

Steven Marcus

*Humanities from classics to cultural studies:  
notes toward the history of an idea*

Those intellectual pursuits and academic organizations that we think of as constituting the humanities are today undergoing a course of change that is entirely in consonance with their history. The idea of the humanities, in point of fact, first appeared in the United States early in the twentieth century and has altered greatly in meaning ever since, thanks to the intellectual, social, cultural, and educational developments that have taken place over the last hundred years.

These alterations are to be understood, in the first instance, as parts of the evolution of the American university and

---

*Steven Marcus is George Delacorte Professor of the Humanities, Emeritus, at Columbia University. A specialist in nineteenth-century literature and criticism, he has published works such as "Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey" (1965), "The Other Victorians" (1966), "Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class" (1975), and "Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis" (1984). He was also instrumental in founding the National Humanities Center. Elected a Fellow of the American Academy in 1974, Marcus currently serves as Editor of the American Academy.*

---

© 2006 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

college system beginning after the end of the Civil War and accelerating steadily as the century ended. At the macro-level of ideal-typical structure, that set of institutions in its historical formation borrowed something from each of the three great European systems from which it also departed. From the nineteenth-century German universities, it adapted Humboldt's animating conception of dedication to original research, combined (often secondarily) with instruction. From Oxford and Cambridge, it secured the notion of the undergraduate residential college, in which teaching included, ideally, educating the social and elevating the moral character of privileged young men, and where, in a community of learning, community often counted for as much as, if not more than, learning. And from the universities of France, the American institutions imported the idea of training young, middle-class men to be officials of the state and servants of society: in America, the land-grant colleges, numerous state universities, and even some normal schools took over the functions that bore upon the formation of middle- and upper-middle-level elites at regional, state, and, occasionally, national levels.

This three-part system that began to evolve in the latter half of the nineteenth

century combined in a spectrum of configurations a hierarchy of undergraduate colleges, graduate research schools and institutes, and technical training centers. Its fully developed form, attained in the second half of the twentieth century, is most distinctly visible in the pyramidal system of institutional distinctions and interchanges that occur among the different elements of the California state system of postsecondary education. At the top are the eight or nine grand university campuses – comprehensive research universities – of which at least two, Berkeley and UCLA, are of the highest standing. Beneath them is the state university (formerly the state college) system, doing its own multifarious academic and cultural work, and sustaining a variety of relations with both the great campuses and the institutions of the third level, the community colleges, which exist throughout the state and aspire to an astonishing range of functions.

A century or more ago, most institutions of higher education rested on religious foundations, and they served, among other things, to reproduce specific social and cultural governing groups. Pressure to change the internal structure of these institutions came from multiple sources. Prominent among them was the intractably growing importance of the natural sciences, which were modifying the shape of the world, intellectually and materially. Spiritually as well, the natural sciences represented a challenge: at worst, they seemed morally subversive; at best, morally indifferent. There was also the increasingly secular character of American institutional, civic, and cultural life, fueled, in part, by the pragmatic demands of a boisterous economy and a clamorous society. In addition, there was, as a substantial corollary to such

practical alterations, an undeniable general decline in the intellectual authority of religion.

At the same time, a widespread movement away from the mandated study of the classical languages and literatures took place: first, classics was no longer a requirement for entrance into the more established undergraduate colleges; likewise, required courses at the lower collegiate level in Greek and Latin began to erode. In short, the classics, along with the classicists, were losing their authority. Second, there was a similar decline in the teaching of ‘moral philosophy.’ Traditionally, this course had been a capstone requirement for graduating seniors; it was also something of a tradition that it was taught by the president of the college, who had customarily, if not universally, been a clergyman. And third, there was the growing consequence in the last quarter of the century of a new undergraduate curriculum: a course of study based more on the idea of free electives than on the notion of a prescribed sequence of courses or even of a distribution of courses among a group of stipulated fields.

The result was a widely felt need for some secular substitute for the religion-based moral education that had heretofore been a central ideological charge of institutions of higher education. It was within this fraught context that the notion of ‘the humanities’ first began to circulate within America’s institutions of higher education.

