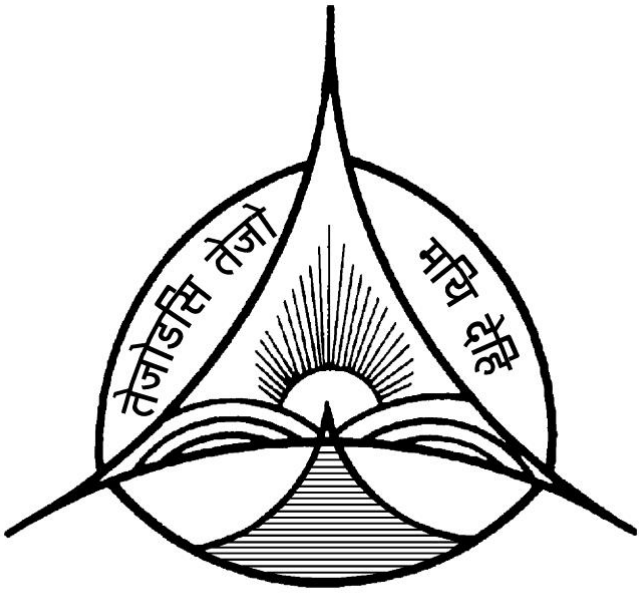
THE JMC REVIEW

An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory



Volume 2
2018

The End of Humanities, Or, the Critique of Utility and the Utility of Critique

KAREN GABRIEL*

In an age when our understandings of the terms 'human' and 'humanistic' have become substantially shaped by questions of use, applicability, marketability and monetization, leading to a powerful and serious challenge about the relevance of the 'humanities', it has become urgent to respond to that challenge. This paper is an attempt to map the contours of this field today; the challenges to it; current and possible responses to that challenge; as well as trace some of the implications of all of these.

Martha Nussbaum in her well-known book on education (2010) recalls Rabindranath Tagore's ideas of education and observes that Tagore went on to found Shantiniketan and Viswa Bharati, both of which have long departed from the Socratic and humanistic ideal that inspired them, and which they were established to promote, 'now it is just like any other single-subject-model university, largely aiming at market impact' (2010: 19) However, both the school and the university were designed 'around the idea of critical thinking and empathetic imagining, an interdisciplinary liberal arts model. This is quite unlike most Indian and even European universities today, which have long been structured around the single-subject rather than the liberal arts paradigm' (ibid.). And the humanities are to be regarded as a critical component of a liberal arts education.

We may understand Nussbaum's phrase, 'structured around the single-subject', in a different sense—that the 'humanities' are structured around the *human* subject.[1] Prior to the Renaissance in Europe, the centralisation of authority in the feudal world, and its steep, almost rigid, pyramidal social structure, inevitably encouraged the production of discourses of knowledge that affirmed and reinforced this structure. Thus, the discourses of knowledge were centred mostly outside the individual, in the production and elaboration of ideas, concepts, postulates and principles that explained, justified, obfuscated and enforced the sharply uneven power distribution in this social structure—in 'God' (theology), in the world of 'God' (cosmology), in sovereignty and the monarch (law and jurisprudence), apart from

* Associate Professor, St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, New Delhi. Email: gabriel.karen@gmail.com

the traditional medieval disciplines of physic (or medicine), rhetoric, logic, mathematics, ethics, Greek and Latin (which were, in fact, the principles and media by and through which the other discourses were drawn; they justified the justifications, as it were) (Cruz 2003: 455–61; Scott 2006: 6–10). One cannot but draw attention to the profound irony here: disciplines that are today regarded as the mainstay of the 'humanities' are revealed to have actually emerged as measures to pre-empt any possible conception of 'the human' (as a common condition of being) from emerging.

Conventional wisdom generally maintains that the re-centring of these discourses onto their *human* subjects that occurred with, during and after the Renaissance was a consequence of the discovery of the ancient Greek and Latin worlds, and of the celebration of the human in them.[2] While this may well be the case, another very important factor here was the gradual disintegration of the feudal order itself, and the redistribution of power that came with the emergence of mercantile, and then industrial, capitalism. This new structure founded, explained and justified its emergence through the ideation and celebration of the human (Wolff and Resnick 2012: 10–12). This could sometimes turn paradoxical and tragic (e.g., the Faustian figure) in its quest to find the limits of the human; but it also became the basis of an entirely new theology – that of 'democracy' – and new jurisprudence – that of 'human rights'. The philosophy of 'humanism' that emerged in this period was thus the base on which a new set of discourses of knowledge was produced, and institutionally established as academic disciplines that sought to elaborate the many dimensions of human capacity (as opposed to divine authority) and human relations that lay outside the traditional, feudal knowledge systems – thus the emergence of fields like political economy, aesthetics, sociology, psychology, natural sciences, and so on.

