I had asked him how many Ph.D.'s in pole dancing they awarded each year, and replied rather stiffly "Your comment will be noted." He then took a small piece of cutting-edge technology out of his pocket, flicked it open and spoke a few curt words of Korean into it, probably "Kill him." A limousine the length of a cricket pitch then arrived, into which the president was bundled by his minders and swept away. I watched his car disappear from view, wondering when his order for my execution was to be implemented.

This happened in South Korea, but it might have taken place almost anywhere on the planet. From Cape Town to Reykjavik, Sydney to São Paulo, an event as momentous in its own way as the Cuban revolution or the invasion of Iraq is steadily under way: the slow death of the university as a center of humane critique. Universities, which in Britain have an 800-year history, have traditionally been derided as ivory towers, and there was always some truth in the accusation. Yet the distance they established between themselves and society at large could prove enabling as well as disabling, allowing them to reflect on the values, goals, and interests of a social order too frenetically bound up in its own short-term practical pursuits to be capable of much self-criticism. Across the globe, that critical distance is now being diminished almost to nothing, as the institutions that produced Erasmus and John Milton, Einstein and Monty Python, capitulate to the hard-faced priorities of global capitalism.

Much of this will be familiar to an American readership. Stanford and MIT, after all, provided the very models of the entrepreneurial university. What has emerged in Britain, however, is what one might call Americanization without the affluence — the affluence, at least, of the American private educational sector.

This is even becoming true at those traditional finishing schools for the English gentry, Oxford and Cambridge, whose colleges have always been insulated to some extent against broader economic forces by centuries of lavish endowments. Some years ago, I resigned from a chair at the University of Oxford (an event almost as rare as an earthquake in Edinburgh) when I became aware that I was expected in some respects to behave less as a scholar than a CEO.

When I first came to Oxford 30 years earlier, any such professionalism would have been greeted with patrician disdain. Those of my colleagues who had actually bothered to finish their Ph.D.'s would sometimes use the title of "Mr." rather than "Dr.," since "Dr." suggested a degree of ungentlemanly labor. Publishing books was regarded as a rather vulgar project. A brief article every 10 years or so on the syntax of Portuguese or the dietary habits of ancient Carthage was considered just about permissible. There had been a time earlier when college tutors might not even have bothered to arrange set tutorial times for their undergraduates. Instead, the undergraduate would simply drop round to their rooms when the spirit moved him for a glass of sherry and a civilized chat about Jane Austen or the function of the pancreas.

Today, Oxbridge retains much of its collegial ethos. It is the dons who decide how to invest the college's money, what flowers to plant in their gardens, whose portraits to hang in the senior common room, and how best to explain to their students why they spend more on the wine cellar than on the college library. All important decisions are made by the fellows of the college in full session, and everything from financial and academic affairs to routine administration is conducted by elected committees of academics responsible to the body of fellows as a whole. In recent years, this admirable system of self-government has had to confront a number of centralizing challenges from the university, of the kind that led to my own exit from the place; but by and large it has stood firm. Precisely because Oxbridge colleges are for the most part premodern institutions, they have a smallness of scale about them that can serve as a model of decentralized democracy, and this despite the odious privileges they continue to enjoy.

Elsewhere in Britain, the situation is far different. Instead of government by academics there is rule by hierarchy, a good deal of Byzantine bureaucracy, junior professors who are little but dogsbodies, and vice chancellors who behave as though they are running General Motors. Senior professors are now senior managers, and the air is thick with talk of auditing and accountancy. Books — those troglodytic, drearily pretechnological phenomena — are

increasingly frowned upon. At least one British university has restricted the number of bookshelves professors may have in their offices in order to discourage "personal libraries." Wastepaper baskets are becoming as rare as Tea Party intellectuals, since paper is now passé.

Teaching has for some time been a less vital business in British universities than research. It is research that brings in the money, not courses on Expressionism or the Reformation.

Philistine administrators plaster the campus with mindless logos and issue their edicts in barbarous, semiliterate prose. One Northern Irish vice chancellor commandeered the only public room left on campus, a common room shared by staff and students alike, for a private dining room in which he could entertain local bigwigs and entrepreneurs. When the students occupied the room in protest, he ordered his security guards to smash the only restroom near to hand. British vice chancellors have been destroying their own universities for years, but rarely as literally as that. On the same campus, security staff move students on if they are found hanging around. The ideal would be a university without these disheveled, unpredictable creatures.

