

Book Review: Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Utility and Markets

by Blog Admin

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*What is the value of the arts and humanities today? This question points to a long and extensively discussed dilemma. This collection of original essays aims to offer examples that show that, rather than relying on the narrowly utilitarian notion of 'research impact' that has developed within current educational policies and debates, it may be more appropriate to look at the ways in which arts and humanities research is already engaged in collaborative endeavours, both within academia and beyond, in order to address the big ethical, political, technological and environmental challenges of contemporary life. Reviewed by **Paul Benneworth**.*



Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Utility and Markets. Eleonora Belfiore and Anna Upchurch. Palgrave Macmillan. July 2013.

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One of the few welcome effects of the post-2008 crisis has been the change to question the profoundly negative consequences of the public realm's creeping economisation over the last thirty years. Introducing markets into public services and civic life came at the cost of reducing all social exchanges to market transactions, reducing everything of value to an economic price as the first step in ensuring 'efficiency' in its use and consumption. But although the Great Crash has outlined the magnitude of the folly that arose in reducing important societal judgements to phony price guestimates, what it not clear is what will come to take its place in public life. What is now needed is a serious and logical societal debate regarding 'what matters', creating a new morality of public governance.



Drawing upon the example of arts & humanities scholarship, a domain that suffered greatly under economic reductionism, [Eleonora Belfiore](#) and [Anna Upchurch](#) use their new book *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Utility and Markets*, to offer a serious contribution in debating a new discourse of wise governance. They reframe the humanities' public value in ways that make it fit for purpose in this search for a new public morality, by problematizing two sets of attitudes facilitating the dominance of what Sandel terms 'market triumphalism'. As well as the usual criticism of those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing, they innovatively also problematize the disservice done to the field by humanities scholars that make 'exorbitant claims for a humanities-based education' (p.ii) and humanities intrinsic value.



They do this by assembling a volume where chapters hang together to open up an interesting scholarly debate, hinting at the excitement and creativity within the research network that mobilised these discussions. The book's overall argument is that market triumphalism in the humanities has been actively connived at by humanists' own passivity in the face of market pressures. It is not enough for humanities scholars to appreciate their own value, they continue, but they must find ways to articulate those values in ways that society at large and key decision-makers find compelling. The book provides a valuable first step in articulating that value by challenging both scholars' and society's preconceptions of humanities' public value, using humanities techniques and practices to create clear understandings and hard arguments for that value.

The book's approach is to offer five debates which serve as testing grounds for developing these more logical and compelling value arguments. The book is organised into five sections, each of which represents a different concern or starting point for a debating position, rather than a systematic division of areas needing coverage. The first two sections reflect in humanities and the 'impact agenda' both its effect in scholars but also the reactions it has provoked within the field. The first section considers how humanities has reacted to increasing demands to be more socially useful. Central to this section is highlighting a disconnect between what Belfiore calls the 'discourse of gloom' of those who regard their own practices as ultimately irrelevant, and the enormously positive experiences of scholars who have used engagement to access new types of knowledge to create new kinds of understanding and answer new categories of question. In the second section, three chapters turn the lens of humanities scholarship back onto the concept of utility, and problematize its introduction in UK and American contexts. What emerges very clearly here is the capacity that diverse and dynamic humanities debates have to highlight the intellectual vacuity of concepts chosen often more for reasons of policy pragmatism than for their logical consistency, itself a useful societal service.

The third and fourth sections show how humanities value at least comes in part by the way that it is used elsewhere, in other academic disciplines and in societal institutions. The third section argues that an important part of humanities' value comes in their interaction with other disciplinary areas. Cleverly written case studies of medical humanities and geography are used to show how that an essential understanding of the human condition are often critical to unlock the societal potential offered by more technological developments. The fourth section explores how humanities is used in practice in the way that society makes value judgements, using cases of museums and a craft school in America. Both cases demonstrate clearly how these institutions activities – and the scholarship they internalise - are vital to a society's capacity to have an informed cultural debate and a democracy offering choices over people's lives beyond the market.

The final section uses the rise of a particular humanistic domain – Digital Humanities – to show how the field is retaining its salience given the increasingly importance of knowledge produced in extended social networks. Humanities scholars using new digital tools has stimulated reflections on the pathways and practices of digital creativity and identity that have created much deeper understandings of human experience and meaning this new connected world. The only shortcoming is that a messy debate can at times feel slightly partial in its coverage. There is sometimes the feeling that the debate arrives at an interesting discussion only to pull back from developing the arguments further, whilst one senses that contributors share the strongly normative position that 'humanities matters' that perhaps sometimes stops hard questions being asked.

But Belfiore & Upchurch have clearly succeeded in getting beyond simplistic cheerleading of their friends, and have even created something beyond an enthusiasts' account, such as Bate's (excellent) *The Public Value of the Humanities*. The book is beautifully written and edited, allowing the reader to relax and enjoy the experience of following an intense, academic debate, whilst its hard, critical edge skewers economic triumphalism on its own inconsistencies. This makes *Humanities in the 21st century* both a compelling call to humanities scholars to reclaim the public value debate, as well as setting a demanding standard for others wanting to participate in that debate.

Paul Benneworth is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the [University of Twente](#), Enschede, the Netherlands. Paul's research concerns the relationships between higher education, research and society, and he is currently Project Leader for the HERAVALUE research consortium (Understanding the Value of Arts & Humanities Research), part of the ERANET funded programme "Humanities in the European Research Area". Paul is a Fellow of the Regional Studies Association. [Read more reviews by Paul](#).