

A New Role for the Humanities?

A DISCUSSION OF

Socrates Untenured: New Wine and New Bottles

BY ROBERT FRODEMAN

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“The challenge facing us, then, is one of disciplinarity.” With this sentence, Robert Frodeman, in “New Wine and New Bottles” (*Issues*, Summer 2020), brings us to our feet, applauding. Then the sobering letdown: “Where do we turn to find new voices and perspectives?”

My answer: our elite universities. I choose this despite Frodeman’s persuasive account of how it is these very universities that parented disciplinarity, and when that was not enough, fell in love with interdisciplinarity, producing even more narrow specialties. Why should we want them to be the source of new voices and perspectives?

Two reasons. First, the alternative is unattractive—think-tanks, consulting firms, social media, advocacy groups, billionaire philanthropists, and corporate charity departments. For all their good works, they are not epistemologically imaginative.

Second, elite universities worldwide are embedded in an influential network of academies, whose members—from those universities—are often more daring and imaginative when speaking as academy members. Frodeman writes, “CRISPR technology for gene editing brings with it profound questions ... that are neither subjective or objective.” But they have to be answered, and it was a select group of national academies that confronted the moral question: should humans try to direct their own evolutionary pathways? And it was as members of academies that physicists declared “never again” following Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Something similar can be said of university-based institutes, whose faculty work independently of the disciplinary departments, of which they are also members. Today, at Columbia University, it is the Data Science Institute that is bringing to the surface the hidden and harmful biases in big data that imprison the innocent, reject the talented, and misdiagnose the sick. Also, the university is combining the Earth Institute (social science) and the Lamont-Doherty Observatory (physical science) to form a Climate School, and at the outset is incorporating *the ethics* of where, how, and with whom Columbia will engage.

No to nuclear bombs, no to designer babies, no to hidden data biases, and yes to the awesome responsibility of climate science to bring social justice to bear as it confronts fires and floods—perhaps these are steps toward new wine in new bottles?

I conclude with a less successful story. In the civil rights era, the social sciences were determined to make a difference, leading to a half-century of increasingly sophisticated research (early childhood intervention, neighborhood effect) and conceptual advances (critical race theory, stereotype threat) that gave us what we thought was a deep understanding of the causes of racism. We were wrong; racism has a stronger hold than we bargained for. What did we miss? A huge fact: racism is evil, a fact that our research agenda made no room for. No wonder, evil is not a social science term. We are handicapped with an epistemology that cannot get to the essence of institutional racism and white supremacy. Let's design an epistemology that can. This will certainly be new wine for new bottles.

KENNETH PREWITT

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Robert Frodeman suggests that COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink our common practices and long-standing institutions. He may be right that the pandemic presents such an opportunity; but it does so not because “the time spent quarantined allows us to reflect on basic motivations and goals.” Far from clearing away “the distracting details of our lives,” as Frodeman writes, the pandemic generates many more distracting details than we faced before. Despite pandemic-generated crises—not because of them—we must take the time now to generate wise policies for the future.

Frodeman predicts that COVID-19 may kill residential colleges. Indeed. Pouring new wine into old bottles causes them to break. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, colleges were places where students flocked to earn degrees to get jobs to pay back their student loans. The pandemic will keep students from flocking to campuses, reducing revenues and forcing colleges to fire so-called contingent faculty who carried the teaching load. Tenure-track faculty will have to adjust, not only to online instead of in-person instruction but also to teaching more students and more classes. Research will suffer as professors set aside projects to take up the teaching slack. The pandemic doesn't provide time for us to rethink the relative value of teaching and research, to reconsider the ethics of hiring teaching-only staff, or to reimagine the role of the university in society; it simply reveals that many of our higher-education policies were ill-conceived.

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In particular, we can now clearly see the mistake in reducing state financial support for higher education, leaving colleges and universities to rely increasingly on student tuition and fees. This model is not sustainable. It never was. Yet far from providing leisure time for us to carefully reconsider our policies for higher education, COVID-19 forces us into tactical reactions, scrambling to balance six-month budgets while reopening campuses and struggling to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff. Fiscal *years* are relics of the past. Long-term strategic planning has been completely overwhelmed by the “hurry, worry, and scurry” caused by the pandemic.

Must we have new wine and new bottles? Jesus says that those used to drinking old wine won't suddenly change their tastes; instead, they'll judge the old wine to be better than the new (Luke 5:39). If putting new wine into old bottles causes them to break, yet we prefer the old wine to the new, perhaps we need new bottles for the old wine.

