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Democratic Citizenship and the “Crisis in Humanities”

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Abstract: As a consequence of the recent global recession, a new “crisis in the humanities” has been declared, and ideas of how best to defend the humanities have been vigorously debated. Placing this “crisis” in the context of neoliberal reforms to higher education since the 1980s, I examine the argument expounded by Martha Nussbaum that the very foundation of democratic citizenship is at stake. I indicate a number of problems with Nussbaum’s case. First, to resist the neoliberal agenda that pits disciplines against one another, I maintain that we need to understand the humanities broadly to include the social sciences. Second, I indicate that the humanities are not just important to democracies, but are a vital aspect of any society because they form a crucial part of human existence. Third, I argue that the humanities are important to democratic societies not merely because they promote critical thinking about our political processes and sympathetic understanding as Nussbaum argues. More fundamentally, the diversity of the humanities in both their content and approaches to knowledge is central to freedom. Finally, I warn against framing the challenges facing the humanities in terms of a crisis discourse that deprecates freedom in accord with the neoliberal agenda.

Keywords: humanities; crisis; Martha Nussbaum; neoliberalism; higher education reforms; democratic citizenship; diversity; freedom

1. Introduction

In the fall out from the recent global recession, commentators on higher education in the United States have emphatically declared a “crisis in the Humanities” [1–5]. Yet, in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—the three countries I possess most familiarity with—recent proposals to prioritize technocratic skills and business needs are merely the latest in a long line of neoliberal

reforms to higher education that were initiated in the 1980s when academic autonomy was first arrested [6–9]. During Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, academics lost security of tenure and the university grants committee that had been run by academics was replaced with a funding committee on which academics constituted a minority. Priority was also placed in funding student places in accord with the national priority for “highly qualified manpower” [9]. Since then, universities have been increasingly transformed into business corporations with the introduction of student fees for domestic students in 1981, and the need to generate funds from external sources seen as a core role of the academic enterprise. The Higher Education Funding Council for England is now located in the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, the “department for economic growth” [10], and in the budget cuts to public funding in 2010, the humanities and arts were targeted causing outcry among their advocates [11]. As in the United States, when dealing with scarce resources, politicians in Britain have tended to favor the sciences over the humanities.

Though neoliberal reforms in Australia and New Zealand have followed their own unique trajectories, governments in these countries have often taken their lead from higher education reforms initiated in the United Kingdom. The result has been no less than a mini-revolution in the higher education sector, one that has affected the sciences, as well as the humanities. In a climate where the profit-motive reigns supreme, the commodification of the sector has seen many scientists struggling to defend the importance of their non-applied research that will never have any direct commercial value. Nonetheless, from the perspective of some in the humanities, even having an indirect potential to contribute to the profit-motive is an enviable position to be in. What is undeniable is that within this climate, advocates for the humanities have been scrambling to produce arguments in their defense, and to justify the very existence of some fields of study whose use-value to the present and/or business has been less than immediately obvious. For some, like Martha Nussbaum, the very “future of democratic self-government” ([1], p. 2) is at stake.

In this paper, I maintain, like Nussbaum, that the study of the humanities plays a vital role in the promotion of empathy, and the development of self-examining thinkers with the knowledge and analytical abilities to question political authority. Nevertheless, I indicate that an exclusive focus on this argument poses the danger of prioritizing certain disciplines over those whose contribution to democratic self-government is less evident. I argue instead that the importance of the humanities lies in its diversity in both its content and approaches to knowledge. The value of the humanities extends beyond its use-value to business or the democratic polity by helping us understand human existence in all its manifestations. It is also this diversity that forms the foundation stone of freedom and that we therefore have a duty to foster. It is precisely this diversity that is threatened, however, by the neoliberal agenda that privileges its singular conception of freedom based on profit. If we are to resist this neoliberal agenda, we need to form alliances wherever possible by widening the debate and asking more fundamental questions about the kind of society we wish to live in. For, the neoliberal attack on diversity and its creation of perpetual crises poses a serious risk not just to the humanities, but also to the free individual everywhere.