The humanities as we think of them today – the formal, organized study of language and literature, philosophy and history, art and music – did not exist in the late nineteenth century. Of course, all of these subjects were taught at the time, but each was considered an independent domain, properly organized as

its own department of knowledge. It was in these years that the first specialized departments of philosophy and of religion appeared. Revealing how rapidly the specialization of knowledge was taking place was the phenomenal growth throughout the 1890s of new scientific and professional organizations, with new journals for newly organized studies (with hitherto unheard-of nomenclatures), as well as the equally speedy expansion of the newer social sciences, which achieved autonomy during the same decade (the first department of anthropology in America was founded at Columbia in 1896).

When the term *humanities* was used in these years, as it occasionally was, it referred to the organized study of Greek and Latin classics. But even here, specialization was the order of the day. Under the influence of the dominant German paradigm, classicists, especially the younger members of the profession, began to undertake new kinds of research, observe new standards of scholarly exactitude and expertness, and honor newly 'scientific' goals and methods in the study of philology.

As a result, some senior classicists began to think of themselves as members of an embattled cultural patriciate – which they in fact were. Distrustful of democracy, resentful of scientific method, made anxious by the secular spirit of a crescent modernity, indifferent or hostile to the immigrant millions disembarking on what they regarded as rightfully their native shores, they conceived of themselves as the custodians of a civilization under siege from alien, if not extraterrestrial, forms of life.

In a period of headlong change, the older classicists represented continuity, for they were almost uniformly oriented toward the past. Such a circumstance is particularly salient if unremitting social

and cultural flux brings about not only growth but also dislocation, fragmentation, an increasingly rarefied and abstruse intellectual division of labor, and specialization without a palpable sense of a conceptual whole. Hence there arose a tendency to look to what was occasionally called 'the humanist tradition' (with virtually no one quite knowing what it was) for cultural orientation and guidance. The historical past of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance 'greats,' the classical record of these men and their deeds, seemed to embody a moral as well as an intellectual set of assurances. In the name of Culture, these older classicists promoted the humanist tradition as an educational ideal of gentlemanliness, a rather genial spirituality and anti-materialism. But their influence was limited. Younger philologists, and most students of philosophy, literature, and art, pledged allegiance, not to a bygone ideal of cultivation, but rather to the eminent-modern ideals of science and systematic research.

Consequently, few scholars were giving much thought to 'the humanities' as the twentieth century began. The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910 – 1911), for example, does not contain any article on 'the Humanities.' There is, however, an entry on "Humanism," which it defined as a Renaissance movement opposed to the "medieval tradition of scholastic theology and philosophy" and involved in the rediscovery of the Greek and Latin classics. One will also find in the relevant tertiary literature of the period mentions of "Litterae Humaniores," the Oxford curriculum in Latin and Greek literature and philosophy. There are also stray references here and there to the curious fact that at Scottish universities the professorship of Latin bore (and still bears) the title "Pro-

*Humanities:  
notes toward  
the history of  
an idea*

fessor of Humanity.” And enquiry into dictionaries of the period yields the finding that they defined the plural form of the noun *humanity* as “the generic term for the classics.”

How uncertain and precarious was the usage of the term *humanities* is evident in a passage from a Phi Beta Kappa address, delivered at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902:

The humanities . . . I suppose that these words call up to the minds of many of us who are not wholly unlettered, a thing in some manner connected with the study of the classics, a something opposed to science and to the study of nature, a something very impractical and very desirable to possess, you do not lose bread and butter by it; a thing much talked of at commencements, and, happily, for the most part, forgotten meanwhile. Indeed, the popular conception of the humanities is . . . not so much a definite conception as an ineffaceable impression that there really are such tongues, and that it is a very disagreeable thing to have much to do with them. The humanities! The very term is redolent of times long gone and smacking of generations before the last. Beside glittering, new-minted epithets like “sociology,” “criminology,” and “degeneracy,” the very word “humanities” looks dim and faded in this new century.

This is a telling passage – and it raises an obvious question. How did ‘the humanities’ lose its association with the conservatism of old-fashioned classicists, and become instead a comprehensive term that described a group of academic disciplines distinguished in content and method from the physical, biological, and social sciences?

