

Pierre Bourdieu

*in Hispanic Literature
and Culture*

EDITED BY

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado



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12. Post Scriptum: Illusio and the Reproduction of the Corps—Notes from an Ambivalent Gatekeeper

Sebastiaan Faber¹ ✉

(1) Department of Hispanic Studies, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, USA

✉ **Sebastiaan Faber**

“I finally came up with a title for my piece in the Bourdieu volume that Nacho is putting together: ‘A Specter Is Haunting the Field ...’.”¹

“I’m not thrilled with it, I have to say. Kind of trite. A bit melodramatic, too, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. I thought the melodrama was appropriate. The thing is, I keep coming across expressions of doom and desperation from established people in the profession.”

“Like who?”

“Well, John Beverley has been at it for years. But just in the last month, I saw some disconcerting thoughts from Alberto Moreiras and Joan Ramon Resina . Here, let me look up the quotes. This is what Alberto posted to Facebook in early December 2013:

Do you ever get the feeling that nothing is ever truthful at the professional level? That everything is always already smoke and mirrors covering up petty power games and manipulative fantasies?²

Here is Joan Ramon, in his epilogue to an interesting new volume on transatlantic studies that appeared around the same time:

A cursory look at the publications of the last two decades suggests that scholars no longer work cumulatively, adding their reflections to those of their predecessors, thereby revising them through some kind of method. The scholar's patience has given way to a pretense of originality among the latest newcomers that is in fact cultivated ignorance, or the borrowed splendor of references culled from alien endeavors, as if such 'shoulder rubbing' was the mark of similar achievement. ... [I]n fact the heady mix of interdisciplinarity with presentism typically results in a scholarship of 'faits divers' that passes for erudition only in a context of academic degradation."³

"I don't really see the connection between the two."

"Well, both express serious doubts about two of the main premises of our work as scholars in the humanities: our commitment to the truth, and our commitment to scholarship as a collective and rigorous enterprise. When Alberto says he feels that 'nothing is ever truthful at the professional level' he is suggesting that precisely when truth matters most—when we are working in an official academic capacity—it's actually most absent. And Joan Ramon's point, at least as I read it, is that we have sold the integrity of our rigorous scholarly soul to the devil of easy success."

"It seems a strangely conservative point to make for someone like Joan Ramon."

"It probably means he wrote that passage in a moment of particular frustration. It reminds me of something I just read in *Inside Higher Ed*. Here, this is the professional curmudgeon D.G. Myers, speaking for his own field, English. For him, too, the driver here is frustration: his job at Ohio State University was simply terminated.

In 1952, at the height of his fame, F. R. Leavis entitled a collection of essays *The Common Pursuit*. It was his name for the academic study of literature. No one takes the idea seriously anymore, nor does anyone ask the obvious follow-up. If English literature is *not* a common pursuit—not a "great tradition," to use Leavis's other famous title—then what is it doing in the curriculum? What is the rationale for studying it? ... [W]here there is no common body of knowledge, no common disciplinary conceptions, there is nothing that is indispensable. ... I fill

no gap in the department, because there is no shimmering and comprehensive surface of knowledge in which any gaps might appear. Like everyone else in English, I am an *extra*, and the offloading of an extra is never reported or experienced as a loss.⁴

The complaint is similar to Resina's: the idea of a collective enterprise, of interlocking projects, has disappeared, leaving us fragmented and vulnerable."

"I wonder if this isn't more of a generational than a disciplinary crisis. If I'm not mistaken, both Resina and Moreiras were born in 1956, so they're a bit over 60. And both have spent most of their professional lives in the United States. Come to think of it, both were born in non-Castilian-speaking parts of the Iberian Peninsula: in Catalonia and Galicia, respectively."

"I'm not sure that those biographical details matter a whole lot here. In any case, I don't think we can reduce their sense of discontent to a midlife crisis or the existential threat of looming retirement. I, for one, recognize their sentiments, and I'm thirteen years younger."

"Really? I mean, I know you are younger, but do you really feel the same way about our work? For someone who doubts the validity of our professional practice you seem to have kept remarkably active. Exaggeratedly so, some might say."

