

THE HUMANITIES AND ITS PUBLICS

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INTRODUCTION

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The title for today's discussion is "The Humanities and Its Publics." Our three distinguished panelists—Ivo Banac, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Robert Weisbuch—all have made important contributions in and to the public sphere. For this panel, they were asked to consider whether there is a misalignment between the humanities and the public. The title suggests that this historically uneasy relationship might be even more complex if we take into account the diverse and multiple *publics* that constitute our society.

American scholars have envied foreign cultures that seemed to be more hospitable to arts and letters. Writing in the middle of cosmopolitan New York in the 1950s, Richard Hofstadter worried about anti-intellectualism in American life; in recent years critics have lamented the loss of the sort of "public intellectual" found among Hofstadter and his Columbia University colleagues. Some question whether there is still an audience outside of the university for intellectuals to engage. Others see a resurgence of what has come to be called "public humanities" and they call on the university to value (in tenure and merit reviews, for example) the intellectual and cultural work that is involved in reaching and teaching a wider community.

Even within commercial culture, the popularity of cable networks such as the History Channel and the Discovery Channel suggests a public appetite for the humanities. The California Arts

Council recently reported that the non-profit arts contribute \$5.4 billion annually to California's economy, while statewide 71 million people participate annually in arts-related activities.¹ The Internet has produced an explosion of reading and writing, even among the MTV generation, and the proliferation of e-mail has created a renewal, however debased, of epistolary culture. Some have even linked the communication of the Information Age to the discursive and epistemological forms of the Enlightenment and the eighteenth-century trope of the Republic of Letters. The frequency with which online journals, discussion groups, and accounts of Internet communication have evoked the Republic of Letters suggests the utopian hope that an Enlightenment project could be rediscovered by the successors of the print revolution.

Is this a reconstitution of a public sphere in which the humanities can participate or is it the final fragmentation of the public into blogs? Has public discourse disintegrated into instant messages exchanged between people who either already agree with each other or already hate each other? The Republic of Letters may seem like a quaint conceit today, a fiction that was utopian even in the eighteenth century. Yet despite its imperfections and contradictions, it embodied certain paradigms that are not to be taken for granted in the twenty-first century—among them, critical discourse, critical thinking, citizenship, intellectual sociability, intellectual community, and a democratic public sphere in which knowledge and information are disseminated and standards of taste and sensibility are debated.

What responsibility do those of us who work in the humanities have to the public? Can we be citizens of the Republic of Letters and more worldly republics? We live in an age in which the terms "democracy" and "capitalism" are used interchangeably, and the difference between citizens and consumers is increasingly in doubt. Nationalism has given way not to international unions but rather to regional and ethnic identifications. One of the paradoxes for Americans in the Information Age is that *globalization* threatens to impose a culture of sameness throughout the world, at the same time that *multiculturalism* challenges us with a culture of differ-

ence at home. Religion is unexpectedly a central issue of our time. Indeed, more than 15 years after Francis Fukuyama first posited the victorious “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government,” *religion* has postponed what he called “the end of history.”² Reason, enthusiasm, skepticism, faith, despotism, rights, terror, universalism, difference—these Enlightenment terms seem ripped from today’s headlines. One could argue that now, more than ever, the public needs the comparative study of history, language, and culture, and the arts, as well as the ways of knowing both others and ourselves that are taught by the humanities.

As a dean, I frequently meet business leaders who tell me how highly they value college graduates with a liberal arts education. They need creative workers who can think critically and communicate clearly, and they depend upon consumers with multiple literacies. Yet we are continually reminded—even when speaking to our colleagues from other disciplines within the university—that we need to make a better case for the humanities, for both the values and the value of a liberal arts education. One of the unfortunate results of the culture wars is that many academics recoil from the subject of *values*. We seem to have abandoned any claim to educate students to become *citizens*—either citizens in our imperfect democratic society, or citizens in the Republic of Letters.

We argued about “cultural literacy” while literal literacy was declining. Today, new forms of literacy are in demand: literacy in the languages and cultures that compose our increasingly diverse and global society; visual literacy; media literacy; technological literacy; and information literacy. As the public struggles to analyze, organize, and make sense of the information that we retrieve at unprecedented rates, will professors be reclassified as “knowledge workers” who train students to be producers and consumers in the new knowledge industries, to be citizens in the multinational corporate Republic of the Information Age?³ In thinking about the humanities and its publics, how might we put letters back into our republic, and put the *public* back into the Republic of Letters?

It is the moderator's privilege to ask questions. I am sure that our panelists will add to these questions as they consider the humanities and its publics, and suggest some answers as well.

Notes

1. California Arts Council and Diane L. Mataraza, Inc. *The Arts: A Competitive Advantage for California II. The Economic Impact of Non-profit Arts and Cultural Organizations in California. Update to the 1994 Economic Impact of the Arts Report*. April 2004 <<http://www.cac.ca.gov/?id=148>>.
2. Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989).
3. Liu, Alan. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

HISTORIAN AS A PUBLIC ACTIVIST IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

Ivo Banac

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Ladies and gentlemen, I have to thank the Council for inviting me to the United States after two years of absence. Instead of tackling the issue of how the scholars in the humanities communicate with their public in a general way, I am going to tell you a very personal story. It is a story of how circumstances created the means of communication and how the sociopolitical context transformed the focus of my activities. It is also a story about a book that has dominated my life as a historian during the past quarter-century and that has in many ways changed it.

