

**Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities**, by Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 158 pages, \$22.95 hardbound.

**Gain the World and Lose Our Souls?**

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Scan the website of nearly any college in the U.S., however small, and you will find testimony of how it's changing American students into global citizens. Start in the Northeast and you'll hear that Colby College is "international, and [its] students develop a mature curiosity and an appetite for engaged global citizenship." Stop in the middle of Lincoln country at Knox College, and you'll find a Center for Global Studies. You can finish up at

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Jack Kemp's alma mater in Los Angeles, Occidental, where "global citizenship" anchors the last of the four college values. Widen your scope to include universities, and the global institutes multiply.

Despite the drop in humanities majors by nearly 50 percent since 1970,<sup>1</sup> global education is one huge growth area in higher education spending. And yet the thesis of Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* is that educational institutions (here and abroad) aren't doing enough to encourage students to become "citizens of the world." *Si monumentum requiris*, Prof. Nussbaum, *circumspice*.

*Not for Profit* is a manifesto for the humanities from elementary school through higher education. Starting in crisis mode, it ends by warning of genocide if Nussbaum's ideas aren't followed. Since the humanities are always in crisis—this journal is the result of one such moment—we can depend on a perennial crop of analyses and improvement schemes. So why are the humanities in crisis? And what is their purpose?

<sup>1</sup>William Chace, "The Decline of the English Department," *American Scholar* 78, no. 4 (Autumn 2009): 32–42. Chace begins by noting that 16 percent of undergraduates majored in the humanities in 2003–2004, compared to 30 percent in 1970–1971.

For Nussbaum, the cause of the crisis is “the profit motive”: “Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.” The purpose of a renewed humanities education is to produce Nussbaum’s “citizen of the world” who can think critically, transcend local loyalties, and imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.

What about her description of the problem? Are fewer people interested in the arts, critical thinking, and the humanistic aspects of science because too many universities are focused on profit? The book frequently laments India’s Institutes of Technology and Management, the schools Thomas Friedman calls “a phenomenal knowledge meritocracy” in *The World Is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). Nussbaum emphatically disagrees. Like many American universities, she writes, they focus too narrowly on professional skills, neglect pedagogy in original research, and encourage the idea that “getting a good job is the main aim of education.”

I won’t deny that similar emphases in America are putting pressure on the humanities. When professors in my institution’s humanities program need to

illustrate the Greek Sophists’ version of success, it’s easy to ask our freshmen about their impressions of college marketing strategies. And if you’re able to discuss the Sophists, you’re among the lucky ones: how many college freshmen ever even encounter Socratic dialectic, which Nussbaum (to her credit) promotes?

But is it really true that we can’t teach the humanities well because technical and business skills are being improved? I don’t believe it. Some of the most innovative writing about developing human potential is coming from business, not from academic psychologists or humanists. More to the point, whether an organization is “for profit” or “not for profit” is almost irrelevant to its vision or strategy. Revenue must exceed expenses for nonprofits as well as for corporations. Everyone finds that difficult. Every institution needs clear vision and thoughtful leadership.

The problems lie primarily within the humanities, not the economic system. High schools are assigning less challenging literary texts, and what they teach is often limited to the author’s biography or the text’s cultural setting. Less and less time is devoted to teaching students how to evaluate a work’s language and

structure.<sup>2</sup> In higher education, the model of disinterested scholarship has all but vanished, often replaced by some form of activism. But the greatest cause of decline is this: professors in the humanities no longer treat the Western tradition as a presence in their lives. They no longer consider it a needed companion on life's journey. It's something to be contested and problematized, but not truly engaged in conversation. With leadership like this, why should students pay attention?

This brings us to the second question raised by *Not for Profit*: What is the purpose of a humanities education?

