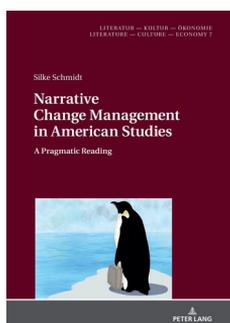




# **NARRATIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN AMERICAN STUDIES: A PRAGMATIC READING**

by Silke Schmidt  
(A Book Review)



The question is not whether the humanities— or more specifically, those disciplines taught at universities—are in a state of crisis, as that seems to have been long since answered. Books like Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (2021) argues that the notion of crisis is in fact as old as the humanities themselves, as scholars today approach their

current predicament in ways that are notably similar to their German counterparts in the nineteenth century. Their book grapples with the issue of whether the humanities field is now irrelevant for modern careers; with departments starved of funding by governments, they have become prey to the forces of technology and modernity, and have since had to prioritize finding grant money and helping heavily indebted students into well-paid jobs. In the midst of this is a sense that something valuable and unique is being lost. The book’s authors, like many others who have weighed in on the crisis discourse, adhere to a belief that the humanities are more than just a “set of disciplines” or “bureaucratic arrangement of departments,” but encompass a set of norms, practices, ideals and virtues—in short, “a way

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of life”—which stands to preserve “something sacred or valuable against forces that threaten their very existence” (5).

These forces have also been studied by scholars of higher education such as Stefan Collini, whose book *Speaking of Universities* (2017) further darkens the picture of what is happening to the academic humanities at present. The immense global surge in the numbers of students and universities in recent years has forced the latter to behave more like business ventures in a commercial marketplace than independent centers of learning, as they have steadily evolved into profit-hungry enterprises more concerned with student enrolment numbers and alumni networks than ensuring the educational quality or fair working conditions for their employees; “at present, the received wisdom in the policy-making world is that the only criterion with undisputed legitimacy across the board is that of contributing to economic prosperity” (Collini 2017). Collini maintains that the focus on quantitative metrics has both harmed academic humanities but also negatively impacted society in general. This general distrust of business ties in with a belief that the humanities’ focus on ethics, values, and self-reflection can counteract the dehumanising influence of managerialism, unfettered capitalism, and neoliberal policies. It is a belief that has also been expressed in street protests calling for the liberation of the humanities from the dictates of economic usability; in the blogs of disillusioned, job-hungry post-docs; in the panels and papers of international conferences devoted to deconstructing the crisis narrative (see Cvejić et al. 2016); and in the seemingly endless series of articles and monographs lamenting the humanities’ decline and inevitable downfall (e.g. Jay 2016; Schmidt 2018).

Yet few, if any, have proposed solutions as new or as radical as those presented in Silke Schmidt’s *Narrative Change Management in American Studies: A Pragmatic Reading* (2021). The book is neither new nor radical in its form, nor in the way that it affirms and interrogates the nature and effects of the crisis, but rather in the author’s approach to finding practical and feasible ways to overcome it. What makes the book different, and also refreshing, is its lack of polemic, positive outlook, and conciliatory tone. Schmidt’s aim is to lay out a pragmatic approach to interdisci-

plinary dialogue, with the disciplines in question being American Studies and Business Studies respectively. Schmidt frequently acknowledges that it is an ambitious project, and her optimism is tempered by a realistic assessment of its potential to bring about lasting change—a subject to which she gives an honest and sobering account in the prologue. Her main audience is American Studies in Germany, with the discussion of the roots of the humanities and liberal arts teaching in America seen very much from a German perspective.

The book is divided into two parts, which encompass twelve detailed and well-researched chapters. It is structured in such a way that it forms a “scholarly narrative” where the findings of each chapter are used for further reflection in the following one. Part I looks at the disciplinary divide between Business and American Studies from a pragmatic perspective, with an aim to establish and facilitate dialogue between them. Part II seeks to develop “a pragmatic approach to solving the problem and testing the method” (S. Schmidt 2021: 31). There is a strong emphasis on communication and dialogue throughout, and the book is written in a way intended to make it accessible to scholars from both fields. The book’s practicality is readily apparent; its clear, jargon-free analyses are interspersed with definitions, examples, and summaries aimed at encapsulating and clarifying the discussions and arguments that preceded them. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the book is its self-reflexive quality. The author is constantly observing and commenting on her methods and approach, and the work of the reader is made easier by the inclusion of these summaries, as well as graphs, diagrams, anecdotes, and cartoons which help to illustrate and enliven the ideas that are being discussed. The practical nature of the book makes it seem more aligned with Business rather than traditional American Studies scholarship. Given the author’s background and current research interests in Management, one feels that this impression is entirely intentional.