"Ouch, coming from you that does *not* sound like a compliment. Still, though, you're on to something. In my case, I think that the increasing doubts about our work are actually connected to my changing role in the field. Within what seems like a short amount of time I have moved from a timid graduate student submitting stuff to the senior gatekeepers to being one of those gatekeepers. For some strange reason that I can't quite fathom, I now find myself helping decide what articles and books get accepted for publication, weighing in on grant applications and writing tenure evaluations. And that makes me nervous."

"Why? Don't tell me you don't trust your own ability to evaluate others' work. Better drop the false modesty now. Coyness is so 1990s."

"Touché. You're right, I don't actually doubt the validity of my own judgments. At least not in principle, and if I have enough time to dedicate to the job—which I often don't, but that is a different problem—in fact, I am surprised at how easy it has become to judge others' work—especially to

reject it. Now that I think of it, part of the problem is precisely that I feel that so much of what is produced in ‘my field’ is, well, not very good.”

“In what way?”

“In all kinds of ways. Some of it is just sloppy or lazy. Much of the stuff people submit to journals seems written in haste, without proper time to read or to think. But more generally, so much of it seems pointless or, how to put it ... steerless, rudderless. When I read these texts, and I really try to, I often can’t help thinking: what’s the use? Why did someone spend so much time on this? I don’t mean to sound arrogant—”

“You kind of do, actually. But go on.”

“What I mean to say is that the justification for much work in our field seems to be lacking.”

“Justification?”

“Yes, the answer to the question: *so what?* What drives someone to write an article or a book about a particular topic? What does their work add, and to what exactly does it aspire to be an addition?”

“You know the joke: we do research to fill much-needed gaps.”

“Yeah, sure. But even that cliché presumes an idea of structure, a need for coverage, a common goal of shared knowledge and insight. Most of the work in our field still operates starting from that premise, but in practice the field is fragmented as all get out. The scholarly texts themselves don’t make sufficiently clear what that shared knowledge or insight might be. And given the lack of obvious consensus about any collective goal or project—here Resina is right, I think—that absence is a problem.”

“And you’re saying this used to be different?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure it was. Let’s take literary studies, which in spite of everything is often still at the center of what we do. Until the 1970s, analyzing a canonical literary text was enough of a justification for scholarly work in the humanities, simply because it advanced our knowledge about that text, or about the way literature works in general. And humanists were collectively invested in developing both.”

“And that’s not enough of a justification anymore?”

“No, not really. We ourselves have of course thoroughly undermined the notion of the intrinsic value of literature and the scholarly analysis of it. And rightly so, don’t get me wrong. For the past forty years or so, we have been able to expand what we work on to include all forms of cultural production,

or all social and political phenomena. And even though we never really stopped reading, teaching and analyzing literary texts, we now treat them much less as literary texts per se, but more as stepping-stones or excuses to think about much larger issues: race, gender, identity, ideology, power, memory and so on.”

“Okay, I agree; that is as good a way as any to summarize what’s been happening since structuralism took over from the New Criticism. What is the problem?”

“One problem is a kind of mismatch between focus and method, or between the kinds of claims we make as scholars and the kinds of proof we adduce. We strangely seem to assume that literary texts can serve as evidence for claims about things that have very little to do with literature.”

“You just lost me.”

“Sorry, let me slow down and try to illustrate this with an example from my own subfield: scholarship about the cultural production in Spain today. I’ve been thinking about this recently because I just wrote something along these lines for a Spanish journal.⁵ For the past ten years or so, *memory* is the name of the game in my neck of the woods. Here, let me do a quick search in the MLA International Bibliography: keyword *memory* and keyword *Spain*. Voilà: 120 articles since 2000. Now let’s take a look at ProQuest Dissertations. Title word: *memory* or *memoria*; keyword *Spain*; since 1999. Look at that: more than 700 dissertations.”

“Of course these include the social sciences.”

“Yes, but still. Now I can tell you that, in my field, what a good number of these articles and theses do is more or less similar. They open with stating that the Spanish transition to democracy was made possible by a pact of silence, a pact that has now been broken. Then they quote Marianne Hirsch, Paloma Aguilar or Paul Connorton about concepts such as trauma, social memory, historical memory or postmemory. And then they proceed to analyze recent literary texts or films to illustrate how Spain is coming to terms with its recent violent past.”

“That sounds pretty interesting to me. I don’t see the problem.”

“The problem is that we are making *sociological* arguments—about, say, the presence or processing of the violent past in contemporary Spain as whole—with *literary* evidence. We make it seem as if our reading of one particular

text can be extrapolated to a larger social impact.”

