Eidos (1) 2017

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI: 10.26319/EIDOS-001-HUMANISTIC-STUDY

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The Future of the Humanistic Study and Its Associated Institutions

In the United States Higher Education is undergoing a rapid change. Some aspects of this change are welcome, some are simply the inevitable march of progress, and some changes are troubling. The keepers of the humanities in every generation must consider all three sorts of change and adjust to them as required for the flourishing (or at least the maintenance) of humanistic thought as a presence and an active factor in civilization. The very rapidity of the current changes makes that duty a difficult one in the present. The concomitant result may fairly be called an emerging crisis in education in the US, and the situation is likely to spread to Europe and to the rest of the world where educational institutions are obliged to exist alongside of corporate-dominated capitalism. The tendency toward the welfare state in many nations will slow and perhaps counteract these problematic developments, but it is fair to say that the more powerful corporate capitalism becomes, and the more it absorbs the political machinery of the nation state to its ends, the more difficulty the educational establishment will encounter in maintaining the kind of education that is more than mere training of persons for service to the corporate machinery. Obviously, the humanities, as they have existed historically, do not seem to be necessary to the coming corporatized university.

The principal contributing causes of this situation are closer to a confluence of circumstances than any plan or even single trend. The humanities have almost always struggled for their place in the official institutions of the government and have often been obliged to exist on the fringes or wherever patronage (with all its strings and pulleys) was available. Thus, there is no reason to be alarmist about the situation on our near horizon. There will always be artists and philosophers and historians and poets who achieve great things for humanity from the pure love of these pursuits and who will willingly suffer whatever poverty and obscurity accompany their creative and literary and educational callings. Wherever there are humans, there will be historians and poets and philosophers and artists, regardless of whether anyone pays them. And there will be great works produced.

The correlation between widespread support, whether public or private, for humanistic endeavor and the quality of the products produced is an uncertain proportion. It is not clear that mass public support for humanistic work, as it has existed during the past century in the West, has been the cause of greater achievement, in terms of the works of genius that endure for generations. However, it is fair to assert that the effect of such broad support and the incorporation of humanistic values in public and private education has genuinely altered, for the better, the average level of appreciation for the bigger questions of life and has made evident to the many, if not quite the mass of humanity, the importance of considering, together and individually, the greater purposes of human life. It is not possible to demonstrate that the spread of such values within the framework of our civilizational institutions has rendered the examined life more worth living, but the faith of humanists professes a confidence that such is the effect of the propagation and spread of our efforts. We do and always shall defend these values, even if their effects are difficult to commodify in the ways that are regarded with approval by the moguls and pundits of our time, or of any other. They value profits and power and military strength and the sequestering of resources. We have to convince them that these activities need a higher purpose and ought never to be treated as ends in themselves. Such has always been our task. It has not changed and will not change.

The present confluence of circumstances is, however, difficult for those called to humanistic endeavor. In the US, the populace has become less willing to support educational institutions with tax money. The growing attitude, for some forty years (it can be dated to the beginning of Ronald Reagan's presidency in 1980, although its roots are much older), has been that whoever uses and benefits from education ought to pay for it. This way of thinking sets aside and gradually renders unconscious the idea of "the public good." The movements in the US that created universal education, in the 19th century, and that associated closely the idea of the public good with the idea of improving one's individual circumstances, has eroded and almost disappeared from serious public debate and consideration. To put it in the clearest terms, people no longer believe, on a wide scale, that universal education, especially of the humanistic sort, is worth paying for, publicly or individually. Publically we have grown toward having the individual bear the costs, even when we recognize that saddling young people with tremendous debt at the beginning of their productive lives is a problem. At the individual level, these same individuals are not mature enough to be aware that their education needs to rise above mere training for securing a job. The humanities are thus squeezed out by the twin pressures of being seen as irrelevant to the aims of a corporatized, tax-hating public, on one side, and an immature and nervous collection of young individuals who cannot recognize its value of humane learning, the other side. This is one part of the present challenge.

The advance of technology into the educational context has made these more gradual changes acute in the present. Without such rapid change, they would have been merely chronic challenges, closely akin to challenges that have existed at many times in human history. In many times and places, circumstances have pressed upon the humanities in similar ways as those I described above, and indeed, very often the humanities went into decline. The effect of that decline was, in my view, always to diminish the peoples who allowed them to decline, resulting in cynicism, purposeless vying for power and control, militarism, and ultimately a lapsing into a condition of moral and spiritual weakness that characterizes the decline of civilization. Giambattista Vico argues that wherever arts and letters have found public support, the city that extends such support flourishes in every civilizational area. Where such support is not found, the city founders and declines and indeed rots in what he calls the "ultimate civil disease," which is "the barbarism of reflection." It is a post-civilizational malaise that weakens people and leads to their dissolution as a people.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the decline in the humanities in the present US educational milieu predicts decline, or perhaps one should say further and more precipitous decline (since decline is easy to recognize as a general fact in the age of Trump). The losses are sustained in the moral, spiritual, and cultural strength of the people and its state. The symbol of these losses is, most noticeably, the contempt

for elevated thinking and for civility in public discourse. The prediction of George Orwell that "ignorance is strength" is fulfilled. And where ignorance is confused with strength, war may be called peace. What, then, are the defenders of humanistic learning called to do in such a time?