2. Defining the Humanities

Before I proceed to the main argument, it is first necessary to clarify what I mean by the humanities. In *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum claims exclusively to promote the humanities, which she

distinguishes from both the sciences and social sciences, because “nobody is suggesting leaving these [other] studies behind” ([1], p. 7). By contrast, in its 2013 report, *The Heart of the Matter*, the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences identifies the humanities and social sciences, unlike the physical and biological sciences, as together possessing unique problems due to a lack of investment in the United States [12]. For example, Congress is currently considering a 22% cut to the National Science Foundation’s Social, Behavioral and Economics Sciences Directorate [13]. Likewise, in the 2010 cutbacks to higher education in Britain, the social sciences were targeted along with the humanities [14]. In Australia, during the 2013 election campaign, Prime Minister Tony Abbott promised that “wasteful” and “futile” research would no longer be funded through grants from the Australian Research Council. The four projects highlighted for criticism expanded across the arts, humanities, and social sciences [15,16]. Nussbaum indicates that supporters of economic growth fear artists who are “not the reliable servants of any ideology” ([1], p. 24); but this is no less the case with academics in the fields of social and political thought, as well as many social scientists who conduct empirical work that challenges increased inequities and other injustices perpetuated by their governments.

Neoliberalism operates by pitting universities, departments, and individual researchers against each other in an attempt artificially to increase “market” competition. Collegiality across departments—and often within them due to competition for scarce resources among fields within a discipline—is broken down as academics compete with each other to attract student numbers as a source of income. The research output of universities and departments are regularly assessed, and league tables produced. These exceptionally time consuming and expensive surveillance exercises militate against the development of collegial relations across disciplines and institutions. Although it is a normal reaction when under attack to bunker down and defend one’s own turf, strategically it is crucial to resist this temptation by forming alliances wherever possible.

In the case of the humanities and “social sciences”, many would also dispute that they are easily demarcated as separate intellectual enterprises. Both assist us to understand the human world including its impact on the non-human world, whilst the sciences focus on the natural world. The American Academy defines the humanities as “the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, and the arts”, whilst the social sciences include the disciplines of “anthropology, economics, political science and government, sociology, and psychology”. The social sciences, it claims, “examine and predict behavioral and organizational processes” by “[e]mploying the observational and experimental methods of the natural sciences”. The impetus for “non-scientific” disciplines to prove their “scientific” credibility goes at least as far back as the seventeenth century when Descartes “denied to history any claim to be a serious study” ([17], p. 103). In an effort to establish history as a viable field of study, many thinkers during the eighteenth century adopted scientific methods in an attempt to uncover fundamental laws governing history and the behavior of human societies. Yet, as much as positivism has been (and still is) evident in departments of political science and government in the United States, it is also highly contested within the United States and largely rejected outside it. Debates over methodology in all of the so-called “social sciences” seriously question the veracity of the Academy’s claim that they apply the methods of the natural sciences. On the contrary, whilst we deal with facts, many of us consider our work is far more “artistic” and interpretative ([17], p. 132).

Although a detailed discussion of methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, recognition of the interdependence between the humanities and social sciences shows how important the humanities are

and the scope of their influence. When the humanities are broadly understood to include the social sciences, the impetus to justify the value of these disciplines on the extent to which they conform to the sciences where “real” knowledge is attained is radically disrupted. Scholars in the humanities need not apologize for failing to be scientists, or see themselves as engaged in an increasingly marginalized sphere of activity, but they can stand on their own intellectual strength based on their difference and re-position their place as center stage in the study of the human world.

Moreover, Nussbaum’s democratic argument that promotes “[t]he ability to think well about political issues” and “[t]he ability to judge political leaders critically, but with an informed and realistic sense of the possibilities available to them” ([1], pp. 25, 26) is dependent on equipping students with the knowledge provided in the “social sciences” and, in particular, political studies. Anthropology with its focus on culture; sociology with its attention to class, race, and gender studies; and human geography with its interest in development also provide crucial insights into our own and other societies that assist students better to understand the complex world in which we live and that have the potential to influence policy-making. Nussbaum ([1], pp. 23–24) rightly indicates that literature and the arts have the ability to open our eyes to new ways of viewing our world and to increase sympathy between people, but so do the study of different cultures and the plight of people that face social, sexual, and racial oppression in the present. It thus does no service to the humanities in Nussbaum’s own terms of their value to democracy to divorce them from the social sciences. Indeed, in her chapter on creating citizens of the world, she concedes the importance of economics, history, and political science along with language learning in the creation of a multicultural education ([1], p. 91).

