

## The Case for History and the Humanities

By Gabrielle M. Spiegel

Four years ago, when I accepted a position as dean of humanities at UCLA, I was contacted by an interviewer for the student newspaper, the *Daily Bruin*, who immediately challenged me by asking me to respond to the statement: "In the modern world, studying the humanities is a waste of time." This is the sort of statement that, in various guises, I am sure we have all heard uttered, along with the assertion that "No one ever died of English," or the question, "Why study all those dead languages and civilizations?" (classics, medieval history, and the like). These sorts of queries are symptomatic of a broader, and I believe deepening, attitude on the part of the public, some university administrators, and doubtless many parents of our students, who would prefer their children to study what in the Middle Ages were called "the lucrative professions": law and medicine, to which today we should probably add business, not something particularly valued back then. The excitement of scientific discovery, especially in domains related to molecular biology, biophysics, medicine, stem cell research, and other potentially lifesaving and life-enhancing research, combined with the high costs entailed in promoting it, has increasingly led universities to focus their efforts in the natural and physical sciences, allowing disciplines like history and the humanities to carry on more or less in their usual fashion, without being the focus of particular concern or undue cost. While this situation surely is not universal, it is sufficiently widespread to cause genuine concern. An acknowledgment of this predicament can be seen in the major initiative launched by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Association of American Universities for "Reinvigorating the Humanities," a program they would not have undertaken without some perception that the public face of such studies is in need of rehabilitation.

Part of the problem, I think, is that those of us in historically oriented humanistic disciplines have not been very clever about the ways in which we argue for the importance and centrality of our fields of inquiry. In defending the practice of history, or the humanities more generally, academics who have dedicated their lives to such study tend to rely on old shibboleths about the importance of understanding history, art, languages, and so on, and understanding what it means to be "human." They also assert the need to preserve the great traditions of the past, its literary and linguistic treasures, and its towering artistic and monumental achievements. The implicit message is that, somehow, understanding such matters enlarges our sense of humanity and nourishes our sense of well-being by safeguarding enduring values against the corrosions effected by change and time. After all, we seem to be saying, the real question is not whether anyone ever died of English, but whether we value the quality of life that reading great literature or knowing the past presumably sustains.

More modern versions of this discourse stress the critical, self-reflective, and analytical skills honed in the practice of historical and humanistic disciplines and the ways in which such skills are critical for preparing students—as Pauline Yu, president of the ACLS phrases it—"for deeper engagement with the central issues of living in a complex and interdependent world." The manner in which we (historians and humanists) approach issues, the argument continues, is profoundly interpretive and interrogative, holding out the reassessment of social attitudes, values, aesthetics, and beliefs as a constant goal, a stance toward the world that is sufficiently flexible to enable us to adapt to shifting circumstances and agendas. Moreover, we do this in a way that is not instrumental—not merely "useful" for some other purpose—but rather pursued as a

good in itself, one critical for the instruction and enlightenment of what David H. Stevens, director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Humanities Division in the 1940s, called "the public mind."

But as the term "shibboleth" implies, we are often, I think, simply talking to each other. As a consequence, arguments for the importance of history and the humanities are losing their purchase; they tend to rely upon a sense of the intrinsic importance of comprehending the achievements of the past in a world undergoing rapid and far-reaching change. It seems appropriate, therefore, to ask where the study of history and the humanities fits in the present world, a world that, I think we can all agree, has been radically changed by the events of 9/11, the rise of terrorism, and the persistence of genocide throughout many parts of the world today.

My response to my interlocutor from the *Daily Bruin* tried, in fact, to recast the importance of grasping the notion of "humanity" on a new basis. Precisely in the modern world, I argued, nothing is more important than studying the humanities.



2008 AHA President Gabrielle M. Spiegel.

"We are heirs to a world," I stated, "that of World War II and its aftermath, when states like Nazi Germany claimed that there was such a thing as 'a life unworthy of life,' the basis on which Germans claimed the right to terminate the lives of the mentally ill, those with birth defects, and those they simply scorned and hated, like gypsies, Jews, and communists." I added:

Anyone who says "no one ever died of the humanities" has not thought much about what happens when states claim the right to define what humanity is, or who is good and who is evil, and therefore justify movements like ethnic cleansing. Given the current situation of the world, I can't think of anything more important than reaffirming the intrinsic humanity of all peoples, however different ethnically, religiously, politically, or even medically. The great and abiding task of the humanities is to cultivate appreciation for the immense variety of the ways that peoples and societies live and think. One of the reasons I like teaching medieval history is that, as the modern West's historical "other," it sounds this message on a daily basis, and demonstrates its deep truth in a thousand different ways. The notion that there is something that can be called "a life unworthy of life" should become, quite simply, unthinkable. The humanities teach this most importantly of all the disciplines, in that they require an imaginative, not merely objective or logical, investment in their investigations.

In a sense, nothing makes the case more powerfully for the absolutely essential place of history and the humanities in the university, in society, and in the global community than the present situation in Iraq. Whatever one thinks of the merits of the war or the reasons for undertaking it, it is palpably true

that we entered into it without fully comprehending the character of the country, the varieties of its religious convictions and political philosophies. To the extent that this is true, American society and government has never needed the kind of historical, linguistic, ethical, and cultural instruction offered by the humanities more crucially than at the present time. The exercise of power without a sense of ethical responsibility is dangerous; the exercise of power without historical knowledge is a prescription for disaster.

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To make this argument is, fundamentally, to assert that the case for historical and humanistic study rests on our ability to address the growing needs of the contemporary world for historical, linguistic, and cultural competencies. Perhaps not surprisingly, even our government seems to appreciate this need. In 2004, the Department of Defense (for its own, fairly obvious reasons), issued a *Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities*, which took the form of a White Paper issued by a gathering in Washington, D.C., in 2004 of leaders from government, industry, academia, and language associations. The *Call*

*to Action* suggests that historical and linguistic competency is as critical to the future of the country as investment in science was believed to be after the Soviet Union launched its first sputnik in 1957, an event that catalyzed investment in scientific education and led to a sustained movement of scientific study and discovery over the course of the last half century. So deeply does the government believe in the validity of this analogy, that they have named this *Call* for historical, linguistic, and cultural competencies "the Sputnik moment" in humanistic studies.

We need not share the government's motives to acknowledge the legitimacy of this argument, nor restrict our sense of the privileged histories, languages, and cultures to Arabic, Korean, and Persian (as the *Call* did), to understand that such historical and cultural competency is rapidly becoming a social, political, and economic imperative in the contemporary world. To be sure, the notion that the study of foreign histories, cultures, and languages is necessary for negotiating the complexities of the modern world is scarcely novel. Yet the need for historical and cultural competency over the range of a vastly enlarged domain is a growing fact of the present world. To take up these tasks is to acknowledge diversities of every kind as a central characteristic of contemporary global societies and to insist on the persistence and importance of local knowledge—and knowledge of the local—within what Pauline Yu has called "the increasingly monoptic globalizing lens." More powerfully than other disciplinary domains, knowledge of the historical past and the humanities help to frame for our students what it means to belong to a nation committed by design to freedom and to the rule of law, and what it can mean to commit ourselves to the maintenance of humane and tolerant civil societies throughout the world.

In the final analysis, this argument for the importance of history and the humanities in the contemporary world is in no way incompatible with the traditional goals of a historical and humanistic education. For, in the end, what we wish for our students, and for ourselves, is that we all live our lives so that, as T.S. Eliot once put it, "you shall not cease from exploration. And the end of your exploring will be to arrive where you started and to know the place for the first time."

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