It all started in the spring of 1981 in Tinicum Township of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where for six months I was entirely sequestered from my university and most of my associates. In a cottage in the woods, I worked feverishly to finish an updated dissertation on the subject of the national question in Yugoslavia. The completion of the project came at the appropriate moment. One year earlier, Marshal Tito had died, and as I was putting the final touches on my manuscript, Kosovo student demonstrations commenced, auguring the beginning of Yugoslavia's state crisis and ultimate disintegration. When the book, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*, appeared in 1984, it was recognized as a primer in issues that were increasingly being replayed. Recognized by the academic community in North America and Western Europe, it received the prestigious Vucinich Prize in the area of Russian and East European studies.

Of course, a book about Yugoslavia could not remain unnoticed at home, especially as it provided insight into the origins of contemporary public disagreements. In due course the conflicted Yugoslav elites started paying attention to my work. There was increased discussion and, in 1987, a group within the Communist party leadership of Croatia decided to translate the book. They succeeded in doing so despite great opposition from the ideological commission of the Central Committee. When the translation was released in 1988, it became an instant best-seller, its analysis of earlier crises being entirely too suggestive to the reading public of the 1980s.

My book was seen, not solely by the important segments of the political leadership, as an argument against Serbian dominance, which was the political program of the rising Yugoslav politician Slobodan Milošević, at this point an entirely unknown personage in the West. Milošević quite properly provoked fear and apprehension, but the opposition to him was marshaled indirectly, as in the promotion of my book. Of course, there was a commercial aspect of the effort. The publication may never have happened were it not for the foresight of a socialist entrepreneur, a publisher who understood the market and managed to disseminate some 15,000 copies in practically no time—no mean feat at a time when the reading public in Yugoslavia was relatively limited.

The reaction to the book was strongly polarized. In the northwestern republics—Croatia, Slovenia, as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina—it was read with muted approval. But in Serbia, where Milošević was making strong inroads, there was a political decision to ignore it in the media; not a single review appeared by the end of the 1980s, although that in no way lessened the sales. It was very interesting to see how various historical establishments reacted to the book, how it was denigrated in certain quarters and how it was enormously appreciated in others. It gave me an immediate public visibility that I was able to put to good use when, at the beginning of Yugoslavia's dissolution in 1991, I pursued a course that appeared at odds with my analysis of Yugoslavia's national question.

One of my theses in the monograph was that Yugoslavia could be held together only by repression. Hence, I was in favor of the independence of its constituent republics. But I was decidedly opposed to the construction of ethnically homogeneous states, something that could be accomplished only by terror, ethnic cleansing, and the partitioning of historical territories, as happened most notoriously in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My attitude led to a series of polemics with Franjo Tuđman, Croatia's president in the 1990s, who started a public campaign against me—and, by implication, against my scholarship. The fight was mean and long; by the end of the 1990s, I had published three books of commentary on the subject and had become a permanent fixture in the oppositional press, not just in Croatia but in some of the other successor states of Yugoslavia. From that point forward, I was a participant in the historical wars that were beginning to emerge. These involved the most important issues of modern South Slavic history, from the meaning of modernity to the assessment of various ideologies, most especially those of nationalism and communism. It is important to note that this was taking place in the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the conditions of war—in some cases, of civil war.

In answer to the question of how one becomes a public intellectual, I have illustrated a very personal course which, admittedly, cannot easily be duplicated. One of the immediate consequences of that course was an estrangement from my work in America. Although I am part of the American academic community, I effectively became exiled from it. More and more, I found myself acting in an entirely different environment. I was no longer a diaspora scholar but a participant in domestic intellectual discussions that were increasingly politicized. This was frequently misunderstood in the United States. As a result of this work in the public arena, I was called to lead a political party in Croatia and subsequently participated in the reform coalition that came to power in 2000.

Historical and cultural debates are significant organizing forces in Eastern Europe—certainly more so than in many other

settings. As a result, disagreements over historical issues, even when they are dominated by people who are alien to the academic world, are tremendously significant. At this very moment we can witness a few timely examples of the importance of historical memory in Eastern Europe. May 4, 2005 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Yugoslavia's Communist leader, Marshal Tito. This was an event with enormous public significance because it provided an opportunity for various supporters and opponents of his regime to make a public stand. As many as 60 buses from all parts of the former Yugoslavia assembled at his tomb in Belgrade last Thursday. Simultaneously, his critics published various attacks challenging his historical record. On Monday, May 9, we shall mark the sixtieth anniversary of victory over fascism in Europe. The three presidents of the Baltic countries are not going to the anniversary celebrations in Moscow because they reject the idea that Soviet expansion in 1945 was liberating. The president of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, is going to the celebrations, but the Kremlin has not failed to criticize him for questioning the Yalta Agreement from the point of view of Polish national interest.