“If you put it that way, it does sound a bit fishy. I agree that showing the workings of a ‘postmemory’ of the Francoist period in one or two novels is not enough to make a claim about the way postmemory might work in Spain generally. For that to fly, you’d really need to do some quantitative research. Interviews, for example. Or sales numbers, and perhaps some form of reception study.”

“Exactly. And it would be helpful to have some kind of theory about the way that fiction interacts with larger social processes, such as the collective memory of a violent conflict.”

“But what does that have to do with the crisis in the field?”

“For me, the proliferation of work on memory in my field is a sign of the rudderlessness I mentioned before. It’s as if we no longer feel it is enough to make arguments solely about particular forms of cultural production—literature, say, or film, or even comic strips. But all we really know how to do is analyze texts, so that’s what we do.”

“So what do you propose we do instead? Stop writing about literature and become social scientists?”

“No, of course not. That’d be stupid. The humanities are as important as they’ve ever been. We just have to figure out how to turn these doubts and misgivings into productive work. And one way to begin doing that, I think, is to put them on the table, talk about them openly.”

“Which is where Bourdieu comes in.”

“Precisely.”

“But isn’t he hopelessly reductive in his views of the cultural field? For him everything is always about power and prestige, about cultural capital. There’s something depressingly economic about his whole project.”

“I don’t agree. I don’t think he is reductive at all. I know that among some of our colleagues calling someone’s work *sociological* is nothing short of an insult. But what I like about Bourdieu is the combination of the mirror and the wide-angle lens: he allows us to pull into the frame what is otherwise almost always excluded.”

“Like what?”

“Like the institutional circumstances under which our work is produced—things that are normally swept under the carpet or hidden from view. Think about it: the conventions and nature of scholarly work, and the whole

structure of the scholarly public sphere, actually erase a whole big chunk of the context in which that work takes place. This creates distortions of all kinds. Among other things, it helps create a false equivalency between very different kinds of products. It is as if a paper by an adjunct at a big state university in the United States was produced under the same circumstances, and with the same purpose, as a paper by a full professor in Germany, a state-sponsored investigator on a one-year contract at Spain's Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas or a *catedrático* with five graduate assistants. The institutional structures, the incentives, the resources, the rewards—everything is different in all these cases. Just to give you one example from my own recent experience: if you apply for Spanish government funding for a literary research project in the field of *Filología Española*, you are not supposed to include texts written in Catalan, Basque or Galician.”

“That’s crazy.”

“It’s simply bureaucracy trumping intellectual common sense. And that bureaucratic aspect is part of the wider institutional picture that gets largely erased once it comes to publication. You know how some email signatures specify what device the email was written on? *Sent from my iPhone, sent from my Android?*”

“Yes, very annoying.”

“Well, imagine something similar describing the personal or institutional circumstances under which a paper or a book was produced. *Written from a precarious tenure-track position at a US state school with a 4–4 teaching load at an annual salary of \$47,000. Produced during a full-pay research leave granted in response to an outside offer. Finally finished during a maternity leave. Cobbled together in haste to make a national research assessment deadline. Printed with a \$5,000 publication subsidy taken from my child’s college fund.*”

“That would be both interesting and a bit embarrassing for everyone involved ... But you were saying that Bourdieu allows you to take that wider picture into account.”

“Exactly. Bourdieu’s work comes with a built-in imperative to include the institutional view. His approach has strong confidence in its own rigor and relevance, but it also comes with the constant awareness that it cannot itself avoid turning into the object of ruthlessly critical analysis. Here, let me quote what Postone, LiPuma and Calhoun say: Bourdieu starts from the premise

that ‘[t]he scientific field can lay claim to no special privilege as against other fields; it too is structured by forces in terms of which agents struggle to improve their positions.’⁶ For me, thinking like Bourdieu opens up our work to a higher level of honesty. Less obfuscation, less pretending we are all in the same boat. And that, in turn, allows us to have discussions about the way our field operates and rethink some basic things that urgently need rethinking.”

“I still don’t see how Bourdieu can come to the rescue of colleagues like you, or like Resina and Moreiras , who are worried about the erosion of the foundations or the legitimacy of what we do.”

“Well, one way to diagnose our ailment is as a loss of what Bourdieu calls *illusio*.”

