

Robert E. Proctor

The Debate over Liberal Arts Education in English-Speaking Countries: Martha Nussbaum's Not for Profit and its Nineteenth-century Predecessors

Abstract

The study of the humanities and the liberal arts is often under attack in the United States when young people are encouraged to major in the so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects in order to contribute to America's economic growth. In her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) Martha Nussbaum attempts to counter this attack. Its title promises a critique of profit, but Nussbaum's book ends up supporting it by arguing that the humanities nourish the imagination, critical thinking and creativity, qualities she says serve profit-making better than the STEM subjects. As soon as Nussbaum adopts the language of the humanities' critics, if only to negate it ("*Not for Profit*"), she ends up subordinating the humanities to the capitalist labor market. Perhaps unknown to her, Nussbaum's arguments date back to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in England when the Utilitarians narrowed the word *utility* to economic utility. The defenders of the liberal arts, such as John Henry Cardinal Newman in his *The Idea of the University*, used the same arguments as Nussbaum, arguments that end up supporting capitalism. Our current economic and environmental crises open a new chapter in this centuries-old debate because they provide new and deeper reasons for advocating liberal arts education.

Negli Stati Uniti si dice che i giovani devono studiare le cosiddette materie STEM (scienza, tecnologia, ingegneria ["engineering"] e matematica) per contribuire alla crescita economica del paese. Martha Nussbaum ne fa la controbattuta col suo libro *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010). Il titolo sembra una critica al profitto, ma finisce col sostenerlo col ragionamento che gli studi umanistici esercitano l'immaginazione, il pensiero critico, e la creatività, i quali servono il profitto meglio delle materie STEM. Dal momento che adopera il linguaggio degli avversari degli studi umanistici, anche per negarlo ("*Not for Profit*"), Nussbaum finisce col subordinare gli studi umanistici al mercato del lavoro capitalistico. Il ragionamento della Nussbaum, forse alla sua insaputa, risale agli albori della Rivoluzione Industriale in Inghilterra quando gli Utilitaristi restringevano la parola *utile* all'economia. I difensori degli studi umanistici, come John Henry Cardinal Newman nel suo *The Idea of the University*, facevano lo stesso ragionamento della Nussbaum, che finisce col dare ragione al lavoro capitalistico. Le crisi economiche e ambientali odierne aprono un capitolo nuovo in questo dibattito secolare perché ci danno altre e più profonde ragioni per sostenere gli studi umanistici.

In the United States an obsession with money, jobs, and economic growth creates a never-ending public debate over the place of the humanities and the arts in our national life, and especially in American higher education. A good snapshot of the latest rendition of this debate is the contrast between Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy*

Needs the Humanities (2010) and the recent proposal by Governor Rick Scott of the State of Florida that students majoring in “strategic areas” such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) be exempt from tuition increases because STEM majors are much more in demand in the job market.

Here is how the blurb on the dust jacket of *Not for Profit* describes the book’s message:

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum makes a passionate case for the importance of the liberal arts at all levels of education. Nussbaum argues that we must resist efforts to reduce education to a tool of the gross national product. Rather, we must work to reconnect education to the humanities in order to give students the capacity to be true democratic citizens of their countries and the world.

Democracy needs the humanities Nussbaum says. According to Governor Scott Florida’s economy needs STEM majors. Each is defending a way of life. Martha Nussbaum is one of America’s public intellectuals. She is a professor at the University of Chicago, and the author of several books, including one on ancient Greek tragedy and philosophy. Rick Scott was Chief Executive of Columbia/HCA, the largest private healthcare company in the United States. According to Wikipedia, Scott resigned amid a controversy over fraudulent billing practices, and became a venture capitalist. His proposal to promote the study of STEM is similar in spirit to the proposal of another more famous businessman-turned-politician, Silvio Berlusconi. When he was Prime Minister of Italy Berlusconi said that Italy’s schools should focus on teaching “the three I’s”: *inglese, impresa, informatica*, English, Business, and Information Technology. Berlusconi didn’t mention Greek and Latin. Neither does Governor Scott.

The key to understanding this debate between the humanities and the economy is to recognize that it is not new. It began with the Industrial Revolution in England over two centuries ago when Jeremy Bentham and his Utilitarian followers, along with capitalist businessmen and entrepreneurs, attacked the study of Greek and Latin, and what was then known as liberal arts education. For over two hundred years the cast of characters has remained the same: academics and public intellectuals defending liberal arts education from the attacks of businessmen and public intellectuals who support utilitarian schooling as the handmaiden of *laissez faire* capitalism. But for over two hundred years the debate between liberal arts and utilitarian education has been muddled and confused. The defenders of the humanities and liberal arts education have tended, perhaps unwittingly, to adopt the premises and even the language of their capitalist and utilitarian detractors, so they end up arguing for what they began by opposing: education as job training. And too often they fail

to define clearly the kind of education they are defending. Nussbaum, for example, uses the phrases «liberal arts» and «the humanities» interchangeably. They are not synonymous. In keeping with the theme of *ClassicoContemporaneo* I hope to show how an understanding of the *history* of liberal arts education offers new and surprising perspectives on this debate.

The Three Transformations in the Liberal Arts Tradition from Classical Antiquity to the Present

We are used to thinking of the liberal arts and liberal education in terms of institutions, especially schools and universities. But that's not where the liberal arts tradition began. If we want to assign it a birthplace, it would be the Roman forum. The liberal arts ideal emerged in Cicero's writings during the violent civil wars that destroyed the Roman republic. Cicero was not interested in designing curricula; he wanted to design an ideal statesman. He wanted to save the republic by formulating an educational *ideal* for young up-and-coming leaders (*principes*), as he makes clear in his speech *Pro Sestio*. His overarching idea was that the statesman should be a philosopher as well as an orator. «*Philosophia*», Cicero insisted, «makes a man good (*bonus*) and strong (*fortis*)» (*De divinatione* 2, 3). *Philosophia* is one of the synonyms Cicero used for *artes liberales*. By *philosophia* he meant all-encompassing learning based on an understanding of reality as an ordered whole, the individual as part of this whole, and all the intellectual disciplines as complementary ways of understanding this great unity. «[A]ll things above and below us are one [...]» Cicero has Crassus say (*De oratore* 3, 20). But although he valued Greek philosophy, and experienced in his own life the deep pleasure of studying it, Cicero saw philosophy not has an end in itself, but as a way of renewing Roman *mos maiorum*, that is, the customs, the civic virtues and the wisdom of the ancestors who had built the Roman republic over many centuries (*De re publica* 2, 2f.). The original *artes liberales* ideal, as crafted by Cicero, thus contained two complementary forms of *self-transcendence*, Greek and Roman. Greek philosophical self-transcendence comes from experiencing oneself as part of the cosmos, as Scipio Africanus does when he hears the music of the celestial spheres in his dream in Book Six of Cicero's *Republic*. Roman self-transcendence arises from the experience of oneself as part of a psychic community across time. As Cicero puts it:

Not to know what happened before you were born is always to remain a child. For what is a human being's life if through the memory of things past it is not woven into the lives of those who came before? (*Orator* 120).

Vitruvius and Seneca followed Cicero in making Greek philosophy and Greek culture Roman by treating Greek philosophers and architects as their ancestors. In *Letter 64 (Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium)* Seneca does so explicitly. They also built on Cicero's description of the ideal statesman/orator by highlighting breadth of learning, the complementarity of all the disciplines, and moral virtue. Vitruvius, for example, drew upon Cicero's *De oratore* and *De officiis* in describing the ideal architect.

The content, meaning, and purpose of the *artes liberales* went through a series of transformations in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, and then again in the nineteenth century. During these transformations the liberal arts tradition lost some of its original themes and interests and acquired new ones. These transformations explain why the humanities and the liberal arts are often hard to define in English-speaking countries.

