

Liberal Read

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In Defence of the Humanities

BOOK REVIEW

Eric Adler

*The Battle of the Classics
How a Nineteenth- Century Debate
Can Save the Humanities Today*

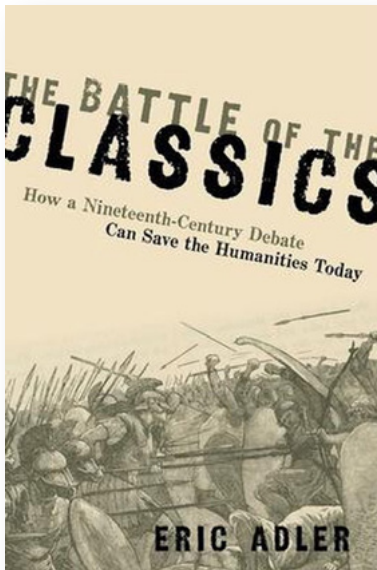
Oxford University Press, 2020

By Mara Pepine

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

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In Defence of the Humanities



Introduction: The humanities past and present

It is already become clichéd to say that the humanities are quickly losing in popularity around the world. For Eric Adler, steeped in the American academic environment, this discussion hits particularly close to home. He recounts a short anecdote that is symptomatic of the way the humanities are treated today: an economics professor disparages them whilst a humanities professor flounders in finding an appropriate apology. In this domain, Adler concludes, the consensus seems to be that the humanities are not doing very well, to say the least. He laments, however, that various apologists of the humanities have been particularly short-sighted. Those wishing to cement the role of the humanities have rarely paid any attention in hindsight to the period before the 1960s. In contrast, Adler's suggestion is to go further back in history and draw upon a highly relevant event of the late-19th century: the so-called Battle of the Classics.

The term 'Battle of the Classics' refers to an intellectual dispute that took place in the US between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. It concerned the role that Ancient Greek and Latin played in American higher education at the time. While the traditionalists were trying to preserve the curriculum based mainly on the classics, their opponents were striving to enrich it with different subjects, from sciences to modern languages. Adler points out that the socio-economic and political circumstances at the end of the 19th century parallel those at the beginning of the 21st enough to warrant a thorough inspection into what worked and what failed during the Battle of the Classics. Namely, both periods are times of intense social change, large-scale globalisation, and technological advancements. Additionally, these eras are marked by doubts about the usefulness and relevance of the humanities in comparison to other domains of knowledge. Adler intends this book not only as an apology for the humanities themselves but also as a guide for other apologists, as well as a comprehensive picture of the history of the humanities and, consequently, their importance

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and role in society. Regardless of which of these facets may interest the reader most, Adler's book certainly provides a detailed account of the position held by the humanities now and throughout history, with a specific focus on the American intellectual landscape.

Defending the Humanities: Key weaknesses of the argument

Adler's first order of business is to analyse the arguments—and the reasons for their failure—of those who aimed to defend the humanities in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Adler laments that many prominent figures in the humanities, despite their laudable efforts to defend their subjects, never seem to agree on what exactly should be studied: which philosophers, which literary works, or if these particular things even constitute the actual key subject of study. It seems to Adler that liberal arts colleges have an ever-growing penchant to eliminate the very idea of a defined curriculum. Adler points out that the roots of shying away from discussing particular content go as far back in history as the Battle of the Classics debates. Adler believes that therein lies the weakness of contemporary arguments in favour of the humanities: when one does not prescribe a particular curriculum, the only thing left to vouch for their value are the skills adjacent to humanities studies. Indeed, there seems to be an entire school of thought that sees their usefulness as depending entirely on the skills they impart to students. Thus, such a focus on skills acquisition undermines the independent value of humanities content.

Adler identifies that the most appreciated skill associated with the humanities is critical thinking. In the Western academic environment, countless professors and universities boast their courses' ability to inculcate critical thinking skills into students, not to mention countless students and career orientation offices parroting and repeating this idea. This is by no means to say that critical thinking is not of paramount importance. In fact, Adler cites a statistic showing that the overwhelming majority of college faculty consider it a priority. But then he points out that giving an exact definition of critical thinking, as opposed to other types of thinking, proves more elusive than one might expect.

