

Caroline Merithew
 Humanities Symposium, February 15, 2011
 “Humanities and What Matters”

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Thank Pat, Alumni Chair, for inviting me to be part of this session,

Thank Paul for his talk and his dedication to the advancement of scholarly discussion,

Thank Audience for coming out during the 5th week of the semester.

I wanted to start with a quote from one of my students this semester, which might be conceived of as a working title.

In history 103, though we are not yet into the French Revolutionary moment, there’s an urge to talk about uprising. This, of course, started with Egypt – but there have also been a few students interested in the Puerto Rican Student revolts in which – as of yesterday -- succeeded in getting the University president to resign.

In the discussion of the latter, one of my students said – unsolicited by me or this Symposium – “You know, it’s the Humanities that does most of the damage.”

So, that made me think. Do I, do we – in the humanities -- cause most of the damage? What kind of damage? Dare I, at the moment that Paul urges us to reinvest in empiricism, begin to invoke relativism and call damage a good thing?

I’ll come back to this.

In Paul’s paper, he makes a number of points on which it’s important for us to dwell.

--First, Paul’s argues that Martha Nussbaum’s defense of the humanities in her 2010 *Not for Profit* seems “quaint, “narrow, and increasingly limited in relevance in 2011”

--Second, he argues, Humanities need more to say and more to be than trainers for good citizenship.

--Third, while recognizing that there has been changes in interest in liberal arts and humanities disciplines (based on statistical information about majors and profession), he steps around the idea of crisis (p6)

--Fourth, he emphasizes the purpose of Humanities research and defines the Humanities as what people “find meaningful” what they “care about”

We might think about the fact that, when Hosni Mubarak resigned, People in the streets were in a moment of what we might call “ecstatic humanity” and joy and within hours they were cleaning the streets.

As the Spanish writer Jose Ortega Y Gasset wrote the purpose of a university is to make “a man a good professional.” (Quoted in Kai Hammermeister “Rereading the University Classics, *Chronicle* Sept 9 2010)

We might argue that those acts of Egyptian protestors – the civil disobedience, the joy, and, the mundane act of – what Friedrich Engels would call reproductive labor were a result of humanities training. They were good protestors and revolutionaries because they did both.

To imagine a better world and act on that imagination. Then, to take up an act of labor and make that place more beautiful is an act of humanity

“The humanities are valuable for the education of our capabilities,” Paul says, “to make reasonable and wise practical judgments about what to do and how we live.” In the Egyptian case, we see both in this small example.

I’m going to take a moment on the third point Paul brings up on crisis because as an historian, I add to the insight of a philosopher and dean.

The fundamental component of an historian's craft is time and chronological framework.

Rather than resist crisis, I suggest we embrace it for a new generation.

I’d date the formulation of this crisis as ½ century old.

In 1964, British Historian, J. H. Plumb paralleled the sentiment of our Dean in his edited volume, *Crisis in the Humanities* (Penguin Books, Baltimore Maryland, 1964), in which he rejects the double suicidal impulses of the humanities, which he defines as (1) clinging to tradition and; (2) retreat into isolation.

He uses his own humanistic field of history -- to lament:

“It has lost all faith in itself as a guide to the actions of men: no longer do historians investigate the past in the hope that it may enable their fellow men to control the future. Its educational value, they feel, lies in the exercises it provides of the mind and not for what it contains.” (Plumb, p9)

Paul’s call for reification of empiricism, I think, echoes a common thread in their thinking.

We might connect the two ends of the 5 decade old crisis era in the humanities with pointing to the fact that Benson and Plumb make their claims after similar impetuses

For Plumb, the first phase was the sputnik moment.

For Paul – and us – it’s, what we might term, a new sputnik moment (neosputnicism, let’s term it).

In each of these phases, there’s a lot of talk about the importance of putting resources into math and science education.

That’s a good thing – for everyone. Lest we forget that the Sputnik moment not only created a math and science bonanza which resulted in a plethora of physicists and engineers, it also inspired the SF columnist Caen to coin the term beatnik – a terminology which we now use to understand the rootless morass of a generation.

But, it also got people thinking about the meaning of education and the importance of breadth.

Math and Biology, History and Philosophy, Psychology and the Fine Arts are more the same than they are different because they are fundamentally about fields with breadth not what, a man from Oregon writing to *Life Magazine* in 1964 (the first phase of crisis) called “Specialized specialists.”

The historian Mary Beard, writing in 1915 – and about a women’s crisis not a humanities crisis argued: “If early specialization is bad for the boys it is even worse for the girls, because at the present time industry tends to make them machines.” (Mary Beard *Women’s Work in Municipalities*, 1915).

So, yes, indeed there’s a crisis

As someone who studies anarcho-syndicalism, I would say, what my subjects say, CRISIS is GOOD. (They’d also probably say to my 103 student, if the Humanities are doing the “damage” good for them).

But, I’m with Andrea Dworkin on this one, who, in her 2002 Memoir, *Heartbreak*, reminds us that apathy is immoral and that to “Do no harm” – to do no damage, if you will “is the counterpoint to apathy.” (204)

To admit crisis is not apathetic.

To understand *this* crisis is a fundamental part of what we do here.

To take it on is a fundamental part of what I think we should do.