

“Collaborative Interdisciplinary Research in the Humanities: Red Herring or Barmecide Feast?”

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Nicholas Ruddick

A red herring is a tactic of diverting attention away from an item of significance. The phrase probably derives from a metaphor used by William Cobbett in 1807 to decry the English press's deflection of public attention from the deteriorating internal political situation by trumpeting a non-existent battlefield defeat of Napoleon. Cobbett recalled how as a boy he had once used a red herring (a pungent, heavily smoked kipper) to deflect hounds tracking the scent of their prey.

Let's imagine a recently hired young humanities faculty member. The university's senior research administrator has informed her dean that his faculty, the largest on campus, hasn't been pulling its weight in research terms. The dean has passed on this news to department heads, advising them to have gentle words about expectations in the ear of tenure-track faculty. As a result, our young scholar decides to spend her summer months working up a SSHRC application, full of positive references to interdisciplinarity and collaboration, rather than on a journal article that will establish her footing in her discipline.

A Barmecide feast is a pretended or illusory feast, or one that looks delicious but sadly fails to live up to expectations. In the folk tale collection known as the *Arabian Nights*, a rich man, Barmecide, asks Schacabac, a poor, starving wretch, to dinner, and sets before him an empty plate to test his stoicism and sense of humour.

The young humanities researcher is delighted to discover that her previous summer's work has paid off. She has won a SSHRC standard research grant worth \$90,000 over three years. She even has the money to hire a student assistant. But soon enough she finds that between preparing new classes, committee work, family demands, and training her assistant, she isn't going to have much time to devote to publishable scholarship in her discipline. No matter: the SSHRC award is for a “program of research” and is not dependent on her completing an actual project. Moreover, her head of department reports that the dean is pleased with how much research money she has generated for the faculty. She also now boasts a promising track record with SSHRC, which bodes well for her next application in three years time. . .

Is collaborative interdisciplinary research in the humanities (CIRH) either a diversionary tactic or a pure sham that leaves only ashes in the mouth? Yes and no. I practice CIRH myself and as a consequence have established a reasonable track record of publication in the humanities. But I believe that CIRH as it is promoted to university administrators by SSHRC, the chief federal funding agency for the humanities, is largely an illusion. The underlying aim is to “render publicly accountable” the federal bureaucracy responsible for research funding while deflecting attention from the lack of a coherent national funding policy for the humanities in Canada. The practical effect is more often than not to offer financial red herrings to distract humanities scholars' attention from the sort of work they should be doing. In short, humanities scholars are strongly encouraged (and younger faculty are practically forced) to spend months filling out

elaborate applications for grants in amounts that they don't need. Ironically, under the present system, success in SSHRC grantsmanship is actually less likely to lead to successful completion of humanities projects than non-application.

Humanities scholarship involves a lot of solitary reading and writing, but because it results in texts that are disseminated via publication, it involves a lot of collaboration, because you can't disseminate good scholarship on your own. You can of course self-publish online, but if there's no peer review process, the result will be academically dubious. Scholarship of value is also usually interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. Good research by classicists requires knowledge of archaeology, history, and literature. Historians need to know something about the relevant geographical and economic data relating to their chosen cultural moment. Philosophers should be familiar with relevant psychological and linguistic research. So there's no dispute: with the usual exceptions that prove the rule, good humanities scholarship is interdisciplinary and collaborative.

But here's the rub: when we are encouraged by administrators to get involved in collaborative, interdisciplinary research, it's not for the reasons that I've outlined above. Administrators tend to measure research effectiveness in terms of dollars pulled in. Such measurements are only possible when research is easily quantifiable. Research in the social sciences (usually involving teams) can be so quantified because grants are essential to it. In Canada, the very name SSHRC hints to us that the social science research model will always be applied to the humanities rather than vice-versa, because scholarship on the humanities model cannot be quantified in dollars. (It can be quantified in other ways, but for a number of political and economic reasons there is no national will to do so.)

The "collaborative" and "interdisciplinary" (or more recently "multidisciplinary") mantra of SSHRC is probably ultimately intended to encourage humanities scholars to join grant-generating social science research teams—which inevitably results in their participating, directly or otherwise, in social science research, not humanities scholarship. Humanities scholarship does not involve data collection and its statistical interpretation.

In the end, we humanities scholars are quite lucky, as our scholarship requires very modest means. Like everyone else, we glow when we are rewarded by what at first glance seem to be cash prizes from the government. But our glow should not be dependent on receiving cash prizes, especially as the prizes themselves turn out to be burdens inhibiting our professional development. In humanities, professional development is achieved chiefly via publication. We should not spend most of our research time applying for grants that we don't need, nor fool ourselves into believing that collaborative, interdisciplinary research involves attaching ourselves to research teams whose priority is not humanities scholarship.