The second secularization or the Humanities and society today: a talk

Simon During

In this talk I want to address, in general terms, the relations between society and the humanities, or what I will call the 'humanities world'.[1]

I want to do so by first considering that relation *historically*, without emphasising the crucial geographical differences in what constitute the humanities around the world today.

In order to think about the humanities at a higher level of abstraction and contextual reach than we usually do, I want to propose that we think about them in relation the notion that, in the West, secularization does not happen once but *twice*. It happens first in relation to religion, and second, more recently, in relation to culture.

What do I mean by this?

I take it that we all understand what the first secularization was: religious secularization. That is, the process by which Latin Christianity was marginalized in Western societies, so that today, as Charles Taylor has famously put it, religion has become just one option among a smorgasbord of faith/no-faith choices available to individuals.[2] That is the sense in which we live in a 'post-religious age.'

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[1] My usual policy is to avoid self-citation but because this talk is so entangled with my other recent writings on the humanities (some published, some not) that I think it is helpful to point to some of the appropriations and repetitions. The concept of a 'humanities world' was first used in "Stop defending the humanities," in *Think in Public: A Public Books Reader*, ed. Sharon Marcus and Caitlin Zaloom. New York: Columbia University Press 2019 (forthcoming), a piece that was first published in *Public Culture*, Public Books website in March 2014. It is also used in "Are the Humanities Modern?" in *Bruno Latour and the Humanities*, eds. Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (forthcoming). Paragraphs from these two essays as well as from a talk on "The Idea of the Humanities' available on academia.com are scattered through this talk.

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2007, p.

Cultural secularization is similar in form. It names the process by which the aura and prestige of high culture and the humanities disciplines have been attenuated and marginalized across the West. As a society, the value of a canon that carries our cultural or, as they once said, 'civilizational' values is no longer assumed. Nor are the forms of disciplined academic training that underpinned that canon assumed either.

And so we now live in a doubly-secularized age: post-religious and post-canonical. Or we might also say: faith has been lost across two different zones: first, religion; then, high culture.

Thinking this way opens up a number of fascinating questions which include the following: are these two secularizations actually separate incidents or rather two aspects of a more general secularization? How does religious faith differ from cultural faith? To what degree are the grounds on which they might be resisted or accepted similar? But I can't fully such questions in this short talk. Let me instead just make a few basic points to help us think about the two secularizations.

Religious secularization, which of course happened earlier than cultural secularization, took two main forms: an intellectual one and a social one.[3]

Intellectually, Christianity began to lose ground from the seventeenth-century on in the wake of the Reformation as the new philosophy associated

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[3] There is a vast academic literature on religious secularization, but the three most influential books on the topic in recent times have been Taylor's *A Secular Age*, Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age,* trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 1985; and Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: a political history of religion*, trans. Oscar Burge. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999. See also, in this talk's context, Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Craig Calhoun (eds.) *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2013.

with Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza et al was developed.[4] From the mid-18th century, Christianity's intellectual and institutional legitimacy further declined when it became possible to articulate the fully fledged atheism that we associate with thinkers like Hume, Diderot and Condorcet who thought of religion either as an oppressive force or as merely expressive.[5]

But this intellectual secularization, which happened gradually, did not have much impact on whether ordinary people did or didn't identify with religious institutions. Everyday-life secularization only took off much later: in fact only in the 1960s—Clive Feld has recently quantified that process for the UK in *Secularization in the Long 60s*— and even then only in some parts of the West. To this day, not so much in the US for instance.

Cultural secularization has happened recently: we see it signs of it in the 1960s and especially in the 'revolutionary' event we usually call 1968, but it is only in the 80s and 90s that it manifests itself clearly.[6] It is hard to get a fix

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[4] The notion that the Reformation is the ur-cause of modern secularism is an old one, indeed more or less contemporary with the event itself. But in recent times it has been given a fillip by an influential historicizing polemic written from the Catholic point of view, namely, Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society,* Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2012.

[5] Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: an Enlightenment in Paris*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1976 remains indispensable for thinking about the emergence of modern atheism. See also, Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1987 and David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell,* London: Routledge 1988.

[6] Indications of this change are various, and many appear below. On the social side, they most obviously include the canon's decline of cultural capital as well as the sheer loss of interest in it as well as the education's system retreat from the concept of *Bildung* as a project. Inside the academic humanities two modes of thought seem to me especially symptomatic of cultural secularization, and because I don't deal with them below I will note them here. The first is the kind of marxian functionalism associated with Pierre Bourdieu's *La Distinction* (1979) which established the cultural capital idea that (I think) most effectively demystified the high humanities intellectually. The second is the avant-garde humanities' turn towards the 'post-human', 'thing theory' and so on, a turn which has taken many forms but has been most influential in Bruno Latour's work, with its systematic dehierarchizing of the human/nature relation. This avant-garde is a programmatic rejection not just of scientism but of *Bildung,* and as such is symptomatic of cultural secularization.

on this process however, because it has not been recognized as such and there

is little academic research on it.[7]

One reason that cultural secularization happened after religious

secularization is of course that the first was a response to the second. Non-

religious high culture and the humanities gained prestige and capacity as

religious faith came under intellectual critique.[8] There is a sense in which

faith was transferred from religion to the humanities, a switch that happened

first in the 18th century (Shaftesbury, Burke, Kant and Schiller being key

figures here), that turn being metaphysicalized and made more explicit by

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[7] The concept of the 'post-cultural,' which is indeed quite widely known, does point in this direction however. That concept and its context were, I think, first articulated by Bill Readings in his brilliant *The University in Ruins,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1996. For a push back on Reading's claim that the postcultural order is hegemonic, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011, pp. 96-98.

