

Football-Meister Say ‘Feel the Hype’: The Aesthetics of Asceticism

Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 326.

More than fifty years ago, the German-born American historian Fritz Ringer (1934–2006) joined a group of historians on both sides of the Atlantic examining German scholarship for clues about the roots and the rise of National Socialism.¹ The ambitious target of Ringer’s analysis was a whole social ‘type’ centered on and informed by the universities. These were the so-called ‘mandarins’ – an elite ‘ow[ing] its status primarily to educational qualifications, rather than to hereditary rights or wealth.’² Ringer believed this group to have enjoyed a unique window of influence in a Germany where industrialization came late: its members gained a foothold in the bureaucracy of the German states and from there elaborated a concept of the state that elevated and secured them as ‘bearers of culture’. The mandarin class, Ringer found, was under duress at the *fin-de-siècle*, uncomfortable with the rise of everything from moneyed entrepreneurs to agitating workers, and opining uneasily (and incessantly) about the nation’s cultural and learned ‘crisis’. Split into a larger, conservative ‘orthodox’ camp entirely dismissive of the new order, and a more select, intellectually agile ‘modernist’ contingent (including, e.g., the noted political economist, sociologist, and diagnostician of modernity Max Weber [1864–1920]) that looked to accommodate the new social elements but found no substantial political purchase, the mandarins – so Ringer – had effectively painted themselves into a corner by the 1930s. Their unrelenting reactionary criticism and eventual escapism, he argued, rendered them ill-equipped for resistance and even, in some cases, amenable to the ‘content’ if not the ‘form’ of National Socialism.³ The mandarins were not responsible for the disastrous

1 Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Hanover and London, 1990 [1969]). For perspective, see, e.g., Kenneth D. Barkin, ‘Fritz K. Ringer’s *The Decline of the Mandarins*’, *The Journal of Modern History* 43 (1971), 276–286; James C. Albisetti, ‘*The Decline of the German Mandarins* after Twenty-Five Years’, *History of Education Quarterly* 34 (1994), 453–65. There is not perfect alignment between the two about the extent to which German academics had become a point of interest for historians by the time of Ringer’s publication.

2 See Ringer, *Decline*, 1–13, quotation at 5.

3 *Ibid.*, 439.

direction that Germany took, but their ‘irresponsibility’;⁴ Ringer argued, dissolved the prospect of an intellectual firewall against the calamities to come.

In his attempt to get at the attitudes and orientation of the mandarins, Ringer openly relied on a kind of double-proxy, confining his treatment first to the writings of university professors, the ‘mandarin intellectuals’ who were said to set the program and standards for the rest of their kind – then narrowing the selection further by allowing humanists and social scientists to be the primary mouthpieces for the intellectuals, excluding, e.g., professors of the natural sciences.⁵ The representativeness of the approach was criticized: at the very least, it left plenty of room for a wider census of mandarin opinion.⁶ Thus it is more than appropriate to find three of the scientists’ neglected spokesmen at the literal center of Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s (hereafter RW) *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*, which devotes its hinge-chapter to what the book dubs ‘mandarins of the lab’. *Permanent Crisis* expands the frame in other ways as well: where Ringer confined himself largely to the period from 1890–1933, RW are also able to accommodate ‘melancholy mandarins’ whose generic ‘laments’ fall earlier and later, including the Prussian pedagogue Adolf Diesterweg in the 1830s and the American Allan Bloom in the 1980s. If we include an earlier, short-form conceptual sketch published by Wellmon on the online pre-print and review-forum Twitter, the figure of the ‘melancholy mandarin’ becomes very current indeed, encompassing ‘self-interested dealers’ – he helpfully offers to introduce some – ‘[who] perform institutional critique & annual elegies but enjoy their university parking spot & health insurance, & do jack shit for local institution, just tolerate students’.

From Diesterweg to self-interested dealers with parking spots: the cast of characters implicated gives a foretaste of the book’s admirable scope. The intent of *Permanent Crisis* is to deliver a historical treatment that will ‘uncove[r] the roots of the persistent sense of crisis surrounding the humanities’ (3). There is an emphasis on ‘continuities’ (3) between the laments around the state of education in the nineteenth-century German university and hand-wringing at the twentieth and twenty-first century American institutions that are in some ways their descendants. The idea is not that historical perspective will belie the impression that the collection of pursuits known as the humanities are in trouble or at a decisive point. On the contrary, RW wish to show that a sense of exigency vis à vis corrupting forces has been somehow inserted into

4 Ibid, 226, 449.

5 Ibid, 6.

6 For the criticism, see Barkin, ‘Ringer’s *The Decline*’, 282, and Albisetti, ‘*The Decline*’, 457 (citing relevant follow-up research, e.g., at 458n14).

the genome of the 'modern humanities', to be expressed over and over again by the equipment of the moment. Rightly unsatisfied by the simple thesis that humanities scholars have sounded the alarm for one reason or another before, they push for the 'strong' claim that crisis has been, and continues to be, *constitutive* of the humanities, a 'core part of [their] project' (3), their 'justification' (117), their 'rationale' (253).

These are fascinating formulations, not least for the sobering effect they will have on any looking to make claims about a 'present' crisis of the humanities. And they go hand-in-hand with other arguments of the 'strong' variety: one is that we ought not follow recent studies in treating the 'humanities' as if they were a centuries-old tradition, extending backwards to the Renaissance and still further to antiquity.⁷ According to RW, we have to do since the late nineteenth century with a distinct 'modern humanities', a constellation of disciplines and pursuits that were assembled by German intellectuals of the period in a 'rearguard action' (150) meant to protect a sense of meaning and moral vision that had been challenged, *inter alia*, by 'the weakening of traditional religious communities and political bonds[.]' (150) Far from being something that was *already there* for the taking – or rather, the studying – centuries ago, the modern humanities occupy a 'hard won' place (151) and a relatively recent one – the product of a concerted cultural project that took place in the university.

