

Conversation
with Nicholas
Dirks edited by
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Transformational processes

The Humanistic Culture and the “Good Life”

Many young people struggle to understand what they are doing with their lives. And this generates more and more fear and anxiety in them. In the context of a representation of reality that conveys high-performance messages. Academia is a protagonist in this narrative. Suffering most from it is a misunderstanding and reductive use of the humanities. Academic Nicholas Dirks considers this approach to be partial and a harbinger of ambiguous answers. However, it's not about proposing an alternative formula; rather, it's about engaging directly—both professors and students—to finally bring the humanities to life in the city of the intellect. Transforming them to transform themselves. Without falling into the temptation to think of the classroom as a therapeutic, saving environment in itself. Or of blaming all responsibility for the fragility of the self on the intrusiveness of social media. “It is in fact through that kind of encounter that important things happen: not so much what you do to live the good life, but rather how you begin to think about what a good life might be for you.” Exclusive interview.

Nicholas Dirks is an academic keenly interested in continually questioning the meaning of teaching. On the incidence of humanistic culture as a virtuous, living vehicle for a deep relationship with students. In the university that is place, City of the Intellect as the title of a provocative book of his comes out in the U.S. in late 2023. Stimulating city the university but also a place dense with contradictions, with deep cracks that, to some extent, contribute to impoverishing the relationship between professors and young students. A depowering also due to a “reduction” of the humanities and therefore little or no significance to the performance demands of today's American society. Dirks, on the other hand, reasons to bring humanistic culture back to the center, as a “transformative” and fascinating opportunity. A humane, life-experiencing opportunity for young college students.

You recently wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education about your father's story as a symbol of the transition from a religious to a secular education, with the humanities taking on the task to educate young generations to a moral standard which was previously under the purview of religious formation. Now looking back on the past century, how would you assess the university's performance in this respect?

That article was both a story about my father and an attempt to figure out where the humanities are today. It is part of a larger conversation with others about how to maintain a certain level of enchantment for the humanities when we witness a constant critique of any kind of canon and any way of thinking about the humanities as a generalizable universal set of en-

gagements, encounters, and readings from which a student could take away a set of values, or at least as a process by which they would think about issues of value in a transformational way. But there's been a focus on reading one's own literature, people, writers, and on immersing oneself in a kind of process of self-affirmation against an established canon that was seen either as elite or exclusionary. It had the effect of bringing people in, but also of segmenting everybody out from a conversation that might have crossed identity boundaries. My father was the only person in his family who went to university. His father, who was very devout, allowed him to go on the condition that he would come back to Iowa as the local minister. But then he was fascinated by philosophy and kept going East, and East was a problem. The taint of the East came up when he was being interviewed for ordination in his church. Nonetheless, he maintained a double relationship with the church and the university. He took the university as a place where he could extend his moral, philosophical, and religious quest, and he did so in a counterpoint with his continuing relationship with the church. In the 1950s and '60s he partook in the creation of *The Christian Scholar*, a journal which captured that kind of antinomy – a hybrid term with a built-in tension – but which required the maintenance of faith and a calling to scholarship independent of, even if connected to, the reference to faith. His story mirrors the steady expansion of the humanities in the 20th century: from Classics to English literature, to other languages and literatures, history, and philosophy, as a kind of secular humanism became a substitute for the more specifically religious kind. Texts were put on a pedestal that was, if not religious, certainly meant to be exemplary and to provide a role model for life.

In the context of the expanding middle class, the growth of the university, the creation of larger and larger public universities, and the idea that more and more people should go to college, we had to expand what this means. Many colleges and universities responded by creating a sequence of general humanities courses. The humanities were often seen as a repository of all these other things that were no longer specifically religious, but still conveyed and contained the world of value and moral reckoning that many people continue to believe they needed. The liberal arts, then, were critical to the education of the youth and ensured that in addition to particular skills they were instilled with a broader moral education as well.

In the 60s and 70s, the culture wars began, and the humanities were increasingly the site for contestation over which texts you read, how college departments should be organized, how the non-West was going to be incorporated into Western civilization, and how underrepresented groups might be accommodated in relation to social and political movements that we all know were a dominant part of the late 20th century.

