

Humanities and the Public Good

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As debates rage about the ‘uses’ of Humanities, the role of Humanities research, and worries over funding in the wake of the pandemic, we need to revisit the question: why fund research in the Arts and Humanities?

We can begin (Humanities is characterized, above all, by self-reflexivity and therefore never stops from asking what the Humanities *is*) with a broad definition of the field, developed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK:

Arts and humanities research generates new knowledge, products and interpretations, and also engages in debate and development of ideas about an archive of knowledge that has been accumulated over centuries. Therefore the processes of questioning, pondering, debating, challenging and innovating adopted by arts and humanities researchers are as significant as the products of research, and all build incrementally on centuries of scholarly research. Arts and humanities research offers a profound engagement with ideas, beliefs, values and cultural institutions, and propagates the deepest insights into who we are, where we come from and how we express ourselves.

Without revisiting the earlier arguments (See <https://thewire.in/society/humanities-critical-thinking-other>) about the inextricable linkage of the Humanities with democracy, let us discuss three principal reasons why Humanities research needs to be funded.

Humanities as a Public Good

Declaring the Humanities a ‘Public Good’ would go some way in ensuring that the instrumental value of the field remains in ‘active’ mode, even if Humanities scholars would rather die than work through an instrumental definition or agenda for the Humanities.

If the Public Good, as the economists would say, is at once non-excludable and non-rivalrous (it is for all to share, and it does not deplete when used by some), Humanities represents the common, non-exhaustible good for mankind.

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It is a Public Good because it constitutes the core of the cultural capital of a nation, of a people. Medievalist and philosopher John Marenbon, working with an instrumentalist agenda (what he calls ‘adapted utilitarianism’), argues that Humanities studies and scholarship contributes to the creative and cultural industries of a nation, including heritage, tourism and others, and hence generates cultural capital. This is a persuasive argument, because it not only retains the grand Humanities agenda of examining creative forces, aesthetics, social value, among others, but also folds it into a (more corporate? market?) model of cultural capital and concerns around heritage, tourism, museumization and national identity.

That is, Marenbon aligns the Humanities’ reflections on, and critical inquiries into, questions of culture, identity, belonging, aesthetic and narrative *expressions* of the above (whether in Literature or musical forms), with their contribution to more tangible – read, ‘profit-making’ – domains of heritage and creative industries. Studies of how nations construct identities in specific forms such as Literature or architecture, which are the subjects of Humanities, can have, in this line of thought, an impact on fields where these same forms are marketed, valorized and even in some cases fought over.

Humanities, Cultural Memory and Legacies

The Public Good here is the cultivation of collective legacies that address questions of ‘who are we?’ or ‘where do we belong?’. These legacies are instrumental in building connections across people – *res publica?* – and communities. Such legacies are precisely what Humanities foreground, discuss and debate and popularize. The Public Good when conceptualized in this fashion is not only shared/shareable but inexhaustible (even if *not* non-arguable).

One recalls the destruction of heritage sites and the UNESCO’s repeated emphases that these sites are legacies for *all* mankind. This is what UNESCO says about World Heritage

Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa’s Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world’s heritage.

What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.

Like a Public Good, Humanities sets up our human legacy as a shared value.

Humanities research points to contradictions and tensions, including exclusionism, xenophobia or racism, that inhabit national identities. The task of Humanities research is to confront such aspects of a national past, to find ways of coping with that past. Rather than a politically determined sense and construction of a monolithic identity which then is projected as ‘authentic’ heritage, Humanities research can point to multicultural roots, syncretism and plurality within a nation or culture’s past, thereby altering the very idea of heritage. This too is a Public Good because the findings of Humanities research percolates – if popularized, but that is another debate altogether – through the social order and can help fight demagogues. Humanities, if practised with a pluralistic and emancipatory method, enables the resurgence of different models of cultural identity, variant views of heritage and a multi-layered idea of the social itself.

Debates in the Humanities about cultural memory – one recalls the attempts by totalitarian nations to control cultural memory – are in fact contributions to a nation’s attempts at nation-

building. Whether it is the preservation of a specific language, the proscription of another (see, for instance, Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*, about the silencing of communities by proscribing their language), Humanities is the straining towards a greater Public Good. Legacies of nationalism that work with essentialist paradigms are what Humanities have (and ought to) fight in Memory Studies, Popular Cultural Studies, and other subdisciplines. Reworking historical narratives to point to schisms and conflicts, Humanities has delivered an unmatched Public Good by showing us non-unitary *but* syncretic, and occasionally, unfortunately, exploitative histories of a nation. As the 'Starting from Values - Evaluating Intangible Legacies', a project under the [Connected Communities](#) theme noted, such projects under the Humanities can 'Unearth "new" legacies and a deeper understanding of "known" legacies' (http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/191720/Starting-from-Values_Legacies-booklet_WEB.pdf).