3. The Democratic Argument

Let us therefore examine more closely the argument for the humanities—when we understand them broadly—for the creation of the kind of citizens we need in order to maintain a healthy democracy. Nussbaum’s case is three-fold. First, the humanities specialize in the promotion of the “cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection [that] are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake”. Second, the knowledge contained in studying other cultures and the international political economy “is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world”. Third and finally, humanities and the arts are adept at cultivating empathy with others and sympathy for their circumstances, which need “to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that modern society contains” ([1], p. 10).

Arguably, these skills are necessary for all societies and not merely democratic ones. Sympathy and compassion are not uniquely democratic values, but feature in a range of moral and religious traditions. Nor do the humanities and the arts necessarily promote these values. As Nussbaum ([1], pp. 28–29, 35, 109) realizes, antidemocratic movements have been highly effective in their utilization of the arts to foster hatred toward marginalized groups, and many stories perpetuate misleading caricatures and sexist stereotypes. Whilst the arts cultivate the imagination, that imagination can be dark and brooding, as can human existence. If we look, moreover, to the political values and personal lives of many artists whose works we admire, they will often disappoint in terms of their empathy for others. Philosophers, too, are not well-known historically for their progressive gender relations, and

contra Nussbaum's claims about the democratic features of Socrates' approach to knowledge, Socrates far from supports democratic values in *The Republic* [18].

The challenges of multiculturalism and globalization extend well beyond democratic boundaries. Non-democratic societies that previously focused one-sidedly on the promotion of technical skills are increasingly recognizing the value of the humanities in fostering innovation and understanding in a globalized world [19]. For example, in a 2012 Humanities Educators' Conference with the theme "Fostering Critical Thinking, Inspiring Active Learning", the Minister for Education in Singapore, Heng Swee Keat, declared:

Humanities educators play a vital role in preparing our young people as Singaporeans with a global outlook. Our students need civic literacy, global awareness and cross-cultural skills so that they can interact with people of diverse backgrounds with confidence and empathy. They should also be able to think critically and creatively when solving problems at work and in life, and tackle problems that do not even exist today [20].

The Hong Kong Academy for the Humanities was also established in 2011 to promote the value of the humanities. The kinds of questions posed in the humanities about the things that concern us; the ways in which we view them, that is, the categories in which we understand our world; and the imaginative impulse to view things differently are at the core of human experience whether it is democratic or otherwise.

Yet many would concur with Nussbaum that the humanities are particularly vital to a well-functioning democracy. As she writes: "Democratic participation makes wider demands, and it is these wider demands that my primary argument supports" ([1], p. 11). For one, democracy depends upon people participating in the political system at the very least through the great majority of the population voting in regular elections. If those voters are literate, informed about social and political processes in the past and present, and can think critically so they do not simply accept without question whatever politicians and the media claim—all of which are skills the humanities specialize in developing—the general belief is that we will have a more robust political system with leaders kept adequately in check by being held accountable for their actions. Thus, democratic leaders and philosophers from Thomas Jefferson to John Stuart Mill have argued for the importance of universal education to the development of representative democracy ([21], p. 280).

There is nevertheless a tension here highlighted by Mill's logic that led him to argue that the more qualified one is, the more votes one deserves ([21], pp. 284–86). Few would accept the elitism of that argument today, in part, because the more egalitarian argument entailed in the idea of the right to vote predominates. One needs no skills to vote; it is simply a right accorded to human beings by virtue of their citizenship in a democratic polity. That right is commonly interpreted also to entail a right not to vote derived from the more general liberal right of one's freedom to do as one wishes as long as one does not infringe on others' freedom. The liberal framing of this right is therefore divorced from any notion of a duty to participate that, as David Miller indicates, is more indebted to a republican conception of citizenship [22]. It is also based on the assumption that no one is in a better position to understand one's interests than oneself. One might decide that one's interests are best served by supporting a party that attempts to create a peaceful society that is committed to a reduction of inequity, but one might

think otherwise. The idea that the individual ought to be free to pursue his or her own conception of the good plays a central role in both liberal and libertarian thought alike.

