The Future of the Humanities in an Age of Technics

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We propose that the Copeland Colloquium take as its theme for 2011-2012 the question of the future of humanistic studies under conditions where scientific and technical reasoning seem to have rendered extraneous many of the basic questions that have traditionally fallen under the purview of the liberal arts.

For the last three years an ad hoc group of faculty has been discussing the future of the humanities. That group has been reading together, thinking about new ways of teaching, imagining ways to stimulate and nurture humanities scholarship. We want to focus and extend that work by organizing and hosting the Copeland Colloquium.

What does it mean to be a human being? What is human nature? What does it mean to live the good or flourishing life? How do humans make and find meaning, imagine new worlds, build understandings across time and place? These, we feel, are the basic questions of the humanities. Our goal is to take stock of these questions—to ask how they have been framed in the past, to bring to light the assumptions that frame and govern their enunciation in the present, and to ask how they should be addressed under conditions that we are proposing to call an “age of technics.” These issues animate thinking in various disciplines, from philosophy to literature, from history to cultural studies. We will use the Copeland to bring to the College scholars who work in the humanities but who also think in capacious ways beyond their disciplines.

When we speak about “technics” we do not mean the empirical practice of “science and technology.” We instead refer to a general style of “instrumental reasoning” that not only prioritizes means over the ends, but also sometimes even regards the means as ends in themselves. This style of reasoning emphasizes efficiency and effectiveness, practicality and usefulness, and activity and applicability. It also calls into question inquiry into the validity, desirability, or possibility of competing ends. Above all, this style of reasoning abandons the sort of open-ended questions that are characteristic of a liberal arts education—questions that are worth pursuing not as means to some other end, but that are ends unto themselves, questions that are worth pursuing for their own sake.
It follows from this understanding of “technics” that we do not have a definite, discrete, or settled historical period in mind when we refer to an “age.” To the contrary, we are interested in clarifying the debate over its origins, basis, and extension. What precisely are the origins of “technics”? Is it synonymous with Western metaphysics, as Martin Heidegger argues? With humanity itself, as Bernard Stiegler proposes? Or, as theorists ranging from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer to James Scott argue, does instrumental reason only come into being as a dominant form under conditions of modern industrial capitalism? If, as Partha Chatterjee claims, the West’s postcolonial domination is grounded on the “epistemic privilege” entailed in Western science’s claim to the “technical” mastery of nature, what then is the place and function of “technics” in globalization?

We wish to pose a similar set of historical, political, and philosophical questions about the humanities. What, exactly, do we mean by the humanities? Under what conditions did it come into being? What set or sets of historical forces permitted it to maintain itself at various moments and under different conditions? In what terms has the question of the “future of the humanities” been posed in the past? How, if at all, is the predicament of the humanities today different from the predicament of the humanities (say) a century ago? These historical, political, and philosophical questions, we feel, are the essential preconditions for any adequate reflection upon the future of the humanities today.

Absent a serious and sustained consideration of these questions we would be compelled to relate to recent events in the constrained, repetitive, wearily, and even narcistic rhetoric of crisis. Why is it, exactly, that the question of the “future of the humanities” is so seldom posed without a tone of panic, alarm, crisis, or even what Freud would call “persecutory anxiety”? Is it because the humanities are today—as opposed to some moment of calm and stability in the past—truly in crisis? Or would it be more precise to classify as a consoling illusion the notion that there was once a golden age in which the humanities were not in some sort of “crisis”? If so, how then do we think about the compulsory and formulaic character of the notion of “the humanities in crisis”? Is there not a sense in which the rhetoric of crisis is a silent but constitutive part of the tradition of humanistic study so many of us today claim to inherit and practice? How might the rhetoric of crisis limit or constrain our ability actually to pose the question of the future of the humanities in a probing manner?

