

ARTICLE

The Public Humanities and the Private Citizen

Geoffrey Galt Harpham

Email: ggharpham@gmail.com

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Abstract

The idea of a “public humanities” reflects a specific understanding not only of the humanities as a field of interest or set of disciplines but also of citizens’ needs in a democracy. This understanding was most fully articulated in the United States, where it informed the national understanding of the goals of education that emerged in the aftermath of WWII. What distinguishes the American conception of the humanities from other systems is the place of privilege accorded the activities of interpretation and judgment, and the conviction that these were most effectively inculcated through the study of literature.

Keywords: America; citizenship; democracy; education; humanities

“The Chinese can swarm a problem,” he told me, “but they can’t necessarily solve it. The Americans do that better.”

Why did I not immediately rebuke this man for his offensive comment? There were four reasons.

First, I was his guest. Second, I was asking him for support for a program I wanted to run, and I did not want to begin our meeting with a disagreement. Third, in my dark chauvinist heart, I was pleased to hear him say this. Fourth, as the president of one of the leading universities in China, there was a good chance he knew what he was talking about.

He continued.

“Chinese students read for information. They are trained to process large amounts of data rapidly and accurately. They can solve problems where the solutions depend on logic, but many problems are not like that.” And so, he explained, the leading Chinese universities had embarked on a national program – this was around 2012 – to reform their system by giving students a “liberal” education that included the humanities in the hope that this would loosen up their thinking and make them more flexible and adaptable.

In short, he would provide the funding I was asking for to fund a program to bring Chinese scholars to the National Humanities Center for a year of independent research. And so, as it turned out, would the heads of five other leading universities in China and Taiwan, who

shared his view that the American educational system, and the humanities, in particular, had something the Chinese needed.

At about the same time, I found myself at a decorous academic gathering in Denmark, when the stately pace of discussion was interrupted by a Danish scholar who launched a panegyric on the American system of education that accorded a place of privilege to the humanities, producing great educational results for American students. Something like this also happened in Australia, where I had gone to speak to academics about the history and premises of the humanities as construed in America. It was not a particularly stirring talk, so I was startled when a senior scholar rose – *rose!* – at the end to say, with emphasis, “My God, why don’t we hear these things in Australia?” What was information to me was inspiration to him – and also frustration, because he never heard these things in Australia.

Such experiences attuned me in a way that I had never been before to the singularity of the American understanding, not just of the humanities as a set of linked disciplines but of the American educational system, the American understanding of education, and really, the American understanding of America. These understandings are embedded so deeply in society and in the educational system that they often go without saying, which is why I had never actually heard those things said in America until I had begun to say them. But they are there and can be extracted if we think backward from the way things are to the thoughts that must have determined them.

If one could identify the primary concept governing the entirety of the American system, it would be the realization that democratic societies require democratic citizens – that is, citizens who feel that they bear some responsibility for society at large. No other form of governance requires this of its citizens. The subject of the sovereign is sovereign only over himself, and that in a very limited sense, but the citizen of a democracy has to make decisions that could affect the entire society. This insight had guided the development of an educational system, and especially a system of higher education, that is strikingly different from any other in the world. The defining statement of this system, the one that effectively set the agenda for many decades to follow, was *General Education in a Free Society*, also known as the Harvard “Redbook,” published in 1946.¹

How different? First, the overarching goal was not occupational training but the expansion of the mind beyond immediate interests or needs. In sharp contrast to much of the rest of the world, where postsecondary education is oriented around the training of specialists in the academy or the professions, the American system, under the vague rubric of “general education,” was informed by the premise that the goal of education is to awaken the mind to a world of possibilities and to give people the flexibility to pursue whatever path they choose for themselves.

¹ *General Education in a Free Society* 1945. The president of Harvard, James Bryant Conant, wrote an introduction to the volume and made other statements in his own voice. See Conant 1948, 1953. See also the report commissioned by the Truman administration, *Establishing the Goals* 1947. Much of the groundwork had been laid at the beginning of the twentieth century by Dewey 1916. For historical accounts of the postwar moment, see Hartman 2008 and Hollinger 2006. For an overview of the fortunes of the humanities since WWI, see Harpham 2011; see also Harpham 2022. Also relevant are three commissioned reports: *Report of the Commission on the Humanities* 1964, *The Humanities in American Life: Report of the Commission on the Humanities* 1980, and *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Science* 2013.

The ends of general education were to be served by “distribution” requirements that compelled students to take courses in three broad areas: mathematics and science, social science, and the humanities. This organization now seems a kind of Mr. Rushmore, a disappointing monument to a past that no longer inspires. But at one time, this tripartite division carried and concealed a very heavy ideological weapon in the ongoing battle between Western democracy and its enemies in that it effectively defined the goal of education not as the acquisition of knowledge but as the creation of democratic citizens.

This underlying goal comes more clearly into focus when one compares the American construction of academic divisions with those of other countries. In France, the *sciences humaines* include, in addition to history and literature, sociology, anthropology, and psychology; in Germany, *Geisteswissenschaften* includes linguistics and economics; and in Britain, the more belletristic Arts and Letters includes visual arts, performing arts, and theater arts, but no philosophy or history. In none of these, does literary study have any particular prominence.

