

Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities
Research Centre for Human Values

The Humanities and Public Discourse

Ballroom, Lobby level, Hyatt Shatin, CUHK

1 November 2011

- 10.00 – 10.05** Welcome: **Professor Kam Louie, President, Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities**
- 10.05 – 10.20** Introduction: **Professor David Parker, Director of the Research Centre For Human Values: *Circling the terrain: recent writing on the humanities as a public benefit***
Surveys the approaches of some recent essays on the public value of the humanities and attempts to map some patterns in them.
- 10.20 - 11.00** **Professor Paisley Livingston, Chair Professor of Philosophy, Lingnan University: *On not begging the question: arguing for the public value of the humanities***
Scholars wishing to argue for the public value of humanistic teaching and research face a dilemma: preach to the converted, or run the risk of begging the question in an attempt to sway those who do not already accept key premises on which an otherwise sound argument might be based. Visiting both horns of this dilemma, I discuss the pragmatics of question-begging and introduce examples of good and bad arguments on our topic. More specifically, I'll contrast claims made by Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* with Harry Brighouse's main claims about the values of education.
- 11.00 –11.30** **Coffee break**
- 11.30 – 12.10** **Professor Robert Gibbs, Director of the Jackman Institute for the Humanities, University of Toronto: *Humanities disagree***
The humanities are not as much disagreeing with some political agenda, as they are a set of methods for exploring multiple viewpoints and interpretations. We cultivate questioning and learn how to see complexity and how to foster civil disagreement. These goals contribute to public discourse itself, by showing that civil society harbors disagreements and builds valuable human relationships through cultivated disagreement. We offer an alternative to reductive analysis of winners and losers, profits and debts—and can articulate how disagreement is a vital part of complex society.

12.10 – 12.50 Professor Anthony Cascardi, Dean of Arts and Humanities, UC Berkeley: *The humanities: an unfinished project.*

The talk will center on the challenges we face in crafting educational policy, in articulating educational values, and in establishing meaningful connections with the public world in light of certain underlying philosophical beliefs. Among those underlying beliefs is that we, as human beings, are ourselves unfinished creatures.

12.50 – 2.30 Lunch break

2.30 – 3.10 Professor Martha P.Y. Cheung, Chair Professor of Translation, Hong Kong Baptist University

Epistemicide? or, validating the personal, the experiential and the introspective as material for the production of (alternative?) knowledge

Epistemicide is a term coined by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa and borrowed by the translation studies scholar Karen Bennett to refer to the spread, since the 17th century, of a type of English academic discourse which is based on the rationalist/scientific paradigm and which has gradually led to what Bennett calls “the systematic destruction of rival forms of knowledge” in most of the English-speaking academic world. The presentation asks whether epistemicide is to be dismissed as an alarmist vision or whether it is a powerful encapsulation of a pernicious state caused by a general epistemological bias against the personal, the experiential and the introspective. Also asked is the question – at once more inward-looking and more self-critical – of whether epistemicide has not been inflicted by the self-initiated attempts of non-science disciplines to aspire towards the condition of science. In view of the increasingly bleak outlook of the global economy, and the dominance of the ethos of resource management and measurable outcomes, how will the humanities deal with the threat of epistemicide this time?

3.10-3.50 Professor Huang Chu-Ren, Dean of Humanities, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University: *Applied humanities: oxymoron or tautology*

One of the often heard criticisms of the humanities is that we are not applied enough, and that we cannot use what we study to improve our society or the human condition in general. This is the context in which scholars in the humanities are made to defend themselves and their *raison d'être*. In this context, it seems that “applied humanities” is an oxymoron and any attempt to justify our existence in the new politico-financial environment of new academia will fail. On the other hand, we can be reminded that that all applications are human-oriented, as applications are designed to meet the needs of human beings and the success of an application depends on how well it serves human needs. In this perspective, humanities as a discipline exploring questions about the why’s and how’s of human beings, is applied by its nature; and “applied humanities” is a tautology. I aim to strike a balance and describe a few

possibilities where the esoteric pursuits of the humanities can find synergy with application to contribute to the betterment of humanity.

3.50 – 4.20 Coffee break

4.20 – 5.00 **Professor Susan Manning, Director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh: *Edinburgh and "English literature," 1762 –2012: academic and civic contexts***
2012 marks the 250th anniversary of the establishment of English Literature as an academic subject. In 1762 the Rev. Hugh Blair became the first incumbent of the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh. Blair had been giving popular lectures on literary history, style and critical analysis under this title to an audience of students and townspeople for several years. The University's decision to make these part of the curriculum was a landmark in the history of a discipline that has become one of the most popular subjects for undergraduate study. As Blair himself put it in his first lecture, 'Whether the influence of the speaker, or the entertainment of the hearer, be consulted; whether utility or pleasure be the principal aim on view; we are prompted by the strongest motives to study how we may communicate our thoughts to one another with most advantage.' It was not an uncontested claim: the stakes were high then, and they remain so now. My talk will consider the implications of some historic civic contexts for the academic study of the humanities, for contemporary debates about their 'value' to society and the national economy.

5.00 – 5.40 **Professor David Faure, Wei Lun Professor of History, CUHK**
Who wants Chinese History? Take it out of the school curriculum?
Whether Chinese History should be taught in the high schools of Hong Kong is currently a highly controversial issue. It raises many questions, such as what students should be taught History for, why over time it has fallen out of favour with students, why despite its falling out of favour in the schools there is no shortage of audience for history-based television programmes, how students should be examined, and what employers want from high school education. I shall argue that whether History, or more specifically, Chinese History, should be taught in school and whether people are interested in History are two separate questions, but when History isn't taught in schools, those two questions will come together.