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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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**REVIEW**

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December 2012

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# The Silent Crisis

by Martha C. Nussbaum

*“All voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves.”*

**W**e are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. No, I do not mean the global economic *crisis* that began in 2008: at least then everyone knew that a crisis was at hand, and many world leaders worked quickly and desperately to find solutions. Indeed, consequences for governments were grave if they did not find solutions, and many were replaced in consequence. No, I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education.

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance.

What are these radical changes? The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policymakers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all “useless” things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. Indeed, what we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science



—the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought—are also losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit making.

This crisis is facing us, but we have not yet faced it. We go on as if everything were business-as-usual, when in reality great changes of emphasis are evident all over. We haven't really deliberated about these changes, we have not really chosen them, and yet they increasingly limit our future.

Consider these five examples, deliberately drawn from different nations and different educational levels:

**I**n the fall of 2006, the US Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, headed by Bush administration secretary of education Margaret Spellings, released its report on the state of higher education in the nation: *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. This report contained a valuable critique of unequal access to higher education. When it came to subject matter, however, it focused

entirely on education for national economic gain. It concerned itself with perceived deficiencies in science, technology, and engineering—not basic scientific research in these areas, but only highly applied learning, learning that can quickly generate profit-making strategies. The humanities, the arts, and critical thinking were basically absent. By omitting them, the report strongly suggested that it would be perfectly all right if these abilities were allowed to wither away in favor of more useful disciplines.

In March 2004, a group of scholars from many nations gathered to discuss the educational philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore—winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and a leading innovator in education. Tagore's educational experiment, which had wide influence in Europe, Japan, and the United States, focused on the empowerment of the student through practices of Socratic argument, exposure to many world cultures, and above all, infusion

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## A new conception, focused on profit, has taken over.

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of music, fine art, theater, and dance into every part of the curriculum. In India today, Tagore's ideas are neglected, and even scorned. Participants in the conference all agreed that a new conception, focused on profit, has taken over, in the process sidelining the whole idea of imaginative and critical self-development through which Tagore had formed so many future citizens of India's successful democracy. Would democracy in India survive today's assault upon its soul? Faced with so much recent evidence of bureaucratic obtuseness and uncritical group-think, many participants feared that the answer might be "No."

In November 2005, a teachers retreat was held at the Laboratory School in Chicago—the school, on the campus of my own university, where John Dewey conducted his path-breaking experiments in democratic education reform, the school where President Barack Obama’s daughters spent their early formative years. The teachers had gathered to discuss the topic of education for democratic citizenship, and they considered a wide range of educational experiments, studying figures ranging from Socrates to Dewey in the Western tradition, to the closely related ideas of Tagore in India. But something was clearly amiss. The teachers—who take pride in stimulating children to question, criticize, and imagine—expressed anxiety about the pressures they face from wealthy parents who send their kids to this elite school. Impatient with allegedly superfluous skills, and intent on getting their children filled with testable skills that seem likely to produce financial success, these parents are trying to change the school’s guiding vision. They seem poised to succeed.

In fall 2005, the head of the search committee for a new dean of the School of Education at

one of our nation’s most prestigious universities called me for advice. Hereafter I will refer to the university as X. X’s School of Education has enormous influence on teachers and schools all over the United States. As I began talking about the role of the humanities and arts in education for democratic citizenship, saying what I took

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to be familiar and obvious, the woman expressed surprise. “How unusual,” she said, “no one else I’ve talked to has mentioned any of these things at all. We have been talking only about how X University can contribute to scientific and technical education around the world, and that’s the thing that our president is really interested in. But what you say is very interesting, and I really want to think about it.”

In the winter of 2006, another prestigious US university—let’s call it Y—held a symposium celebrating a major anniversary, a centerpiece of which was to have been discussion of the future of liberal education. A few months before the event, speakers who had agreed to be part of this were told that the focus had been changed and that they should just come and lecture to small departmental audiences on any topic they liked. A helpful and nicely talkative junior administrator told me that the reason for the change was that the president of Y had decided that a symposium on liberal education would not “make a splash,” so he decided to replace it with one on the latest achievements in technology and their role in generating profits for business and industry.



There are hundreds of stories like these, and new ones arrive every day, in the United States, in Europe, in India, and, no doubt, in other parts of the world. We are pursuing the possessions that protect, please, and comfort us—what Tagore called our material “covering.” But we seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one’s own plans; about what it is to talk as someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex.

The word *soul* has religious connotations for many people, and I neither insist on these nor reject them. Each person may hear them or ignore them. What I do insist on, however, is what both Tagore and Amos Bronson Alcott meant by this word: the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation. When we



meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail; because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.

Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at this time of crisis, too few questions have been posed about the direction of education, and, with it, of the world’s democratic societies. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost.

The profit motive suggests to many concerned leaders that science and technology are of crucial importance for the future health of their nations. We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education, and I shall not suggest that nations should stop trying to improve in this regard. My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial, are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry, abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world’s most pressing problems.

These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.

I shall make my argument by pursuing the contrast that my examples have already suggested: between an education for profit making and an education for a more inclusive type of citizenship. I shall try to show how the humanities and arts are crucial both in primary/secondary and in university education, drawing examples from a range of different stages and levels. I do not at all deny that science and social science, particularly economics, are also crucial to the education of citizens. But nobody is suggesting leaving these studies behind. I focus, then, on what is both precious and profoundly endangered.