The first transformation occurred in the early Middle Ages. In his allegory *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* ("On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury") Martianus Capella, a contemporary of St. Augustine's, repackaged the Roman *artes liberales* as seven disciplines, which came to be known as the Seven Liberal Arts. These consisted of the "trivium", the three language arts of grammar, rhetoric and logic; and the "quadrivium", the four mathematical arts of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Perhaps because they provided such a clear and logical organization of most of the intellectual disciplines, and perhaps also because they added up to the mystical number seven, Capella's list of seven liberal arts became canonical and formed the basis of medieval schooling. When universities came into being in the 11th century, the seven liberal arts constituted the undergraduate curriculum; those who went on to the higher faculties of law, medicine, and theology had first to complete the arts curriculum and receive a Bachelor or Master of Arts degree. But the medieval seven liberal arts no longer encompassed all the areas of learning as Cicero's *artes liberales* had, which he made synonymous with *philosophia*. The great medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas explicitly argued that the *artes liberales* do not encompass all learning, but prepare one for *philosophia*¹. On the beautiful and deservedly famous *Fontana Maggiore* in Perugia, Italy, the seven bas-reliefs depicting the seven liberal arts lead to an eighth bas-relief: Lady Philosophy, and beyond her is another relief of two eagles looking up, perhaps representing Theology. The Seven Liberal Arts of the Middle Ages thus represent a slight narrowing in the meaning of *artes liberales* and a shift in focus from public service to schooling.

Although medieval liberal education no longer meant all knowledge, in the guise of the seven liberal arts it still constituted broad learning, for it encompassed mathematics,

¹ See McInerney in WAGNER (1986, 248-72).

natural science, music, and language studies. These seven disciplines enabled a medieval Christian such as Dante to read God's two books, the Book of Revelation (Holy Scripture) and the Book of Nature².

In the early Middle Ages Martianus Capella shifted the focus of the *artes liberales* to curricula and limited them to seven intellectual disciplines. Then later, in the Renaissance, there occurred a momentous reordering of all the areas of study. A divorce took place between what we call the humanities and the sciences. It is a divorce with which we still live. The divorce happened in the following way. In reacting to what they believed was the degeneration of university education and in proposing an ideal education for their own time, the Renaissance humanists, followers of Petrarch, imagined a new kind of education that bypassed the quadrivium of the mathematical arts, and changed the medieval trivium by eliminating logic and adding poetry, history, and moral philosophy alongside of grammar and rhetoric³. They called these five language disciplines *studia humanitatis*, "studies of humanity". They took the phrase from Cicero's defense of Archias (*Pro Archia Poeta*). But they narrowed its meaning. In Cicero's writings *studia* and *artes humanitatis* are synonymous with *artes liberales* in so far as they denote *all* the intellectual disciplines, including mathematics and the natural sciences. The English phrase "the humanities" comes from *les humanités*, the French translation of the Renaissance *studia humanitatis*. The new Renaissance/modern "humanities" do not include mathematics and science.

The medieval seven liberal arts curriculum was transformed by the addition of the new Renaissance humanities to become a hybrid tradition. In addition to being a narrower curriculum than the medieval *artes liberales*, the new Renaissance humanities were synonymous with Greek and Latin language and culture, and became known as "classical education" in the English-speaking world. The new Renaissance classical education, of which Cicero's works constituted a major part, combined with some of the mathematical disciplines of the medieval quadrivium, became the curriculum of new pre-university secondary schools in Europe, founded by Jesuits in Catholic Europe, and by various protestant sects in Protestant Europe. It was the Puritans who brought this amalgam of medieval liberal arts cum humanities/classical education to America. This hybrid liberal arts tradition survived until well into the 19th century, and it handed down from generation to generation the original *Latin* writings of Cicero, Vitruvius, Seneca and other Romans. America's Founding Fathers, for example, read Cicero (who was John Adams's personal model) in Latin.

² See OLSON (2002, xii-xiv).

³ KRISTELLER (1965, 178).

The Liberal and the Humanities Today

The liberal arts tradition was transformed again in the 19th century by the addition in the university curriculum of modern languages and literatures and the new social sciences of political economy/economics, political science, and sociology. Within the humanities area of the liberal arts curriculum the Greeks and the Romans gradually disappeared from center stage. Today most people understand the humanities not as classical education, but as world languages and literatures and other non-scientific subjects such as philosophy and religion.

Part of the confusion over the meaning of “liberal arts” and “liberal education”, and the relationship between them and “the humanities” comes from the divorce between the new Petrarchan humanities, which studied one’s interior life, now conceived in terms of an intensive self, and the natural sciences and mathematics, which studied nature⁴. During the Renaissance and afterwards the traditional seven liberal arts continued to be taught in the universities, but now alongside of the new humanities (*studia humanitatis*), understood as the study of classical Greek and Latin. As the blurb on the book’s dust jacket shows, Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit* tends to make liberal education synonymous with the study of the humanities. A serious discussion of mathematics and the natural sciences is absent from her book. This omission is not surprising. We moderns live with what the British physicist C.P. Snow famously called “The Two Cultures”: the humanities versus the sciences⁵. This dichotomy is alien to ancient thought and the original *artes liberales*; it began with Petrarch in the Renaissance. It is a dichotomy our ecological crisis challenges us to overcome.

The English Gentleman’s Liberal Education: The Influence of Italy

This brief history should enable us to understand better what happened to the liberal arts in England two centuries ago, the consequences of which are still with us. They explain the debate between Martha Nussbaum, and Rick Scott and Silvio Berlusconi. Beginning in early 19th century England liberal education was attacked in the name of science, technology, and capitalism by thinkers and businessmen eager to advance capitalist industrialization and the liberal reforms they believed it needed in order to succeed. The

⁴ See PROCTOR (1998²) for a fuller discussion of the origins of the modern humanities. It may be that the word “arts” skews one’s understanding of the breadth of liberal arts education today. An admissions officer for my college told me that when he travels in China to recruit students he is careful not to use the phrase «the liberal arts» but rather «the liberal arts and sciences».

⁵ SNOW (1959).

target of their attacks becomes clear when we understand how the liberal arts were defined at the time. By the early 19th century the medieval and Renaissance transformations of the liberal arts tradition had long been consolidated, but the third, the importation of modern languages and literatures into the heretofore Greek and Latin humanities, would not take place until later in the century. In nineteenth-century England liberal education thus meant not only broad learning but also the study of Greek and Latin grammar and literature, and Greek mathematics, especially Euclid's geometry⁶. But it was also meant something more. In addition to encouraging the study of classical as opposed to Medieval Latin, and ancient and New Testament Greek, the Renaissance gave rise to the idea, still found in Victorian writings on liberal education, that to be liberally educated is to be a "Gentleman". An English gentleman was someone who was culturally refined and polished through knowledge of the Greek and Roman classics.

The English ideal of the gentleman was a direct import from Italy. It was found in Baldassarre Castiglione's very popular book *Il cortegiano*, "The Courtier". In *The Courtier* Castiglione adapted Cicero's ideal orator/statesman for life in the princely court of Urbino, with the result that although very much concerned with education the action of the book takes place in a Renaissance feudal court, not in a school or a university. The book and its setting were a natural fit for London society in eighteenth-century Georgian England, where one got a liberal education by studying the classical authors at home through tutors and in any number of different secondary schools – but not at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which were very much in decline during this period. The liberally educated gentlemen of Georgian London looked down on the Oxbridge dons as indolent pedants, and at life in the colleges as uncouth, exemplified by what London society considered the rough country sports the boys played there⁷.

⁶ All mid-Victorians admitted that the study of the classical languages «was commonly synonymous with liberal education» (ROTHBLATT 1976, 147). One of the battles that occurred among proponents of liberal education in Victorian England concerned whether or not modern languages should be taught in the university curriculum in addition to or even instead of the languages of classical Greece and Rome (FARRAR 1868² and PROCTOR 1998², 98, 110).

⁷ ROTHBLATT (1976, 80, 87). Castiglione explicitly modeled his ideal courtier on the ideal orator Cicero describes in his *De oratore*. When in the urbane London of 18th century Georgian society Castiglione's *cortegiano* became the English "gentleman" his education was called a "liberal education". Although primarily literary, it included training in the originally feudal skills of fencing, dancing, and riding, now considered "liberal" pastimes. Most important of all, Georgian liberal education enabled one to engage in what the Italians called *conversazione civile*, "polite" conversation, conversations in which one would demonstrate wit, urbanity, and knowledge of the Greek and Roman classics. This kind of a broad, highly refined and somewhat dilettante education enabled one to move and speak gracefully and seemingly effortlessly – that is, with Castiglione's untranslatable *sprezzatura*, "nonchalance" – in the cosmopolitan salon society of eighteenth-century Georgian London. Since upward mobility was possible in this society, a "liberal

In the early 1800s, when Oxford and Cambridge were reformed and the rise of industrial society put an end to the Georgian era, the ideal of the polished and refined liberally educated gentleman passed from the cosmopolitan salon society of London into the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. At Oxford the eighteenth-century ideal of the liberally educated gentlemen was then reappropriated and restated for very different times in the writings of nineteenth-century England's two most thoughtful and eloquent defenders liberal education, John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), both fellows of Oriel College⁸. It was this amalgamation of the Renaissance Georgian ideal of the classically educated gentleman with the still in many ways medieval liberal arts curriculum of Cambridge and especially Oxford that came under attack as England industrialized.

