

Gerald Early

The humanities & social change

The mere exercise of reading the text as it really is will make the reader moral and wise in a direct way that no systemic body of dogmatic teaching can rival. . . . The real point of close reading is that it produces the right sort of person – a person of evident worth.

– Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine,
*From Humanism to the Humanities*¹

The humanities today seem caught in an irresolvable contradiction. At any given moment, they see themselves either as cultural gatecrashers and agents of radical social change or cultural gate-

keepers and champions of tradition, often unsure of which act they are performing. It is hard to say whether the tension posed by this disjunction propels the humanities as potent forces in American culture or disables them as insecure, incoherent areas of study. The social, economic, and political changes of the postwar era have served only to exacerbate this sense of disjunction and sharpen opposing impulses, not resolve them.

All of the major changes in American society since the late 1940s – from revisions in immigration law to the advent of effective, mass-produced birth control; from the relaxation of taboos against obscenity to the creation of the GI Bill – can be subsumed under one concept: the democratization of American society. These changes have made any status claim based on unfair or *unmerited* advantages, including those proceeding from particular physical traits, cultural differences, or emotional and psychological conditions (that do not

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¹ Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 148. Here Grafton and Jardine reflect on the changes that Erasmus brought to humanist training.

result in violent behavior),² both legally untenable and morally illegitimate. In effect, a greater number of people now enjoy greater accessibility to American cultural and social institutions.

The civil rights movement extended these transformations into the lives of black people in the United States, probably our nation's most visibly persecuted group; but it also changed how the nation overall sees racism and, more generally, social and political hierarchies based on something "natural" or biological. The paradigm shift in the situation of blacks resulted in similar movements and changes in the legal and social status of women, Hispanics, homosexuals, and other groups that had been victimized or socially degraded in America. Presently, efforts to change the status and treatment of the physically disabled, the chronically ill, the overweight, the learning disabled, the emotionally disturbed, and others continue this endless quest for equality and liberation from irrational, or seemingly irrational, prejudice that significantly affects people's ability to exercise the full benefits and entitlements of American citizenship.

Identity politics were discussed and acted upon long before the post-World War II era. (What, after all, are nationalism, religious schism, and class consciousness but forms of identity?) Take, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation of black identity from his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born

with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³

But the concept of identity as we understand it today, even the widespread use of the word itself, entered American life after World War II. Du Bois deals with racial identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but he never once uses the word *identity*. By 1955, when James Baldwin's collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, was published, use of the word *identity* abounds. Consider these passages from one of the most famous essays in the collection, "Stranger in the Village":

[T]hat the slave in exile yet remains related to his past, has some means – if only in memory – of revering and sustaining the forms of his former life, is able, in short, to maintain his identity. This was not the case with the American Negro slave. He is unique among the black men of the world in that his past from him, almost literally, at one blow.

[T]he white man's motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish his identity. And despite the terrorization which the Negro in America endured and endures sporadically until

2 These days, scholars commonly refer to this advantage as white privilege, or white male privilege.

3 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classics, 1969), 45.

today, despite the cruel and totally inescapable ambivalence of his status in his country, the battle for his identity has long ago been won.⁴

Baldwin's writing points to the intense preoccupation with *individual* identity against the impositions of bureaucratic or institutional structures, the right to an identity as an expression of self-determination, the politicization of the individual's need to acquire and express an identity, the formation of an identity through acts of consumption, the difficulties the individual faced in creating an identity, the quest for identity, and the ultimate meaning of identity that crystallized as a mass phenomenon during the postwar years.⁵

The interdisciplinary studies born during this period – black studies, women's studies, cultural studies – offered a way to combine humanities across fields, in part through the politicization of identity. What drove these amalgamations was the idea that explicit ideology can unite traditional disciplines – the Black Aesthetic or Afrocentrism for black

4 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 169, 173. Du Bois's formulation seems more penetrating and explicit than Baldwin's in that Du Bois tries to describe what identity is and what it does or how it works. Baldwin assumes everyone knows what it is, which, by the 1950s, was probably not an unwarranted assumption. Everyone at least thought he or she knew what it was.

5 The rise of the postwar superhero comic book injected the concept of "the secret identity" into popular culture. (Superhero comics existed before and during World War II but reached the apogee of their development as a genre after the war, particularly with the advent of the Marvel "angst" superheroes of the 1960s.) Indeed, as a child I first encountered the word *identity* reading a comic book.

studies, feminism for women's studies, postmodernist, Marxist-inspired deconstruction for cultural studies – far more effectively than either a consensus subject matter or a consensus method or approach. Advocates praised these new interdisciplinary fields for making identity explicit instead of masking it, arguing that the traditional disciplines were essentially identity constructions or identity affirmations of one sort or another – usually Eurocentric, Anglo-oriented ones.

The new uncovering of identity forced several of the humanities, even as they maintained their traditional configurations, to absorb ideas of difference, diversity, and the inauthenticity of canon formation. Some humanities disciplines even began to adopt the concept of the antidiscipline, the "negative capability" of the discipline. Thus a discipline's ideology has to be "resisted" (another favorite cant word): deconstruction, demythologizing, demystifying, unmasking, and subverting came to define the act of critical analysis in several humanities disciplines.

The latest approach to interdisciplinarity in the humanities is the concept of diaspora, a variation of the old-fashioned theme of same and different, particular and universal, and yet another way of intersecting discipline with identity. Diaspora imposes two imagined communities: the original geocultural community and the worldwide neo-cultural community, which identifies itself in relation to the original geocultural community. People of a common geocultural heritage spread across the world and throughout different cultures and nations, differentiating themselves while also remaining the same.