The book’s primary aim is expressed in its title, namely working to change the narrative surrounding the academic humanities. Schmidt argues that the way to go about this is not to “mourn the state of the field,” nor to accept the prevailing tendency to “value

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crisis as a way of life,” but rather to “move towards pragmatic solutions to these challenges” (24). Schmidt addresses the developments that have impacted higher education, and identifies three main issues. First, there is digitalization, and how technology has irreversibly changed how knowledge is obtained, produced, and disseminated. Second, there is differentiation, by which she means the way knowledge has become fragmented across the various disciplines, along with the ever-increasing specialization within the respective subjects. Third, there is a need for a communication that can cut through the growing complexity in order to offer greater clarity for those in other disciplines and for non-academic audiences. All of these challenges must be met if the humanities, and American Studies in particular, wishes to remain a relevant part of the university. While she points out that the broad scope and unique disciplinary culture of American Studies are beneficial when it comes to innovation or identifying and diagnosing problems, the problem lies with implementation. This means transferring thought into action, and that action is required on two different levels: the academic, meaning research and teaching, and that of organization or administration. Schmidt argues that American Studies “can benefit from management methods that enable the field to strategically expand its strengths in the competition for research innovation and academic talents” (25).

Schmidt is well aware that this is easier said than done. If the resulting culture clash is the result of deep-rooted differences in methodology and epistemology and how they relate to problem-solving, then how could the two disciplines help one another? She looks to bring about change by bridging the knowledge gap between them, and she rightly infers that the main difference between the “Two Cultures” is that, unlike the sciences, humanistic study tends to yield uncertainty rather than certainty, the kind of knowledge “that solicits its own revision in an endless process of refutation, contestation, and modification [...] hence, the very nature of the knowledge produced by the humanities is inseparable from crisis as an uncertain and immediate threat” (37). Yet rather than seeking to ‘normalize’ the crisis as a permanent state of affairs in the manner of Reitter and Wellmon (2021), she makes the point that crises in general tend to be driving forces behind innovation.

The current crisis should therefore be seen as an opportunity, though she remains focused on first establishing communication between the disciplines and with non-academic audiences as well. Schmidt's view of the humanities is thus very much aligned with its conventional discourse, insofar as it offers ethical awareness and critical reflection, which are increasingly in demand by society and industry; "whenever managers are responsible for steering large organizations, they need clear thinking and a moral compass in order to make responsible decisions" (Schmidt 2021: 26). Schmidt casts doubt on whether Business Schools in their current form, with their emphasis on quantitative methods and scientific objectivity, can be expected to teach these qualities. Yet where she breaks with the conventional outlook of the humanities is by arguing that, far from being the source of its problems, Management and Business are in fact the best place to look for ways to solve them.

The benefit of exchanging methods and practices is that it offsets a major imbalance between American Studies and Business in terms of practice and theory. Business and Management studies, Schmidt argues, are heavily practice-oriented, while American Studies "seems to miss any access to practical learning" (29). Her goal of developing a model of pragmatic reading looks to bridge this gap between theory and practice, and she uses the philosophy of pragmatism as a means by which both might benefit from mutual engagement and interdisciplinary dialogue. Pragmatism is a key term that recurs throughout the book and provides further theoretical support for the interdisciplinary exchange she prescribes. Schmidt draws on the ideas of William James and Richard J. Bernstein, and defines the concept as follows: "pragmatism follows inductive empiricism and values experience as the source of learning. The goal of pragmatic inquiry is change-oriented action" (27–28). Her aim therefore is to take the knowledge gained through research and experience and turn it into something tangible, something that can be applied to create sustainable change. Though Schmidt admits that as a theoretical approach pragmatism is no longer fashionable, she suggests its resurgence is a sign of changing times, though it is above all a tool

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that “encourages one to use creative problem-solving skills to find new methods for tackling old problems in new alliances” (28).

