

JOHN CABOT UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND HUMANITIES

HUMANISMS AND BEYOND

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION



EDITED BY
FABRIZIO CONTI AND STEFAN LORENZ SORGNER
WITH A FOREWORD BY
FRANCO PAVONCELLO

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Humanisms and Beyond:
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Humanities in Liberal Arts Education

Edited by
Fabrizio Conti
Stefan Lorenz Sorgner

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Franco Pavoncello

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FOREWORD

FRANCO PAVONCELLO,
President of John Cabot University

The enduring strength of the Liberal Arts tradition has always been its relevance to the contemporary experience of higher education, regardless of the discipline studied or the nature of the times. Critical thinking, the elegant transmission of one's thoughts in writing and speech, and the appreciation of our past heritage, our present challenges and our future visions are the building blocks of the formation of young minds, whatever their path may be.

Since its founding 50 years ago, John Cabot University, an American overseas institution of higher learning, has placed the Liberal Arts tradition at the center of its mission as a necessary ingredient in the study of any discipline. At the same time, its decades long presence in the Eternal City, which has been at the center of world history for the past 3,000 years, has infused our international university with an inevitable genetic attention to the study of Humanities, intended as an exploration of the historical, philosophical, and moral challenges of our past, present, and future.

It is thus a distinct pleasure for me to introduce this volume edited by Fabrizio Conti and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner with contributions from faculty members of our Department of History and Humanities, as it discusses the importance of the Liberal Arts, the development of their traditions as well as their paths towards the future. At the same time, the volume reveals the special culture of our university characterized by the constant and open debate between professors and students. I am

convinced that this volume will give much food for thought to scholars and students, while inspiring all those involved in the fascinating task of building an educational environment that can use the opportunities of the present to develop visions of the future by engaging in a fruitful dialogue with our immense humanistic heritage.

LIBERAL ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

AN INTRODUCTION

FABRIZIO CONTI and STEFAN LORENZ SORGNER

Humanisms and Beyond: Past, Present, and Future of the Humanities in Liberal Arts Education is the first volume that puts together ideas by the members of the Department of History and Humanities at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy on such a challenging and fundamental educational issue as the humanities. John Cabot University is a liberal arts institution, therefore its very nature and mission are at the heart of the topics discussed in the volume, which are, most significantly: the role and importance of the humanities in shaping liberal arts education as well as humanism as a defining process in the Western cultural and pedagogical development. Never before have the humanities and liberal arts been at the center of such a significant re-evaluation of their own standing in the overall discourse of transforming university-level education in a fast-developing world.

The liberal arts seem to be steadily developing in educational models in other parts of the world. Signs of recovery can be detected where intense debates have taken place, which is the case in the U.S.A. Those who believe that the liberal arts and humanities are somewhat obsolete are opposed by Nannerl O. Keohane, Senior Scholar of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs at Princeton University, and former President of Wellesley College and Duke University. Keohane points out at least four directions that would mark a positive development for those who decide to obtain a liberal arts education. First, according to her, liberal arts and sciences guarantee a successful preparation for both those aiming to practice a learned profession, such

as law, medicine, teaching, and for professions such as finance, business, technology thanks to their being inherently “liberal” and interdisciplinary, capable of developing an idea of broader context that sectoral studies lack and that would itself be insurance against obsolescence. The second reason is that the liberal arts can refine the mind, teaching concentration, critical thinking, and clear expression both in writing and verbally, with the ability to move from one topic to another with ease and a spirit of curiosity. Moreover, liberal arts education would be particularly ideal for educating democratic citizenship as well as providing access to a “community of scholars, both professional and amateur, spanning the ages.”¹

As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has emphasized in her work and through her personal involvement as a designer of liberal arts programs all around the globe, skills learned in the liberal arts school are essential to the development of the individual as well as to that of democracy itself.² If we note how economic development does not always go hand in hand with that of democratic principles, we can probably agree with Nussbaum that future economic growth alone cannot be the exclusive element on which to base an educational model. The liberal arts along with the humanities provide a valuable framework for understanding the past as well as for preparing for the future, in a view where open-mindedness, inclusiveness, and the ability to master complexity are some of the essential objectives reached through this overall framework. It is with the same open-mindedness and curiosity that the authors of the chapters in this volume have sought to express, each in their own disciplinary field of reference, their views on how the debate on humanities and liberal arts is more relevant today than ever before.

The volume opens with Danica Pušić’s contribution, “From Antiquity to Today: Reflections on *paideia* and *humanitas*,” in which the author reflects diachronically on the development of concepts such as *paideia*, *philanthropia*, and *humanitas* which, all together, have built the axes on which the Western educational approach has revolved for centuries, from the classical world to the modern world, described as the process

¹ Nannerl O. Keohane, “The Liberal Arts and Presidential Leadership”: <https://highereredreporter.carnegie.org/the-liberal-arts-and-presidential-leadership/> (accessed, Jan. 2023).

