

Beyond the Academy: Solutions to the Academic Brain Drain in Embracing Public Creativity and Leadership

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It's no longer a controversial point to say that a major crisis facing research universities today is the erosion and casualization of the academic talent pool. Contingent, low-paying employment for research and teaching academics is increasingly normal. As with any field in such conditions, a talent exodus is a constant danger, and perhaps today a reality.

The Peter Principle has been accepted as a cynical truth about organizational culture, including the university system, at least since Max Weber wrote about it. Those more likely to succeed in an organization are not its highest performers or most ambitious workers, but the second or third best or the middle of the road. Those whose ideas are least offensive or provocative to established opinions often have an easier time advancing through an establishment. Combine this tendency with a labour crunch, and the inevitable result is a brain drain.

Fresh Starts

Just because someone has trained as an academic researcher and teacher doesn't mean that this is the only career path they can pursue. Many react to the contingency and increasingly poor pay of inescapable adjunct and short-term professorships by leaving academia behind entirely.

The difficulty of that career transition can be much more difficult than many other career shifts because of the public perceptions of the PhD and people who have them. It's a popular stereotype that the only thing a doctorate is qualified to do is teach courses in her discipline. Jennifer Polk is a Toronto-based life coach specializing in post-PhD clients, and she's seen the effects of these stereotypes in their mind-sets.

People seeking career change guidance typically begin sessions with "with that vague sense of what kind of life you want to live, what kind of role you want to be in ... What are your values, what are your character strengths? What do you want to do in a day? What sort of people do you want to be around?" The most difficult hurdle of someone leaving an academic career is cognitive—simply imagining yourself otherwise than a professional university academic.

The psychological barriers transitioning post-academics face are especially destructive: feeling that you've failed, that you're inadequate. Young academics can easily find themselves in cycles of arrogance and self-hatred. "I remember when I was a first year PhD student," said Polk. "I was looking askance at those who were not successful in the academic job market. Even when I was 24, I was the prototypical terrible grad student with a bad attitude about everything else."

Transitioning from the university system to work elsewhere can be psychologically taxing because of a professional atmosphere in academia that separates itself from the mainstream business world and works against its norms. Polk knows “a lot of people who have a lot of trouble finding appropriate work—or even work of any sort” after leaving academia for business. Many former academics spend a long time simply adjusting to the different language of the corporate world. Even many humanities and social science departments’ career development services are illiterate in the language of modern business. In our conversation, Polk quite deservedly gave herself a laugh at the out-of-touch, overly-entitled connotations of the term “graduate placement committee.”

Some academic departments are taking seriously their students’ need to transition from doctoral programs outside of a faculty labour market where job-seeker demand far outstrips job supply. The American Historical Association, according to Polk, has begun “a career diversity program, where they’ve given grant money to graduate history departments to do their own programming on career diversity issues.” Women in the AHA are leaders in post-PhD career diversification, spearheading the development of different private-sector career resources and mentorship programs in Chicago, California, Arizona, and New York.

Some university-based scholarly organizations are catching up to the reality that their graduates need help building careers beyond the academic sector. Yet while post-PhD workers may find poverty and unemployment less likely in the coming years, the brain drain from the traditions of knowledge production in the humanities and social sciences continues.

Polk’s clientele includes many people who have left the labour crunch of academia behind for more lucrative careers elsewhere. They have overcome the difficulties of transition and begun a new life beyond the ivory office complex. Polk is one of these people herself. She has a doctorate in history, but has never done or published historical research in any forum since leaving the university system.

A Tradition Beyond an Academic Discipline

The working world of university research is radically different in character, temperament, language, and basic attitudes from work in the corporate and government sectors. As well, as Polk and many others experienced, the culture of university faculty and graduate students often breeds contempt for the corporate and government sector. The perception of former academics working outside the university sector as inadequate or as failures may not be common, but it isn’t uncommon either.

I’ve experienced the contempt of scholars established in tenure myself—sometimes from prominent guest lecturers and conference presenters, sometimes even from former and current colleagues. This is the inevitable fate of the independent scholar whose work lacks the legitimacy of being issued from a faculty office.

But maybe that fate is not so inevitable. Recognizing precisely what a brain drain does to a society—in this case, the society of professional knowledge producers in the humanities, social sciences, and even the physical sciences—means understanding the real value of those who've left. Those without faculty credentials can contribute to the knowledge production of a field. A brain drain means that failure in the field need not equate to a lack of talent or ability—it's simply a sign of poor luck.

Recognizing a brain drain alongside the power of the Peter Principle means that those without faculty credentials may actually have more to offer a field of knowledge production than those still inside the system. If the mediocre and less polarizing job candidates tend to be rewarded with what few positions exist at all, then academic disciplines will have to keep those dedicated enough to have pursued the PhD and talented enough to have built a career outside the academy part of their knowledge production processes.

This seems at first like a contradiction—How do you contribute to an academic discipline from outside the academy? The answer is for the gatekeepers of a discipline to dismantle one important gate. Simply let people who are trained in the history and techniques of a discipline but don't hold a university faculty position contribute to it.

