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promises to revolutionize public education, and, as Cain wryly notes, "educators and researchers old enough to recall similar promises about other media technology just rolled their eyes" (p. 165).

Finishing the book with a history of classroom computers allows the narrative to end very near the present, and the book was published recently enough that it could include a discussion about the relationship between screens, schools, and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It gives the whole book more current relevance. Also, the idea that conservatives mobilized against each of the new screen technologies for fear that "new experiments in classroom screen media had intensified public schools' efforts to erode family authority and traditional values" (p. 96) seems particularly relevant in the current historical moment, a time of reactionary movements promoting book banning (such as the removal of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* by a Tennessee school board in January of 2022) and ongoing battles against critical race theory.

We have a tendency to project our greatest hopes regarding education onto school screens. Generations of reformers have argued that each new iteration of "the screen," whether it be Hollywood films, the television, or the personal computer, will democratize educational access and revolutionize the way our children learn. Looking at the history, though, is crucial, as Cain's book clearly shows us that each new medium has struggled to keep itself from reinforcing (or even amplifying) existing inequalities, has justified its own necessity by downplaying the importance of effective teachers, has provided increased access of commercial interests into the public sphere, and often has failed to clearly envision its objectives.

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Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon. Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age

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Permanent Crisis is an ambitious intellectual history of the modern humanities that locates the origins of our culture wars over higher education in the contests over the nineteenth-century German university. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argue that the so-called crisis of the humanities is neither a recent phenomenon, as culture warriors like Allan Bloom and William Deresiewicz have claimed, nor has it resulted from the erosion of a once-cohesive tradition dating back to the Renaissance. Rather, both our modern conception of "the humanities" and our sense of its decline

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date back simultaneously to the development of the German research university in the nineteenth century. The humanities was a modern project designed to counteract the tendencies of modernity, a dynamic that ensured that the humanities would always be in crisis, so long as modernity maintained its native tendencies. Reitter and Wellmon arrive at the "paradoxical conclusion" that "modernity destroys the humanities, but only the humanities can redeem modernity, a circular story of salvation in which overcoming the crisis of modernity is the mission of the humanities. Without a sense of crisis, the humanities would have neither purpose nor direction" (116). Moreover, "the humanities" was conceived from the outset as a disciplinary formation *within* the university rather than a method or set of axioms detached from specific institutional forms. As a result, its fate has always been tied up with that institution, resulting in a series of unresolved and perhaps unresolvable internal tensions specific to the university—between moral formation and scholarly research (*Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*), between intellectual unity and disciplinary specialization, between fact and value—that continually lend the humanities the appearance of disarray and decline.

Although most of the book is an intellectual history of German debates over the purpose and meaning of the humanities, Reitter and Wellmon occasionally pair inflection points in German rhetoric with parallel disputes in the US during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They begin with the broad statements of the university's organizing purposes laid out in the lectures and writings of Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. These designs emphasized the need for university studies to lead toward unified knowledge, but already recognized the dangers of overspecialization and the temptation, for both individual students and the state, to privilege professional studies over humanistic *Bildung*. Though these visions remained mainly hortatory, some of these arguments did find their way into concrete institutional reforms, and especially into the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810.

Despite the apparent successes of the German university by the mid-nineteenth century, when it was regarded as the most advanced and free in the world and drew increasing numbers of foreign (including American) students, German thinkers saw alarming signs of decline. These "melancholy mandarins," as Reitter and Wellmon call thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Adolph Diesterweg, sounded all the same notes as American critics like Bloom and Deresiewicz do today, when American higher education is analogously ascendent in the eyes of the world.

