

Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, Oxford University Press, 2016, ISBN 978-0-19-872805-4, 204 pages

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The preamble of an Oxford collection about the state of Humanities highlights that a simple search on Google of the word “crisis” brings to the surface no less than 23 million of answers – all of them being associated with feelings of fear, melancholy, distress. However, the need to identify the disciplines grouped under the umbrella of Humanities is older than what Google’s record system can comprise. Thus, Helen Small, professor at Pembroke College Oxford, attempted to identify the directions from which humanist disciplines have been attacked across time. Published in an initial version in 2013, the book awoke positive reactions in the British academic world because, although it is written in a period when Humanities are forced to project the most powerful self-image outside the discipline, the book does not appeal to the discourse of fear and not even to that of melancholy. Starting from a definition of culture which involves equally two relation elements (“trained habits of intellection and individual behavior” and “trained habits of intellection and group behaviour”), the author focuses on the idea of a scientific community and its features, completed in the brackets with “a discipline, a profession, a nation”.

From the beginning, even though she notices that the self-image is created precisely because Humanities have been attacked in the last years, especially from an institutional point of view, and the identified enemies are extrinsic, the field reacting to the exterior pressure (political and economical) – more precisely, to the hostility of some imposed terms which do not regard by any means the historical peculiarity of the discipline (public good, policy makers, social benefit, impact etc.) –, Hellen Small aims to avoid the political approach, in favour of an evaluation of humanities starting from what they are, in a positive inquiry of legitimation, not as a clear-cut answer to the present debates: “My aim has been to avoid, as far as possible, immersion only in the

current state of institutional debate, which will quickly date” (7).

Undoubtedly, the choice of exclusively approaching the subject (or almost exclusively, if we take into consideration the last chapter, which aims the study of disciplines from the field of Humanities *for their own sake*) from the perspective of the external threats does not serve the outline of a complete depiction of discipline’s crisis. The pursuit of a lively debate on this crisis’ theme from the French space - through William Marx, for instance, in his famous *L’Adieu à la littérature* or in his more recent work *La haine de la littérature* – would have completed the context through an approach of the crisis from the perspective of autocreation in the interior of the field. Without ignoring the external threats generated by the organization and reorganization of departments and by the grant of budget funds, current and painful for French academics as well, the mentioned works also point out the struggle of the disciplines with themselves. Still, not even in the footnotes does Helen Small refer to another cultural space than the British-American one.

In fact, the general interest in including within the debate recent papers, irrespective of their origin’s space, is limited. Hardly does the author establish a connection with present works dedicated to the same theme. The bet of the book seems to reside in avoiding the polemics and the direct debate in favour of an overall perspective of humanities’ situation in the Anglo-Saxon space. The work reveals the erudition of the author, who juggles with remarkable ease through references from antiquity, Victorianism, Romanticism or modernity, in the attempt to reach the roots of these debates in the history of culture.

All in all, besides the recourse to eloquent texts and the regret that present works neglect these references associated with the analysis of the apocalyptic discourse set out by the author from the premises, the motivation of the inquiry is of contemporary interest. The debates which keep trace of the degradation of the importance assigned by the society in general and by the government’s policies especially to the field of humanities are placed under the umbrella of a royal economic concept – that of “public good.” Helen Small identifies five main directions that generated favourable arguments for the status of Humanities (as a contributor to the public good) and which organise the present work.

Firstly, outlining them briefly, the disciplinary umbrella finds its motivation in the fact that the specialists “do a distinctive kind of work”, which by dint of the utilitarian principle is useful to society: it fulfils the role of preserving culture, of interpreting and reinterpreting it. On the other hand, particularly American scholars like Martha Nussbaum approved arguments which develop a democratic stake in the British space, that of a guardian of the political system’s health (they perform a Socratic gadfly function in democracy). Another chapter explores the argument of the contribution of literature to the general happiness – it suggests not only the provision of reader’s happiness (based on the Plato-Socratic theory and persisting in the recent history of ideas through Roland Barthes’ distinction between pleasure and delectation), but also the manner in which literature and culture in general are effective because they ensure a pervasive happiness of the community, as social benefit, as a collective experience of society. Lastly, Humanities are good in themselves as owners of an intrinsic value. Secondly, the architecture of the book is of high interest. The organizing of the material of the inquiry by avoiding a direct polemic to other theoretical contemporary accounts, while privileging a complex dialogue with tradition, is a matter of choice, rather than an accident.