The Utilitarians' Attack

Beginning in the early 1800s liberal British intellectuals and capitalist businessmen who followed the new Utilitarian school of philosophy worked relentlessly to get Parliament to mandate compulsory public education. Capitalism, they believed, would create the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people through its power to produce cheaply and efficiently the material necessities, comforts, and luxuries of life. They wanted schools in Britain that would foster this goal with curricula directed towards economic utility. In his 1816 educational utopia *Chrestomachia*, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the founder of Utilitarianism, argued that the middling ranks of society, the shopkeeper and management classes, needed literary and scientific knowledge for their work, but not the classical languages still required in law, medicine, and theology. The subjects to be eliminated from Bentham's ideal school include the fine arts and *belles lettres*, and the «moral arts and sciences»⁹. Bentham's followers, the second generation Utilitarians, lobbied Parliament for compulsory public education in reading, writing, and arithmetic followed by science and technology and the study of the principles of laissez-faire market capitalism. They worked

education" was a very useful education because it could help one ascend the social ladder. In composing this brief overview I have followed ROTHBLATT (1976).

⁸ As Newman put it, «It is common to speak of 'liberal knowledge', of the 'liberal arts and studies', and of a 'liberal education', as the especial characteristic of a University and of a gentleman [...]». NEWMAN (1996, 81 *The Idea of a University*. Discourse I, Section 4). Rothblatt observes that "Arnold's culture is a brilliant restatement of the central tenets of the eighteenth-century idea of a liberal education" ROTHBLATT (1976, 149). Newman's celebrated description of the gentleman (Discourse VIII, Section 10, NEWMAN 1996, 179f.) is probably ironic (PATTISON 1991, 47; CULLER 1955, 238).

⁹ OLSON (2002, 167).

ceaselessly to achieve this goal. By the 1870's they succeeded when several acts of Parliament gave them schools close to the ones they wanted¹⁰. Public schooling in America followed a similar path¹¹. Today, more than a century later, we are living with the consequences of the Utilitarians' efforts, for in its general orientation the schooling they created has remained unchanged in the English-speaking countries: compulsory public education with competitive classrooms, testing and numerical ranking of students, and the linking of teacher pay to quantifiable performance¹².

The Utilitarian Origins of Public Schooling

How the English-speaking countries ended up with competitive and quantifiable education is the story Paul A. Olson tells in his *The Kingdom of Science: Literary Utopianism and British Education, 1612-1870*. Olson's account goes from Francis Bacon's utopian vision of man's domination of nature by means of experimental science to Adam Smith's utopia of a vast increase in material wealth through the division of labor in a capitalist economy where individual self-interest serves the common good through the invisible hand of the market.

De te fabula narratur. Although it ends in the 1870s, *The Kingdom of Science* is about us, for Bacon's scientific and Adams's economic utopias have now turned into the frightening dystopias of our environmental and economic crises. As Olson shows, these utopias were by no means the only path to the future, for from their very beginnings they were contested by other writers and thinkers. That Bacon's and Smith's visions of the future continue to dominate public debates is the result of intellectual battles that extended across several centuries, and which were carried forward by the determined and well-planned political lobbying of liberal reformers and businessmen. In Olson's reading of the history of education, Bacon's and Smith's scientific and economic utopias inspired a corresponding educational utopia. As Olson puts it, in the post Reformation / Renaissance period education in England and the United States took a different course from that in Protestant and Catholic states on the continent:

¹⁰ See OLSON (2002, 184) on the Elementary Education Act of 1870, with the extension of compulsory attendance to all districts in 1876.

¹¹ See OLSON (2002, 15,184f. et *passim*) on Horace Mann. See also BOWLES – GINTIS (1976).

¹² The American educator Horace Mann was in close touch with reformers in Britain, and introduced in New England their vision of schooling for the working classes.

[T]his course was utopia-centered [...] Anglo-American utopia-based education after Bacon emphasized capitalistic-style competition, the basics, and science and technology to the elimination of all other serious study¹³.

Bacon's Utopian Remake of Nature

The conceptual foundation for the utilitarian attack on liberal education in the early 1800s was laid centuries before in the writings of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). These same writings have created the mind-set and the belief system that underlie the human species's devastation of the earth and its ecosystems. In his utopian novel *New Atlantis* (1624/27) Bacon imagined that experimental science would enable human beings to dominate and remake nature, thereby «enlarging the bounds of Human Empire to the effecting of all things possible»¹⁴. Bacon's utopian vision of the purposeful human domination and transformation of nature required challenging the value the Greeks had accorded to philosophical contemplation. Here is Bacon writing about experimental science, the sine qua non of transforming nature through technology:

Of all the signs there is none more certain or more noble than that taken from fruits. For fruits and works are as it were sponsors and sureties for the truth of philosophies. Now, from all these systems of the Greeks and their ramifications through particular sciences, there can hardly after the lapse of so many years be adduced *a single experiment which tends to relieve and benefit the condition of man*, and which can in truth be referred to the speculations and theories of philosophy (*Novum organum* 1, 73. My italics)¹⁵.

Most nineteenth-century thinkers embraced Bacon's goal of actively changing nature rather than passively contemplating it. As Marx famously put it in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, «The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it» (XI). Bacon's phrase «To relieve and benefit the condition of man» epitomized a portentous new belief, a belief which now mesmerizes people all over the globe: that industrialization guided by applied science will make everyone on the earth happy, rich, and free.

The nineteenth-century myth of a material heaven-on-earth through the industrial exploitation of nature guided by scientific reason and political reform was all but irresistible. For the majority of nineteenth-century savants, Bacon's utopian remake of

¹³ OLSON (2002, ixf.).

¹⁴ OLSON (2002, 50).

¹⁵ Cited in TAYLOR (1989, 213).

nature through experimental science «to relieve and benefit the condition of man»; Smith's utopian vision of a dramatic increase in the wealth of nations through the division of labor and the invisible hand of the market; and Liberalism's promise of the extension of popular sovereignty and social wellbeing through gradual reforms guided by professional social science experts – these visions seemed truly to promise Bacon's «extension of human empire» on a scale grander than the world had ever before seen. Even Marx and Engels, capitalism's most acute and prescient critics, were attracted to the revolutionary transformations the bourgeoisie had achieved, as they state so clearly in their *Communist Manifesto*. For them, communism would continue the material progress capitalism had begun. But it would spread the new material comforts and riches in a more rational and equitable way than capitalism could¹⁶.

For a taste of the seemingly boundless nineteenth-century enthusiasm for a future created by science, an enthusiasm nourished by a conviction in the superiority of the present over all past ages of human history, consider this passage from Darwin's contemporary and fellow evolutionist A.R. Wallace's 1898 book *The Wonderful Century*

Not only is our century superior to any that have gone before it but... it may be best compared with the whole preceding historical period. It must therefore be held to constitute the beginning of a new era of human progress. ... We men of the 19th Century have not been slow to praise it. The wise and the foolish, the learned and the unlearned, the poet and the pressman, the rich and the poor, alike swell the chorus of admiration for the marvellous inventions and discoveries of our own age, and especially for those innumerable applications of science which now form part of our daily life, and which remind us every hour of our immense superiority over our comparatively ignorant forefathers (A.R. Wallace in his *The Wonderful Century*, 1898)¹⁷.

In attacking liberal education, the Utilitarians believed they had Progress on their side, and were sure that the history of science and the history of capitalism would confirm this faith, as Wallace's words so clearly suggest.

Doubters and Dissenters

Some thinkers were not so sure. In nineteenth-century England a critique of capitalism and liberalism can be found in novels, and also in essays concerned with the

¹⁶ «Marxism, growing from the same *zeitgeist* as English capitalism in the midst of the industrial revolution, proceeds from the same ethos». BOLTON (2012).

