The Humanities at the End of the World

chronicle.com/article/the-humanities-at-the-end-of-the-world

Alexander I. Jacobs 2015年9月28日

By Alexander I. Jacobs

September 28, 2015

François Berger for The Chronicle Review

If somehow I found myself tasked with rewriting Cormac McCarthy's nearly perfect post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road,* I would change only one thing. I would insert an episode where the heroes happen upon a traveler waylaid by cannibalistic bandits. Hungry, murderous, and decorated with human bones, the cannibals have forced the traveler to his knees. He is pleading for his life, trying desperately to explain why they ought not to kill, cook, and eat him. "I can teach you critical-thinking skills," he cries out. "Everyone needs to know how to write!" The bandits glance back and forth at one another, slightly puzzled but clearly unimpressed. "You don't understand," says the traveler. "This isn't just about bare survival. It's about meaning, values, citizenship. You need me! You need the humanities!"

The traveler, doubtless, would end up rotating slowly over a campfire. Such is the fate of a superfluous person in a barbarous world. At least he would have had the opportunity to participate in an illustrious literary genre from before the world went up in smoke.

Impassioned defenses of the humanities have recently become an established feature of op-ed pages, magazine articles, and full-length polemics. And it is not for nothing. The humanities are certainly in a bad way, the result of right-wing state legislatures, corporate-minded university administrators, and STEM advocates waging an extended campaign to delegitimate and defund the study of literature, philosophy, and history. Even President Obama, who never misses an opportunity to trumpet the value of education, couldn't resist taking a cheap shot at art history. The collective message is that we live in an age of austerity, and the humanities are a luxury we can no longer afford.

Against these accusations, defenders of the humanities advance two counterarguments. Some insist that the skills students develop while earning degrees in philosophy and history are, by a happy coincidence, perfect for a life of corporate middle management, or still better, some variety of "knowledge work." Humanities majors emerge from college exceptionally good at talking, writing, and thinking. What company wouldn't want to be populated with those sorts of people?

Another set of defenders try to repudiate precisely this market logic. A college education ought to be more than job preparation, they argue. The humanities should be appreciated on their own terms rather than as crude and ineffective instruments for making money. The humanities aim to create well-rounded people, better citizens and colleagues, not more productive employees. To subordinate the humanities to the demands of the marketplace is to corrupt and destroy them.

What if humanities education no longer has a significant role to play in American life?

Different though these lines of argument appear, they both assume that the crisis of the humanities is largely a problem of persuasion. State legislatures wouldn't resist spending public money on a department of gender studies if only they understood how valuable such departments actually are. If tech companies took seriously their commitment to creativity, then they would happily hire specialists in postcolonial literature. It would seem that we just need to get our sales pitch right, articulate a need that Americans didn't know they had. Whether you want to be a renaissance man or a late-capitalist hustler, the humanities have something for you.

But what if persuasion is not the issue? What if the problem is not a failure to properly appreciate the role of humanities education, but rather that such an education no longer has a significant role to play in American life? If the political scientist Jacob Hacker is right, we are currently living through what he calls "the great risk shift." Since the 1970s, the United States has gradually dismantled its ramshackle framework of social security, with the result that economic risk is now borne primarily by individuals and families, rather than spread across institutional and social life.

Defined-benefit pensions have given way to 401(k)'s, employer-provided health benefits have grown meager, and wages have stagnated. Job loss, medical emergencies, or the discovery that your retirement fund is caught up in someone's financial shell game can mean bankruptcy and home foreclosure. The resulting sense of insecurity is so great that *The New York Times* reports that political strategists are telling 2016 presidential candidates to avoid the term "middle class" because its mere mention fills Americans with anxiety and sadness.

In this world, your average college freshman can look forward to a lifetime of scrambling to avoid being swindled on everything, from student loans to housing, health care, and retirement savings. Much of the outcome of this struggle will be determined by luck and the whims of foolish politicians, corrupt bond-rating companies, and psychopathic stock traders. Our freshman's only hope for consistent access to a paycheck and benefits is to make herself indispensable to those with wealth and power. Four to six years of university training will be her principal and perhaps only opportunity to transform herself into the kind of creature that can accomplish that not-inconsiderable feat. Spending those years examining the great questions of life is a tremendous and perhaps inadvisable gamble.

After a fashion, then, the austerians, greed-heads, and STEM geeks are right. The humanities *are* a luxury. They are the sort of activity humans undertake when their waking lives are no longer consumed exclusively with the struggle to secure some kind of future for themselves and their families. That is, they are an expression of civilization.

As the American social compact decays and individual futures become more uncertain, our thoughts naturally turn away from questions of how we ought to live or what we ought to believe, and toward questions of how we can pay for medicine or guard against poverty in old age. That only makes sense. The humanities are objectively less important today than they were 50 years ago, but that is because we have chosen to be uncivilized, and the uncivilized simply have no time for Simone de Beauvoir or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

In a world of 401(k)'s, health-insurance "marketplaces," income volatility, and part-time work, we can defend the humanities until we are blue in the face. None of it matters. We cannot hope to engineer an affection for culture in the absence of real material security. Americans will find the study of old books and big ideas worth their time and money only when they decide to tame the power of business and when social life becomes more easily navigable for ordinary people.

In the meantime, all our exhortations will fall on deaf ears, nothing more than the desperate pleas of a superfluous person begging not to be eaten.

A version of this article appeared in the October 2, 2015, issue.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.