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The Social Utility of the Humanities

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Is the teaching of the humanities a luxury that today's societies can no longer afford? Martha Nussbaum responds that, on the contrary, in a world of globalized economic competition, there are social and political reasons for studying the humanities.

Reviewed: Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010. 178 p., $23.

Martha Nussbaum's latest book is a manifesto: in fewer than 150 pages, the American philosopher offers a plea in behalf of a certain vision of education and the humanities. The book draws largely on the author's academic work on the role of the emotions, imagination, and narrative in moral and political life. Those who know her work will recognize arguments previously developed in *Upheavals of Thought*,[1] *The Fragility of Goodness,*[2] and *Cultivating Humanity.*[3] The tone of *Not for Profit* is different, however: it is resolutely vigorous and committed, honed for the purpose of public debate.

A Crisis of the Humanities?

Indeed, the book appears at a time when many other essays and articles have been published in the United States on the fate of the humanities in a period of economic crisis, and when utilitarian goals have been imposed on the entire educational system, from elementary

[1] Oxford, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
[2] Oxford, Cambridge University Press, 1986.
[3] Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997.

schools to universities. To cite a few recent examples: *Crisis on Campus* by Mark C. Taylor,[4] *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* by Mark William Roche,[5] and *Reforming Our Universities* by David Horowitz.[6]

Participants in the debate fall into two fairly distinct camps. On the one hand you have those who advocate changes in education as a necessary adaptation to the economic rigors and increased demands of international competition. For them, instruction in the humanities is at best a charming but useless luxury and at worst a guilty indulgence. On the other hand, proponents of the humanities often find themselves backed into a defensive position, forced, whether they like it or not, to assume the role of guardians of tradition.[7]

The great virtue of Martha Nussbaum's work is to present a plea on behalf of the humanities that is anything but an anxious defense of social distinction. She directly confronts today's challenges without nostalgia for a hypothetical golden age of the humanities. Instead of treating the humanities and the arts as an *a priori* good, she does not shrink from the task of *justifying* their social and political interest, which she does with talent. To put it in a nutshell, Nussbaum's thesis is not that research in the arts and humanities should be maintained *despite* the economic crisis and growing need of technology. It is rather that the humanities are part of a proper response to the crisis. But of course the crux of the matter is to say just what the word "humanities" covers, and in this respect Nussbaum's book is quite the opposite of a timid conservative brief. Ultimately, her argument leads to the conclusion that a thorough and profound reform is needed in the way in which the humanities are taught and practiced.[8]

Nussbaum's argument is laid out in seven short chapters structured around an opposition between two ideal-typical models of education. One model is what she calls "education for profit" or "education for economic growth," which seeks primarily to endow students with

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[4] New York, A. Knopf, 2010.
[5] Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.
[6] Washington, Regnery Publishing Inc., 2010.
[7] The op-ed page of *The New York Times* of Oct. 17, 2010, offers a typical sampling of this debate. The occasion was the closing of the French department at SUNY-Albany. The exchanges illustrate the general tone of the debate and also its closed nature: it consisted of academics sparring with other academics.
[8] On possible arguments in favor of the humanities, see the blog of Michel Lussault: http://blog.educpros.fr/michel-lussault/2010/11/12/les-humanites-pourquoi-pour-qui-2/.

technical skills that will enable them to function in a world of global economic competition. Here, her style is austere and realistic: international competition imposes certain requirements, and states can maintain their rank only by instilling the qualities necessary for technological innovation and profit-making economic activity. The other model, which Nussbaum favors, is what she calls "education for democracy." Here, the argument is simply that an exclusively profit-oriented education slowly but surely undermines the conditions that allow democratic societies to function. A vital democracy requires citizens capable of participation, well-informed, and independent-minded: profit-oriented education fosters these qualities only to a limited degree, and they must be cultivated by education at the primary, secondary, and higher levels.

Nussbaum's argument runs as follows: if we cherish democratic values, then we must train not only good technicians but also men and women endowed with the necessary critical and empathic capacities to fulfill their role as citizens. The growing cultural diversity of globalization only adds to the list of requirements: we need citizens capable of understanding how situations and problems are interpreted in different moral and cultural settings. In the last step of her argument, Nussbaum insists that the necessary capacities for critical thinking, empathic openness, and comprehension of cultural diversity are developed mainly by the arts and humanities, or, rather, by a certain practice of the arts and humanities.

