

What's the Middle Ages Got to Do With It?

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Let's celebrate the study of the Middle Ages, especially at Cornell, and the study of the humanities generally. No whining allowed. But this should not prevent us from taking a clear-eyed look at the circumstances in which we carry on our labors. The circumstances begin with the culture in which institutions like Cornell are embedded. Mario Vargas Llosa has written a book that was titled in Spanish *La civilización del espectáculo*, literally *The Civilization of Spectacle*. The English translation was published last year with the somewhat gloomier and more dramatic title *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*. He begins as follows (my translation):

It is probable that never in history have there been so many treatises, essays, theories, and analyses of culture written than in our own time. The fact is all the more surprising in that culture, in the sense that has usually been given to this word, is in our days on the point of disappearing. It may already have disappeared, discreetly emptied of its content and this content replaced by another that denaturalizes the one that it had.

According to Vargas Llosa, the culture or civilization of our times is that of the spectacle, of momentary entertainment that helps us to escape boredom. He writes,

This ideal of life is perfectly legitimate, without doubt. Only a fanatic puritan would reproach members of a society who would like to give solace, relaxation, humor, and diversion to lives contained in general in depressing and sometimes brutalizing routines. But to convert this natural propensity to have a good time into a supreme value has unexpected consequences: the banalizing of culture, the generalizing of frivolity, and in the field of information, the proliferation of the irresponsible journalism of gossip and scandal.

In the scene he describes, ideas are replaced by images. Values are measured only according to the prices of the market. And this culture, or lack of culture, is disseminated all over the planet. This is what we call globalization.

We must of course not allow ourselves to fall victim to a nostalgia for a prior golden age that never quite existed, as Vargas Llosa does to some degree in citing T. S. Eliot and Matthew Arnold. Of that supposed golden age we still hear a good deal. But lamenting a lost era only leads to more lament. Instead we are obliged to carry on a sometimes uncomfortable dialogue between the past and the present—to understand that past as deeply as we can while remaining open to, if sometimes skeptical of, the present.

This dialogue, in the face of extraordinary anti-intellectualism, must be guided by fundamental values. Every human being is born with certain capabilities, in the phrase of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. These are the capabilities, for example, of being well nourished and well housed, of having good health and of being free. Among these capabilities is also the capability of exercising the imagination and the creative spirit with which everyone is born. Every child is born an artist and a humanist and a scientist. To

deny both children and adults the exercise of these capabilities, as we do when we rip the arts and humanities out of K through 12 schools and increasingly constrain them in universities, is to deny these students a fundamental human right. That is to say that when we speak of the importance of the humanities and the arts in education, we are not talking about entertainment. We are talking about justice.

Our universities, however, are increasingly under the very pressures that Vargas Llosa writes about. A great deal of pressure aims to make education into entertainment, and if students find education boring, then to provide other kinds of entertainment to help them escape education. In the higher quality institutions, both public and private, there is increasing pressure to provide whatever it is that rich people are prepared to pay for. This can only have a corrosive effect on what universities and colleges ought to stand for. The unfortunate irony is that many of the critics who maintain that universities and colleges should be more “customer focused” while lamenting certain kinds of amenities that put upward pressure on the cost of higher education fail to understand that it is precisely the market pressure of a consumerist society that drives costs up. At the heart of this stands *U. S. News & World Report*. For many institutions and their trustees, whether they say so or not, the highest priority seems to be to rise in the rankings. In order to do this, one must have richer students. That is, one must have higher average SAT scores, which are perfectly correlated with family income. One must spend the money to attract a great many applications from students who can afford to file many applications, most of whom one hasn’t the slight intention of admitting. And so forth.

Now, attracting rich students who can afford to pay the advertised price of education is not all bad because in the absence of a robust national program of financial

aid, every institution is left to develop one on its own. This means charging some people a lot so as to be able to charge others little or nothing. It's called income redistribution. But since "income redistribution" for any purpose is a toxic phrase in our national political life, individual institutions must do it for themselves. On a national basis this is both inefficient and chaotic, and it is happening at both private and public institutions. It sounds a lot like the problem of health care.

