

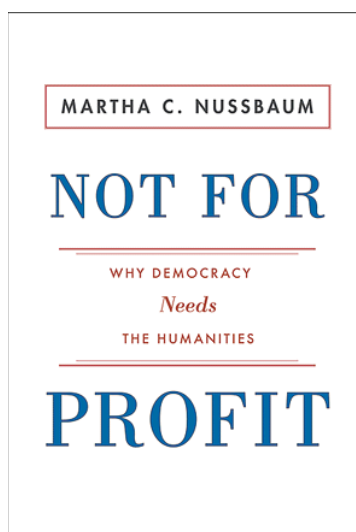
A Review of *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*

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MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S LATEST BOOK, *NOT for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010, 158 pp.), begins with a rousing call to arms aimed at anyone who cares about education on a global scale, particularly those who are concerned with promoting the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship. Early in the text, she says, "We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance . . . I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the nature of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education" (pp. 1–2). After calling her readers' attention to the serious nature of this silent crisis, she identifies the source of the problem in terms of social, economic, and intellectual trends that are generating a rather malignant impact on educational policies and practices across the globe. She states:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance. (p. 2)

According to Nussbaum, the world in which we live is driven by the forces of insatiable economic gain and a mechanistic desire for productive citizens whose contributions to society are as predictable, efficient, and single-minded as are the mathematic calculations that estimate each nation's bottom line. This drive for profit comes at a cost, though, one that exists outside the margins of an accountant's spreadsheets and creates a deficit we cannot bear to sustain. Characterized above as the loss of citizens who are capable of independent, critical, compassionate, and innovative thought,



Nussbaum later describes this as an attack on the beating heart, the very "soul" (p. 6), of our societies. Her objective in the remainder of this work is to explain how and why we should focus our attention on creating systems of primary, secondary, and tertiary education that support, practice, and promote the cultivation of individuals who possess "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation" (p. 6). As the previous statement suggests, Nussbaum's view of education for democratic citizenship rests upon certain

principles and values concerning what it means to be human that derive from what can be learned through the humanities and the arts, both of which are endangered by the same dire conditions that leave us turning to them for sustenance and rehabilitation (p. 7).

There are many layers to Nussbaum's argument, and the remainder of the book attempts to address each on a chapter-by-chapter basis. In chapter 2, "Education for Profit, Education for Democracy," Nussbaum explores how the foundational social principles of countries such as the United States and India seem to run counter to and even contradict the goals for economic growth that drive many of these countries' current policies and practices. As such, she identifies a tension that exists within these nations, one that is historically grounded and useful for readers to turn to if they are

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looking for social and political justifications for renouncing the profit-driven model this work urges them to critique.

Chapter 3, “Educating Citizens: The Moral (and Anti-Moral) Emotions,” entails an analysis of the human condition from a psychological perspective that explains why the current situation stems from an internal tension that is as complex as the sociopolitical one described in the book’s previous chapter. Nussbaum does this by focusing on how we cope with feelings of anxiety and disgust while also identifying how those pathologies play out through oppressive forms of social hierarchy and destructive associations with others, both of which can result in a kind of numbness toward the plight of others, which detracts from the types of camaraderie and fellowship necessary for a truly democratic community to thrive. She then turns to Rousseau and Gandhi as sources of hope in disrupting this dynamic due to the emphasis they place on the importance of preparing citizens to be capable of “compassionate concern,” a disposition that is comprised of a cultivated sense of sympathy, widened and imaginative perspectives on the world and its inhabitants, and an empathetic approach to understanding the lives of others (pp. 36–37, pp. 43–46).

