

The humanities in crisis or the crisis of humanity?

OPINION

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On account of statistics on declining enrolments, shrinking job prospects, dwindling funding, and growing condescension from society, the future of the humanities disciplines has been variously described as gloomy, hopeless, and bleak. This diagnosis has been mainly due to declining interest in the humanities both by students and society in general. Whereas the more favored disciplines in the natural sciences, especially in the STEM fields, bask in the admiration of society and thereby attract funding for studies, research, and community engagements, the humanities continuously struggle under the threat of being consigned, like alchemy, to the dumpsite of historical relics. Indeed, whereas natural science and business programs can pick and choose from among the best of students, students for the most part only consider the humanities as a last resort.

In Kenya, the reality of the humanities in crisis is aptly captured by the pronouncements of Deputy President William Ruto. While serving as Kenya's minister for higher education back in 2010, Ruto dismissed the humanities and social sciences as irrelevant to the Kenyan economy. Similarly, on October 24, 2018 he dismissed history, geography, anthropology, and sociology as courses not worthy studying at the university. Urging universities that receive public funding to 'up their game,' Ruto asserted that universities should be ashamed of churning out 'unemployable' graduates who end up 'roasting maize on the roadside.' Other top public officials, like the Cabinet Secretary for Education, George Magoha, have decried introduction of 'useless' courses, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, that are 'irrelevant' to the Kenyan economy.

The foregoing reality raises a number of questions: Are the humanities, and social sciences for that matter, irrelevant courses not worthy of their place at university? Should universities exist primarily to serve the labor market? What accounts for this apparent crisis in the humanities? Universities, as degree granting institutions, were established with the purpose of offering tuition primarily in non-vocational subjects; to train the mind in higher thinking; to comprehensively educate the person for society rather than simply train individuals for the labor market. Universities are charged with four main functions of which instruction in skills is only one. The other three are the search for truth, the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship, and the promotion of the general powers of the mind in order to produce cultivated individuals rather than mere automata for the labor market. Universities cannot achieve these functions without the power of humanities and social science epistemologies.

Arguably, the apparent crisis in the humanities is reflective of a crisis of humanity more generally. This crisis of humanity manifests itself in four ways. The first is the tyranny of the contemporary neoliberal economic dispensation rooted in the ideology of free markets. This economic mindset privileges the amassing of private property over concern for the common good. It has led to universities being required to train for the capitalist labor market rather than educate for the welfare of society since it prioritizes short-term over long-term interests, and treats money as the measure of all good. University education is not pursued for its own sake, but for the instrumentalist purpose of enabling its partaker to make money in the neoliberal market place. University programs that are seen not to directly contribute to this short-term goal are declared valueless. Within this context, the humanist values of morality, ethics, integrity, justice, equity, truth, respect, and compassion, the forte of a humanities education, are sacrificed at the altar of pursuit of wealth. The idea of intrinsic rightness and goodness of actions has been abandoned in favor of the instrumental good, with economic considerations as the supreme good of all instrumental actions.

The power of this tyranny of the market has led to the prevalent culture of worshipping wealth and the wealthy without an iota of care about how such wealth is acquired.

Second, and as a corollary to the first, the crisis of humanity is manifested in the mantra of privatization with its focus on the economic bottom line. As a result of the globalizing effects of free market neoliberalism, developing countries were called upon to liberalize and privatize, to rationalize and retrench, and to cut back on public spending by eliminating subsidies on staple foods and introducing cost-sharing with consumers of public goods including education and healthcare. Institutions of higher learning were required to justify continued receipt of public funds by demonstrating their value to the national economy. The resultant effect was decreased funding for disciplines, particularly in the humanities, that could not tangibly demonstrate their contribution to economic development. At the same time, funding for other branches of knowledge, especially in the natural sciences was increased because of their presumed guaranteed contribution to the pocketbook. Many humanities departments in universities were abolished with several disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and religious studies, lumped together into single departments.