Well, what's the middle ages got to do with it? Quite a lot, actually, because the study of the middle ages is caught in these pressures beyond its control and yet represents many of the things about higher education that we ought most to prize. Let it not be said here, by the way, that we aim to stamp out fun. Many of us will remember that among the most powerful ingredients in Cornell's Medieval Studies Program for many years were Bob and Carol Kaske's parties. But we can talk about such things another time. Here we want to talk about the best kind of fun there is at a college or university or in any way of life—the exercise of the imagination and of the powers of analysis and the communication of the results.

How often has one heard the following buzzwords and phrases in discussions of higher education? Critical thinking, communication, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, globalization. We hear them from the defenders of higher education, but we also hear them from the critics who say that we are not preparing students for the real world with enough of these things. I find it hard not to wince when I hear them because they have become so debased.

But the study of the middle ages, especially at Cornell, has embodied these things in the very best sense. In the first instance, this is because serious study of the middle

ages is inherently interdisciplinary. In order to do serious work, one must actually know a few things and acquire some tools. These tools of course include Latin and other languages, and there is no room for someone who finds learning a foreign language boring. And although it is of course possible to become swamped in specialized detail, any serious study of the period requires a breadth of view that incorporates art, philosophy, religion, politics, geography and more alongside paleography, codicology, and philology. I say especially at Cornell.

Cornell is blessed with an intellectual diversity and thus a quality of intellectual fresh air not found at those institutions we play football against. When I was a graduate student at the P school in New Jersey, no one ever suggested that I take a course in a department other than my own. This is unimaginable at Cornell. How much better off I would have been if as a graduate student I had studied with Jim John before setting off to Spain to work on my dissertation, for which purpose I had to teach myself about Visigothic script. I did actually meet Jim and E. A. Lowe exactly once at the Institute for Advanced Study on the eve of my departure for Spain. Don't get me wrong. I had wonderful teachers at Princeton. It just wasn't the same kind of richly interdisciplinary program that I encountered on arriving at Cornell. In that sense, all of my graduate students were much better trained than I was because they quite naturally studied with Jim or Alice Colby-Hall or some other member of the field outside of the music department.

This kind of collaboration extended to undergraduate teaching as well. For a number of years I taught a course on late medieval and Renaissance secular vocal music jointly with a colleague in the French section of the Romance Studies Department. No

one ever questioned this, as they do at some universities, by suggesting that such a course could only count as half a course in my teaching load or that it would be bad for the department because somehow my department would be obliged to share the student-credit hours with another department. We and our students went where good ideas led us, even or especially when they crossed bureaucratic lines. Much about some forms of university administration now much in vogue (it's called Responsibility-Center Management, in case you're wondering) can seriously inhibit these kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations and in the process can actually falsify a subject of study.

A case in point is my own field of liturgical chant. In recent decades much has been said about the role of oral tradition in its transmission, drawing on the work of Parry and Lord on "The Singer of Tales." The results often give the impression that whoever created liturgical chant in the middle ages did it for the sake of giving present-day musicologists something to do, for it fails to take account of the enormous exegetical project of the medieval church, of which music formed only a part alongside art, architecture, and the most detailed mastery of biblical and patristic texts. These churchmen assembled sacred written texts to be sung as part of the explication of the whole of the Christian story throughout the liturgical year. A failure to take account of the nature of this project leads one down the wrong path to understanding the musical aspect of the project.

More generally, retrenchment and the budget models that often come with it can simply limit the horizons of students if every department and college is forced into the business of trying to attract more student customers at the expense of one another. This is to turn the university over to eighteen-year-olds and the power of marketing. The

university must have values and beliefs about what it will study and teach that are resistant to the culture of spectacle. That eighteen-year-olds may not know or care enough to study certain subjects in large numbers cannot be allowed to become the ultimate arbiter of what gets studied and taught. In purely financial terms, furthermore, a system that aims somehow to “balance teaching loads” across all departments does not by itself save any money. The only way to save money is to reduce the number of faculty in relation to the number of students in the institution as a whole, and this will require thinking carefully about the quality of the education being offered.

There will always be some fields with lower enrollments than others. Medieval Studies may well be one of them. But the degree to which what is learned there teaches us about ourselves and the world in the present day, and the degree to which it is a kind of laboratory in which students learn precisely the skills and habits of mind that modern life and a fulfilling life require—these things demand that we continue to celebrate and support medieval studies at Cornell long beyond its 50th anniversary.