Not all liberals, however, believe that freedom is merely a matter of being left alone. Nussbaum challenges this classical liberal conception and champions a conception of freedom based on self-governance. Freedom requires “good” citizens—and not just an elite few—who understand the importance of democratic participation. This requires that they are not only critical thinkers, but also sympathetic toward others so they do not merely consider their self-interest in their political decision-making. For this reason, she rejects the current emphasis on vocational training and technical skills, and instead promotes a “good” education that “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” ([1], p. 18). It is also an education that gears its instruction and the kind of books that are read toward those that develop people’s compassion and empathy for others ([1], p. 37). These are laudable goals and whilst I might disagree with her focus on Socrates as an appropriate model for a democratic interlocutor, who promotes the empathy, humility, and respectful listening skills essential for intercultural dialogue, I sympathize with her desire to develop self-examining and critical thinkers who possess the empathetic skills to understand others in their own terms.

Another side to democracy is nonetheless evident in the way it operates in many advanced industrial societies today. Mass participation is minimized in favor of representation by politicians whose loyalties—whether they are to a party whip with the power to deselect them or lobby groups with the funds to devastate their next election campaign—often override any concern they might have to listen to their constituents. The professionalism of political life—or what is called the presidentialism of the prime minister’s role in Westminster systems of government—has accorded greater power to leaders who in some cases even fail to listen to the advice of their cabinet ministers in favor of their own network of analysts [23]. Parties have become increasingly run from the center with the voices of their members having minimal impact so that membership has been in rapid decline. In the United Kingdom, for example, only 1% of the electorate was a member of one of the three major parties in 2010, compared to 3.8% in 1983 ([24], p. 2). Similar trends have been reported in Australia [25] and New Zealand ([26], pp. 236–37). Mass demonstrations—as were evident in the United Kingdom and Australia prior to the Iraq war—also have had little, or no, effect on political decisions.

It is in the interests of those in power even in democracies to ensure the populace does not become thoughtful and critical about our political processes. If parties increasingly want to control their internal dynamics in a top-down manner, they are not looking for alternative perspectives. The irony of neoliberalism in the higher education sector, too, has been greater government control over the sector by reducing academic freedom and expanding bureaucratic control. Between 2003–2004 and 2008–2009, professional managers in the British tertiary sector increased by 33% and academics only by 10% [27], whilst Australia now has a sector with 55% non-academic staff across all universities [28]. Though administrative staff are crucial in supporting academics in their research and teaching, this bureaucratic growth has often been accompanied by a decline in academic control over core activities in favor of hierarchical line management and greater government control in determining national priorities. A range of compliance mechanisms have been developed from the United Kingdom’s Quality Assurance Agency that oversees course design and learning outcomes for students to annual performance audits for academic staff. Often the justification is greater democratic accountability; if

taxpayers' money is involved, then we need to develop open mechanisms to ensure they receive value for money. The institutional culture that has ensued in many places is based on the premise that academics are not to be trusted to perform well without punitive surveillance measures in place [29]. By contrast, the new managers are rarely, if ever, accountable for their decisions to the teaching and research community that (in theory, at least) they are meant to serve.

The answer to reducing bureaucratic control is not to reduce government funding; on the contrary, bureaucratic growth has operated in tandem with decreased funding. Where universities in Australia have been given autonomy, it has been in terms of increasing non-government avenues for income generation but that, in turn, has merely justified further the shift away from academic control within universities in favor of increasing business and managerial interests. Money is redirected from teaching less popular or expensive courses irrespective of their educational value toward marketing campaigns, glossy mission statements, and expensive compliance mechanisms. Meanwhile, individual academics are routinely gagged from commenting on areas beyond their field of expertise such as administrative decisions that affect their working lives ([29], p. 32; [30]). We have a product to sell, so we need to keep any disgruntlement in house, and on a business model we need happy consumers. This means our students need to be proud of their institution, and believe it is at the forefront of research and teaching innovation. The upholding of this image means the impetus is strong to sacrifice critical thinking about the direction of our institutions and government mechanisms that measure our performance. Despite all the cynicism that exists, for example, toward the New Zealand Performance-Based Research Fund exercise due to the ways its rules can be manipulated by various universities and disciplines to their advantage, we all nonetheless complied in submitting our portfolios, and our institutions simply looked for the best spin they could make with the statistical data. Conformity to the rules of the game—no matter how much they are found wanting by thoughtful, critical people—is what counts.