That is, however, not the only weakness he finds in this particular argument. In fact, its entire line of argumentation relies on the idea that only the humanities can offer the type of instruction that fosters the development of critical thinking. Yet none of the major proponents of such an argument have been able to deny other subjects their claim to providing critical thinking skills, too. Adler's third point concerns all the skills-related arguments made in defending the humanities, leading to humanistic disciplines' dependency on arguments based in the social sciences. Many contemporary apologists would eagerly turn to studies and statistics of psychology and sociology to prove the value of the humanities. This poses a double problem. First, it shows that humanists are incapable of demonstrating the value of their subject on their own, thus achieving the undesired effect of casting even more doubt on the value of the humanities. Second, it gives the social sciences the power to end the humanities with any simple study that might find the humanities infinitely less useful than STEM subjects, for example.

Adler concludes that these contemporary apologies lack the requisite weight to confer much-needed stability onto the humanities right now—mainly because they are reliant on skills-based arguments, but also because many are still quite uncertain about what exactly constitutes the essence and corpus of the humanities. Their ties with similar historical concepts are mostly disregarded, while adjacent terms such as *liberal arts* are taken to be synonyms.

Brief History of the Humanities: From antiquity to the U.S. education system

In contrast, the concept of the humanities for Adler is inextricably intertwined with its long history. He thus devotes a lengthy chapter to the different attitudes and conceptions that have both formed the history of the humanities and been instrumental in the creation and consolidation of contemporary (Western) society. The modern humanities as a set of academic subjects being a rather recent development, many scholars consider their point of origin to be not so very distant in time. However, and this is of paramount importance to Adler's entire argument, this view divorces the humanities from their Renaissance and ancient counterparts. A short foray into the etymology of the word *humanities* serves to link the contemporary American academic environment to the world of Ancient Roman patricians. Thus, 'humanities' stems from the French *humanités*, which, in turn, is a translation of the Latin *studia humanitatis*. Although today we tend to regard classical antiquity as a unified whole, it is important to distinguish between Greek and Roman influences. Adler points out that many scholars mistakenly believe that the point of origin of the humanities

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comes from Ancient Greek culture. However, while its ideals must have had a strong influence, the first mention of the term appears in the 1st century BC in one of Cicero's speeches, *Pro Archia*. In it, the famous Roman orator defends a wrongfully-accused Greek poet, Archaias, and refers to the value that the *studia humanitates* (he also calls them *artes liberales*) can provide to society.

Cicero championed and popularised the *studia humanitates* or *artes liberales* as an educational ideal, bringing forth intellectual and moral virtue and thus being suitable for any free-born person. While Cicero and other authors did not necessarily agree on which specific subjects to include on the list, this is not so important. Much more relevant is the fact that the Romans specifically considered the *studia*

humanitatis to be non-vocational and non-utilitarian. Its primary purpose was instilling moral virtue into free-born people. Another essential quality of the *studia humanitatis* was the importance given to particular content—Homer's epic poems and the Aeneid were staples that were optionally supplemented by works of other celebrated authors.

Late antiquity and the early Middle Ages saw the consolidation of two avenues of education deriving from the *studia humanitatis*: the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). The *studia humanitatis* also saw one of its core tenets disrespected by medieval European society, since institutions of higher instruction focused primarily on vocational training. The European world at the time had lost a lot of its knowledge of antiquity; the intellectual environment began to recover only in the 11th century with the rediscovery of Aristotle and the advent of the scholastic movement. Logic was praised as the most important part of philosophical dialectics and its formalised study was launched. The Renaissance arose from the austere landscape of scholastics. Some scholars and intellectuals were turning towards the works of classical antiquity as early as the 13th century. They would later be called *umanisti*, humanists; Italian poet Petrarch was among the most important of them. Only at the beginning of the 15th

century did humanists formalise their educational programme, with the trivium as its key subject. As opposed to the scholastic appreciation of the quadrivium, Leonardo Bruni defined the new *studia humanitatis* as based on studying the literary works of classical authors. He saw it as best suited to impart the most fundamental contemporary subjects: moral philosophy and divinity. This helped to bring up both the classical works themselves and the idea that *studia humanitatis* served to instil virtues.

What united the Renaissance-era *studia humanitatis* with their ancient counterparts was not only this moral emphasis but also their advocacy for non-vocational education. However, in establishing the *studia humanitatis* as the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy, Bruni departed from the ancient ideals that viewed it as a comprehensive education and openly opposed subjects like the natural sciences or mathematics. This distinction and opposition between the trivium and quadrivium as educational ideals gave birth to the chasm that separates the modern humanities and STEM subjects today. Also stemming from this same time period is the distinction between the humanities and the liberal arts, which encompassed both the trivium and the quadrivium. The differences in the way the *studia humanitatis* was viewed in these different periods might be explained by a change in societal attitudes. While the Romans had a more global and expansive outlook, focused on contemplating the universe's perfection, Renaissance humanists were more individualistic and introspective, preferring the pursuit of their own perfection.