My own preference would be the 1810 vintage from the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt's vineyards: a wine featuring balanced teaching and research, each reinforcing the other, integrated into the person of the professor. Fresh notes from students add to the complexity. A strong foundation in state financial support for higher education produces a lingering finish as the state benefits, in return, from a citizenry with *Bildung*—personal and cultural maturation—and the capacity for autonomous decision-making. New bottles, yes. Old bottles will break. New wine? Perhaps. But no wine before its time.

J. BRITT HOLBROOK

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Higher education faces multiple challenges today. I and others in the community are, perhaps rightly, accused of elitism, and our knowledge services are often dismissed as overpriced and overspecialized. And now there is coronavirus, ravaging preexisting notions of college campuses and shared worlds. Will our knowledge-building enterprise make a difference? Will anyone listen? Should they?

Robert Frodeman intriguingly addresses these questions by going to the root of our knowledge frameworks: the assumptions that focus our intellectual work, our “fundamental ontology.” To Frodeman, higher education’s intellectual division of labor has been built on a framework that treats facts and values as separable things.

Frodeman seems convinced that higher education will have little to say about the enormous questions motivated by coronavirus without fashioning new bottles for a new wine: new knowledge frameworks to support truly creative, relevant knowledge, frameworks that refuse the fact/value distinction. Among those leading the way, Frodeman says, will be “poets, artists, and philosophers,” who are less obedient to these tidy divisions than others in our community.

If we in higher education must forge new bottles—practically speaking, new disciplines, departments, research, journals, courses—to produce new wine, how is this supposed to happen? Perhaps poets, artists, and philosophers may indeed lead the way, but these practical institutions are surprisingly durable, and we would need far greater buy-in among a greater diversity of our colleagues.

More of us would be needed to embrace what the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman called the reality of liquid modernity, where novel agents such as coronavirus greet us in surprising ways, opening up new knowledge frontiers and opportunities for action ill-suited to knowledge frameworks that hearken back to a more solid modernity.

This will not be easy: the things we call facts and values derive directly from the quest for certainty buried in knowledge politics going back centuries. Some observers have proposed that one way out might be to work alongside others, in and outside higher education, in a knowledge-building cosmopolitics that refuses a priori firm foundations (facts as separable from values), yet also strives toward a meaningful sense of our common world.

Inter/transdisciplines are needed, yes, and more people in higher education are needed to build them. Yet they also tend to be infuriatingly sloppy and, well, ill-disciplined. Those of us who are convinced that we need to forge new knowledge frameworks, new bottles for new wine, can start by listening to those who are not yet convinced. We can pay attention to the enduring questions our colleagues ask, their points of departure for research and teaching, as the focus and division of intellectual labor our existing bottles offer. Our new bottles must likewise provide reasonable focus and division of labor.

What would new bottles look like for new wine? I am a geographer and director of an environmental studies program, and one possibility that may help us to more creatively address environmental issues is places. There are certainly others. Let us greet coronavirus as an opportunity to explore new knowledge frameworks, so as to more successfully address this and other challenges we face.

JAMES D. PROCTOR

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Given the devastating experience of Spanish flu, it is obvious that COVID-19 is not humanity’s first encounter with a pandemic. What makes COVID-19 novel is that a natural disaster has turned into a global social challenge, as we come to realize our potential capacities—and incapacities—to deal with it properly: at global scale.

Despite this, social conflicts have arisen at national levels around the particular responses that different national health systems have taken. In most western countries, the primary and immediate response was to institute precautionary measures based on the capacities that individual national health systems could bear.

The overall objectives, in each national case, could be seen as legitimate because urgent action was required. However, the longer that societies needed to endure the precautionary measures, the more democracies started to face the challenge of providing democratic deliberation on the choices of objectives and measures.

It is revealing to compare the current situation in the United States with President Franklin Roosevelt’s progressive agenda to institutionalize the “new” freedoms from want and fear, both nationally and at the global level, through the establishment of the United Nations. At the time, the freedom from want was articulated in terms of economic and social security. Indeed, contemporary calls for a universal basic income would fit well into such an agenda. The institutionalization of a freedom from fear was primarily articulated in terms of preventing nations from experiencing physical aggression from other nations.

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COVID-19 reminds us not only of the necessity of having universal access to health care at the national level as a public good, but also that having an effective and safe vaccine will be a real solution only if becomes a planetary public good.

The Roosevelt agenda therefore represents, to use Robert Frodeman's phrasing, an "old bottle," maybe even a forgotten one, to secure internal national peace. But a new wine will be needed to secure the still-new freedoms given COVID-19 in an ever-changing global context. Globalization has blurred the distinction between securing internal national peace around social economic security, and securing external security and global peace. Global cooperation is more than ever a necessity, and scientists currently lead the way, as shown by unprecedented levels of open global collaboration, not wholeheartedly supported by the Trump administration.