Before observing this project unfold, we are oriented in the verbal and conceptual idiom of those that set it in motion and maintain it. An initial chapter presents influential articulations *c.* 1800 of the 'unity-of-knowledge ideal' – the commitment to the notion that there was a certain holism, a totality, of which individual intellectual pursuits should recognizably partake. Not easily dislodged, the 'unity' principle would continue to sit behind disdain for things like specialization or mean careerist knowledge for a very long time to come. It would help to inform critiques like the ones we witness in the subsequent two chapters. Here is Diesterweg complaining of the failure of the university (too specialized, too research-oriented) to teach independent thinking and character; here is Nietzsche on the teaching of philology as sterile, vulgar, divorced from life. Here, too, are more contemporary laments about the university's failures: Bloom, William Deresiewicz, Andrew Delbanco. It is against this backdrop of 'crisis talk' early and contemporary that RW introduce the 'mandarins

7 In this connection, RW point to James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, 2014) and Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 2013). Using a long timeline to tell the history of humanities scholarship, or elements thereof, is of course itself nothing new: for a classic earlier example, see, e.g., L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford, 2013 [1968]).

of the lab'. In readings primarily of selected speeches from the celebrated pathologist Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), and the physiologists Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) and Emil Du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), they show that for all their heightened influence, Germany's most prominent natural scientists acknowledged that there were mysteries that their methods were unable to solve. The 'essence of the human mind' (Virchow), the 'human mind itself in all its various drives and activities' (Helmholtz), the essence of matter and force and the problem of human consciousness (Du Bois-Reymond) remained either inaccessible to natural science or the province of other fields. What this amounted to, say WR, picking up the words of Virchow, was a 'door' (117) left ajar for non-scientists.

It was a 'door' through which philosophers like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936) would push, articulating a 'countervailing form of knowledge against the natural sciences' (165). In the new disciplinary 'settlement' that their work would help contour, the *Kulturwissenschaften* or *Geisteswissenschaften* filled the vacuum left by the ascendant mandarins of the lab who concerned themselves with generating laws from a 'passive mechanistic model of nature', while ceding the particulars of moral, political, and philosophical questions. 'In short', write RW, 'Dilthey...assembled an array of previously disparate disciplines and juxtaposed them to the natural sciences, called them *the humanities*, and, finally, asserted their epistemological and institutional monopoly over ethical and moral questions' (157). It was a 'bold' move, to be sure, but also a reactive one – conditioned by the success of the natural sciences and meant to carve out space alongside them. In this sense, the 'modern humanities' were born as a 'defensive' act (184).

The humanities had taken on no small responsibility. Already in the days of Diesterweg there had been consternation that the university was not doing enough to teach its charges how to live. Now the natural sciences had been 'quarantined' (157, 165) from such questions, which were localized into a particular *sub-sector* of the university: the 'modern humanities' had emerged as a 'therapeutic' (151) force, a 'consolation' (135) meant to deliver what the natural sciences, to say nothing of their technological applications, could not. After establishing these expectations, RW turn to Max Weber and the response embodied by his famed 1917 (published in 1919) lecture *Wissenschaft als Beruf* ('Scholarship as Vocation'). Delivered in Munich as World War I ground grimly on, Weber's bracing lecture warned that scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) of any variety – natural scientific and humanistic – was in fact ill-suited to deliver 'meaning', let alone console. Becoming a scholar was an uncertain proposition hinged to everything from the accidents of inspiration to the inefficiencies and idiosyncracies of hiring committees. It demanded a willingness for

micrological focus, for hyper-specialization, for the experience of being rapidly outmoded. And the work itself delivered scholarly answers – which were precisely *not* answers about what to do or what values to embrace, what character to assume and how to live. What scholarship could do, besides introducing rational forms of control and methods of thinking, was bring ‘clarity’: *what* positions might lead by *which* methods to *which* ends, what principles and convictions were consonant with which stances? In essence, it could help people to ‘render account of the ultimate sense of their own behavior’.⁸ But it could not choose that behavior for them. It could tell you what the consequences, the inconsistencies, the effects and influences of a way of living were, but not which way to live.

There was, RW note – picking up a Weberian keyword – a certain ‘asceticism’ to this stance, a frank willingness to pare the scholar’s station and role that rankled some of Weber’s contemporaries, and that RW suggest as a salutary reminder of where the boundaries should lie in scholars’ and scientists’ accounts of what their fields can deliver. It is one from which humanists – and not just nineteenth-century German humanists – can certainly benefit. To drive home this point, the authors deliver a final chapter on the twentieth-century formation of humanities programs in American universities. The process, they argue, was characterized by a discourse similar to what they have observed in the earlier German context: anxiety about the rising profile of the natural sciences and other trappings of ‘modernity’, and concern about what they neglected or endangered. The ‘door’ was once again open, or – to speak with RW – the ‘crisis’ that carved out the humanities’ ‘basic social function’ (184) was once again on display. RW’s suggestion is that American academics are still not free of this crisis, and that instead of repeating ‘negative justifications and self-conceptions of the modern humanities’ (254) or falling victim to the circular notion that the humanities can ‘console’ us in the hard world that created them, we should follow Weber. It is Weber who, in the end, gestures at a ‘path out’ (262): he offers a clear-eyed reminder to be skeptical of talk of moral and ethical solutions proffered from the professorial podium, and – should we insist on crises – a spur to acknowledge ‘the moral urgency of sober, unglamorous, disciplined thinking’ (264) in their midst.