[8] The chronological ordering here is indisputable, but the exact history of the turn from religious faith to cultural consecration, and the relations between them, remain unclear. Perhaps the most ambitious and influential theory has been the broad *Kompensationstheorie* put forward by Joachim Ritter in his *Die Aufgabe der Geisteswissenschaften in modernen Gesellschaft* (1962) and taken further by Herman Lübbe and Odo Marquard. For the 'Ritter school', to cite Marquard in German (since translations are slippery here): "Auch und gerade modern sind und bleiben wir Menschen stets mehre unsere Traditionen als unsere Modernisierungen. Die Geisteswissenschaften helfen den Traditionen, damit die Menschen die Modernisierungen aushalten können: sie sind…nicht modernisierungsfeindlich, sonder— als Kompensation der Modernisierungsschäden—gerade modernisierungsermöglichend."
["In modern times too, and in modern times in particular, we humans are and remain always more our traditions than our modernizations. The human sciences help those traditions so that humans can endure these modernizations. Thus the human sciences are not…opposed to modernization. Instead, insofar as they serve to compensate the damage done by modernization they in fact make modernization possible." Odo Marquard, 'Über die Unvermedilichkeit der Geisteswissenschaften,' in *Apologie des Zufälligen: Philosophische Studien*, Stuttgart: Philip Reclam, p. 105, translated as *In Defence of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies* by Robert M. Wallace. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991, p. 97.) Here religion is considered as a 'tradition.' As I see it, the problem with this way of thinking is that it assumes a human essence which experiences a loss under the modern regime of (for instance) utility calculation, the mathematicalization of nature and the dominance of Weberian *Zweckrationalität* (the Ritter school does not, however, focus on capitalism itself), and this loss requires spiritual compensation. Given science's (putative) intellectual devastation of revealed religion, this compensation primarily takes the form of cultural consecrations of cultural canons and the academic humanities (*Geisteswissenschaft*). But I am sceptical that a human essence which requires compensation for modernity's transformation and neutralization of the lifeworld in fact exists: where, especially after cultural secularization, is the evidence for it? This way of thinking assumes something like a Western spiritual self, subject to experiences of cosmic longing, angst and awe, which it conflates with human being as a whole. We will encounter this difficulty again below.

Schopenhauer and then formulated in a more administrable terms in Great Britain in the mid 19th century, Carlyle and Arnold being central agents in that process.[9]

But we should not insist too strongly on analogies between the two secularizations. Doing that risks downplaying the ways in which they differ.

Four such ways are especially relevant.

First they operate quite differently in terms of class: unlike religion, the humanities have always been classed: in their formalized modes especially, they have belonged mainly to an elite, or rather to a fraction of the elite.

Second: cultural secularization is less unified than religious secularization at least in the sense that it has had two slightly different targets.

On the one side, cultural secularization involves a loss of status and perceived functionality on the part of 'high' cultural canons and intellectual lineages. By which I mean that quite suddenly, for instance, having a detailed

[9] As far as I am aware this history is not available in a complete and coherent form. So, more as a heuristic gesture than as an evidenced argument, I note that I am referring here to a received narrative in which Shaftesbury first sketches a picture of a civilized but secular civil society in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711); Burke goes on to offer a secular explanation for religious emotions like awe and the feeling of sublimity in *The Philosophical Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756); in the 1780s and 1790s Kant and Schiller produce theories of the aesthetic based in our response to the sublime and the beautiful which can fulfil the most important human capacities, including that of freedom; around 1808, Fichte, drawing up a plan for Prussian national education, replaced theology at the centre of university education by a form of the humanities, a move which is not undone in Humboldt's famous account of *Bildung* in the policy documents that established Berlin University in 1810. Then, in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818) Schopenhauer, postioning himself against Hegel and the whole academic system, argued in effect that an aesthetic relation to the world is more authentic than either a religious or a philosophical one and that this only becomes clear in works of inspired genius—i.e. in a canon. Somewhat similarly, Carlyle secularized world history by placing religious "heroes" on the same plane as cultural, military and political ones, and last, again in the UK, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) drawing on Coleridge, began to develop a pedagogical concept of culture which can replace religion in the state's education system. In *God and the Bible* (1875) and elsewhere, Arnold went on to reinterpret Scripture precisely as aliterary/cultural monument rather than as revealed wisdom. As a culmination of this sequence, in 1945 the US state turned to a humanities which had shaken off its 'liberal arts' (i.e. classicist) and ostensibly elitist shackles to make the country safe for anti-totalitarian democracy.

knowledge of and love for Bach's music stopped being a marker of a 'cultured' or 'civilised' person and became just a matter of personal opinion and interest instead.