If the issues and memories of the 1940s and 1950s are as alive today in Eastern Europe as they were 60 and 50 years ago, it will come as no surprise that the more recent controversies are livelier still. These controversies have played an important role in shaping the historiographies of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where there is enormous disagreement over the most elementary interpretations. It would be unrealistic to predict any final or easy resolutions of these conflicts. Too much is at stake. There are too many implications for the current political options. And, unfortunately, professional scholars too often have stayed away from the debates, fearful that they would be breaking ranks or sticking their necks out. That is why the role of public intellectuals is vital. We have a heavy responsibility not to capitulate to various pressures, most notably nationalist, populist, and confessional pressures. We must not capitulate to various idealizations of any past system.

There is a paradox here. Twentieth-century history and twentieth-century studies generally are to a very large extent avoided by East European historians and other scholars. The most distinguished people in the humanities in many of these countries are specialists in the Middle Ages. If I were asked to name the most significant living Serbian historian, I would mention Sima Ćirković, a prominent medievalist. In Croatia, too, the leading historians are medievalists—Neven Budak and Ivo Goldstein. Yet, in these cases the responsibility of commenting on twentieth-century issues has prevailed over narrow craft rules. Ćirković has been a significant force against nationalism in the Serbian Academy. Budak writes a weekly column in a major Zagreb daily. Goldstein's last two books have been on twentieth-century themes.

Can the interests and paradoxes of Eastern and Southeastern Europe have any implications for the seemingly more settled intellectual and academic environment of the Western world, that of the United States in particular? I cannot be sure, but I feel that colleagues in the field have an obligation to tackle the controversies of our age. I am not proposing any crass reductionism or a return to the idea of relevance, which was so important a generation ago. But I am saying that we have to educate the broad general public. The ways are not new. Neither are the methods. We shall have to pursue our usual research and our usual publications the way we have as long as scholarship has been public. But we have to return to our responsibility to educate, to the Enlightenment belief that we have a responsibility to make the unknown known, and thereby to change the political realities. David Marshall noted in his introduction that religion is the most important public issue of our time. I agree with this, and I would suggest that in our studies of religion we have to take into account how modernity has affected theology and confessional thinking generally. This might be a key to the questions that are so profoundly troubling to this generation.

IF WE SAY IT, WILL THEY LISTEN?

Jean Bethke Elshtain

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The problem with being tagged a “public intellectual” is that it places one in peril of becoming more and more public and less and less intellectual. This is both an occupational hazard and, I suspect, a particular sort of conceit: True intellectuals are a rare breed removed from the rough and tumble of everyday life. This vision suggests that their calling is to occupy the *vita contemplativa*; thus, flirting too intensively with the *vita activa* could place their status as intellectuals in jeopardy. A public intellectual, then, risks being a Sophist rather than a Socrates.

There are real perils in going public—especially, it seems to me, if one longs for a different time and place, when intellectuals allegedly commanded far more attention, respect, and even power than they do today. This perceived lack of influence at present invites glowing reports of cultures different from our own, as well as past eras in our own culture, within which intellectuals are or were seen, heard, and even lionized—the image of Jean-Paul Sartre leading the ardent masses down the Champs-Élysées is a good example of this type of romanticization.

Over the years, I have participated in many conversations in which American intellectuals spoke in glowing terms of the esteem in which intellectuals are held in other countries. France was mentioned most frequently in this regard. These American intellectuals were enamored with the idea that in countries like France, you could turn on the television, any time of day or night, and

find a real intellectual dilating on foreign and domestic politics. Helping to set the public agenda became a goal of such public intellectuals, whether as thorns in the sides of politicians or as catalysts for political movements and forces. These were the goals whether one had any particular knowledge of the subject at hand or not. The view was that the intellectual must seek to unsettle the powerful or, more rarely, to advise the powerful, as was the case with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in the Kennedy administration.

Most often, intellectual engagement, or our ideal of it, is oppositional. Through art, word, argument, and protest, the intellectual opposes something. In *The Wild Ones*, an early Marlon Brando film, the Brando character, a menacing biker in black leather, orders a soda at the general store in a small town. The soda fountain girl looks at Brando and asks, "What are you rebelling against?" Brando responds, "What do ya got?" The intellectual, like Brando's biker, opposes "whatever ya got." It follows that the intellectual's vocation in the humanities is always that of negator, always on the attack. If we are not on the attack, somehow we are not doing the job; we are capitulating to power. Only when power is on the side that we favor are we free to join hands without losing our status as intellectuals.

We seem to be captives of a particular picture of the humanities and its publics that equates being an intellectual to being a critic—perhaps even a caustic and unrelenting one. This image recalls a phenomenon that Christopher Lasch dubbed "pseudoradicalism": One isn't happy unless one is enraged about something.¹ Such negativism easily rigidifies into a kind of automatic response.