¹⁷ Wallace quoted BOLTON (2012).

meaning and purpose of education. British writers such as John Henry Cardinal Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Charles Dickens, who wanted a much broader education than the Utilitarians proposed (Newman); or who feared social and intellectual anarchy (Arnold); or who were appalled by the wretched lives of the new industrial working classes (Dickens), spoke up, but since they belonged to no political movement, they could do little more than dissent from the Liberal/Utilitarian myth of Progress, as Newman does in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and in *The Idea of a University*; or mock the capitalists as philistines, as Arnold does in *Cultural and Anarchy*; or satirize their schools and factories, as does Dickens in *Hard Times*. These works still speak to us. Of Newman's *The Idea of a University*, which continues to be quoted today¹⁸, Frank Turner writes:

No work in the English language has had more influence on the public ideals of higher education. No other book on the character and purposes of universities has received so frequent citation and praise by other academic commentators. [...] [...] [Newman] furthermore articulated a vision of the university against which alternative visions despite their relevance, usefulness, and radicality, make the activity of the university seem intellectually and morally diminished¹⁹.

The Standard of Economic Utility

What Dickens, Newman, and Arnold wrote concerning utilitarian schooling and liberal education was in large measure a response to industrialization in general and to one issue in particular: the question of utility. In *The Idea of a University* Discourse I: "Introductory" Newman states that one of the two controversies that gave rise to his thinking about liberal education was the charge of «their *inutility*» brought against the subjects taught at Oxford because of their alleged «remoteness from the occupations and duties of life»²⁰.

These attacks on liberal education began early in the century on two fronts. Jeremy Bentham and his followers, who included businessmen, began a campaign for the kind of compulsory «facts, facts, facts» public schooling for the new industrial working classes that Dickens satirizes in his novel *Hard Times*. Around the same time Utilitarian intellectuals and sympathizers associated with the more practical and pragmatic Scottish universities in the North wrote a series of articles in 1808-1810 in the *Edinburgh Review* criticizing as useless the classical education Oxford offered its students²¹. The defenders of education at

¹⁸ See GRAY (2012).

¹⁹ NEWMAN (1996, 282).

²⁰ Discourse 1 Introductory, Section 1 (NEWMAN 1996, 15).

²¹ CULLER (1955, 220).

Oxford parried the attack by throwing the word “utility” back at the Utilitarians: Oxford had no intention of teaching students anything “useful”, they said. And in fact in *The Idea of the University* Newman’s first line of defense for liberal education is Oxford’s. Discourse V is entitled “Knowledge Its Own End”. Newman quotes Cicero’s *De officiis* (*On Duties*) to argue that the desire to know is a fundamental characteristic of human nature. With Bacon and Bentham in mind he says of Cicero:

So far from dreaming of the cultivation of Knowledge directly and mainly in order to our physical comfort and enjoyment, for the sake of life and person, of health, of the conjugal and family union, of the social tie and civil security, the great Orator implies, that it is only after our physical and political needs are satisfied, and when we are “free from necessary duties and cares”, that we are in a condition for “desiring to see, to hear, to learn”²².

We can get a feel for this debate between classical education and economic utility from a passage in George Eliot’s novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859). Eliot was close to the circle of Utilitarian reformers led by the businessmen George Combe and William Ellis²³. Of the education his father envisioned for him, young Latimer says,

My brother was to be his [Latimer’s father’s] representative and successor; he must go to Eton and Oxford, for the sake of making connections, of course: my father was not a man to underrate the bearing of Latin satirists or Greek dramatists on the attainment of an aristocratic position²⁴. But, intrinsically, he had slight esteem for “those dead but sceptered spirits” [...]. To this negative view he added a positive one, derived from a recent connection with mining speculation; namely, that a scientific education was the really useful training for a younger son²⁵.

After a phrenologist diagnosed Latimer’s intellectual deficiencies from feeling the bumps on his head (the early Utilitarians used the “science” of phrenology to explain educational differences and justify compensatory education), Latimer is given an education in systematic zoology, botany, natural history, science and the modern languages to remedy

²² NEWMAN (1996, 79f.). Cicero, however, would never make the pursuit of knowledge an end itself. In the *De re publica* he has Scipio praise the ideal statesman who has acquired learning. Then he continues with this caveat: «But if only one of these two paths to prudence must be chosen, even if that quiet life devoted to the best studies and arts (*optimae studia et artes*) will seem happier to some, this civic life is certainly more deserving of praise and more illustrious (*quietae vitae ratio beatior, haec civilis laudabilior et inlustrior*) [...] (3, 3, 6)».

²³ OLSON (2002, 184, 214).

²⁴ The Georgian gentleman has come to Oxford!

²⁵ Quoted in OLSON (2002, 220).

his supposed problems with «organization»²⁶. Young Latimer's education, as Olson puts it, «eliminates his literary and imaginative interests, as Utilitarians prior to John Stuart Mill felt one must with ordinary or working people, and substitutes scientific/organizational ones». But Latimer does something that would be anathema to the Utilitarian reformers: «on the sly», Eliot says, he reads Cervantes and Shakespeare, and finds joy in gazing at the beauty of nature without analyzing it²⁷. In satirizing both Oxford and Utilitarian education George Eliot gives us insight into both.

Capitalism's Division of Labor

The reason the defenders of Oxford feared the concept of usefulness goes a long way towards explaining why defenders of liberal education today still remain on the defensive. The new capitalist mode of production radically narrowed the meaning of utility, for capitalism introduced something new into human work and human consciousness: the extreme division of labor in a new technological mode of production. From the Utilitarians' point of view, the division of labor²⁸ rendered the breadth of education demanded by the Georgian ideal of the gentleman literally “useless” for industrial workers and for capitalist entrepreneurs. Thus while the defenders of an Oxford education seem to have accepted the argument that the division of labor increased society's material wealth, they were deeply troubled by what it did to the human mind and to the human person. In Discourse VII: “Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Profession Skill” Newman quotes from the writings of two of his predecessors at Oriel College who responded to the attacks from the *Edinburgh Review*. The passage Newman chose from the 1810 response by Edward Copleston, Oriel's provost²⁹, indicates clearly that capitalism is the overarching context of the dispute, for Copleston speaks explicitly of the division of labor. He also mentions the new social science of Political Economy. And his phrase «the wealth of nations» is the same as the title of Adam Smith's book on capitalism. In defending liberal education, Copleston used the language of its detractors.

I want to quote at some length from Newman's Copleston because this passage contains, *mirabile dictu*, all the major arguments that would be made in favor of liberal education over the next two centuries:

²⁶ *Ibid.* 221.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ And with it the increased specialization of modern life and thought. See BERGER et al. (1974).

²⁹ CULLER (1955, 220).

“It is an undisputed maxim in Political Economy”, says Dr. Copleston, “that the separation of the professions and the division of labour tend to the perfection of every art, to the wealth of nations, to the general comfort and well-being of the community. This principle of division is in some instances pursued so far as to excite the wonder of people to whose notice it is for the first time pointed out”.

Could Copleston be including himself when he writes of the wonder aroused by the new concept of the division of labor?

As we have seen, Jeremy Bentham, the founder of Utilitarianism, argued that the middling ranks of society, the shopkeeper and management classes, needed literary and scientific knowledge for their work, but not the classical languages and the traditional liberal arts. It was the former, not the latter, that would create what Copleston, using the language of the Utilitarians, calls «the general comfort and well-being of the community». But this material well-being comes at a cost. Copleston continues:

But, while he [the specialist] thus contributes more effectively to the accumulation of national wealth, *he becomes himself more and more degraded as a rational being*. In proportion as his sphere of action is narrowed his mental powers and habits become contracted; and he resembles a subordinate part of some powerful machinery³⁰, *useful in its place, but insignificant and worthless out of it*. If it be necessary, as it is beyond all question necessary, that society should be split into divisions and subdivisions, in order that duties may be well performed, yet we must be careful not to yield up ourselves wholly and exclusively to the guidance of this system; we must observe what its evils are, and we should modify and restrain it, by bringing into action other principles, which may serve as a check and counterpoise to its main force³¹ (My italics)

«Which may serve as a check and counterpoise to its main force»: this phrase nicely summarizes the subsequent history of thinking about liberal education. From this time on all defenses of a broad, integrated liberal arts education can be subsumed under an implied critique of the division of labor inherent in the technological mode of production, and in particular of the deleterious effect this division has on the human mind: the recognition that the transformation of nature (think, for example, of all the kinds of matter transformed in the production of automobiles) through the technological machine-driven mode of production leads to a compartmentalization and fragmentation of human consciousness, just the opposite of what liberal education is supposed to achieve. Here is how the sociologist

³⁰ Copleston anticipates the sociological understanding that technological production, a central feature of modernity, makes the worker an appendage of the machine. See BERGER et al. (1974, 26).