On the other side, cultural secularization means the loss of belief in the ethical and intellectual value of the traditional academic humanities disciplines — what we can call the 'high humanities'.

Let me give a concrete example here: when towards the end of his life, Kant thought about university education in his *Conflict of the Faculties*, he made a case for rethinking the role of the Philosophy Faculty which was then considered inferior to the theology, law and medical faculties. In Kant's time, the Philosophy Faculty was itself divided into two departments. One covered history, geography, linguistics, (*Sprachkenntniß*), the empirical natural sciences (*Naturkunde*) as well as *Humanistik* (classics). The other department covered pure rational knowledge (*reinen Vernunfterkenntnisse*) of various kinds (maths, a-priori philosophy and so on). And, without going so far as to propose that that hierarchy actually be reversed, Kant made the point that at least intellectually, the study of philosophy and history comes first just because theology, law and medicine all require reasoning and some historical knowledge whereas the inverse is not true: philosophy and history do not require knowledge of theology, law or medicine. My point is that the Kant's argument that the disciplined humanities lie at the base of our training, and thus implicitly of cultural practices generally, cuts little ice today.

Of course these two forms of cultural secularization — the erosion of canonicity and the loss of authority and legitimacy for the disciplined training

into the humanities—are joined. That is why it has become almost impossible today to affirm the social or ethical value in studying—to give some examples— verse forms in Dryden's poetry; Lessing's relation to Mendelssohn; the early-modern Dutch ship-building trade; differences between humanist thought in Florence and Milan in the *quattrocento*; contemporary analytic philosophy's technical debate over free-will. Such topics are of course still researched and even taught, but they have become socially and culturally peripheral precisely because they are not connected to a communal acknowledgement of the humanities' value. Thus, at least in Anglophone countries, it has become all but impossible publically to defend the use of tax-payer's money on them.[10]

The third way in which cultural and religious secularization differ is that (arguably) it seems that religion has less social force after its secularization than the humanities do after theirs.

In regard to religion, it turns out that, early secularizing intellectuals such as Pierre Bayle were right, a culture can get along pretty well without revealed religion at its centre.[11] But that seems less true of the humanities. In some form or other they retain considerable force and shaping power. They do so, I'd argue, for various reasons.

The humanities have never had a single project or ethical centre. They are not based on a belief or a set of beliefs; they are radically dispersed: they involve all kinds of activities, dispositions and arguments which go in

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[10] See, e.g., Meaghan Morris, 'Humanities for Taxpayers: some Problems,' *New Literary History*, 2005 (36): 111–129.

[11] For Bayle and the 'virtuous atheist' argument, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 330-341.

different directions politically and morally. [12]   They certainly are not structurally connected to the encouragement of empathy and critique as is often said.[13] And they are hard to secularize for precisely that reason: they possess no essence, no specific doctrines and ethical principles, to break with.

They turn out to be much larger than the old high humanities. Despite the humanities' variety and dispersion, a vernacular version of the Kantian line is correct: our culture cannot get along without, for example, abstract reasoning, a sense of the past and, I would add, aesthetic and ethical judgement. None of these practices are of course confined to the humanities, but —and this is crucial— the humanities do allow for their expansion and development. The humanities accrue a power that is hard to extinguish just because they provide fertile ground for historicized reasoning, memory and judgment. Being able to think logically (and dialectically); knowing more than others about the past; having a strong casuistical sense of what rules count when; being especially familiar with information and archives that enable one to exercise informed judgment; having a grasp of bigger pictures

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[12] This line of is somewhat expanded in my unpublished talk/paper, "The Idea of the Humanities." https://www.academia.edu/34926361/The_idea_of_the_humanities_2017

[13] The notion that the humanities have a special role to play in the promulgation of empathy is so common that it barely requires citation. A very sophisticated version of that idea is to be found in Jonathan Lears, 'The Call of Other Worlds,' in *The Humanities and Public Culture* ed. Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett. New York: Fordham University Press 2014. There, thinking about the trauma caused to the Crow people by colonial expropriation and violence, Lears suggests that what is required today is a "poetic response that not only reinvigorates Crow imagination but also manages to strike a chord in the souls of we members of the dominant culture" (115), that poetic response being embedded in the humanities. As to critique, the most prominent recent voice for critique's centrality to the humanities has been Martha Nussbaum and her case for a Socratic open-ended questioning as essential for a healthy democracy. See, e.g. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: why democracies need the Humanities,* Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010. That neither empathy nor critique or Socratic scepticism are basic or essential to the humanities as they exist now and have existed in the past becomes apparent as soon as you examine their actual practices carefully. Which programs do in fact lie closest to the centre of the actually existing humanities (if any do at all) is not at all clear but I make a case for four such programs in "Are the Humanities modern?"

than your interlocutors; being able to make quick and accurate assessments about whether this version of an image or a text is better than that one….all these are skills (some thought of as *phronêsis* in the Aristotelian tradition) that secure authority and power for individuals in all kind of situations. These skills are not, I repeat, confined to the humanities, but they do thrive there.