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

of enhancing “the education of a child that would lead to the attainment of excellence in adulthood” (p. 3). However, the author notes on the basis of Gerald F. Else, that since the twentieth century there has been a developing awareness that it is no longer enough to study the Classics in order to be well educated. A new and broader meaning of “humanities” then began to develop, which included but was not limited to, the Classics.

David N. Levy’s “Plato’s Definition of Liberal Education and Its Contemporary Relevance” discusses the theme of liberal/illiberal education in Plato, particularly in the first book of the Athenian philosopher’s *Laws*, which the author reads particularly in light of the reflections of the Pan-African scholar and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, according to whom liberal education is particularly linked with problems of “truth, Beauty, and Goodness, that is, with the riddle of existence.” (p. 47). Levy shows how the very concept of liberal education, for us based on critical sense, inclusiveness, and above all freedom, still owes something to the Platonic approach as civic and together moral education, that is, based on specific elements considered essential values, then as now.

Fabrizio Conti writes about “The Uses of the Past: Humanism, History, and Liberal Arts Education,” proposing a reflection on the development, and at the same time, the almost inextricable intertwining of the cultural-historical and educational levels between ideas of *humanitas*, the liberal arts, and history as a discipline. This relationship has come to be defined over time in the Western world from its classical roots to its Renaissance reinterpretation, and from this to present-day rediscovery for pedagogical purposes of classical and humanistic principles – not least those fostering *soft skills* - to be integrated with the possibilities offered by advanced research and educational instruments. Transdisciplinarity is discussed as one of the defining methodological elements of liberal arts education, and the study and teaching of the historical problem of witchcraft is also discussed as offering key insights from this perspective.

In her “Leibniz’s Teleology, or a Pre-History of Cybernetics,” Brunella Antomarini proposes a revisit of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz in the post-digital era as a possibility to recover the role of modern Western philosophy in the post-humanist context. Leibniz is characterized as one of the main protagonists of humanism and modern

philosophy, who nonetheless aspired to partly overcome this tradition from the perspective of rational scientific thought. The author thus proposes a cybernetic reading of Leibniz that would show an anti-anthropocentric humanism according to which the human body is no longer entitled to a central or exceptional role, but is seen as one of many possible organic or cybernetic bodies.

Dario Biocca's "Silvio Pellico and Antonio Gramsci: A Humanist Legacy?" discusses the possible humanistic interpretation of the human journey and the work of communist political leader and scholar Antonio Gramsci, and writer and champion of the Italian Risorgimento Silvio Pellico with whom the former is often associated because of his political passion and related personal vicissitudes. In particular, the author shows how quite soon both "were turned by their admirers into champions of the Italian humanist tradition and formidable "teachers" of political and moral values to future generations" (p. 98). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Italian schools included the memoirs from the two authors' imprisonment in state teaching programs, following a view that history and politics could be reconsidered from a broader humanistic perspective in which individual and collective freedoms would be inseparable.

In his "*Laudate Hominem: Humanism, Humanity, and Piety According to Fabrizio De André. The Importance of La Buona Novella in the Work of the Genoese Singer-Songwriter*," Andrea Lanzone writes about the great Italian songwriter, Fabrizio De André, who died in 1999, and his idea of humanism, which the author finds imbued with human compassion in the peculiar characterization of the characters the songwriter erects as protagonists of his songs. These are, Lanzone points out, the humble, the "last," the vanquished who survive on the margins of society, from thieves to prostitutes, from the Romani to American Indians and Sardinian brigands, to all the other outcasts whom the songwriter never judges. De André's is a humanist that Lanzone describes as "full of humanity, but also full of those discomforts and mistakes typical of the condition of human existence" (p. 117).

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's essay "What Are the Metahumanities?" concludes the volume. In his chapter, Sorgner discusses the "posthuman paradigm-shift" with its raising issues that pertain to different aspects of the current cultural debate, from the more properly philosophical, to the ethical, artistic, and of the course educational aspect. Sorgner starts with

a definition of posthumanism as a philosophical redefinition of the human, as well as the difference between posthumanism and transhumanism, although both currents of thought “embrace a new anthropology and reject the traditional humanist account of a human being as consisting of an immaterial soul and a material body” (p. 138). The author discusses the need to incorporate new theories and technologies into the traditional riverbed of the humanities, a process of integration and transformation giving birth to what he calls “metahumanities.”

In an “Afterword. Conversation with ChatGPT on the Future of the Humanities,” Stefan Lorenz Sorgner practically deals with the challenges related to the future of the humanities by having a conversation on this topic with a weak AI, the chatbot ChatGPT, which seems to have the potential to radically transform the humanities as we have known them for a while. In a critical conversation with this chatbot, Sorgner reveals the potential as well as the limits which go along with it. Thereby, the special chance of the bot for serving as a brilliant inspiration is revealed, which could provide intellectuals with an opportunity to develop an entirely new level of complexity for their projects.

