Higher Education and the Arts and Humanities in a Consumer Society

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Introduction

Recent books like Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*¹ and Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*² have painted a bleak picture of the possible future of higher education. Donoghue’s dystopic and frighteningly convincing account presents us with the prospect of two systems of higher education—an elite, liberal arts education for the few and a largely vocational and diminished education for the masses. While Nussbaum champions America’s tradition of liberal education (especially the role of the arts and humanities in it), she nevertheless offers us an equally cautionary tale. If guided solely by economic interests and concerns, she predicts the slow but steady decline of liberal education in the United States—with devastating consequences for our democracy and our citizens.

We already are seeing some of this future unfold in the stripping down of General Education programs and the dramatic rise of for-profit universities that often stress vocational training to the detriment of all other educational goals.³ The ever-present consumerist ethos turns higher education into a mere means to an end, with the mighty dollar becoming the measure of all goods. In the current environment, the arts and humanities increasingly seem like strange historical appendages at our colleges and universities. My claim is that the diminution or even

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³ Research indicates that when the focus is on vocational training, higher goals of critical thinking and assessment fall by the wayside. See *Rethinking Teaching in Higher Education: From a Course Design Workshop to a Faculty Development Framework*, edited by Alenoushi Saroyan and Cheryl Amundsen (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2004), 60.
disappearance of the arts and humanities not only threatens our democracy but it puts the very future of higher education at risk.

**Cultural Context**

One need not look far to see the deteriorating condition of our democracy, and there is plenty of social science research to confirm what we are seeing all around us. Robert Putnam's groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* details the decline of civic engagement, and thus the decline of democracy, in the United States. Published in 2000, Putnam concludes that “Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.” The data indicate that during the first two thirds of the 20th century, Americans were increasingly involved in civic life, and that in the last third they slowly became less and less involved.

Putnam considers a number of factors that help to explain this phenomenon, but perhaps the most important are the advent of television culture and rampant consumerism—cornerstones of today’s popular culture. Television served and continues to serve as an anchor that tethers us to our homes—joined now by our computers, game consoles, and home entertainment centers. Putnam notes that between 1965 and 1995 Americans gained approximately six hours of leisure time in their weekly schedule and devoted almost all of it to watching television. Husbands and wives spend six to seven times as much time watching television as they spend “in community activities outside the home.” In short, we are very private citizens—more private than we have been for a long time.

Another cause in the decline of civic engagement is the rampant consumerism of our culture, in which we increasingly are identified more by what we own than by our relationships to other people. More and more individuals are focused on the pursuit of wealth and the consumer products that it can purchase. Little time may be left for engaging with one another to solve community problems. Television and consumerism lead to a decline in social connectedness, and thus a decline in social capital—the resource that is critical not only to solving community problems but for creating communities where people can thrive. Putnam shows that children are better educated, that neighborhoods are safer, that economic prosperity is higher and more equally distributed, that children and adults are healthier, and that people generally are happier in communities with high social

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8 And this move to a more private existence impacts other activities. Even when we are engaged politically, it increasingly is an individual act performed out of our home (e.g., signing an online petition) rather than a communal act in which we are face-to-face with other people. See Putnam, *Bowling*, 229.
9 Perhaps the best work on this phenomenon is Juliet Schor’s *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).
capital (i.e., where people are more socially connected). In short, the deterioration of civic life leads us to be less happy and less healthy than we should or could be. So a thriving democracy, which is only possible through active and effective civic engagement by everyone, is not just some theoretical aim or good. It literally is good for us—good for our bodies and our souls. Thus, the values of good citizenship are worth teaching and inculcating in our students—for their good and for ours.

Let’s take it a step further. Putnam makes the case that the more social capital there is the more social equality there tends to be, and the more social equality there is the more easily social capital can be generated—a cycle that leads to stronger communities and healthier and happier citizens. In their book *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett draw upon an amazing wealth of data to show that social *inequality* has negative impacts on a wide range of social and personal problems, including community life and social relations, mental health, drug use, physical health and life expectancy, educational achievement, teenage pregnancy, violence and crime, and social mobility. The thrust of the book is that these negative impacts are less dependent on a population’s average income (at least in developed countries) than they are on the *disparity* of incomes across economic classes. And these impacts cut across all economic classes. Social *inequality* is bad for us—rich and poor. Social *equality* is good for us—rich and poor.