The Dangers of the World Beyond the Academy

That might be easy to say, but there are plenty of outstanding questions and concerns about what a tradition of knowledge production outside the academic setting would look like. One would intuitively think that the most obvious question would be over such a tradition's quality control mechanisms.

Peer review in academic institutions operates according to clear rules, and while it may have many well-documented issues, the process has been generally effective in maintaining disciplinary quality. Without the rigorous demands of academic institutions encouraging peer review as a matter of professional collegiality, it's natural to think that there can be no place in a beyond-academic humanities tradition for quality control gatekeeping.

The natural home for a humanities tradition—its debate and publishing platforms—would appear to be the internet, like a blogging community or other online home. It offers many advantages over the world of peer-reviewed professional publications. The internet's most important virtue for disseminating knowledge is its openness. Many peer-reviewed journals are kept behind expensive paywalls, accessible only to university libraries. Fine for students and faculty, but those beyond that community are cut off from new content, new studies, and new ideas.

Yet from a well-established position inside the academy, the online world's very openness may make it appear utterly unsuitable for the production and publication of new knowledge and debates. The world of blogs and other social media publication does not appear to be dominated by calm, rational, disinterested researchers.

The dominant voices of the internet would be those who shout the loudest—tastelessly provocative bloggers like Vox Day, Mencius Moldbug, and the alleged journalist, Breitbart.com’s Milo Yiannopoulos. Beyond these noxious individuals, any reasonable expression appears vulnerable to the anonymized assaults of online mobs like dogmatic closed-minded political Reddit boards, the ethical toxicity of the 4Chan culture that gave birth to Gamergate, and a diverse “Social Justice Warrior” culture that many consider a similar mob operating in the name of political correctness. The internet appears to be a place where the stoic dignity of academic discourse can only wither and break before an onslaught of the loudest voices on Earth.

All these dangers are present, and add up to a real danger that faces the humanities’ direct engagement with the social landscape beyond academia. I’m not about to argue that this danger isn’t present in any and every attempt to bring the traditions of the humanities beyond the academy. I am about to argue that the existence of this danger is precisely why humanities traditions need to get accessible, online, more diverse, and bigger than the walls of any academy can maintain.

Embrace Experimentation!

That argument consists of a discussion of the latest work of my own colleague in blogging philosophy and cultural criticism, Phil Sandifer. A former academic in cultural studies, Sandifer has continued to publish literary criticism (about literature itself, as well as television, film, and comics) on his blog and through his small publishing company, Eruditorum Press. His works have two major lessons for any tradition of knowledge production expanding beyond the academy.

One is how important it is to experiment. A problem with traditional peer review is that deviations from a discipline’s standard article format are frowned upon. Since passing peer review is the only path to publish in the professional journals that tenure and promotion committees prefer to see on an applicant’s CV, creative experimentation in writing itself is rare.

Sandifer, in contrast, has published boldly experimental essays of cultural criticism and political philosophy throughout his last five years as a prominent blogger. In his words, he writes with “complete disregard and neglect for normative conventions of shape and style of what intellectual and academic writing is supposed to look like.” He’s a pioneer of what I like to call the longest-form publications—single works that unfold in real time, publishing a new instalment regularly until their eventual completion, which sometimes takes literally years.

TARDIS Eruditorum, his multi-volume compendium of essays on Doctor Who and its cultural influences, took more than four years to finish. It unfolded literally live, one essay at a time covering 50 years of television history, and several of its key essays were crassly experimental and provocatively strange. Several were composed using different cut-up techniques, others involved more direct links to Sandifer’s own life experience,

and some were interwoven with nigh-indecipherable allusions to William Blake. He since began an even longer, more complex project of cultural criticism, *The Last War in Albion*, a complex exploration of Britain's political history told through the lens of the "British Invasion" in the US comics industry.

To build a viable career as a member of a humanities tradition beyond the academy, you need to turn toward the popular, and build the skills in marketing and public relations that a more typical academic might consider beneath them. "You necessarily have to adopt the value that academia most neglected" said Sandifer. "That's a populist bent. You have to make a 180 degree hard reaction against the impulse that gets you your PhD." His own work shows that a populist bent is far from dumbing down your content. His intellectually challenging writing has drawn him a bigger and more loyal audience than his peer-reviewed publications in professional journals could ever have.

Embrace the Mud of Society!

"There's a lot of people who will try to blame the theoretical turn of humanities academia" for its turn away from relevance beyond the academy. The most well-known narrative is that "the postmodernist movement of Deleuze and Foucault and Derrida was where it went wrong. But frankly, Derrida's the last academic anyone listened to! I think for this disaffected expatriate generation of academics, part of the liberating thrill of having to hustle for your audience on a blog instead of being comfortably tucked into an ivory tower is" the embrace of experimentation. "All of the reading was Deleuze and Derrida and those types of people, but God forbid you try to produce anything like that!"

