

Rethinking the Humanities: Paths and Challenges

Ed. Ricardo Gil Soeiro and Sofia Tavares

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This volume is a collection of lectures given as part of the ACT (Alterities, Crossings, Transfers) series hosted by the University of Lisbon's Centre for Comparative Studies. The lectures, transcribed and presented as essays, are the work of some of the world's leading scholars on the humanities, and were originally presented in May 2010 at the international symposium, *'Rethinking the Humanities: Paths and Challenges.'* The topic centres on the current 'crisis' of the humanities, focusing on causes as well as potential solutions. While agreement on what exactly the 'crisis' of the humanities entails (or indeed if it even exists) is not universal throughout the collection, it can be summed up as the general decline in numbers of students of the humanities. The current (and debateable) social perception of the humanities as a superfluous or luxury field, versus the more academically rigorous and applicable sciences, is also discussed. Contributors were asked to reflect on the three opening texts of the volume: 'Humanities between Science and Art', (Paul Ricoeur), 'Humanities – At Twilight?', (George Steiner) and 'Crisis in the Humanities', (Marjorie Perloff) and these were chosen to provide a basis for understanding the current situation of the humanities. These lectures, originally given prior to the 2010 symposium, form the first chapter of the volume, and are intended to introduce a theme, which is discussed in further detail by contributors in the second chapter, 'New Horizons for the Humanities'.

While the collection is cohesive and well organised, the volume in general would benefit from editing. There are several grammatical and spelling mistakes, presumably arising from the transcription of the lectures, which somewhat diminish the authority of

the work. The topic is also extensive enough to warrant a section on further reading for those seeking to pursue more viewpoints (although the variety expressed in this volume is impressive).

The overall consensus seems to be that if indeed the humanities are ‘at twilight’, it is a largely a self-inflicted demise, which can only be reversed by an overhaul and rethinking of what the term means. Almost all contributors agree that clinging to past notions of the humanities as a luxury field populated by ‘the archetypical image of the intellectual – male, white, Eurocentric, etc.,’ will not suffice and Damrosch encourages audiences to, ‘think freshly both about our mission and about our medium,’ (p. 67).

The role of the humanities in modern society is discussed extensively in terms of how they *should* function, how they *can* function, and how they actually *do* function. Part of the decline seems to be a general shift towards career-oriented education. This undervalues the ability of the humanities to produce ‘knowledgeable and empathetic citizens,’ and emphasises marketability and economic profit over critical-thinking and reason (p. 2). More and more students are choosing fields of study which are profitable, for example, medicine, technology, science, mathematics, business, etc. and this leaves fewer to the humanities. This academic devaluation of the humanities is also accompanied by a social one. Because the sciences are now seen as the most practical career choice, the humanities have become undervalued as an academic pursuit. No longer do humanistic disciplines belong to the elite, the privileged few. Rather now it is characterised as a field of study for those who do not qualify for the profitable and utilitarian positions. Arguably the solution to this is drawing in more students and generating greater interest, but Steiner argues that the dissemination of humanistic teaching to the general public and the overall venture of mass education have over time yielded results which are ambiguous at best. He states:

If there has been a genuine dissemination of a certain degree of readership, of artistic interest and, very notably, of musical awareness and response, there has also been a ‘downmarketing’, a vulgarization of culture on an unprecedented and now ever-accelerating scale (p. 37).

What Steiner and many other contributors to this volume recommend is a revamp of the humanities as they are currently taught, and a move back toward their Classical context as a rigorous, multi-disciplinary set of fields including (but not necessarily limited to) philosophy, history, music, art, reason, and literature. This does not mean re-appropriating 'high culture' to the elite few, but rather refraining from diluting it to suit general tastes in an effort to make the relevant fields more accessible to a wider audience. The humanities are meant to be challenging, and therein lies their purpose and appeal. Peter Levine also argues that in addition to a more rigorous curriculum, the humanities would benefit from increased engagement with public ethics. 'The original and fundamental purpose of the humanities,' he argues, 'is moral argumentation,' (p. 129). The humanities have somehow strayed from this purpose and become too self-reflexive, limiting their potential for growth and causing stagnation.

The most successful thing about this book is that it acts as part of the solution it recommends. The authors unapologetically reference Plato, Aristotle, Derrida, Kant, etc. presuming at least rudimentary prior knowledge on behalf of the audience. Rather than explaining philosophies and lines of thinking, the essays expound on topics that students of the humanities should be (but are often not) familiar with. It becomes an unaggressive challenge to break the cycle of passive learning and reach beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the education system as it stands; a challenge where one is encouraged to become familiar with the theories referenced in order to better understand the potential solutions being proposed. One solution to the 'crisis', the book seems to suggest, is harder work, deeper understanding, and public discussion. This collection actively engages its audience and follows its own advice by posing intentionally difficult questions to readers. Where are the humanities going? Where should they go? It is clearly up to the students and professors of humanistic disciplines to work out a solution together. If there is one unifying thought across all of the lectures presented in this collection, it is that the humanities will only ever be obsolete if those studying and caring for them allow it.

Bibliography

Soeiro, Ricardo Gil and Sofia Tavares (ed). 2012. *Rethinking the Humanities: Paths and Challenges*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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