8 Max Weber, ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’, in *Wissenschaft als Beruf. Politik als Beruf*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter, Max Weber Gesamtausgabe I.17 (Tübingen, 1992), 71–111, at 103–4.

For looking to tell a difficult story about a quantity at once as elusive and as high-profile as the ‘humanities’, the authors have been deservedly praised.⁹ Assessment of their readings and contextualizations of Schelling and Schiller, Du Bois-Reymond and Dilthey, Niethammer and Nietzsche, Humboldt and Helmholtz, is best left to specialists – and the fact that more than one will be necessary is a testament to the breadth of their work. And one salutes the edifying example that the authors draw from Weber. With all of that in mind, I would like to spend some time in this review on a consideration of whether the book succeeds, so to speak, on its own terms. My assessment, which I will aim to substantiate in as sober and unglamorous a spirit as possible, is that it does not.

Theses: the Strong and The Weak

We begin with the question of argument. As already indicated above, we are confronted here with a kind of superposition of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ claims. The ‘weak’ claim at issue would be that the history of universities yields up many examples of critique both from within and without, some of which indeed have to do with the question of the university’s role in the lives of its members, and with the boundaries and relative competencies of different disciplines in helping to dispense this role. Because these critiques not infrequently line up along comparable fronts (the natural sciences versus...other sciences; ‘pure’ versus applied scholarship; personal versus practical; scholarship versus money/industry), a would-be twenty-first-century critic does well to consider them, lest tired truisms be repeated and/or deeper-lying problems missed. In this sense, one can only agree with the estimation of Suzanne L. Marchand on the jacket of RW’s book: ‘Anyone considering writing an essay or op-ed on ‘the crisis of the humanities’ ought to read this book first’.

But matters become more complicated when we turn to the ‘strong’ claims that the work also advances, and for which, one suspects, it is just as likely to be cited. The first, noted above, is the ‘premise’ (6) that the humanities as we now know them – the ‘modern humanities’ – are a creation of the later part of the nineteenth century (though Niethammer, for example, is said to present

9 See, e.g., Kyle Edward Williams, ‘What Are the Humanities Good For?: Breaking Free From Crisis Talk’, *The Hedgehog Review* 23 (2021): <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/distinctions-that-define-and-divide/articles/what-are-the-humanities-good-for>; further *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where the work makes it onto a list of ‘Best Scholarly Books’ for 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-best-scholarly-books-of-2021>.

a vision for a ‘new, modern humanities’ [16] decades earlier). There certainly was disciplinary churn in the nineteenth-century German university, a fact reflected in any number of ways. To the reality that by the 1890s certain institutions were dividing their philosophy faculties into separate faculties for the natural sciences and humanities (169–70), we can add the fact, richly detailed by David Cahan and among the foci of a forthcoming study by Fabian Krämer, that entirely new spaces – very expensive spaces – were being built for professors who identified as physicists and physiologists and chemists.¹⁰ Likewise, that prominent natural scientists were offering, ‘powerful mechanical and material accounts of phenomena once thought necessarily to involve divine wisdom and non-natural powers’ – in short, disenchanting the world.¹¹ It is equally possible, in short, to read government budgets and lists of university buildings, not to mention the popular speeches of a figure like Helmholtz, and realize that a ‘new scholarly persona’ (114) was at issue – that it was possible to *be* a natural scientist and not, for instance, a philologist or a historian, in an increasingly distinct way, with the furniture to match. Scholarly practitioners, including ‘modern humanists’, moved in a differently peopled and proportioned disciplinary world and had to choose how to posture accordingly.

What is less clear, however, is how this changed what they were doing or even what they thought they were doing. A potential way of demonstrating such change would be to offer a close look at actors on either side of the great nineteenth-century divide at work on something plausibly analogous – like reading a classical text, or expounding on the importance of a classical text in a public forum or classroom – and to bring out thereby the ‘important discontinuities and differences’ (6–7) between the ‘modern humanist’ and their precursors. As things stand, it sometimes feels like RW are searching in the dark for what the decisive distinguishing criterion is. The modern humanities are said to be cast as ‘countervail[ing] against specific historical forces and problems that threaten *the human*’ – *not* against (presumably *pre-modern*) ‘disordered desires, unruly passions, or the presence of evil’...but rather against ‘historical changes’. (6) They are said to be distinguished by the ‘persistent discourse of crisis’ (there is no convincing discussion of what discourses *crisis* replaced, though it is

10 See David Cahan, ‘The Institutional Revolution in German Physics, 1865–1914’, *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 15 (1985), 1–65. Fabian Krämer addresses the spatial and material aspects of the developing ‘two cultures’ divide in his Habilitationsschrift entitled ‘Before the Two Cultures’ (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2022), the basis for a monograph of the same name slated to be published with Princeton University Press.

11 Steven Shapin, ‘Weber’s *Science as a Vocation*: A Moment in the History of ‘is’ and ‘ought’’, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 19 (2019), 290–307, at 297.

asserted that for the pre-modern proto-humanities the primary friction was with theology [219]). The modern humanities are said (following Niethammer?) to serve ‘the explicit needs of both present and future’ and to ‘provid[e] practical moral succor for a new age’ as against (this again presumably *pre-modern*) catering to ‘some antiquarian curiosity’ (16) – an eyebrow-raising claim no doubt for Renaissance historians.¹² They are said to consider knowledge to bear traces of ‘higher origins in human mind and reason’ as against being the ‘product of technical skills, arts, and scholarship’ (219). They are said to ‘stand in for liberal education as such’ in a way that their pre-modern equivalents did not (79). Readers can try to provide their own examples for and against these purported antitheses: but the fact of the matter is that in order to substantiate them *themselves*, RW would have to give some primary attention to the writings of ‘pre-modern’ figures (not to mention what they *did*) in a way that would parallel their close readings, for example, of Nietzsche and Weber.