I admit that the demands placed on us are daunting. Some will say we must convince our leaders, in political, corporate, and educational life to restore the humanities to their former role in our educational institutions. We must show them that philosophy bakes bread, that art improves ordinary life, that history saves us from repeating past errors. Surely they could be convinced if we could find the right story. I believed this kind of narrative, more implicitly than consciously, for the first four decades of my life. But in the last fifteen or twenty years, I have come to believe, with increasing confidence, that the unthinkable is actually happening: we are betrayed by the leaders of our civilization, but more importantly, we have cooperated in undermining our own cause. We agreed to submit our educational activities, on a daily basis, to a model of professionalized behavior that was and is profoundly at odds with what we profess as our purposes. We made ourselves hypocrites by policing one another when any of us dared to voice an opinion that might cost us the comfortable status granted to us by our corporate masters and their political lapdogs and catspaws. We did this and continue to do this t o e a c h o t h e r, and the wider power structures have successfully bought our compliance and enforced our silence. These include our "professional organizations," such as the American Philosophical Association, and its counterparts in the other humanistic disciplines. These organizations disserve humanistic learning by regulating it too narrowly, even against their intentions and stated purposes. They aim for good but accomplish the opposite by cooperating too easily with powers and forces that have reason to cloister the intelligentsia and little reason to listen to its pleadings once cloistered. Yes, there is use for the natural sciences, for the computer scientists, for the management and marketing teachers, but the historians and poets need to be kept busy policing one another's acceptability.

The dire situation is most visible in higher education, but it is spread throughout primary and secondary education even more broadly. Compliance is what was desired by the technologically fuelled corporate power structure, and by means of a carrot of comfort and a stick of bureaucratic biopower, compliance was secured. From the subjection of public school teachers to absurd programs like "No Child Left Behind" to the illusions entertained by college professors that professionalizing was a categorical imperative, the corporate power structure has thoroughly infiltrated and reorganized the consciousness of the educators of the last four decades. Allowing us to fantasize about ourselves as free agents of humane value, it has cultivated educators into uniform rows of genetically modified crops, sprouting, germinating, and tasseling on command, fertilized in a soil of crippling personal debt and being harvested by the great corporate reaper as defense contracts and quietist propaganda. We are then threshed and winnowed in cubicle farms, dried with annual assessments, and stored in siloes belonging to the educational equivalent of Monsanto, where we rot unless markets and prices should make it profitable for our masters to ship us to the moral feedlot to be consumed by the cattle they fatten for slaughter. That, my friends, is what the educational establishment has consented to become, as we put students in debt for them and teach them what never to say because it might be thought "unprofessional."

But you, my humanistic reader, you are i n f e r i o r corn. You are of no likely value to Monsanto. You are being siloed to keep you from contaminating the more profitable crop –the computer scientists, the information technologists, the engineers, the accountants, the future middle managers, and the other varieties that bear the slightest achievable resemblance to the wild varieties of grain from which they have been modified. You will contaminate the GMO graduates unless you can be kept in your place. And who does that work? Your colleagues do it. The inferior colleagues you allowed to become chair, and then assistant dean, and dean and then finally provost and chancellor. And you allowed it because you believed the world was waiting for your next article. Well, it wasn't and now you're under the thumb of the dimwits who toed that corporate line, the

ones who now hand you a meaningless form that will both take many hours to complete and (largely because of that) assure the dimwits of their own authority, and indeed of their own reality, since both depend upon your acquiescence. If they can take your time they can take your soul. And they have.

The only reasonable response to the situation is to find a corner of a field and cultivate heirloom varieties of wild seed, and to share the crop with whoever can appreciate that not only is it superior nourishment to the soul of humanity, it is also perhaps the wild seed that will emerge to save what c a n be saved when the foreseeable blight destroys the corporate monoculture. I encourage every humanistic educator to consider seriously looking for that untended, remote piece of land. Here, where it is found, one must take on some portion of the humanistic task of civilization and work with it organically, adjusting to what t h a t field will yield. We cannot individually raise the full variety of crops needed for our humanity, but we can each take on some part. There will not be material wealth in this undertaking. Survival will have to be sufficient for us. Comfort is not to be expected or striven for. We are on our own. For the immediate and foreseeable future, operating without close ties to existing public institutions is necessary. We cannot allow ourselves to fall into dependency on a revenue stream whose source is the very bureaucratized biopower that we are seeking to outlive.