The university’s most fundamental goal is to cultivate a certain turn of mind that produces the best in every field and in every way of life. Our dear departed colleague Archie Ammons puts it simply and best, as great poets do, in his long poem *Garbage.*:

art makes life, just as it makes itself, an

imitation: art makes shape, order, meaning,
purpose where there was none, or none discernible,

none derivable; life, too, if it is to have
meaning, must be made meaningful; if it is to

have purpose, its purpose must be divined, invented,
manifested, held to

In this sense, the artist, the humanist, the scientist, and the entrepreneur are all engaged in the same activity—to make “shape, order, meaning, purpose where there was none or none discernible, none derivable.” To study the middle ages, a culture that has “tumbled into the night of time,” in the phrase of Paul Zumthor, is to confront a vast quantity of often fragmentary data of all kinds requiring specialized skills and to attempt to make “shape, order, meaning, purpose where there was none, or none discernible, none derivable” on first encounter. The turn of mind that pursues this effort and that succeeds in it is the turn of mind necessary to succeed at anything—including the world of business, but especially including the making of a meaningful and fulfilling life.

A crucial feature of support for medieval studies should also be mentioned. That is the library. A program in medieval studies absolutely requires a strong library whose collection reflects the breadth and interdisciplinary character of its work. It is simply not true that everything will soon be digitized and that we will then no longer need buildings with books, as some people in high places are heard to say from time to time. It is nevertheless true that the library cannot simply collect everything, as perhaps once it aspired to do, and that therefore the professionals in collection development, working closely with the faculty, must have a keen eye to what is required. In my day in the provost’s office, the university librarian was a member of the deans’ council and participated in discussions of academic programs. I used to say to the deans that for every new faculty hire they should file an environmental impact statement to be signed off on by the librarian. At the same time, it is in the nature of the university not to know precisely what will be required for study and teaching in the future, even over relatively short time spans. The university must be prepared to support the best teaching and

scholarship, wherever the best ideas lead them. Within some reasonable general framework of what the university should study and teach, faculty hiring should pursue the people most likely to have the best new ideas and not simply fill existing slots. This is a challenge for the librarian, but it can be met.

When I arrived at Cornell, the music department did not have a medievalist. It was probably the only music department of any consequence that did not at that time. How would hiring me impact the library? In this case, the library was way ahead of the music department—not just the music department library but the Olin collection as well. I arrived to find material on medieval Spanish liturgical chant, often with the pages still uncut, that had not been available to me in the Princeton library. It was as if Andrew Dickson White himself had said “Some day young Randel will arrive, and we had best be ready for him.” More likely he said something like “No university and no music department of consequence can possibly not want to study medieval culture broadly, and we must prepare for that.”

Who pays for the library and how can be a vexed question made worse by factionalism among departments and colleges brought on by, you guessed it, Responsibility-Center Management. But the library must be seen as a value to the university as a whole and not just as a cost center. A dean who says that he or she should not feel obliged to contribute to the support of the library directly or indirectly because the students in that college don't really read very much should be driven from office on that ground alone.

I have now started to wander off onto the terrain of my life in administration, and for purposes of illustrating more general principles (and not, I hope you will believe,

because of a fascination with myself) let me wander farther. Well, what's the middle ages got to do with it? Both everything and nothing. I have always insisted to my students that life is a pile of accidents no matter what you think. It is therefore a good idea to be as ready as possible for the next accident. Curiosity helps with that.

The facetious answer that I give to the question about why a professor of medieval music becomes a dean and provost and president is that if I take time off from the study of medieval music to become a bureaucrat, when I return to that study after however long an absence, no one will have composed any more medieval music in the meantime, and I can take up more or less where I left off. In retirement and now returning to my studies I can see that in the meantime, not surprisingly, the library has acquired a good many more books and articles about medieval music and that I have some catching up to do.

The serious answer that I give to that question is that I have always believed that if there have to be deans and provosts and presidents, I want them to have my values. Perhaps you have some sense of what some of these values might be.

