

## The Humanities in a Global Age (Paul Jay, Loyola University Chicago)

DEMOCRACY AND THE HUMANITIES

A SYMPOSIUM COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

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This is a great topic, and I'm honored to be a member of this panel. In a year when we look back to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NEH, we do well to also look forward by asking ourselves what the role of the humanities will be in an increasingly globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century. I agree whole-heartedly with the premise of this session -- that the humanities can no longer be conceived of simply as a repository of national culture. But I would go further -- and I know I'm far from alone in saying this -- and insist that the humanities can no longer be conceived of simply as the repository of Western culture and Western values. The humanities are well positioned to contribute to what will surely be increasingly complex, cross-cultural, and transdisciplinary explorations of what it means to be human. But the humanities, especially as they are practiced in the West, are also well-positioned to be productively transformed through exposure to other, diverse, approaches to the human, approaches from different traditions and other histories which sometimes challenge our own humanist ideals.

With this idea in mind, I'd like to explain why I found myself having mixed feelings about the specific question posed to this panel: *To what degree can the humanities help people transcend local loyalties and parochial interests?* The implication here, of course, is that there are loyalties and interests that serve the common human good, values that are universal, which transcend

local and parochial ideals and values (the UN-sponsored ideal of “human rights” is inspired by this idea, but it’s of course had a checkered history). While the ideal of “the common human good” is an awfully attractive one, the underlying distinction it’s based on -- between the local and the universal – is, as we all know, a difficult one. It has a long history of making trouble. We need look no further than the humanism upon which the humanities in the West are based, for many beliefs central to Western humanism were invoked in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to justify and secure colonial domination in the so-called New World, the African continent, South Asia, and myriad other locations around the world. The historical link between humanism, cosmopolitanism, and colonialism makes the whole question of globalizing the humanities a vexing one. From the historical perspective I’m calling attention to, relying on the humanities to free other people from their local and parochial loyalties and interests runs the risk of repeating the very forms of cultural colonization scholars in the humanities have been busy critiquing for the last 30 years.

I think our topic requires that we make a distinction between the humanities narrowly conceived as a largely secular institutional and academic enterprise specific to the rise of the research university in the West, and humanistic inquiry conceived more broadly as a global, collective body of thought engaged specifically with exploring conceptions of the human mind related to the arts, music, and philosophy that are often grounded in a wide range of spiritual traditions and religious fundamentalisms. Such inquiries have been going on for thousands of years across the globe in a myriad of civilizations (see Rens Bod on the history of the humanities). They long predate (and sometimes stand at odds with) the institutional rise of the secular humanities in the West. For this reason, returning to a more diverse, global,

heterogeneous conception of humanistic inquiry has the salutatory effect of decentering dominant practices of the humanities in the West, while at the same time opening that inquiry up to deep divisions and competing world views.

I want to be clear that I'm NOT saying local beliefs and practices ought to be seen as sacrosanct, nor am I saying that the term "parochial" is simply a rhetorical tool for criticizing other people's interests (though sometimes that's clearly the case). What I am saying is that as the humanities we practice become more globalized, and as they develop institutional structures that are more transnational in scope, one principle challenge we face is taking care to negotiate the complex relationship between the universal and the local. I agree with Kenneth Pruitt, Director of Columbia University's Global Centers, who wrote that: "If globalization is taken to mean standardization, harmonization and homogenization it puts us on a mistaken path that poses a risk to the humanities, which are necessarily . . . engaged with local particularities -- languages, literatures, histories, cultures, [and] civilizations."

A global humanities – especially as it operates in institutional forms – ought to be comprised of a culturally, socially, philosophically, artistically, and spiritually diverse set of practices and organizational structures that encompass the historical and geographical scope of humanistic study across the globe I spoke of a moment ago. There ought to be a *reciprocal relationship* between a transnational or globalized humanities and the dramatically different cultural worlds they interact with, one that provides a way for people to transcend local loyalties and parochial interests, but at the same time creates a context in which those same people can be transformed by exposure to the local and the parochial.

If we think of the humanities more narrowly as a cluster of disciplines – the fine arts, literary studies, religious studies, history, and philosophy – our challenge is to insure their engagement with the kind of geographical and intellectual diversity I’ve been talking about. Arts education needs to be global in scope, as do inquiries into religious and philosophical systems, and the study of history – particularly in the West --has to continue to expand its coverage of non-Western histories. Developments in my own field, literary studies, have moved rapidly in this direction. English literature is now treated as a transnational body of works linked by language as much as by nation and culture, and the critical paradigms we use have shifted dramatically from national to Commonwealth, from comparative to postcolonial, and now to global. These trends have disrupted traditional histories and critical practices, but in a way that I think has been deeply productive.

Of course there are a number of new centers and programs associated with the globalizing of the humanities that are already focused on the kinds of questions I’m suggesting we need to explore. I’ll close by citing one whose orientation I particularly like. It’s called “Toward a Global Humanities,” and it’s housed at the Cogut Center at Brown University. As the introductory page of their website puts it, “the project . . . seeks to explore concerns of human populations that have histories of exclusion and marginalization from the production and practice of dominant knowledges. The project both adds to and interrogates dominant discourses within the humanities. Its objective is to construct a wider sense of the possibilities of what the human might look like and to engage in comparative understandings of worldviews, ways of life and ways of knowing. In doing this, the project reworks conventional narratives about the invention of the human as an object of study while exploring questions of difference, the character of

human classification systems and systems of values. The project is a comparative one and demands both intra- and interdisciplinary conversations.”

It seems to me that initiatives like this are poised to deal productively with the challenges I’ve been discussing. It’s sensitive to how a globalizing humanities is unavoidably complicated by the role dominant discourses in the humanities have played in marginalizing other discourses, and it stresses the opportunity the humanities have to learn from exposure and interaction with other approaches to the human, and the knowledge systems they are based on. I think the comparative, interdisciplinary – even transdisciplinary – orientation of the work it envisions sets the right tone, providing a sensible map for negotiating the complex territory I’ve tried to briefly sketch out in my brief remarks this morning.