The topics covered in the volume, as can be seen, are diverse and broad. A breadth and diversity that we believe well represents one of the main features of the liberal arts educational model, with its interdisciplinary nature and its potential for inclusiveness, to which the humanities, as the essays in the volume demonstrate, have provided the main framework of reference over time. The challenge that remains open, and to which the humanities as part of the liberal arts are called upon to respond today, is how to make a clearer and perhaps a more palatable educational offer whose historical and traditional relevance is well known but whose transformative potential to meet the needs of the future is still sometimes ignored. We hope that this volume can help initiate a debate on the relevance of *paideia* and the humanities with their continuing capacity for renewal and updating, benefiting from the many tools that scientific, technological and interdisciplinary advances now provide every day, giving the humanities and liberal arts education in general the ability to link, in a virtuous and fruitful way, past, present and future.

From Antiquity to Today: Reflections on *paideia* and *humanitas*

Danica Pušić

I. Introduction

A. Difficulties in Defining *paideia*

The term *paideia* has often been taken as implicitly clear in the discussion about Antiquity. Different translations of the term *paideia*, based on the interpretation of the ancient authors, show the difficulties in defining it. The ancient meaning of the term is far from being obvious, and it needs further diachronic exploration.

B. Second Sophistic

It was during the Second Sophistic – a literary-historic term referring to the period of Greek culture during the first centuries of the Roman Empire (c. 60-230 CE) – that the writers

invested more than any other in education and specifically into *paideia*, which is a Greek term that carries an altogether different range of sociological and semantic meanings from those of the English “education.”¹

Recent scholarship about the idea of *paideia*, notably Ingo Gildenhard’s *Paideia Romana: Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations* (2007), has shown there is an almost obsolete need to re-examine the very concept

¹ Tim Whitmarsh, “Reading Power in Roman Greece: The Paideia of Dio Chrysostom”, in *Pedagogy and Power*, eds. Y. L. Too and N. Livingstone (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193-200.

of *paideia*.² In the scholarship on this period, considering *paideia* as the fundament of the culture, we can find dense layers of meanings related to the concept of *paideia*. The idea of *paideia* is commonly considered a tool for social promotion,³ a *sine qua non* to the political power,⁴ and central to the topic of the elite.⁵ The words of Isocrates certainly inspired and endorsed this belief:

...and [philosophy] knew, furthermore, that whether men have been liberally educated from their earliest years is not to be determined by their courage or their wealth or such advantages, but is made manifest most of all by their speech, and that this has proved itself to be the surest sign of a culture in every one of us, and that those who are skilled in speech are not only men of power in their own cities but are also held in honor in other states.⁶

The mandatory readings established by *paideia* had a radical role in discussions about power and prestige in Rome. However, during the Second Sophistic, the role of *paideia* became less transparent. As Whitmarsh states, the “opinions” of Greek canonical authors about the issue of Roman power were unclear, since the authors often had a vaguely close relationship with the Latin tradition.⁷ Lucian’s works are often explored for having conceptualized the implementation of Greek *paideia* into the Roman social and economic domination. In *Sale of Lives*, for instance, Lucian derides the superficializing and commodification of philosophy. In *Nigrinus*, he contraposes Athens, as the city from which *paideia* draws its origins, to Rome, the city in which the implementation of *paideia* into the context of power contributed to surpassing Athens.

During the Second Sophistic, readings were available only to a sophisticated audience, which was responsive to sarcasm and authorial

² Jaś Elsner, “Paideia: Ancient Concept and Modern Reception,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 20, 4 (2013): 136-137.

³ Lieve Van Hoof, “Performing Paideia: Greek Culture as an Instrument for Social Promotion in the Fourth Century A.D.,” *The Classical Quarterly*, 63, 1 (2013): 387-406.

⁴ Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 35-70.

⁵ Edward Jay Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006).

⁶ Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 49.

⁷ Whitmarsh, “Reading Power in Roman Greece,” 212.

insinuations. Hence, the texts written during this period were and are more complex to interpret.

II. *Paideia* a Predecessor of *humanitas*

Ancient Greece's anthropocentric culture and society considered the individual equipped with innate capacity toward intellectual growth and, unsurprisingly, gave particular importance to education. Two core terms were adopted in a characteristically anthropocentric conception of the Universe: *pais*, "child," and *homo*, "man."⁸ The concept of Roman *humanitas* is allegedly a result of the maturation of its Greek counterpart: it valued the education of a child that would lead to the attainment of excellence in adulthood.

The Greek *paideia* and Roman *humanitas* were often regarded as overlapping concepts. This belief was based on the well-known passage of Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* (XIII, 17), often quoted to show the overlap in the two concepts' content until the 20th century:⁹

Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly do not give to the word *humanitas* the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks call φιλάνθρωπία, signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction; but they gave to *humanitas* about the force of the Greek παιδεία; that is, what we call *eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*, or "education and training in the liberal arts." Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the pursuit of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, have been granted to man alone of all the animals, and for that reason, it is termed *humanitas*, or "humanity."

The most widely known quality that has been attributed to *paideia* remains the same: the key to humanity. When offered education and training in the liberal arts, the individual was destined to acquire

⁸ Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, translated by George Lamb (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 294.

⁹ See Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 vols., translated by Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1934-1944).