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PROFESSOR RIP VAN WINKLESTEIN  
APPLIES FOR A TEACHING JOB ...  
AND FINDS HIS DISCIPLINES (AND MUCH OF SOCIAL SCIENCE)  
HAVE DISAPPEARED

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*Essay*

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*What if you woke up one day and found that your entire discipline, to which you had sacrificed years of your life, had suddenly disappeared ... not because it had become obsolete but because it had been replaced by advocacy and indoctrination, and that nobody seemed to notice or care, as if it had happened by design? It happened to me....*

I earned my Ph.D. some 20+ years ago in a field of social science that I thought had prepared me for life; one of the bedrocks of university disciplines. Though my field had largely been founded by people like me – male humanitarians – that was the worst category to be in at the time I earned my Ph.D. because it was the group not fitting the mandate for “diversity” in hiring. If I wanted work in my field, I would either have to take some jobs overseas (which I partly did, on prestigious fellowship) or work as an adjunct “gypsy scholar” (which I also partly did) or just find another temporary career that might apply my skills (which I also did, overseas) and just wait.

I waited a generation and stayed overseas. My female classmates started their families. Others took other careers. I found a wife but we couldn’t yet find the stability in a place to start a family. I grew my beard that mostly went white. I built a track record publishing unusual theoretical works in new journals, mostly outside my field. And then, I decided to apply again for teaching jobs, with full credentials as both a scholar and a practitioner. But something had happened. My field literally disappeared, not entirely in name but in substance.

What was once a science was now reclassified as a humanities. Where it had been defined before by questions, it was now defined only by a methodology, really just a form of journalism and philosophy without any basis in what was possible or why. The actual subject of study that defined the field was no longer there. It was replaced by political advocacy for whatever groups the teachers belonged to.

To understand what happened, just imagine that my field was once a natural science, with a discipline for testing and measuring universal principles and building on them, which is how we advance human knowledge and the mission of the universities. Imagine that my discipline was like physics, studying matter and energy and their dynamics by testing hypotheses and developing laws.

If what happened to my discipline happens to physics (and the way things are going, who knows), here is what physics would look like today. Instead of a common core of courses, with a progression of theories and laboratory work and testable problems that are common at every university and are the basic building blocks leading to more fundamental questions, all of that would be gone.

In its place, there would be history of philosophies of physics that declared science to be unworkable and that “imagined” physical impossibilities, and individual interpretations of physics, and journalism of physics, and visual photography of physics, but all of this under different names, certified as academic,

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with journals and book learning, doctrinal courses but no science. Scientific principles of causality and transitions (like evolution, in biology) would be replaced by religious type theories claiming that the world and its creations were all products of imagination and could be created by human imagination. Courses would have names like “The Forces”, “Waviness”, and “Dimensionality”. There would be “relevant” courses like “The Physics of Capitalism”, “Particle Diaspora Studies”, “Post-Socialist Physics”, “Fast Food Physics and its Acceleration” and “Queer Physics” and “area studies” courses like “The Physics of Islam” and “The Physics of Latin America”. There would be topical courses like “Metaphysics, Astrology, and the History and Theory of Physics,” “Post-Modern Physics and the Deconstruction of Physics”, and “Physics as a Cultural Construction”. There would be new political courses like “Physics and the Physical Attraction of the Sexes”. And there would be fashionable courses like “Black Holes and Other Mass Movements: A Critical Perspective”, “Transnational Physics and Electron Migrations”, . In place of laboratory courses would be film courses like “Visual Physics” and “Qualitative Methods in Physics: Participant Observation Physics through Readings and Discussion”, and “Corporate Internships in Physics”. There would be “applied” courses like “The Physics of Poverty and Inequality”, “The Physics of Power”, and “The Physics of Social Work and Social Forces” and “Immateriality of Physics”.

Comparative studies would also be eliminated since study of principles would no longer be relevant. The goal would be to “report” and to explore “identity” and to offer philosophy. Articles in journals would be shortened to a maximum length of some 8,000 words, to promote “case studies” since there would be no need for inventing and presenting new methodologies or tools or testing theories or even offering proofs and theory and evidence. That would free scholars up to write about “Observations of Big Things” and “Observations of Small Things” and “Feelings on Bigness”. One could become a reporting expert, for example, on “The Rain in Spain”. (Here’s an unscientific hint and the basis for a short article that would be easy to peer review because you can find it in the literature. “The rain in Spain ... falls mainly on the plain!” But of course you should not take my word for it. You should seek grants and conduct field observations on it every summer and write a new article. And you will probably safely earn tenure!)

