

Some thoughts on the reception of the humanities by the “other”

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I am deeply honored to be here and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to address this distinguished audience of some of our most brilliant students and their parents, as well as and some of my finest colleagues. As you just heard, I am an engineer, so, formally, I am an outsider to this group, although I do not necessarily feel that way. But, I do want to recognize the leap of faith required of you to reach out to the vocational disciplines and invite me here today.

I originally thought I was expected to talk about my own research – academics love to do that to anyone willing or forced to listen – so I started making mental plans on how to draw a compelling case for the importance of predicting thermal transport properties of semiconductor nanostructures based on molecular dynamics methods informed by density functional theory. But then, the organizers informed me that I was free to talk about anything I wanted, so I resolved instead to share with you some of my thoughts on the reception of the humanities by the “other” (meaning those who are not professional purveyors of the humanities either in or outside the academy). And, of course, as also some of you in the audience, I am a member of the “other” group. Here, I readily disclose that I am not a disinterested member of the “other”, in part because of the overwhelmingly positive experience in the humanities during my own formal education, as well as due to a lifetime of pleasure and love of the humanities, in no small part due to the influence of my wife, a prominent academic humanist, who is with us here in the audience. So, I am a multiply biased observer, but I hope an honest one.

Before I get to the main thrust of my talk, let me admit failure in resisting the temptation to preach to

our soon to be Phi Beta Kappa's and Cal graduates. To this end, I will read to you a passage: "... there is the urgent issue of how to preserve a margin for excellence in a populist society, when more and more of the money is being spent on behalf of all of the people. The great university is of necessity elitist – the elite of merit – but it operates in an environment dedicated to an egalitarian philosophy. How may the contribution of the elite be made clear to the egalitarians, and how may an aristocracy of intellect justify itself to the democracy of all men?" Are you tensing, feeling a little discomfort? "Aristocracy", "elitism": is this a missive from an ultra-conservative think-tank or some secret royalist society? In fact, these are the words our own Clark Kerr from his now legendary 1963 Gotkin lectures at Harvard, an essential and remarkably timely read for anyone who cares about higher education, like many of us in this room. By graduating from Cal and academically distinguishing yourselves as you have, you are now joining the elite of merit, and I hope you will think of yourselves as the elite of merit, an honor indeed but also an invitation to occupy the high ground bestowed to you in consequential ways. I will come back to this later.

Let me now turn to the humanities and quickly dispose of the question of properly defining them. In this regard, I favor the simplicity of thinking of the humanities as defined by their concern with the subject of the humanity. As the philosopher Charles Frankel elaborates: "The humanities are that form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed. All knowledge becomes humanistic when we are asked to contemplate not only the proposition, but the proposer, when we hear the human voice behind what is being said." Or, as put somewhat differently by the political theorist Hannah Arendt: "We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human." These are sweeping definitions, but I would like to adopt them here. They are also in stark contrast to the constricting organizational structures of the modern university, where literature is thought of as part of the humanities, but music is thought of as part of the arts. And, even

more bafflingly, history (at least at Berkeley) is thought of as part of the social sciences, as does anthropology (which, after all, is supposed to concern itself with the study of the *anthropoi* – the humans – and their societies. These are all mightily confusing facts for the poor engineer!

Let's now turn to the reception of the humanities. In 1780, John Adams, one of the Founding Fathers and the second President of the United States wrote from Paris to his wife and confidant Abigail: “I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Painting and Poetry Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.” What a wonderful stroke of idealism, steeped in the unbounded optimism of the New World and the 18th-century belief in the gradual progression to a society free of onerous labor! On the other side of the Atlantic, the aristocratic roots of the humanities are well-attended in the words of Cardinal Newman (John Henry Newman) who argued that a liberal education should produce fine “gentlemen”, whose “intellectual discipline preserves [them] from the blunder”, and who “observe the maxim of the ancient sage”, while being “too indolent to bear malice” and “patient, forbearing, and resigned, on philosophical principles.”

