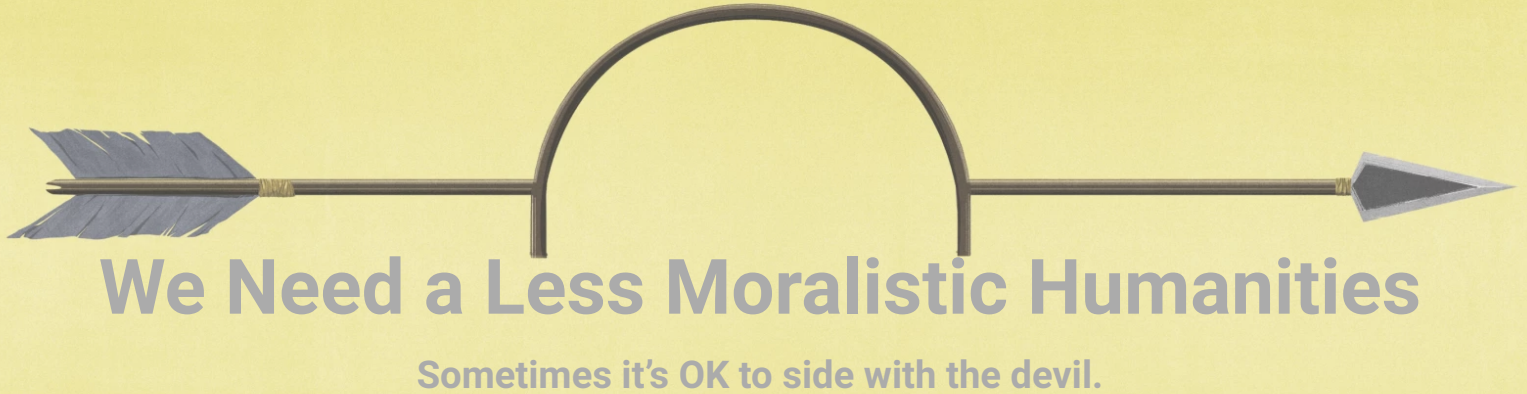


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REVIEW | ESSAY

By *Nicolas Langlitz*

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For the last decade or so, we have witnessed a period of renewed moral activism — think Occupy Wall Street, the Black Lives Matter movement, and #MeToo, to say nothing of student demands for safe spaces and a heightened sensitivity to potentially offensive expression. Campus monuments

honoring slave owners, perpetrators of genocide, colonialists, and racists are removed; department buildings and ethnographic film festivals are renamed. My own field of anthropology has been in no way immune from the generalized sense of renewed moral exigency. In 2020, the American Anthropological Association officially institutionalized its members' morals by prioritizing proposals for executive sessions that promote anti-imperialism, anti-ableism, anti-transphobia, etc. American cultural anthropology is now a moral-political project invested in promoting the values of progressives in the United States rather than in observing and reflecting on human life in a less ethnocentric fashion.

Anthropological knowledge has always served as an instrument of moral improvement, usually with the assumption that the epistemological values fundamental to the study of society could easily be reconciled with the moral values necessary to reform it (and the Good and the True did indeed coincide as long as it didn't occur to anyone to study the oppressors as empathetically as the oppressed). Joel Robbins traced the currently prevalent form of moralism back to the 1990s, when the discipline shifted its focus from an exploration of cultural difference (now dismissed as "othering") to witnessing the misery that human beings (usually those in power) visit upon other human beings (the victims of marginalization and abuse).

But anthropology's old interest in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "the savage slot" (by which he means the inherently "other" in the geography of our imagination), and more generally in other cultures, had not only, and probably not even primarily, been driven by the desire to dominate and exploit, something many readers of James Clifford and George E. Marcus's seminal volume *Writing Culture* came to believe. It's true that anthropologists have been lackeys of colonial

administrators and CIA informants, but they've also been dreamers who studied other ways of life because they hoped to find livable alternatives to their own societies. Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss [went](#) to the field to undo the cultural self they had inherited. Bracketing their moral convictions was not just an epistemological practice to understand the so-called native's point of view unencumbered by ethnocentric bias; it was also a work on the self that aimed not at ethical fortification but at transformation.