Physics departments as we know them today would no longer exist. They would be merged with other sciences into departments of “Natural Sciences” or taught alone without other branches like physical chemistry or biophysics.

Of course, government and business might be funding some other new courses that might not sound so unusual. There might be courses like “Physics for Global Weapons and Elite Security,” and “Physics for Counter-terrorism”, and “Physics of Communications for State Security and Control” and “Physics of Network Analysis” and “The Physics of Prison Construction”. Some say we already have these and these are the real applied courses that have gone too far in the opposite direction.

All of this could be described as nonsense (or dangerous), but nonsense attached to self-interest and patronage networks and careers. And it would happen overnight, with new entrants quickly replicating the previous patronage systems to choose disciples to secure their interests.

Probably all of this sounds absurd when applied to physics, but a physicist might be the first to admit that physics also has religious questions and implications that cross borders with the humanities, and that there are plenty of questions on what is measurable and what is knowable. Taken to an extreme, these humanities questions and political issues about the uses of physics and its applications as well as questions about who studies physics could lead to exactly the kind of situation that happened in my discipline. In my discipline, the absurd is now real. The names of courses and the approaches noted above are mostly the reality today in my discipline and in some nearby disciplines.

While my discipline has mostly disappeared in the past 20 years, similar disappearing acts were already occurring in other disciplines much earlier. What led me to my doctoral discipline was my experience with those social science disciplines that had already mostly lost touch with reality and had

substituted mathematics, theology, labeling and reporting for scientific hypothesis testing of important human behaviors that could be measured empirically across cultures and predicted.

My discipline was anthropology, the dynamics of humans in groups (cultures) within environments (habitats) with the sub-discipline of social and cultural anthropology (the dynamics of these contemporary groups) linked to the history of human groups and their transformations (archaeology) and to the evolutionary biology of primates (physical anthropology) and corollary to development and differentiation of language (linguistics).

I entered anthropology to answer some fundamental questions about human societies, how they changed, and what was possible. At the heart of the study of human societies were questions about genocide, war and peace, and internal violence (predicting when it occurred and the factors that led to it); questions about sustainability and survival of cultures and understanding and predicting the factors of how it worked, questions about democracy and rights at the level of cultures and at the level of individuals, rule of law and legal systems and what was possible and what factors and conditions were necessary and whether there was a technology of society to achieve it, definitions of “development” and “progress” and whether there was a universal “good” and what social technologies could be used to achieve it and protect it when it was threatened, and related questions.

It probably also was not accidental that many of the founders of the discipline who had posed these questions and who hoped to find answers in order to create a better world believed in empiricism and human action.

I entered anthropology for the chance to look at real variables that linked human groups and actions to their environment and could be studied to show the link between geography, environment, and climate, and interactions between neighboring areas, on economic systems, political systems, technology, and beliefs. I understood the discipline as the place for doing holistic modeling of societies and then comparing these societies to each other and over time to answer big questions. Holism meant incorporating any and all methodologies from other social science that might help, studying societies at all levels, and collecting real data rather than narrow and trivial information like election results or product purchases.

Almost all of that has now been wiped out. Most of the questions can no longer be asked. The methods can't be used. The assumption that humans are like other species and can be studied like other species, evolving with their environments, is disfavored. It is as if the Church had stepped back in to declare Darwin's theory of evolution an invalid starting point, with human action to be considered in isolation and in a way that reversed the causality.

When you commit to a discipline and to teaching it, it is a calling. It is a part of how you see the world, your commitment to the future and to others. I am sure that those who wiped out my discipline see themselves as having a religious and ideological belief in what they do, but I don't think it is a “calling” for them, based on a love of students and humanity and of nature and intellectual life. I don't think they make a choice of many possible careers and view it as a sacrifice. I don't see any real love or commitment in their approaches. What I see is opportunism and little ability and little other choice. That is why as they continually look to generate new courses, the titles seem to come not from research problems but from whatever topic is presented in the newspapers, with little roots to discipline or study. The best minds, with ideals, are not in the field promoting the current absurdities.

Now my task is not just trying to re-enter my field. It is trying to rebuild it, restore it and reverse the damage to bring back sanity and rationality. To do that, I have to get a foothold. I can publish, though finding “peers” and convincing reviewers who no longer read or know the classics but who only recent “Newspeak” is difficult. Most of what I write isn't read or taught. It has disappeared along with much of the discipline that existed before and that is being wiped out.