In developing her educational philosophy, Nussbaum rehearses themes and gestures familiar from her other writings—empathy, strictures on disgust, suspicion of tradition, and faith in world citizenship. Like “profit,” the term “world citizenship” goes undefined, though Nussbaum provides many descriptions. The world citizen is active, critical, curious, and capable of resisting authority and peer pressure. The same is true in her

much longer work, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997), where this undefined world citizen is capable of self-criticism, and of logical and critical analysis. There, his “narrative imagination” nourishes empathy for the stories, emotions, and wishes of others.

Nussbaum deserves praise for defending these outcomes for a humanistic education, so far as they go, and for encouraging a liberal arts component to education in Sweden, India, Germany, and elsewhere. But what makes this person a “citizen” of the world? Aristotle said a citizen is defined by having a share in judging and ruling. Did you have a share in the election of Ban Ki-Moon? Was it your representative who confirmed Somalia's nominee to the International Court of Justice? (Should it matter to world citizens in America if the U.S. recognizes the International Court's jurisdiction?) Every aspect of legitimate republican government must be derived from the people, writes James Madison in *Federalist* 39. But Nussbaum's abstract, democratic citizen of the world has had no say in these matters.

Listen to Madison again, this time in *Federalist* 10: “Theoretic

<sup>2</sup>See Sandra Stotsky, with Joan Traffas and James Woodworth, “Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey,” *Forum: A Publication of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics and Writers* (Spring 2010): 2–75.

politicians, who have patronized this [purely democratic] species of government, have erroneously supposed, that, by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.” He didn’t think this kind of citizenship would work, even in America. Shouldn’t an author who promotes critical analysis turn that analysis on the major term in her lexicon, namely “citizen”?

The most important qualities of the citizen may not even be the ones Nussbaum mentions. For Tocqueville, the American citizen’s chief duty was to pass along the “science of association” for democracy to flourish, that is, learning how to create networks of people to solve discrete problems. Two other civic elements essential to Nussbaum’s goal of reducing global poverty—property rights and respect for the rule of law—don’t even make her list.

Because she has such a negative view of tradition, Nussbaum is not listening to the thick descriptions that Madison and Tocqueville provide of actual citizenship, the issue central to *Not for Profit*. She’s not unpatriotic, just bored. The best

she can say for traditions (in *Cultivating Humanity*) is that they usually contain sufficient resources that can be used by critics to criticize their own culture. True, but it reminds me of some friends whose marriage vows included a pledge to criticize each other. They’re divorced.

Indeed, citizenship in the U.S. or any other country is “morally irrelevant” according to Nussbaum.<sup>3</sup> We should give our first allegiance to no mere form of government—not even a world state—but to the “moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings.”<sup>4</sup> But what does this moral community consist of? Extremes meet, as Coleridge liked to say, and Nussbaum’s thought plummets from the global to the individual level with no mediating structures to break its fall. The customs, religious practices, laws, and habits by which real communities live are virtually ignored by Nussbaum, unless they promote equality. This has consequences for actual cultures. Readers of *AQ* who are familiar with Nussbaum’s fierce advocacy of homosexual marriage, based on

<sup>3</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *For Love of Country?* ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

a view of individual rights to the exclusion of culturally sanctioned traditions, will not be surprised that she's recently expressed support for polyamory.<sup>5</sup>

Nussbaum's instinctual disapproval of tradition in *Not for Profit* undercuts the very thing she values most highly in literature: empathy. While she abounds in empathy for those she agrees with, her work has built progressively higher walls against others. Nussbaum has gone out of her way to misrepresent Leon Kass's argument against cloning and concluded that legal

efforts to preserve marriage are "hate-inspired."<sup>6</sup> In *Not for Profit*, she makes no effort to understand the millions of parents who've responded to the decline of the arts and humanities by creating home schools, "Core Knowledge" schools, or "classical academies."<sup>7</sup> You'd think that empathy might propel Nussbaum, as it has E.D. Hirsch, to find common cause with a wide range of people who disagree with her political assumptions. Instead, these people suffer her ever harsher judgment.