Given the data, it would seem that higher education should take an active role in the education of citizens and the promotion of civic engagement. But many people argue that higher education should not be in the democracy business. For example, see Stanley Fish’s work *Save the World on Your Own Time*. He and others claim that training in democratic citizenship is best left to other social institutions—not our colleges and universities. The tasks of the latter are strictly academic. A college education is about thinking well and conducting research, not becoming a more moral person or a better citizen.

If we lived in a flourishing democracy in which other institutions effectively trained us for citizenship and effectively established just and productive relationships, I perhaps could live with Fish’s position. But we do not live in such a democracy nor do we have such effective institutions. The evidence on this matter seems clear. So how will our colleges and universities respond? Fish claims that saving the world is not the faculty member’s job. Why not? It’s as if Fish is the cook on a sinking boat who, when asked to help bail out the ship, replies “But that’s not my job.” In other words, if not the chef, if not us, then who? As Cornel West says, there “is a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today.”

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10 Putnam cites evidence that indicates that the “younger you are, the worse things have gotten over the last decades of the twentieth century in terms of headaches, indigestion, sleeplessness, as well as general satisfaction with life and even likelihood of taking your own life.” While he cannot attribute all of these negative indicators to the “generational decline in social connectedness,” there are good reasons to make such an attribution (Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 263, 265).
11 Putnam notes that the generations that lived through the Great Depression and World War II experienced a great leveling in economic terms. These generations also were some of the most civically engaged in our nation’s history (Putnam, *Bowling*, 271).
12 Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
He wonders if perhaps we are entering a “postdemocratic” age, and concludes that “the great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy.” How are citizen-soldiers going to be prepared for this battle? Why should higher education not help to train them?

Given the failure of too many other institutions to inculcate the values of citizenship (particularly social and economic justice and genuine equality), it is wrong for higher education—an institution through which an increasing number of our citizens pass—to simply ignore the situation and assume our democracy crisis will just work itself out. Higher education should not and cannot ignore the situation. If higher education is not in the business of inculcating democratic values, then it fails our students and our society. It simply becomes a means to economic and consumerist ends (for example, the Gross National Product, high salaries, etc.)—ends that are not inherently wrong but nevertheless can run afoul of our deeper democratic aspirations.

**Nussbaum’s Argument**

Martha Nussbaum has made the case for the social and political benefits of education (particularly higher education) in works like *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* and the aforementioned *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. In the latter work, she claims that we are at a critical crossroads:

> Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.

For Nussbaum, the skills and attitudes that are critical to a democracy are the kinds of skills and attitudes emphasized in the study and practice of the arts and humanities. These include “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend

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14. Zygmunt Bauman makes a compelling case in a number of works why we shouldn’t simply leave it up to the dominant consumer culture to straighten out our democracy.
15. I think it is important to keep in mind this point from Ruth W. Grant: “students arrive on campus with the most important tasks of character formation already completed. They are not blank slates or balls of putty. In fact, many of them are already better people than many of us will ever be” (Kiss and Euben, *Debating Moral Education*, 286).
17. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 2. She adds: “Democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting, skills that we all badly need to keep democracies vital, respectful, and accountable” (*Not for Profit*, 77).
local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.”

Liberal education, with a strong emphasis on the arts and humanities, helps students to develop these abilities.

Drawing from Nussbaum’s work, let me highlight just two contributions that the humanities and the arts can make to our development as effective citizens. The first is what Nussbaum calls “Socratic thinking.” This is more than just being able to think critically or engage in critical analysis. This is the ability to think and reason with other people, indeed to think and reason through our dialogue with others. Nussbaum writes:

Socratic thinking is important in any democracy. But it is particularly important in societies that need to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. The idea that one will take responsibility for one’s own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict.

The skill of Socratic thinking is not learned through the regurgitation of facts and the assembly-line style of content delivery that turns education into a mere means to an end (the college degree, the high-paying career, etc.). Socratic thinking can be learned through the careful, sustained, and communal engagement with art, philosophy, music, and all the other cultural products that define our humanity and make life worth living.