The change began early in the twentieth century, when younger scholars of classical literature, together with their colleagues in philology, philosophy, lit-

erature, history, art, and music, began to use the word *humanities* as a general term to refer to what bound their inquiries loosely together. Still, up until 1930, the use of this term in this way was intermittent and inconsistent. Sometimes it implied everything that was *not a science* (but that understanding would exclude a good deal of important humanistic scholarship itself), and sometimes it meant any study that had no immediate *utility*. Only gradually did it take on the sense that we accept and assume today.

From the outset, the term was loosely inclusive – as when, in 1919, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) included in its titular self-description the words “devoted to humanistic fields.” Four years later, the range of relevant fields was dramatically narrowed when a number of disciplinary organizations seceded from the ACLS in order to found the separate and autonomous organization, the Social Science Research Council.

The term *humanities* effectively enters the academic taxonomy only after 1930, when at the University of Chicago a general reorganization replaced the Faculties of Arts and Letters with the Division of the Humanities. Similarly, in 1936, Princeton initiated an undergraduate interdisciplinary “Special Program in the Humanities.” Meanwhile, in 1936 – 1937, Columbia instituted the path-breaking freshman sequence in the humanities, a mandatory and interdepartmentally taught curriculum, which grew out of its predecessor in contemporary civilization and offered a reading list of literary, philosophical, and religious texts from Homer to Goethe. And at Yale and Harvard, the humanities appeared a few years later as one of the subject groups in their distribution requirements. These courses, sequences, groupings of subjects, and registries of

requirements (and there were similar curricular arrangements being installed at Stanford, Berkeley, and then by both simultaneous inspiration and rapid percolation at many other institutions) were the instructional infrastructure of what was to become a new institutional and intellectual context, linking the work in languages and literature, history, philosophy, linguistics, religion, art and music history, and the so-called softer side of the social sciences. In other words, only in the 1930s and 1940s does the idea of, as well as the term, 'the humanities' begin to be deployed with regular frequency and with the relative specificity of reference to the disciplines that we apply it to today.

Does this history imply that the humanities were, by and large, a residual and merely organizational (not to say administrative) category? Does it imply that the humanities were what were left standing after the social sciences hived themselves off and swarmed off to meet their manifest destiny? Are the humanities the funeral baked meats coldly furnishing forth the marriage tables for other, more up-to-date intellectual undertakings?

Well, yes and no. But mostly no.

What this history *does* show is that the humanities are essentially a modern invention, not the legacy of a longstanding tradition. Thus, when the authors of *General Education in a Free Society*, a Harvard Red Book published in 1945, confidently claimed, "Tradition points to a separation of learning into the three areas of natural science, social studies, and the humanities," they were talking nonsense, for they were summoning forth a tradition that did not exist before the 1930s.

Moreover, the tradition thus conjured up proved to be relatively short-lived.

The war years had brought an influx of European refugee scholars and such paradigmatic achievements as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* – a magisterial synthesis that made the modern idea of the humanities plausible. At the same time, the experience of the war years underlined the fragility of the humanist ideal. By the 1950s, scholars like Lionel Trilling and journals like *Partisan Review* had rallied to the defense of the humanities, understood now as an imperiled but essential bulwark against barbarism.

As cultural studies began to emerge in the 1960s and after as a broad, reshaping tendency within the humanities, the organizational model customarily pursued was that of the interdisciplinary programs of American studies, many of which had gotten underway themselves in the late 1940s and 1950s. Such innovations began frequently as movements within disciplines and departments. They then typically branched out into interdepartmental explorations, faculty seminars, interdisciplinary team-taught seminars, and then largely undergraduate courses of study. Including literature, history, art history, law, sociology, anthropology, and whatever else has seemed appropriate, such programs have regularly been the organizational paradigm and umbrella for cultural studies. The titles and interests of such programs are now too numerous to list, but they include prominently African American studies, women's studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, New Historicist studies, and gay and lesbian studies. They are, as the saying goes, where the action has been, and it isn't difficult to see why – they are doing something intrinsically right, however much one may want to hold concretely and specifically in reserve.

*Humanities:  
notes toward  
the history of  
an idea*

Two large influences are present in the family history of this latest development. First is the untimely return of Marxism, a particularly awkward matter in a post-Marxist world. The reaffirmation of Marxism as a program in the humanistic academy, when it is for the historical moment dormant or in an expired state almost everywhere else, creates a difficult situation for its more perceptive adherents (and tends as well to make some of their avowed radicalism appear quaint rather than subversive). In addition, the Marxian universalist perspective does not accord comfortably with those anti-Enlightenment, anti-Eurocentric, anti-American, and anti-University sentiments that often seem to drive certain of these recent academic cultural subgroupings.