In Nussbaum's work, empathy seems to work in only one direction—away from one's own culture and toward an abstract community of the like-minded. But does that really describe an education in the humanities? For instance, if you found the observations from Madison and

<sup>5</sup>In *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford University Press, 2010), Nussbaum argues that the "legal arguments against polygamy...are extremely weak. The primary state interest that is strong enough to justify legal restriction is an interest in the equality of the sexes, which would not tell against a regime of sex-equal polygamy," (154–55). To an audience at the "Politics and Prose" bookstore in Washington, D.C., she was more expansive:

What if we have a practice of polyamory... namely contractual arrangements among plural adults where there's no systematic subordination of women?...I don't think there's any compelling state interest that would tell against that except possibly administrative complexity [audience laughter]....[P]resumably we'd have to have someone taking the state to court and claim they're being denied a fundamental right under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. I think, you know, they would have a strong argument, as far as I'm concerned, but I just know it's not in the foreseeable future that courts will go there.

*Book TV*, C-Span 2, April 11, 2010, <http://booktv.org/search.aspx?For=martha%20nussbaum>. Accessed August 28, 2010.

<sup>6</sup>In *From Disgust to Humanity*, Nussbaum calls the Defense of Marriage Act a "hate-inspired law" (209). In the same book, her first criticism of Kass reads thus: "Kass concludes that disgust is a sufficient reason to ban a practice that causes no harm to non-consenting parties" (xiv). She's referring to "The Wisdom of Repugnance," in which Kass says no such thing and even qualifies "repugnance": "Revulsion is not an argument.... In crucial cases, however, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it." Kass then provides a subtle and rich account of the rational reasons for opposing cloning. *The New Republic* (June 2, 1997): 17–26.

<sup>7</sup>Nussbaum does briefly mention the world religions component in Hirsch's "Core Knowledge" curriculum on page 69 in *Cultivating Humanity*.

Tocqueville compelling, however unlike these men you may be, doesn't that give you empathy for those "others" from the past who lived in what is recognizably a precursor of your own culture? A full understanding of the humanities seems to demand some positive value for one's own traditions, some narrative that one can inhabit and enjoy as well as criticize. To quote another University of Chicago philosopher, "[O]ne cannot...truly understand any culture unless one is firmly rooted in one's own culture..."<sup>8</sup> Without that, I don't see how a humanities education can provide the wisdom we need to move intelligently into the future. What Nussbaum advertises as empathy, by contrast, turns out to be yet another instance of "The Big Sort," where like-minded guardians of a particular expression of culture set boundaries that attract other like-minded persons and expel the rest.<sup>9</sup>

While nearly every reader of *AQ* will agree that the humanities are

<sup>8</sup>Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary* (June 1967), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/jerusalem-and-athens-some-introductory-reflections-4357?page=2>.

<sup>9</sup>In *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008), Bill Bishop describes how Americans have clustered in more homogeneous communities—politically, economically, and culturally—in recent years.

suffering in higher education, the situation looks rather different if you include church-related colleges and universities. The stress on globalism is strong there as well, but humanities programs in Catholic and Protestant schools have fared better. Villanova has a Center for Global Interdisciplinary Studies but also a required two-semester course that introduces freshmen to Greek writings, St. Augustine, Shakespeare, and other Western authors. Even when institutional ties to religion have weakened and intramural strife has threatened long-lived humanities courses like the one at Davidson, the program can usually survive.

My own view is that, unlike secular schools such as Temple University, whose Intellectual Heritage Program is lamented in the Summer 2009 *AQ*, colleges like Davidson and Villanova still have a story to tell. Historically, American universities found their stories in the plots of Scripture and the Church's interaction with the world. That story's archetypal conflict comes between Athens and Jerusalem—between reason and revelation, this world and the world to come. It's not that individual instructors at Temple, Chicago, or elsewhere have lost interest in history or philosophy. But Jerusalem? Because secular

institutions don't think that religion can hold its own in a dialogue with reason, they lack the institutional commitment to explore the argument that has dominated our civilization. Without a true conflict, you may be able to "problematize" the past, but the student quickly sees how the problems should be solved. No conflict, no story. And without a story, why bother with the cultural history of the West?

