

THE HUMANITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

By

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Prepared for Symposium on the future of the Humanities

'The Humanities and Public Policy' does not fall trippingly off the tongue. In public policy we think of 'wonks'; in the humanities, often, of people with their heads in the clouds as they move through the world dreamily, not fussing with the boring particulars of policy making.

Clearly, our panel cannot leave matters there. Clearly, there is more to say. When, then, is it? Let's begin with a simple observation cast as a query.

How often is a conference held to defend the importance—the very existence—of law, business, economics, physics, whether to society in general or public policy in particular? I can think of none but if such conferences have been held they are few and far between. By contrast, events such as ours today are a predictable feature of the cultural landscape. Those of us who believe in the vital importance of the humanities, for whom the humanities lie at the heart of things, most often find ourselves on the defensive.

That may explain why so many defenses of the humanities begin with brave, bold letters that rather quickly fade, like vanishing ink. We do not quite know how to make our case to the uncomprehending, nor to defend the humanities against the irate.

To the uncomprehending, our brief may take the form of glowing, positive assertions—those who do not know their history are condemned to relive it; the Founding Fathers were humanists and they did something right; the humanities is foundational to the culture of the West, a claim often burnished with quotes from famous worthies. This may all be true but cast at such a level of generality it is not too helpful.

We may also be tempted to overstate our case. We hear things along these lines: the reader of great works of literature will not become a murderer; the lover of opera will not be deficient in the life of the empathic mind; the aficionado of Mozart will not be cruel and unfeeling. This is oversimplified, but I assume you take the point. The humanities is overwhelmingly edifying and civilizing, we are assured.

Alas, such assertions do not bear up under close scrutiny. Take that lover of opera, Adolph Hitler, who visited the great opera house of Paris as one of his first tasks upon making his triumphant entry into the occupied city. He wanted pointers on how to build the grand opera house he had in mind for a new pan-European center. As well, there are the horrible images from memoirs of death camp survivors detailing how orchestras composed of prisoners, kept alive for a time for the purpose, played Mozart as the damned walked to the gas chambers. (A grotesque horror represented searingly in Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List"). One can name poets and brilliant film makers who were were fascists or communists-totalitarians, in other words.

The humanities is no universal cleansing agent, scrubbing humanity of its propensity toward violence and evil deed-doing. If we turn another direction and try the 'art for art's sake' approach, we find it too insular in its aesthetic elitism, especially so in a democratic society absent an aristocratic tradition.

What recourse do we have, then, where the uncomprehending are concerned? Let's leave this query for a moment and turn to the irate, those unsettled because they do not see any "pay off" for monies expended for the humanities. The humanities, so goes the charge, guarantee no one a socially necessary job. As well, in the past several decades, departments of the humanities seem to have taken leave of their senses. The scholarly writing that emerges from such departments, including-or perhaps especially-literature, is unintelligible and arcane, a dialect favored by those who seem to inhabit a country quite different from the one most citizens call home.

Word gets out and is no doubt sensationalized. Readers learn that books they cherish are not, apparently, what they seem. Beloved books and poems are deconstructed to the

vanishing point as meaning is drained away and readers are told, in effect, that they have been duped into believing something that is not the case. As a result, the gap between the academic liberal arts and the ordinary reading public grows. And that gap bodes ill when it comes time to look at public policy priorities, including spending for the humanities.

Those of us defending the humanities squirm a bit because we sense that there may be something to some of the complaints of the irate. We may go on to acknowledge certain concerns but we plead moderation and forbearance: do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Here, too, we need to make a more vigorous case.

We are urged to proclaim the 'relevance' of any of the humanities. Sadly, any line of defense mounted by those declaring the relevance of the humanities to public policy will be riddled with pitfalls, especially if we succumb to the temptation to launch utilitarian arguments and functionalist manifestoes. Many of these work along the lines of:

The humanities produces more productive workers; employers like to hire people with humanities backgrounds.

This, in turn, helps to keep us competitive, perhaps not in a direct way business or economics does, but it functions like that nonetheless.

Frustratingly, however, there are few empirical studies that prove that such claims are verifiable. I have in mind the sort of thing that would make a public policy person perk up. Absent that, it too often sounds as if we are turning what may be a modest benefit into a magnified boon. I have been told that more empirical evidence has been accumulated than I was aware of that correlates humanities competence to a number of good things. That is no doubt helpful. But as experts in the social sciences remind us constantly: correlations cannot be used to make causal arguments—on and on in that vein.