These are reasons why a secularized humanities—a post-canonical humanities—still reach deep into our society through all kinds of networks and institutions, in all kinds of forms and media, many at a distance from the academy.

This is the first substantive point I want to make in this talk. And to do it justice we need to think further about 1) why cultural secularization happened; 2) what a post-canonical humanities looks like; and 3) what we might do about our current situation.

First, causes then: why cultural secularization happened.

As we all know globalization has been one of its causes. In this context, globalization is intertwined with both feminism and decoloniality.[14] As such, it is a slightly contradictory anti-colonial globalization which affirms a Herderian relativism for which all cultures whatsoever are ascribed equal value at the same time as it downgrades European high culture just because it was a product of colonialism, patriarchy and white supremacy. In this context, as we also all know, canonical European culture is often, and

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[14] The intellectual basis for this movement will be familiar, and is found in texts like Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), the Combahee River Collective's *A Black Feminist Statement* (1977), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong's, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), and Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. (2011). Todd Shepherd's *The Invention of Decolonization: the Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (2008) provides a fascinating historical account of one aspect of decoloniality's emergence.

increasingly, dismissed as a vehicle for dead white men which is of little interest at least to those who are neither men nor white nor dead. This is one major force behind cultural secularization.

A second, again well-known, cause of cultural secularization is what is often just called 'neo-liberalism,' i.e. the extension of market relations into domains and institutions where they previously played no or little part.[15] The relation between cultural secularization and capitalism is complex. On the one side, an education system primarily directed at increasing economic competitiveness and productivity sidelines the traditional humanities because their economic contribution is minimal or at least indirect.[16] On another side, in an era of radically expanding and niche-marketed consumption, many commodities/commodified experiences can provide the cultural distinction and capital for the 'liberal-professional class' that high cultural participation once did, arguably can provide more nuanced distinctions and prestige than high culture ever did. On a third side, neo-liberal governments have wished to educate wider sectors of the population in order to increase skills or, to put this another way, to intensify competitiveness by expanding equality of

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[15] The literature on this topic is large and this paragraph's line of thought will again be familiar to many. Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* remains indispensible here but see also Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, (London: Pluto Press 2013) and Christopher Newfield *Unmaking the Public University: the 40-year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2008). For a less denunciatory and classroom-based account based on the Australian situation, see Ruth Barcan, *Academic Life and Labour in the New University: Hope and Other Choices* (London: Routledge 2013).

[16] It is worth recalling that, as an intellectual movement, neo-liberalism has its own epistemology, based on the pragmatist notion that knowledge cannot be guaranteed as true except in so far as it works in the market. I don't think this idea has had much purchase in education policy workers but it lurks in the background of neo-liberal governmentality.

opportunity.[17] Therefore they have continuously 'modernized' (i.e. future-oriented) and expanded the university sector as such, which may not benefit the traditional or high humanities but nonetheless does allow a post-canonical humanities to flourish.[18] Again we need to think dialectically here: neo-liberalism produces more students and a larger humanities world but also less prestige for the high humanities and the canon.

Technology also abets cultural secularization. High culture became canonical under a particular, now gone, technological regime, one reliant on particular media and expressive forms—print, the portable canvas, live music performances and so on. While all these forms continue today they have been marginalized by industrialised media, including most recently and powerfully, complex, multi-functional digital media such as the smart phone. These latter don't form a media ecology in which received high culture easily retains its rarity value and prestige, but, again, it is an ecology in which other expressive, creative and critical practices proliferate.[19]

Cultural secularization's last and more minor cause is internal to the academy—namely, professionalization. It is obvious that cultural secularization has happened alongside the increasing self-enclosure of the academic disciplines. To just give two instances of this process:

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[17] Increasing participation in higher education is a global phenomenon, and the student cohort has become more diverse in class and ethnic terms, although well off whites and Asians still dominate. In Australia and the UK, participation in higher education as a percentage of cohort population has increased about ten fold since 1950 with the largest increases since 1989; in Germany about threefold; in India figures for the period are hard to find but in the last decade participation has more than doubled; in the US participation increase over that period has been about fourfold. (These disparate figures are taken from a number of reputable sources on the web.)

[18] I thank Alison Moore for the point about future-orientation here.

[19] See, among many other works, Eric Klinenberg (ed.) *Cultural Production in a Digital Age* (London: Sage 2005) and Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 2016.

First (in Anglophone nations): the importation of the 'research' paradigm from the sciences into the humanities from the 1960s onwards.[20] (Before then Anglophone humanities academics were primarily figured as erudite teachers, scholars and thinkers not as researchers.) By scientifizing the humanities, this transposition undid their claim to possess general ethical and cultural capacities.

Second, more technically we can point to the proliferation of professional research journals many based on tiny research specializations in the postwar period and then another acceleration in the number of specialist journals in the online format from about 1990. (Accurate figures here are hard to find but it seems there are well over more than ten times as many academic journals in the Humanities today than there were in 1950). This is worth mentioning because much of this scholarship is produced just for bureaucratic reasons (i.e. to fulfil requirements for hiring or promotion) not for academic ones. Although specialization is a process that has been complained about for centuries, it is only recently that its primarily bureaucratic functions and purposes have become openly apparent.[21] This too damages the humanities' aura and prestige.