The university exists for the sake of the life of the mind and not for sake of counting beans. The life of the mind, when well lived, can have many valuable practical consequences, and indeed universities are the intellectual infrastructure that has made this nation what it is or at least what it has been heretofore. But the life of the mind is a good deal more important than that. For it is the only life worth living, no matter how one comes to buy one's groceries. If you are not deeply curious about ideas and other people and their ideas and if you do not wish you could nurture and increase that curiosity in young people, I hope you never decide to become a dean or a provost or a president.

The university is by its very nature a money-losing business because it is after all in the truth and beauty business. Every nickel that it spends can create more truth and beauty, and so it wants to spend as many nickels as possible. Yet it must live within whatever means it can attract honestly while remaining true to its values. It does what it does because it believes in those things as a matter of principle and not because the people in marketing have said that some of our products are no longer fashionable and are not adding to shareholder value, so lets develop some products that will appeal to our target audience of teenagers. This is no excuse for teachers who fail to understand and act on the fact that not all students develop at the same rate and can be appealed to and inspired in the same way. As my grandfather used to say, it takes all kinds of preaching to reach all kinds of folks. But although it is increasingly difficult in consumer culture to say it out loud, there is a reason why some people are called the teachers and others are called the students. Even if students can no longer be compelled to much of anything, they can at least be expected to engage in a willing suspension of disbelief.

When on the rubber-chicken circuit (or now more often, it seems, the rubber-salmon circuit) promoting liberal arts education in general and the humanities in particular, I have often told the following story.

If I were the owner of the store across the street from the college campus selling college sweatshirts, I would hope for business transactions like this one. A student comes into the store and asks for a sweatshirt. I hand the student a sweatshirt, the student holds it up and says that it fits, gives me the money I'm charging, and leaves as a satisfied customer. In the business of higher education, however, it is

more like the following. A student comes into the store and asks for a sweatshirt. I had the student a sweatshirt, the student holds it up and says, “Wait a minute. This is way too big.” I reply, “That’s exactly right. Now you do 100 pushups a day for four years, and it will fit you perfectly.”

From this it follows that the university cannot be run on the basis of one or a pile of algorithms that will spare one the need ever to make a hard decision based on values. Nor can it be run on the basis of the advice of management consultants who will gladly sell you the latest fad from the world of business, though in the wake of the financial catastrophe, universities have spent a very great deal of money on management consultants. It’s not that the university is not a business. Of course it is. But one must know what kind of a business it is, and that is fundamentally different from the businesses that most consultants know. Nevertheless, I repeat, the university must know how to live within its means. This, however, entails many things that are quite different from other businesses. For a start, there are many different colors of money flowing through the university, and they can’t all be drawn together to yield a single number on the bottom line of a profit-and-loss statement of the kind that most university trustees from the business world are accustomed to. Even the rating agencies have not always understood this, but we should no longer be surprised by what rating agencies don’t understand. There will always be—there must always be—many cross subsidies within a university. This too is a form of income redistribution, and it is not inherently unjust if what one cares about most is the intellectual health and well-being of the university as a whole and the values for which it stands.

Some of what afflicts the modern university emerges from well-meaning boards of trustees. I leave aside for the moment the trustees or regents of some public institutions who cannot always be said to be well-meaning but who seem instead to be bent on the destruction or at least severe crippling of their institutions. There are some trustees who have made a very great deal of money at doing essentially one kind of thing. Sometimes it has been mostly making money off of other people's money without contributing much to the general welfare of society by creating jobs and goods and services, and sometimes it has been by standing in the right place at the right time. But with the best will in the world, they may believe that their success in their business, as measured by their wealth, means that they have the solution to the university's problems, which are usually described as financial but inevitably shade over into notions about what "lines of business" the university should be in and how it should treat what they may want to call its customers.

When hiring presidents, these trustees naturally turn to people as much like themselves as they can manage and who will be susceptible to their advice about how to run things. They want the CEO who can make big decisions, often from the hip, who is a change agent, who is disruptive, and various other things common in management speak. This starts off on the wrong foot, because there is no useful or even meaningful sense in which the president of a university of any quality can be said to "run" the university, though some presidents may even use the term. At one time, Jack Welch was thought to be the great genius CEO because at GE he said, in effect, "We are getting out of making toasters and going into financial services." There is simply no analog to this strategy in a university. And it should be remembered that GE did make a lot of money in financial

services for a while, but then came the financial catastrophe, and it has since sold off its financial services businesses under a new CEO.