When practiced at their best, moreover, these disciplines are infused by what we might

call the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in. Science education in recent years has rightly focused on educating the capacities for critical thinking, logical analysis, and imagining. Science, rightly

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## Without support from suitably educated citizens; no democracy can remain stable.

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pursued, is a friend of the humanities rather than their enemy. Although good science education is not my theme, a companion study on that topic would be a valuable complement to my focus on the humanities.

**T**he trends I deplore are worldwide, but I focus throughout on two very different nations that I know well: the United States, where I live and teach, and India, where my own global development work, much of it focused on education, has been conducted. India has a glorious tradition of



humanities and arts education, exemplified in the theory and practice of the great Tagore. And his valuable ideas laid the foundations for a democratic nation and greatly influenced democratic education in Europe and the United States. But I also talk about the role of education in rural literacy projects for women and girls today, where the impetus to empower through the arts remains vital, and the effect of this empowerment on democracy can be clearly seen.

Where the United States is concerned, my arguments range over many types of educational experiments, from the use of Socratic self-examination in schools of many sorts to the role of arts organizations in plugging gaps in the public school curriculum. (The remarkable story of the Chicago Children's Choir provides a detailed case study.)

But education does not take place only in schools. Most of the traits that are my focus need to be nurtured in the family as well, both in the early years and as children mature. Part of a comprehensive public policy approach to the questions this manifesto raises must include discussion of how families can be supported in the task of developing children's capabilities. The surrounding peer culture and the larger culture of social norms and political institutions also play an important role, either supporting or subverting the work done by schools and families. The focus on schools, colleges, and universities is justified, however, because it is in these institutions that the most pernicious changes have been taking place, as the pressure for economic growth leads to changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and funding. If we are aware that we are addressing just one part of the story of how citizens develop, we can pursue this focus without distortion.

Education is not just for citizenship. It prepares people for employment and, impor-

tantly, for meaningful lives. Another entire book could be written about the role of the arts and humanities in advancing these goals. All modern democracies, however, are societies in which the meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views; and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their own particular goals. What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials. Every modern democracy is also a society in which people differ greatly along many parameters, including religion, ethnicity, wealth and class, physical impairment, gender, and sexuality, and in which all voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves. One way of assessing any educational scheme is to ask how well it prepares young people for life in a form of social and political organization that has these features. Without support from suitably educated citizens; no democracy can remain stable.

**C**ultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake. The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the context of a grasp of the global economy and of the history of many national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world. And the ability to imagine the experience of another—a capacity almost all human beings



possess in some form—needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

The national interest of any modern democracy requires a strong economy and a flourishing business culture. This economic interest, too, requires us to draw on the humanities and arts, in order to promote a climate of responsible and watchful stewardship and a culture of creative innovation. Thus we are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship. A flourishing economy requires

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## A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship.

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the same skills that support citizenship, and the proponents of what I shall call “education for profit,” or (to put it more comprehensively) “education for economic growth,” have adopted an impoverished conception of what is required to meet their own goal. This argument, however, ought to be subservient to the argument concerning the stability of democratic institutions, since

a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself. Most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic. Moreover, although it is clear that a strong business culture requires some people who are imaginative and critical, it is not clear that it requires all people in a nation to gain these skills. Democratic participation makes wider demands, and it is these wider demands that my argument supports.

No system of education is doing a good job if its benefits reach only wealthy elites. The distribution of access to quality education is an urgent issue in all modern democracies. It has long been a shameful feature of the United States, a wealthy nation, that access to quality primary/secondary education, and especially access to college/university education, is so unequally distributed. Many developing nations contain even larger disparities in access: India,

for example, reports a male literacy rate of only around 65 percent, a female literacy rate of around 50 percent. Urban/rural disparities are larger. In secondary and higher education, there are even more striking gaps—between male and female, between rich and poor, between urban and rural. The lives of children who grow up knowing that they will go on to university and even postgraduate education are utterly different from the lives of children who in many cases do not get a chance to attend school at all. This is about what we should be striving for. Until we are clear about this, it is difficult to figure out how to get it to those who need it.

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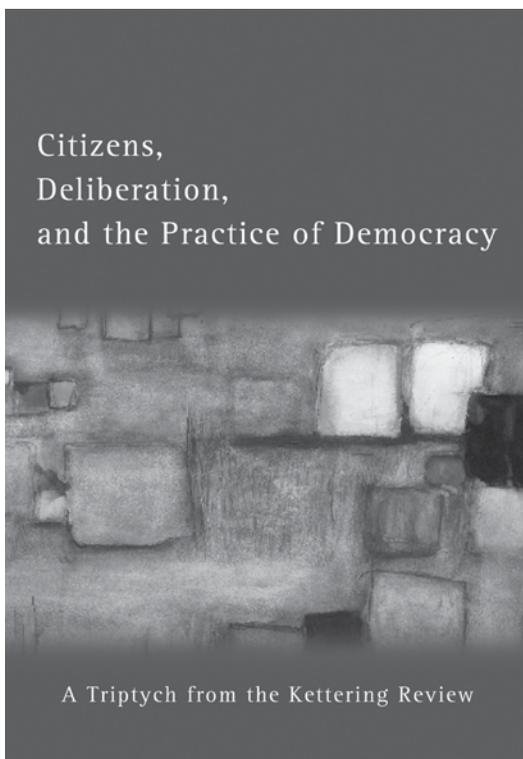
*Martha C. Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. This essay, drawn from her 2010 book, Not for Profit, is published with permission of the Princeton University Press.*

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