“Right, I vaguely remember that term. He uses it to indicate the shared belief in the game among those invested in it, no?”

“That’s right. The thing is that for Bourdieu, the loss of *illusio* is actually a condition for rigorous scholarship. Listen to what he writes in *The Rules of Art* : ‘one cannot found a genuine science of the work of art without tearing oneself out of the *illusio*, and suspending the relationship of complicity and connivance which ties every cultivated person to the cultural game, in order to constitute the game as object.’⁷ And then he adds in a note: ‘It is only exceptionally, especially in moments of crisis, that certain agents may develop a conscious and explicit representation of the game as a game, one which destroys the investment in the game, the *illusio*, by making it appear what it always objectively is (to an observer foreign to the game, indifferent to it)—that is, a historical fiction or, in Durkheim’s terms, a “well-founded illusion.”’⁸

“Described like that, as a misrecognition well-founded in appearances, Bourdieu’s *illusio* sounds a lot like Marx’s concept of ideology .”

“Actually, more like Žižek’s. Especially if you think of the *illusio* as embodied less in the players’ minds than in their actual practices. Remember what Žižek writes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: ‘[I]deology is not simply a “false consciousness”, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as “ideological” ... “Ideological” is not the “false consciousness” of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by “false consciousness”.’⁹ Bourdieu

defines the *illusio* as ‘an investment in the game which pulls agents out of their indifference and inclines and predisposes them to put into operation the distinctions which are pertinent from the viewpoint of the logic of the field, to distinguish what is *important* (“what matters to me,” is of *interest*, in contrast to “what is all the same to me,” or *in-different*).’¹⁰ It is the participation in the *illusio* that itself ‘creates the very value of the objectives of the game,’¹¹ and even fierce competition among rival claims to cultural capital ‘implies and elicits recognition of the common objectives of the competition.’”¹²

“Okay, but if I’m not mistaken, those points apply to the art world, and more precisely the French art world of the 1960s and 1970s.”

“Sure. And Bourdieu did tend to make the curious assumption that the French situation was somehow universal.”

“So French of him!”

“Indeed. Still, I think the notion of *illusio* is applicable outside of the field of artistic production that Bourdieu deals with in *The Rules of Art*. His *Homo Academicus*, for example, takes a similar approach to the production of cultural capital in academia and its ‘reproduction of the order’ or ‘reproduction of the corps’ at universities.”¹³

“Again, at French universities. But I see your point. Bourdieu allows us to turn a loss of illusion into a productive scholarly moment. But then what? Is it possible to play the game once one has come to see it as a game?”

“That is the million-dollar question. If you allow me for a moment to stick with Bourdieu’s terminology, you could say that developments over the past forty years or so in the scholarly study of the cultural history of Spain and Latin America have produced a loss of clarity about the *nomos* of scholarly practice. Which is why we now find ourselves in a state of *anomie*.”

“Remind me what *nomos* means.”

“In our case, the *nomos* is the definition of what legitimately counts as scholarship, or who is a legitimate scholar.”

“Okay, but that loss of clarity about legitimacy is no news to me.”

“Of course not. Important attempts have been made to redefine the scope of the field and its object, and to reinvent rules for the game in hopes of regaining for it a minimal legitimacy.”

“And have those attempts worked, in your opinion?”

“Only partially. Because the crisis of our specific field has coincided with a more general questioning of the rules of the scholarly game. This has affected the very foundations of scholarly practice: peer review and publishing and, in the US context, the viability of tenure and the procedures by which it is granted.”

“Wait, slow down, you’re suddenly making a couple of huge jumps. Peer review, publishing, tenure?”

“Yes, sorry about those leaps. But we cannot afford to exclude the big picture here. The good thing is, though, that this bigger picture also allows us to talk about the nitty-gritty realities of our daily lives. For any of these discussions to be productive, I feel they should stay rooted in a dialogue about actual practices.”

“Such as?”

“Well, such as peer review. Not too long ago, the editors of the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* wrote an interesting piece about that process. Here, let me look it up. It’s by Ben Fraser, Malcolm Compitello and Eva Romero . As journal editors, they signal a number of problems with the whole system of peer review. For example, they reject ‘the notion of the objective, impartial editor’ as ‘a fanciful creation based on an ... incomplete understanding of the realities of the review process.’¹⁴ They also talk about real pressures: they are getting more and more submissions, which puts ‘a strain on existing review structures.’”¹⁵

“Some of this goes to Resina’s concerns about the fragmentation of the field.”