Reitter and Wellmon then move to the role of the rising natural sciences in both supporting and opposing the humanities. While some natural scientists pitted science against the humanities in the now-familiar rivalry between "materialism and idealism," others, like Hermann von Helmholtz and Emil du Bois-Reymond, argued that natural science contributed to the moral formation at which the humanities aimed—that, as Reitter and Wellmon put it, "physiology was a form of natural-scientific *Bildung*" (119). A rigorous education in the sciences could teach students the appropriate skepticism of authorities (sorely lacking in philological studies that enslaved students to the judgments of a few great scholars) and the independence of mind that distinguished the liberally educated person. Moreover, science itself ran up against impregnable limits, they alleged, since it could not account for the

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fullness of the human—particularly for consciousness and morality—and so was compelled to cede these essential questions to the humanities.

This dichotomy was systematized in Wilhelm Dilthey's categorization of knowledge into the "human" and natural sciences in the late nineteenth century. This paradigm remains familiar to us today, along with the tensions it attempts to hold in check. Dilthey's "human sciences" were simultaneously grounded in empirical, rigorous methods (such as historical and textual criticism) and designed to restore the human meaning that the mechanistic natural sciences stripped from the world. This was an increasingly urgent task as the sciences gained power and prestige over the humanities, because without intelligent guidance from above the sciences, the amorality and materialism of the sciences would denude and perhaps even destroy humanity. But the very rigor of the human sciences tended to have the opposite effect—rather than re-enchant the world, the fruits of humanistic inquiry exacerbated skepticism about the possibility of meaning. Instead of an inspired bard depicting timeless human longings, Homer was determined by textual critics to be an unplanned series of accretions in the oral tradition. It is Max Weber, the hero of the story that Reitter and Wellmon tell, who finally, in his 1917 lectures on vocation, limits these overreaching promises and soberly recasts the potential of the humanities within the limits of scholarly discipline and professional integrity.

The last chapter brings us finally to a somewhat scattered and abridged view of the American twentieth century, where the debate over the humanities was taken up by Americans looking longingly at Germany and, after the war, by German émigré scholars themselves. Major American universities established undergraduate humanities courses and programs beginning in the 1920s and 1930s in response to the same broad fears about the soul-crushing tendencies of modernity as those expressed by Germany's melancholy mandarins. But they also, more optimistically, saw the humanities as compatible with and even necessary for mass democracy, an optimism which Reitter and Wellmon suggest is misplaced.

Although the book covers extensive ground and weaves together many threads worthy of further consideration, it concludes somewhat aporetically. The parallels between the old German and the new American debates are persuasive, as is the case for the permanence of crisis rhetoric in these debates. But the German universities never resolved any of these questions; they simply declined in prestige as the American universities rose in their place, and both continued muddling through. Reitter and Wellmon claim that many of the old categories of the debate have been exploded—the humanities cannot morally elevate society by imbuing it with transcendent human truths or overcome the mechanization of human life by science. Disciplinary specialization is irreversible and the unity of knowledge is impossible, as is a return to the Renaissance *studia humanitatis*, which was never the origin of our present arrangement.

What the university humanities can offer today, they contend, is a more limited "value freedom"—their reinterpretation of Weber's "*Wertfreiheit*"—one that "induce[s] students to reflect conscientiously on the values they presume to be their own," and "to understand how their own moral claims and values will inevitably conflict with those of others, and that acting in accord with their values will have specific social consequences" (263). This sounds rather like the spineless "values

clarification" curricula introduced into American schools in the 1970s, which embodied the defensive relativism that inspired Allan Bloom's 1987 jeremiad setting the American humanities lament industry in motion in the first place. It's hard to find fault with their efforts to limit the grandiose promises of the humanities, or to contextualize—and thereby calm—the rhetoric of crisis, and "value freedom" is certainly preferable to value prescription by one's moral and political enemies. But it remains a timid effort to defend a last, rapidly shrinking redoubt rather than to advance beyond it or recapture any territory for the humanities. Perhaps no more can be hoped for in practice, but rhetorically—and this is nothing if not an exemplary study of the history of a certain kind of rhetoric—it is not clear that this move can pull us out of the swamp of permanent crisis.

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