

Humanities as the Fading Stars of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the decline of humanities as a field of study and its diminishing role in contemporary society. Starting from its origins in ancient Greece, humanities have long played a central role in intellectual discourse and education. However, the aftermath of the two World Wars and the rise of scientific and industrial societies brought about a state of crisis, shattering the confidence of humanists in their ability to lead and instruct. Scholars widely agree that the humanities are in decline, and this paper investigates the contributing factors to this phenomenon.

Humanities as a field of study can be traced back to the Ancient Times, where it occupied a central role in the intellectual discourse. Its cradle was set to become the ancient Greece, where it started to flourish, and its blossom did not seem to fade until the start of the 21st century. Their role in contributing to the education of human society was undisputed throughout the Greek and Roman civilizations, the Medieval Ages, the Renaissance and the Modern Age, until the two World Wars changed the perception about many aspects of life unquestioned before, including the role of humanities in society. A state of crisis came into existence that in 1964, the historian J. H. Plumb already forecasted: “Alas, the rising tide of scientific and industrial societies, combined with the battering of two World Wars, has shattered the confidence of humanists in their confidence to lead or to instruct” (Ayers 24). Nowadays much of the academic public unanimously agrees that the humanities are in decline and tries to find the contributing factors to the failure, which are classified by Ibanga B. Ikpe under the keywords of “tyranny of the marketplace”, “cultural change” and “anti-intellectualism” (58-59).

Many of the scholars attribute the decline of the humanities to the “tyranny of the marketplace” (Ikpe 58). The likes of Donoghue, Sirluck and Newfield all blame the “corporatisation of universities” as one of the main sources of the problem (53). For instance, Donoghue argues that the infiltration of market focused forces into the administration of universities result in economic, rather than academic motivation, in the decision-making process of universities (53). In his view, this leads to a tendency of de-emphasising the disciplines such as the humanities in favour of those that can be “granularized” into formulaic information bits and can be more easily reoriented into a profit orientated direction (53). Donoghue states that it is the success of such business-oriented institutions in providing cheaper, market-defined and more flexible education that puts pressure on others to adopt ‘for profit’ strategies in an attempt to survive in an increasingly competitive industry (53). Therefore, a change from long-interest to short-interest can be seen throughout the spectrum of human interactions from the individual to multi-company and multi-national levels, affecting the academic level as well. In a world where money becomes the “measure of all good” and there is a stronger than ever discourse promoting individualism, humanities tend to perform poorer in comparison to fields such as IT, which perfectly fit the economic motivations of the market (Hendry 268).

Another contributing factor to the problem is what Ikpe calls a “cultural change”, to which he refers in the statement: “humanities scholars have shifted their attention away from issues that are the immediate concern of human beings” (55). Since the end of the second World War a breaking point arose between the canonised humanity trend, that was accepted by all for centuries, and a new discourse that started to bring a new approach to this field and had the intention of modernising these ideas to the taste of the 20th century. Wilson for instance points out:

Philosophy was once written to teach men and women how to live; now, much of it is written to befuddle fellow philosophers. Poems and paintings were once produced to move the spirit and engage the common

man; now, many are produced to repel the many and titillate the few. Literature was once thought to convey deep meaning; now, some think it can convey no meaning at all. (66)

As it seems, this idea of modernising the humanities led to a total redefinition of itself and many in the field disapprove of the result. More and more voices state that the humanities turned their back to the original ideals it once held and that this alienation led to what Weisbuch calls a discourse that has drifted towards the realm of unintelligibility and has stopped being fun both within and outside academy (B4). It may be that this is just an isolated problem of a few disciplines and cannot lead to a cultural crisis, but it seems to be a more critical problem than anyone has anticipated it to be. Ikpe clearly points out this problem, referring to it as a “crisis that threatens the essence of humanity as we know it and with it several centuries of human civilisation” (57).

The final factor to the problem of the decreasing role humanities occupy in society is a trend that may be referred to as “anti-intellectualism”, which started to occupy significant ground in the past few decades (Ikpe 59). Hofstadter provides an accurate description of the phenomenon when he says that “anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (7). By this he is referring to the ignorance that is shown towards those who are related to any form of intellectual activity and the fields that they represent. In a world where there is a constant desire for egalitarianism between social classes, nowadays a stronger sentiment than ever can be felt against those disciplines that might have once been related to aristocracy and elitism. As instant payoff becomes the trademark of the century, where everything is measured in the time and profit it produces, humanities fall behind significantly. Ikpe in his writing underlines that “the most common critique of the humanities is that it has no relevance in the contemporary marketplace” and as such, are faced with the urgent need for innovation (59).

For a long time now, the humanities have been accused of not being innovative enough and of losing in their relevance to human society, due to the fact that they create more questions than answers to the urging problems of the age. For instance, Chambers argues that “typically moral dilemmas (concerning euthanasia, unemployment, genetic modification and so forth) all involve questions of value which is the particular concern of the humanities” (4). What this suggests is that there are multiple problems in relation to which society turns to the humanities for answers and explanations, but in most of the cases the answers fail to satisfy the public. Academics like McCormick and Ikpe see that the solution to the problems can be resolved only through a new way of thinking. The humanities scholars need to find the necessary resources to convince the general public that, even though they are “individually tyrannised by the markets and similarly afflicted by other culture-bonds ills that constitute the crisis of humanity” they can still find solutions (Ikpe 60). Mann writes that this can only come to fruition if humanities scholars double up as humanists: “a humanist is one who uses facts, while a practitioner of the humanities is merely a man who discovers them” (98). This may include significant effort and time to achieve, but it seems to be the most promising way to solve the problem of the humanities in the 21st century.

In conclusion, humanities throughout history have always been close to the human societies; however, a process of alienation appeared after the end of the Second World War. These have been the most difficult years for these disciplines, when a constantly growing distance appeared between the public and themselves. Ikpe names the three most critical contributors to the problem, calling them “tyranny of the marketplace”, “cultural change” and “anti-intellectualism” (58-59). It seems that the sources of the problem are known and scholars try their best to find solutions for the problem and regain the credibility humanities once held.

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