“Exactly. Here, listen: ‘[T]he authors who submit essays to journals (authors who are often, but not exclusively, younger scholars) and the peer-reviewers who evaluate them (reviewers who are often, but not exclusively, more senior scholars) are often at cross purposes.’”¹⁶

“But haven’t generational gaps like that always existed?”

“Well, according to these three colleagues, ‘there is reason to believe that the scholarly distance between authors and reviewers may be increasing at a faster rate given the notably increased attention paid to interdisciplinarity’ (see Note 16). They make an interesting connection to daily life at a university: ‘junior scholars may find themselves more and more isolated in departments where methodological and thematic interests are diverse and

only infrequently overlap.”¹⁷

“Okay, so what I am hearing is that there are two different problems here. On the one hand there are more submissions, and on the other hand they are more diverse in terms of topic and discipline. Both things make it hard to find appropriate reviewers.”

“Precisely. As part of a possible solution, Fraser, Compitello and Romero propose that editors take on a more proactive role, but they also want the reviewers to spend more energy on the process, taking on more of a mentoring role—partly to make up for a lack of mentoring in young scholars’ institutional environments, but also given the fact that, with the shrinking market for monographs, journal articles will become more important for tenure and promotion.”

“It’s a great idea in principle. But who has time for that?”

“That is an excellent question—especially given the increase in journal submissions that they point to. I don’t doubt their good intentions, but I think their proposals are not radical enough.”

“In what way?”

“In that they don’t question the nature and legitimacy of the academic article and the academic journal as such, or the nature of an institutional structure such as the academic department.”

“Those are big things to question.”

“They are, but there is no reason why we can’t at least try to imagine alternatives. I mean, are we humanists or not? Don’t we deal in the imagination?”

“Okay, point taken. Go ahead.”

“All right, since you asked, here we go. Stepping way back, I think it’s time we asked ourselves, as humanists, what *kind of knowledge* we hope to produce, and for whom.”

“I just read something by Simon During in which he argues that the humanities are way too diverse to subsume them under a single definition. But I have always thought that, when push comes to shove, as humanists we produce specialized knowledge about the human experience, particularly as it is mediated through cultural expressions and artifacts: literature, film, art, performance. During also points out, by the way, that the term ‘humanities’ covers these cultural expressions—novels and paintings, say—and the

scholarship about them. As scholars of the humanities, he says, we sometimes claim virtues that strictly speaking belong to our objects of study.”¹⁸

“Still, even accounting for Doring’s nuances, your definition sounds about right, at least for what we could call the scholarly humanities. Now, to get back to my question, for whom do we produce that knowledge? When you write an academic article, who is your intended readership?”

“That’s a tougher one. It’s not something I think about a lot, I have to admit.”

“That is a symptom in itself, don’t you think? But let me ask you a different question. Who is your *actual* readership? Be honest.”

“Maybe the reason I don’t think about it a lot is because it’s a bit depressing. If I’m lucky, my stuff is read, eventually, by a couple of colleagues in my subfield and a handful of eager graduate students.”

“And are you happy with that small readership?”

“Not particularly, although I’m not unhappy with it either. I have no illusions. Given my topic and style, and the academic venues I publish in, only other academics are going to be able to follow my argument, or understand why it needs to be made in the first place. Most colleagues in other subfields have too much trouble keeping up with everything that appears in their own area to pay much attention to my stuff.”

“Then let me ask you this: why do you write in such a way that only other academics would want to read you?”

“Out of habit, I guess. I was trained to write that way in graduate school. Plus, it helps with getting my stuff accepted in the better journals.”

“So it’s about particular incentives.”

“Yes, partly. I like to think I’m self-motivated, and the same is no doubt true of most of my colleagues. We’re not in it for the money, that’s for sure. We write about what interests us, and because it interests us. But institutional incentives do play a role. I’m not positive I would have written a second academic monograph if I hadn’t needed it for promotion to full professor.”

“Now think about the kind of knowledge you are producing. Can it only be produced in the format and venue you are currently producing it in? Does it have to come as a 300-page monograph or a twenty-five-page article in a scholarly journal?”