Of course, there is a degree of merit in the notion of the happy consumer. Many academics are, for example, committed to teaching students well, and hope they will receive positive student evaluations in recognition of their work. Does being a good educator necessarily correlate, however, with happy students? It does according to the neoliberal model of education that focuses on providing skills training, but is it really my job, as a political theorist, to make all my students feel comfortable so they leave my lecture with a satisfied smile? Or is it my role to challenge them so they feel decidedly uncomfortable at some point during a semester? Is confusion, at least initially, not an important step in learning new concepts and ways of thinking? To be sure, there are better and worse ways to guide students through that process, but confusion is unavoidable as they learn to assess difficult material for themselves. Sometimes, too, no matter how much we simplify philosophical material so it is more accessible to our students, it can be difficult and even tortuous to read and engage with. Yet, we consider it worthwhile for the insights that are gleaned by doing so. Hence, there remains the importance for students at a certain stage in their development to read the originals for themselves so they can determine what they think of them rather than experience them only through others' interpretations. As much as some students might wish to be shown the "right" way, it is not our role simply to replace their current ideology with a new one and thereby produce followers for our cause. A commitment to critical thinking about society and our role in it is about letting the desire to control others go, and constitutes a radically subversive position also in contemporary democratic societies.

Thus, whilst I concur with Nussbaum on the benefit of nurturing thoughtful, critical thinkers in our respective societies, we first need to ask more fundamental questions about the kind of democratic society we wish to live in. We also need to examine our role in society as academics and the part we play in perpetuating the current neoliberal agenda. To take just one example, “the publish or perish mentality” has been keenly pursued by academics wishing to obtain tenure and promotion, but it is having dire consequences in many of our disciplines where we know that the greatest figures in our fields would never have produced the works we admire if they had faced similar strictures. Thoughtful, considered thinking takes time, and whilst increased funding to employ more academics in the humanities would considerably assist in this regard, the current challenges facing the humanities cannot be reduced solely to a funding issue.

Nussbaum has produced a spirited defense of the humanities by appealing to a tradition of education she identifies in the United States that is based on critical thinking rather than the profit-motive. She also ([1], p. 93) recommends the American liberal arts model that includes general courses for all students—over the kind of specialization that exists in European countries—for all democratic countries. There are certainly advantages to a model that combines the development of more technical and scientific skills with the incorporation of humanities subjects. One is that the value of the humanities in enriching people’s worldview is recognized by diverse groups in society including engineers and scientists [31]. However, in terms of the democratic value of the American liberal arts degree, it is noteworthy that whilst the voter turnout rate in the United States is now comparable to that in Britain, it is far worse than in New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark ([32]; [33], p. 53). Also, Europe possesses a long tradition of producing some of the most radical and critical thinkers in the humanities. There is thus more than one educational model at the tertiary level that can achieve critically informed, democratic participation.

4. The Importance of Diversity

The danger of focusing solely on the democratic value of the humanities is that it can readily lead to the prioritization of certain disciplines within it such as political studies. Somewhat surprisingly, Nussbaum does not propose the study of politics; instead, as a philosopher, she prioritizes the compulsory teaching of two philosophy courses including logic. Yet the privileging of one form of thinking over another is highly problematic. As a scholar indebted more to the German tradition of philosophy, I am less enamored with the advantages of the Anglo-American analytic tradition that still dominates many philosophy departments in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. As Isaiah Berlin ([34], p. 19; [35]) indicates, a sentence can be both logical and grammatical, but nonetheless nonsensical. Logicians are also deeply divided over what constitutes a “good” proposition. Honing one’s debating skills can be a valuable exercise, as Nussbaum suggests, particularly if one is planning on a political career. Debates are nonetheless directed toward the winning of an argument, something that can interfere with the kind of listening skills required for genuine intercultural dialogue. Nussbaum maintains that the Socratic legacy of reasoning she supports is not about winners and losers because Socrates submits himself to the same examination as he does his interlocutors so “all are equal in the face of the argument” ([1], p. 51). Yet, in *The Protagoras*, by determining the rules of the discussion on his terms, Socrates delegitimizes alternative modes of argumentation and thereby increases his chance to regain the upper-hand in the dialogue [36]. The strength of the

humanities instead lies in teaching us that there is not one way to argue, and not one way to foster critical thinking.