The world of private equity, in which a great deal of money has been made and in which university endowments have invested a great deal, has also had unfortunate effects on how some trustees will think the university ought to function. If you run a private equity firm, you raise money from investors, and with that money you buy companies that are thought to be underperforming, perhaps only because their stock price is low through no fault of their own, you probably install new management and sell off parts of the company, possibly firing a few thousand people to “slim down” and reduce costs. You may also load this company with debt so as to be able to pay yourself and your partners big dividends and fees. If your new CEO doesn’t make his numbers two quarters in a row, you take him out and shoot him. You then sell this debt-laden company back to the public through a stock offering that nets you a substantial profit, of which you and your partners keep 20% before your investors get anything and after your investors have paid you 2% per annum for the use of their own money. Here again we have a strategy for making money that has no application to a university. There is no way to slim the university down by selling off various of its parts. There is very little way in which to make it more productive by simply firing a lot of people. If your new president has not been fast enough to take your advice, you cannot simply shoot him or her without causing a great deal of unproductive disruption. The case of the University of Virginia is an especially good example, where the trustees in question have been proved utterly wrong on the issues, and the president they tried to fire has survived the very considerable turbulence that ensued.

There are many trustees who generously give of their time and resources to colleges and universities. They are crucial to the very survival of these institutions, now more than ever. But there is the danger that some of them will do what we all do in some degree, namely suppose that their experience and perspective are universally applicable even in matters that lie far from their experience and perspective. (A good liberal education is, of course, supposed to keep you from falling into that mistake.)

Since moving to the Mellon Foundation, I have often been asked what it was like to go from one side of the table to the other—from asking for money to giving it away. Surely, my questioners usually said, giving it away must be more fun. Asking for money is a lot like being in sales. The *Chicago Sun Times*, in an article after my arrival at the University of Chicago, described me as “scholar, diplomat, salesman.” If one has a really good product in the value of which one really believes, being in sales is a perfectly satisfying activity and can even be fun. There, too, it is all about values. In short, I thought of my jobs as both university president and foundation president as being fundamentally the same. As a university president I thought that my job was to listen for other people’s good ideas and then try to secure for them the resources with which to realize those ideas. As a foundation president I thought that my job was to listen for other people’s good ideas and then give them the resources with which to realize those ideas.

In neither job can one support all of the good ideas that come one’s way. Much worse, however, would be to have a feeling of relief at the end of the day that no one had come to you with a good idea. The most important principle here is that neither the university president nor the foundation president can have all of the good ideas. Not every university or foundation president understands this, and the principal gift of a good

many of them is for self-promotion without taking account of how helpful it is to be standing in the right place at the right time.

When university president's retire, the public relations department cranks out stories saying, "During President X's tenure, he increased the university's endowment by Y percent [where Y is thought be a big number]." In recent periods in this country huge amounts of wealth have been created to the benefit of a relatively small fraction of the population. In those periods, university and college fundraising flourished and included megagifts about which we all read in the news. The self-promoters were always glad to take the credit, even if the gifts did not support what mattered most in the university or entailed substantial obligations on the university's part. I on the other hand arrived at the University of Chicago in the year 2000, just as the tech bubble in the economy was bursting. I imagined the story. "President Randel, in a single year, was able to reduce the size of the University's endowment by a remarkable 20%." I then arrived at the Mellon Foundation in the year 2006, just before our latest financial catastrophe. I imagined the story. "President Randel, in a mere two years, was able to reduce the size of the Foundation's endowment by a remarkable 20%." At least it took me twice as long the second time. One should be humble enough to give credit where credit is due and recognize a pile of accidents when one sees one.

I wanted the president of both the university and the foundation to have my values, and the only way I could guarantee that was to agree to be one when presented with the accident of an opportunity. I wanted them to be good listeners, curious about ideas and people of all kinds, and above all committed to the values that ought to govern

any university truly worthy of the name. That would mean having a commitment to fields like medieval studies that lie close to the heart of what a university should be.

Happy Birthday, Cornell Program in Medieval Studies. Long may you flourish.

Cornell University
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