By contrast, there is the critic that Michael Walzer calls "connected."² This is a rather different vision, one of an intellectual who acknowledges that she is a part of that which she analyzes and explores and, from time to time, criticizes it. This critic is not apart from but a part of that which she is lifting up for analysis. Such an intellectual never forgets that she speaks from a particular place that gives her bearings and, in the case of academics, her very livelihood.

I will now move on from those moments when intellectuals may have been lionized to take a measure of things here and now. Each university at which I have taught over the last 32 years has at one point or another appointed a committee or task force charged with finding ways to close the perceived gap between humanities scholarship and the broader public of interested citizens. Such committees usually construe that broader public as a kind of clientele or constituency of the humanities. The National Endowment for the Humanities was initiated in part to close this perceived public deficit in the humanities. In addition, without an excess of fanfare, many states' humanities councils have undertaken projects that draw large and enthusiastic crowds, most often for historic projects or artistic exhibits. I have had some very interesting experiences participating in programs sponsored by state humanities councils.

For example, in 1983 in Missoula, Montana, I—along with Robert Bellah, Robert Jay Lifton, Christopher Lasch, and Stanley Hauerwas—participated in a discussion about the Cold War and the atomic standoff. What impressed me was that people had traveled in some cases a couple of days to come to this event. There were people there who came in on their own airplanes because they lived so far away that flying was the only way to get there. Similarly, a couple of years ago, I was a humanities lecturer in the state of Wyoming, which is very sparsely populated. I remember being in a relatively small town when it started to snow rather heavily. I thought no one would turn up, yet I entered the school auditorium to find it packed with people who wanted to hear a discussion of the state of American civil society. So there are people out there who are interested in these kinds of engagements. I think we should hear more about such efforts, since thus far they seem to have made little impact on those who lament the loss of a vibrant world of public intellectuals enjoying influence. The model to which many are glued remains that of the heady bohemian intellectual of mid-twentieth-century Greenwich Village, or of the oppositional intellectual leader riding bravely at the forefront of political and ideological movements.

There are at least two identifiable trajectories at present. In the first, intellectuals function without a clearly identified public to the point that the term “public intellectual” expresses an aspiration at least as much as, if not more than, a reality. The problem in this model is that the “absent” public it laments is often construed as one that is perpetually distracted, glued to their television sets, absorbed in the Internet, deeply materialistic, or more apt to prefer boorish shouting matches that substitute for dialogue rather than intellectual discourse. The critic, in this way, criticizes the culture and its inhabitants who, unsurprisingly, prefer not to listen to statements condemning them. Thus, for an intellectual on this trajectory, the public is that which one distances oneself from.

In the second model, the problem is not the public. Instead, the problem is rooted within the public intellectuals, who are said to be caught up in self-confirming, insular, and rarified worlds of their own within which they converse in a mind-numbing vocabulary that is designed not to communicate to a broader public. Unsurprisingly once again, the public is turned off. The public in this model is neither disinterested nor stupid. It is a rather canny public that has seen through the pretensions attendant upon intellectuals who have separated themselves from broader publics given their affinity for arcane vocabularies and the undeniable empirical reality that scholars in the humanities tend to share a common political orientation. I am reminded of the story of the famous film reviewer for *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael, who opined in disbelief after the 1972 reelection of Richard Nixon that she found his electoral triumph quite simply impossible because she did not know a single person who voted for Nixon in New York’s Upper West Side.

Within this second frame of reference, contempt for most American publics becomes a temptation once again—even if one began by lamenting the ways the humanities had separated itself off from the wider public. As I have already suggested, people get rather tired of feeling looked down upon, and they withdraw. But how important is this? That depends on one’s understanding of

both humanities and publics, but it certainly puts us squarely within a larger debate about contemporary democratic society. [ACLS President] Pauline Yu, in her letter of invitation to this event, posed some very interesting questions, including, “Has humanistic scholarship forsaken its public obligation?” To answer that question, one has to reflect upon what sort of obligation that might be. I would say first that it is not primarily a political obligation, and that this is a mistake public intellectuals often make. Rather, it is an obligation of fulfilling one’s office with dignity and integrity. By this I mean doing the best one can to be an example of a superb historian, or teacher of literature, or playwright, or pronouncer on things political.

This task of humanistic scholarship cannot be boiled down to the point of critique. Indeed, there are days when I want to throw that particular word out the window, as it is dragged in to justify all manner of dubious enterprises. The pathway of wacky conspiracy theories laid down by a few notorious characters in the academy is justified in the name of critique. One can see how a perfectly good word can be abused to cover a multitude of sins, including the sins of the loss of standards of assessment for scholarly work; of refusing, for example, to take decisive action when a scholar is found guilty of plagiarism; or of paying too little attention to scholarly qualifications in the first place. Too many in the academy rush to uncritically defend in the name of critique those among us who fail on all of the standards that I have set forth. This does damage, as it says to a wider public, “If you are an academic and you are on the attack, and you hate the same people we hate, we are with you. But if you defend the people we hate, you are part of the ignorant masses.” This kind of attitude leads the public to view the academy as a place that does not uphold its own standards of scholarly integrity and decency.

