

# The Travels and Travails of Scholarship Today

*Pauline Yu*

I am much honored to address this conference and wish to thank President Krausch for his kind invitation to do so. It is a privilege to be visiting for the first time Johannes Gutenberg University, which is so ably led by President Krausch and his team. I also want to thank Vice Dean Alfred Hornung for his help in setting this program. As a scholar of American studies, he knows, I am sure, that for many years my organization, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien provided valuable opportunities for young German Americanists to carry out research in the United States. Prof. Dr. Hornung has been a principal in establishing a number of other exchange programs, including one that brought a young Mainz PhD, Dr. Nicole Stahlmann, to the United States and eventually to the ACLS, where she is now the Director of Fellowship Programs, overseeing the award of more than \$15 million in fellowship stipends this year. Nicole is a valued colleague, and I want to thank the university and Dr. Hornung for preparing her so well for her considerable responsibilities.

It's a special pleasure for me to be speaking to you today because I, too, was part of the transatlantic traffic between Germany and the United States, albeit in the other direction and many decades ago, while an undergraduate at Harvard University. I had decided to major in modern French and German history and literature but did not have sufficient German to undertake the coursework. Since Harvard at the time did not have any programs for study abroad (how could anyone, after all, obtain a better education than in Cambridge, Massachusetts?!), my only option was to take a year's leave of absence. My German instructor urged me to go, as he had, to the Freie Universität in West Berlin, which seemed like a fine idea. This was the fall of 1968. Some of you may remember what things were like at European universities that year. By January everyone was on strike. I didn't end up taking many classes, but I certainly had a very interesting year and left Germany hopeful to sustain the interests and connections kindled during my stay. I was therefore delighted to accept your kind invitation to speak today.

Today I bring you greetings from "the margins"—the margins of higher education policy and funding. That is where one of the most prominent online academic news sources recently located the humanities and social sciences. On

February 18, 2011, *Inside Higher Education*—a solid and reliable web-based journal—carried a report on the formation of a new national Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, which it described as an effort to put those fields “on an equal footing on the public agenda with science, technology, engineering and mathematics.” The story was headlined “Yanked from the Margins,” as if such a location were appropriate to denote our beleaguered fields.

I am pleased to be a member of this Commission, and we have a challenging task ahead, for while the humanities and social sciences are unquestionably central to the intellectual vitality of the university, these domains—the humanities especially — have suffered in current American national policy deliberations. Let me give you an example. You may know that President Obama is a former university law professor and an accomplished, articulate author who—unusually for an American politician — actually writes the books that bear his name. Our president is a forceful advocate of education and research. In his January 2011 State of the Union message, he called for the US to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world” in order to “win the future.” You might predict, therefore, that the president would include the National Endowment for the Humanities among those research and education agencies exempt from the reductions applied to what is considered “discretionary spending.” You would be wrong to do so. It is an unambiguous comment on public appreciation of the humanities that President Obama’s proposed budget seeks an increase of 13% in the appropriation for the National Science Foundation, which funds the natural sciences, yet seeks to cut the funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities by the same percentage. This approach would be unbalanced if the agencies were funded equally to begin with, but they most assuredly are not: in Fiscal Year 2010, the last year for which there was a Congressional appropriation, the NSF received \$6.9 billion and the NEH but \$140 million. And this is the position of the Democratic administration, which generally supports the humanities. A substantial fraction of Congressional Republicans have proposed to abolish the Humanities Endowment altogether. One understands the sense of marginality.<sup>3</sup>

This is a matter of some moment to me, for the organization I represent is the leading representative of humanities scholarship in the United States. The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) is a federation of 71 learned societies whose membership ranges from just under 500 to well over 30,000 working scholars. Our mission is to advance humanistic studies in all fields of the humanities and social sciences and to strengthen relations among national organizations dedicated to those studies. We do this principally through a wide

---

<sup>3</sup> Fall 2011 update. The outlook for federal funding of humanities scholarship has worsened since this address was delivered. The legislative process has been particularly chaotic for the last few months, but the most likely appropriation to pass the House of Representatives will put NEH funding, when adjusted for inflation, at the lowest level in 40 years. Proposals to reduce funding further or to abolish the agency altogether are continually proposed.

range of fellowship programs and through strategic initiatives addressing key issues in such topics as international studies and scholarly communication. We see a porous boundary between the humanities and the social sciences, so when I speak of the humanities, I hope you'll understand that I include the social sciences as well. ACLS was founded in 1919 to represent the United States in international academic circles, so it is especially appropriate that I have the opportunity to address you today.