So where are we left? Let's give matters another twist by turning directly to concrete cultural moments that signify more general and complex truths. I have in mind a post 9/11 cultural event. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley supported an initiative that generated a city-wide reading program. Any

interested citizen would read a given text named as the 'public text' for that period and multiple discussion sessions would be held in public libraries all over the city—this, at least, is my recollection of how the program worked.

9/11 jolted program officials and they decided to do something. They selected W.D. Auden's poem "1939" as a public text. Four of us, including a poet, were asked to offer brief presentations on the poem prior to opening things up for discussion. This discussion was to take place in the largest available auditorium in the downtown library. Knowing the size of that venue, I fretted that there might be five people on stage—four speakers and a chairwoman—and perhaps twenty or so in the audience. I need not have worried, as it turned out.

The poem having been made available in city newspapers, if memory serves, folks trekked in, many just off work and in their uniforms: the policeman, the transit ticket taker, the nurse, mothers with children, an interracial audience eager to discuss a poem occasioned by a terrible public event—the German blitzkrieg against Poland—in order to come to grips with another horrendous public event—the terrorist attacks against America. I was impressed, as I always am on such occasions, by the insights and thoughtfulness of ordinary people when they are given an opportunity of this sort.

Does this connect the humanities and public policy? Yes, if we work with a capacious vision of public policy as those activities that involve the public, or representatives of the public; all policies, events, and initiatives aimed at that public. There are, of course, many publics—but we'll not get into that at this point. Suffice to say, there is more to public policy than how a bill becomes a law and explicit statutes passed by Congress.

Before we proceed further, let me note that public policy—not just the humanities—requires critical scrutiny. For some years, the hard-core modelers with their macro- or micro-economic presuppositions, have dominated public policy assessments. Some claim that if you cannot quantify something, it does not exist. For my purposes, the overriding problem begins at the beginning—with the dominant view of the human person that prevails in the fields of economics, social science and social service, and

much of political science. To be specific, people are construed in reductionistic terms as maximizers of their marginal utilities. A small part of our complex human make-up stands in for the totality. This vision of human nature, or anthropology, is, we know, false to the kinds of creatures we are if it is taken as the whole truth about what makes us tick. It is not.

We are also people who dream dreams, who hope, who act out of generosity and kindness with no expectation of reward. We are people who sacrifice for others, who extend ourselves to strangers. There is so much about who and what we are that falls through the grid of the working assumptions of public policy nowadays.

One concrete direct consequence, for example, can be pointed to in our foreign policy, namely, the refusal among policy makers and scholars of public policy to take religion seriously as a potent motivator of human action.

Religion was, and is, seen as something external, window-dressing for what was, or is, really going on underneath. This remains the case for a surprising number despite the fact that many have at this late date finally acknowledged that we ignore religion at our peril. And we ignore religion because it fell through the grid of our dominant models.

The 'something else' about us, above and beyond our calculations about our own self-interest, requires a more truthful and enlarged view of the human person and human possibility—those very truths that are nurtured by the humanities. One thing the humanities has to do with public policy, then, is to challenge its presuppositions at base: to take apart models that have become standard in policy circles. This is invaluable lest we lose sight of the human being in his and her complexity and, correlatively, of citizens in their civic capacities specifically.

When we are claimed by citizenship or called to citizenship it is not in the language of maximizing our utilities favored by so many policy wonks but of hopes for a fairer, freer, more decent, just, and, yes, beautiful world. I have over the years encountered students who entered college aflame with bright ideals. And then they are told, if they turn to much in social science, that there is a rock bottom to things that looks very little like the ideals they

cherish. Something similar happens to students entering the humanities, too, where a basic love of books, cherishing texts, gives way to modalities that deflect attention from the text and place it on technical theories instead.

Students ask: is that all there is, then?

No, it is not. Not by a long shot. That 'not by a long shot' is the baliwick of the humanities as our forebears thought of things: humana civilitas, a universal human culture and civilization; truths that can be known by all without distinction, not through revelation but through reason. This was the view of such great Church fathers as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. To be sure, revelation opens up vistas otherwise closed—Augustine's famous credo ut intelligam, faith seeking understanding—but there is a natural reason with which all God's creatures are gifted, and a basic empathy. This helps to hold us together in what Augustine called the earthly city even though our deepest beliefs may differ.