A second ‘strong’ argument of *Permanent Crisis* is that the modern humanities are...*permanently* in crisis. That they emerged from the spirit of crisis, insofar as they were called into being to meet the challenges and deficiencies of the natural sciences. That they have remained beholden to the ‘temporality of crisis’ (6) in that they have constantly needed to define themselves against looming ‘historical changes: industrialization, new technologies, natural science, and capitalism’ (6; cf. 116). That crisis-talk is thus an ‘integral feature’ of the humanities’ development in Germany and the United States (253). And that, indeed: ‘Without a sense of crisis, the humanities would have neither purpose nor direction’. (116) A few things are worth noting. First – concerning the final point – it is in the nature of historical counter-factuals (e.g., *if not...would have*) that they are extremely difficult to prove convincingly, precisely because the counter-fact does not obtain. Beyond that, one finds that the ‘crisis’ at issue is astoundingly flexible, so that its legibility from the record, by turns as an actors’ and analytical category, is not altogether surprising. Aside from the opposition to the array of modern bogeymen from industrialism to capitalism, the humanities’ ‘crisis’ is said to consist, for instance, in a ‘nature-culture’ and corresponding ‘two-cultures’ (162) division (Dilthey), in a ‘constant dissatisfaction’ (218) with the ability to return to a unity of knowledge or to a disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and in the fact that the humanities can be ‘justified...as both method and ethos’ (220). Meanwhile, Weber, in a talk that significantly addresses *Wissenschaft* – that is, *not* the humanities *per se*¹³ – is presented in effect as having diagnosed the crisis, represented the crisis, and to have called

12 See recently James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2019).

for more crisis (217–20). It might, incidentally, be worth contemplating whether there is indeed any field that is able to resist defining itself, in teeth-gnashing fashion, against historical circumstance. The problem of the ‘permanent crisis’ of physics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would make quite a study, encompassing the physicists’ concern about losing their souls or their purpose to government, to industry, to national allegiance, to militarism, to a lack of imagination on the part of officials, to the blunt exercise of calculation, to the simple impenetrability of the cosmos. The apparent gist of what Truman said of Oppenheimer, who had directed the wartime work at the Los Alamos Laboratory, is illustrative: ‘Don’t let that crybaby in here again.’¹⁴ Quite so: too much crisis. But then Oppenheimer had humanist proclivities.

One last ‘strong’ thesis: that among the crises at issue are ‘crises of overpromising’ (4), a problem said to have posed (and to continue to pose) a ‘danger’ – a source of ‘peril’ – to universities (79). ‘Nowhere’, we are told, ‘did the explosion of overpromising and inflated expectations’ in post-secondary education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ‘become more definitive and onerous than in...the humanities’ (79). This is the type of claim that rings some intuitive bells, and there may be a note of insider cynicism here left over from Wellmon’s duties as a curricular reformer at the University of Virginia. But on this point, once again, one finishes the book with more questions than clarity. Most essentially, what are the criteria for establishing an overpromise? Who has to make a promise on behalf of the humanities, and how many and which people have to be disappointed for us to establish that an overpromise has taken place? Clearly Max Weber was worried about professors giving unqualified directives from the cathedra: how far does this indication go to prop up a claim that the humanities generally – or, for that matter, the humanities specifically – have engaged in systematic over-promising? Have the natural sciences (any number of well-funded utopian schemes come to mind) been scrutinized for the relative actionability of their promises?

There is also the problem of where we end up. It is slightly disorienting, nearing the end of *Permanent Crisis*, to read conclusions, proffered by RW via Weber, such as the following: ‘[u]niversities are in fact uniquely well equipped to form students into mature, independent, self-reflective subjects’

13 A point made also in Michael Meranze, ‘We Other Humanists: On Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 February 2022: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/we-other-humanists-on-paul-reitter-and-chad-wellmons-permanent-crisis-the-humanities-in-a-disenchanted-age/>.

14 Mary Palevsky, *Atomic Fragments: A Daughter’s Questions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000), 146.

(214; repeated effectively verbatim from 197 and again at 263). Or again: '[t]he purpose of intellectual work is to help make possible meaningful forms of life for this world' (263). One imagines these are conclusions that many of the most aggressive defenders of universities and humanities could – indeed already do – take as their own, which makes one wonder afresh just who it is who is being put in the dock for overpromising. The point of course is that there is meant to be a difference between *how* the university education of, say, Diesterweg and the university education of Weber were to create 'meaningful forms of life', but are the promises not *im Endeffekt* the same? As it is, the reviewer is left with the impression that the authors are trying to have their cake and eat it too, a fact that Reitter essentially acknowledges with a closing sentiment in a recent interview: 'Maybe it's a matter of improving the overpromising'.¹⁵ That is, then: overpromise by all means, just do it...better.