Of course, not everyone in the pre-industrial West was enamored with liberal education. Already in 1693, the English philosopher John Locke in his treatise on education warns the father whose son studies poetry that “if he proves a successful rhymers, and gets once the reputation of a wit, I desire it may be considered what company and places he is like to spend his time in, nay, and estate too: for it is very seldom seen, that any one discovers mines of gold or silver in *Parnassus*.” I trust that this argumentation rings familiar to some of the parents in the audience. [Recount the recent event honoring

Thuy Vu (parents volunteered to pay for a second degree after she graduated from Cal with a major in Rhetoric – she was shy and pursuing a degree in Rhetoric helped her how to articulate her ideas in public, and she ended up liking it!)]

And then, on the heels of the industrial revolution came the phenomenal flourishing of the mathematical, physical and natural sciences. By the middle of the 20th century, the idealism of the humanities was waning and the sciences had proven their worth in everyday life of the citizenry and in the conduct of two world wars. In 1959, the British chemist Charles Percy Snow brought the tension to the fore by proclaiming the deep division between the two cultures represented by the literary intellectuals and the scientists, and also lamenting their mutual incomprehension. Almost sixty years later, Snow reads as a relatively moderate commentator. He remarks that “attempts to divide anything [in this case, the academy] into two ought to be regarded with much suspicion” and that “this polarization is a sheer loss to us all.” Nevertheless, his book elicited angry refutation by many of those he referred to as literary intellectuals. Doubtless, some found his bold pronouncement of equivalence-in-importance between having read a work of Shakespeare and being able to describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics simply too much to take (by the way, the Second Law of Thermodynamics is a scientific postulate akin to the colloquial expression “you cannot get something for nothing”). Snow is also quite firm (and probably unfair) in his assertion that “intellectuals are natural Luddites” in that they “have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it.” Speaking of intellectuals, it is worth observing that this title was at the time of Snow's work, and largely continues to be, afforded only to individuals in the professional humanities and social sciences. Only in rare exceptions one thinks of a chemist or a biologist (let alone a medical doctor or – heaven forbid – an engineer!) as an intellectual.

In the time since Snow's work, we have experienced a wide array of major triumphs (only slightly tempered by occasional disasters) in science, technology, and medicine. As a former mayor of New York City that chose not to run for president remarked just last week: "For the first time in human history, the majority of people in the developed world are being asked to make a living with their minds, rather than their muscles." This is while the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities is declining constantly since 1970. In contrast, since 1980 business is the most popular major accounting by 2013 for approximately 20% of all bachelor's degrees granted. This is a stark contrast to the less than 3% of college graduates who are majoring in English.

The consensus both from inside and outside the tent is that the humanities are in crisis. As put both succinctly and dramatically in 1964 by the British historian John Plumb: "In a sense, the social sciences are fighting for life, the humanities against death". At the same year, the internal angst *vis-a-vis* the sciences is well-represented by the British-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner, who assigns blame to the so-called knowledge disciplines and takes particular aim at physics: "It is difficult to suppress a feeling of superiority, of embarrassed compassion, when considering the subject of physics. In this century, physics has, I am told, undergone two revolutions. Two! ... With all these enormous advantages, all that these numerous and well-financed scientists can achieve is two, a miserable two revolutions...". While, as he adds: "Consider, by contrast, a truly progressive subject, like philosophy. We have, in this century, undergone no fewer than *four* resolutions!" [my four apples are better than your two oranges...] And, he is only getting started: "... the advances in philosophy are far greater (because [they are] far more radical) than those of science, and hence ... the rate of progress is far greater than would appear from the simple arithmetic consideration of number of revolutions per century." [I am not making this up...].

Closer to today, and pointing, thankfully, his finger inwards, the academic and public intellectual Louis Menand, one of the most eloquent writers on the topic declares that “the humanities disciplines are facing a crisis of rationale”, “[they] don't seem to be dying out, but they do feel dislocated. They are institutionally insecure because they appear to have lost their philosophical roots.”

On that note, let's turn again to the perspective of the humanities from the eye of the “other”. One of the most striking observations is that the “other” overwhelmingly thinks of the humanities as a continuum placed above disciplinary boundaries. However, by and large, the humanists appear to think of themselves in far narrower denominations. [I share here my personal experience of being involved in a very ambitious humanities initiative in my capacity as chair of the faculty senate. I thought of it as an exciting opportunity to enhance the quality of the campus experience in this particular and very vital aspect of the humanities, while my humanities colleagues seemed a lot more concerned about the implications of the initiative within the much narrower scope of their disciplinary interests]. This strict disciplinarity is a bit off-putting to the “other”, especially since the humanities purport to embrace the human in its entirety.