³¹ Discourse VII, Section 7. NEWMAN (1996, 119).

Peter Berger and his colleagues describe what they call the «pluralization of life-worlds» unique to modern technological society:

Through most of human history, individuals lived in life-worlds that were more or less unified. This is not to deny that through the division of labor of other processes of institutional segmentation there have always been important differences in the life-worlds of different groups within the same society. Nevertheless, compared with modern societies, more earlier ones evinced a high degree of integration. Whatever the differences between various sectors of social life, these would “hang together” in an order of integrated meaning that included them all. This integrating order was typically religious. For the individual this meant quite simply that the *same* integrative symbols permeated the various sectors of his everyday life. [...] The typical situation of individuals in modern society is very different. Different sectors of their everyday life relate them to vastly different and often severely discrepant worlds of meaning and experience³². Modern life is typically segmented to a very high degree, and it is important to understand that this segmentation (or, as we prefer to call it, pluralization) is not only manifest on the level of observable social contact but also has important manifestations on the level of consciousness³³.

As if to anticipating this description of the separated «life worlds» of modern society, Copleston goes on to argue, in the passage quoted by Newman, that «[s]ociety itself requires some other contribution from each individual besides the particular duties of his profession. And, if no such liberal intercourse be established» humans will be «engrossed with petty views and interests [...]». Humans will act «as so many unconnected units, displacing and repelling one another».

Literature especially will contribute to this liberal intercourse. Copleston must mean Greek and Latin literature, for in 1810 Greek and Latin still constituted the major part of the undergraduate curriculum at Oxford:

In the cultivation of literature is found the common link, which, among the higher and middling departments of life, unites the jarring sects and subdivisions into one interest, which supplies common topics, and kindles common feelings, unmixed with those narrow prejudices with which all professions are more or less infected. The knowledge, too, which is thus acquired, expands and enlarges the mind, excites its faculties, and

³² Think of Copleston’s characterization of the specialist: «he resembles a subordinate part of some powerful machinery, useful in its place, but insignificant and worthless out of it».

³³ BERGER et al. (1974, 64f.). Note that the «consciousness» of which Berger and his colleagues speak implies the historically unique consciousness of the Renaissance/modern intensive self as opposed to the unitary and holistic consciousness experienced by the premodern extensive self.

calls those limbs and muscles into freer exercise which, by too constant use in one direction, not only acquire an illiberal air, but are apt to lose somewhat of their native play and energy. And thus, without teaching him the peculiar business of any one office or calling, it enables him to act his part in each of them with better grace and more elevated carriage; and if happily planned and conducted, is a main ingredient in that complete and generous education which fits a man “to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war” [John Milton, *On Education*]³⁴.

Like Copleston, Newman too speaks explicitly of the division of labor. He introduces the theme of “Knowledge Its Own End” of Discourse V with this thought:

If his [the student’s] reading is confined simply to one subject, however such division of labour may favour advancement of a particular pursuit, a point into which I do not enter here, certainly it has a tendency to contract his mind.

And shortly thereafter he asks of Philosophy:

Even supposing it to enable us to exercise the degree of trust exactly due to every science respectively, and to estimate precisely the value of every truth which is anywhere to be found, how are we better for this master view of things, which I have been extolling? *Does it not reverse the principle of the division of labor?*³⁵ (My italics)

Here again in Newman’s writing we find Copleston’s idea of liberal learning as a check or counterpoise to the division of labor. From the perspective of the history of the liberal arts tradition, it could thus be said that Newman and Copleston, writing at very beginning of the Industrial Revolution, added a new and soon to be dominant theme to discussions of the value of liberal arts education, a theme which corresponds to the relatively new concept of the division of labor: the compensatory, even “redemptive” role of liberal learning in an industrial society, a society in which people’s work and consciousness were becoming increasingly fragmented.

³⁴ Discourse VII, Section 7. NEWMAN (1996, 119f.). The phrases «better grace and more elevated carriage» and «complete and generous education» are redolent of the world of the 18th century gentleman, whose education was almost exclusively literary. See ROTHBLATT (1976).

³⁵ Discourse V, Section 1 and Section 2. NEWMAN (1996, 76f., 78).

Our Victorian Defenses of Liberal Education

Copleston's and Newman's focus on the division of labor throws a new and revealing light on our contemporary defenses of liberal arts education. As far as I can see, *all* the major arguments we still use today to support and defend liberal education are based on its presumed ability to compensate for problems specific to modern industrial society, especially social and mental fragmentation, and the pluralization of life worlds³⁶. Consider these five arguments which proponents of liberal education have been using for the past two centuries:

- Liberal education is education of the whole person.
- Liberal education prepares us to live a rich and meaningful life.
- Liberal education is an end in itself.
- Liberal education gives us a mental breadth, agility, and creativity which prepare us for each and every profession, and for changing jobs and even careers.
- Liberal education prepares us to be good citizens and leaders by teaching critical thinking, communication skills, and moral values.

The first three assertions concern the mental life of the modern autonomous and inward-turning self; the last two address the intensive self's life at work and in social and political communities. When Copleston and Newman speak of liberal education's enlarging the mind and when Arnold states repeatedly in *Culture and Anarchy* that culture's «perfects» the self, these Victorian writers are talking about what we today call «the whole

³⁶ Note that in trying to defend the individual from mental impoverishment and social fragmentation, all of our nineteenth-century defenses of liberal education presume an *intensive self*, for they portray the human mind as a container or as a muscle, that is, as an individual and autonomous center of thought and cognition which can be shaped, molded, and exercised. In his study of Newman's educational ideal A. Dwight Culler observes that two sets of images run through Newman's *Idea of a University*: the mind as storehouse or container, in which case the goal of education is mental enlargement; and the mind as a living organism which «digests» knowledge (CULLER 1955, 206). The latter image responds to Newman's understanding that liberal knowledge is not just broad learning, but broad *integrated* and *systematized learning*. Culler traces these images to two different intellectual traditions, but that need not interest us here. My point is that both of Newman's images reflect the modern experience of the self as a unique, autonomous center of consciousness and cognition, which Copleston and Newman say can be exercised, i.e. contracted or enlarged, and which in *Culture and Anarchy* Matthew Arnold (and Leonardo Bruni before him) says can be «perfected». For Cicero and the ancients, treating the mind as a muscle which one needs to «exercise», or speaking of its «contraction» or «enlargement» or «perfection» or even «digestion», would make no sense, since for the ancients the mind or reason is not a whole, but only part of the whole. The whole is the cosmos or universal reason. A good statement of the ancient extensive self is Cicero's: «But man was born in order to imitate and contemplate the cosmos; he is in no way perfect, but is some little part of the perfect», Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2, 14, 37.

person» and this person's «quality of life», both of which are crippled and impoverished by the division of labor as it is practiced in capitalist enterprises.

By a sort of logical legerdemain the first three defenses of liberal education are often enlisted to support the fourth: that liberal arts education prepares one to compete in the job market. Although his first defense of liberal education is Discourse V: “Knowledge Its Own End”, in Discourse VI: “Knowledge Reviewed in Relation to Profession Skill” Newman quotes Copleston in arguing that liberal knowledge enjoyed and experienced as its own end so enlarges the mind and refines its judgment that it becomes extremely “useful” in equipping the mind for each and every profession. This is the argument for liberal education I have heard most often in forty years of teaching at a liberal arts college. In its contemporary guise this argument asserts that liberal arts education is the best education for an uncertain and continually changing job market³⁷ because liberal arts training of the mind in critical thinking and creative problem-solving makes one widely and continually employable, and even prepares one for radical career changes.