“I haven’t given that too much thought, either. The 8000-word article is such a default format. But of course I see what you are getting at. You’re beginning to sound like Nicholas Kristof : you would like me to write for the *New Yorker* rather than for a handful of specialists.”¹⁹

“No, that’s not actually what I’m getting at at all. Kristof’s column in the *New York Times* was not very thoughtful or useful, and many people have pointed that out much better than I can. But this conversation we are having is not about the need for all academic humanists to become public intellectuals or versions of Malcolm Gladwell . Many academics are very engaged with society, as teachers and in other roles. What I’ve been mulling over for a while now is a much more fundamental question: whether the production of humanistic knowledge needs academic venues at all. Think about what you call our default formats: could it be they have outlived their usefulness? For people trained in analyzing textual form, it strikes me as strange that we don’t think more about the form of our own scholarly texts. The awkward twenty-minute recitation that we call a conference paper (and that most people I know loathe, whether as speakers or as listeners), the forty-five-minute invited talk, the twenty-five-page article, the 300-page monograph—aren’t they rather counterproductive when it comes to creating knowledge about the culturally mediated human experience?”

“But what other venues and formats are there?”

“Look around you! Magazines, blogs, documentaries. Exhibits, performances, videos, graphic novels... We can do with fewer monologues, less stilted styles. We can do without the artificially authoritative voice. Do we really need phrases such as ‘tease out,’ ‘inscribe’ or ‘positionality’? Think about it: is there a reason why our work cannot read more like articles for the *New Yorker* ? Or for *The Believer*? Why can’t we adopt other formats—even if it is a simple, traditional stick like this very dialogue?”

“I think you are exaggerating how bad things are. Many of our colleagues are excellent writers, and many express themselves in readable formats all the time. If there is a problem, it is that most of that work doesn’t count.”

“Count for what?”

“For salary and tenure and promotion.”

“And why doesn’t it?”

“Hey, now you are making me think like an administrator, I don’t

appreciate that. But let's adopt the administrator's viewpoint for argument's sake. For starters, a dean would say that work that's not in a traditional scholarly format does not count because there is no way for outsiders to tell whether it is any good. The academic publishing system has built-in mechanisms to separate the chaff from the wheat: peer review, journal rankings, impact factors and the like."

"But weren't we just discussing how peer review doesn't actually work that well? And don't get me started on rankings and impact factors."

"Right. But at least there is a semblance of impartiality and quality—one that, say, a natural scientist on a personnel committee will accept as valid."

"Ah. So the *raison d'être* of academic journals in the humanities is to help us humanists prove to scientists that our work is legitimate."

"It sounds a bit strange if you put it like that, but yes, I think that is an important part of the picture."

"Even though the kind of knowledge we seek to produce might not need that particular format."

"You're moving too fast again. Remember, that is a point I have not yet conceded."

"Fair enough."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure I disagree with you on this. Look: why should we humanists feel the need to apologize for the level of difficulty of our specialized work? It sounds to me like yet another manifestation of our institutional inferiority complex. A tenure-track scientist has no trouble asking for a half-a-million-dollar start-up package, but we feel bad about requesting a computer upgrade. I mean, can you imagine a physicist apologizing for the fact that lay people can't understand her work? Or even a political scientist?"

"You're right, and I have thought about that, too. I have two points to make in response. I think there is a fundamental difference in the kind of knowledge that we produce and the kind of knowledge that a physicist or political scientist produces. Many of us work—parasitically, I might add—on texts and images that are meant to be understood by a general audience, and are often meant to *move* a general audience to its core. Insofar as we aspire to deepen that understanding, I feel we have an obligation to adhere to formats or languages that are also accessible to a general audience. But I often have the impression that the difficulty of our colleagues' work is a *needless*

difficulty. As a reader, that irritates me to no end.”

“To what do you think that’s due?”

“Part of it, no doubt, has to do with perverse institutional incentives. If a physicist on a personnel committee can actually read and understand our scholarship, she might think it’s not very scholarly. But another part, I’m sure, is due to simple laziness, lack of time or lack of awareness. Writing well takes longer. And not thinking about your audience does not make for a more legible text.”

“Okay, point taken. But what do we do about it?”

“Well, writing can be taught. Why don’t we teach our graduate students—our future colleagues—to write better and for a wider audience? As teachers we never stop thinking about our student audience. So it’s not that we’re not capable. We just seem to forget when it comes to scholarship.”