This approach towards the question of legacies and the past is phrased pithily by a Medieval historian, Ronika Power:

[Humanities research] develops an epistemological bridge – it is a journey from data to finding, and through it we gain a much more holistic view of the lived experience of ancient people and societies, material culture, technologies...

The above definition, interestingly, is incorporated into a document published by Deloitte on the value of Humanities research (<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-value-humanities-111018.pdf>).

Humanities and the Construction of Values

In the *World Humanities Report 2015* by Poul Holm, Arne Jarrick and Dominic Scott published by Palgrave Macmillan, we find nine core 'value categories' of the Humanities listed: intrinsic value, social value, cultural heritage, economic value, innovation, critical thinking, contribution to other disciplines, personal and spiritual development, and aesthetic appreciation'.

The crisis of any age is often the consequence of a clash of value systems and the enforcement of value systems. If we assume, as argued by Martha Nussbaum and others, that Humanities fosters democratic values (Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*, is a must read for this reason), and that democracy, a secular-scientific outlook and tolerance are *necessary* values for the Public Good, then the Humanities above all other disciplines, is focused on these domains.

The problem with the invoking of a term such as 'values' immediately carries connotations of conservatism and revanchism. But that need not be the case, as thinkers across Humanities have argued.

Values cannot be dismissed through cultural relativism, because it is (still) possible to argue that some values are better than others. By arguing that both sides have equal validity, and therefore suspending judgement (a stance vouchsafed by both the ancient Sceptics and the postmodernists) in favour of one or the other, one ostensibly avoids the normative. But this detached scepticism that avoids the pernicious normative also means that one avoids all commitment, including the moral, in the name of respecting every point of view. This debate and construction of values, about the normative and the necessity (or not) of a moral stand, is at the heart of the Humanities (and the word ‘moral’ is *not* being used to describe conservatism).

I cite the above from Martha Nussbaum who in her early essay, ‘[Valuing Values: A Case for Reasoned Commitment](https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=yjlh)’ (<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=yjlh>), pinpoints the problem with the avoidance of a moral stand. She notes that a “universal agreement as the criterion of acceptability for a normative principle’ is impossible because then, “if we come up with anyone at all who believes the contradictory of a given proposition, this is sufficient to get us started on the road that ends up in suspension of commitment”. People have different reasons, including very bad ones, for their beliefs, and sceptics see all reasons as the same. For Nussbaum, the absence of commitment is the ‘antecedent’ to the acceptance of *all* arguments. Nussbaum argues that what is “very fundamental to human life, [is] the disposition to make ethical commitments and to get upset about them”. It is ‘disturbance’, as she terms it, that is the basis of commitment. The abstract, says Nussbaum, is an aspirational mode: “speaking abstractly can be a way of expressing the special reverence and awe with which we regard certain ethical norms”. Abstract universals are the reason to examine ourselves, and this is the province of the Humanities. To cite Nussbaum:

The refusal to investigate the abstract universal concept in such cases is a refusal to look for a deeper consistency and unity in one's own commitments. Such a person would never have learned a crucial fact about himself, namely, that his beliefs are internally in disorder, and incapable of offering consistent guidance.

Nussbaum goes on to argue that setting abstract standards is not a weird thing to do: “it need not mean that the abstract standard is extra-historical. It can be a way of talking about the gap between a deep layer of reflection and a superficial impulse”.

This ‘deep layer of reflection’ is the ground of the Humanities. Humanities is about the precise sense of disturbance produced by the reflection. It debates with serious commitment, questions of commitment. It examines *how* values are formed, the contexts of state-sponsored values and the dangers of populism (the ‘superficial impulse’). Humanities calls for a greater attention to values that cannot be abandoned: social justice, emancipation, equality, tolerance, rationality, *even when each of those values are endlessly debated and their semantic scope twisted, mauled, constricted and on occasion expanded.*

The three points outlined above are, one would think, adequate reasons for funding the Humanities. Humanities is as transformational and transformative – sounds diffident, I agree – as any other discipline, and even more fundamentally so. If a field of inquiry alters our conceptual frames, demolishes certain dangerous myths, forces us to re-evaluate forms of belonging that were historically instituted as ‘natural’ through literature, the law or social norms, and, finally, causes us to examine our so-called beliefs and traditions by subjecting them to a pitiless self-reflection, that field then encodes a plan, a vision for the future. Constitutions and founding principles, let us remember, including our own, were drafted by those who studied Humanities and its cognate fields, which helped them see far into the future. The plan and vision remains, as ever before, with the Humanities. The Public Good which is the Humanities is that precisely because the vision and aspirations it can set up are *inexhaustible*, like the idea of a good life or a ‘democracy to come’.

If there is a Public, there is a Public Good. And of all disciplines, the greatest Public Good of the greatest number can only be through the Humanities.