At the university level, too, the argument for gearing the books that are read toward those that promote empathy is deeply contentious. Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* is no less important to read on the subject of power because it advocates violence [37]. Through literature and drama, too, we learn about the complexity of human existence and much of that is not directed toward empathy or compassion. It is the diversity of human experience that the humanities excel in illuminating and that enable us to gain greater understanding of our existence. We can, of course, teach empathy as a methodology aimed at attempting to understand others' arguments and experiences from their perspective. However, whilst I adopt such a hermeneutic method in my classes, it is a different proposition to consider making it mandatory. The disputes I have, for example, with rational choice theory, or positivism, or realist approaches to international relations constitute debates that need to be conducted, not legislated upon. Sometimes we hear students complain if a course adopts a particular ideology or framework of thinking with which they do not agree. In contemporary neoliberal times, Marxist academics, for example, are bound to run against the grain. Yet knowledge within the humanities operates within different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, and whilst I promote critical thinking by teaching a range of philosophical perspectives on a topic, there also remains considerable value in learning from a scholar immersed within a tradition. To teach our students to respect this diversity by being open to learn from it, we need to support it within our respective fields.

For, the value of the humanities collectively lies in its diversity in both its content and approaches to knowledge. Medieval history is important for both the research skills it provides its students and to understanding the present, but even if I do not benefit directly from the knowledge generated by colleagues in medieval history it does not follow that it possesses no value. Also, if courses in international relations attract a hundred more students than those in medieval history, it does not mean that they have a hundred times more value. Nor is it the case that because international relations might inform students so that they become more considered voters, and I thereby benefit as a citizen of a state with more peaceful foreign relations, that courses without a similar missionary intent have no value. Indeed, if such benefits to society were the standard of success for the humanities, we would need to conclude that they have been to this date an abject failure. Moreover, while I may never individually benefit from the existence of courses in medieval history, they nevertheless enrich the society in which I live. It might be objected that I therefore obtain the kind of instrumental benefit I would with improving our democratic system, but in the case of medieval history it is highly probable that I will remain entirely divorced from any direct benefit from its teaching. By contrast, even people who never vote would benefit if the decisions of their politicians were based on a more informed understanding of world affairs.

Nevertheless, I do possess an interest in being a member of a society that cherishes diversity and I therefore possess a duty to sustain its diversity. I may never take a class in medieval history, but having the option to do so increases my freedom of choice. More importantly than my self-interest, it provides freedom to those students and historians who specialize in the field to do so. Although I might not wish to follow that path, it is possible that my neighbor or friends' child might. While neoliberals claim that they allow everyone to pursue their own conception of the good, in practice, they narrowly conceive freedom in market terms. In current education policy, for example, arguments about

autonomy form the basis to reward those subjects that attract greater student numbers and to cut those that fail to have mass appeal.

At the same time, however, the market can be understood in more liberal terms. Thus, John Stuart Mill insists in *On Liberty* on the importance of diversity to freedom of expression ([21], pp. 116–17). As he argues, it is possible to find insights in a range of material also when one otherwise disagrees with it, and even if 99% of people agree a publication is egregious, it is always possible that those 99% of people are wrong. Enabling the market place of ideas to flourish unfettered by censorship is seen as essential to the capacity to learn and progress. According to Mill, we should therefore “thank” those “who contest a received opinion”, and “open our minds to listen to them” ([21], p. 105).

Few in the humanities today would accept so uncritically the idea of a “free” market place of ideas undistorted by power relations. Many would also add the caveat that when confronted with hate material of various kinds, there ought to be limits to freedom of expression. Yet Mill’s argument with respect to diversity and freedom for which he was indebted to the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt maintains its relevance; if the profit-motive becomes the sole criterion for what is taught at tertiary level so that entire fields are rendered redundant, then censorship is exponentially increased. It might be covert rather than overt censorship, but it is no less effective. Historians will still be able to access library books on medieval times and conduct their own research even if the teaching of a course in their field is considered irrelevant, but as publishing options wither away in response so, too, will the incentive to work in the field. If students never have exposure to medieval history, extraordinary initiative by individuals will moreover be necessary for them ever to consider it as a field of endeavor. Whenever the market closes another door to their possible endeavors, the freedom of future generations is thus diminished.