Das Berufesein

If there is a hero of RW's book, it is Max Weber. It is difficult to gloss Weber satisfactorily: the father of sociology, the anatomist of authority, the historian and theorist of capitalism, the student of world religions, the precocious, tortured son of a liberal parliamentarian and a well-to-do, deeply religious mother, he became one of the most formidable profilers of the bourgeois classes to which he squarely, though perhaps with little fulfillment, belonged. Scholars and biographers have traced the contours and contradictions of a life bookended by the rise of a unified Germany and the devastation of the First World War. There is the academic star who managed, in the quarter century after ascending to professorial rank, only six years of university teaching. The expounder of asceticism who, as a young professor, could drink a fraternity student under the table, and proved a stranger neither to extravagant spending nor to celebrity nor to love affairs. The late conversion to critique of the Kaiserreich. The impossibly prolific reader and writer who spent years in a turn-of-the-century mental breakdown that at times cost him his ability even to read or dictate a letter. It is the sort of manifold portrait that ensures there is a Weber for everybody. Meaning there is also always someone who, in the words of his recent biographer Jürgen Kaube, 'knows an aspect of [Weber's] texts, his career, his

15 Merve Emre and Len Gutkin, 'The Groves of Academe Are Always on Fire: Crisis has been with the Modern Humanities Since their Inception', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 August 2021: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-groves-of-academe-are-always-on-fire>.

context a bit better, and knows that he said something differently in 1913 than in 1918, and always somebody who has read more of what was read by the people whom Weber read'.¹⁶

The reviewer is no such *Kenner*, and is content to engage with the Weber that RW present: namely an exponent and representative of a certain type of 'modern asceticism'. The idea here, which can be grasped largely from Weber's *Scholarship as Vocation*, on which RW focus, is that there is paradoxically a type of robust moral example to be found in refraining from moral claims. Those that evince the 'calling' of the scholar must confront the reality that it is not their place to designate an ultimate end or meaning of life; it is rather to indicate the nature and consequences of the ends and meanings available, and the way that they might compound and conflict. For RW, this represents a kind of 'third way' between the notion that scholarship and the university have nothing to do with living a moral life, and the breathless sense that studying can make you better (though it seems to have more to do with the latter than the former).¹⁷ The 'called' scholar, by his/her very restraint, achieves a type of steely freedom: as RW (216, 220), Steven Shapin and others have noted, Weber stood before his audience and told them he could not indicate to them how they *should* be, while providing a kind of normative model in the very pragmatics of his appearance and delivery.¹⁸ RW would have all of us university creatures be a bit more like Max Weber: they wish us to dispense with the 'overpromising' and exhibit the stern asceticism of the scholar's *Beruf*. Surely one must ask: to what degree have the authors exhibited it themselves? In short: can *Permanent Crisis* itself be taken as an example of the type of university product that it is meant to herald?

In a particularly memorable passage of 'Scholarship as Vocation', Weber turns to the inner conditions of the scholar's calling, and delivers the news that the scholarship of his era found itself in a state of strict specialization. 'And thus', he writes:

he who does not possess the capability to just pull on the blinders, so to speak, and ascend obsessively into the notion that the fate of his soul depends on whether he correctly makes this – *precisely this* – conjecture at *this* point of *this* manuscript – that person should probably just stay away from scholarship....Without this strange rush, one ridiculed by all outsid-

16 Jürgen Kaube, *Max Weber. Ein Leben zwischen den Epochen* (Berlin, 2014), 431.

17 For 'third way', see Emre and Gutkin, 'The Groves of Academe Are Always on Fire'.

18 Shapin, 'Weber's *Science as a Vocation*', 301–3; earlier E.R. Curtius, 'Max Weber über Wissenschaft als Beruf', in *Max Weber: Critical Responses*, vol. 1: *Man, Context and Politics*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (London, 1999), 21–26, at 26 (cited by RW at 303n152).

ers, without this passion...for whether this conjecture succeeds, one does *not* have the calling for scholarship and should do something else.¹⁹

Scholars sweat the details, even ones that many wouldn't find worthwhile. In which connection: is it a concern that in this, the lone (lead?) contribution to a (projected?) University of Chicago Press series entitled *Studies in the History of the University*, the Hanoverian minister and noted first curator of the University of Göttingen, Gerlach Adolf Freiherr von Münchhausen (1688–1770), whom one cannot pick up a piece of literature about the history of that landmark university without tripping over, is confused (33) with...another Münchhausen?²⁰ Perhaps not, for – called, ascetic or otherwise – *homines sumus omnes*. The captious exercise of cataloguing slips could be carried on for any book: in itself, it is not particularly interesting.

That said, it is a particular characteristic of this – *precisely this* – book that it argues for a sort of scholarly cum ethical commitment that loads a failure to check every last detail with an additional charge. Then, too, one must at least consider whether there are instances where a lack of acribic attention affects the texture and 'usability' of the work or indeed point to larger structural concerns. Having had somewhat more experience with sources for the activity of the ancient historian Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) than for many others among the book's impressive cast of spokesmen, the reviewer looked again at a section on 'Industrial Philology' (106–8) meant to provide context for some of Nietzsche's complaints about the state of philology. In a picture that has become familiar from recent secondary literature on Mommsen, the ancient historian's leading role in influential *Unternehmungen* of the Berlin Academy, including principally the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, a project (still underway today) that looked to collect, critically assess, and publish the widely scattered Latin inscriptions of the Roman world, make him a key representative of a 'big' scholarship of the late nineteenth century (Mommsen

19 Weber, 'Wissenschaft als Beruf', 80–1 (full passage, with abbreviations marked in translation above): 'Und wer also nicht die Fähigkeit besitzt, sich einmal sozusagen Scheuklappen anzuziehen und sich hineinzusteigern in die Vorstellung, daß das Schicksal seiner Seele davon abhängt: ob er diese, gerade diese Konjektur an dieser Stelle dieser Handschrift richtig macht, der bleibe der Wissenschaft nur ja fern. Niemals wird er in sich das durchmachen, was man das 'Erlebnis' der Wissenschaft nennen kann. Ohne diesen seltsamen, von jedem Draußenstehenden belächelten Rausch, diese Leidenschaft, dieses: 'Jahrtausende mußten vergehen, ehe du ins Leben tratetest, und andere Jahrtausende warten schweigend': -- darauf, ob dir diese Konjektur gelingt, hat einer den Beruf zur Wissenschaft *nicht* und tue etwas anderes. Denn nichts ist für den Menschen als Menschen etwas wert, was er nicht mit *Leidenschaft* tun kann'.