A reactionary school of thought at first, humanistic ideals slowly began to make their way into higher education. By the time Harvard, the first American higher education institution, was founded in the early 17th century, the curricula of Oxford and Cambridge had already been sufficiently influenced to the point where these same ideals were being propagated in the New World. The colonial colleges demonstrated their heavy influence by Renaissance thinkers with an emphasis on moral improvement and the study of classical languages. These colleges drew upon Oxbridge curricula and thus also absorbed a heavy dose of scholasticism, still quite present at European universities. The Protestant Reformation was another factor that strongly influenced the evolution of American higher education in general and the humanities in particular. By the end of the colonial period, almost all US colleges required students to take moral philosophy courses. Their purpose was to impart the necessary virtues on a new and highly religious colonial American society. These colleges were, however, eager to keep up with the times, and they had incorporated influences of the Enlightenment, e.g., establishing a chair of mathematics or including algebra in the curriculum, by the end of the 17th century.

Battle of the Classics: The core of the issue

All of this ultimately led to the Battle of the Classics at the end of the 19th century, an event in the history of ideas that Adler feels was largely misunderstood until the later decades of the 20th century. He argues that a possible explanation for this was that, ever since antiquity, the study of classical authors has carried with it strong aristocratic associations that would have been negatively perceived in the newly industrialising U.S., with its egalitarian sentiments and rising populism. After the American Civil War and the rise of Darwinism, the intellectual faction known as the scientific-democrats sought to dethrone the classical curriculum in favour of a more science-based one. Its goal was to foster the creation of new knowledge as opposed to traditionalists' focus on past wisdom. During the late 19th century, the focus on knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself began to gain

popularity, which, Adler argues, became a harbinger of the decline of the humanities. By that time, American colleges no longer looked to Oxbridge for inspiration, instead being influenced by German research universities, with their scientific approach and academic professionalisation. Indeed, the Germans pioneered a new discipline, a scientific take on classical studies, *Altertumswissenschaft* (the science of antiquity). This novel approach was brought to the U.S. by Americans pursuing doctoral studies in Germany.

Faced since the beginning of the 18th century with an ever-growing number of detractors, the “classical colleges” experimented with alternative tracks that would allow undergraduates to bypass a classical education. Such programmes were becoming so popular in the mid-19th century that tradition-oriented Yale felt threatened enough to publish *The Yale Reports*, which argued that its curriculum was superior to vocational training because it inculcated mental discipline. Adler deplores the sudden focus on a skills-based argumentation in favour of the classical curriculum. Whereas the Renaissance humanist might have said that reading specific authors would instil moral values, traditionalists of the American collegiate system seemed content to reduce the classics problem to a matter of psychology. The passing of the Morrill Act precipitated the move away from classically-focused higher education by providing more and more avenues of vocational training. The scene was completed by the emergence of American research universities at the end of the 19th century. As freer and more science-based curricula spread across the U.S., mandatory study

of the classics quickly faded away. Faced with such hostility, classical scholars sought to enlarge their scope of work by including other subjects, thus creating the modern humanities. This proved, however, to pose great taxonomical problems: history, for example, was at the time considered to be a social science rather than falling under the scope of the humanities.

Charles E. Norton is the one who took it upon himself to confer the modern humanities the kind of gravitas enjoyed by the *studia*

Adler urges students of the humanities to turn towards the Renaissance ideals of humanism; a return to these origins would improve not only the academic world that today finds itself quite in disarray but also society as a whole.

humanitatis in order to gain the legitimacy they desperately needed. He transformed the humanities into research about Western civilisation. Full of fallacies and inconsistencies, his argumentation and reframing of the humanities worked only because American colleges at the time were interested exclusively in European cultures. However, the open curriculum started to gain detractors even from the ranks of *scientific democrats*, who raised their concerns about the lowering of scientific standards resulting from the free elective system. To counteract this regrettable situation, Johns Hopkins adopted a system that would later spread throughout American higher education institutions: the major and minor system that is still in practice today. Choosing another solution, a distributive system like the one implemented by Lowell at Harvard only served to side-line the humanities even more. Columbia preferred to take over some Nortonian ideas and introduced a subject into their core curricula that would satisfy the humanists. Eventually, the Great Books programme was created in order to familiarise students with some canonical Western authors. In the

last decades of the 20th century, when social progress brought to light the fact that the Great Books programme and similar subjects were exclusively concentrated on men, especially white men, many universities facing such criticism preferred to scrap those programmes entirely instead of reforming them. Afterwards, since the distribution system has continued to proliferate even today, the humanities suffered more and more until they were faced with the same problems as the classics in the 19th century, being considered elitist and not particularly important to those envisioning a vocational education.

