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WHY THE WORLD NEEDS HUMANITIES?

Abstract: Both in “normal” times and in particular when deep and still unfolding global crisis penetrates all spheres of social life humanities play vital role in finding solutions and alternatives to this human and socially made social phenomenon. To execute this role – as was often proved in the past – humanities together with social sciences need besides robust autonomy proper support from democratically constituted society. Privileging the neoliberal (or neo-conservative) view that markets more or less automatically lead societies out of crisis is fundamentally wrong by confusing market economy with the social-darwinist notion of market society. Democratic society which avails itself of humanities (and social sciences) is destined either to its extinction or toward “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life” (Hobbes).

Key words: *humanities, social sciences, democracy, globalization, hard sciences, civilization*

INTRODUCTION

The wisdom which is needed to exit global/national crises, to improve human conditions and to facilitate democratic development is vitally dependent on obtaining the knowledge which targets beyond “know-what” toward “know-how”. Acquired knowledge in humanities and with it entwined values present the proper “barometer of civilization” and moral back as an unavoidable requisite in the trajectory of producing the public good. Moreover it contributes toward measuring the reach of human happiness which goes beyond materialistic myopia of the market value of all final goods and services produced within a country (GDP). Recently we were reminded (Julian Friedland 2012) that roughly 98 percent of the last 2,500 years of Western intellectual history, philosophy (humanities) was considered “*the mother of all knowledge*”. The author (in a personal message to this writer) argued that the rest “2 per cent mathematically represent 50 years of predominately U. S. history in which we have seen philosophy (humanities) marginalized at a rapid rate as the wider culture of scientism has captured the imagination”.

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THE “USEFULNESS” OF HUMANITIES

After Nietzsche’s famous claim that “God is dead” editorial in *The Guardian* (4 June 2012) referred to most recent Stephen Hawking intellectually arrogant and critically naïve statement that “philosophy is dead”. There is namely rather mainstream opinion among scientists that humanities together with its main culprit philosophy are a non-subject from which science and scientists respectively have nothing to learn. This should probably be blamed on Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers who throughout the 20th century focused their attention exclusively to a very narrow set of conceptual problems.

Editorial further mused that the studied research topics hardly surpassed the imaginative range of a car manual. However, Hawking eventually revised himself when he asked science and scientists to resolve such questions as “why is it that we and the universe exist” and that when we would find answer to this valid question, we would reach “the ultimate triumph of human reason”. Moreover, then men “would know the mind of God”. From just mentioned intellectual flaw follows, according to the mentioned editorial only one conclusion: that science needs to interrogate its own conceptual foundations and that this applies equally to moral and ethical implications of its work.

The “usefulness” of humanities can be expressed in obvious concrete terms: production of knowledge concerning the core constituents of our civilizational DNA, robust awareness and representations of our collective and individual identities, what is going on around us and in the world, what are the value and institutional “anchors” in our life, providing educational basis for active and responsible engagement of citizens, who understand precious social and existential issues, etc. Cognitive capital of “soft” sciences, as was noted by Patricia Meyer Spacks and Leslie Berlowitz (2009: 5) thus consists of 1. commitment to critical consciousness; 2. use of analytical power; and 3. critical reflection. Humanities moreover contribute building blocks of social and political imaginary, which secures that “moral” and “complete” man does not submerge to “commercial” man, that is to human being with crippled or uncertain identity, limited potential and ideals (Rabindranath Tagore).

HUMANITIES IN TIME OF CRISIS

Humanities are no doubt crucial in continuous shaping of individual and common awareness of right and duties of individual. This, of course, cannot be performed within the narrow confines of instrumental view of knowledge which according to Don Michael Randel (2009: 10) all too often subjugates our thinking about vital issues concerning our societies and cultures. Moreover, we could hardly speak of civilization and in particular about its endurance if we would forget that “ultimate foundation of any society ought to be on human imagination”. All this is according to the mentioned author eventually (co)related to the fundamental question what it means to be a human being, what values do support the production of knowledge, its application to society, and finally to not much less relevant question as to how individu-

als and collectives should organize their long and short-term lives. For a vital and vibrant democratic society it is of utmost importance to cultivate talk about these crucial issues, in many ways unique and indeed existential social questions. Silence in this regard is a convincing sign that there is something wrong with the democratic course of society and that something should urgently be done in changing its wrong direction in order to avoid further and fateful social decay.