It does not follow that the autonomous critical thinker favored by Mill and many liberals is the only appropriate model to adopt. Mill advocated a life so dedicated to autonomy that he made invalid alternative forms of life more devoted to reverence [21]. We could also follow Nussbaum’s Socratic method of reasoning in our study of alternative traditions of thought, as we would examine our own. However, to do so, before we have attempted to understand them in their own terms and to appreciate them from the perspective of the people for whom they possess meaning, means we are liable to miss any wisdom they might possess in our attempt to assimilate them into our own way of thinking and examining. Thus, we will also fail to fulfill the more primary role of the humanities that unites its various disciplines, namely, to help us understand human existence in all its diversity.

The aesthetic value of the humanities and its creative dimension have been recognized throughout history, and fulfill an important part of who we are as human beings by enlivening our imaginations in multifarious ways. This value is not reducible to the capacity of the humanities to teach us empathy or sympathy, or their usefulness to democratic participation, or their ability to help us understand the present, despite the importance of these ends. When a poet eloquently describes nature, he or she can open our eyes to a new way of viewing the world, but a poet’s propensity to transport us to the sublime is a significant achievement in itself. There is not one way of experiencing the humanities, just as there is not one way of being human. The strength of the humanities as a whole lies precisely in this diversity. For this reason, too, the value of the humanities extends far beyond democratic societies.

5. The Neoliberal Politics of Crisis and Fear

It is this diversity, however, that is currently under threat from neoliberal policies. The dilemma we face is not whether the humanities will survive; the importance of the humanities and the skills they provide are sufficiently well understood in democratic societies that the demise of the humanities is nowhere seriously countenanced. Yet the humanities are being transformed, and the question we confront is to what extent its diversity will be impoverished. In some UK universities, scarce resources have resulted in the closing of departments deemed irrelevant and the burgeoning of others considered more viable in attracting student numbers. In England between 2006 and 2012, full-time undergraduate degree courses fell by 31% (27% throughout the UK), restricting student choice [38]. Within departments, too, academics vie for the intellectual importance of their subjects against their colleagues more concerned to ensure student popularity. In departments of politics, this has often led to a prioritization of papers dealing with current international affairs or domestic public policy over those more difficult courses devoted to the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline. Of course, diversity will always be less in smaller departments and universities. It would also be naïve to suggest we entirely ignore the pressures to attract student numbers. However, neither students nor university administrators are in the best position to know the educational value of particular topics to a discipline, and wherever possible we need to resist the pressures to concede solely to their demands by protecting the diversity of our offerings.

Where academic control over educational content has already been lost, such resistance may be unfeasible. Thus, it is crucial for academics where they still possess a level of autonomy to resist attempts to remove it. Effective resistance can only exist, however, when academics put aside their urges either to protect their particular field in a way that casts other academic fields, like the sciences, as the threat, or to exploit an opportunity for expansion of their particular interest within their discipline when it is at the expense of others. Above all, to protect the pluralism on which the intellectual integrity of our disciplines is dependent, the forming of alliances wherever possible both within our own disciplines and across them is vital. As noted above, the liberal arts structure in the United States might have advantages in this regard. However, great scientists everywhere recognize the value of the humanities, and those who do not might be convinced at least by the need to protect non-applied research. If the Australian case is a potential gage of the development of neoliberal reforms in higher education, it is also naïve to think that the sciences will not elsewhere be eventually affected more directly. In the 2014 Australian federal budget, for example, research funding to the sciences in all areas other than medical research was cut by A\$450 million in addition to the A\$470 million over the previous two budgets [39]. The issues at stake are not merely a concern for those of us in the humanities.

Yet the framing of these challenges in terms of a crisis discourse is counterproductive. The politics of neoliberalism is characterized by the creation of crises. To be sure, crises are not entirely manufactured. The terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon were momentous, but the “war on terror” that was subsequently created by the Bush administration effectively placed the world in a permanent state of crisis. Having established we were in a perpetual warlike condition—with a war on terror never winnable—then the imminent threat of Saddam Hussein and his alleged weapons of mass destruction were employed to justify the US-led attack on Iraq.

Having created a crisis, governments then offer solutions to calm the fear they have generated. Rational and critical thinking is in the meantime sacrificed in the interests of “necessity”. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, intelligence agents and those in power ignored evidence that did not accord with their preconceptions, and in some instances misused the available information to suit their own political ends [40,41]. As it became evident post-invasion, no real necessity existed. Yet the cruelty inflicted on the Iraqi population with over 120,000 civilian deaths from violence estimated between March 2003 and October 2013 was real [42]. As Judith Shklar maintains in *Ordinary Vices*, fear deprecates freedom in the name of “necessity”, and can far too easily lead to cruelty ([43], chap. 1).