Battle of the Classics: Three key controversies

Adler goes on to analyse three debates that took place in the context of the Battle of the Classics. The first controversy arose around Charles Francis Adams, Jr.'s speech, "A College Fetish". In it, he criticises the practice of Ancient Greek as a mandatory requirement for admission to college, especially at Harvard. He belonged to the 19th-century American elite, so his education naturally featured a great deal of classical study. It is mainly due to his failure to measure up to the standards of the time in the domain of classical studies that he harboured such resentment towards the classics, although he made some valuable points when criticising the rote memorisation that was ubiquitous in the classroom. His detractors, the traditionalists, however, made the mistake of appealing to skills-based arguments, namely falling back on mental discipline. This weak argumentation and lack of a coherent defence resulted ultimately in Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, removing the mandatory status of Ancient Greek as an admission requirement, which was a clear sign that the classics were losing the battle.

The second debate, involving the same President Eliot along with President James McCosh of Princeton, concerned the curriculum and whether it should be open or fixed. McCosh, a defender of the fixed curriculum, had a quite religious upbringing and was educated in the colleges of Scotland, whereas Eliot was what Adler calls "a consummate Spencerian" and a passionate scientist who found it hard to pursue his career at an academic level in a country whose collegiate system didn't put much faith into such an education. This debate was intensely reported on, and it inflamed the American intellectual world, but ultimately Eliot took the victory and reformed the Harvard curriculum.

The third debate was centred in the numerous controversies surrounding the intellectual movement called New Humanism and one of its most vocal proponents, Irving Babbitt. New Humanism gained attention with the publication of *Humanism and America*, also serving as its manifesto. New Humanism has its roots both in the Roman concept of the *studia humanitatis* and Renaissance humanism. In Babbitt's writings, however, it is at times difficult to differentiate between his philosophical understanding of humanism and the historical movement of humanism. His philosophy rests on the belief that human nature shows proof of a duality, that people have impulsive desires as well as the ability to restrain these desires. The study of certain works of particular value could help people keep such impulsive desires more easily in check. The Romantic movement showed itself to be a strong opponent to Babbitt's New Humanism, arguing against the duality of human nature and for the embracing of natural compulsions. Surprisingly, at the time, Babbitt didn't consider the works of antiquity or Western civilisation in general to be the most suited to help curb these impulsive desires. Instead, he looked both globally, for example, into the vast Buddhist tradition, as well as outside of the academic and intellectual environments for inspiration.



Conclusions

Adler concludes this foray into the history of the humanities and what brought about the unfortunate situation in which the discipline finds itself today by repeating the need to draw upon the mistakes of our forefathers. Adler is no nostalgic, griping about the glories of the past, though. He is aware of the shortcomings the traditionalists of the Battle of the Classics (counter-parts to the humanities' apologists today) and pointedly admits that the wide-spread views of the time were particularly narrow-minded and that their arguments might actually have gained more weight if they had taken into account more than just Western culture and wisdom. There is no need to see the humanities relegated to a dusty corner of academia—the way the classics were after losing the Battle of the Classics—if one can avoid the argumentation pitfalls which the traditionalists of the 19th century fell into.

Adler argues that one of the most important lessons the contemporary humanities can draw from such contentions of days past is that their apologetics should focus far more on the specific content the humanities impart, rather than the skills they may also provide to their students. Adler once again stresses how indefensible skills-based argumentations can be and warns of the dangers of relegating the responsibility of proving the value of the humanities to social scientists. Most of all, he urges students of the humanities to turn towards the Renaissance ideals of humanism, as only such a return to these origins might return the humanities to their once-privileged position. He argues that studying the humanities with the sole purpose of bettering one's character would improve not only the academic world that today finds itself quite in disarray but also society as a whole. Most importantly, when it comes to the humanities, it is essential that the curriculum focus on content and on specific works (he lists a few) that prove most valuable.

ABOUT ELF

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