Humanities are about protecting and embedding our life and society's purpose with genuine values. There are a number of disciplines in humanities which are providing them: philosophy, languages, linguistics, the arts, history, music and others. All of them, according to Richard J. Franke (2009: 13–23), in their specific manner, ask and identify individually and socially sensitive questions. In order to discover them they need to apply critical thinking and imagination. Aiming at objectivity would be in vain if it would lack these two relevant competences. This is not done for some professionally selfish reasons, but as Franke clearly states, for the sake of providing citizens and decision-makers with qualified expertise, informed opinion and the capacity for anticipating processes in a fluid and uncertain world around us. In the most optimal way we can accomplish these aims when we are able to link creative and critical competences (thinking) with work performances. The final “destination” of critically examining and future oriented humanities is – in contrast to technological products, which make life more comfortable – reached when humanities endeavors establishes explicit meanings with a view to purposes and directions of societies in this in many ways unique and not yet transparently revealed century.

In time of crisis one often hears prevailing political voices that either societies could save on humanities or treat them as luxury. Nothing can be as wrong as such an attitude toward them. In time of crisis the humanities are even more needed. They do provide the tools to understand deeper and sensitive layers of crisis; moreover, they provide early warning systems before crisis occur, if responsible leaders are willing to listen to their voices. They have the advantage, because they “always feel ill at ease in the world, always (themselves, R. R.) in some degree of crisis” (Edward L. Ayers 2009: 30). While achieving and accumulating new knowledge they at the same time question conventional wisdom, which is not of a much help when it comes to deciphering the deep causes and helping to find the way out of the crisis. It is for sure that it is much easier to explain to people the practicalities one learns in business schools, but is it less tangible if humanities on the other hand provide knowledge, which helps people to better understand causal and contingent relationships, vicissitudes between particular and general, identifying the contextual aspect of a studied problem or gaining skills by which one can gather evidence in taking solid views on concerned issues?

IN DEFENSE OF HUMANITIES

While humanities themselves experience permanently various crises (epistemological, paradigmatic, conceptual, analytical and others) they do at the same

time provide means for overcoming them. Steven Brint (2002) convincingly argues that their repertoire in this regard offers the following competences: capacity to understand logical relations and abstract discourses, comparing and distinguishing between relevant contextual meanings, value interactions between particular and general, discriminating between essential and accidental, further between content, form and ability for self-reflection, that is to understand ourselves through the lenses of other (s), etc. Humanities to be sure are nevertheless not without their own productive contradiction, which is on the one hand performing the role of inspiring and mobilizing for social changes and on the other hand compassionate defending tradition and safeguarding the accumulated cultural capital, created in the past centuries if not millennia.

Universities were and still are playing the central role in producing and reproducing what stands for humanities. Martha Minow (Nannerl O. Keohane 2012) puts forward a very convincing argument in defense of humanities: “You go to a great school not so much for a knowledge as for arts and habits; for the art of expression, for the art of entering quickly into another person’s thought, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual position, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time; for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage, and mental soberness.”

Martha Nussbaum in her book titled *Not for Profit* (2010) further advanced arguments for embedding humanities into the educational process. Education is namely greatly responsible for the formation of citizenship within the confines of democratic society: only informed and independent citizens can think for themselves, develop a critical stand toward tradition, to be able to think about the good of the nation as a whole and to view their own nation as a part of a very complicated and fluid world order. Critical thinking and imagination are often more reality conducive than is conventionally perceived. It enables those who apply them to see multiple scenarios and thus caution researchers and scholars before various opportunities and dangers. Knowledge simply taken from the past or present is greatly enriched by imagination which can add relevant and more justified anticipations about the complex future ahead of us. Thus it is indeed certain that both the imagination and critical thinking contribute toward acquiring the new knowledge.

“A CRIPPLE IN A CAVE”

Likewise Nussbaum Virginia Woolf in her book *Three Guineas* (Keohane 2012) defended “the importance of cultivating taste and the knowledge of arts and literature and music”. In this vein she asked and at the same time also answered the following not just rhetorical question: “What then remains of a human being who has lost sight, sound, and a sense of proportion? Only a cripple in a cave.”

At this point we have to ask ourselves whether universities are still performing their role as promoters of critical thinking and disseminating the vast corpus of wisdom and knowledge by which humanities excelled for so long. Unfortunately, too many universities were in the recent time taken by entrepreneurs, managers, bureaucrats, administrators and staffers who betrayed the initial and founding idea of university's commitment to a critical search for new knowledge by transforming them into institutions where the value of knowledge was exchanged for profit.

Scholars in the area of sociology of knowledge and education often warned that the quality of advanced, in fact any, teaching is negatively correlated with the unrestrained power of their administrators. The worst think that could happen, if it is not already happening, is that bureaucratization of universities should eventually end in some kind of "knowledge factory" (Stanley Aronowitz) where ability to think would be overtaken by gaining purely vocational training. It is quite a paradox that even in the time of financial (economic) crisis new echelons of administrators and staffers are added to university payrolls while at the same time shrinking the full time faculty teaching personnel.