The fourth argument often leads to the fifth: critical thinking and speaking not only produce resourceful and flexible workers; they create good citizens and leaders. Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit* actually blends the fourth and fifth arguments by stating that both businesses and citizenship in our now global society need creative thinkers. Nussbaum's penultimate chapter is entitled “Cultivating Imagination: Literature and the Arts”. It emphasizes the importance of imaginative literature in helping students to understand *empathetically* other people and other cultures. By highlighting the value of the humanities and especially literature, Nussbaum's defense of liberal education is very much in line with one made by nineteenth-century advocates of liberal learning. Newman's long quote from Copleston includes the argument that «[i]n the cultivation of literature is found the common link, which, among the higher and middling departments of life, unites the jarring sects and subdivisions into one interest» etc. And Matthew Arnold explicitly connects the study of literature to critical thinking, and through it to a classless citizenship that will enable «culture» to triumph over social and intellectual anarchy³⁸. Substitute «world culture» for «Hellenism» (ancient Greek culture) in Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and you get Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*.

Copleston, Newman, and Nussbaum end up defending liberal education by adopting the language of its detractors: the liberal arts, they argue, and especially the humanities,

³⁷ Or rather for what Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio term «the jobless future»: temporary work but never a permanent job. See ARONOWITZ – DIFAZIO (2010²).

³⁸ See Steven Marcus's discussion of «culture» as an elaboration of Arnold's notion of criticism in ARNOLD (1994, 169f.).

Nussbaum says, provide a training of the mind that makes them actually very *useful* in a capitalistic economic system³⁹. It is crucial to recognize that if we continue to use Victorian defenses of liberal education without calling into question the economic system that gave rise to them we will be stuck with our predecessors' confusion and lack of clarity. For example, Newman's thoughtful intellectual biographer A. Dwight Culler struggled to understand how Newman can assert in Discourse V that liberal knowledge is an end in itself and then argue in Discourse VI that it contributes to professional skill⁴⁰. At the end of her *Not for Profit* Martha Nussbaum struggles to understand how President Barak Obama, who went to Occidental College, a quintessential liberal arts college, and then to Columbia University, known for its fine undergraduate general education program, can as President of the United States speak publicly about education only in terms of jobs, or how Nehru as Prime Minister of India could reject the humanities, «despite his own deep love for poetry and literature», and encourage only science and economics «as lynchpins of the nation's future»⁴¹. In Obama's and Nehru's case the answer is clear: in a society that accepts the goal of unlimited industrial growth, the division of labor, and the radically opposed roles of capitalist and worker, the Utilitarians will always have the upper hand, especially as far as public education for the masses is concerned. That the liberal arts do indeed remain very much on the defensive today can be seen clearly in the word "Not" of main title of Martha Nussbaum's book: *Not for Profit*. She shares with her Victorian predecessors

³⁹ Nussbaum's book would seem to be a critique of capitalism: *Not for Profit*. But it is not. Nussbaum's central argument is not only that democracy needs the study of those subjects she calls «the humanities», a phrase she never defines, but which she seems to equate with the art, music, and above all with literature, subjects that exercise the human imagination for its own sake, with no utilitarian goal of making money. Her central arguments include this unstated premise: pursuing studies «not for profit» is good for profit. The humanities form students whose so-called «critical thinking» and imaginative creativity, agility of mind, and facility in writing and speaking are a boon for profit business. «[E]ven if we were just aiming at economic success», she asserts, «leading corporate executives understand very well the importance of creating a corporate culture in which critical voices are not silenced, a culture of both individuality and accountability» (p. 53). To this argument she adds a second: «A second issue in business is innovation, and there are reasons to suppose that a liberal arts education strengthens the skills of imaginative and independent thinking that are crucial to maintain a successful culture of innovation» (p. 53). As far as the arts are concerned, Nussbaum argues that they too serve business. «As with critical thinking, so too with the arts», she writes. «We discover that they are essential to the goal of economic growth and the maintenance of a healthy business culture [...]. Innovation requires minds that are flexible, open, and creative; literature and the arts cultivate these capacities» (p. 112).

⁴⁰ CULLER (1955, 219f.). A friendly reviewer of Culler's book exculpates Newman with the following argument: «When Dr. Culler wishes (p. 219) that Newman had stopped short at having asserted 'knowledge-its-own-end', and not gone on to tell us that liberal knowledge was actually more useful than useful knowledge, he seems to be underestimating the need, at that time, in 1852, to stress that point [...]» (BEALES 1957, 181).

⁴¹ NUSSBAUM (2010, 136f., 130).

inconsistencies of argument because while she repeats throughout her book worries about the future of the liberal arts and especially the humanities, nowhere does she call into question the capitalist mode of production nor its effect on the human mind. Adam Smith did.

Adam Smith's Critique of the Division of Labor

Although the Utilitarians' attack put them on the defensive, nineteenth-century proponents of Oxford's liberal education raised an issue that today, over a century later, puts liberal education squarely on the offensive as a herald of a future society in which work ceases to be intellectually crippling. In identifying what Copleston called the «evils» of the division of labor, they linked their defense of liberal education to that aspect of the capitalist mode of production which Adam Smith singled out for his most devastating criticism. It is a criticism that has never been answered.

Adam Smith's book on the capitalist mode of production is entitled *The Wealth of Nations*. The very first sentence of Book I, Chapter 1, reads «The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is any where directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour»⁴². Marx succinctly summarized Smith's overarching message: «[...] the essence of *The Wealth of Nations* – namely the view that the capitalist mode of production is the most productive mode (which it absolutely is, in comparison with previous forms)»⁴³. But Smith understood that there was a dark side to capitalism, a price to pay for the vastly increased wealth he believed the division of labor produced: the intellectual crippling of the worker. For Smith, all previous modes of production – hunting, shepherding, farming – while fostering less complex societies than capitalism, produced well-rounded individuals:

In such societies the varied occupations of every man oblige every man to exert his capacity; and to invent expedients for removing difficulties which are continually occurring. Invention is kept alive, and the mind is not suffered to fall into that drowsy stupidity, which in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all the inferior ranks of people. In those barbarous societies, as they are called, every man, it has already been observed, is a warrior. Every man too is in some measure a statesman, and can form a tolerable judgment concerning the interest of society and the conduct of those who govern it. [...] Though in a rude society there is a good deal of variety in the occupations of every individual, there is not a great deal in society as

⁴² SMITH (1994, 3).

⁴³ *Theories of Surplus Value*, cited in PACK (1991, 161 n. 26).

whole. Every man does, or is capable of doing, almost everything which any other man does; or is capable of doing. Every man has a considerable degree of knowledge, ingenuity, and invention; but scarce any man has a great degree. The degree, however, which is commonly possessed, is generally sufficient for conducting the whole simple business of the society⁴⁴. In a civilized state, on the contrary, though there is little variety in the occupations of the greater part of individuals, there is an almost infinite variety in those of the whole society. These varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation of those few who, being attached to no particular occupations themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people. The contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive. Unless those few, however, happen to be placed in some very particular situations, their great abilities, though honourable to themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of their society. Notwithstanding the great abilities of those few, *all the nobler parts of human character may be, in a great measure, obliterated and extinguished in the great body of the people*⁴⁵. (My italics)

Of this last sentence Robert Heilbroner writes: «The final judgment passed on the quality of life in commercial society is devastating»⁴⁶.

In speaking of those few persons (philosophers such as Smith himself?) who can contemplate *all* the varied occupations of men and thus arrive at a comprehensive view of the economy as a whole, Smith is describing an activity of the mind similar to the descriptions of liberal education Newman presents in his *The Idea of a University*: the mind's striving for an integrated, logically coherent, systematic overview of the interrelationships between all the intellectual disciplines and the specialized knowledge contained within each of them. Smith, of course, in the passage quoted above, is speaking of the division of labor in capitalist industry, not in a university. And yet both of Smith and Newman cherish a kind of synoptic vision, what the ancient philosophers called «the view from above». Newman, in fact, calls the person who has received and who lives a liberal education «the man of philosophic habit», where «philosophy» is defined as that

⁴⁴ There are striking similarities between what Smith imagines to be the broad but less complicated knowledge available to all men in pre-capitalist societies and Cicero's description of the days of Aelius and Cato in ancient pre-empire Rome (*De oratore* 3, 133-35).

⁴⁵ SMITH (1994, 840f.).

⁴⁶ HEILBRONER (1975, 531). Note the title of Heilbroner's article on the rarely discussed dark sides of capitalism described in Smith's writings: «The Paradox of Progress: Decline and Decay in *The Wealth of Nations*».

true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, of determining their mutual dependence (Discourse VI, Section 6)⁴⁷.

Smith seems to be describing Newman's man of philosophic habit when he asserts that «[t]he contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive».

