

**Review of Martha C. Nussbaum's**  
***Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities***  
(and Why I Agree with Her)

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Martha C. Nussbaum's central argument in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) is that a high quotient of liberal arts education is essential for healthful democracies and human happiness. Education needs to be *for* something, after all, and this sweeping aim (freedom and joy) would be difficult for most to argue against – least of all those of us who already favor humanities-infused education.

Like other books of its kind, *Not for Profit* inevitably preaches to the converted. But many of the points it makes along the way are eye-opening and very much worth knowing. A well stocked arsenal of argument is always wise, and those of us who go forth and teach in schools, colleges, and other institutions around the world, need to be as versed as we can be in arguments for the inclusion of humanities subjects in primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

As an American lecturer of English who has been teaching in the Republic of Ireland for twenty years, and whose students are international as well as Irish, I was fascinated to learn precisely how my own liberal arts education came to be; how it compares with European and other international norms; and why an undergraduate education like the one I completed in New Jersey in 1986 is still typical in American colleges and universities today.

According to Nussbaum, a university programme of study that does not immediately specialise is unusual in many other parts of the world. Here in Ireland, undergraduate degrees specialise from the start, and, as is widely known, the same is generally true in Britain and other European countries.

Nussbaum's detailed analysis of education in India, however, is illuminating for those of us schooled and operating in Western systems. Juxtaposed against her sustained, historical review of American liberal arts education, her depiction of Indian educational norms, higher education norms in particular, renders *Not for Profit* an engrossing tale of two university systems.

The American liberal arts model of higher education, Nussbaum reminds us, is fundamentally Socratic. It has been deeply, and maybe indelibly, influenced by the pedagogies of Bronson Alcott and John Dewey, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century educational theorists and practitioners. India, also a democracy – governed by rule of law, as any other – no longer privileges a liberal arts curriculum. The current dearth of wide-ranging curricula in India suggests that government *by* the people does not necessarily produce education *for* the people. India's modern-day universities and institutes, with their emphasis on market-ready skills, would appear to be designed for the economy. The economy, one would think, *is* for the people. But Nussbaum reminds us time and again that the distribution of wealth in India is grossly uneven.

What she most wants to convey, though, is that a purely utilitarian, pre-professional, 'growth-directed' model of education lacks soul (a concept she delineates in non-religious terms) and is unlikely to be as 'practical' as hoped, since humanities subjects condition individuals for creative and critical thinking, both essential to enduringly buoyant economies. Without creative and critical thought on the part of an active, watchful citizenry, democracy becomes notional, and economies attenuate in favour of a shrinking, and potentially dictatorial, elite. Thus the store of human happiness diminishes.

In describing Indian education, Nussbaum identifies Nobel Prize for Literature winner (1930) Rabindranath Tagore as its guiding, but now fading, light. Like Alcott and Dewey, Tagore espoused 'the empowerment of the student through practices of Socratic argument, exposure

to many world cultures, and, above all, the infusion of music, fine art, theater, and dance into every part of the curriculum.’ His ideas were once far reaching. But today, Nussbaum tells us, even the university he founded, Visva-Bharati’ (meaning ‘All the World’), has surrendered its reputation to government auspices that want, primarily, to ‘produce’ graduates for the burgeoning economy.

The business-trumps-education trend is, of course, rampant around the world. So it is especially surprising that the United States, usually classed as a nation in a state of advanced capitalism, may be skirting it. Nussbaum informs us that many American universities have made ‘deep cuts’ in humanities and arts programming. But philanthropic support from private donors has offered protection, as has the sheer force of habit. Private endowments bequeathed to alma maters across the land come from benefactors who so value their own liberal arts backgrounds that they want very much to preserve wide ranging curricula for future generations.

As an American reader of *Not for Profit*, I found welcome irony in this reassuring state of affairs. In a country where business models predominate in most aspects of life, still the incorporation of liberal arts subjects into undergraduate degrees is thought to be, quite simply, *for the best*. For instance, a primary degree in Pharmacology at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, requires its graduates to have completed ‘a total of nine courses in the humanities and / or social science. Of these, the School requires two writing courses in the humanities and one Economics course as a social science. The other six courses must be true humanities and / or social sciences.’ This curriculum is designed to meet the requirements of the Accreditation Council for Pharmaceutical Education. And it is typical of most non-humanities bachelor’s degrees in the United States.

Nevertheless, Nussbaum worries that the long standing tradition of humanities core requirements in most American college degrees is endangered. Despite philanthropic support, the economic crisis, she believes, does threaten to undermine the principled intentions of university managers and administrators who may buckle under pressure from certain quarters, and then find themselves joining less sympathetic bureaucrats in the wish to meet ‘immediate

worldly purposes', to quote Harvard's President Drew Faust who has vociferously defended the liberal arts model.

When I was in college, beginning in 1982, I majored in English and Secondary Education. To meet core requirements, I took subjects from across the curriculum including mathematics, history, philosophy, religion, and the natural, applied, and social sciences. I come to you now, the writer of a book review, a lecturer of a single discipline, who once learned a handful of things about statistics, geology, computer science, psychology, medieval philosophy, logic, western civilization, and American history. I no longer have much knowledge of any of these areas. In general, they have not been 'useful' to me in any tangible way. But I suspect that I have myself been more useful to others as a sentient woman, humbled by the work of mathematicians, geologists, computer programmers, philosophers, and historians. I know a tiny bit about what they do. And I understand how much richer is our world because of their intellectual pursuits.

I also perceive, with the news of each passing departmental closure or amalgamation on this side of the Atlantic, the lure of instant gratification. Models of education that focus solely on employability concede to this lure. They also misunderstand the word education. It comes from the Latin *educere*, meaning to bring up or to draw out. *Training*, on the other hand, is narrow and specific. It is narrow and specific and, we must readily acknowledge, it is *as valuable as the day is long*. It is not, however, education in a true or universal sense. Education offers scope, where training offers precision.

Colleges and universities, and the societies who fund them, would be acting in humanity's best interest if they refrained from confusing these two, 'education' and 'training'. They are not interchangeable. Pre-professional training, all the rage, according to Nussbaum, in today's Indian tertiary institutes, obviously has a place in our world, and therefore a place in our schools and colleges. I could not write, edit, and send this review, had I not learned some basic computing. But I would have so little to say if I had not learned some rhetoric.

Pre-professional training, packaged in degrees that exclude all else, is short-sighted. An education rich in humanities subjects is an education rich in ideas. But once education serves

only the marketplace, it has lost sight of itself. If Nussbaum and other influential educators of her persuasion succeed in their proselytizing, future generations in Europe, in America, and in India will thank them. Because once we have consumed all of the consumables, it will be comforting to still have ideas.