Today's sense of marginalization is not new. In 1930, Abraham Flexner, a prominent educational reformer, wrote that "with the quick march of science, philosophy and humanism have gone under a cloud; when they assert themselves, they are prone to do so apologetically."<sup>4</sup> This afternoon I will not apologize when asserting the value of the humanities, for I believe that they are intellectually central to the university, even if they are too often to be found at its fiscal periphery. And that periphery is a dangerous place to be in times of fiscal stress. The difficult position of NEH is only the leading edge — should I say "bleeding edge"? — of the budgetary axe. Our major disciplinary associations report a desperate job market for new PhDs, and even employed scholars worry about their programs being closed and their tenure abolished.

The travails of the humanities and related social sciences in higher education in the United States are but one aspect of a larger set of anxieties about the future of the American university. "The American model [of the university] is beginning to creak and groan," says James Duderstadt, the president emeritus of the University of Michigan.<sup>5</sup> Fifty years after the 1960 California Master Plan framed what became the world's finest public university system, many academic leaders feel, as the president of Arizona State University, Michael Crow, put it, that "You have to rethink everything, every aspect of the university."<sup>6</sup> Critiques have been launched from every direction. If there is, as we are so often told, a crisis in scholarly publishing, that problem does not seem to extend to the burgeoning set of publications about the crisis of scholarship and the university. These volumes have no consistent point of view, but they do present scoundrels aplenty: rapacious, short-sighted, unprincipled university administrators willing to sell out to the market *Zeitgeist*; cosseted, self-satisfied and aloof tenure-track faculty unwilling even to acknowledge their privilege as adjuncts do ever more teaching; capitalists who seek to undermine any independent voice that might question their hegemony.

In these books, we often find a longing for the academic Eden of the mid-

---

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Flexner: *Universities: American, English, German*. New York 1930, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Karin Fischer/Ian Wilhelm: Experts Ponder the Future of the American University. In: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 21, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Masterson: College Leaders Share Ideas for 'Reinventing' Higher Education to Meet New Needs. In: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 4, 2010.

twentieth century. In the past forty years, US universities and colleges have undertaken many expedients and adjustments aimed at restoring the conditions of the golden age after World War II, when funding, enrollments, and public support were all on the increase. As government support has declined, better-off parents in the US will pay higher tuition rates. Double-digit endowment returns will fund plant and program expansion. Better-off parents around the world, it is now discovered, will pay higher tuition rates. Increased use of contingent faculty could aid budgetary adjustments. But now, many agree that these expedients have been exhausted. These buttresses to the extant business model can no longer contain the model's internal strains.

While the particularities of this story are specific to the US, I am sure that its message is not unfamiliar to you. Today, in the US, the UK, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, pressures on public finance are disrupting extant models of university operation as well as the fundamental compact between the university and society. We are in a time of both promise and peril for higher education. There is promise in the worldwide growth in higher education, growth that responds to increased demand grounded in the recognition that the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century rewards education and expertise. As I will discuss, there has always been a global transmission, adaptation, and retransmission of academic ideals and paradigms of university systems. What is notably different now is the presence of a new class of actors: first, a global student body with the means and mobility to reward educational excellence; and second, a widened and intensified arena of institutional competition. All ambitious university leaders aspire for their institutions to rise in global rankings.

The peril of this moment is that as policy-makers and educational leaders respond to budgetary pressures, it seems as if we are working out a new relationship between the state and the university, one in which market memes dominate the discussion and higher education is conceived of more as a commodity than as a community. The concept of education then becomes interchangeable simply with "workforce preparation" or "training."

This shifting conceptual framework holds particular perils for the humanities. These fields were at the core of the university as it emerged in early modern Europe, but are now but a fraction of the academic enterprise. And they are a poorly understood and underappreciated fraction. The demands of global economic competition and global competition among universities and university systems, it is suggested, demand efficiencies that cannot accommodate an educational domain of small fields of study with no apparent economic pay-off.

The international travels of university ideals and models have been a great engine of scientific and cultural progress. The challenge going forward will be to articulate and exemplify the ideals of the twenty-first century global university, ideals that must be grounded in an academic vision that encompasses but is not

subsumed by market dynamics. Indeed, if we look at the history of that transit, we see that the humanities have been integral to the university's role as a knowledge-bearing institution, as an incubator of innovation, and as an essential repository of intellectual freedom. We must keep this centrality in our sights.

How has the interplay between national and transnational forces shaped the contemporary university? My exploration of this question shall pay special attention to the current travails of the humanities in American academia.