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Since the late 20th century, this ethical project has lost traction. The shift from the savage slot to what Robbins calls “the suffering slot” has been accompanied by the rise of a new moralism: “Premised on the universality of trauma and the equal right all human beings possess to be free of its effects, suffering-slot ethnography is secure in its knowledge of good and evil and works toward achieving progress in the direction of its already widely accepted models of the good,” as Robbins puts it. As witnesses of the world’s most arresting ills, anthropologists must call out whoever or whatever is to blame. Of course, these knights in shining armor will repentantly recognize their own complicity with the structures of oppression, demand that we move beyond these structures, and come out morally elevated.

As an anthropologist of science, however, I can’t help wondering how telling good from bad has become such a pervasive practice. Shouldn’t anthropologists be

primarily concerned with telling true from false? I am looking for ways of writing about human beings that do not mobilize the readers' empathy with one group at the expense of their empathy with another group. Is it really necessary for anthropologists to regularly tempt readers already struggling to abstain from self-righteousness? Why dangle in front of them identification with an author who denounces, and thereby elevates his readers above, racists, sexists, capitalists, neoliberals, imperialists, neocolonialists, and scientists whose naturalist worldviews cement an unjust status quo? Even the devil needs an advocate, especially in increasingly polarized societies all too ready to frame people of different persuasions as immoral.

Critiques of moral discourse are a perennial feature of intellectual life. Every era has its antimoralism, from the sophists' calling into doubt the conventional morality of ancient Greece, to French Enlightenment *philosophes*' challenges to the Christian moral order, to the anthropologist Arnold Gehlen's attack on what he perceived as the excessive moralism of the German student movement of the late 1960s.

The current moral revival likewise has its own critics. The sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning describe a new emphasis on victimhood; the leftist philosopher Robert Pfaller sees political correctness as an ideological cover-up for economic brutalization; the literary theorist Stanley Fish defends the freedom to live a disengaged *vita contemplativa* against the growing pressure to politicize the university and against his colleagues' tendency to advertise "their virtue bona fides"; the art critic Hanno Rauterberg says liberals and leftists have lost faith in art as a progressive force of permanent transgression; and the conservative philosopher Alexander Grau — echoing Gehlen — dubs what he sees as the increasing

moralization of all human activities, from shopping to scholarship, “hypermoralization.”

And, of course, we already have some amoral anthropologies. For instance, evolutionary anthropologists observe our species in a noncritical fashion. As heirs of positivism, they exercise interpretive restraint. They understand themselves as scientists, not as thinkers whose job it is to reflect on the value and meaning of human life. I appreciate evolutionary anthropology for the insights it provides into our primate nature. But I long for something entirely different: an anthropology derived from humanities-oriented traditions in cultural anthropology but freed from the project of moral critique and telling right from wrong.

The most pressing task of anthropology, as I understand it, is to exercise a sense of possibility, to make available alternative perspectives, and to examine how they inform the conduct of life. Institutionally, a department of anthropology might provide a safe space for exploring the ramifications of these often unsafe ways of thinking and doing. In the face of incessant demands for more engagement, the discipline needs to find a new home in a renovated ivory tower where it can make itself useful, not by promoting the social mores of a moral-political avant-garde, but by restoring a sense of ethical complexity and possibility. This version of anthropology might, with a few modifications, easily be adopted by cognate disciplines.

The antidote to the new moralism is not to go to the mat for an old one but to step back and observe. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann developed one such practice of detachment, which he called second-order observation. First-order observers observe the world; second-order observers observe observers. While first-

order observers ask what is and maybe what should be the case, second-order observers want to know how these determinations are made. They recognize the contingency and the blind spots that both enable and delimit competing points of view. Yet their position is not privileged: It does not provide a view from nowhere but comes with its own blind spots. Second-order observers might see less than the observed observers — but they also see differently, and recognize that what appears natural and necessary to first-order observers is contingent on their perspective. They loosen the seemingly tight coupling of observation and reality. The goal is not to promote a single account of nature or one camp's political agenda but to do justice to life in pluralist and highly differentiated societies.