“So let me get this straight. You don’t agree with Kristof that we should all be writing for the *New Yorker*. But you do think we should be writing more in the style of the *New Yorker*?”

“If you mean that we should write more legibly, entertainingly, clearly and with more attention to the reader, then yes, I think that would be a wonderful thing.”

“But doesn’t your ambitious plan for institutional reform then boil down to a lesson in stylistics à la Strunk & White? Short, declarative sentences, minimal use of passive tense, no split infinitives?”

“Actually, no. It’s about much more than that. Remember that we started talking about a lack of rigor or quality, the loss of a sense of shared enterprise, and about work that seems rudderless. I feel that a discussion about audience and format and style—however pedestrian those things may seem—actually goes a long way to addressing those problems. In other words, I’m calling for a much more fundamental rethinking of our work, at all levels, from graduate training to tenure requirements.”

“I can tell you now it’s going to be tough to change tenure requirements. You know how deans are. And the more prestigious the institution, the more conservative. I’ve never understood that.”

“But here we go back to Bourdieu. Isn’t academic quality determined by peer review? And aren’t we, at this point, the gatekeepers who are in charge of reproducing the corps? Don’t we help determine what counts and doesn’t count as legitimate scholarship? Isn’t that Bourdieu’s point all along?”

“It would only work if there were some sort of consensus among people in our field. The lead would have to be taken by those who have nothing to lose: the full professors at prestigious institutions. And journal editors. It would be extremely unfair to expect the untenured to take this on.”

“I couldn’t agree more. After all, the Open Access movement would have never taken off if the Arts & Sciences faculty at Harvard, of all places, hadn’t been the first to adopt a self-mandated Open Access Policy.”

“A second question is whether you would limit the call for reform to the humanities, or if there are problems that affect the social sciences and natural sciences as well.”

“That is a good point. My sense is that the natural sciences actually need specialized scholarly publications. I’m not sure about the social sciences. In my experience, social scientists are more divided and have a more negative image of each other than, say, people in English have of us. Have you ever heard a political scientist talk about his sociologist colleagues across the hall?”

“I know. Talk about hang-ups and complexes!”

“But still, involving non-humanists in the discussion would be a good thing. Speaking of which, have you seen the position paper called ‘Science in Transition’?”

“No, what’s that?”

“It came out in the Netherlands in the fall of 2013, partly in response to a whole range of revelations of wide-scale scholarly fraud.”

“Oh, wait, you mean the case of the social psychologist who made up research results out of thin air and forced himself to eat all the candy he had bought for his non-existent test subjects?”

“Yes, Diederik Stapel is one of them. But there were more, including a cultural anthropologist who turned out to have made up a big chunk of his research. He invented entire communities.”

“Hey, a new take on Benedict Anderson... But what does this Dutch position paper say?”

“It’s actually a pretty interesting overview of the state of affairs in academia generally and how things have developed over time. It’s also remarkably all-encompassing, even though it’s set in a European context, assuming some form of centralized state policy. What makes it so broad is that the authors think of science as including all branches of scholarship, even

the humanities. The topics they address are as big as they get: the image of science in contemporary culture; questions of quality and trust—particularly the public’s trust in science as a source of truth; scholars’ reliability and corruption; the connection between scholarship and policy; and the relationship between scholarship and teaching. A couple of the issues you and I have talked about come up as well. They, too, reference Bourdieu, by the way. In fact, the authors want to include more Bourdieu-like perspectives at the undergraduate level. ‘[F]undamental changes are needed,’ they write:

Every bachelor program should pay attention to the phenomenon of science and its adherent problems. Every student needs to have a basic knowledge of the often random divisions in the scientific world and should realize that, although veterinary science and classical languages are studying different subjects, they also share important fundamental traits. ... It is stunning that ever greater numbers of PhD students receive their degree without having a clue about who is pulling the strings, who is funding what, what role special interest groups play and how their research subproject fits into the greater whole.²⁰

Although the authors are all natural scientists, as far as I can tell at least, it’s interesting that they also note the loss of the idea of scholarship as a shared enterprise, a notion they seem to associate with the liberal arts tradition:

Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, when modern discipline formation began to drive the fragmentation of the university, there was still a strong awareness of the whole of available knowledge, the students all had the same basis and were all carriers of a common ideal. In the present day, the idea that working at the university implies a common mission is in jeopardy. We are gratified to see the revival of this classic ideal in honors programs and university colleges. But is it not sad that these insights are only taught to the best students, instead of being part of every student’s intellectual stock-in-trade, as they should be?²¹