Here lessons can also be gleaned from the case of Australian higher education. According to Michelle Carmody, higher education in Australia—and not just the humanities—has been in a perpetual state of crisis for the past 20 years, and the solution to outcries at this occurrence has not been to return government funding to previous levels or to reduce bureaucratic control. Instead, each crisis has led to another neoliberal solution sold to the public with the rhetoric of increased freedom through workplace flexibility and greater freedom of choice for students [44]. The latest “necessary” solution is further to cut government funding to higher education, whilst providing universities with the “autonomy” to charge whatever fees they wish for their degrees [45]. Managers of the older universities that are likely to benefit financially from deregulation have welcomed the change. Yet, the unique conditions in the Australian sector (see [46]) mean any idea that a fair market can be created is a pure fallacy, as is the successful adoption of America’s private sector model of higher education in a country that lacks a developed philanthropic culture amongst its elite.

The “necessity” of these changes has not derived from successive governments having insufficient funds during these constant crises. During the lifetime of the Howard government from 1996–2004, higher education was cut by 4% whilst the defense budget almost doubled from A\$10.4 billion to A\$19.9 billion [47,48]. Nor has the Australian economy since suffered the kind of recession experienced elsewhere in the world. The neoliberal rhetoric is a chimera, and not merely because individual freedom is not created through job insecurity with almost half of Australian academics now unconvinced they possess autonomy and control over their working lives ([29], p. 32), or because student choices are not free if they are determined by their capacity to pay. The commodification of education further means students increasingly consider the value of their degree not for any intellectual enrichment it might offer them, but *only* for its use-value in the market place; their freedom is thereby diminished.

As idealistic, romantic, and old-fashioned many might think attempting to turn back the clock on the neoliberal university might be, neoliberalism has created a discourse of freedom and choice that provides the possibility to challenge its credibility. It is also feasible to eliminate much of the bureaucratic red tape and wastage that exists in the Australian system to redirect funding back into actual research and teaching [46]. It would take political leadership, but it is not inconceivable or entirely impractical. Where neoliberal reforms to higher education are not so advanced, and the new managerial class has not been so firmly embedded into the system, resistance is clearly more viable. To resist successfully, though, we need to open the discussion beyond the role of the humanities and consider what role, if any, the intellectual has to play in our various societies today. At the very least, if intellectual endeavor is to survive beyond the production of knowledge according to whatever government in power finds useful, we need to engage more effectively with the populace than we have

done so in recent years. Though this might seem like a mere pipedream in Australia after years of anti-intellectual rhetoric, it is inadequate to bemoan the anti-intellectualism of our respective societies; our alumni attest to its fallacy. The transformation of universities from elite institutions to mass-based ones has also meant there are far more academics today from working-class backgrounds who demonstrate that the desire to think critically is not confined to an out-of-touch elite.

6. Conclusions

Rather than plunging from one crisis to another without ever catching our breath, we need to have the audacity to resist the neoliberal drama and pause to think. We also need to ask fundamental questions about the kind of society we want to live in. Everyone has a stake in this debate; as Charles Taylor aptly put it in his critique of neoliberalism in the 1980s, it matters to the free individual everywhere

that certain activities and institutions flourish in society. It is even of importance to him what the moral tone of the whole society is—shocking as it may be to libertarians to raise this issue—because freedom and individual diversity can only flourish in a society where there is a general recognition of their worth. They are threatened by the spread of bigotry, but also other conceptions of life—for example, those which look on originality, innovation, and diversity as luxuries which society can ill afford given the need for efficiency, productivity, or growth, or those which in a host of other ways depreciate freedom ([49], p. 207).

In this debate, the humanities are central, and yet simultaneously the current situation in the humanities is merely symptomatic of a wider neoliberal attack on freedom itself. If we broaden the debate, we will have far greater chance of finding allies. Neoliberalism has a highly impoverished conception of freedom, but the desire for self-governance and a respect for diversity cross many political and philosophical divides. We thus need to recognize that the problem for those of us in the humanities is not an isolated one produced by the recent, global recession; rather, it is the consequence of the far greater threat that neoliberalism poses to the diversity on which freedom depends.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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