20 His relation Karl Friedrich Hieronymus Münchhausen (1720–1797).

himself spoke in terms of *Grosswissenschaft*).²¹ Though here Mommsen is no longer a 'socialist politician',²² as he was in an article apparently preparatory to this segment of the book, it remains conceivable that readers may want to check for themselves in what degree he and his dealings fit the picture that RW lay out. They will experience some difficulties. An initial footnote on, inter alia, the belief of the Prussian *Kultusministerium* official Friedrich Althoff (1839–1908) in the 'deep internal bond between scholarship and the state' cites a letter of Mommsen to his son-in-law Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in a volume of letters between Mommsen and Althoff. The letter apparently referenced (on the basis of number and date) is not in said collection, but rather in a different *Briefwechsel*.²³ Once that has been worked out there remains a further problem: the cited quotations do not appear in the letter. Similar frustration is occasioned by the next annotation, which is meant to substantiate the

21 See especially, Stefan Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen und Adolf Harnack. Wissenschaft und Politik im Berlin des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1997), 55–94, and a number of related essays (e.g., 'Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Großwissenschaft. Altertumswissenschaftliche Unternehmungen an der Berliner Akademie und Universität im 19. Jahrhundert', in *Die modernen Väter der Antike. Die Entwicklung der Altertumswissenschaften an Akademie und Universität im Berlin des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Annette M. Baertschi and Colin G. King [Berlin, 2009], 397–421). Further: Rüdiger vom Bruch, 'Mommsen und Harnack: Die Geburt von *Big Science* aus den Geisteswissenschaften', in *Theodor Mommsen. Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alexander Demandt et al. (Berlin, 2005), 121–41; Annette M. Baertschi, 'Big Science' in Classics in the Nineteenth Century and the Academicization of Antiquity', in *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 3: *The Modern Humanities*, eds. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam, 2014), 233–49; Lorraine Daston, 'Authenticity, Autopsia, and Theodor Mommsen's *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*', in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, eds. Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing, vol. 2 (Leiden and Boston, 2016), 955–73; Lorraine Daston, 'The Immortal Archive: Nineteenth-Century Science Imagines the Future', in *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents, Futures*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago, 2017), 159–82; Torsten Kahlert, '*Unternehmungen großen Stils*: Wissenschaftsorganisation, Objektivität und Historismus im 19. Jahrhundert' (Berlin, 2017), esp. 53–184.

22 An exceedingly infelicitous way of characterizing Mommsen, the famed liberal, who in the year before his death wrote of the need for a union between the Social Democrats and his left-liberal camp, while leaving no doubt that he had 'never been' a socialist and had no plans of becoming one. For Mommsen's politics and political activity, see Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen*, 327–518, esp. 462–85 on the specific incorrectness of the gloss cited, along with Jürgen Malitz, 'Ich wünschte ein Bürger zu sein'. Theodor Mommsen im wilhelminischen Reich', in *L'Antichità nell'Ottocento in Italia e Germania – Die Antike im 19. Jahrhundert in Italien und Deutschland* (Berlin, 1988), 321–59, at 338–44. The reference in question is Chad Wellmon, 'Loyal Workers and Distinguished Scholars: Big Humanities and the Ethics of Knowledge', *Modern Intellectual History* 16 (2019), 87–126, at 91.

following central claim: 'Unabashed in his top-down management style ('one leads, many labor', he wrote), Mommsen presided over hundreds of scholars who together operated as collecting armies that performed narrow, mostly mechanical functions, creating a model that was emulated widely, and not only in the humanities' (106). The citation leads to part of the wind-up to an 1877 speech on the occasion of Frederick the Great's birthday, where Mommsen is just getting around to saying that he will outline Frederick's stance towards the Catholic Church, especially in Silesia.²⁴ Needless to say, this has nothing to do with the *CIL* or Mommsen's 'collecting armies'. It is only fair to note that no other footnotes in this section appear dysfunctional.

All of this might again be dismissed as mere nitpicking, but in fact the sentence just quoted on Mommsen's management style is neatly representative of a larger issue with RW's text. Said issue is that the treatment operates on a very thin layer of what we might call discourse and allusion, without doing the leg-work necessary to clarify the realities connected to the discourse (this largely pertinent to the primary sources) or the positioning with respect to the allusion (this noticeably in the case of secondary literature). The Mommsen material is a mix of both kinds of thin-ness. Let us deal first with the allusion. What RW are doing is following a strand of the scholarship concerning Mommsen that has emerged from the painstaking empirical work (in German) by Stefan Rebenich on Mommsen's involvement with the organization and implementation of collection- and publication-projects of the Berlin Academy.²⁵ On the basis of this work, Rebenich and Rüdiger vom Bruch have advanced Mommsen as a founding precursor of a kind of government-funded, collaborative, industrially resonant *Big Science* that would grow especially prominent in the twentieth century. This is a stimulating thesis that in fact gives the 'humanities' the lead in a form of organization often identified with the natural sciences. It has been carried over into English by Lorraine Daston and others. None of this secondary literature is cited in the book, which is surely a function of a publishing imperative to limit the endnotes. But the effect, practically, is to take a rather bold thesis at third-hand and present it in textbook fashion *as if it were primary*, without flagging the conversation and its possible countervailing

23 Mommsen to Wilamowitz, 25 February 1894, in *'Aus dem Freund ein Sohn'. Theodor Mommsen und Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. Briefwechsel 1872–1903*, eds. William M. Calder, III and Robert Kirstein (Hildesheim, 2003), vol. 2: no. 393.