Helen Small uses as a statement the premise that current debates focusing on the crisis of Humanities do not employ innovative characteristics, but their roots lie in some older polemics (most of them identified in the Victorian period), which she aims to identify – illustrating on this occasion the lack of appropriateness of those who approached this topic without mentioning their predecessors. Certainly, the process does not intend to disregard the works of the contemporary theoreticians, but the preservation of current references exclusively in the footer of the page under the umbrella of “See also” is both an indicator of the up-to-date documentation of the author with regard to the published books on this theme and an obvious decision to avoid polemics with them.

Basically, the author identifies a few eloquent works in the history of debates, which regard the value and usefulness of literary and cultural studies and which she analyses by extensively quoting from John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin or Geoffrey Hill. For certain, while reckoning the research effort put in the re-interpreting

of these texts, the reader may wonder whether other “historical” texts would not have deserved as well to be quoted as crucial references in the debate. However, as any inquiry of legitimation through an appeal to the cultural memory, Hellen Small’s study searches traditional examples that would serve the theses of the present.

Another element that demonstrates the non-polemical strategy of the book lies in its second premise: the discourse of defending the value of humanities is – stylistic symptoms are very relevant - corrupted by the enthusiasm of some specialists, who perceive themselves as absolute defenders of their discipline in front of detractors. Therefore, the distance that Helen Small assumes in approaching the problem is motivated by her desire to avoid this type of essentialist discourse, already acknowledged and anticipated by the general and axiomatic title of the work, *The Value of the Humanities* – which seems to be a marketing strategy of the publishing house, rather than a natural choice of the author.

One of the major assets of this book resides in the philologist’s auto-irony, strongly related to her ability of defending the discipline. Paying attention to the vocabulary generally used in the struggle to defend humanities, Helen Small commits to an exercise of linguistic analysis specific to Martha Nussbaum’s theoretical discourse, whose arguments are filled with imperatives: “powered by imperatives (requires x 2, must x 2) and with axiological positions (by moral plain speaking – good/bad, true/bogus). Helen Small concludes: “It is, in other words, a strikingly un-Socratic defence of a Socratic education – though that is a sacrifice mandated by the genre of the manifesto” (129). Moreover, Small notices a problem related to the use of “us” – first person, plural, as a legitimate plural of the defence discourse. Once again, the stylistics is close to that of a manifesto, while the „voice” defending the Humanities seems to speak on behalf of an entire professional class. However, the author pleads for pro-democratic values by stating that not only a group is artificially built under the umbrella of this “us”, but also an elitist attitude: “it does seem to commit us, willingly or not, to a guardianship model of democracy” (141).

Nevertheless, a consistent chapter, placed at the beginning of the book points out the necessity of the field of research to create a defining community for itself – related to other disciplines, which also pass through a pervasive phase of disciplinary self-interest.

From a historical “Two culture model” – Sciences vs. Humanities –, Helen Small heads for the present “three culture model” – sciences, humanities and social sciences –, not without claiming that if the dichotomy proved to be dogmatic, the new model of organising fields of knowledge is, in itself, conventional. Nowadays, any attempt to circumscribe specific features of knowledge faces the complexity of modern disciplines. As Small notices, an *antique* culture based on the two cultural models (arts and sciences) can no longer function and only a system of conventional delimitation could reform the academic model of enlisting *knowledge*. The general definition of every type of specialist, based on 3 primary dimensions and on 6 secondary ones, as described by Jerome Kagan, aimed to point out different characteristics among the community of those belonging to the three fields in *The Three Cultures* (2009). Thus, specialists in Humanities “are interested in understanding human reactions to events and the meanings humans impose on experience as a function of culture, historical era and life history”, those specialized in Natural Sciences “are interested in prediction and explanation of natural phenomena” and those interested in Social Sciences insist on the “prediction and explanation of human behaviours and psychological states” (49). Summarizing (although Helen Small avoids it), Humanities are oriented towards the past, while Natural Sciences and Social Sciences are oriented towards the future, their main function being that of anticipating.