It may take some historical imagination to put this in one’s mind today, but within living memory – mine, for example – the humanities seemed like the core of the purely educational mission, and English the central discipline of the humanities. Literature enjoyed this prominence not just because of the uniquely culture-creating capacities of literature but primarily because by mid-century the study of literature in the most prestigious colleges and universities had come to be dominated not by literary history, the study of authors, generic conventions and innovations, or intellectual history, but by the activity of the reader. The literary text, according to the leading figures in the discipline of literary studies at the time, had to be considered apart from the author who produced it. In this orphaned state, the text commanded attention as an irrefutable but radically incomplete fact whose meaning and value had to be determined by the reader through interpretation, which was to be considered not an automatic or unconscious processing function but a teachable skill.

This understanding of the discipline – as English was now learning to think of itself – recommended itself to those charged with designing the postwar educational system. They saw that literary study could be treated as a kind of lab experiment in which students learned to take a heightened interest in the world beyond their narrow concerns, become invested in the idea of a cultural tradition, and learn how to make decisions about complex matters where no final truth was attainable. All these, they thought, would be useful for citizens of a democracy, especially an American democracy, and would permit the humanities to align itself with the concept of the “endless frontier” proposed by the mid-century scientist Vannevar Bush as he argued, with tremendous success, for the government funding of science.²

This chain of reasoning may seem quite fantastical in 2025, but it produced the American system that much of the rest of the world came to admire, and I do not think it was altogether misguided in its ends, even if the means were a bit shaky. Among its many downstream effects was the consensus that the humanities serve the public interest, a consensus that has given this journal its name and its mission.

Some years ago, I met a man who put a face on this dense mesh of assumptions, abstractions, generalizations, and hypotheses. After giving a talk at a Midwestern university, I was

² Bush 2025.

surrounded by a circle of people, mostly students. An older gentleman whose clothes and bearings suggested professional confidence came to the front, announcing that he wanted to tell me his story.

As a teenager, he told me, he had been washed up on a Florida shore in 1960, a refugee from Cuba with no money, no connections, and no papers – a beneficiary of the US’s welcome to anti-Castro Cubans. For a couple of years, he knocked around, learning some English, before deciding that if he wanted to enter a profession of some kind, he needed some education. He enrolled in a community college.

In addition to his courses in electrical engineering, he said, “They made me take an English course – it was horrible!” The English he had picked up did not equip him to understand what he was reading, and he felt utterly unprepared to read the assigned Shakespeare play. “So I sat in the back and kept my head down. But,” he continued, “one day the teacher came over and looked straight at me and said, ‘Mr. Ramirez, what do you think?’”

The man had, he told me, no thoughts at all. He looked up at the teacher with an expression of helpless vacancy and was intensely relieved when the teacher eventually moved on. “And that,” he announced, “is my story.” He gave me his card and vanished into the night.

Back in my hotel room, I took out his card. He was an emeritus professor of comparative literature at a distinguished university.

Over the next few days, I came to see that Mr. Ramirez’s story condensed into diamond density the American conception of the role of education in democratic citizenship: the welcome to immigrants, including the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free; the opportunity to improve one’s lot through education; the insistence that all students learn a wide range of subjects regardless of their personal abilities or ambitions; the inclusion of the manifestly impractical humanities in the required curriculum; the presumption that the heights of literature – Shakespeare! – can be enjoyed and appreciated by the humblest people; and the capstone in this magnificent arch, the conviction that the value of literature lies not in the text alone but in the exchange between reader and text.

I found myself so moved by this story that I wrote a book called *What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez? The American Revolution in Education* that traced the history of the forces and ideas that have structured the American system that people all over the world have found so distinctive and exciting.³

Since that book appeared in 2017, the American consensus on the ends of education, and so many other subjects, has eroded, and many of the most prestigious institutions responsible for sustaining it seem confused about their underlying rationale or mission, becoming defensive, sometimes ideological, and vulnerable to political attacks. I have not noticed any uptick in sales of my book in the first months of the current administration. The once-upon-a-time consensus on the ends of education has been swamped by political forces on one side and by economic pressures on the other. Elsewhere in the West, where higher education is funded almost entirely by the government and serves the national interest, institutions of

³ Harpham 2017; this book contains an extended account of the establishment of the modern discipline of literary studies in the United States. A more comprehensive multinational historical account can be found in Guillory 2022.

higher education are increasingly seen as engines for promoting innovation, economic growth, and competitive advantage, and are supported accordingly.

In 2025, Mr. Ramirez would not make it ashore at all. Nevertheless, I would argue with even greater force today than I did then that anybody interested in making America or any place great should take a serious interest in an educational project whose value to the public takes the form of the general, society-wide cultivation of private capabilities.

The power and the paradox of a “public humanities” reside in the fact that the best kind of public interest is served not by trying to forge or enforce conformity in views, ambitions, or attitudes but rather by fostering in the public at large the sense that each person has his or her own perspectives and interests that contribute to the shaping of the world they live in, and that these deserve a *prima facie* respect – as, of course, does the concept of the fact to which our private understandings are accountable. That respect can be hard to sustain when one finds oneself face-to-face with actual people with their actual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. But far more so than the mere fact of voting, it is precious and constitutes the actual value of a democratic system, which founders, loses its way, or even destroys itself without it.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham is the author most recently of *Scholarship and Freedom* (Harvard University Press, 2020) and *Citizenship on Catfish Row: Race and Nation in American Popular Entertainment* (University of South Carolina Press, 2022), plus the online anthology “Theories of Race” (theoriesofrace.com). He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Tulane, and Duke, and from 2003–15 he was Director of the National Humanities Center.

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