Furthermore, a crucial similarity is that both fields “value narrative as a means of teaching” (400). In the opening chapters, she works out a theoretical language with which to ‘read’ the two disciplinary cultures and thereby elucidate their value to each other, primarily through the method of Narrative Organization Studies. This focuses on narrative and storytelling which is easily accessible to those involved in both Business and American Studies. Schmidt identifies the main benefit of this method insofar as it broadens the concept of literature, so that ‘reading’ can also encompass management literature of any kind. It is by broadening the concept of critical reading that she lays the book’s theoretical foundation, and which also unites its two parts into a coherent whole. The book’s later chapters give American Studies scholars quick and easy access to some key ideas and narratives of Business and Management Studies by supplying historical information as well as insights into renowned theorists and practitioners such as Mary Cunningham, John P. Kotter, and Peter F. Drucker, though Schmidt also intends Business Studies scholars to “see their own field through the prism of my reading” (29).

Schmidt strives for a balanced approach throughout the book, with the various strengths and weaknesses of both disciplines examined in considerable detail. She identifies the causes of the interdisciplinary conflict, which she claims is primarily due to a lack of adequate knowledge of American business history, as well as its methods and outlook, on the part of American Studies. In the face of such difficulties and potential skepticism regarding her project, she puts forward her own experience, which has shown her that there “has never been a reason why humanistic training and methodology should stand in opposition to management thinking and practice in a social sciences environment” (30). She also cites the example of Peter Drucker and the roots of Business Studies in the liberal arts in America, which “combines knowledge from the arts *and* sciences” (30). Schmidt also echoes the popular argument that the “coexistence of machines and humans will rely on people who understand humans even better than machines” (30). The only way humanities

can truly make an impact on contemporary society is by connecting with the “social reality” and the issues that are relevant for the world outside academia, which is what students, in her view, are being prepared for anyway. So, the desired impact of the book goes beyond the university, as it is for the those who think about education in a digital world.

That world, Schmidt argues, “is coming to appreciate the humanities more and more as the basis of holistic knowledge and transferable skills” (41). Yet so far those in American Studies, with a few exceptions, have shown little interest in engaging in any form of exchange with Business Studies, despite the potential rewards of putting their skills on the market. This a point that Schmidt addresses in her introduction. When it comes to uniting the two disciplines, she claims that “the stress is on methods, not on mindset,” as she is not advocating a change in the overall outlook of those engaged in the humanities, as in her view “understanding and practicing management is not the same as adopting a business-oriented value system” (25). Schmidt recognizes that there must be a mutual desire to engage in this kind of dialogue, as one “cannot unite parties that do not want to be united” (30). She also acknowledges the “hostility” felt by American Studies towards any business-related content, which runs throughout the crisis discourse discussed above. This, one feels, is the crux of the matter upon which the success of her project ultimately rests.

Given the nature of her project, it is understandable that she focuses on finding solutions rather than dwelling on problems, yet there are some important issues relating precisely to the humanities “mindset” that would have benefited from further development. First and foremost, there are deep ideological differences between the two disciplines that have set them at opposite ends of the political spectrum. It would be hard, for instance, to reconcile Marxist theory or the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, or anti-globalist discourse encountered in many American Studies courses with the dictates of business, however mutually beneficial the eventual outcomes may be. The movement in the humanities toward tackling inequality, racial discrimination, and environmental issues has only deepened the divide between those judged to be on the ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ side of these debates, not to mention

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the longstanding veneration of countercultural figures who have preached outright rebellion against America's business as usual mindset and the status quo. So, can Business and American Studies fully adopt the methods and practices of the other without also absorbing the mentality, habits of thought, and worldview? It goes back to the old debate on how much mastering cultural practices also depends on adopting cultural values, and what compromises and sacrifices must be made along the way. It is easy to sympathize when one hears the frustration and exasperation of humanities scholars who feel compelled to justify and defend their work, and by extension, their livelihoods; yet underlying these sentiments is a deep anxiety that their very identity is in danger of being stripped away.

Still, that is not to say that these same scholars would not be wise to read Schmidt's book and to heed its message. While it might make uncomfortable reading for some, its level-headed, action-oriented outlook is exactly what is needed to shake the humanities out of its downward spiral into inertia and despair. Desperate times, it would seem, call for drastic measures.

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