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## Martha Nussbaum on the silent crisis of universities

In her recent work *Not for profit. Why democracy needs the humanities* Martha Nussbaum (2010) speaks about the silent crisis touching universities around the world. This crisis is caused by removal of the humanities and the arts from universities and educational programmes in every country of the world. This crisis may go unnoticed by the societies (therefore the expression *silent crisis*), since it does not involve thrilling incidents nor outbreaks of violence. Yet it touches the humanity as a whole and has a tremendous effect on the shape of our future societies

Nussbaum argues that governments, thirsty for national profits, reform their educational systems in such a way, that they are heedlessly discarding skills needed to keep democracies alive (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2). She also claims, that such practices lead to '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' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2).

### Crisis in Education

We should ask, what is this educational crisis, that Nussbaum describes as massive in proportions and grave in global significance? Why does she compare it to cancer and even says, that in the long run, it can be damaging to the future of democratic self-government? (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 1–2).

The crisis Nussbaum speaks about concerns education. It is caused by the fact, that the humanities and the arts are being cut away in primary, secondary and university education, in virtually every nation of the world (Nussbaum, 201, p. 2). Poland is no exception here: quite recently we have been witnessing attempts at closing humanities departments. These attempts are either explained by lack of profit, or economic significance for the mar-

ket.<sup>1</sup> Humanities are considered by policy-makers as useless trinkets, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market. So, in search for profit, they are cutting curricula – and by that, they limit the minds and hearts of parents and children (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2).

Humanistic aspects of science and social science – the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought – are losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making. We have been experiencing that phenomena in Poland also – at least during last 20 years the question of the deeper sense and meaning of pursuing studies was replaced by one concerning profitability of higher education. Universities have been trying to adapt to this trend, by advertising various disciplines as key ingredient leading to gaining certain professions or skills essential for having a successful career. Universities and colleges have been trying to invent and sell (so to speak) new courses, by advertising them as very effective and helpful in finding a job.

How often do we hear, that studying humanities is impractical or it is rather a hobby rather than a serious profession!

Nussbaum considers this trend as a very dangerous one – she warns, that if this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines or slaves, instead of reflective and complete citizens able to think for themselves, criticise traditions and status quo, and compassionately understand another people (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2). Nussbaum says, that by limiting our access to humanities, ‘the future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.’ (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2)

Nussbaum claims that ‘this crisis is facing us, but we have not yet faced it.’ (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2) We seem to go on as if everything was as usual, as if the reality had not changed. We haven’t really thought about changes in education, we have not really chosen them – but simply followed them, without even considering, that they increasingly limit our future and the future of our children.

### Financial profit vs humane growth

Nussbaum says, that the rush to profitability in the global market makes it possible that values precious for the future of democracy are in danger of getting lost (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 6). She asks about the fate of the arts and literature, so often valued by democratic educators. And the answer she provides is the following:

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1 In 2014 there was an attempt at closing faculty of philosophy at the University of Białystok. Moreover, the new reform of higher education proposes closing humanities departments if economy or market does not call for them – which means, that philosophy, ethnography and cultural studies departments are in real danger.

education for economic growth will, first of all, have contempt for these parts of a child's training, because they don't look like they lead to personal or national economic advancement. For this reason, all over the world, programs in arts and the humanities, at all levels, are being cut away, in favour of the cultivation of the technical (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 23).

What is worse: educators for economic growth will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. Why? Because a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of ignorance, and moral ignorance is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 23). It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them. Therefore humane and humanistic education, developing sensitivity for inequalities may and shall make objectification of people impossible.

### What humanities and arts give us in the long term perspective?

Nussbaum says:

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 (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7).

Above mentioned abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts – and those are:

- the ability to think critically,
- the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a 'citizen of the world',
- the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.

According to Nussbaum, cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10). The ability to transcend one's culture, openness to other groups, and nations in the context of a grasp of the global economy and of the history of various national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal in a responsible manner with the problems we are currently facing as members of an interdependent world (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10). Additionally, ability to imagine the experience of another human being, which Nussbaum understands as 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 (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10).