Luhmann never missed an opportunity to style himself as the dispassionate administrative officer among German intellectuals, a man without qualities, a provocateur whose moral hypothermia was meant to infuriate critical theorists, especially his lifelong adversary Jürgen Habermas. Luhmann dismissed any critique that “proceeds all too hastily with the assumption that we could if we only wanted to” and refused to tolerate “the posture of priggishness” and “the rod of moral admonition.” “I don’t feel at all,” he said, “like a schoolmaster for society or someone who knows better where things should be going, but at most as someone who observes changes and notices deficiencies, for example, theoretical deficiencies.”

The most pressing task of ethics, Luhmann contended, was to warn against morality. Ethics is a theoretical reflection on moral judgments of good and bad. Since moral judgments cannot be applied to themselves — it is not necessarily good to think in terms of good or bad — ethics needs to determine when moral judgments should be applied and when it would be preferable not to apply them.

Luhmann recognized that everything could be looked at in moral terms, but nothing had to be. Often it was better to adopt a different perspective: to ask whether a business deal was profitable or unprofitable, if a contract was legal or illegal, if a scientific finding was true or false. Moralizing such issues, by contrast, was just about signaling approval or disapproval. Luhmann believed that moralism rarely solved any problems but, rather, provoked conflict, even violence, and made all future communication more difficult.

As a moralist tone became more prevalent in the social sciences, Luhmann took a position that Peter Sloterdijk later described as that of devil's advocate. In using that term, the philosopher situated Luhmann's efforts to deculpabilize human life in religious history. Originally, the *advocatus diaboli* had been a functionary in the Vatican's process of declaring a dead person a saint. His job was to test how robust the *advocatus Dei*'s arguments in favor of the candidate's canonization were by challenging them.

Luhmann liked to defend the maligned sides of distinctions. When it became popular to protect the environment and rage against "the system," Luhmann reminded conservationists that "dying" forests weren't concerned about themselves — "the environment is the way it is." Only within the system could the activists' irritation arise. When critics of capitalism lamented the corrupting effects of money, he pointed out that it also mitigated conflicts. When scientific research was denounced as unethical, Luhmann conceded that scientists could be judged good or bad but emphasized that their truth claims had to be proven true or false. He wanted to leave behind the Christian assumption of the fundamental guilt of the human being. When Luhmann played devil's advocate, Sloterdijk argued, he really provided legal counsel to humankind.

Sloterdijk contended, further, that overcoming the desire to cultivate indignation and pass judgment represented a work on the self that placed Luhmann, a former administrative-court lawyer, in the tradition of letting-be associated with mystics like Meister Eckhart: “The overcoming of *ressentiment* is a cultural project that, in its logical and psychological scope, demands hardly less effort than the Buddhist Dharma, the greatest effort at mental hygiene ever yet attempted.” Luhmann’s second-order observations not only enabled the construction of a theory of society but also functioned as spiritual exercises that enabled him to sidestep the moralism of his time. Under the veneer of systems-theoretical abstractions Sloterdijk noticed a renewed philosophy of life — a *Lebensphilosophie* — that knew itself dependent on the protective climate of the academic preserve.

Today, nobody wants to live in an academic preserve. The ivory tower’s fantastically expensive building materials smell of privilege. Its interior design lacks radical chic. And considering that tides of shit are beating at its walls, as Gustave Flaubert put it, retreating to the ivory tower appears outright immoral. We had better wade out there.

The *vita contemplativa* has been under attack for more than a century, as the historian of science Steven Shapin discusses in an [essay](#) on the concept of the “ivory tower.” In 1937 the American Writers’ Congress met at my university, the New School for Social Research, and ridiculed the ivory tower as a safe place for writers whose real obligation was to get out and fight fascism through their work. Ironically, this ivory tower-bashing followed in the footsteps of the very fascists the Writers’ Congress opposed: Mussolini’s regime also wanted artists to descend from the ivory tower to connect with the people and become an integral part of national activity.

The anthropologist might fashion himself as an antihero, a man without qualities.

After the war, the focus shifted from the arts to the sciences, but left and right continued to agree that this was no time for cloistered disengagement. Scientists had to help build better atom bombs — or prevent a nuclear Armageddon. In the late 20th century, the focus shifted yet again from serving political goals to making oneself useful on the market — although advocates of community engagement continued to contribute to the demolition of the ivory tower from a political angle. In the ancient religious and secular debate over the active and the contemplative life, people had expressed preferences for one or the other, Shapin observed, but they had always acknowledged that both engagement and disengagement were necessary moments in human life and in the making of knowledge. By the early 21st century, however, “the finely poised classical conversation has turned into a monologue, even a rant.”