At the moment, the loudest themes being played in the symphony of American higher education are the insistent drumbeat of financial crisis and the clanging cymbals of political conflict. The economic meltdown of 2008 destroyed a considerable amount of the endowment wealth supporting private universities and accelerated the long-term decline in government support of higher education, a decline affecting all sectors of our system but particularly devastating to public universities. Until 2008, the secular decline in revenue from the federal and state governments was made up by increased contributions from tuition-payers — parents and students — and faculty. The faculty bearing this burden are not those fortunate enough to be tenured professors or at least on the tenure-track, but the growing ranks of “contingent faculty,” adjunct faculty hired to teach for a contracted term at lower cost and without the possibility of a permanent position or the expectation of producing research.

In 1970 faculty members in part-time positions represented only 22.0% of all faculty members teaching in US colleges and universities; in 2007 they represented 48.7%. Of faculty members who are fulltime, well over a third does not have access to tenure. When graduate teaching assistants are included in the calculations, barely one-quarter of the instructional staff are full-time and have access to tenure. This shift toward a more contingent workforce is occurring at all types of institutions in both the public and private sectors.<sup>7</sup>

Contingent faculty cannot uphold the ideal of the scholar-teacher, a conception that lies at the heart of the research university as an institution that both creates and transmits knowledge. This paradigm — so deeply assumed that it is often implicit — posits that the scholar-teacher whose intellectual horizons are broadened by research can best educate students in the liberal arts, broadening their intellectual horizons and inculcating in them the same habits of lifelong critical inquiry practiced by the scholar-teacher. Reacting to the fiscal crisis, some universities and several state legislatures are moving to increase teaching loads and reduce or eliminate faculty sabbaticals and research leaves, thereby reducing opportunities for scholarly discovery. American higher education's growing reliance on a part-time, poorly paid academic workforce undermines the

---

<sup>7</sup> Modern Language Association of America (Hg.): Issue Brief: The Academic Workforce, [http://www.mla.org/pdf/awak\\_issuebrief09.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/awak_issuebrief09.pdf).

ideal of the scholar-teacher more effectively than the broadsides of those critics I mentioned earlier who see research simply as faculty feather-bedding. There are no easy solutions to this issue. It is like the national debt. It took a long time to get to this point, and it will take years to unwind from it, but you must start by recognizing the problem.

For the past two years, ACLS has made a modest intervention into the employment patterns of the academic humanities. After the 2008 economic meltdown, many new PhDs confronted a “jobless market,” as colleges and universities cut back on hiring. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation helped us confront this situation of market failure, by developing a “mini-market” for placing the most promising young humanists, selected in rigorous, national, peer-reviewed competition, in two-year positions at our leading colleges and universities. The participating institutions paid some of the cost of these positions, but the subsidy provided by ACLS and Mellon allowed them to hire excellent scholar-teachers into positions that allowed for classroom experience, research and professional development. We have found that a growing interval between receiving a PhD degree and beginning a tenure-track position is becoming a common stage in the academic career-path in the humanities, as it has long been in the sciences. In the coming years, we will be working with our partner institutions to see how we can structure this post-doctoral “space” in the most constructive way possible.

Another space that is opening up is the gap in financial capacity between our public and private universities. Thirty years ago, a newly-tenured professor at, say, the University of Illinois had the same salary as one at the University of Chicago, and there was similar parity between the University of Texas and nearby Rice University. But today, faculty at private universities out-earn their public colleagues by 20%.<sup>8</sup> That difference often extends to research support, graduate student aid, library acquisitions and other critical elements of the scholarly infrastructure. The secular decline in public support for higher education is overdetermined by many causes, including a generalized economic weakness, tax aversion, and misconceptions about public investment in education. UC Berkeley professor David Hollinger, one of the foremost US intellectual historians, was moved last year to ask, painfully, if Berkeley can continue to be both “really public” and “really good.”<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that the eroding position of public universities raises serious concerns of educational equity.

The fault line between the public and private realm is an ideological contest as well as an institutional divide. Much of the current policy discourse in the US

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Orszag: A Health Care Plan for College. In: New York Times, September 18, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> David A. Hollinger: Being Really Good vs. Being Really Public: Is This Our Choice?. In: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities. April 2010, [http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/point\\_of\\_view\\_Hollinger.shtml](http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/point_of_view_Hollinger.shtml).

treats higher education as a private good, as a means of individual career advancement, and not, as in the past, as a public good—as the means by which society makes a collective investment in human capital, an investment that will bring returns to the whole society, not the least of which is the assurance that a broad swath of the population has opportunities for social mobility. How far will this conceptual shift proceed?