One of the big problems, they say, is scholarly overproduction, which

they think is the result of perverse incentives: ‘In most disciplines, so many articles are published annually that no researcher has the right to pretend that he truly keeps up with current developments. The only way out is hyper specialization, resulting in a lack of overview.’²² They are also unhappy with the current methods for determining scholarly quality. And they note a steady devaluation of teaching, including secondary-school teaching, in relation to scholarship:

The quality of the core task of education is threatened across the whole of the university by at least three developments: the overrating of research, the dissolving of the connection between secondary education and the university, and the lack of funding for the ideal—higher education for many.²³

They are so straightforward they sometimes sound scary, even to me. Listen to this: ‘Would it not be advisable to use the time now devoted to the production of superfluous articles for the improvement of the students’ education?’²⁴ Here a ruthless kind of Dutch utilitarianism seems to rear its head: ‘is it not strange that the use of so much humanities research is never discussed? Put differently: how much of this type of research does our society actually need?’ Again, they talk about overproduction:

The number of scholarly publications has become so large that nobody can keep up with his own discipline. Moreover, a large part of the research results is only relevant for tiny groups of colleagues. ... Does this awareness not force us to a reconsideration of the kind of research we should want to do?”²⁵

“Wow, go Netherlands! Interesting, indeed, and, I agree, a bit scary, too. My first thought is that these are not the kinds of questions that we should be raising publicly, least of all here in the United States. A dean might hear us—or worse, a politician—and interpret our doubts as a perfect excuse to cut us down even more, or at the very least increase our teaching load. I mean, these are not times to be airing our dirty laundry for all to see.”

“So this should stay between us for now?”

“Absolutely.”

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Footnotes

- 1 This dialogue is based in part on conversations with colleagues, including Germán Labrador Méndez, Ignacio Sánchez-Prado, José Ramón Ruisánchez, Pedro Palou , Alberto Moreiras, Pedro García-Caro, Carmela Ferradáns, Jed Deppman, Claire Solomon and Yago Colás. My thanks to all.
- 2 Alberto Moreiras , Facebook Status Update, December 5, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/alberto.moreiras/posts/557375067688593>
- 3 Joan Ramon Resina, “Epilogue: Transatlantic Hispanism or Ibero-Atlanticism?,” in *Theorising the Ibero-American Atlantic*, ed. Harald E. Braun and Lisa Vollendorf (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 267.
- 4 D.G. Myers , “Academe Quits Me,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 14, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/01/14/english-professor-scans-landscape-upon-forced-retirement-essay>
- 5 Sebastiaan Faber , “Actos afiliativos y postmemoria: Asuntos pendientes,” *Pasavento. Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 2.1 (2014), 138.
- 6 Calhoun, Craig J., Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone, eds., *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.
- 7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 236.
- 8 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 382.
- 9 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 21.

- 10 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 227–28.
- 11 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production . Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12.
- 12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 88.
- 13 Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 87, 84.
- 14 Benjamin A. Fraser , Malcolm Alan Compitello and Eva Karene Romero , “An *AJHCS* Editorial Position Paper: A Modest Proposal on Peer Review,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 15 (2011), 13.
- 15 Fraser, Compitello and Romero, “An *AJHCS* Editorial Position Paper,” 13.
- 16 Fraser, Compitello and Romero , “An *AJHCS* Editorial Position Paper,” 14.
- 17 Fraser, Compitello and Romero , “An *AJHCS* Editorial Position Paper,” 19.
- 18 Simon During, “Stop Defending the Humanities,” *Public Books*, March 1, 2014, <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/stop-defending-the-humanities>
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- 20 Huub Dijstelbloem , Frank Huisman , Frank Miedema and Wijnand Mijnhardt , “Why Science Does Not Work as It Should and What To Do about It,” *Science in Transition*, October 17, 2013, 7–8, <http://www.scienceintransition.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Science-in-Transition-Position-Paper-final.pdf>

21 Dijkstra, "Why Science Does Not Work," 7.

22 Dijkstra, "Why Science Does Not Work," 12.

23 Dijkstra, "Why Science Does Not Work," 25.

24 Dijkstra, "Why Science Does Not Work," 26.

25 Dijkstra, "Why Science Does Not Work," 27.