I can attest that, when the New School recently decided to brand its vision of academic life as one of “engagement,” nobody spoke up in defense of the ivory tower as a place to gain distance, put things in perspective, and resist and modify prevalent views — including the view that ivory towers are socially irresponsible relics of a now untenable academic or artistic self-indulgence. This roaring silence is hardly surprising for a university that has long understood itself as promoting progressive thought and fostering a cosmopolitan spirit by providing refuge to persecuted scholars. And market research confirmed that it was in the best interest of a tuition-driven institution to promise to prospective students engagement rather than life in the ivory tower.

Anthropology, it is true, has much to offer to the project of engaged scholarship. Its signature method, ethnographic fieldwork, requires thinkers to get out of the armchair and learn about the world from direct observation and participation. Susan Sontag noted that the anthropologist frequently figures as the hero of his ethnographic narrative, which recounts his inquiry as both adventure and therapy from the cultural afflictions of his own society.

But the therapeutic quality of fieldwork opens up a different possibility: The anthropologist could also fashion himself as an antihero, maybe in the image of that fictional man without qualities, Ulrich — the hero, or anti-hero, of Robert Musil's unfinished interwar masterpiece, *The Man Without Qualities*. After three failed attempts at becoming a great man (first as an army officer, then as an engineer, and eventually as a mathematician), Ulrich decides to take a one-year “holiday from life.” Concerned about his son's idling career, Ulrich's father uses his connections in the Vienna of 1913 to find him a job as secretary of a commission charged with preparing the 70th jubilee of Emperor Franz Josef's accession. Instead of using this opportunity to finally advance his social status, Ulrich becomes a *flâneur* and participant-observer of an extensive tableau of Austrian elites on the brink of the First World War.

Ulrich finds the shard of a broken mirror in each of the other characters. Each embodies aspects of truth, but as soon as they voice an idea that Ulrich himself had previously entertained, he is immediately driven to challenge it. He sees two sides to everything and thus cannot accept the pretension of any one side as ultimate. If Ulrich's mode of observation were to serve as a model for ethnography, it would require the cultivation of both empathy and alienation.

Among the tasks assigned to Ulrich is to collect, sift, and archive innumerable petitions that propose to use the jubilee to advance a motley of good causes, either restoring the Austro-Hungarian Empire's past glory or facilitating progress toward a better future. As secretary, he expresses his amazement that half of the petitioners seek salvation in the future and the other half in the past, while everybody appears to perceive the present as unbearable. The point of this ironization is not that Ulrich is content with the current state of affairs, but that he relishes the limbo of unrealized possibilities. He remains without qualities because he cannot summon up a sense of reality even in relation to himself. He wants to live hypothetically: Turning into a philosophy of life the positivist scientist's guarded attitude toward always preliminary facts, he understands himself as someone open to everything that may enrich him inwardly, even if it should be morally or intellectually taboo. And he does imagine himself as basically capable of every virtue and every baseness. Ulrich is not interested in how things should be but in how they might be.

Ulrich's ethic of indeterminacy has its gentle and forgiving side: "Man is not good, but he is always good," Ulrich quips as his increasingly deluded former lover asks him to use his new position to help a compulsive sex killer who has been sentenced to death. "A human being can really do no wrong; what is wrong can only be an effect of something he does." Ulrich has been interested in the murderer as the product of suffered abuse and misogynistic neurosis. The question of whether the man can be held accountable for his crimes reveals the exhausted character of morality and legality, and reflects the impossibility of finding a superior standpoint from which to judge the case. Despite his claim that the murderer did nothing wrong, Ulrich makes no effort to save the man.

Ulrich's amoral provocations are an expression of what his sister calls a "holiday

mood,” in which nonvacation life appears not all that important. As people are pursuing their social, pecuniary, or carnal interests while fighting over high-minded ideals, Ulrich observes the folly of the world. And so his materialism takes on a distinctly mystical quality. On the far side of the moral concerns of real life, this good-for-nothing conjures up the possibility of an existence beyond good and evil: “Mysticism ... would be connected with the intention of going on vacation permanently.”