Chapters 4–6 (“Socratic Pedagogy: The Importance of Argument”; “Citizens of the World”; and “Cultivating Imagination: Literature and the Arts”) shift the focus of the discussion to education and build upon one another in establishing the historical and theoretical precedents for a curriculum and pedagogy that is humanistic and democratic in nature and practice. Calling upon the work of Socrates, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Alcott, Mann, Dewey, Tagore, and Winnicott to shore up the validity of her claims, Nussbaum constructs an analysis of teaching and learning that offers an antidote to the problems that plague our test-driven, anemic educational practices. Her argument is best summarized later in the text, when she explains:

Notice that part of the issue here is content, and part is pedagogy. Curricular content has shifted away from material that focuses on enlivening imagination and training the critical faculties toward material that is directly relevant to test preparation. Along with the shift in content has come an even more baneful shift in pedagogy: away from teaching that seeks to promote questioning and individual responsibility toward force-feeding for good exam results. (p. 134)

By asking the readers to reconsider what and how we teach, Nussbaum advocates for the development of students whose minds are as creative as they are flexible, whose hearts are capable of genuine care and concern for others, and whose lives are characterized by the kind of thoughtful, critical, and compassionate personal agency that Nussbaum considers to be necessary for any democratic society to remain true to its intrinsic goals and principles.

Nussbaum’s concluding chapter, “Democratic Education on the Ropes,” serves a dual function: on the one hand, it offers a stirring conclusion to the arguments presented in this work that compels her readers to understand and commit ourselves to working against the current predicament in which we find

ourselves; on the other hand, it launches a specifically aimed critique at the educational policies currently being promoted by President Obama and his administration, policies Nussbaum views as being destructive to the democratic and humanistic goals that make the United States the unique and desirable political experiment it purports to be (pp. 137–138).

When taken as a whole, *Not for Profit* offers an argument that is consistent with, but not entirely novel to, scholars and practitioners working within the realm of democratic education. It offers an edifying, and somewhat idiosyncratic, approach to addressing the challenges and principles of democratic education, most of which are already familiar to the readers of this journal. In this respect, it is tempting to conclude that this book falls short of adding anything that is genuinely new or illuminating to the conversation; however, it is worth noting that we probably are not Nussbaum’s intended audience. Given the scope and range of contemporary examples, scholarly arguments, and social and educational principles raised within this work, it appears as though Nussbaum is working on the defensive, offering justifications for her claims on as many fronts as she can muster in anticipation of readers who are skeptical about her arguments. For this reason, it is possible to imagine a number of different groups for whom this book has been written. One might conclude that *Not for Profit* is aimed at school administrators and educational policymakers who have the power to change the status quo but are currently reluctant to do so, whether that is because they do not comprehend the implications of their actions or because they lack an understanding of what other possibilities for teaching and learning can (and should) exist. It is also possible to imagine that Nussbaum wrote this work with her university colleagues, situated in the humanities and the arts, in mind, individuals whose life work resonates with her claims but who struggle to articulate the profound value of their educational endeavors in terms that adequately respond to the hostile climate in which they currently find themselves operating. The gestures made throughout the book to draw connections to educational examples occurring outside of the United States also suggest that Nussbaum has international readers in mind, perhaps those who have a vague affinity for the kind of education described in this text but need help fitting it within a broader context that is relevant to their society’s needs and goals. In keeping with the principle of democratic citizenship present throughout this book, Nussbaum’s final audience for this work could be average citizens, members of our population who recognize the central role education plays in the cultivation and preparation of future citizens and who feel a sense of responsibility toward ensuring that the education students receive sufficiently serves the nature and purposes of our society, even if they are not quite sure of what that should entail.

If any of these potential audiences attend to this work seriously, they are sure to learn a great deal and hopefully be inspired to contribute to the mounting critique of the destructive trends that are supported by the seemingly blind opportunism and profit-driven greed that characterize the current political, economic, and educational landscape. Such an outcome would be in accordance

with Nussbaum's objective in writing this work, since she invites her readers to join her in recognizing the urgency that prompted this "manifesto" (p. 121) when she notes:

If it should turn out that things are less bad than I believe them to be, we should not breathe a sigh of relief; we should do exactly what we would if we believed things were pretty bleak. We should redouble our commitment to the parts of education that keep democracy vital. Even if it should turn out that they are not as profoundly threatened as I believe them to be, they are clearly vulnerable and under great pressure

in an era of economic globalization. (p. 122)

And so, with a comment such as this, scholars already working to defend the principles and practices of democratic, humanistic education should be reminded that we can use as many allies as we can find, not only to prevent things from getting any worse but to shore up the valuable and necessary aspects of democratic education that are weakened and endangered by the era in which we live.