It is in this context that we must locate the emergence of the 'humanities'. It is also in this context that we can understand how fields like rhetoric, logic, ethics and even mathematics (e.g., our BA in Maths) became part of the 'humanities'. From the 18th century onwards, the other disciplines became discernibly distinct as 'natural philosophy' (which subsequently disaggregated into the various sciences, excluding biology), 'natural history' (later, biology), and by the 19th century, the 'social sciences' (McElreavy et al 2018). The disciplines that remained were seen to be the 'purely' human fields of knowledge, i.e., the fields that defined and elaborated the capacities and abilities that are commonly, or universally, human,

untrammelled by the historical specificities of the social sciences, or the preoccupation with 'objectivity' of the natural sciences. In their very formation, then, the 'humanities' constituted the discursive basis and the ideological justification for the breaking of the feudal order, and – especially in the emergence of individualism – the establishment and consolidation of the capitalist orders.

It is important to understand the dynamics of this emergence of the humanities and its political implications clearly. As capitalism evolved and consolidated itself – from mercantile, to industrial, to imperial and colonial capitalism, and finally, to the contemporary blend of all of the above with globalised, transnational, finance capitalism – it needed to justify its emergence and existence less and less. The fall of the USSR and the Iron Curtain, and the characterisation of China as no longer practising communism but state-controlled capitalism, [3] has furthered and intensified the sense that capitalism needs no further justification or championing – the market is its own champion. Which is why, today, the 'humanities' are not only redundant to the new political economy, they hinder its further evolution by continuing to remain as a point of critique – only, this time against itself. The ideological basis on which capitalism evolved has now become a bothersome conscience. And this is the reason why the 'humanities' as we know them are in a crisis, looking for relevance in a world that has thoroughly marketised relevance itself. For over a decade now, it has been understood – especially by the corporates and governments who fund it – as a waste of time and space, because, when the market becomes its own justification, it also becomes the only acceptable justification for everything else that is associated with it – which, today, leaves very little out.

The dominance of the market, and of the epistemic trope of 'utility', in determining the relevance, value, significance, need for, desirability of, even the ethics and morality, of things and people, is exacerbated by technological innovation and change. The consequent diminution of the human in the face of mechanisation has not only led to the speeding up of work, but to the recalibration of time itself, in relation to body clocks and circadian rhythms having to adjust to the demands of industrial-mechanical schedules of operation (Hoffman 2009: 32; Klein 2007: 264-66). Further, extensive technological change has inevitably meant more and more intensive human–machine interfacing, and possibly less and less human–human contact. The emergence of ICT and new media technologies in particular has

impacted directly on human–human interface, radically overhauling the very means by which people communicate with each other. This has gradually filtered into education too, especially in technology-assisted pedagogies like the broadcasting of recorded lectures, obviating the physical presence of a teacher or lecturer. Whether intended or not, this increasing techno-centrism has effectively and increasingly rendered all communication, as well as communications media, technologically determined. One only has to see how prefabricated McDonaldized[4] emotions in the form of emojis and memes, for instance, have taken the place of emotional expressions on social media. The replacement of human subjectivity with machine simulacra is only likely to become more elaborate and pervasive as research into AI (artificial intelligence) grows.

The humanities are staging a comeback of sorts, at least in the US, albeit after a state-corporate approval of their utility, best enunciated by the US Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, in its 2013 Report, *The Heart of the Matter*. It observed that, when it comes to creating a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, 'the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common' (Commission 2013: 9). There have also been sturdy attempts from within the academe to protect and battle for the humanities. For instance, Martha Nussbaum reviews the gradual decline of the Socratic orientation so central to the liberal arts education in the USA, as pressure to marketise education gains intensity. Her argument is that the humanities and a liberal arts education are invaluable for the cultivation of rounded, active 'informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens' (2010: 51). 'Democratic decision-making itself is based on a shared knowledge of history, civics, and social studies. A thorough grounding in these subjects allows citizens to participate meaningfully in the democratic process—as voters, informed consumers, and productive workers' (Commission 2013: 10). Here, 'education is not just about the passive assimilation of facts and cultural traditions, but about challenging the mind to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical in a complex world' (Nussbaum 2010: 18). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also promotes the idea of the humanities as the point of critique against capitalism, but demands that we 'make future educators in the

humanities transnationally literate, so that they can distinguish between the varieties of decolonization on the agenda, rather than collapse them as "postcoloniality"' (2016: 152).