Our first order of business, then, is maintaining academic credibility and integrity. Even a few examples of a failure to do so spread a corrosive patina of suspicion over the academy as a whole, especially in a society that has lost a good bit of its confidence in our basic institutions and is mistrustful to begin with. Beyond

that, our responsibility is to do the best job we can to educate America's young people to be competent. Our job is not simply to tear down—here that word critique comes in again—but to help to generate minds that can simultaneously affirm and negate, criticize and embrace, and to do so with some interpretive and analytical sophistication, whatever side they wind up on politically. We are, after all, scholars—not policers of political borders. And we need to think about what it means to scholarship in particular and democracy more generally that our publics now seem captured in tinier and tinier slivers of identity by which they define themselves. The word citizen is lost among these fragments, for as one approaches the world within one of these slivers of identity, one becomes enraptured with one's own outsider status at the same time that one seeks full validation by the wider society.

Our universities often reflect this development and lose common points of reference. We fail to think about the preconditions for important dialogue. This may be the most basic challenge that we face, given that ours is a distracted world in which people are torn in many different directions. Will we continue to multiply tiny publics that are increasingly incapable of talking through their situations with others? If that happens, the entire premise of the humanities will be undermined, for the humanities takes its bearings from the assumption that there is something called *humanity*. An international political life—for example, the internationalization of human rights post-World War II—assumes that there is such a thing as a general humanity to which rights are attached. I think that humanities scholars must assume this general humanity even as we keep in mind the many varieties and cultural modalities in and through which it is expressed.

Tying this vision of the humanities into democracy is a very complicated matter indeed, but I want to offer one example. There is a powerful story about humanities and democracy in our own culture that is too little known, and it may help us to think through this issue. It is a story involving one of our great public intellectuals and public citizens, Jane Addams, about whom I

have written an intellectual biography.³ Addams was a founder of the Hull House, the pioneering social settlement. Hull House is usually thought of as a proto-welfare institution, but it was instead a site for what Addams called “a mutual interpretation of the classes, one to the other.” By this, Addams meant not only the middle and working classes, but also the extraordinary collage of immigrants who inhabited the Nineteenth Ward of Chicago in the last decades of the nineteenth century—Italians, Greeks, Irish, Germans, Bohemians, Russians, Jews, Mexicans, and more. Surely this was a paradigmatic situation of mutual unintelligibility, since people literally could not speak one another’s language.

But for Addams, the humanities—literature, art, music, theater, and social debate—could bring people together across vast cultural and linguistic distances that separated them. She was interested in doing this because she believed we had to forge a common citizenship out of all these diverse representations of a general humanity. So to this end, Hull House created a 750-person theater for drama and lectures, and it provided clubs and spaces for the exchange of ideas in settings that were not beset by the kind of excluding jargon that is often present and rightly lamented in academic discourse. When Addams argued in favor of creating an art museum, she encountered quite a bit of opposition—“These immigrants aren’t interested in that!” But, of course, as soon as the art museum was opened, over a thousand immigrants a week, many of them exhausted after a day’s work, came to view its holdings.

So for Addams *then*, and I believe for us *now*, much of the challenge of sustaining a democratic culture was and is that such a culture must create space for all to speak and to be heard while at the same time educating people in such a way that they can distinguish the shoddy, the cruel, the venal, and the simplistic from the generous, the capacious, and the complex. There is a tension between egalitarianism and a certain kind of elitism, but it is a good tension to have. If the field of academic humanities spends most of its time defending its stance of critique, it may well

neglect its task of cultural translation. I am often amazed at the letters and e-mail messages that I receive from the public—or a public—when I have written something particularly controversial. Since the people who agree with an author usually do not send letters in response, some of these messages are pretty awful—I had one recently that called me “irredeemably mendacious”—but many are thoughtful and keen on continuing the discussion. There are publics out there that are eager for engagement. I do not know what institutional forms can best promote such engagement; our lives are so crazily distracted and busy that we rightly try our best just to inhabit well the cultural forms now available to us. But if universities could get into the habit of examining what some of our state humanities councils do, it might afford models of an engagement that go far beyond the rarified and unintelligible jargon of which we have read and heard altogether too much—jargon that does not emanate solely from those “crazy folks” out there on talk radio.

I am not going to end on a “Field of Dreams” scenario—that if we build it they will come—but perhaps on a rather more modest vision: If we speak clearly and honestly, they will listen. And “they” are many more than one might think; they are out there right now, reading and analyzing and engaging, and the question is, are we in turn prepared to engage and to listen and to learn?