What else would a disengaged anthropology be but a permanent vacation? Maybe a science? No evolutionary anthropologists would center their endeavor on the question of the right way to live, as Ulrich does, and they certainly wouldn't describe their trips to the tropics as holidays. But their observational attitude is actually not that different from the refusal of Musil's antihero to pass moral judgment and intervene in the name of the good.

Consider primatologists. As conservationists, they certainly take action in the human world to protect their research subjects against poaching or deforestation, but it does not occur to them to chastise chimpanzee males for systematically killing members of neighboring groups, beating females into submission, or playing an orphaned mangabey baby to death, even though it is thought the animals are not merely following a genetic program — that is, their behavior is in theory modifiable. Nor would it ever occur to primatologists to take sides in a conflict, even if an inferior individual turned to them to solicit support.

From the primates' point of view, primatologists must appear like *flâneurs* who look at their existential struggles in a holiday mood. Perhaps cultural anthropologists would come to understand human life more accurately if they renounced critique

and activist research, adopted a contemplative attitude, and attended to *Homo sapiens'* not always pretty behavior from a nonjudgmental angle. For an ethnographer it is not good to be good.

What else would a disengaged anthropology be but a permanent vacation?

Such an amoral economy of science might be asking a lot of anthropologists. After all, we are human and have evolved as moralists. Yet reading Musil might provide inspiration not to sink into a complacent naturalism that takes our predisposition to pass judgment as inevitable but to understand anthropological fieldwork as a spiritual exercise. Although this is not how evolutionary anthropologists practice it, detached observation can serve a comprehensive work on the self, which might include training as devil's advocate and even developing a quasi-mystical stance where partial perspectives of finite beings can come together. Here the often defamed God's-eye view is transformed from a view from nowhere into a view from everywhere that preserves the aspiration of impartiality.

In this spirit, a refurbished ivory tower could educate possibilists. In an essay called "The Task of the Humanities," the literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has proposed that the humanities abandon the goal of moral betterment (as if their faculty members could claim moral superiority over people in other walks of life) and serve what Luhmann held as the function of academic research: increasing complexity, in the case of social research through second-order observations that open up alternative points of view. This would confront students and colleagues with facts that are inconvenient for their party opinion, as Max Weber put it. This vision of science and scholarship as a vocation does not aim at providing moral

orientation, but an opportunity to experiment with heterodox views.

If the goal is engagement, if we seek to break down the barriers between scholarship and society, then it might be right to judge academic discourse not just on epistemic but also on moral and political grounds. Alternatively, we could conceive of the academy as a high-containment laboratory for ideas, even perilous ideas, which might enable us to understand and re-evaluate conceptions of human life that are so strange to us that they appear immoral. Isn't that what you would expect of anthropologists to whom nothing human is alien?

In today's moral hyperthermia, the project of overcoming a sense of self-righteousness appears to be among the most important ethical projects. Anthropologists could contribute to it by withdrawing from the heat of the culture wars to a place where we can safely try out alternatives. This essay sketches one such possibility of an amoral anthropology. Its place is not outside but amid a widely institutionalized moralism. After all, the *advocatus diaboli* was a Vatican official. No canonization can even be considered unless someone represents the devil pro bono. Ditto for a saintly science of the human.

This essay is adapted from an article that [appeared](#) in HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory.