In the midst of this debacle, it is the humanities above all that are being pushed to the wall. The British state continues to distribute grants to its universities for science, medicine, engineering, and the like, but it has ceased to hand out any significant resources to the arts. It is not out of the question that if this does not change, whole humanities departments will be closed down in the coming years. If English departments survive at all, it may simply be to teach business students the use of the semicolon, which was not quite what Northrop Frye and Lionel Trilling had in mind.

Humanities departments must now support themselves mainly by the tuition fees they receive from their students, which means that smaller institutions that rely almost entirely on this source of income have been effectively privatized through the back door. The private university, which Britain has rightly resisted for so long, is creeping ever closer. Yet the government of Prime Minister David Cameron has also overseen a huge hike in tuitions, which means that students, dependent on loans and encumbered with debt, are understandably demanding high standards of teaching and more personal treatment in return for their cash at just the moment when humanities departments are being starved of funds.

Besides, teaching has been for some time a less vital business in British universities than research. It is research that brings in the money, not courses on Expressionism or the

Reformation. Every few years, the British state carries out a thorough inspection of every university in the land, measuring the research output of each department in painstaking detail. It is on this basis that government grants are awarded. There has thus been less incentive for academics to devote themselves to their teaching, and plenty of reason for them to produce for production's sake, churning out supremely pointless articles, starting up superfluous journals online, dutifully applying for outside research grants regardless of whether they really need them, and passing the odd pleasant hour padding their CVs.

In any case, the vast increase in bureaucracy in British higher education, occasioned by the flourishing of a managerial ideology and the relentless demands of the state assessment exercise, means that academics have had little enough time to prepare their teaching even if it seemed worth doing, which for the past several years it has not. Points are awarded by the state inspectors for articles with a bristling thicket of footnotes, but few if any for a best-selling textbook aimed at students and general readers. Academics are most likely to boost their institution's status by taking temporary leave of it, taking time off from teaching to further their research.

They would boost its resources even more were they to abandon academe altogether and join a circus, hence saving their financial masters a much grudging salary and allowing the bureaucrats to spread out their work among an already overburdened professoriate. Many academics in Britain are aware of just how passionately their institution would love to see the back of them, apart from a few household names who are able to pull in plenty of customers. There is, in fact, no shortage of lecturers seeking to take early retirement, given that British academe was an agreeable place to work some decades ago and is now a deeply unpleasant one for many of its employees. In an additional twist of the knife, however, they are now about to have their pensions cut as well.

As professors are transformed into managers, so students are converted into consumers. Universities fall over one another in an undignified scramble to secure their fees. Once such customers are safely within the gates, there is pressure on their professors not to fail them, and thus risk losing their fees. The general idea is that if the student fails, it is the professor's fault, rather like a hospital in which every death is laid at the door of the medical staff. One result of this hot pursuit of the student purse is the growth of courses tailored to whatever is currently in fashion among 20-year-olds. In my own discipline of English, that means vampires rather than Victorians, sexuality rather than Shelley, fanzines rather than Foucault, the contemporary world rather than the medieval one. It is thus that deep-seated political and

economic forces come to shape syllabuses. Any English department that focused its energies on Anglo-Saxon literature or the 18th century would be cutting its own throat.

Hungry for their fees, some British universities are now allowing students with undistinguished undergraduate degrees to proceed to graduate courses, while overseas students (who are generally forced to pay through the nose) may find themselves beginning a doctorate in English with an uncertain command of the language. Having long despised creative writing as a vulgar American pursuit, English departments are now desperate to hire some minor novelist or failing poet in order to attract the scribbling hordes of potential Pynchons, ripping off their fees in full, cynical knowledge that the chances of getting one's first novel or volume of poetry past a London publisher are probably less than the chances of awakening to discover that you have been turned into a giant beetle.

Education should indeed be responsive to the needs of society. But this is not the same as regarding yourself as a service station for neocapitalism. In fact, you would tackle society's needs a great deal more effectively were you to challenge this whole alienated model of learning. Medieval universities served the wider society superbly well, but they did so by producing pastors, lawyers, theologians, and administrative officials who helped to sustain church and state, not by frowning upon any form of intellectual activity that might fail to turn a quick buck.