Third, the crisis within humanity is manifested in the rise of anti-intellectualism that is now ubiquitous. Its essence is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who represent it; and a disposition to constantly minimize the value of that life. The result of this is the current general disdain towards all forms of intellectual activity and a tendency to denigrate those who engage in it, by society in general, but more especially by populist ruling elites. Anti-intellectualism is identified with religious anti-rationalism, populist anti-elitism; and unreflective instrumentalism. Religious anti-rationalism is the belief in the superiority of faith over reason and the fear that scientific endeavors will lead to the elimination of religion. The growth of religious fundamentalism around the world and the popularity of new-age religions in the face of contemporary life challenges is a testament to this. Indeed, as the crisis of humanity deepens, fundamentalist evangelical churches that promise instant miracles continue to prosper and grow in leaps and bounds as adherents flock in, ready and willing to part with their hard-earned meager resources in the name of planting seeds for the expected miracle of instant material transformation. Populist anti-elitism refers to the notion that academics view themselves as superior to the general population and encompasses, among other traits, a mistrust of claims to superior knowledge or wisdom. Thus, whereas the dynamics of governing a modern state requires an astute mind with requisite knowledge of people, their communities and the affairs of state, electorates are sometimes said to be more inclined to elect a person with whom they feel comfortable sharing a beer, or, in democratizing countries such as Kenya, the force of affective ties dictate that votes are cast on the basis of ethnic belonging. Paradoxically, such electorates expect their leaders to be adept in economic management, social relations, and political affairs. The third manifestation of anti-intellectualism is unreflective instrumentalism. Herein, all forms of thought that do not promise relatively immediate practical payoffs are devalued and dismissed off hand. The current crisis of the humanities could thus be said to arise from unreflective instrumentalism, especially since the most common critique of the humanities is that they have no relevance in the contemporary neoliberal marketplace.

Fourth, the crisis of humanity is also manifested in the tyranny of passion, or the rule of the senses. This is related to what some scholars call the seduction by the fleshpots of consumerism. This seduction, so prevalent in contemporary society, has resulted in an unhealthy desire for things that titillate the senses and that enflame the passions, thus leading to a decline in the desire for things intellectual and moral-ethical, the essence of the humanities. This tyranny of passion has led to contemporary society's preoccupation with the celebrity culture, the sponsor-sponsee transactional relationships, the slay queen-slay king phenomenon, the transient Facebook and Instagram likes and

dislikes; and the concomitant dislike and denigration of everything that does not lead to immediate gratification.

Nevertheless, much as the crisis in the humanities is a reflection of a crisis of humanity more generally, it is arguable that humanities scholars also carry some of the blame for the crisis in their disciplines. There is concern that humanities scholars have shifted their attention away from issues that are the immediate concern of society. Critics note, for instance, that philosophy was once written to teach humanity how to live; now, much of it is written to befuddle and mesmerize fellow philosophers. Poems and paintings were once produced to move the spirit and engage the ordinary person; now, many are produced to repel the many and titillate the few. Literature was once thought to convey deep meaning; now, some think it conveys no meaning at all. Similarly, literary/scholarly criticism was originally intended to improve either the artist's/scholar's product or the general public's understanding; now, criticism has become an end in itself. In other words, the humanities have in the course of history redefined themselves to an extent where they are looked upon as irrelevant by their patrons. There is, therefore, a growing consensus both within and outside the academy that humanities discourse has drifted towards the realm of unintelligibility and has stopped being fun both within and outside the academy mainly because humanities scholars have ended up speaking to one another while completely eschewing engaging society.

Overall, there are a number of measures that can help redress the crisis in the humanities and, in so doing, return the humanities to humanity. These include harnessing the wealth of knowledge within the humanities for practical social use, reengaging more assertively with the public with a view to reasserting the rule of reason over the tyranny of passion and the greed of markets, projecting to the public the critical value of a humanities education in producing a critical civil society, and reasserting the age-old idea of humanities as therapy especially its expressive or creative arts therapy, among others. Most importantly, humanities scholars need to engage more with society even as they continue in scholarly activities that have defined the humanities through the ages. A reassertion of humanities therapy in all its expressive trajectories is a critical way for the humanities disciplines to engage with the contemporary world that is increasingly enamored with the world of technology even though the vast majority of humanity are technological immigrants rather than technological natives.