The implications of a liberal arts education for national and foreign policies and policy makers are, it turns out, of the most fundamental and basic kind, for example, is our world nothing but a series of states as uber-individuals looking out for their own narrowly construed interests, or is there a 'more', a sense of an international society? Not one world, God forbid, as what could be more boring or even menacing than a bloated image of a homogenized world with the concentrations of power that would involve.

No, rather, a society that has a stake in maintaining a world of many particular peoples with their own languages and cultures and histories whose existence is made possible by the system within which they are nestled, one that preserves and protects their independence. We require a view of ourselves as citizens sufficiently sophisticated to grasp such complexities. We cannot arrive at this sophistication without 'input', as we nowadays put it, from the humanities.

Do we think of others exclusively as adversaires, whether actual or in situ? Or are they fellow citizens who love their politics as we love ours? Are their ways completely unintelligible to us or can we understand through shared reason and imaginative empathy what is going on with other societies even as they strive to comprehend us?

I am not painting a utopian picture here. I am talking about a living, working reality. But it works only to the extent that the component parts are robust; only when certain understandings and possibilities are kept alive. Kept alive in order to challenge; kept alive in order to shape; kept alive in order to inform.

Perhaps the best way that I can begin to bring these remarks to a culmination is to recount another experience. Imagine a time, long ago and far away.....

I was educated in a school building that housed grades 1-12 in the rural Colorado village of Timnath, Colorado, population 185. The Timnath Consolidated School District #62 was tucked away in one of those little places in America that had no library. We got books from a bookmobile that arrived in Timnath every two weeks or so.

Our text for high school English was called Adventures in Reading. I have looked at that text since. By no means was it dominated by a single point of view: that of the dreaded white European male. We read numerous women writers: Mary O'Hara, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elsie Singmaster, Selma Lagerlof, Rosemary Vincent Benet, Sarojini Naidu (a great Indian lyric poet and follower of Gandhi's), Willa Cather, and Emily Dickinson. We read Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. We read Leo Tolstoy and Pedro de Alarcon. We read translations of Native American warrior songs.

Through Adventures in Reading, we could make the lives and thoughts of others our own in some way. In my imaginings and yearnings, I did not feel constrained because some of the writers I admired were men, or of another race, or from a 'foreign country'. I later chafed against some of the constraints I encountered outside my imagination, of course, but education is about opening the world up, not imprisoning us in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality.

I was taught, as the preface to the textbook said, that: "Reading is your passport to adventure in faraway places. In books the world lies before you, its paths radiating from great cities to distant lands, to scenes forever new, forever changing...Reading knows no barrier, neither time nor space nor bonds of prejudice—it admits us all to the community of human experience."

Clearly, I was a lucky child. Through an educartional policy that, at that time, lifted up and foregrounded the liberal arts, I was being prepared for cultural literacy, democratic citizenship, and much else besides. Without the liberal arts, the task of human self-understanding, essential to decent and humane public policy, withers on the vine.

The humanities are essential to a culture of democratic argument, to the building of democratic dispositions, for we need something substantial that we share in order that our differences can be made maniFest in a way that distinguishes but does not divide in insidious ways. Taking to heart the humanities gives us a perspective we would otherwise lack on the roiling crises with which we are beset: we can put them into perspective; we need not view them in apocalyptic terms; we've been through something similar, not identical, but similar; we have a repertoire of understandings and concepts that we can draw upon to help us deal with all of this.

If our conceptual repertoire shrinks, if the well of knowledge dries out, if the very notion of humanities—and humanity—is forlorn, we may, eventually, grow to look more like the creatures many now build models on: locked up in boxes of self-interest narrowly construed. Alexis de Tocqueville contrasted this narrow ego-centrism to a self-interest rightly understood, a self understanding. We might say, that appreciates that without others there is no distinctive self. We become who we are through dialogue and relationships; through the mutual definition of one another.

It takes a bit of effort to make a sustained case for the humanities and liberal arts and the uncomprehending and irate are people short on time and often temper. But make it we must. We may overuse the word 'crisis'—no doubt we do—but that doesn't mean we are wrong to do so. There is a great deal at stake. If Adventures in Reading was right, all those many years ago in little Timnath, Colorado, our self-understanding as persons and citizens is up for grabs and that is something precious that needs conscious tending, from the humanities and public policy, singly and together.