24 Theodor Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze* (= RA) (Berlin, 1905), 69. The citation is also incorrect in Wellmon, 'Loyal Workers', 110–1199. The common denominator between material spurring the reference in both cases suggests that the citation is meant to be to the 'nicht von Einem geleistet aber von Einem geleitet' of RA, 209.

25 For relevant references see n21 above.

elements: for instance, Daston's argument that Mommsen's methods in some respects resembled cozier traditions of artisanal or household (as opposed to factory) work, or passages presented by Torsten Kahlert that show what some of the work on *CIL* apparently looked like: a younger scholar or two coming over to Mommsen's house to work with the material in his study.²⁶ The thinness in this case leads readers to think that they are closer to the controlled inspection of the primary sources than they really are, and excites some worry what fourth-hand Mommsen might begin to look like: dressed as a train conductor and perched atop a smoke stack telegraphing an industrialist while driving legions of uniformed Prussian soldiers through the African desert.

There are other forms of 'thin' secondary allusion running through the book, the most prominent being the centrally situated 'melancholy mandarins'. As a piece of terminology, one has here to do with an apparent monstrem fused together from two giants of the Anglophone history of knowledge: a label ('mandarin') borrowed from Weber by Ringer, who turned it into a historiographic touchstone, paired with a recent descriptor ('melancholy') compellingly deployed by Lorraine Daston to encapsulate a particular epistemologically-oriented thesis about 'modernity' (namely that *fin-de-siècle* scientists and scholars saw their results being constantly – hence the melancholy – outmoded).²⁷ By choosing to operate with 'melancholy mandarins', RW take on all sorts of electric historiographic associations, none of which they engage at any length or with any real clarity. There is some obscure signaling about questions like (168–9) whether the university historian Friedrich Paulsen can be fit into the orthodox/modernist mandarin schema, and, e.g., an indication that Helmholtz and his ilk are 'mandarins, not simply natural scientists' (121) because they embraced research as *Bildung* (crooked, incidentally, since Ringer would have contended that it was the mandarin-ness that drove the *Bildung*-sympathy and not vice versa). An interesting indication (179) by RW that the humanities were presented as a way around Daston's modernity-problem (some humanistic results could not be straightforwardly outmoded), is not followed up. In short, one is left to wonder (as, for example, with the

26 Daston, 'The Immortal Archive', 166–67, 174–75; Kahlert, 'Unternehmungungen großen Stils', 180–1.

27 For Ringer, see above. For Daston, see, e.g., 'The Immortal Archive', 175–76; 'When Science Went Modern', *Hedgehog Review* 18.3 (2016): 18–32, at 22, 28, 29. The latter is cited by RW, though not directly in conjunction with the term 'melancholy'. Incidentally, I cannot find the quotation at 140–1 (cited at 291m129), which appears to be a paraphrase of a part of the *Hedgehog* article delivered as if it were directly from Daston.

labored invocations of Marx and Burckhardt in the opening pages (1–2), or the eleventh-hour turn to ‘colonial legacies’ – nowhere substantively addressed – in the conclusion [262]) why these allusions are being taken on at all, and whether they do not rather cloud the conversation than enhance it.

Ringer is good for the reviewer to think with, because his work is a fine example of how writing about discourse – that is, for our purposes, simply and predominantly what scholars were publishing and publicly propounding – can be put in the service of a much larger argument. The achievement of *Decline of the German Mandarins* was not simply to make a provocative claim about the level of intellectuals’ complicity in the demise of the Weimar Republic, but also to limn a whole social stratum and to show that the interests of this stratum were to a degree *determinative* of their discourse. That is to say, per Ringer, the shifts and rifts that were taking place in countless learned books and prorectorial addresses were a kind of synoptic reflection of a subvening tectonic effort by a social class to secure itself. One might profitably compare this approach to other landmark examinations of doings in the German university: A.J. La Vopa’s *Grace, Talent, and Merit*, which found the conversation around the titular terms to be a proxy for a larger cultural concern to moderate the access of the poor to positions of influence;²⁸ likewise, the work of R. Steven Turner, who found the professionalization of the university disciplines – philology first of all – and the installation of a ‘research imperative’ to be artifacts of the dissolution of a *Standeskultur*.²⁹ In all these cases, one could argue, a kind of ‘tiering’ was essential to the aesthetics of the work: the key discriminant that helped make the impression of a high-caliber argument was its earnest effort to connect happenings at the level of discourse with larger social and demographic wrangling. More recently, a different sort of tiering has come to prominence: one that juxtaposes (or indeed integrates) learned discourse with ‘practice’.³⁰ To adduce efforts in this line that, in different ways, are coextensive with *Permanent Crisis*, one could point to Sven Dierig’s *Wissenschaft in*

28 A.J. La Vopa, *Grace, Talent, and Merit: Poor Students, Clerical Careers, and Professional Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, 1988).

