

“Economism”

It has become common for colleges and universities to dismiss Western Civilization, Humanities, and Classics courses on the grounds that these courses fail to equip students with tools needed to succeed in the marketplace, and the courses privilege racist, Eurocentric, and patriarchal content. Although mainstream twentieth century Western Civilization and related coursework was legitimately subject to such critiques, wholesale dismissal of these areas of inquiry risks gravely imperiling fulfillment of higher education’s ability to foster students’ will and ability to appraise the strength and limitations of their own thinking, as well as the principles at stake in their everyday lives.

Though I concede that a university education is expensive and once students leave the university they must make a living, still we should be careful of applying a wholly practical or economic meaning to the term “useful.” I worry that the call for “economism” or what historian Tony Jundt identifies as the present need to reduce the value of everything to an economic calculus overlooks the importance of education as “food for thought,” the material necessary for the construction of reality.

Philosophers as well as modern day neuroscientist agree that the way we construct the world involves our language, our culture, the literature we read, our fears, hopes, as well as the way the world is. We do not perceive a world that is simply exterior to us. What they are saying is that we do not see the world with complete objectivity because every moment we see our world through our construction or interpretation of it.

Is a university education a public good? Or is it a service to be bought and sold based on what's marketable? Of course, there is no reason that it can't be both.

It should come as no surprise that the number of students taking part in such coursework has declined precipitously. In 2011 *Inside Higher Education* reported: "Survey courses in Western Civilization, once a common component of undergraduate curriculums, have almost disappeared as a requirement at many larger private research universities and flagship public institutions." Similarly, Nina Handler, Coordinator of English at Holy Name University reports, "this is a bad time for my species." Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* she laments the dissolution of majors, on her campus, in English, religious studies, philosophy, and music. This is also happening in large public systems. On March 18th, of this year, the Washington Post reported that a satellite campus of the

University of Wisconsin plans to drop 13 majors among them history, philosophy, English, political science, art, and French.

Uruguayan journalist, novelist, and “global soccer’s pre-eminent man of letters”

Eduardo Galeano writes, “The history of education is a voyage of sadness. It is a voyage that transformed pleasure into a duty. This is measured by education being transformed into an industry. By doing so it exiled the beauty that was born of pleasure and joy. In the world of the 21st century education is condemned. It is not necessary and it is not necessary that which is not profitable.”

Courses of study like the Great Books, the Classics, the Humanities, and Western Civilization are important in that they provide students the means to probe the values and ideas at stake in their everyday lives. To put it another way, it isn’t possible to deconstruct or think critically about contemporary society unless one has some idea of what it took to produce contemporary society – warts and all.

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