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[20] A widely read but ineffectual critique of the appropriateness of the research paradigm for literary studies in particular was mounted by F.R. Leavis in his *Education and the University* (1943). On the history of the anti-research-paradigm in that discipline, see Carol Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge 1880–2002*, Basington: Palgrave 2005 and Mark Hewson, "The Debate with Method in the History of Literary Studies," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 55/1, 2018: 23-46. It is worth noting that a version of debate between science research methods and methods proper to the humanities had already been played out in the famous late 19thc German/Austrian *Methodenstreit* which involved historians and economists rather than literary critics. And it's also worth noting that theoretical neo-liberalism developed from out of the science side of that debate.

[21] On the earlier history of specialization and its discontents see, for example, Thomas William Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* London: Croom Helm 1982.

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How has cultural secularization affected the humanities practically?

To think about this question we need push harder on my distinction between the academic and the extra-mural humanities.

Let us take the academic humanities first. Here, especially in the Anglophone world, what secularization has meant is the displacement of a disciplinary or departmental model by a post-disciplinary or school model. We can treat each in turn.[22]

The disciplinary or departmental model

In this model each discipline was housed in its own department. [23] Departments made rigid distinction between those who do and don't hold tenured positions, and most teaching was carried out by tenured academics. Within the departmental model, all disciplines were autonomous, and teaching and scholarship were, ideally, combined. This structure, which we think of as traditional, was in fact only established about a century ago. Sole discipline academic departments barely existed before about 1900 and European universities have never organized themselves around them.

To a greater or less degree, the twentieth-century humanities disciplines had their own traditions, methods, pedagogical practices, topics and problems, and charismatic founders. Disciplines were, however, also normally divided into smaller often feuding intellectual formations: for

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[22] A fuller version of this section of the talk is available here:
https://www.academia.edu/764233/Postdisciplinarity_2011
[23] See Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001 from which much of the information below is derived.

instance, in philosophy, the divide between analytic and continental philosophy; in history, the divide between intellectual, social, political and cultural history.

Ethically and psychologically, humanities departments have been shaped by a set of affective idealisms: love of the discipline for its own sake; curiosity, contemplation of, rather than engagement with, the world. They were also marked by 'collegiality,' an internally-democratic professional honour code which, when examined more closely, often disguised patronage systems that were more powerful when departments were expanding and job opportunities more plentiful than they are today.

School model

In the Anglosphere especially, departments have been replaced by schools and centres in many institutions. Leaving externally-funded centres asice, these schools don't shelter a single discipline, but rather contain various 'programs' or post-disciplines, often brought together higgedly piggedly. Indeed in this structure the humanities themselves become a 'meta-discipline' rather than a collection of disciplines. More and more often, people say, 'we're in the humanities' not 'we're in history' or 'in philosophy' etc. Pedagogically, courses are no longer conceived in terms of pathways designed to introduce students into a discipline step by step. Coverage disappears.

Post-disciplinarity is not to be confused with inter-disciplinarity, i.e. with exchanges and connections between established disciplines.[24] (But something we might name 'inter-post-disciplinarity' is now common, namely, projects which join various post-disciplines.) Post-disciplines are also often named 'studies' (and the French have gone some way towards developing a post-discipline—'studies' studies'—to analyse this phenomenon).[25] Prominent examples include cultural studies, science studies, visual studies, legal studies, American studies, museum studies...

Different post-disciplines were established on different grounds and for different reasons. They have no single overarching logic or purpose.

Some emerged out of teaching needs linked to new employment opportunities: new media studies trains students for jobs in digital media; legal studies helps students to be hired as para-legals; music therapy aims to certify students for specialist positions in the health care industry.

Some post-disciplines emerged in relation to substantive new topics and domains for which resources and infrastructure are lacking for full disciplinarity: museum studies, for instance. Indeed it seems to be impossible to establish a new discipline today: a strong indication that the age of the discipline is in retreat. But it is also true that some fields—'film studies' for example—seem once to have hovered between disciplinarity and post-discipinarity.

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[24] For a strong defense of disciplinarity and an understanding of its threats, see Jonathan Kramnick, "The Interdisciplinary Fallacy," *Representations* 140/1 (2017): 67-83.

[25] That was a theme of le colloque, "Les designations disciplinaires et leur contenu : le paradigme des studies," l'Université Paris 13. Jan 2017 which I attended.

Some post-disciplines appeared from out of post 1960s progressive identity politics: e.g. gender studies, queer studies, African American studies.

Finally, older disciplines can themselves become post-disciplinized: English becoming 'literary studies'; history, 'historical studies'; classics, 'classical studies,' for instance.