In very important ways, such a critique was made possible only through a humanistic approach. After all, the humanities have been thought of as that which reminds us of where we have been, helps us envision where we are going, and crucially, equips us with the wherewithal to get there in a critically self-aware way. How do we understand and manage change if we have no notion of the past? How do we understand ourselves if we have no notion of a society, culture, or world different from the one in which we live? A fully balanced curriculum—including the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences—provides opportunities for integrative thinking and imagination, for creativity and discovery, and for good citizenship. The humanities (and sometimes the social sciences too) go beyond the immediate and instrumental to help us understand the past and the future. 'They help us understand what it means to be fully human in all its complexity and calibration, and connect us with our global community' (Commission 2013: 9).

These, and other such defenses of the humanities, take recourse to revisiting and reiterating their original, historical role as a justification for the dismantling of an oppressive (feudal) order. They seek to convince the current global political and economic dispensation that the humanities can still be useful, even necessary, to its well-being.[5] Another interesting direction taken by the defense of the humanities is, similarly, to focus on their utility, but this time by modifying the discourse itself to render them more 'applicable'. Thus, over the last few years, we have witnessed the emergence of fields like 'medical humanities', 'digital humanities', and 'posthumanities' (which in fact already seeks to render the humanities finished). But the fact of the matter is that they seek to retain the humanities by transforming them into the very thing they are critical of: a marketable product. This is not to say that the skills, values and perspectives promoted by the humanities are becoming, or indeed have already become, redundant or inadequate. However, in 'a time when economic anxiety is driving a narrow concept of education focused on short-term payoffs, it is imperative that colleges, universities, and their supporters make a clear and convincing case for the value of liberal arts education' (Commission, 2013: 32) beyond its market utility.

It is in this context that we must locate our title phrase, 'The Critique of Utility and the Utility of Critique', and examine the significance here of its two key words, 'critique' and 'utility'. The critique of utility offered by the humanities manifestly illustrates the importance of – indeed, the necessity for – an education in the humanities. This may seem somewhat paradoxical, even contradictory: would not the critique be undone by its own utility? However, this ignores the fact that the two 'critiques' in the title do not signify the same thing: the first 'critique' is used as a verb, while the second is used as a noun. The significance of the first is governed mainly by (a) its object – 'utility'; and (b) its subject – the implicit critic; it therefore refers to a very specific critical event – a particular critique. The second 'critique', however, refers to 'critiques in general', so to speak – i.e., to the very concept of 'critique'. Its significance is therefore determined, not by any single instance or event, but by the larger debates on and around such events, which together constitute it, simultaneously, as a discourse, an epistemology (Wagner 2001) and a methodology. But even in this larger sense, 'critique' implicitly invokes the critiquing subject – the subject who *activates* it. It may exist as a discourse without directly invoking or referring to a specific subject, once activated – but even then, the activating subject remains an implicit referent of that discourse.

At first glance, the use of the term 'utility' appears to be along similar lines: the first instance of 'utility' refers to 'utility in general', to the concept and the debates around it, while the second refers to a very specific kind or instance of 'utility', viz., that of 'critique'. The difference, however, is that, unlike 'critique', 'utility' does not change from verb to noun between usages; it remains the same noun, with the same signification, even in two different cases. Its relative autonomy from an activating subject arises from the fact that it refers to the properties or attributes of a thing that render it utilisable, with or without an actively utilising subject. No doubt, it has to invoke a hypothetical utilizing subject in order to make sense of a given attribute or property as utilisable; but that is the extent of its premise of subjectivity. It effectively reduces and reifies subjectivity itself, to no more than the terms on which it becomes a 'user'. Consequently, perhaps inevitably, the introduction of subjectivity in the form of a critique of utility in a specific case immediately makes it an exception to the general one: the utility of critique can only make sense if we exempt it from our critique of utility, rather than see it as falsifying the latter.