Besides this type of analysis committed to describing the directions from which Humanities were attacked, the author takes up a series of polemical ideas which aim to add reflexive observations and to point out the controversial aspects which conferred the book the aura of a veritable barometer of debates on this topic.

The crisis of Humanities in Great Britain is real, but the academic context of the crisis is more important across the Ocean. An important observation which supports the administrative section which determine the organization of disciplines in universities, involving especially for that purpose the debates regarding the utility of every art, illustrates that the importation of the term Humanities (American) – a proof of the American academicians’ efforts to define the specific of studying literature, language and arts “in response to an aggressive form of positivism” which dominated the space across the ocean in 1940 -1950 through the exclusive promotion of some specific

scientific methods as unique ways towards “the true knowledge” – generated not only academic politics of funding study programs, but also the creation of some scientific and methodological artifices. The reunion of these disciplines under the umbrella term of Humanities allowed as well the extension of the aim towards interdisciplinarity, very popular in the administrative area and in that of funding politics which focus on “knowledge transfer”, “economic relevance” or “impact and social benefit”, as Small argues. In fact, while an aspect of interdisciplinarity was the purpose of any common sense inquiry (a literary thesis pursued also *sine qua non* a substantial constituent of the ideas’ or science history – the example given by the author) this administrative umbrella has the role of encouraging linking applications instead of generating new methods “it designates not a subject or a method but at most a framework”. (16)

In addition, Helen Small reveals her concern with regard to the role assigned to Humanities in preserving the health of the democratic society. The risk of intermingling the critical spirit specific to literary disciplines with the critical capacities prerequisite for taking part in the life of the fortress is undeniable. However, it is debatable whether the critical spirit implied in literary theory is different from critical thinking. Quoting from Mulhern (from a conference *Why Humanities?*, 2010), the researcher proves that the legitimating of Humanities by appealing to their ethic constituent, which could have been easily confiscated by the pro-democratic discourse of “the common good”, does not solve the problem of specialists whatsoever. This type of arguments does not aim for a definition: “It puts democracy first, and the contribution of the humanities second” (143).

The debate on whether there are intrinsic or relational values to the aesthetic object (see Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s distinction with regard to contingencies of value) is another concern of the book. Whilst Shelly Kagan – who pleads for the distinction instrumental value vs. value as an end, “for its own sake” – is quoted, the chapter enforces Christina Korsgaard’s theory instead, according to whom the intrinsic value does not have as opponent, in a utilitarian direction, the instrumental theory, but the “extrinsic value”, that is “the value a thing gets from another source”. Helen Small points out cautiously the tendency to treat individual answers as specific to the theory of emotions, to cognition or to a social conditioning of subjectivity. There is a “difficulty of

connecting the qualities of the object to the response of the subject; and in turn of connecting that individual subjective response to a true standard” (162), while this remains Achilles’s heel of any attempt to formulate arguments in this direction.

Thus, the legitimizing of Humanities is built only tangentially on what would represent the intrinsic value of philological disciplines. Even when this value is brought to discussion, the researcher seems to use it only for grouping a series of attitudes in favour of the Humanities. Unlike the debates within the French culture, Helen Small does not build up an inventory of the intrinsic threats (theoretical, canonical, methodological) of the discipline and focuses only on extrinsic enemies – the government – in front of whom Humanities need to illustrate their utility as common good. Practically, what Helen Small successfully realizes is an inventory of the manners from which Humanities were attacked as an administrative department structure. Not without expressing her scepticism and setting high limits.

To conclude in the same positive tone in which the book is written, the most eloquent argument in favour of disciplines is undoubtedly the appeal to legitimating works of the field’s memory because it certifies through this choice two very important aspects: the permanence of a discipline in the history of humanity – a guarantee of quality – and the insubstantiality of concerns regarding a new crisis, since answers were given to these fears in older cultural periods.