The danger is falling back to an isolationist agenda aimed at ensuring that operators in global markets bring home social and economic benefits. The success of such an agenda is an illusion. But the measures likely to accompany it—for example, securing first access to medical resources, or withdrawing from international cooperation and institutions such the World Health Organization, which was responsible for making available an effective vaccine for Ebola—are in fact likely to increase global insecurity and intensify national social conflicts.

Perhaps the Trump administration's agenda is therefore a new bottle, but one that pushes the United States further away from the extended Roosevelt agenda at the global level for an actual solution.

RENÉ VON SCHOMBERG

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Robert Frodeman, like many observers, is trying to understand the broader implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. More bluntly than questioning the fact/value distinction, the "ontology of the modern research university," or conceptualizing the humanities as "hovering above" the sciences and "our best hope [for] the fermentation of new worldviews," I'd add that the American reaction lays bare the fragility of a polity founded on individualist liberty.

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There is something self-contradictory about a politics based in a social ontology that denies the reality of society. President Trump is not so much an aberration as simply the most dramatic representative of a well-established anti-intellectual, conspiracy-mongering tradition. As president, Thomas Jefferson repeatedly floated paranoid theories about Federalists conspiring to create a monarchy (read socialism and Communism today). Revolutionary Era slogans such as "Don't tread on me" and "Give me liberty or give me death" are redeployed to bracket scientific knowledge, protest mask wearing, and resist stay-at-home orders—not to mention vaccinations.

The tension between individualist (i.e., libertarian) freedom and social necessity was present in the earliest correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams. Jefferson fundamentally opposed the military draft as depriving individuals of their rightful freedoms. Adams pointed out that if citizens were left to their liberty, not only would there not be enough volunteers, but those who volunteered wouldn't be disciplined enough to be a serious fighting force. The 13 colonies shirked obligations to George Washington's Continental Army in favor of funding and joining their local militias. Just as the liberty of the colonies depended on restricting the liberty of colonists, to free America from COVID-19 will require limiting the freedom of Americans. What we have here is simply an old wine in a new bottle.

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No thoughtful person—especially one who has worked in a university—can seriously question Robert Frodeman’s conclusion that organized inquiry has lost its way. However, his soft-focus way of putting the case understates the challenges ahead to remedy the situation. To be sure, he is right that a kind of revival of the humanities is necessary. More to the point, we need to return to the early-nineteenth century “Humboldtian” roots of the modern university, which for the first time located philosophy as the foundational subject underwriting all specialized forms of knowledge.

Frodeman’s coy talk of “fundamental ontology” is really about this moment. It was dominated by the first generation of German idealists who followed in Kant’s footsteps, the most famous of whom was Hegel. These thinkers inspired successive generations who made their fame both inside and outside the academy by epitomizing in their person what it meant to be a “man [sic] of knowledge” in the secular world. Perhaps the poster boy for this sort of education was Karl Marx. In the United States, the Humboldtian spirit was pursued most forcefully at Harvard University in the early twentieth century by the likes of William James, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana. Their work produced T. S. Eliot and Walter Lippmann, among others, who set the pace for the rest of the century’s thinking.

A reformed university requires a new breed of academics. They will not be specialists chasing each other’s tails for citations and other forms of peer approval. Instead, they will stand tall and set an example for their students to follow.

What all those academics had in common was that they were great lecturers without being preachers. They had an authority in their person that didn’t derive from a religious office. The nuance should not be lost, especially at a time when it is tempting to ditch lecturing altogether in favor of “flipped classrooms” and “student-centered learning.” The temptation derives from the moral vacuity of academic specialization, to which Frodeman rightly draws attention. If a lecturer is no more than a carbon-based vehicle for content delivery, then a set of PowerPoints customized to student needs might indeed be more efficient. But in that case, the knowledge imparted is no more than a means toward whatever ends might have driven the student to acquire the knowledge in the first place—and all of Frodeman’s high-minded talk about the “humanities” will have been in vain.

To drive home Frodeman’s point with the bluntness it deserves: a reformed university requires a new breed of academics. They will not be specialists chasing each other’s tails for citations and other forms of peer approval. Instead, they will stand tall and set an example for their students to follow. And the students will follow them not because they necessarily agree with what their teachers say, but because they agree with the seriousness of thought that led their teachers to say it. Consider the German sociologist Max Weber, one of the most influential theorists in the development of modern Western society, who died a century ago this year. The “new wine” that Frodeman needs to make his vision a reality is closer to port than sangria.

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“A New Role for the Humanities?” *Issues in Science and Technology* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2020).

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