Post-disciplines are typically methodologically eclectic and permeable. What is often just called 'theory' can be transferred from postdiscipline to postdiscipline, where it stands in the place of the methods that were autonomous to the old disciplines. Thus the French philosopher/historian, Michel Foucault became the late twentieth-century's most cited humanities academic because so-called 'Foucauldianism' could be applied across various post-disciplines.[26]

Under the new 'school' structure, professionalism itself has changed, because universities are managed as if they were businesses. This means academics are regarded not as professionals bringing their disciplinary skills and erudition to a university which they will help govern, but as employees of institutions that exist in competitive relation to one another. Under the new dispensation, academics are no longer professionally independent: their primary responsibility is to the university that employs them not to their discipline.

Ethically, schools and post-disciplines are marked by pragmatic professionalism and careerism (and the cult of stars and 'seniority') rather than the received disciplines' idealized pure love and contemplation.

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[26] For most cited thinkers in the postdisciplinary period (according to Google Scholar), see
https://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/2014/05/18/top-humanists-of-the-last-century/

Because the school model has been developed by university managements who think of universities as business enterprises, quantification proliferates. Disciplines and post-disciplines are identified in code numbers usually set at the state level (for instance, the European Union has its own official coding structure for research topics and interests) so as to monitor research outputs. Particular programs are ranked across universities by external agencies. Citation counts become standardized and are used to hierarchize academic journals and publishers as well as used as criterion for individual promotion and program rankings. In some universities, individual academics' 'performance' are also quantified in money terms: dollars are attached to research publications, to research grants, to students taught, to administrative tasks carried out, so that individuals can be regarded as profit centres in relation to School budgets. As far as research is concerned, this means that research is only viewed and credited as a collective product of collegial or disciplinary networks when it is produced by a formally constituted inter-postdisciplinary team.

Under this model teaching and research become disjoined, and teaching is increasingly carried out by postgrads and postdocs as well as by precariously employed, badly paid, adjuncts. Teaching is increasingly administered in relation to money as well as to the technological requirements of computers and digitalization, so that, for instance, class sizes increase and curricula become less flexible. Because the key measure in allotting school budgets tends to be student numbers and because there is minimum control over what courses or subjects students can choose,

programs that fail to attract sufficient students can just disappear, no matter what their intellectual/methodological status and function.

In sum, under cultural secularization and its post-canonical, post-disciplinary structure, there is no felt responsibility to the disciplines themselves as a basis of knowledge and value and the universities are administered not as collegial associations but as education businesses.

Extra-mural humanities

Most discussions of the humanities assume that the humanities are essentially academic. This is, however, a simplification. Even if we allow for a moment an orthodox understanding of the history of the humanities as developing out of early-modern European humanism and reaching an apogee in the West during the Cold War, then many of the most significant scholarly and theoretical contributions to that trajectory were written outside the academy. Just think of influential thinkers like Matthew Arnold, Simone de Beauvoir, Julien Benda, Jeremy Bentham, Maurice Blanchot, Thomas Carlyle, François-René Chateaubriand, René Descartes, Denis Diderot, Franz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Johann Gottfried Herder, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, C.L.R. James, Gottfried Leibniz, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, John Locke, Niccolò Machiavelli, Karl Marx, J.S. Mill, Michel Montaigne, Montesquieu, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Péguy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Baruch Spinoza, Alexis Tocqueville, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lorenzo Valla, Voltaire none of whom (mainly) worked in universities. Indeed beginning with the emergence of humanism in early modern Italy right up until the later 19th century the university system was routinely at odds with currents that

have most powerfully shaped the humanities as we know them. Historically, the humanities and the universities have mainly been opponents. [27] Admittedly, the academy became more important to the humanities after 1945 and today pretty much monopolize at least our image of them, but it remains important to keep both today's and the past's the extramural humanities in mind when we think about the whole humanities world.

As I have been arguing, post-tertiary education's extension since the war, and especially since the 1980s under neoliberalism, has enlarged the humanities world. So too has the general increase in cultural consumption. Many more people have studied in Arts Faculties, if only a course or two, than ever before; many more people produce and consume products which refer to knowledges and sensibilities that the humanities foster. But let's not forget that a *popular* humanities has been developed since at least the seventeenth century. We can recall Joseph Addison's famous 1711 description of this. Addison wanted to bring "Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and Coffee-Houses." By the time that Addison was writing, that will to popularize was already well established, and over the centuries would go on to produce a flood of books and reviews, and then, later on, of exhibitions, films, tv, radio shows, web sites and so on, disseminating analysis, understanding, preservation and interpretation of society, culture and

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27 The recent scholarship has tended to revise the notion that scholasticism belonged to the university system whereas humanism lay outside it, but for my purposes here the claim is justified I think. See, for instance, Jonathan Davies, *Florence and Its University during the Early Renaissance,* Leiden: Brill 1998; Paul F. Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*, Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press 2002 as well as Grendler's "The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 57 (2004), 1–42.

nature—a flood that continues, stronger than ever, today. Furthermore: once we bring that flood to mind we can also easily see that there exists a huge amateur humanities in which, as it were, people, some of whom have had only the most attenuated connection to the academy, think and learn along with the popular humanities, using the skills of reasoning, interpretation, judgement, archiving and historicising that I mentioned earlier. It is pretty clear that the humanities world has historically drawn much of its energy and legitimation from popular and amateur activities like these.