Now there have been recent exceptions, and many *AQ* readers will recognize them. New centers have been developed by outstanding, established faculty like Robert George (Princeton), Patrick Deneen (Georgetown), and Barry Strauss (Cornell). Backed by foundations with an interest in American founding principles, these programs often support lectureships, graduate students, and courses of study. Their leaders have demonstrated extraordinary skill in maintaining good relations with their schools.

Still, the impetus for establishing them emerged from a recognition that their aims were at odds with the ethos of the American university. Unless they gain a strong institutional purchase within their universities, I think it's unlikely that these programs will long outlast their founders' tenure. The politics over their future will often be

doubtful and sometimes grow ugly. For the present, however, they are white-hot stars among the black holes of today's humanities constellation. And if the faith commitments of church-related colleges fade, they may be our best source of light.

Which brings us back to the church-related colleges. Historically, they've been interested in Athens in part because of their interest in Jerusalem. This relationship creates a series of questions that initiate the thoughtfulness we associate with a true education. Can one live a good life solely by reason and without faith—or vice versa? How is one's response to evil altered by belief in God? How does one account for the awe inspired by a scientific understanding of the physical universe?

In the case of my own institution, this relationship prompts a social question—how should Christians relate to culture?—that has been far more challenging than anything I encountered in my secular undergraduate or graduate education. Some Christians on the far left and the far right worship a "Christ of culture," to use Richard Niebuhr's term, in which Jesus is the avatar of a particular expression of culture. The religious Left tends to worship a Jesus of cultural tolerance and

equality; the religious Right tends toward a Christ of consumerism and nationalism. Both identify their faith with this culture. Others, notably Lutherans like Niebuhr's more famous brother Reinhold, see "Christ and culture in paradox," where the pressing demands of justice and charity can never be fully reconciled. This encourages a robust, realistic engagement with secular culture, but guarantees that one's hands will remain dirty: the biblical founders of civilization were the descendants of Cain, after all. Still others in the Augustinian tradition are hopeful about "transforming" various elements of culture to approximate some version of the kingdom of God. The Puritan effort to convert the drudgery of ordinary work into a high calling from God—a "vocation"—is an excellent example.

The legacy of the Puritans, so significant in our own history, reminds us of how far from Jerusalem our secular culture has drifted: some working Americans may appreciate the deep significance of vocation, but most probably just go to a job. And most students at most colleges—including religious ones—are probably just working toward degrees. But the traditions of church-related schools cannot

merely be parked in the long-term lot—driven around at the annual alumni gathering and then safely returned when hiring and curricular decisions arise. Either traditions live as active, valued partners in a school's institutional life or they die. This will continue to be a significant challenge for church-related schools as they move closer to Athens and further from Jerusalem.

Although I've been discussing curriculum, the relationship between the two cities enriches church-related schools in other ways as well. It encourages faculty to value students in a manner that differs fundamentally from that of a secular college. When I attended an Ivy League commencement recently, the speaker congratulated the graduates for having left behind many of the prejudices with which they entered college. Apart from insulting their parents, the remark hinted at the speaker's low esteem for incoming students on Orientation Day.

By contrast, a church-related school recognizes that even before the freshman takes off his backpack, he needs to be seen as a creature (yes) in God's image and treated with the virtue of hospitality. And when the student begins to study what's inside that backpack and compare it to other cultures, some of



his pre-judgments (to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's term) will be toughened rather than toppled. Without a religious core, American schools seem to have a hard time talking about their

students' cultural tradition. Their attention has wandered all over the globe. If you need proof, pick up *Not for Profit* and then scan a few websites.