How satisfactory was this? It worked for a time. But starting in the 60s, there was a sense that the humanities were where you had to completely upend the old conventions. And so, the humanities became a space of engagement, but one that also created major debates and increasingly polarized divides over what to do in the general curriculum. If it was to be moral education, then whose morality are you going to instill? This question begins to both divide people and erode a common sense of justification.

And then you have what is in effect a counter reformation: a movement that advocated for a return to the Classics and Western civilization. We saw, for example, major gifts given to Yale in the 80s by a Texas ranching family meant to support the study of Western Civilization, only to have it rejected by the faculty who don't want to be told by some Yale rancher in North Texas what and how they must teach.

In my father's experience, there was a sense that a secular humanism could become the successor and perform some of the functions of the older religious education. But if you're stressing the process of critical thinking, you are agreeing about what the method is, not the

message. And without the kind of parallel contrapuntal anchor of, say, the church or of some confessional identity outside of the university, everything gets connected, directed by, and ultimately contained within the university itself, which cannot perform what many people would like the humanities to perform, that is, to teach students what they need to know to live a good life, right? So, that becomes an almost irreconcilable contradiction that collides with the economic imperative to focus on what's going to get you a job and an income and deal with college debt ...

In the past few decades, we have seen the proliferation of large humanities survey courses aimed at offering students a reflection on what is a good life. What do you think of these efforts? And you used the word 'transformational', which carries a great variety of meanings. When is a text transformational for you?

I taught for many years at Columbia which has a Core Curriculum that has a sacred status. Even people who don't like it believe in the importance of knowing something about the tradition that established it as the core. They also understand that you could never again get the consensus you would need to create something in its place. So, it is still much as it was created 100 years ago. Administrators are deeply concerned about getting students to think about certain kinds of moral issues but don't know how. They get preoccupied with the rise in mental health problems and think that the humanities could occupy a quasi-therapeutic role. Whatever it is, it's a set of compromises that is whittled down, contained in the early years and far removed from what and how these courses were first thought in the early 20th century.

Are they still transformational, or transformative? What would that mean? I was brought up as a fundamentalist Christian, and historicizing Christianity and secularizing my sense of value was a transformation. And it was largely accomplished through the courses I took in college. But is that something one would wish upon anyone? There were people in my church who said: you go to college, and you'll lose your faith. Some think universities are destroying society by teaching our children the wrong kinds of lessons. Not everybody sees the secular as a positive thing.

Whatever our particular stories or experiences, those of us in the humanities do believe that students who encounter great works of literature or art, however you define what a great work is, especially from backgrounds that haven't had exposure to this type of cultural objects, will at some point find something that will speak to them in a way that is transformative. It is in fact through that kind of encounter that important things happen: not so much what you do to live the good life, but rather how you begin to think about what a good life might be for you.

In an environment that is becoming ever more protective of students' wellbeing, where – to use a phrase from your book – “the language of trauma has begun to inflect the rhetoric of representation”, where do you find the courage to propose transformative texts? And how can we encourage others to do the same? There's a lot of complacency either to the profession or to mainstream culture, so that many don't take risks in questioning things.

Some of these things are really wild and crazy in terms of the effects they might have on a young person who hasn't worked out who they are and what they're doing in life, and who have more and more anxiety and a great deal of fear. So, we expose them to lots of new ideas, but then we immediately contain them through the discipline of reading, writing, and making an argument. I'm not necessarily comfortable with the idea that the classroom might become either a place of therapy or of activism because we have conventions and disciplines around these engagements that are fundamental to the university. Again, there is a tension there. As for trauma, when it becomes the argument that supports saying that we should not read something, then I worry that it smuggles in a form of censorship, which is not compatible with the openness required for a university.

You must accept that the humanities can have powerful effects on students. On the one hand, that means that some humanistic knowledge can be troubling, as it was for me as a fundamentalist, or as it could be for anyone with strong beliefs or assumptions that are directly challenged. On the other, this kind of study can change your life in very positive ways, providing for example the basis for a lifetime of appreciation for literature, art, music, or what have you. But you also channel that into forms that are part of a set of disciplines to which we accord a kind of organizing authority, with respect to university life, defining what we teach, how we get hired, how we get promoted, etc...

Many elements are considered a factor in the general malaise of our society. For example, the Surgeon General recently called for a warning on the use of social media. Do you think that the fact that we have sacrificed humanistic culture may have anything to do with the general insecurity and fragility of our youth, or are these two parallel phenomena?