One constant in the liberal arts tradition from the time of its birth in classical antiquity up to the present is the cluster of concepts and images surrounding the idea of wholeness and unity⁴⁸: the belief that reality is a beautifully ordered whole (*kosmos*); that all the disciplines are complementary ways of understanding and describing this whole; and that the individual is part of this whole. On the basis of this ancient belief, the liberal arts tradition asserts that human beings have innate desire to comprehend (Latin *comprehendere*, “to grasp mentally”) and become one with this whole⁴⁹. In saying that «[t]hese varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation of those few who, being attached to no particular occupations themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people», Smith, like Newman, is expressing one of the distinguishing beliefs of the liberal arts tradition.

But Smith says that these men are few, and are rarely in “situations” (politics?) where their comprehensive vision of the whole can contribute to the common good. When he concludes that «[n]otwithstanding the great abilities of those few, all the nobler parts of human character may be, in a great measure, obliterated and extinguished in the great body of the people», could Smith be including the capitalist, the entrepreneur, the factory manager in this great body of the people? His concept of the capitalist division of labor introduces the idea that one's occupation can dull or stupefy the mind. But can people who work with their intellects rather than their hands become stupid?⁵⁰ It would seem so, unless

⁴⁷ NEWMAN (1996, 99). See also CULLER (1955, 190).

⁴⁸ What the ancients would call the problem of the One and the Many.

⁴⁹ Where this unification takes place depends on one's concept and experience of the self. The ancient extensive self becomes one with the cosmos and the *polis*; the modern intensive self seeks its unity with the whole within its own individual and autonomous self.

⁵⁰ See Paul Baran's useful distinction, which I used in the Introduction, between the intellect worker and the intellectual. The «intellect worker» is a person who is employed to use his or her intellect to do a specific job. An «intellectual» is a person who believes «the truth is the whole», as Hegel put, and who has the courage to search for this truth (BARAN 1969). For Smith on capitalists and managers, both of whom are corrupted morally by the division of labor, see PACK (2010, 71-79).

they step back and strive to contemplate the economy as a whole. Such, at least, seems to be the logic of Smith's argument: the division of labor can extinguish «the nobler parts of human character» and render people who work with their intellects just as stupid as people who work with their hands⁵¹.

Smith, however, does not pursue this line of thought, although Copleston and Newman do. Smith focusses instead on the effect of the division of labor on the worker's mind, not on the capitalist's. Here is Smith's famous description of this division:

In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too, are perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or exercise his invention in finding our expedients for removing difficulties which never occur.

What happens to such a man?

He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally *becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become*. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life⁵². (My italics)

⁵¹ «Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!» Marx said of the capitalist's single-minded pursuit of money (*Capital* Vol. 1, Cap. 24, Sec. 3). Newman's description of the «illiberal» man obsessed with one single thing provides a nice gloss on Marx's famous sentence: «Men, whose minds are possessed with some one object, take exaggerated views of its importance, are feverish in the pursuit of it, make it the measure of things which are utterly foreigner to it, and are startled and despond if it happens to fail them» (*The Idea of a University* Discourse VI: «Knowledge in Relation to Learning», Section 6, NEWMAN 1996, 100).

⁵² SMITH (1994, 839f.). John Ruskin, writing his *Stones of Venice* almost a century later, observes, «We have much studied and perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life [...]». Quoted in BRAVERMAN (1974, 78f.).

In his book *Capitalism as a Moral System: Adam Smith's Critique of the Free Market Economy*, Spencer J. Pack calls this description of effect of the division of labor on the worker «one of the strongest indictments of modern capitalist society every made»⁵³.

Rather than demand the elimination of the capitalist mode of production because of its terrible human cost, Smith called for the government to institute public education to broaden the workers' minds. The reasons Smith gives for doing so may surprise us, especially in the context of Oxford's defense of liberal education in the university, a defense that emphasized the wholesome exercise of the human mind. Smith worried about two possible outcomes of worker stupidity: sedition, and the lack of martial spirit, which would make the workers' unable to defend their country in time of war. Smith wanted an education that teaches workers to see society as a whole and their place within it; to respect themselves and «obtain the respect of their lawful superiors»; and to understand and identify with their government. They would thus be motivated to defend their country in time of war, and less liable to «the interested complaints of faction and sedition [...]»⁵⁴. The Utilitarians took up Smith's call for public education for the working masses – but discarded Smith's key idea that it be broad⁵⁵.

The Twin Crises of Capitalism

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* was first published in 1776, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Nothing could be farther removed from Cicero's ideal orator, who must be able to speak with wisdom, virtue, and eloquence on all things divine and human (*De oratore* 3, 23), than the extreme mental specialization Smith condemns in his description of the division of labor. But Smith was willing to tolerate the extreme division of labor because of the vast increase in material wealth capitalism seemed capable of producing; the deleterious effects of the shrinking of the worker's mental capacities could be mitigated by public education. As we have seen Copleston and Newman likewise seem to accept the division of labor as necessary for economic growth; Copleston even uses

⁵³ PACK (1991, 144). As Harry Braverman observes in his *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, «the subdivision of the individual, when carried on without regard to human capabilities and needs, is a crime against the person and against humanity» (BRAVERMAN 1974, 73).

⁵⁴ SMITH (1994, 846). Concerning the fear of sedition, Mark Blaug observes, «Before the creation of a national police force and the development of small arms weapons, there was widespread fear of rioting mobs, inspired by the examples of the French Revolution». The classical economists took «what was then the enlightened view that the spread of education among the poor would promote rather than endanger political stability» BLAUG (1975, 588).

⁵⁵ OLSON (2002, 161).

the phrase «the wealth of nations». For them, the capitalist mode of production was the reality of the day; liberal education will somehow be its counterpoise. But could liberal education be more than a counterweight or mitigating force to the bad mental and moral effects of the division of labor and the obsession with money⁵⁶. Could liberal education be a guide to another kind of organization of work? Rather than argue that the “not-for-profit” humanities are good for business, why not try to imagine how we could organize the economy in such a way as to give everyone an opportunity of living a liberal arts life? We can ask this question more easily now than two hundred years ago because capitalism itself seems to have entered a fatal crisis.

We are living in a watershed moment of human history. Capitalism has entered its worst crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930's. Politicians tell us that economic growth will eventually lead us out of this crisis. But economic growth has contributed to another, historically unprecedented crisis: the human species' destruction of its natural environment. Some economists and philosophers are beginning to say what politicians cannot say: more economic growth is neither possible nor desirable. In a recent paper “Is U.S Economic Growth Over? Faltering Innovation Confronts the Six Headwinds”, the economist Robert J. Gordon states that «[t]here was virtually no economic growth before 1750, and thus there is no guarantee that growth will continue indefinitely». He suggests «that the rapid progress made over the past 250 years could well turn out to be a unique episode in human history»⁵⁷. The French philosopher Serge Latouche has written a short treatise with the provocative title *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, translated into English as *Farewell to Growth*⁵⁸. Our twin economic and environmental crises are an invitation to a profound change in the way we human beings understand our world and ourselves. They are forcing us to look for new ideas concerning human nature and the good life.

Some ages create the future by using the present to break the intellectual shackles of the past. The Scientific Revolution began when Galileo's astronomical discoveries persuaded him to reject Aristotle's geocentric view of the universe in favor of Copernicus's heliocentric one. Other ages create the future by using the past to break the shackles of the present. This is what happened in the Renaissance when Petrarch and his followers used a

⁵⁶ Newman's cites injunctions from the Bible and Fathers of the Church against the love of money in *The Idea of the University* when he expressed his fears concerning the encroachment into the domain of Theology of the new university discipline of Political Economy as a 'moral science', a science which makes the pursuit and accumulation of wealth the road to happiness, the goal of human life, and a source of moral improvement among the working classes (Discourse IV Sections 10-12. NEWMAN 1996, 67-73).

⁵⁷ GORDON (2012, Abstract).

⁵⁸ LATOUCHE (2009).

dialogue with ancient Greece and Rome to free themselves from the intellectual shackles of medieval scholasticism, which had degenerated into a spiritually barren obsession with logic and linguistics⁵⁹. Our economic and ecological crises invite us to do the same today: create for ourselves a psychic community across time that can free us from some bad and now poisonous ideas we have inherited from the rise of modernity.