“In tough times, the humanities must justify their worth,” asserted a headline two years ago in the *New York Times*.<sup>10</sup> If the chief aim of both national educational policy and the individual student’s enrollment is economic competitiveness, then the humanities are too easily caricatured as vestigial, what you would call *Orchideenfächer*, luxuries that have become unaffordable and expendable in a fiscal crisis. Should a hard-pressed university reduce instruction in foreign languages or in science, technology, engineering and medicine? The president of the State University of New York at Albany answered that question by announcing that his university would end admissions to programs in French, Italian, Russian and classics. Tenured faculty teaching in those programs were told that their positions would be terminated in two years.

For a research university to take such action is indeed dramatic and may have been intended exactly for that effect, for the New York state university system is seeking authority to raise its own tuition as the state government reduces its support. But language instruction, one of the humanities’ key curricular building blocks, has been declining across a wide range of American institutions even as student interest in learning languages has surged, displaced in many cases by programs that promise to fit students into specific occupational categories by offering courses in accounting, business management or health care delivery.

This is an unwise approach, for the capacities of the humanities and related social sciences are ever more necessary in an interconnected world where individuals and cultures brush up against each other, interact, and recombine. As the sociologist Nancy Rutherford pointed out in a 2003 conference on international education, “Higher education is an aquifer not a spigot.”<sup>11</sup> Building on this point, the former president of the Modern Language Association, Mary Louis Pratt, writes that universities “cannot be built in response to immediate needs, as the spigot someone can turn on for the expertise they need at the moment...[but] should be conceived as a deep reserve, built up slowly and sustained over the long term, on the assumption that though specific needs will arise, they cannot be anticipated.” Understanding the rest of the world takes time and commitment: “Deep knowledge of particular parts of the world cannot be produced overnight. It has

---

<sup>10</sup> February 24, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> The International and Foreign Language Human Capital Challenge of the U.S. Federal Government. In: Duke University Conference, January 23-25, 2003, p. 33, <http://ducis.jhfc.duke.edu/archives/globalchallenges/pdf/rutherford.pdf>.

to be built up over years, supported through real relationships with people and institutions abroad, passed along, invested in, and valued independent of the contingencies, fears, and passions of a moment.”<sup>12</sup> This is why no understanding of the globalizing world can be achieved without a sustained commitment to humanistic study.

Our scholars themselves understand this well. One of the great intellectual shifts in the humanities and related social sciences in the US in the past half century has been the movement of research on different world areas from the periphery of these fields to the center. Since the 1920s, ACLS has nurtured work in specialized international programs, but now upwards of 40% of the awards in our central research competitions concern the study of cultures and societies outside North America, Europe, and the ancient Mediterranean — cultures, that is, that were once studied principally within the framework of exotic “area studies” and thus outside of what was considered the mainstream of academia. Within this wealth of projects, we have also seen a recent surge of interest in exploring how countries with mixed ethnic, racial, and religious populations have flourished, as well as how trade and commerce have exerted a cultural, as well as economic, impact.

Another promising area for the humanities is the terrain opened up by innovations in information technologies. In 2006, our program in the digital humanities awarded Todd Presner, professor of Germanic languages and literatures at the University of California, Los Angeles, a grant for “Hypermedia Berlin,” which is “an interactive, Web-based research platform and collaborative authoring environment for analyzing the cultural, architectural, and urban history of a city space.” Its fully annotated digital maps interlink “hotspots” at hundreds of key regions, structures, and streets over Berlin’s nearly 800-year history, integrating cultural and urban history with the spatial analyses and modeling tools used by geographers. Earlier this year, Presner and his colleagues responded to the dramatic events on the Nile by creating “HyperCities Egypt,” a digital map of Cairo that locates and archives tweets from the uprising, bringing Egyptian voices to the rest of the world while also preserving them for the future.

Presner explains: “We wanted the world to be able to hear these voices coming out of Egypt since they add a very different perspective and dimension when compared to traditional broadcast media. To date, we have archived and mapped more than 300,000 tweets coming out of Egypt since the project began. These are searchable and can be studied by scholars interested in understanding the roles that social media played in documenting and fomenting the revolution in Egypt. At the project’s core are values central to the next wave of digital hu-

---

<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Pratt: *The Archive and the Aquifer* (President’s Column). In: *Modern Language Association Newsletter* 35,4 (Winter 2003), p. 3.

manities: harnessing new technologies to expand the global public sphere, animating the archive in new ways, and using technologies to increase the purview, relevance, and importance of the humanities in the world."<sup>13</sup>

Philip Lewis, vice president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, believes that higher education is "too big and too important to fail," and will perforce make adjustments to the pressures about it.<sup>14</sup> Universities are complex, sprawling institutions and systems of tertiary education exponentially even more intricate. How do education leaders navigate in these difficult times? If competition among universities were driven not by values mediated by economic markets, but instead by the proven values of the academic market, then we would have a contest that does not conclude with a zero-sum result but instead enriches all by enlarging the global community that creates, preserves, and transmits knowledge. The history of higher education as an international system gives ample evidence of this result. Let me now glimpse briefly into that history.