It's a hard question. Jonathan Haidt has written a book (*The Anxious Generation*) in which he argues that social media has helped to produce the levels of anxiety we witness and makes very clear connections between it and the fragility of the young. But others have said that there have been other spikes of mental health problems and generational anxieties that were not connected with social media in the past. So, it can't be a total explanation. What's happened over the course of the last 50 years in the humanities is that humanists have become more critical of the traditional canon and have not only insisted on studying the works of more women and



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people of color but also from nations that were formerly colonized. Some of this has been reflected in the growth of fields like African American studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, and also postcolonial studies. As there has been interest in the social message of humanistic work on the part of faculty and various academic communities, there's obviously been a kind of reaction to this from other people, including disgruntled humanists, like Allan Bloom and Anthony Kronman. Meanwhile some politicians think that the humanities are about instilling patriotism and not making white people feel guilty about the fact that they're white, as if that is actually what is being taught or what the intention of anybody teaching a course on the history of slavery is. There is a lot of distrust of the university, and a sense that we're corrupting the youth at the same time we are not preparing them for real jobs. It's a conflation that becomes almost a convergence between an attempt to control the university and a reduction in its scope to being solely a provider of skills.

This convergence is weirdly powerful because there are parents understandably concerned with their kids getting jobs, leading however to the sense on the part of many that money is more important than ethics or philosophy, while the right wing is worried that we're teaching young people all kinds of bad things. It's a perfect storm. And there are things within our own disciplines that have not been healthy in the long term. I read a lot of post-structuralism, which I have found to be very interesting. But it tended to create real impediments for some students who were interested in coming to the university to read literature, or to behold works of great art, wanting for example to see why Leonardo Da Vinci was so amazing, instead of seeing him reduced to being the purveyor of Medicean economic hegemony. You work on these issues as scholars, but humanists have also collaborated in their own growing irrelevance.

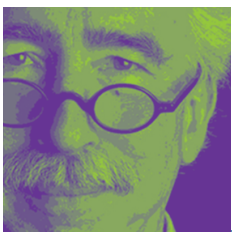
Do you think that this waning of ideal certainties may have anything to do with the fragility of the self that we witness today?

I don't know if you can establish a causal relationship. There are so many other things happening in our society, and some of them are structural. High school students are under so much pressure to get into the best colleges because they are led to think that otherwise their life will be over. And other people are questioning why they should go to college, if it is full of radical leftists who are trying to destroy our society. I think the humanists must take on issues like artificial intelligence, ecological sustainability, politics, even a neoliberal economic regime that has produced the inequality that we see today. These are things that humanists do. We must engage these present issues and show our relevance in ways that empower us to claim that what we're doing is critical. And we can't hold on to old disciplinary conventions because my dissertation advisor did it this way, and his dissertation advisor before him. This is the kind of guild-like nature of our academic enterprise. Instead, we have to create spaces rather than doctrines that allow teachers and students the time and space to experiment with different ideas, ways of thinking, and even things that might take them off on a complete tangent before they get rooted into their particular career preparation and jobs. And if the humanities don't take this upon themselves as its task, somebody else is going to do it, and it's going to move young people away from the university. So, it's an urgent issue for all of us who believe in the importance of a university education.

In your book, you speak of the university as a city with all its cacophonies. What would be the founding document that keeps that city together? What is the core foundation of your city of intellect?

It is hard to answer quickly without using a cliché. I was very careful when I was trying to define how to think about the liberal arts not as a body of material, but as a set of protocols for engagement with critical works of culture. It was necessary to break down the two cultures and

ensure integrated connections between the so-called sciences and the so-called arts to maintain that sense of the university as a universal community. In Europe, the modern university began when a group of people got together in Bologna to teach courses. And students came and it was all very unstructured, but it was a city of intellect, it was an idea of a community of people in a discreet location that you could access for the purpose of learning. It was the first such space outside of monastic institutions, and those early universities were predicated on the notion of a diversity of people who were coming together for that kind of quest. But I don't know if I can identify a founding document for the city of intellect, although I do like the idea of finding one. These days I'm back in New York a lot, and the city has that kind of proximity, density, and openness to cacophony that I refer to as a referent for the university. New York is loud, people are saying what they think and sometimes are rude and unpleasant, but they're certainly engaged. So, I don't have a good quick answer for you, but I think the image of the city is a good one for what a university itself is at its best.



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