Adam's Smith utopia of material wealth created by an Invisible Hand of a market made of up self-interested individuals and Francis Bacon's utopian vision of «enlarging the bounds of Human Empire to the effecting of all things possible» through applied science have turned out to be frightening dystopias. Both presume a specifically modern understanding of the human self: a unique, autonomous intensive center of cognition and volition that relates to other human selves and to nature as an autonomous subject facing an exterior object – in Martin Buber's terms, as an I-It, as opposed to an I-Thou. The ancient Greeks and Romans didn't think this way. They understood themselves not as autonomous, inward-turning “intensive” selves, but as beings “extensive” with the cosmos and the *polis*. «Man was born in order to contemplate and imitate the universe (*mundus*)», Cicero wrote, «[H]e is in no way perfect, but is some little part of the perfect (*quaedam particular perfecti*)» (*De natura deorum* 2, 14, 37). The liberal arts tradition began in Cicero's writings as an amalgamation of Greek cosmic and Roman civic self-transcendence, the latter stated clearly in Cicero's description of the memory of our ancestors which I quoted above⁶⁰. Reading Cicero and the ancients, getting a sense of their experience of an extensive self, can inspire us to think our way out of the pervasive selfishness and individual isolation endemic to capitalist society. The ecological crisis and the theory of the Big Bang are already leading us in this direction. According to the latter the origin of everything in the universe occurred in a nanosecond in one primal explosion. We human beings are thus part of all that is, was, and ever will be. It's going to take us awhile to adjust to this idea. The ancients can help us. Their cosmology was static, not evolutionary. But it envisioned a similar unity of being. «All is one», Cicero has Crassus say in the *De oratore*:

To me the ancients, having grasped something greater in the mind (*animo complexi*), appear to have seen much more than the point of sight (*acies*) of our mental powers (*ingenia*) is able to observe (*intueri*). They said that all things, above and below us, are one (*omnia haec, quae supra et supter, unum esse*), and are held together by a single force (*vis*) and harmony (*consensio*) of nature. There is no class of things that can stand

⁵⁹ PROCTOR (1998², 39, 45f.).

⁶⁰ I provide a much more complete discussion of this assertion in my webcast at <http://www/nccsc.net/webcasts>.

by itself, severed from the rest, or which the rest can lack and still preserve their power (*vis*) and eternity (3, 20).

Reading the ancients in the context of our economic and environmental crises can also wean us away from speaking the language of business when we talk about education. In the nineteenth century the defenders of liberal education found themselves on the defensive because the Utilitarians, followers of Smith and Bacon, were intellectually triumphant. Under the banner of Liberalism they promised political freedom and material wealth to all the peoples of the world. It was hard to resist the idea that laissez faire capitalism, through the magic hand of the market, would sooner or later make everyone in the world happy, rich, and free. John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose *The Idea of the University* continues to be cited today as a defense of the liberal arts, spent his life fighting liberal thought. But his writings show that he ended up speaking the language of liberalism in its economic guise as the creation of wealth through the division of labor. Martha Nussbaum, as we have seen, ends up speaking Rick Scott's language by arguing that the "not-for-profit" humanities are good for profit: businesses should hire liberal arts graduates because of their critical thinking skills and creative imaginations.

Since I teach at a liberal arts college I prefer to believe that Nussbaum's (and Newman's before her) assertion that liberal arts graduates are good hires for business is in fact true. I want my students to find jobs. But I want much more for them than a job; I'd like them to be able to continue their liberal arts education throughout their lives. I'd like the liberal arts tradition to go on the offensive by suggesting how the business model can be improved, or even totally transformed. Let's measure the business model against the political and ethical ideals found in the liberal arts tradition, a tradition that came into being as an attempt to save the Roman republic through education. Nussbaum rightly argues that the liberal arts educate people to be citizens of a democracy, to ponder and debate questions concerning the common good. But in a capitalist economy people spend the most productive hours of their day, often eight to ten or even more, not in public forums but in private workspaces overseen by a boss. And most of their jobs involve a high degree of specialization. For them, a liberal arts life, republican citizenship nourished by periods of contemplative leisure, is not practicable. It is this life, this ancient ideal that I wish for my students.

New Thinking: the Economy

It is now clear that capitalism's division of labor, which in *The Wealth of Nations* Smith singles out for his greatest praise and his severest criticism, is not necessary for the production of material wealth. It is a consequence of a *political*, not an economic decision. The division of labor is a necessary part of the *undemocratic* organization of private or state capitalist enterprises with their hierarchical top-down management created by an external board of directors chosen by the major shareholders or by the party. It is a scheme of control which separates the capitalist and the worker and assures that the capitalists control the decisions of what, where, and how to produce, and what to do with the economic surplus. If workers were their own board of directors the division of labor could be handled in ways that would not cripple the worker. What is more, a liberal arts education, the original goal of which was to create republican civil servants, would become strikingly useful even in the restricted sphere of the creation and distribution of material wealth, for the workers of an enterprise would need to think of themselves not just as workers, but as citizens. As citizens they would need to acquire wisdom, virtue, and eloquence in order to participate actively in the direction of the enterprise, and also in the relationship between the individual enterprise and the local, state, and national communities⁶¹. In his recent book *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* the economist Richard Wolff discusses democratic worker self-directed enterprises (WSDEs), the best example of which is the large and growing Mondragón Corporation in Spain. Wolff argues that *specialization of function in the productive process does not require the specialization of the worker*. Speaking of the rotation of jobs within a WSDE, he writes:

A WSDE-based economy could thus address the ancient problems of the division of labor and specialization of function. Adam Smith's pin factory has often been interpreted as rationalization for ever-more-narrow specialization of jobs, training, and mentalities necessary for maximizing surpluses and profits. For most of these interpretations, specialization of a function has been treated as identical to specialization of the functionary. Yet this is not the case. Whatever the merits of specialization of function within a division of labor, the merits of equivalently specializing the worker are dubious. Beyond a certain degree and a certain time, keeping one person in one job may reduce productivity and profitability. *If a fully-rounded personality and a diversely engaged body and mind are connected to personal happiness, genuine democracy, and work productivity*, then a WSDE-based economic

⁶¹ See ALPEROVITZ (2013).

system with rotation of jobs will be more fulfilling – and quite possibly more productive – than work has been under private or state capitalism⁶². (My italics)

Note that what Wolff calls «a fully-rounded personality» is contemporary rendition of Castiglione's Renaissance *cortegiano* come alive in the Georgian Gentleman.

What if Nussbaum were to go a step further and argue that not only does democracy need the humanities, but the economy needs democracy, and corporations need to become community-based republics? Such a turnaround in thinking would *ipso facto* make the liberal arts tradition our guiding educational tradition, for students studying STEM subjects would need to be prepared not only to do specialized work, but to ponder and debate in public meetings and assemblies the overall direction of the enterprise – exactly as we college professors do when we determine the academic programs, standards, and curricula of our universities, colleges, and departments.

This watershed moment in human history and in the history of the earth constitutes an opportunity for the liberal arts to teach us a new language. It is a language that is actually very old. Robert Bellah and his co-authors had an inkling of this language when in their book *Habits of the Heart* they urged us to learn to speak again the language of commitment and community we inherit from our Biblical and republican traditions⁶³. We inherit the latter through the liberal arts tradition. In his emphasis on the poor Pope Francis is inviting not just Roman Catholics but the entire world to speak the language of not of the market, but of the Gospels. In so doing he has begun to confound some wealthy Catholics in the United States who believe – rightly so! – that he is not speaking their language of business and finance. The title of Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit* uses the language of her purported business opponents and ends up telling them that the humanities are good for business. The liberal arts tradition can have a higher calling today. It can suggest a new language of commitment and community, a language that searches for a balance between the intensive and the extensive self. We find this language at the birth of the *artes liberales* in Cicero's writings, and in those of his first interlocutors, Vitruvius and Seneca⁶⁴. To renew this language today is powerful example of *ClassicoContemporaneo*, the contemporaneity of the classics.

⁶² WOLFF (2012, 137).

⁶³ BELLAH et al. (1989, 275-86). As the Anglican theologian John Millbank recently put it, «We hope that many Muslims and Jews, as well as Christians, will embrace a return to the politics of the Good, rooted both in the Bible and in classical antiquity. It is this legacy, re-thought and democratized (in keeping with biblical impulses), which alone can now save Europe, America, and the world» (SCHNEIDER 2010).

⁶⁴ See my nineteen-minute April 2013TEDx talk:

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