Notes

1. Lasch, Christopher. “Politics and Culture: Academic Pseudo-radicalism.” *Salmagundi* 88–89 (1990–91): 25–36.
2. Walzer, Michael. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
3. Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

THE SILENCE—AND THE NOISE—OF THE HUMANITIES

Robert Weisbuch

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(as of July 1, 2005)

I am easily the most provincial of the three speakers on this panel. I think of a very long journey as going from our home in northern New Jersey to my alma mater, Wesleyan University, in central Connecticut, where I took my daughter last September. Sarah is 17 and looking at colleges. At one point, with all of the kind respect that a 17-year-old has for her father, Sarah turned to me and said, “Dad, you look weirder than ever. What’s going on?” “Well, Sarah,” I replied, with all of the love that a father feels toward his rude teenage daughter, “Why don’t you just be quiet?” Then I continued, “I am weeping a little bit because that room there in that building is where I roomed with my best friend of 30 years ago and my best friend today, Bill Hollinger. We disagreed about everything, and we were friends—not in spite of the disagreements but because of them—and I am thinking about that.” And Sarah said, “You still look weird.”

Later that evening, I was thinking about what it was that moved me so much in returning to my alma mater, and it was more than just my dear friend Bill and the usual kinds of nostalgia. It was a thought about the quiet and the noise of being a college student. The quiet comes from being surprised by how far one’s own mind can go when one shuts out distraction, deepens one’s knowledge, throws out an idea and then tries to throw it out further. It is the quiet that comes from that wonderful capacity that our places of learning have to shut out the noise. And yet having

only the quiet is like learning to breathe without exhaling. It is to become bloated and narcissistic. There is a book about liberal arts colleges that says that liberal arts colleges are like country clubs where history and English substitute for tennis and golf, and that strikes me as just a disastrous idea.

Those same liberal arts colleges, after all, were begun usually in a church-related manner, with the goal of improving society. And to the extent that we eschew that notion as impure, it seems to me, we injure ourselves terribly. Even so, there is a need for us to deepen the quiet in one sense. That is to say, it has been some 50 years since anybody thought profoundly about the disciplines and how we introduce them—what should be taught first, what should be taught second, and so on. There was Harvard's Red Book, and then there was the book that Harvard, Princeton, and Yale wrote with Exeter, Andover, and Lawrenceville about how we introduce young people to our disciplines.¹ (The latter book was largely ignored except for one small footnoted idea which became advanced placement.) Yet here we are at a moment when we have all sorts of discoveries in cognitive science, and it seems at times like our friends in cognitive science do not know what to attach to. Here we humanists are in the midst of the disciplines and the interdisciplines, and if we could get together with cognitive scientists we might really be able to talk profoundly about—and then practice profoundly—a science of how our students and how we ourselves learn. And we seem to be missing that opportunity.

Even if we do deepen that quiet and delve into its potential, we must nonetheless think about the noise as well. I loved college for the silence, but I also loved it for the noise; during my time in college, the noise was about Vietnam and civil rights. The noise always has to do with the necessity of taking a journey from the pastoral place of thought to the city of pressing events and of employing our learning, as best we can, with all of our fallibilities, to make the world a better place. There is a sign that hangs in the office of my friend who leads the National Center for Atmospheric Research that reads "Do both," a slogan I have been hoping we

can live under in the humanities. We need to do both—we need to provide each person with the inner life of the arts and sciences, with the hunger for self-knowledge and for losing the self in an appreciation of otherness, and we also need to bring our learning from the pastoral grove to bear upon our social urgencies.

In his book, *We Scholars*, David Damrosch writes,

Too often, American scholars still hold fast to a hermeneutics of exile, using their specialized knowledge to dwell in a distant time within an esoteric disciplinary space, returning periodically like Rip Van Winkle from his inaccessible mountain retreat. We scholars rightly cherish our independence of mind and our originality of concept, but we need to balance the hermeneutics of exile with a more creative hermeneutics of community.²

And so I want to echo something that Professor Elshtain said. It is fine to critique society; it is better to constitute society with our learning. It is fine to gum up the works; it is better to be the works.

When I think about making publics, I wonder whether publics are born or made or located, and I think that they are all three. First of all, publics are born, I want to believe, in a way that is analogous to the one described by the late and beloved poet Kenneth Koch. Koch said that little children, even babies, love poetic words, love rhythms, love to be dangled on a knee. He surmised that sometime between being bounced on a parental knee and puberty, we do something awful to turn that kid against what came naturally: a love of rhythmic language, poetry.³ And I like to believe that if we can drive back our definitions of each humanities discipline to a kind of rude, root question—say, for history, “How did my particular place in the world come to be?” or for literature, “I wonder if other people ever felt this way?,” or for cultural anthropology, “That’s weird. I wonder why they like

doing that?”—we will discover that publics for the humanities are a given, so long as we do not kill them off.

If that is true, it is clear that we mess up somehow, and we must make or regain our publics. There is some evidence that we in the academy are messing up more than we normally do, for there has been something of a culture boom at the same time that there has been an academic bust.

The public interest is abundant, judging by the crowds of people who go into the mega bookstores, not all of whom are sipping lattes; by the tripling in the audience ratings of National Public Radio over the last few decades; and by the plethora of new and successful cable channels that treat all of our subjects. Now notice that locution, “our subjects,” for it may be the problem. Maybe “our subjects” do not utterly belong to us. In the face of this culture boom over the last 40 years, we seem to have lost half of our percentage of majors in humanities, and hundreds of liberal arts colleges have become primarily pre-professional. This has not happened to the humanities alone, for the sciences have also suffered—we are told that there were more bachelor degrees awarded in leisure and recreation studies last year than in mathematics. It is also true that professional degrees carry with them a healthy dose of the liberal arts and of humanities credits. But by most indices, we have been in decline for some decades now in terms of academic positions, federal dollars, salaries in relation to other fields, and foundation support. You name it, and we seem to be losing it.

