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The ivory tower and the economics of knowledge: part I

Today the hole story.

Late British philosopher William Whewell (1794-1866) lived most of his life inside an ivory tower. He just didn't know it. Possessing a remarkable combination of scientific and moral-philosophical interests, Whewell had the opportunity to think big and little thoughts at Trinity College of Cambridge University. He served successively as professor of mineralogy, professor of moral philosophy and college master. He even did a high-level administrative stint as vice chancellor for a year and got out while his mental powers were still intact. His major work explored the history of inductive science and how facts relate to the concepts that scientists use to colligate them.

There were two reasons why Whewell didn't realize he was trapped inside an ivory tower. First, he had holes in his brain. Second, the metaphor had not been used yet to caricature institutions of higher learning.

In order to figure out how colleges and universities came to be viewed, mainly in negative terms, as ivory towers, I wandered electronically around UT's 40-acre version over the past six weeks, e-speaking to humanist intellectuals who are simultaneously animate research tools and living cultural treasures of the state of Texas. I started with research librarian Shiela Winchester who pointed me to the word-usage graphics in the electronic "Oxford English Dictionary." The image occurs first in French (Sainte-Beuve 1837) and then creeps into the English language in Henry James' unpublished novel "The Ivory Tower." But neither author wrote of colleges and universities as ivory towers.

I beat an e-path to my erudite Classics colleague David Armstrong — I thought Vergil's image of true and false dreams emanating from gates of horn and ivory respectively might be pertinent. My dream proved false, so I then explored the English and French-Italian departments, where Alan Friedman, Phillip Barrish, Evan Carton, Jorie Woods, Dina Sherzer, Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Ernie Kaulbach guided me along many treacherous corridors of the labyrinth of the history of ideas.

I now know what Whewell could never have known. References to the ivory tower and to ivory-tower intellectuals become common in the socially engaged political discussions of the 1930s and really heat up in the '50s and '60s when post-World War II necessities and the exigencies of the Cold War place a decided emphasis on the acquisition of practical knowledge in higher education. The image comes from the Song of Solomon: "your neck is an ivory tower." It is later applied to the Virgin Mary and then to the Roman Catholic Church, stressing purity, permanence and stability. By such odd stages does a Judaeic image of royal erotic flattery become high praise of carnal sinlessness and institutional religion. The term only turns pejorative when outsiders turn it on the academy.

Whewell also had holes in his brain. At least that is what J.B. Tuke and W. Rutherford thought they discovered when given permission to examine Whewell's brain, post mortem, as part of their ongoing work on insanity. They published their results in 1869 in "On the Morbid Appearances Met with in the Brains of Thirty Insane Persons." I came across the title as a graduate student. Could you resist reading a short book with such a title?

Tuke and Rutherford diagnosed Whewell's condition as follows. A life of thinking thoughts on abstruse subjects divorced from the cares of the workaday world caused holes to form in Whewell's brain that resembled those found in patients committed to insane asyla. Nonetheless, they did not make any recommendations for the safety and well-being of other Oxford and Cambridge dons. And they certainly didn't jump to the universalist conclusion most college students entertain at some point: My profs are crazy.

Let me assure you that few profs at Texas institutions of higher learning are in danger of developing holes in their brains. Most of us are too busy with practical micro-economic concerns: how to stay afloat as salaries lag well behind the rising costs of living, how to make outdated computers do all the snazzy high-tech things the regents and Legislature and administration think we should do, how to obtain grants to fund laboratories and student research.

It is also macro-economically problematical not to have places of learning that nurture the Whewells and the Kaulbachs of this world. Next time, the whole story.

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