The above, somewhat detailed exposition on the title, was prefatory to the following propositions regarding knowledge:

(1) As French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault reminds us, different systems of classification register the different epistemes by which different cultures organise knowledge ([1989] 2002).[6] One such classification could be that, there are broadly two kinds of knowledge, produced by two systems of knowledge production. These are:

(a) knowledge of things that may be, are, or will be used by humans, including of humans who may be (treated as, or perceived to be) 'usable' things; and

(b) knowledge of humans as subjects and subjectivities, and of human societies as collectives of such; this may or may not be 'usable', since 'usability' is not the primary focus of such knowledge.

(2) The former kind of knowledge is easily monetised and marketised, given its focus on 'usability'. The continuing evolution and spread of (the multiple forms of) capitalism has ensured that the latter kind of knowledge has also come to be defined more and more along these lines.

(3) The humanities and social sciences both engage with the human – with the idea of being 'human' – but it is only in and through the humanities that the *continuously mutating, morphing, flux of human subjectivities, as they engage with the world,* is mapped and narrated.

(4) This mapping-and-narration is inherently transitory; its claims and assertions are neither entirely verifiable or ascertainable, nor entirely falsifiable or questionable; its predictive power is unreliable, at best, and absent or inaccurate, at worst. Thus, the knowledges claimed by the disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology, literature, theatre, music – i.e., all the humanities – are not constituted objectively but *inter-subjectively*.

(5) Originally a term from psychoanalysis, 'intersubjectivity' is gaining traction (even if not always clarity) in the broader field of humanities and social science discourse to

refer to processes of dialogic, empathic consensus- building around subjective experiences, to construct these as shared experiences.[7]

(6) This is not to be confused with another, similar, older and perhaps more well-known idea, viz., 'the social construction of reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The latter emphasises the 'given-ness', as it were, of the social realities into which an individual is born, suggesting thereby that the individual's agency in shaping his/her reality is rather limited by the pre-existing, 'given' conditions. 'Intersubjectivity', in contrast, with its emphasis on dialogue, communication and consensus-building, suggests a greater agential role for the individual in determining his/her reality.

(7) This emphasis on the intersubjective constitution of (certain kinds of) knowledge then, is an affirmation of the subject and of subjectivity, beyond the reifying claims of the discourse of 'utility', and serves as the basis for the 'critique of utility' that we have been preoccupied with here.

(8) More significantly, it offers a new way to conceptualise the 'humanities' outside the prescriptions and prerequisites set by the discourse of 'utility'. Propositionally, it allows us to conceptualise the 'humanities' as the field of knowledge concerned precisely with the ways in which this intersubjectivity is constituted. Its objective in this sense is to register and record the dynamics between the various subjectivities that together constitute this intersubjectivity, whether as politics, history, theology, literature, etc.

Through these propositions I have tried to set out the particular significance of the critique of utility for us today: the current order of things in a globalising and economically challenging, increasingly instrumental and fragile world, is uncertainty. The origins and causes of that fragility and uncertainty are probably several, if not many; but one of them, certainly, is the gradual devaluation and marginalisation of the articulation – perhaps even the cognition – of those uncertainties as the traces of a legitimate knowledge: that of subjectivity and the subject. Of course, these global fragilities and uncertainties have been, and continue to be, mapped and discoursed upon assiduously, elaborately, in fields like economics, sociology, international relations, and so on, but as 'objective' realities, governed and regulated by known, knowable mechanisms and processes (usually either state-centric or market-centric).

This 'objective' knowledge is pursued and encouraged precisely because it has enormous 'utility'. In contrast, the fields that actually explore and articulate this uncertainty in terms of the personal, subjective, experiential knowledge of it, i.e., the humanities, are not encouraged.

Hence, 'far from being financial or career suicide to major in a Humanities subject', what is required more than ever are the 'transferable skills of humanistic studies—flexibility, adaptability, critical analysis, clear oral and written communication—which are solid preparation for that uncertain future' (Task Force 2015: 3). At the same time, however, they ought not to serve as a means to facilitate the oppression and exploitation inevitable in capitalism. They ought not to become feeders to the advertising and management practices that constitute the ideological backbone of capitalism. Rather, there is an urgent need to revisit and revive the political origins of the humanities, which it has forgotten, or been forced to forget, as capitalism has evolved. A renewed politicisation of the humanities is absolutely essential, which it has tended to eschew; by sacrificing that political heart, in order to cater to its economic underbelly, the humanities is not renewing itself, it is only eating itself into a corpse. This, then, must be the future we need to chart for the humanities: allow it to become the basis of a new political vision, of an imagination that can transcend and go beyond the capital-shaped world.