There also exists an extramural *figurative* humanities, by which I mean a domain of styles, objects, designs, tastes that are shaped by the humanities, carry their imprint and indirectly express and stimulate their findings. Take the Bauhaus of the 1930s as an example: Bauhaus designs and artworks, famous for their austere industrial elegance and their refusal of mere decoration or ornamentation, were produced in accordance with sophisticated social/philosophical theories both academic and extra-mural, theories which loosely resonated with other not necessarily related "modernist" knowledges—with, for instance, T.S. Eliot's rejection of romanticism which formed the basis of twentieth-century Anglophone academic literary criticism, or with logical positivism—a Viennese school of philosophy which downgraded the role of feeling and judgment in producing true knowledge—or, more immediately, with Marxist embraces of industrial technology. To recognize that the humanities are expressed in designs, fictions, movies and so on—that a humanities sensibility is articulated in all these marketable forms— is once again to shift our sense of the humanities'

current imperilment. Under cultural secularization and its post-disciplinary university, the academic humanities lose authority while the popular, amateur and figurative humanities in the larger humanities world thrive.

One last point on this: to consider the extra-mural humanities is also, I think, to recall that the forces that are producing a meta-humanities within the university system also have a will to flatten out differences between the academic, popular and figurative humanities, or, at the very least, to increase interactions between them. It is partly in that spirit that politicians and university managers now often encourage what is called 'impact' in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands as well as the 'public humanities' in the States. Politicians and university managers routinely encourage academic humanists to communicate with wider publics. These efforts, however, are made alongside increasing professionalization, and so are in tension with what is probably a stronger tendency in the humanities.

How might we think about our situation then? What to do practically?

I feel like saying, 'not much'. Under cultural secularization, it is no longer possible to defend the humanities with the kind of traditional arguments that Helen Small has analysed in her excellent book, *The Value of the Humanities*. What we can do rather is to understand what is happening, not just narrowly in terms of specific places and institutions, but in the broad context of the humanities world and cultural secularization, and then to think about the opportunities and blockages that that cultural secularization offers.

My thesis, then, is that we need to think of a whole humanities world in which the academic humanities form only a part, and the high humanities

based in the traditional disciplines only a smaller and more marginal part still. To think like this is to think dialectically in the sense that the secularized humanities world is a bigger, more vital humanities world than ever at the same time that it has lost ideological legitimacy and authority, indeed in part *just because* it has lost legitimacy and authority.

It is also to think about class: how, on the one side, the humanities world and especially what is left of the high humanities under their secularization is a world of the elite, albeit one ideologically based in liberal relativism, identity politics and a faith in universal empathy and cosmopolitanism.   This means that the powerful politics which sets conservatism against the 'liberal elite' is a class war in which that elite is , by its own humanities-based value system, on the wrong (i.e. the elite) side.[28] Confusing. At the same time, the academic humanities are becoming poorer, and young academics driven into precarity. A confused, precariatized elite then.

I would suggest further that the strictures on our capacity to critique cultural secularization become most apparent when we address the *causes* of that secularization. Of course to embark on a critique of cultural secularization involves a deeper question, namely, why exactly would one bother? Many of us have no difficulty accepting religious secularization, why is it different for cultural secularization?

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[28] These arguments have become familiar, usually from the right, but see, from the left, Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009) on the impact of a humanities education on class position, and more generally, Jean-Claude Michéa's *Notre ennemi, le capital* (2016) which makes the uncomfortable argument that today's humanities-educated, culturally-secularized, liberal elites are actually neo-liberal capitalism's useful idiots.

So let us quickly examine connections and analogies between contestations of religious and cultural secularization.

In a summary fashion, we can distinguish between three different genres of resistance to religious (or in particular Christianity's) secularization. The first is absolutist: secularization is wrong because God's revelations and miracles are true. The second is structural-functionalist: religion provides the framework in which our society, culture and morality are most securely supported, and thus attempts to marginalize it should be slowed or thwarted. The third is existential and expressivist: human beings are in fact lost in a cosmos they cannot account for and therefore are driven towards the transcendentalisms which articulate the wonder, awe and anxiety they encounter in approaching Being. Religion, not necessarily based in doctrine, ritual or revelation, best expresses those affective, existential needs, in part because it binds us to earlier generations.

We can note that, in today's secular society, none of these three reasons to resist religious secularization are conceptually strong: the first is, by received criteria of proof, empirically wrong; the second is disproved by the fact that successful Baylsean societies—i.e. societies not dominated by religion in the Christian sense of 'religion'—do prosper. The last seems somewhat beside the point. Even were mankind's existential needs inexpungable, they mount no barrier to the secularization that we (and others) do in fact have.