The second contribution that the humanities and the arts can make to our development as effective citizens is to cultivate our narrative imagination. The arts in particular play a special role here. They move us emotionally, not just cognitively, and this movement opens us to the other in ways that alternative forms of

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18 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 7.
19 In order to produce the kind of citizens we need, Nussbaum highlights seven things that schools (from K-12 to colleges and universities) can and should do:

- Develop students’ capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people, particularly those whom their society tends to portray as less, as “mere objects”
- Teach attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness that suggest that weakness is not shameful and the need for others not unmanly; teach children not to be ashamed of need and incompleteness but to see these as occasions for cooperation and reciprocity
- Develop the capacity for genuine concern for others, both near and distant
- Undermine the tendency to shrink from minorities of various kinds in disgust, thinking of them as “lower” and “contaminating”
- Teach real and true things about other groups (racial, religious, and sexual minorities; people with disabilities), so as to counter stereotypes and the disgust that often goes with them
- Promote accountability by treating each child as a responsible agent
- Vigorously promote critical thinking, the skill and courage it requires to raise a dissenting voice.

(Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 45-46)

20 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 54.
21 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 95.
information or discourse cannot move us. For example, mere statistics (think here of being bombarded with poverty rates, unemployment rates, percentages of people who suffer from hunger, etc.) may produce outrage but lack a human face. Moral and political arguments (I have never been moved by reading John Rawls, though I agree with most of his arguments about justice) provide powerful justifications for our positions but can hardly elicit the empathy or compassion that we get from a powerful novel, inspiring song, or poignant picture. The arts nurture our narrative imagination and develop empathy and compassion.

Citizens (both national and global) who are empathic and compassionate are critical to establishing or preserving human interactions that are not reduced to market norms. In moral terms, such citizens treat others as ends-in-themselves and never simply as means to ends. Without the proper education, Nussbaum argues, "our human interactions are likely to be mediated by the thin norms of market exchange in which human lives are seen primarily as instruments for gain." The proper education is one with a liberal arts structure—one that is heavy on the arts and humanities (including the study of human diversity). Such an education can "supply a useful foundation for the public debates that we must have if we are to cooperate in solving major human problems."

For example, take the issue of economic inequality. The great disparity of wealth between the third world and the first world is manifesting itself even within such wealthy nations as the United States. Our ability to address these disparities and the burdens faced by those who are victims of economic injustice is dependent on our ability to sympathetically understand the lives of others. Such sympathetic understanding leads to compassion and even action on behalf of the least advantaged in our society and in the world. But being motivated to act on behalf of the least advantaged does not happen by accident. It is fostered in part by education, an education in sympathy and compassion. Through such an education we become more responsible citizens—in the sense that we respond to the trials and tribulations of our fellow citizens.

Being sympathetic and compassionate towards others requires imagination—imaging what their lives must be like. Using the example of the literary arts, Nussbaum concludes: "If the literary imagination develops compassion, and if compassion is essential for civic responsibility, then we have good reason to teach works that promote the types of compassionate understanding we want and need." Of course, to teach such works presupposes a genuine commitment to liberal education and financial and moral support of the arts and humanities.

Put another way, sustaining and promoting the arts and humanities means making a real commitment to our democracy. An education without the arts and

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22 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 80.
23 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 94.
24 Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity, 99.
25 “Today we still maintain that we like democracy and self-governance,” Nussbaum writes, “and we also think that we like freedom of speech, respect for difference, and understanding of others. We give these values lip service, but we think far too little about what we need to do in order to transmit them to the next generation and ensure their survival” (Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 141).
humanities or with greatly diminished programs in these areas would lead to diminished citizens and a diminished democracy. Nussbaum concludes:

If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate.26

She argues that those who want to limit or eliminate the arts and humanities “sell our democracy short, preventing it from becoming as inclusive and as reflective as it ought to be.”27

**Historical Context**

Nussbaum’s claim about the democratic import of higher education—with a central role for the arts and humanities—is not without historical precedent.