Like many of the new hybrid fields, diaspora studies continue the work of the

civil rights movement, which politicized the nation's expanding population of college students at a time when a college education was becoming a professional and occupational necessity. This activist group of young people, mainly (though not exclusively) middle class as a result of rising postwar American prosperity, had a considerable impact on the humanities and social science curricula of many colleges and universities, particularly elite institutions. They imported the *practice* of social change from the outside in, and then brought ideas from the academy back to their social and political movements. In effect, they tried to make higher education reflect the nature of the society that it intended to serve and make society reflect some of the ideals they learned in humanities and social science classrooms.

This latter point is crucial: the movement for social change that took shape in the 1960s did not come from nowhere. The students who were part of the civil rights movement and its offshoots did not invent their ideological inclinations; they intensified the ones that they had received in their liberal arts educations. After World War II, leading humanist and humanities-oriented social science scholars and intellectuals associated with some of our best schools – Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, Kenneth Clarke, Lionel Trilling, E. Franklin Frazier, John Hope Franklin, Elliott Liebow, Marshall Stearns, among others – saw the defeat of fascism and the containment of communism as the triumph of liberalism, evidence that there were no rational ideological alternatives to liberalism, that the only thing better than liberalism was more liberalism as a sort of never-ending proof of its own moral and political fitness. What else could liberalism do but seek equality and liberation for all who were unequal

and not free? To this end, scholars presented liberalism to their students as a moral necessity.

Liberal education of the postwar era taught students to value social change as an unquestioned social good and see it as only a one-way street: all social change was progressive. A major tenet of liberalism is progress, and the questions we ask to gauge the extent of social change reflect how powerfully liberalism underlines many of the assumptions, political evaluations, and judgments of our society: How much progress have we made in race relations? How far have women come? Can we improve the status of the poor? The assumption behind such questions is that reform and liberation always lead from bad to better, an assumption that coincides with how Americans generally see the arc of their history, as a narrative of redemption. Liberalism is our invisible, default ideology, our civic piety.

It is striking to note, then, how few historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) ever adopted women's studies, black studies, or even creative writing programs, despite having a number of radicalized students in the 1960s. Black colleges, largely conservative institutions, retained their conservatism and refused to adopt many of the changes that were occurring. One wonders whether they would have been better off if they had adopted them, or if it is too late to adopt them now. As it happened, HBCUs changed mostly by becoming poorer: losing their best students and faculty to white institutions and losing ground in the educational marketplace much as women's colleges have. Why this is has a great deal to do with the essential historical differences between black and white higher education, the distinct clientele they served, and the larger political and social pur-

poses for which they were created. In some respects, however, the decline of the HBCUs can be traced to the nation's ambivalent, confused response to the concept of merit.

At first, merit, and the ability to measure it objectively, seemed the solution to all “unnatural” or politically constructed inequalities. With merit-measuring as a sort of color-blind, gender-neutral, class-unconscious, social threshing machine, deserving talent, wherever it was, would be recognized and rise to the top. (Du Bois expressed this belief for blacks as the construction of a “Talented Tenth.”) In the early days of racial integration, objective merit was strongly advocated and examples of its effectiveness were touted: Jackie Robinson's successful integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, Ralph Ellison's winning the National Book Award for fiction in 1952, and the integration of the American military during the Korean War. (Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the military in 1948, two years before the Korean War, but the war greatly accelerated the process.) During the 1960s, however, the idea of merit itself was attacked. In the new liberal critique, merit was a construction that reflected the values and rules of the dominant class to preserve a plutocracy disguised as an elite of talent and brains. Moreover, it was false to believe that merit could be objectively measured and numerically rendered.⁶ This analy-

6 See the famous British satire by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1958; repr., Baltimore: Penguin, 1971). The fact that the idea of merit became closely aligned with intelligence testing and IQ led, in part, to the severe criticism of the concept, as postwar liberalism has generally expressed unease about IQ tests.

sis led to the attack on skills-based testing as unfair and inherently biased.

But merit, indeed a moral formulation when connected with the idea of “deserving,” also had the patina of the scientific, as it represented the objective and the measurable, twin obsessions that have become forms of intellectual virtue in our society. Ultimately, the concept of merit came to reflect the sense of insecurity at the heart of the humanities. On the one hand, wishing to exhibit both rigor and method in a scientific age that prized both, the humanities found measurable, objective merit in both their content and their pedagogy to be enormously valuable. (A Great Books curriculum – tough, typically Eurocentric books that nobody read but that everyone thought ought to be read, plus a dusting of Latin and Ancient Greek – was a huge guarantor of humanistic merit.) On the other hand, it was largely scholars in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences who were interested in the social changes that most vigorously challenged the concept of merit as unfair and illusory, who considered Great Books courses as unnecessary, unjustified, and simply a hegemonic expression of cultural propaganda or, worse, snobbery. These scholars' quest was to make the humanities less “elitist” and more democratic and accessible to all, to ask, who determines what is a Great Book? What indeed constitutes greatness in a book?

During the postwar years, this version of merit challenged both the democratic impulses of the gatecrashers and the elitism of the gatekeepers, and humanists have ever since been unable to resolve the conflict. It seems to me useless to say that the postwar humanities are functional or dysfunctional according to some normative set of expectations, as no particularly stable set of normative

expectations has ever governed them. What we do know is that the humanities very much reflect their times, for good or ill, even as they struggle for ways to reflect the past on its own terms. The kind of humanities education we have at any given moment may not necessarily be the kind we think we deserve, but it may be the only kind we can want or vehemently not want – or the only kind we think we want or think we hate.

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