Now I will return to that ownership phrase—“our subjects.” They are ours, and they are not. We own those academic disciplines that seek to ratchet up an interest in high or deep or informed knowing. We own that, but the beginning interest belongs not to us but to the world, and the question becomes whether we want to go into the world to court the interest. To state my idea more clearly, a great deal of attention has been paid to locating publics for the humanities, and that is a worthy effort. Most of us who have been ensconced in the academy have been told that the middle class that loves to read and loves to think and

loves to analyze was lost somewhere between the 1950s and now. Yet if we go out into the world, we discover that such claims are entirely false, utterly untrue. And that is great. In fact, we are surprised to discover that very large numbers of people are ready to resume their interest in the humanities precisely because once they were our students. So our first public, if we think about it, is right in our classrooms. Our first public is our students, and something I mourn in the humanities, and mourned five or six years ago when I previously spoke at this conference, is the fact that sometimes we in the humanities appear ashamed of the fact that we are terrific teachers. We seem to have lost the lead in pedagogy to people in the sciences and mathematics out of some wrong fear that if we take teaching too seriously, our hold upon scholarly dignity, already shaky, will be utterly undone. That is something like saying, "Gee, if I field well, they will believe still more strongly that I cannot hit." Well, no, that is not what happens, and it is unwise for us to eschew a deep interest in teaching and learning at this moment when, as I noted, cognitive science can provide us with valuable information but is relying on us to bring it to bear on college teaching. That is a destructive waste of a prime opportunity. It is time for us to take the lead in pedagogy again, and we are well-equipped to do so.

If our college students are an obvious future public, younger students are all the more so. Yet here again, the scientists and mathematicians have taken a lead in connecting public and higher education, from primary school through college, and we have been almost entirely inactive.

That has led to still another lost opportunity among students and faculty members of color. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WWNFF) is about to publish a report on diversity and the doctorate,⁴ and we have discovered, looking carefully at the data, that the closer you look, the worse it gets. While African-American and Latinos constitute about 32% of the population between the ages of 21 and 29, you will find that they constitute only 7% of those who were awarded a Ph.D. in the arts and sciences by U.S. institutions last year. That is less than a

quarter of the number of degrees that were awarded to international students. Even these horrid figures represent growth over the last 20 years. And yet do you know which of the areas is growing most slowly? It is the humanities. Most quickly? The social sciences, which are strong and getting stronger. While we have been worthily arguing over the canon, and teaching more writers of color, we have not been connecting to the high schools or even the community colleges. Two-thirds of all Latinos who go to college go to community college, but most of them do not go on for the B.A. We seem to consider linking with our colleagues in the high schools or in the community colleges a form of mission slippage, and then we whine about all of our efforts to recruit students of color. We say, “We’ve been trying so hard, but we can’t find any!” Well, we are looking in the wrong places. We are failing to go where the students of color are. We are failing to help cultivate the next generation of scholars, and that means that the racial gap between students and faculty in the next generation is going to be greater than it is today. And it is going to be worse in our fields, where I believe we care as much as anyone about bringing together equity and excellence in this country.

Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young told us in our youth to treat our children well. Someone treated us well, and they usually treated us well before we ever got to college. Return the favor in a compact among generations and ensure a public without social and economic boundaries.

Speaking of boundaries, of course, there are other ways to make new publics, and most of those have to do with efforts in public scholarship. Let me quickly mention some of the efforts that are being made right now. Next week, I am going to be at Skidmore College, where a group of people associated with the editorial board of a journal called *Common Knowledge* are joining together to talk about how the humanities disciplines can help to ease international conflict. They hope to build a conference and then a center that will create opportunities to talk about how each of the humanities disciplines can contribute to our global understanding. That, to me, is a noble form of public scholarship:

modest, serious, crucial. Another example, at Bard College, is the Clemente Program that extends to many sites around the country. The Clemente Program argues that the way that you break the cycle of poverty for people is not by teaching them to sling a burger at McDonald's but by teaching the great books and by teaching people how to write about the great books. It has had extraordinary results in any number of cities. It may sound almost like a *Saturday Night Live* skit—you know, “I’m poor, I’m hungry.” “Well here, have a poem.”—but it turns out that it actually works to break the cycle of poverty. It proves the doctrine of “Know thyself” and its powerful effects on people.

When the Chicago Humanities Festival happens every year, the *Chicago Tribune* publishes a special section as though it is the annual auto show, and there are over a hundred events around the city. Also in Chicago is a program called the Public Square,⁵ where colleagues from the University of Illinois at Chicago and other universities lead discussions about an idea or a controversy each week in various coffee shops, barber shops, or wherever people congregate, which are followed by periodic larger meetings on the most compelling issues.