29 See R. Steven Turner, ‘The Prussian Universities and the Research Imperative, 1806 to 1848’ (Princeton University, PhD dissertation, 1973) and several related articles, e.g., ‘The Prussian Professoriate and the Research Imperative, 1790–1840’, in *Epistemological and Social Problems of the Sciences in the Early Nineteenth Century*, eds. H. N. Jahnke and M. Otte (Dordrecht, Boston, London, 1981), 109–21.

der Maschinenstadt, which showed a ‘mandarin of the lab’ confronting ‘modernity’ in an industrializing city by actually taking us inside his living-quarters, workshop, laboratory.³¹ Likewise, William Clark’s *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, which – this particularly relevant for RW – looked to see Weberian theories of authority in the flesh and blood, the fabric and furnishings of the German university.³²

Permanent Crisis has learned the lesson of these and other recent works only partway. The authors understand it well enough to assure us in the book’s opening pages that they ‘consider the humanities as both practice and discourse’ (5). They understand it well enough to tell us at the end that scholars have ‘largely overlooked... the extent to which the practices and very self-conception of the modern humanities emerged from and have sustained themselves through... crisis discourse[.]’ (253). But they have not learned it well enough to deal substantively with practice anywhere in between. There is no second ‘tier’ to this narrative. One could object, of course, that Diesterweg publishing his complaints is a sort of practice. But – picking up our earlier reference to thin-ness – it is perhaps better to think of practice in terms of *thickness*: as a kind of continuous shift along the spectrum from two to three dimensions. If the source is an academic speech, then its practice-quotient would increase in the extent that one moved from the words delivered to explore its preparation, its delivery, its recording, its handling for publication, the audience, the acoustics, and so forth. If the subject is Theodor Mommsen, then one would wish to consider how precisely one reckons one’s way to ‘hundreds’ of scholars under his purview, what should be understood under the ‘narrow, mostly mechanical functions’ (106) referenced as this lot’s responsibility, what in fact it meant to ‘tightly manag[e]’ (106) a classicist, and whether it is apt to conflate the testimony of Wilhelm Henzen (1816–1887), Mommsen’s elder (by one year) and a friend on whose collaboration Mommsen had made his direction

30 For a very recent and remarkable example, see Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase, *Geistesarbeit. Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften* (Berlin, 2022), with relevant analysis at 12–21. The refreshing (and well executed) take is that one may deliver oneself from the sterile generalities of the humanities-in-crisis discourse (and its critique) precisely by focusing, in granular detail and with all the resultant nuance, on how it is that specific scholars in specific times and places actually occupy themselves. One is confronted here with everything from how philologists fidget in their chairs, to what they underline in which editions of their books, to their various draft formulations for lectures, to the colors and fonts they choose for their book-covers.

31 Sven Dierig, *Wissenschaft in der Maschinenstadt. Emil Du Bois-Reymond und seine Laboratorien in Berlin* (Göttingen, 2006).

32 William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006).

of the *CIL* contingent, with that of the great historian's 'workers' (108).³³ In any case, the point is clear enough: in a book like Dierig's or Clark's a door opens and somebody with a foot stubs their toe. In *Permanent Crisis* a 'door' opens when Helmholtz publishes a prorectorial address, and a quarter-century later a Dilthey-book appears.

Does this mean that only tiered books about the university should be written and celebrated, and only books in which people stub their toes can be correct and true? Far from it. The concern in this case is one of internal accountability – the fact, namely, that we are *told* that what we are receiving is a history of *practice* and discourse written by two skeptical Weberian ascetics who deliver strong theses while underscoring the importance of the scholarly calling, and what we receive is not that. We have before us, in short, a book that trades on the *aesthetics* of things like stern scholarly asceticism and practice-based treatment without following through. *Permanent Crisis* walks and talks like a book that has done the sober work of excavating tiered stories about rebarbative German scholars and dialoguing with august ('mandarins') and up-to-date ('melancholy') works of secondary literature, but it does not deliver.

Universities – to *some* extent in nineteenth-century Germany and to *some* extent still today – give *some* students and professors, if they wish, a chance to live a strange kind of life. It is a life where one can indeed 'pull on the blinders' and devote inordinate amounts of time to old manuscripts that few others care to see, to languages and texts that few might care to read, to lengthy reviews of single books on which the fate of approximately no one's soul depends. We can certainly disagree about whether more or fewer people should be living such a life, whether it amounts to passion or to pedantry, salvation or scourge, but a powerful reading of *Permanent Crisis* is that instead of worrying about making headlines on one side or the other, those of us who have the rare opportunity to exist – indeed, to be established – inside such an ecosystem should make the most of the space it provides for curiosity, rigor, obsession – or rather, 'the careful thinking and scholarly virtues to which humanities scholars typically aspire' (3). It is difficult to say how a book written to this tune would look, but perhaps it would convince its reader that it promised no more than it delivered and that it was zealous about the correctness of its details, its little conjectures. Thanks to the university, there will be readers with the time and the wherewithal to probe it on these scores.

33 Though Eduard Schwartz's contention is no doubt relevant: 'everybody worked for Mommsen'; see Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen und Adolf Harnack*, 88.

As for Weber, one could hardly endeavor to speak for him, but it is quite evident from *Scholarship as Vocation* that he was anxious – much like RW – about academics who ‘overpromised’. The scholar would tell you certain things about *how it was*. For other, arguably more inspirational services, there was a different kind of character: the football-Meister, a type that had presumably impressed Weber with its influence on his travels in America. When one of the authors of *Permanent Crisis* instructs us, on Twitter, to ‘[f]eel the hype’ around the book, we are inclined to wonder which we are getting. ‘Anyone considering writing an essay or op-ed on ‘the crisis of the humanities’ ought to read this book first’. Whether it savors of the locker-room or the lecture hall will be one question they will have to answer.

Christian Flow

Assistant Professor, History Department, Mississippi State University,

Starkville, MS USA

cfi258@msstate.edu