In one small corner of the USA, a group I am associated with has found a corner and is seeking to address a part of our common humanistic task. Located in Murphysboro, Illinois (near Carbondale and its campus of Southern Illinois University), the American Institute of Philosophical and Cultural Thought (AIPCT) is a scholarly institution with an educational and cultural mission. The Institute was conceived by John Shook (now the President) and Randall Auxier (in whose large Victorian home the Institute is based) during conversations about the future of the humanities. AIPCT activities have now taken up some of the functions formerly sponsored by the Center for Dewey Studies, which has been closed after fifty years of outstanding service to humanity, due to funding cuts and, more immediately, due to unwise changes in the focus and energies of SIUC. In short, SIUC, like so many other institutions that have become victims of the problems I described above, has ceased to value the humane side of its calling and is unwilling to support it.

Our desire to see to the continuation of some of the work of the Dewey Center is one reason why the inaugural address of AIPCT was given by the Director Emeritus of that distinguished Center, Larry A. Hickman. Dr. Hickman, now retired, is the third member of the founding AIPCT Board. The recent past has been difficult, but we are looking to the future. We know the humanities are doing poorly at present in our institutions of higher learning, and they are not likely to do well in the foreseeable future, due to the corporatization of the universities, and to the widespread tendency in our culture to undervalue humanistic learning. So we have created a space for humanities and humanistic thinking (including religious humanism) that does not depend on the university system, or on the largess of its administrators. We intend to embrace technology in all of its forms because we know that this must characterize our means of learning in the future. We will offer on-line education, remote learning in virtual classrooms, and an aggressive digitization of valuable research materials from our growing holdings of rare books, journals, and papers. Making such materials available on the public internet is among our most pressing aims.

Also among our purposes is conserving and preserving such important materials for hands-on research. There are things that cannot be learned without face-to-face conversations and classes, and that cannot be intuited without laying physical eyes on primary materials. Humanistic learning is not simply the transmission of information from one generation to the next. It requires the formation of concrete living communities, whose countless daily interactions create a whole of insight and a power of intuition far exceeding the sum of its parts. In short, just as wisdom is the whole of virtue, as Aristotle so wisely said, the art of forming community is the whole of learning. There can be no virtual community of any depth except among people who have learned how to maintain and live as part of a concrete community that has a place, a time, and purpose. And

here there is the danger of what Marx somewhat hyperbolically called false consciousness. Our colleagues in the university believe they know what community is and often believe they have learned the art. Indeed, this is what they associate closely with "professionalism." But that is not community, it is compliance with mindless quasi-normativities that provide the illusion of shared life and shared purpose without the genuine sacrifices of dialogue, compromise, painful mutual commitment, reconciliation, and rituals of atonement that make genuine community possible. Our corporatized colleagues live in fear of the loss of their status and comfort and delude themselves into thinking that such fear can be offset by an atmosphere of professionalized cooperation. In the name of such professionalism, they routinely punish their graduate students, the novitiate, until either conformity is attained or expulsion of the recalcitrant has been agreed upon as necessary. And far more of the novitiate wander away in disillusionment than are expelled for non-conformity. The survivors are not the best and the brightest, they are the compliant. This is not education and it certainly is not community. It is the workings of fear and naked self-interest to produce privilege for some at the expense of others, and the accompanying illusions required to make ignorance seem like strength. The rejection of real difference in the name of "diversity" (a euphemism if ever there was one) is one of the more ironic effects, but there are thousands of others. It is mass *mauvais foi*.

Returning to our specific effort against this culture, because Southern Illinois is already known around the world for its holdings and research in North American thought, we are specializing in that. We have already gathered some 35,000 volumes. This collection of books and papers come as gifts from the a number of living supporters, such as Richard T. Hull and Douglas R. Anderson, and members of the Board, along with generous gifts from the estates of over a dozen distinguished professors. These include books and papers from Charles Sherover, John Howie, Warren Steinkrauss, H.S. Thayer, V.T. Thayer, Abraham Edel, Howard Radest, Creighton Peden, and Jo Ann Boydston, among others. There are many first editions and rare books, as well as important papers and correspondence. There is also microfilm and other technologies now fading from view (cassette and videotape, and compact disks/cd-rom, for example) whose conservation is important to capturing the last half century of humanistic thought.

AIPCT is sponsoring on-line classes and hosts events regularly, including seminars, workshops, and public and private lectures. The space is available for appropriate receptions and other events of a cultural nature. There musical concerts occasionally. We also have a resident fellowship program (and our first resident fellow is already at the AIPCT for 2016–2017, Thurman Todd Willison from Union Theological Seminary in NYC). There will be a visiting scholars program as well. We have fellows, student fellows, research fellows, and senior fellows of the AIPCT who contribute their efforts and participation regularly and who share our purposes and are voluntarily responsible for spreading awareness of our work.

The AIPCT is not equivalent to the house. The Institute *is* the books, the papers, and the programs, along with the people who do the work. We anticipate growth and could move elsewhere if needed, in the future, in order to expand. The house creates a pleasant setting for research and functions, but is a separate entity, eventually to be incorporated and set on the National Register of Historic Places, with a different Board and a different mission. It has an art collection and is itself an architectural and artistic treasure.