What about resistance to cultural secularization then? It turns out that thinking analogically with reference to the religious paradigm can be helpful here. In this context too some of those who wish to push back on cultural

secularization do so on absolutist grounds, making the claim, for instance, that the cultural canon which holds Western civilization's glories is where real beauty and truth exist, and no where else.[29] Some who wish to push back on cultural secularization make a functionalist argument: the humanities and the canon and the traditions and institutions which support them provide irreplaceable grounds for a good society: they can shape, for instance, empathetic and tolerant moral sensibilities more powerfully than any alternative. Last, some who resist cultural secularisation do so again on expressivist grounds, making the claim that high cultural traditions and artefacts along with the practices of interpretation and critique that we have developed, provide us with the least reductive, most subtle, most profound, impersonal and thoughtful public experiences and lessons we can find, experiences which sanction the heritage.

None of these defences seem to me particularly philosophically strong either. Without going into detail: I think most of us agree that our canon does not bear any absolute truth and beauty but rather belongs precisely to a (fraction of) one particular culture or cluster of cultures. The functionalist argument is weak because, as we have seen, the humanities preach other messages than empathy and tolerance and the democratic, cosmopolitan virtues (think Hobbes, Nietzsche, Arendt, Pound etc etc). And, of course, as a matter of fact they don't seem to make people more empathetic and tolerant anyway. The expressivist argument is politically impossible because of its implicit elitism: it divides and hierarchizes the world into those shaped by the

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[29] This kind of argument is often put by Straussians and was most famously circulated by Allan Bloom in his best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

humanities and those who are not. Against the grain of contemporary ideology, it also downgrades experiences which happen in nature or in sport (say) rather in the proximity of high-cultural artefacts. But it is also weak philosophically, because, as was the case for similar arguments against religious secularization, it is irrelevant. Some groups and individuals will no doubt continue to experience canonical cultural works (literature, art, classical music) as incomparably enriching and illuminating (I do myself) but that does not and will not hold cultural secularization back. Under secularization, admiration of and commitment to the canon, even to the heritage of the old disciplines, remains an option (especially for elites), just as religion remains an option (especially for the subaltern.)[30]

But the fact that there are no overarching rational grounds to resist cultural secularization does not mean that it ought not to be tested, especially because, as a matter of fact, it threatens the material interests of those involved in the high humanities in particular, interests that also deserve respect. And as I say, from a post-faith point of view, it seems best to probe and push back on cultural secularization's putative weaknesses by carefully examining its causes and reasons. This enables us to avoid those received, now unpersuasive and banal, defences of the canon and the humanities.

Some causes for cultural secularization are obdurate: it seems clear, for instance, that we cannot effectively intervene on the constant changes in technology. They seem to have a force of their own. Nor can we do much about academic professionalization and specialization: if those processes are

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[30] Who needs reminding that it is at the 'top' of the education system that the old disciplines are most secure and the canon most thoroughly covered?

going to slow, which they may do, that probably won't be because of pious exhortations to communicate more with the wider public humanities, or to further quantify impact.

There are, however, two causes of/reasons for cultural secularization that are open to negotiation because they are more openly ideological.

The first has to do with the processes of intellectual decolonisation and identity emancipation that underpin cultural secularization. Here I think more thinking is required.

The argument that, to put it very crudely, the received canon is to be downgraded on the grounds that it was created by white, male, Eurocentric, colonizing elites is very powerful today for reasons which I and many of us have real sympathy for. But it is in fact misconceived. One strong reason for that was first spelt out 25 years ago by John Guillory in his *Cultural Capital*. Let me put it like this: the qualities and forms through which literature, art, music and so on gain their powers and from which they draw their intensities are 'relatively autonomous'. They have no direct relation to the admittedly unjust social conditions out of which they were produced. This is true of all aestheticized expressive forms in all societies whatsoever, and all or almost all known societies, white or not, colonizing or not, have been by the standards that are dominant in the humanities world today, cruel and unjust. To judge cultures and works by (our understandings of) the equity or not, tolerance or not, peacefulness or not, and fairness or not of the societies or individuals which produced them is to end up with an all but empty heritage, and, in

particular, to erase the pasts that have formed us. This seems to me a cogent argument to push back on an aspect of post-canonicity.[31]

The other cause of cultural secularization that invites a certain push-back is the neo-liberal extension of market structures into the education system. These policies can now be contested on ecological grounds of course. Slowing growth is today in all our interests. But neo-liberal governmentality can also be contested on more familiar cultural-political lines. The domain of high culture and the disciplinary lineages stand athwart or even against the neo-liberal state's ideological and administrative protocols which are, as we all know, producing increased inequity and leading to re-oligarchization and even, against the grain, tyrannies too.

Preserving high culture and the high humanities in a quasi-Burkean spirit functions today as a resistance to neo-liberalism, which, at least from my political position, itself confers on them a value and purpose. In that way, what remains of the high humanities finds itself aligned with green and radically left anti-capitalist political movements. This means that the humanities world is, at its old pinnacles and centres, structurally bound to a politics of resistance shared by very different agendas on terms that do not respect received left/right divisions. Something like this conjunction between conservatism and leftism was first thought through over fifty years ago by Raymond Williams in his path-breaking *Culture and Society* which in many ways remains an intellectual-historical template for any engaged analysis of how the humanities and society interact.

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[31] A similar argument can be mounted against the rejection of the high academic humanities specifically.