I already have noted the present crisis of the University of California, but now I would recall the hopeful moment of its founding in 1872, for we see in the inaugural address of its first president, Daniel C. Gilman, the charismatic power of transnational university ideals, ideals that were to be borrowed to a considerable degree from Germany. Gilman is a notable figure in the history of the American university, for after a short term in California, he inaugurated another paradigmatic institution: The Johns Hopkins University.

There is much that is quaint, even antique, in the address delivered at the California inaugural, but it is striking that 139 years ago, President Gilman identified two dynamics that have powered the University's ascendancy. First, Gilman asserted, there were worldwide standards for university education. Individual institutions were not isolated cities on distant hills but part of an interrelated system in which universities improved through emulation and competition. "During the last few years great changes have been made in the higher educational system of this and other lands," the new president noted. "Everywhere among enlightened people, universities in their most comprehensive scope are...receiving impulses which are as credible to the spirit of the age as they are hopeful for the ages yet to come." The challenge for California, he proposed, was to join that system. "In the [r]ace for the encouragement of knowledge and education for the young," he declared, "the Occident must not be distanced." By "Occident," I should note, Gilman meant the western United States, but the same dynamic applies today as policy makers worry that the United States is falling behind Asia in "competitiveness."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ACLS Fellows: Perspectives on Egypt, February 16, 2011, <http://www.acls.org/news/2-16-11/>.

<sup>14</sup> Remarks for Panel III. Delivered at the Townsend Center and Representations workshop, University of California, Berkeley, October 15, 2010. Unpublished text in my possession.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel C. Gilman: The Building of the University, an Inaugural Address. November 7, 1872, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/calhistory/inaugural.gilman.html>.

Gilman's second principle was a corollary of the first. If the university movement converging toward a new mechanism of knowledge production was worldwide, its openness to new talent must equal in breadth the range of its research interests. In this regard, Gilman found this state very well positioned. California, he said, was "a community more varied than almost any in the land...whose central city is cosmopolite like Constantinople of old." The new university, he maintained, must be open to all. "California is not only granary, treasury, and mart for the American States which are growing up on this long coast," he emphasized, "but it is the portal through which the Occident and Orient must exchange their products and *their thoughts*" [emphasis added]. Indeed, he envisioned Berkeley as a kind of bilateral intercultural study center. "Would it not be fit," he asked, "that in this vicinity, near to, if not in connection with, this University, a high seminary should be founded...having the double purpose of enlightening Americans in respect to the languages, literature, and history of the East, and of instructing the Chinese and Japanese in modern languages and the sciences of Europe and America?"<sup>16</sup>

When President Gilman departed California to help found the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, he had even wider opportunity to apply the ideals of the German research university in an American setting. Many historians of American higher education have charted the enormous influence of Hopkins as an institution emphasizing graduate education, educating doctoral students in the research mode of the seminar and the laboratory. And it was a timely example, for higher education was expanding to accommodate the needs for expertise in an industrializing and urbanizing society. Hopkins faculty played prominent roles in the creation of many of the leading disciplinary scholarly societies that constitute my organization.

By the early twentieth century, higher education in the US had hybridized the German research university with a second model, the undergraduate college emphasizing liberal education, derived from English antecedents. A third institutional paradigm of American higher education is the land-grant state university serving society with special focus on "agricultural and mechanical" practicalities. It is important to note that the Morrill Act of 1862, which inaugurated this system, specifically included provision for undergraduate instruction in the liberal arts.

American higher education mixed and melded these three streams, but our university system became distinctive in the mid-twentieth century not only for its institutional shape but for its public scope, as it embodied a commitment to universal access to higher education. From the Morrill Act, through the GI Bill after World War II and into the 1960s' and 1970s' education of Baby Boomers, there

---

<sup>16</sup> Gilman 1872.

Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften an der Universität  
von morgen

Innenansichten und Außenperspektiven

Dreyer, M.; Schmidt, U.; Dicke, K. (Hrsg.)

2014, VI, 176 S. 16 Abb., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-05516-5