The second such flow of influence is in some measure connected with the first, though it is not immediately or solely derived from it. I am referring to the general notion of the cultural construction of knowledge. This is a powerful and useful conception both in theory and application. It has itself a diversity of affiliative roots: it has originary leadings in certain Marxist dealings with ideology, in cultural anthropology as a whole, in a number of the larger motions of nineteenth-century historicist modes of thought, and in the sociology of knowledge. Precisely because it is so strong an instrument of analysis, it has to be employed with considerable tact and urbanity – which, unfortunately, it often is not. For it is only one moderately short intellectual step from the measured historical relativism of this perspective to the lamentable reductionism of a considerable portion of identity politics, the assertion that one's personal or group situation – class, race, or gender – determines the substance of one's thoughts and beliefs. And from this

point it is merely one step again to the claim that 'everything is political' – that one's position, location, or site determines all arguments and convictions, and that genuine contentious discussion is, in effect, pointless. Or, rotated to yet another side, the belief that the political bearing of a work of literature is the most important thing about it, or that such a work is foremost merely another text in some historical negotiation over power, is equally ruinous. Just as stifling is the constructionist argument in an extreme form – that since all knowledge is socially or culturally constructed, no transcontextual validity is possible. That remark is as axiomatic as the claims it condemns. How damaging such arguments can be are visible in certain quarters of some American law schools.

Yet despite such serious drawbacks and dubious intellectual groundings, I believe we are undergoing another shift in the internal configuration of the disciplines that constitute the humanities. History, culture, literary analysis, and other thick pursuits, now that grand theory has receded, have been let in again – through the back door, so to speak. It will not, I suspect, be ultimately fatal that the impulses that first moved some of the designers of these new initiatives and programs were overtly political in ways that allowed ideological leanings and purposes to compromise the scholarly studies that they undertook. What is important in this connection is that a new range of topics and themes has been legitimately started, that new cultural and historical materials are being brought forward for discussion and analysis. To be sure, we are not out of the ideological woods yet; some of the more heated opposing groups are still having it out, ensuring more unpleasant

scenes and consequences. (Think of what might happen in legal studies.) But there is a sense abroad that the most intense moments of acrimony may be past, that some settling is taking place, and that pitched battle has given way, if not to peace, then to smaller guerilla actions and even, here and there, to armed, if exhausted, truce. Most of all, there is a growing sense of need for new intellectual departures and an intuition as well that the connections and discontinuities between generations of teachers and scholars need attention and repair, that we may have lost generations of academics as well as of writers and artists, and that this reckoning has yet to be made.

We may hence in this spacious context choose to regard what are known as cultural studies largely as residues of ideological movements, but residues that have been progressively assimilated, in the customary American way, into the general intellectual life of the academy, a life that is more than ever before intimately bound up with changes in the culture at large. Or, alternatively, we may regard such developments as *emergent processes*, carrying their history along with them, to be sure, but resuming with modified perspectives certain projects that have been suspended for a time – for example, revisionary readings of the old ‘new critics’ and historians by some of the younger cultural critics. These latest scholars have less history behind them, but considering the nature of much recent history, that may not be an entirely bad thing. Equally cogent, however, is the sense they communicate of an awareness of intellectual and disciplinary *fragmentation* of both perspective and knowledge and of the need for new shapes of intellectual *integration*.

My own intuition of the current situation is that we must take such projects as

they come, one by one. For the present, it is sufficient to commit oneself to the notion that the intellectual excellence of the individual scholar or program is the basis for judgment. We must regard cultural projects with overtly political purposes or principally ideological ends as suspicious, if not outrightly dangerous, objects. The inner reconfiguration of the humanistic disciplines of study at the end of the twentieth century will take place whether we want it to or not. Our responsibility at this time, it seems to me, is to make that transition to new purposes and perspectives as honest and open, as flexible and inclusive, as possible. If we turn ourselves to this work, we will be doing what it is appropriate for scholars and critics at any time to do.

*Humanities:  
notes toward  
the history of  
an idea*