Socratic Pedagogy and Narrative Imagination

Obviously, this argument can work only if "humanities" refers as much to a form of pedagogy and practice as to a specific content. If the humanities are to be a response to the need for "education for democracy," then their purpose must be to convey not only the core content of a culture but also the practice of reflection. For instance, although Nussbaum evokes Plato's name at several points in her work, she does not use it to refer to an indubitable classic belonging to a fixed canon. She is interested, rather, in the type of mind that cultivates itself through critical encounters with classic texts, the reading of certain novels, and, more generally, with Socratic questioning of different ways of life.

This defense of the role of the humanities in maintaining living democratic societies is based on a systematic set of theses. The most fundamental of these is a psychological thesis,

pertaining to both individual and social psychology. Why are the arts and humanities part of the answer to the question of how to preserve democratic society? For Nussbaum, the reason is that they teach us about the formation of democratic *emotions*.[9] Her guiding question is therefore, How can we educate individuals so that they seek not domination and exclusion but equality and mutual respect? What type of emotion should be cultivated so that a society will function not according to a hierarchical principle but according to an egalitarian one? In her own words, "How do people become capable of respect and democratic equality? What makes them seek domination?" (p. 29) Nussbaum accordingly sets herself the task of spelling out the psychological assumptions inherent in any pedagogical theory. Her own theory is based on taking Samuel Huntington's famous idea of a "clash of civilizations" and standing it on its head. For Nussbuam, the clash is not external to civilization but internal: if there is a "clash," it is "within" the individual and within democracy.[10] Education must strive to give students the means to resolve the clash between hierarchical tendencies toward aggression and exclusion on the one hand and egalitarian and empathic tendencies on the other. Nussbaum bases her answer on a particular theory of emotional development, which sees aggression as a specific response to vulnerability. This theme resonates with another debate around the concept of "care," which also emphasizes the political dimension of the emotions and of feelings of vulnerability.[11]

Underlying Nussbaum's argument is a second important theme, having to do with meta-ethics. Nussbaum asks what capabilities individuals must develop in order to think adequately about the complex normative problems that citizens in today's democracies must face. She notes that imagination, in the sense of the capacity to put oneself in the place of others, is essential in a multicultural society. If we are to vote and decide the fate of others, we must be capable of imagining what our decision will do to them. This is all the more important in a cosmopolitan context. "Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone." (p. 95) Normative questions are resolved not only by recourse to argument but

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[9] On the contrast between democratic emotions and hierarchical emotions, see Nussbaum's commentary on the libretto and music of Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*: "Égalité et amour à la fin du *Mariage de Figaro* : constituer les émotions démocratiques," *Raison publique*, n° 13, autumn 2010, pp. 15-48.

[10] On this point, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007.

[11] For the link between care, vulnerability, and politics, see *Raison publique*, no. 14, Spring 2011, special section on "Grammaires de la vulnérabilité" and in particular the article by Sandra Laugier, "Le *care*, le souci du détail et la vulnérabilité du reel."

also by a certain type of attention to situations that require us to put ourselves in the place of others. We must therefore cultivate "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have." (pp. 95-96) To treat the arts and humanities as the principal instrument for developing empathic imagination is to take a decidedly optimistic view of their effect. In this respect, Nussbaum approves of Winnicott, who conceived of "the role of arts in human life as, above all, that of nourishing and extending the capacity for empathy." (p. 101) One might object that art has also demonstrated its ability to serve the politics of closure and identity and that novels, for example, can reinforce stereotypes as well as break them down. Thus it is a specific conception of the practice of the arts and humanities that Nussbaum defends, one that sees them as instruments of openness and understanding. How can we be sure that these instruments will have the desired effect? We cannot: according to Nussbuam, there can be no certainty in this respect. Nevertheless, "knowledge is no guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behavior." (p. 81)

Finally, it is worth stressing one last point having to do with Nussbaum's particular conception of pedagogy. Following American tradition in this regard, she favors an idea of active pedagogy derived from the work of thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, and Rabindranath Tagore. In the fourth chapter of her book, she discusses these and a few other writers as examples of a Socratic pedagogy that can be adapted to the needs of the twenty-first century. All of them also see education in the humanities as intimately related to practical education. Rousseau and Dewey are perhaps the most striking examples of educators who believe that reflection stems from practice and from the effort to solve the problems of everyday life.