Sandifer has also embraced the bare-knuckle politics of online activism and engagement. Last year, he entered the controversy of the Hugo Awards' hijacking with enthusiasm, publishing many posts and interviews, as well as a long essay and interview collection *Guided by the Beauty of Their Weapons*, on all the issues that battle involved—directly, explicitly, and tangentially. That project has since spun off into a new book, to be published later this year, on the intellectual underpinnings of the neoreactionary movement in contemporary Western culture.

"I focus more on the work of Curtis Yarvin, a software engineer who blogs under the name of Mencius Moldbug, who is really the origin point of this neoreactionary movement. He was originally a traditional libertarian-minded Bay-area techno-libertarian of the expected sort. Then he took this really weird ultra-conservative turn. . . . He wants a corporatist monarchy as the ideal form of government, and views this as the apotheosis and true final form of libertarianism as actually a near-totalitarian monarchy.

"[Moldbug] is not the first person to notice that libertarianism and totalitarianism are relatively similar, but he seems to think it's a good thing as opposed to a problem," said Sandifer. "I mean he's got a certain theme for all that, that order is good and chaos is evil. As in, you have a duty to fealty to a rightful monarch, and rightfulness is entirely a formalist property, and power justifies itself."

Sandifer's book takes in the full scope of the major writers and philosophies of the new reactionary movement, incubating in right-wing libertarian online enclaves. It covers territory as wide-ranging as transhumanism, a variety of philosophical analysis of political concepts and movements, the general spectre of humanity's self-inflicted destruction, the last century of horror fiction, and an examination of why the greatest writers of horror fiction have tended to be horrifyingly racist, sexist reactionaries themselves. It's a 50,000 word essay that begins with the phrase "Let us assume that we are fucked" and proceeds through a comprehensive description of the history and philosophy of neoreactionary thinking and activism, almost through free association.

It would never pass peer review. The point is that it doesn't have to, and shouldn't have to. Sandifer's *Neoreaction: A Basilisk* takes on public figures who can mobilize mobs of reactionary activists through their blogs and related online communities. Yarvin / Moldbug can mobilize politically effective action in the real world, even though he would never have been accepted as a contributor to academic discourse on political ideas. Why does he fly under the radar of progressive academia so easily, despite his real-world power?

In Sandifer's words, "He's this rambling associative blogger who's not very good." Moldbug's style is little more than standard libertarian trolling: "Coming up with a statement that he would like to be true because it's a nice conservative bit of trolling like 'America is a communist country.' And then he just redefines terms wildly away from what anyone else would ever use them to mean and pick isolated examples from history that don't quite fit the normal neoliberal late capitalist historical narrative and say, 'Because you can't explain this, it means I must be right.'"

This is, ultimately, the answer to the question of how to do quality control gatekeeping in a humanities tradition that leaves the academic institution: you can't. The public world is ultimately a very Wild West publication environment, where quality control no longer stands as a barrier to publication itself, but is a function of building support in the wider community of readers and boosters. One can dismiss this as letting quality of research turn into quality of marketing, and this is an omnipresent danger in taking one's work beyond the academy and into the public square. But the benefits can outweigh the costs.

Sandifer, as can we all, can use his own position outside the academy to build his own community of people dedicated to progressive causes. He's using the research and analysis abilities that he developed in the academic system to understand the fundamental ideas animating popular political movements of our day. And he's built his own platform from which he can publicize the danger of these neoreactionary ideas, and show their links to socially powerful phenomena like online harassment mobs that mainstream media and academia find difficult to explain. These examples show how a position outside the traditional academy can be more powerful and effective than remaining inside the ivory tower. Surviving and thriving beyond the academy requires a harder head and stronger stomach than a conventional faculty position can offer.

Democratizing the Humanities

It can sometimes be very easy for professional academics of any discipline to fall into habits of elitist thinking and action, to hold themselves separate from the masses of people. If the ongoing academic brain drain continues—and it shows no sign of slowing down—then we must reject that elitism for our knowledge traditions to survive the cuts to academy-based research and teaching that will come and are here already. Taking a tradition of knowledge production outside the academy means getting our hands dirty, fighting public battles for the sake of our ideals, and combatting directly the reactionary and destructive social forces of our time.

A researcher can no longer turn to the protection of tenure and academic freedom to defend herself from reactionary attacks. The academy itself, as a state-funded institution, is subject to the desires of reactionaries who have no qualms about mudslinging or using state power to destroy ideological enemies. Self-organizing communities of researchers and writers like SERRC or Eruditorum Press offer alternative paradigms—ways to bring our traditions of knowledge production directly to the people that the academy has always benefited (at least hypothetically).

A tradition of humanities and social science knowledge production whose boundaries expand beyond the academy will be a much more diverse community. There will be professional scholars still inhabiting tenured faculty positions, contingently-employed and part-time teachers, and researcher-activists with day jobs¹ all part of a single community. These people will share their common resources, build accessible online profiles, and market their books, essays, and conversations to join an even wider discourse in the public square.

The result may look to some like a downfall from a prestigious position. But it has the potential to become a renaissance.

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¹ Like such disreputable figures as William Blake, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Benedict Spinoza.