The raging debates of the 1970s and 1980s surrounding literary theory and the wholesale rejection of classical textual analysis led to what must have been a painful self-examination of the meaning of the humanities. The literary critic Hillis Miller, one of the principal proponents of the so-called deconstruction movement summarized it as follows: “Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock, but thin air.” While this critical dismantling of traditional literary methods spread to many expressions of the humanities, its application produced large volumes of virtually impenetrable scholarship and elevated linguistic jargon to untenable heights. The scientists scored an easy victory in

the eyes of the “other”, when in 1996 the physicist Alan Sokal somehow managed to publish an article titled “[Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity](#)” in an archival journal of post-modern studies. The article was, in fact, a masterful example of pure and fully intended nonsense disguised behind a thin veil of linguistic pseudo-sophistication. It was an embarrassing hoax.

Somewhat earlier, the social unrest manifested in the Free Speech Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the opposition to the Vietnam War had already made its mark in the academic humanities by triggering a major revision of liberal arts curricula. These revisions reflected a wholesale rejection of the faith in the unity of knowledge and of the grounding on the ideals of western civilization. The outcome of this national move was the abolishment or substantial weakening of core curricula and canons, the heightening relativization of traditional humanistic values, and the proliferation of new, highly focused and oftentimes duplicative sub-disciplines within the humanities. The philosopher Allan Bloom did not make many friends in the academy when he observed in his controversial book “The Closing of the American Mind” how some of these trends (spanning the education system from kindergarten to college) are, as he says, failing democracy and impoverishing the souls of our students. Notwithstanding reasonable disagreements with some of Bloom's views, there is broad concern with the perceived rudderlessness of core humanistic education in our universities. The cafeteria-style fulfillment of breadth requirements may be expedient, but also may be less than optimal in serving our students' needs. Between a rigid canon of requirements and the complete freedom to learn anything on anything, there is plenty of fertile middle ground that would effect some degree of intellectual coherence. To quote Hanna Holborn Gray, the University of Chicago's long-time president and a widely respected scholar and administrator: “An introduction to some of the seminal ideas that characterize our culture is an essential part of a liberal education and not an act of political

indoctrination.”

And one more observation from the perspective of the “other”: in dissecting the elements of human activity, Hannah Arendt made a distinction between *vita activa* (the outwardly, public, positively disruptive life) and *vita contemplativa* (the private, tranquil life, free from external disturbances). [Plato and Aristotle...] She did not think of these two elements as being mutually exclusive but rather complementing each other. My observation is that academics in general and academic humanists in particular ought to rethink the balance between the two aspects of our intellectual lives. Next time you are at an airport, stop by the newsstand and peruse the books available for sale. How many of them are written by academics? Of those very few, how many are written by academics in the humanities? I assure you that both numbers will be disappointingly low. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with intellectual asceticism, except it happens that so many of the most pressing problems and challenges of our political lives are problems in which the humanities, including prominently the academic humanities, can and should (but typically do not) play a central role in the public arena.

I would like to close by noting that the canonical case in support of the humanities remains strong and its imperatives urgent. Unlike physics, business, and engineering, there are no textbooks (or, for that matter, online supplements) for critical thinking, ethics, culture, and imagination. Yet these attributes are essential for responsible citizenship and the continuing improvement of a great society. We need common ground, even (or, perhaps, even more so) in an increasingly multi-cultural, ethnically diverse, and, why not, occasionally intolerant society – otherwise, we will continue talking past each other and be easy prey to fools, hypocrites, and demagogues of all sorts. The “other” appreciates that the humanities alone were not able to prevent the culturally sophisticated Weimar Republic from turning into the nightmare of Nazi Germany. After all, knowledge in which the knower is revealed does not

necessarily make us all better. But it is in the hands of our elites – including the elite of merit – you – to make sure it does. The “other” is already applauding you.

Thank you for indulging me.