That we invite reflections on these questions does not, of course, imply that we are uninterested in the predicament of the humanities today. To the contrary, our proposal is spurred in part by our concern over the place and function of the humanities in contemporary higher education, particularly its relation to the life sciences. As Louis Menand has pointed out, “[t]he most important intellectual development in the academy in the twenty-first century has to do with the relationship between the life sciences—particularly neurobiology, genetics, and psychology—to fields outside the natural sciences, such as philosophy, economics, and literary studies.” It would be imprecise to say that recent developments in the life sciences—e.g., the mapping of the human genome—undercut the necessity or validity of humanistic questioning, and indeed few scientists would suggest as much. It would be more precise to say that these developments risk enucleating humanistic questioning; although the field of bioethics appears to affirm humanistic inquiry, certain versions of bioethics seem to affirm the basic questions of the humanities only
conditionally, no longer as an end unto themselves, but simply as a way of increasing the felicity
of biomedical theory and practice.

In response to these challenges, our assumption in proposing this colloquium is that the
basic questions of humanistic studies are, in an age of technics, neither useless nor luxurious, but
more indispensable and central than ever. As some of our most insightful scientists have
recognized, the new powers and capacities that advanced science and technology has put at our
disposal have not suspended the fundamental problems of the humanities; to the contrary, they
have intensified them to an almost intolerable degree. Debates over abortion and euthanasia,
about the beginning and end of life, not to mention the emergence of techniques of genetic
engineering and human cloning, like the development of nuclear weaponry a generation ago,
have placed the basic questions of human existence at the very center of public discourse in the
U.S. These debates are paradoxical in a way that is, we believe, symptomatic of the predicament
of the humanities today. At the very moment that colleges and universities have been tempted to
abandon the classic problems of the humanities, those same problems have reappeared in the
very world to which colleges and universities wish to remain relevant: spurred by new
developments in science and technology, the question of the fundamental meaning and limit of
human existence is today the core of an all-consuming public debate. Humanistic questions are
not then merely “relevant” to these debates; they are rather the inexhaustible wellspring of, if not
also the chief stake in, the debate itself.

This colloquium will invite applications from scholars who understand the current
dominance of technics to be a chance, opportunity, or occasion to repeat anew the basic
questions of the liberal arts. How, if at all, has the meaning of humanity changed in the technical
age? Under conditions where we can alter at will our basic genetic code, what is the future (as
Jürgen Habermas has asked) of human nature? Is there not a sense today in which biology is
today a destiny that we can choose? If so, on what basis do we choose it? With reference to what
concepts of the good and flourishing life?

We will use the 2011-2012 Copeland Colloquium to engage the College in a year
long effort to advance understanding of the past, present, and future of the questions that are at
the core both of humanistic scholarship and our public life. We will reach out to colleagues
across the campus and to students in producing a colloquy that we believe will be important both
at Amherst and for the world of higher education.

Program

In the 2011-12 Copeland Colloquium, we would like to host four fellows. They might
include philosophers, historians, artists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, literary
and cultural theorists, and others interested in the practices, justifications, and representations of
the humanities. Some fellows will be nominated by us (such as, perhaps, Roger Berkowitz, ’90),
some will be identified by other members of the Amherst Faculty. In addition we will advertise
nationally and internationally.
During the year each fellow would give at least one public lecture, which we would publish online in the form of a working paper. We would invite them to speak in our classes, arrange for them to offer workshops in various departments, work with them to organize a “teach in” on the future of the humanities. They would play a crucial role in our ongoing conversation about the humanities at Amherst. They would, in addition, help us organize and host a one-day colloquium on our theme to which we would invite three additional scholars from outside Amherst, again from a variety of disciplines.

We would also like to continue the Copeland practice of holding regular lunches with the fellows, advertising and inviting interested students and colleagues to join us to talk generally with our fellows but also to engage in discussion about some concrete and topical issue related to our theme. At these lunches fellows would present their work, we would share our work, and we would read and discuss articles/essays of common interest.