Reforming Research and the Imperative of Growth

Among these various theses, all of which deserve to be discussed in detail, it may be worth focusing on two important points. First, one thing that is surprising to a French reader is the apportionment of roles in defending the humanities between public and private actors. Nussbaum begins her book by noting the general climate of pressure that surrounds the teaching

of arts and humanities today: utilitarian imperatives are ever more pressing, as is the demand for efficiency understood in narrowly economic terms. At several points in the book, the author remarks that in the United States this pressure comes mainly from politicians and administrators, whereas support for threatened programs comes from wealthy graduates and thus from private financial sources. In other words, private money is one of the most effective defenders of the "liberal arts," in opposition to the political will. When administrators seek to shut down or curtail instruction in the humanities, their opponents turn to these former students, who think back fondly on their undergraduate years: "We go to wealthy alums whose educational values pretty well match our own since they are by and large alums who loved their undergraduate liberal education." (p. 132) These circumstances clearly do not apply elsewhere, since they are intimately related to two distinctive features of the American system: 1) the first two years of a university education are not specialized but require students to sample a wide range of disciplines, including the humanities; and 2) philanthropic giving and private financing of higher education are often cited as cultural differences between the United States and Europe. Although this argument thus depends on specific features of the American system, it nevertheless offers an interesting way of thinking about ways to promote positive feedback between teaching in the arts and humanities and society at large.

A second feature of Nussbaum's argument is the way in which she analyzes the increasing pressure to make education and training "useful." In particular, the few paragraphs she devotes to recent reform in the United Kingdom, the so-called Research Excellence Framework (pp. 127 ff.), are particularly interesting for the reader in France, where the system of higher education and research has recently been subjected to a wave of "Excellence Initiatives" and other reforms. Nussbaum is unalterably opposed to reforms that try to put the humanities into a box that cannot hold them. In particular, she notes that the system of awarding research grants by project may work well in some scientific disciplines but makes no sense in the humanities. She also notes that the spirit of these reforms has generally been hostile to the arts and humanities, which are seen primarily as useless ornaments.[12]

[12] Nussbaum tells the following anecdote: "One cynical young philosopher, in one of these recently merged departments of philosophy and political science, told me that his last grant proposal was six words under the word limit – so he added the word 'empirical' six times, as if to reassure the bureaucrats that he was not dealing in mere philosophy – and his application proved successful." (p. 129).

Here, too, there are valuable lessons for Europeans to learn from the independence of research in the United States. Nussbaum criticizes the British reform for its obsession with economic utility: "'Impact'" is the buzzword of the day, and by 'impact' the government means above all economic impact." (p. 128) She notes that the humanities have been backed into a defensive position, in which they must permanently justify their existence to the government.

It is very interesting, however, to see that Nussbaum does not end with this critique. On the contrary, she proposes a constructive and energetic response to enable the humanities to move beyond mere complaint. Instead of rejecting the question of the utility of education out of hand, Nussbaum specifically raises it, but in order to give a novel answer. She insists that the "utility" of education must not be reduced to economic growth and must be related instead to the type of society that one wants to maintain. Indeed, what she is doing here for education is what she already did for economic growth models: she is known for her work with Amartya Sen in promoting a more complex growth model than can be specified simply in terms of GDP. Nussbaum and Sen did not dismiss the issue of measuring progress but instead insisted that it be evaluated in terms not of GDP but rather of basic "capabilities" such as health, literacy, and so on. Similarly, Nussbaum now does not avert her eyes from the issue of the utility of education but offers a response that goes beyond the merely economic.

She also points out that this debate is global. Although *Not for Profit* focuses mainly on the United States and India, its arguments are particularly welcome in the French context. Various European countries have been hit with "excellence initiatives" and other such reforms, and for the humanities the issue has been to move beyond anxiety about performance measures to deal with more fundamental issues. What kind of education and what kind of research are relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century? Whom do we wish to educate, and for what purpose? What qualities of mind do we want to cultivate? What type of citizen do we need to maintain our open democracies and vibrant public space?

Under pressure to meet utilitarian goals and promote growth, defenders of the humanities are well advised not to dismiss these issues out of hand and adopt a defensive posture. They should rather seize the opportunity to redefine and expand what we mean by growth, utility, and

social progress. To be sure, research and teaching in the humanities must change if they are to meet the challenge of the moment. We must move from nation-centered history to truly global history, making students aware of economic interdependence among countries, and we must improve language teaching while promoting a critical, Socratic spirit. The program is as attractive as it is ambitious.

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