Notes

1 The 19th century German educationalist Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer is credited with inventing the term 'humanism' 'to describe a high-school and university curriculum based on what have been known since the Middle Ages as the "humanities": the study of ancient Greek and Latin, and of the literature, history and culture of the peoples who spoke them' (Davies 1997: 9ff).

2 Tony Davies identifies Jacob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian, as the first proponent of this view (Davies 1997: 15ff).

3 Generally attributed to Ian Bremmer (2009).

4 In the sense captured so aptly by sociologist George Ritzer in his book, *The McDonaldization of Society* ([1993]2004), which identified predictability, calculability, efficiency and control as the four main elements of this phenomenon. When applied to emotions and affects, they offer a version of 'subjectivity' that has nothing uncertain about it.

5 A similar point is made by Slavoj Zizek, but very briefly, in passing, when he refers to the growing trend of a 'return to ethics', especially through disciplines within the humanities like political science, as symptomatic of the success of capitalism (Zizek 2000: 127).

6 The knowledge classification schematised here is not unlike Foucault's own classification of 'the human sciences' as excluded from the others (ibid.: 378-81). Foucault's prediction that the 'human' would be erased from the field of knowledge in due course is also reminiscent of the gradual erasure of the subject in Higher Education, as it comes increasingly under big corporate sway.

7 For succinct accounts of the concept of 'intersubjectivity', see Crossley (1996); Adams (2011); and McGraw (2012).

References

Adams, William A. 2011. 'The Development of Intersubjectivity'. Presented at *Psychology & the Other Conference,* 1–3 October. Cambridge, MA. Available at http://billadamsphd.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Dev-of-Isuby-V11-Final.pdf

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books.

Bremmer, Ian. 2009. 'State Capitalism Comes of Age: The End of the Free Market?' *Foreign Affairs,* May/June. Available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2009-05-01/state-capitalism-comes-age

Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences. 2013. *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences For a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation*. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Available at http://files.webservices.illinois.edu/2882/the_heart_of_the_matter___report.pdf

Crossley, Nick. 1996. *Intersubjectivity: The Fabric of Social Becoming. Philosophy and Social Criticism*. London: Sage.

Cruz, Jo Ann H. Moran. 2003. 'England: Education and Society', in S.H. Rigby (ed.), *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages* (The Historical Association). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Davies, Tony. 1997. *Humanism*. *The New Critical Idiom* Series. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel [1989] 2002. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.

Hoffman, Eva (2009). *Time*. London: Profile Books

Klein, Stefan. 2007. *The Secret Pulse of Time: Making Sense of Life's Scarcest Commodity.* Trans. Shelley Frisch. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Mcelreavy, Christine Victoria Tobin, Taylor Martin, Mickayla Bea Damon, Nicole Crate, Andrew Godinez and Kayleigh Bennett (eds.). 2018.
'The History of the Academy and the Disciplines', in *Interdisciplinary Studies: A Connected Learning Approach*, a collaborative e-book curated by Robin DeRosa. Available under Creative Commons licence at https://press.rebus.community/idsconnect/

McGraw, John J. 2012. 'What is Intersubjectivity?' *THERE Journal of Design,* 8: 72–77.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Ritzer, George [1993] 2004. *The McDonaldization of Society. Revised New Century Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scott, John C. 2006. 'The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations', *The Journal of Higher Education* ,77(1) (January/February): 1-39

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2012. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Task Force. 2015. *Report of the Task Force on the Future of the Humanities at Princeton University*. Princeton University. October. Available at https://www.princeton.edu/strategicplan/files/Humanities-Task-Force-report-2015.pdf

Wagner, Peter. 2001. 'Epistemology and Critique', *European Journal of Social Theory,* 4(3): 284-87.

Wolff, Richard D. and Stephen A. Resnick. 2012. *Contending Economic Theories: Neoclassical, Keynesian, and Marxian*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2000. 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!' in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso.