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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# When Humanists Undermine the Humanities



Gary Neill for The Chronicle Review

By Eric Adler | MAY 14, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM

If the news media are to be believed, these are not heady days for the humanities. In the *New Republic* in 2013, for example, Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed intoned, "You've probably heard several times already that the humanities are in 'crisis.' The crisis is real." As if to add insult to injury, the Trump

administration's budget blueprint for 2018 proposed eliminating the National Endowment for the Humanities. In a commentary in *The Hill*, Rep. Raúl Grijalva of Arizona called Trump's goal of cutting off the NEH "every bit as corrosive to our national character as his border wall or Muslim ban."

This climate has encouraged much hand-wringing from humanists. In a demolition of Jeffrey M. Duban's book *The Lesbian Lyre* (Clairview Books, 2016) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Edith Hall, a classics professor at King's College London, bemoaned the incapacity of her fellow academic leftists to discuss the transcendental power of literature and the arts. "The left, from Marx and Engels via Piscator, Brecht and critical theory to New Historicism and poststructuralism, has consistently evaded aesthetics," she wrote. "It has scant language in which to discuss the motivations of many people who enjoy poems, art galleries or musical performances: that they find them beautiful." Hall's admirable candor points to a broader problem: In an important way, many humanities scholars are themselves responsible for the lowly place of the humanities in higher education.

During the attention-grabbing feuds over undergraduate education in the 1980s and 1990s, traditionalists in the culture wars supported teaching the humanities based chiefly on aesthetics and presumed intellectual merit. William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* (1984), a talismanic text for academic traditionalists, invoked the Victorian poet and education reformer Matthew Arnold in labeling the humanities "the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience."

In *Speaking for the Humanities* (1989), a riposte to Bennett and his fellow traditionalists, the authors, a collection of

## Without a reinvigoration

prominent left-wing humanists including Jonathan Culler and Marjorie Garber, attempted to undercut this approach.

"What," they asked, "is to be the relationship between works traditionally taught as great — the vast majority of them

by Western white males — and writing

reflecting the experience and aspirations of other groups, either within Western societies or from other societies?"

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This was a typical gambit during the culture wars: academic humanists attempting to subordinate concern for aesthetics and intellectual merit to the inculcation of particular political values. The leftist cultural critic Henry Giroux wrote in 1990 of his hope for "a rationale and purpose for higher education, which aims at developing critical citizens and reconstructing community life by extending the principles of social justice to all spheres of economic, political, and cultural life."

To understand how such arguments have shaped the humanities, we need look no further than the vast literature lamenting their precarious status. Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010) attempts to muster a rousing defense of the study of literature and the arts with hardly a word about aesthetic merit. Instead, Nussbaum centers her apologia on certain undefined skills: "I shall argue," she writes at the book's beginning, "that the cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake." For that reason, she argues, America urgently needs the humanities.

That line of attack, though well intentioned, exemplifies the humanities' demise. For Nussbaum the humanities are essential because they encourage "critical thinking." But this quality is not unique to the humanities. Could one argue that students don't learn to "think critically" if they study, say, sociology, mathematics, or psychology? It would be difficult to make this case with a straight face. As Victor E. Ferrall Jr., president emeritus of Beloit College, justly asked, "Whatever critical thinking may be, why is it more likely to be learned by studying English literature or philosophy than business management?"

Furthermore, this skills-based rationale for the humanities is exactly the sort of blunder traditionalists made during the 19th century. As promoters of new disciplines in the social and natural sciences clamored for inclusion, traditionalists insisted that the classical languages deserved their dominant place in the undergraduate curriculum because studying them promoted "mental discipline." It did not take long for critics to dismantle that claim: The classical humanities, after all, have no monopoly on "mental discipline," just as the contemporary humanities have no monopoly on "critical thinking."

More important, these attempts to defend the humanities in fact subordinate them to the social sciences. In her book, Nussbaum cites a variety of studies by psychologists to buoy her claims about the value of the humanities. Through this means, she and like-minded thinkers like Paul Jay make social scientists the arbiters of the humanities' value. The

implicit message is that, unlike the humanities, the social sciences have the tools to assess value. To establish their worthiness, humanists must play the social scientists' game. Like the guardians of the curricula of antebellum classical colleges, such defenders of the contemporary humanities are setting themselves up for failure.

Peans to a literary work's power and beauty seem faintly embarrassing and out of place in academic scholarship. After all, scholars don't want to receive the same scorn that *Speaking for the Humanities* doled out to "belle lettrists who unselfconsciously sustain traditional hierarchies, traditional social and cultural exclusions, assuming that their audience is both universal and homogenous." As if that weren't a sufficient admonition, in a 1991 column in *The Chronicle*, Paula Rothenberg contended that "the traditional curriculum teaches all of us to see the world through the eyes of privileged, white, European males and to adopt their interests and perspectives as our own." Consider yourselves warned, fans of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare!

Without a reinvigoration of aesthetic criteria in the humanities, the enterprise of humanists is doomed. Already the sick man on sundry campuses, the study of literature and the arts will never survive without recovering the means to defend its value on its own terms. This is not to say that we should turn a blind eye to diversity and inclusiveness. After all, the culture wars were fruitful in helping demonstrate that a variety of cultural traditions are home to works of great beauty and profundity.

But we must recognize that in some key respects, the traditionalists of the academic culture wars were correct. Aesthetic quality and intellectual import are key ingredients in the defense of the humanities, wherever they may be found. Without such ingredients, well-meaning advocates are left with impoverished justifications for undergraduate courses in literature and the arts.

In an 1884 speech defending the compulsory collegiate study of ancient Greek, Daniel Henry Chamberlain, a Yale and Harvard graduate and onetime governor of South Carolina, included specific appeals to the value of individual works of Greek literature. "Of the works of Plato it may be said that, apart from the thought which they contain, they are true literary masterpieces," Chamberlain said. Without kindred sentiments from the pens of unembarrassed humanists, the study of literature and the arts on American college campuses is in danger of dying altogether.

*Eric Adler is an associate professor of classics at the University of Maryland at College Park. His book Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond was published last year by the University of Michigan Press.*

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.  
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