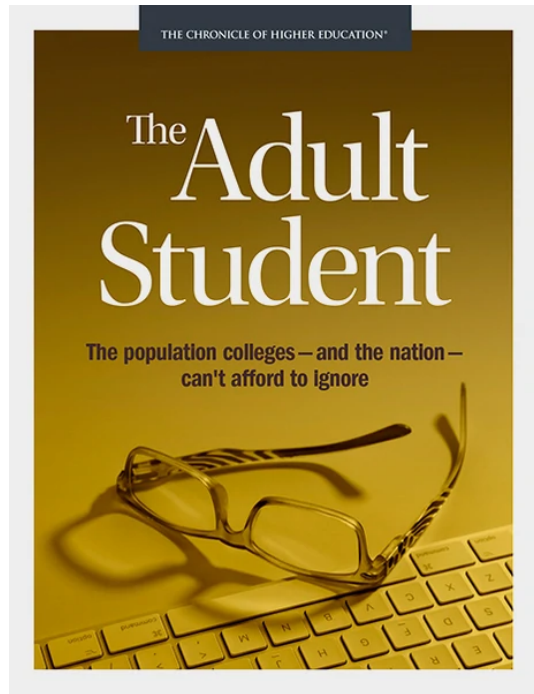
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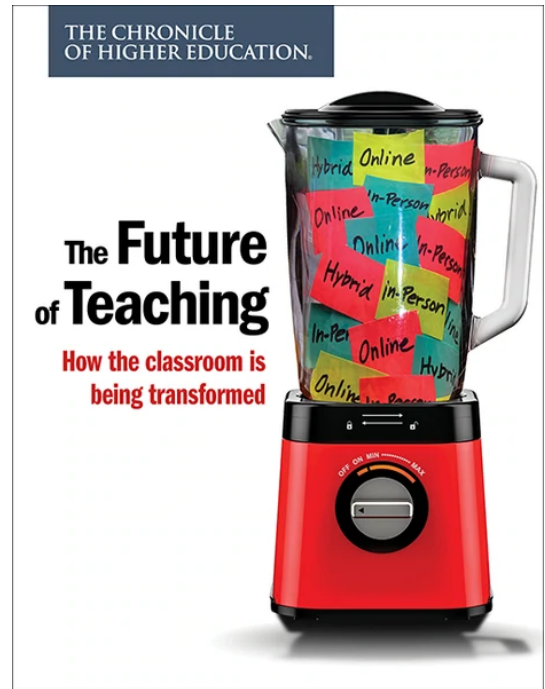
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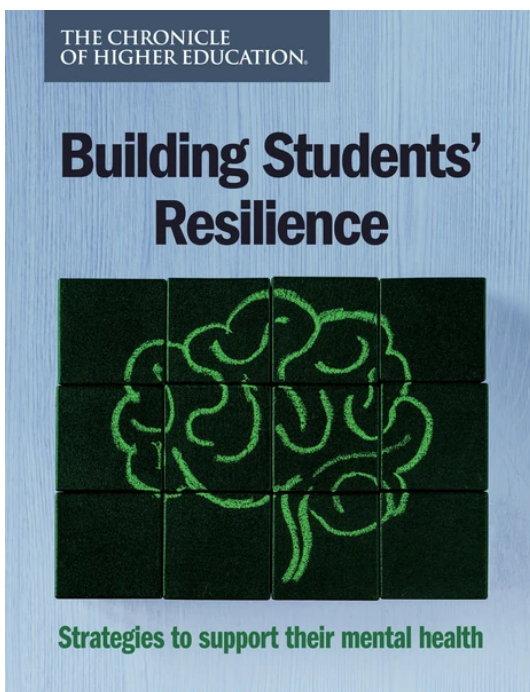
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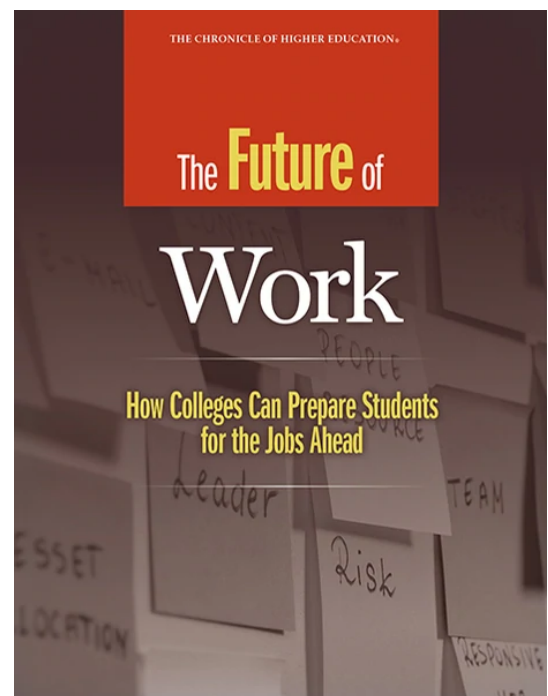
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