A couple of years ago at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, we started to give modest grants of \$2,000 every summer to any students who were writing humanities dissertations and felt they might do something interesting in the world beyond the academy. You can look on the WWNFF website under Practicum Grants⁶ to see hundreds of examples of former grantees. All of these people quickly finished their dissertations and got out into the world. The grants demonstrated that people with doctorates could not only work in academia, but could work in other worthy endeavors as well. A cultural anthropology student at the University of Texas, for instance, went to work at a school for delinquent girls and used everything she knew from cultural anthropology to teach these young women, who had been abused as children, to build more positive images of themselves through creative writing, biographical writing, storytelling, dance, and other creative pursuits. A historian at the University of Virginia

went to Mississippi and started a freedom school for fifth graders, teaching African-American history in the summers, and raised over \$50,000 to make the school self-sustaining. Another student at the University of Texas went to work at NASA, writing biographies of the astronauts for the NASA Museum. These are just a few examples.

Even with all the very dynamic outreachings of several of our leading humanities institutes, we seem to be running short of movement. And yet I find that whenever top scholars in our disciplines gather these days, this very topic, the one I am so very glad that President Yu and the American Council of Learned Societies has chosen to spotlight, seems to dominate conversation in one form or another. How do we discover an institutional home for this conversation? We all recognize that the sciences hold a huge advantage because of constituted entities like the National Science Foundation and the National Research Council, and we appear to lack the equivalent bodies. Could this question of creating publics for the humanities lead to such a body? Certainly it has been a leading element in the recent relative success of funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In the meantime, here is what I am sure is going to be a very unpopular proposal. We currently define “service,” the decidedly third of the three main criteria for faculty evaluation, in terms of the number of overlarge committees on which we sit with a 4:00 p.m. headache. What if we were to redefine “service” as the application of knowledge for the public good, using a very broad and flexible notion of what constitutes that public good? I am not speaking about extra credit; I am speaking of a criterion, a normal expectation. It has been my experience that when I ask a colleague what they might do to apply their learning to any social sector, the first response is, very often, bafflement. But if I ask that same individual to take five minutes to think with her or his best mind about this issue, invariably, literally invariably, after a minute or two, a reply begins with the words, “Well, I always wanted to...” Going out beyond the academy is risky, and pratfalls are frequent,

but there is huge joy in it, as well as a sense of connection and scope.

I was going to conclude with something about democracy, and I was going to talk about how the liberal arts are so important to democracy. It is certainly a subject worthy of volumes, and our speakers, each of them in very different ways, have spoken beautifully about this connection in ways that I would not at all wish to undercut. Yet I do not very much like the way I had planned speak about it, so I am not going to engage with it here except to say that I really do not care about democracy as a humanities scholar. Indeed, I do not think we ought to forward the humanities in public forums expressly because it will support democracy. Rather, I believe that any form of government ought to be valued because valuing difference allows us to think in those ways that we associate with the arts and sciences, with that freedom of thought, with that empathetic thought, with that demand that we even think in terms of how things look to our enemy, and that we think with them before we think about them or against them. Any form of government should be valued simply because it allows the human brain to behave in a way that engages the liberal arts, which is not simply a form of education but a way of living.

So it seems to me that the publics we are talking about are ready for us if we would simply give ourselves away. When we fail to do so, when we do not give ourselves away in that manner, there usually lurks one or another trope about purity.⁷ I would add that the distance is very small between the pure and the puerile. Why do we think that we are somehow too good to compete for human attention? I wish that all of us in academia would lose the depression, stop whining, and get out there and win the world without compromise. Recognize what you love and fight to make it prevail, just as you would fight for a political ideal, because our enterprise is deeper than politics. The world never refused the humanities. The humanities have shown a tendency to refuse the world. Reconsidering that choice should be the chief business of this generation

Notes

1. *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1945; *General Education in School and College: A Committee Report by Members of the Faculties of Andover, Exeter, Lawrenceville, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952.
2. Damrosch, David. *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*. Harvard UP, 1995.
3. Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980.
4. The full report is available online at <http://www.woodrow.org/newsroom/News_Releases/phd_diversity.html>.
5. The Public Square is sponsored by the Illinois Humanities Council.
6. <http://www.woodrow.org/phd/Practicum/list_of_practicum_grant_winner.html>
7. I am indebted to W. Robert Connor for this idea.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Robert Weisbuch is President of Drew University. He was President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation at the time of the 2005 ACLS Annual Meeting, a position he had held since fall 1997. During his tenure, Weisbuch emphasized WWNFF's role in connecting higher education to the social sectors beyond academia, connecting the levels of education to each other, and great teaching. Initiatives focusing on these goals included the Humanities at Work, The Responsive Ph.D., Teachers as Scholars, and High School Early College.

Weisbuch joined WWNFF after 25 years at the University of Michigan, where he served as Chair of the Department of English, Associate Vice President for Research, and Associate Dean for Faculty Programs and Interim Dean at the Rackham

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