In the 19th century, John Henry Newman famously and valiantly defended the ideal of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, education as its own end. Fish, in fact, quotes Newman approvingly. Newman says of knowledge that it is “valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end.”28 He adds that “there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does” and that the “object” and “mission” of the university is “intellectual culture.”29 I agree. But Newman also argues—an aspect of his work that Fish and others often neglect—that university education has practical and social effects (see his discussion of the “good” of education in section 5 of Discourse VII). He claims: “If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society.”30 Indeed, what Newman describes in the following passage is a varied collection of civic skills.

It [Liberal Education] shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in

26 Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 143.
27 Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 297.
the way; he is a pleasant companion, and a comrade you can depend upon; he knows when to be serious and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect.\textsuperscript{31}

So Newman does not present us with an either/or choice for higher education—either learning for its own sake or learning merely in the service of other ends—but recognizes the mutual and complementary relationship between education and the social good. John Dewey carried such an argument into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Of course, he is much more of a proponent than Newman of the progressive, democratic aspects of education. As he says, "It is the aim of progressive education [the only education worth doing] to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them."\textsuperscript{32} For Dewey, education (higher or otherwise) necessarily has a political dimension and necessarily shapes our social and economic lives. So, "the problem is not whether the schools should participate in the production of a future society (since they do so anyway) but whether they should do it blindly and irresponsibly or with the maximum possible of courageous intelligence and responsibility."\textsuperscript{33} Producing a just and meaningful future society requires the concerted attention and effort of a wide range of social institutions—including our educational institutions, from elementary schools through universities.

The kind of progressive educational philosophy advocated by Dewey also is found in more contemporary works. For example, Paulo Freire and bell hooks argue for a vision of education as liberatory praxis. And all of these thinkers, like Nussbaum, recognize the central role that must be played by the arts and humanities.

The Future of Higher Education

When higher education neglects its role as an important institution that teaches and cultivates civic values, it sows the seeds of its own destruction. Here is where Fish is fundamentally wrong in regard to the politics and the future of higher education. He believes that values education is destructive of the educational project—that it ultimately will be the undoing of liberal education. My claim is the opposite. Without values education, we increasingly will see the disappearance of anything that resembles the educational project—at least the one in the classical liberal education tradition.

Let’s face it. Students generally can find all the facts they ever need to know in their pockets. Everything is right there in their cell phones. The worldwide web and instant access to information is fundamentally changing the nature of higher education and the role of the faculty member. No longer are faculty needed to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Newman, Idea, 126.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 119-120.
\end{itemize}
provide content for students. They can provide content, but the web makes them redundant in this regard. And online, for-profit universities can provide that content much more efficiently and cheaply than can your stereotypical faculty member in a physical classroom. This situation leads Mark C. Taylor, in his work *Crisis on Campus*, to predict that either colleges and universities and their faculties will change, or they will die.\(^{34}\) So what can we do? Taylor argues that the future of higher education will focus on the ways that faculty can facilitate students in their efforts to distinguish good from bad information, to relate information from different disciplines to each other, to ask critical questions and analyze information, and to apply information in changing circumstances. And, I would add, the role of the faculty in a society like ours is to help our students to use information and their developing critical and analytic skills in the service of values central to achieving a good life (including serious reflection about what constitutes a good life) and improving our democracy. The information and skills they need, however, are not just scientific and vocational—they are humanistic. This is why the arts and humanities are so critical.

If we do not change, if we do not alter our present course, I believe we will head down the path to Donoghue’s dystopic vision. We will continue to emphasize vocational training to prepare another generation of workers for relatively meaningless lives of consumption, disposal, and re-consumption. We will continue to live alone together, with more and more of the most important decisions about our lives left in the hands of national and transnational corporations and the political “leaders” that they buy. We will continue to define ourselves as workers and consumers, but increasingly rarely as citizens.

In conclusion, we need to reinvigorate the arts and humanities on our campuses. Only in this way can higher education be a vehicle for the teaching and promotion of democratic values in a culture increasingly dominated only by economic and consumer values and where democracy remains less than it ought to be. If higher education does not teach and promote democratic values, then it simply will continue to be co-opted in the service of economic interests and a culture industry that has profit as its primary end and that treats citizens as only consumers. And if we are a nation of only consumers, then both higher education and democracy are greatly endangered.\(^{35}\)


\(^{35}\) An excellent treatment of this issue can be found in Benjamin Barber’s *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).