How do I find the people who know what has been lost and convince them to keep it alive by giving me a chance to do so?

In applying for teaching positions, I quickly saw that it wasn't just the discipline that had disappeared but that all of the associated systems for hiring and recruitment had also changed. That made applying for teaching positions an entirely different process, reversing all of the principles of qualifications and standards and merit.

In earning my Ph.D., I went to the most competitive schools, took more courses, advanced more quickly, published earlier, taught my own courses earlier, and won more honors and prestigious awards than my classmates. That is why, while I accepted having to wait 20+ years while positions were being filled on the basis of gender and ethnic quotas, I thought I could simply reapply after the wait and rely on all of these credentials. While waiting, I published more, added professional skills in new areas, won some more awards, and also had a professional applied career.

For teaching positions, being older and experienced actually should also be a major advantage because, by definition, a teacher must be someone who has a greater base of knowledge and experience and skills. Civilized societies view elders as sources of knowledge and wisdom and the image of a professor is someone who is respected for the years of investment in a discipline. But, with the disappearance of my discipline, the existing measures of qualifications have also largely disappeared. Where there are no longer any standards for courses and no hierarchy of knowledge, there are also no real standards for hiring.

Imagine if the advertisements for jobs in your field were filled with categories that were simply new jargon, often invented by each school, and generally with the departments having no real idea what they were seeking to hire. Top universities in the country in my field now advertise for candidates to teach topics that have not only never existed but that they often cannot even define. In the past few months, I have seen job announcements for candidates to “interrogate capitalism” (can one also “interrogate fascism”? is it done with water boarding?), and to teach “environmental anthropology” (a bit paradoxical, since the field was defined as the relation between humans and the environment), to teach “indigeneity” or “migration” or “transnationalism” (but not the processes of cultural adaptation), to teach undefined ideologies like “post-socialism” (as if an ideology was once a culture), and “humanitarianism”, or “inequality”. There have also been advertisements to teach courses in “terrorism” and “victimology”, “environmental justice” and “human rights”, as well as “feminism” and “ethnicity” and other popular labels that people might read in the newspapers or talk about at cocktail parties like “the Internet”. Not a single one of these courses existed before in the top universities where I studied and none of them were advances on the basic buildings blocks.

For a while, I thought, maybe I should create a few of these labels of my own, of something unique that sounded trendy, that was equally absurd and that no one else would have. In my view, most of the professors in my field today are really functionally illiterate in the basics of the discipline and in anything else outside it. They hardly read. My idea was to suggest that I was an expert in “Distractamology: Theory and Methods” and “Cultural Regressivity: Ideology and Religion”, “Social Parasiticlinivity: History and Applications”, and “Diarrhetical Anthropology: Unstoppable Cultural Creation”. These would perfectly fit the times. It probably wouldn't be hard to publish pieces on them in some of the “best” journals, either, that are mostly just jargon and sound-bytes. But since most of what exists today is already so absurd, one can hardly improve upon it.

For most of the areas in which they advertise today, departments are not replacing professors already teaching the subjects for which they are seeking to hire. That is why most of the basics and approaches that would build on them have largely disappeared. Today, departments are just picking names of things they thought they should have that they didn't already have as if they are collecting species for a zoo or foods for a buffet, on the basis of “representation” and popularity, rather than content. I have written to many of these departments and asked them what skills and perspectives they want taught (and I suggested some), what methods they were open to use (and I suggested some) and how they saw these areas fitting with their department and the definition of the discipline (sometimes I offered ideas). The usual response

is, “we are open to different approaches and perspectives” and “we have no fixed idea.” They have no idea what they are seeking or why and no standards to measure it.

Some things have not changed; such as the “area studies” courses that were just reporting specializations designed to serve military and commercial interests. Those courses haven’t changed but the areas of focus have. These “area studies” have always really been “Enemy Studies”, “Business Partner Studies” and “Narcissism Studies”, which means that today there are just new areas like Arab and Islamic studies, Chinese studies, and Diaspora studies as enemies and partners and immigrant identities change.

In a real “discipline” in a real university, knowledge is like a ladder like basic language and mathematics in grade-school education. Each topic advances on a previous one. The more experienced or brilliant one is in a field, the higher one advances on this ladder with advancement presuming mastery of the lower rungs and ability to teach them. In a real discipline, the knowledge and skills are standardized. The better the schools where one studies and the higher one advances and the better one does, the more qualified one is and the higher one’s position should be on the pecking order for seeking positions.