Times, however, have changed. According to the British state, all publicly funded academic research must now regard itself as part of the so-called knowledge economy, with a measurable impact on society. Such impact is rather easier to gauge for aeronautical engineers than ancient historians. Pharmacists are likely to do better at this game than phenomenologists. Subjects that do not attract lucrative research grants from private industry, or that are unlikely to pull in large numbers of students, are plunged into a state of chronic crisis. Academic merit is equated with how much money you can raise, while an educated student is redefined as an employable one. It is not a good time to be a paleographer or numismatist, pursuits that we will soon not even be able to spell, let alone practice.

The effects of this sidelining of the humanities can be felt all the way down the educational system in the secondary schools, where modern languages are in precipitous decline, history really means modern history, and the teaching of the classics is largely confined to private institutions such as Eton College. (It is thus that the old Etonian Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, regularly lards his public declarations with tags from Horace.)

It is true that philosophers could always set up meaning-of-life clinics on street corners, or modern linguists station themselves at strategic public places where a spot of translation might be required. In general, the idea is that universities must justify their existence by acting as ancillaries to entrepreneurship. As one government report chillingly put it, they should operate as "consultancy organisations." In fact, they themselves have become profitable industries, running hotels, concerts, sporting events, catering facilities, and so on.

If the humanities in Britain are withering on the branch, it is largely because they are being driven by capitalist forces while being simultaneously starved of resources. (British higher education lacks the philanthropic tradition of the United States, largely because America has a great many more millionaires than Britain.) We are also speaking of a society in which, unlike the United States, higher education has not traditionally been treated as a commodity to be bought and sold. Indeed, it is probably the conviction of the majority of college students in Britain today that higher education should be provided free of charge, as it is in Scotland; and though there is an obvious degree of self-interest in this opinion, there is a fair amount of justice in it as well. Educating the young, like protecting them from serial killers, should be regarded as a social responsibility, not as a matter of profit.

I myself, as the recipient of a state scholarship, spent seven years as a student at Cambridge without paying a bean for it. It is true that as a result of this slavish reliance on the state at an impressionable age I have grown spineless and demoralized, unable to stand on my own two feet or protect my family with a shotgun if called upon to do so. In a craven act of state dependency, I have even been known to call upon the services of the local fire department from time to time, rather than beat out the blaze with my own horny hands. I am, even so, willing to trade any amount of virile independence for seven free years at Cambridge.

It is true that only about 5 percent of the British population attended university in my own student days, and there are those who claim that today, when that figure has risen to around 50 percent, such liberality of spirit is no longer affordable. Yet Germany, to name only one example, provides free education to its sizable student population. A British government that was serious about lifting the crippling debt from the shoulders of the younger generation could do so by raising taxes on the obscenely rich and recovering the billions lost each year in evasion.

It would also seek to restore the honorable lineage of the university as one of the few arenas in modern society (another is the arts) in which prevailing ideologies can be submitted

to some rigorous scrutiny. What if the value of the humanities lies not in the way they conform to such dominant notions, but in the fact that they don't? There is no value in integration as such. In premodern times, artists were more thoroughly integrated into society at large than they have been in the modern era, but part of what that meant was that they were quite often ideologues, agents of political power, mouthpieces for the status quo. The modern artist, by contrast, has no such secure niche in the social order, but it is precisely on this account that he or she refuses to take its pieties for granted.

Until a better system emerges, however, I myself have decided to throw in my lot with the hard-faced philistines and crass purveyors of utility. Somewhat to my shame, I have now taken to asking my graduate students at the beginning of a session whether they can afford my very finest insights into literary works, or whether they will have to make do with some serviceable but less scintillating comments.

Charging by the insight is a distasteful affair, and perhaps not the most effective way of establishing amicable relations with one's students; but it seems a logical consequence of the current academic climate. To those who complain that this is to create invidious distinctions among one's students, I should point out that those who are not able to hand over cash for my most perceptive analyses are perfectly free to engage in barter. Freshly baked pies, kegs of home-brewed beer, knitted sweaters, and stout, handmade shoes: All these are eminently acceptable. There are, after all, more things in life than money.

*Terry Eagleton is a distinguished visiting professor of English literature at the University of Lancaster. He is the author of some 50 books, including *How to Read Literature* (Yale University Press, 2013).*