A NEW SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMAGINARY

Both for universities and humanities it is fatal that the first suffered the vocational turn informed by the "growth model of the economy that puts profits before human welfare" (Kate Soper). Further, to respond efficiently and responsibly to the critical environmental and social challenges of this era universities would need the hand of humanities, that is essentially a new social and political imaginary "to undertake the turn from exclusively materially reproductive way of living to a low- or no-growth economic model rooted in an expansion of leisure time and rather different conception of social flourishing and human wellbeing".

Attempts to separate humanities and sciences are fundamentally flawed. Darian Meacham (2010) strongly argues in favor of their continuous process of fertilization which can be otherwise understood as a defense of interdisciplinarity. She gave a number of concrete examples how for example works of Leonardo, Leibniz, or Goethe stimulated great discoveries and at the same time demonstrated the urgency of close cooperation between humanities and natural sciences. Instead in causal empirical terms, humanities such as philosophy, psychology, and even literature can be – when it comes to experiences theoretically – ahead of the natural sciences. Such advantages are clearly evidenced in cognitive area and neuroscience, that is in areas closely related to the study of senses. In this regard Meacham mentioned philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl who already some time theorized the total integration of senses by which they helped natural scientists in their efforts to unlock the mysteries of sensory perceptions. Yet another proof that speculative and experimental sciences together with humanities can contribute toward productive atmosphere in the areas of creativity, intellectual dialogues, and reciprocal engagements.

STRONG IMPETUS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Besides, there are other positive and obvious consequences of studying the humanities: ability to read and write, familiarizing with the language of emotions, obtaining the art of comparisons and wealth of analogies, etc. In time (s) of crisis this kind of knowledge from humanities might help in various ways. Let us take just an example of history which could teach us how previous generations faced and confronted the challenges of the past or an example of literature which provides, according to David Tebaldi (2009) insights into human needs, desires, and motivations. All in all, humanities give individuals and human collectives more transparent and useful view on what is possible, right or desirable in critical economic times. This justifies optimism with a view to often raised question whether humanities will survive in today's all too materialistic societies. Some less optimistic scholars do not doubt in this regard, their skeptical thought is rather focused on questioning whether their home, for example in a hundred years from now, will still be universities?

Humanities stand for "soft" knowledge which represent itself a very strong impetus for social change (Michael Edwards 2010). Humanities are therefore part of the solution and not part of the problem. No politics of knowledge is satisfactory if it does not properly include humanities and if it does not offer convincing proposal with a view to combining "know-what" with "know-how". Merely technical knowledge eventually evolves into some kind of technocracy unable to support democratic processes of problem solving and public policy decision-making. Edwards sides with the social purpose of any knowledge which is democratically-created and controlled and opposes those who either practice or defend the view that knowledge should exclusively serve a private activity by producing cognitive results animating instead of public sphere purely commercial interests.

Undermining humanities won't bring anything good to societies and to the world, quite to the contrary. To defend humanities means at the same time challenging all too prevailing view that our lives should run according to the dictates of economic utility. The marginalization or in the worst case the extinction of those subjects and disciplines that cannot stand the test of "market value" would not only temporarily hurt societies but would signify the fatal departure from what has been so far understood under civilization. Amanda Nevill (2010) referred to a historian who said that the humanities present a better barometer of civilization and what is happening in our world than the stock market or in the legislative bodies. Undermining their status would therefore pose a huge and humanly existential threat to the social and cultural wellbeing of our societies.

CONCLUSION

In the era of globalization and ever increasing and mutual interconnectedness of contemporary societies, humanities, just like the other social sciences, finds the instrumentalist view of the social world of knowledge and values insufficient.

Without humanistic knowledge and values all other sciences would not be able to achieve a relevant understanding of the common, public good, while on the other hand we would be also left without the foundation on which individuals' rights and responsibilities, as well as – last but not least – the humanely and environmentally sustainable cohesion of every society, rests. However, the existence of societies cannot be taken for granted, which is why they have to constantly reproduce and renew themselves. And it is self-evident that in order to do this, what is needed is imagination as well as constant searching and its concomitant active curiosity. It is especially on the basis of these and similar reasons that the study of values and ideas within the humanities and social sciences is justifiable and well founded – above all in those areas in which we can see the production of new knowledge and well thought-out choices regarding its usefulness within society occurring.

In the light of such professional commitment and the cognitive opportunities that humanities share with other social science disciplines, two problems are identified in this area which have probably been also the most crucial and sensitive in the recent period: globalization and identity. Although it is true that history has not yet pronounced – and will probably never do – its “final” judgment regarding them, it is not wise to wait for such a closing trial. Instead of an unproductive silence, it was definitely more appropriate that we extracted from the complex and contingent activities connected with globalization and identity. They are founded on humanistic premises in order to identify those few most frequently and indisputable established facts and realizations from which it is possible to detect their relatively general (humanistic) tendencies. Moreover, to base upon them the necessary individual and strategically designed social interventions and responsible professional considerations.

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