With specialization, there are more tracks, but in real disciplines, those tracks build standards of knowledge of the world. One’s qualifications can also be measured by the number of different tracks where one earns proficiency.

But with the disappearance of my discipline, all of these ladders of knowledge and existing standards and qualifications also disappeared with it.

Almost uniformly, when I look back at the people who were hired for these positions in previous years (and they are rarely announced; there is no concept anymore of transparency or openness; everything is kept hidden and probably understandably), the people selected are inexperienced, unpublished, from mediocre schools, with weak and narrow skills; almost exactly the opposite of what you would expect if there were standards and quality. The schools say they picked the “best” and “most qualified” and “best fit”. How could that be?

Here’s probably what is happening and why.

If universities were businesses and were subject to the requirements of their customers (students) and their beneficiaries (communities), they would have to openly show that they were picking the most qualified candidates and they would be held accountable. But today, all of these processes occur in the dark with no review. Students, communities and job candidates have no idea what really goes on and even with the laws establishing schools as public organizations, real public oversight has disappeared.

Bureaucracies with no oversight act to protect the bureaucrats. Professors today are a special kind of bureaucrat. Their goal seems to be to minimize the demands on their time and to find ways to maximize their reputation, fame and disciples. There’s no reward for advancing the discipline or protecting communities or students. It isn’t how funding works (from donors or high levels of government) and it isn’t how their advancement works. Their incentive now is to hire people who can work under them, to whom they can shift their work, whom they can exploit for credit, and who can build their egos. That is how they view their students and graduate students. And it is apparently now the model of hiring. Pick the weakest person, whom you can exploit.

The quota filling of disciplines didn’t simply add a few new slots and leave others for later, for which qualified scholars might apply. It replaced those slots with a new patronage network. Instead of the “boys’ club” or “old boys’ network” (or, for my benefit, the male progressive empirical scholars who had filled key positions in social sciences), there was now a “young girls’ network” and minority club, generating new positions to create this new hierarchy.

Those systems are very hard to challenge and enter. They can simply sniff under your armpits and figure out whether or not you dose on the same substances and fantasies and lifestyle. Mostly, they seem to do it by focusing on reference letters and networks rather than on skills and publications. Probably

there is nothing new here and the patronage networks that existed before have now been replaced by new ones. While business selections use references to confirm what is in the record, university hiring in my field does not seem to depend at all on one's actual record as much as on the networks. As before, honest scholars and humanitarians who care about the discipline and about students and the community are easy to spot. And they are easy to derail in hiring processes.

Of course, it wasn't just my discipline that had disappeared. Many other systems have been dismantled in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere.

Indeed, some scholars might argue that in the social sciences and humanities there never was any objectivity in hiring and the mechanisms and teaching were always politicized. The difference in the past may have simply been that during the period of industrialization, with the existence of a middle class and demands from minorities as well as international competition, there was a recognized need for and funding social sciences and competition of ideas. At that time, there were calls for accountability and for results.

Today, the only real "accountability" and results seem to be that of "representation", information collection, and popularity, rather than building effective social sciences and systems. Today, that seems to have been dismantled under the pretense of inclusiveness in place of results.

We aren't living in the times of 20 and 50 years ago when one could write to a government official and say, "we aren't investing anymore in civilization and if we don't we are destroying our future". To do that, today, you would have to find rational people who cared about the future, who valued science and reason. And where are you going to find that? You can't go to the courts and show that hiring processes had run amok with discriminatory standards without end, replacing any kind of merit. To do that, you have to find a justice system that understands justice and is more than just in service for elite interests.

Being overseas should be good training for all of that. I spent a lot of time in dictatorships like the Soviet Union and then its "independent" states and in other "post-colonial" countries that were pretty much like they were under colonialism. Although no one says it aloud, the U.S. and many European countries have slowly copied the model of these other countries so that now they are pretty much indistinguishable. In the U.S., for example, they copied the "State Security" apparatus of the Soviet Union and gave it almost the exact same name.

Now we have a global educational system that is sending the products of these disappeared disciplines to the former Soviet Union and to China, where they all too easily fit in, substituting the teaching of one ideology for another.

I can't just go away for another 20 years this time waiting for this to change and neither can the globe. The results are becoming all too clear.