If a nation wants to promote humane, people-sensitive democracy, opening and promoting opportunities for 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' to each and every per-

son, what abilities will it need to produce in its citizens? – Nussbaum asks and proposes the following as crucial:

- the ability to think well about political issues affecting the nation, to examine, reflect, argue, and debate, deferring to neither tradition nor authority,
- the ability to recognise fellow citizens as people with equal rights, even though they may be different in race, religion, gender, and sexuality: to look at them with respect, as ends – not merely tools to be manipulated for one's own profit,
- the ability to have concern for the lives of others, to grasp what policies of many types mean for the opportunities and experiences of one's fellow citizens, of many types, and for people outside one's own nation,
- the ability to imagine well a variety of complex issues affecting the story of a human life as it unfolds: to think about childhood, adolescence, family relationships, illness, death, and much more in a way informed by an understanding of a wide range of human stories, not just by aggregate data,
- the ability to judge political leaders critically, but with an informed, realistic and unbiased sense of the possibilities available to them,
- the ability to think about the good of the nation as a whole, not just that of one's own local group,
- the ability to see one's own nation, in turn, as a part of a complicated world order in which issues of many kinds require intelligent transnational deliberation for their resolution (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 25–26).

If nations provided education in this regard, we would have heaven on Earth, would not we?

### University in times of crisis

The pressure for economic growth has caused many political leaders in Europe to redirect the shape of university education – both in teaching and research – along growth-oriented lines. Additionally questions were asked about the contribution of each discipline and each researcher to the economy (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 127).

We continually hear about departments being closed or merged with other units whose input to profit seem as more obvious. But this results in putting pressure on the merged disciplines in order to emphasise which parts of its own scope lie closer to profit. We are witnessing and experiencing this process also here, in Poland, and can also speak of the crisis of humanities – since the Ministry of Science pushes humanities aside, by transferring funds for those sciences, that are considered as more useful or practical.

It has been understood that research in the humanities contributes to human life in a global way, not by producing this or that immediately useful discovery – says Nussbaum, and gives example of humanities professors in the United States, who get a certain

amount of research leave as part of their standard contract. They need to prove their active engagement in research and publication during that time, but they show this to peer faculty who understand the sense and character of humanities research (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 129). Nussbaum also writes that ‘British humanists have to continue filling out grant applications for government agencies, a great time killer, and also a great distorter of research topics, since the government agencies who screen grant applications are looking for ‘impact’ and are often deeply suspicious of humanistic ideas’ (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 129). I might add, that in Poland, seeking for points or so called ‘grantology’ is also at stake.

Nussbaum regrets, that under pressure to cut costs, we cast away those parts of the education that are so crucial to preserving a healthy society. ‘What will we have, if these trends continue?’ she asks. The answer is gloomy: such process leads to production of technically trained people not knowing how to criticise authority, useful profit-makers with untrained and neglected imaginations (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 142).

Can something be done? It is our obligation to insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, otherwise they will drop away, since they do not make money.

They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 143).

Nussbaum demands that humanities should be included into educational curriculum, because, when practiced at their best, other disciplines are infused by what she calls the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, by exercising daring imagination, by empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7). In her opinion, ‘science education in recent years has rightly focused on educating the capacities for critical thinking, logical analysis, and imagining. Science, rightly pursued, is a friend of the humanities rather than their enemy.’ (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 7–8) With that in mind we should pursue, propagate, and advance the humanities research, seeking ways for inclusion (and even marriage) of humanities with science, thus promoting interdisciplinary research widening the scope of academia.

## Bibliography

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### Summary

The article concerns Martha Nussbaum's recent work *Not for profit. Why democracy needs the humanities*, in which Nussbaum speaks about the silent crisis touching universities around the world. This silent crisis may go unnoticed, and is caused by removal of the humanities and the arts from the university and educational programmes in virtually every nation of the world. Even though such crisis may go unnoticed, it has a massive effect on the shape of our future societies. Nussbaum argues that governments discard skills needed to keep democracies alive and leads to producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens. The article presents Nussbaum's proposal for preventing such situation and thus keeping democracy alive.

**Keywords:** humanities, Martha Nussbaum, education, crisis of universities

## MARTHA NUSSBAUM O CICHYM KRYZYSIE UNIWERSYTETÓW

### Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy ostatniej pracy Marthy Nussbaum *Nie dla zysku. Dlaczego demokracja potrzebuje humanistów*, w której autorka mówi o cichym kryzysie dotyczącym uniwersytety na całym świecie. Ten cichy kryzys może pozostać niezauważony i jest spowodowany usunięciem nauk humanistycznych i sztuki z uniwersytetu i programów edukacyjnych praktycznie w każdym kraju na świecie. Mimo że ten kryzys może pozostać niezauważony, ma ogromny wpływ na kształt naszych przyszłych społeczeństw. Nussbaum twierdzi, że rządy odrzucają umiejętności potrzebne do utrzymania demokracji przy życiu i prowadzą do tworzenia pokoleń przydatnych maszyn, a nie pełnych obywateli. Autorka przedstawia propozycję Nussbaum jak zapobiegać takiej sytuacji, a tym samym utrzymać demokrację przy życiu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** humanistyka, Martha Nussbaum, edukacja, kryzys uniwersytetów