

## Review

**Martha C. Nussbaum**

### ***Not For Profit. Why Democracy Needs The Humanities***

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<http://www.law.uchicago.edu/faculty/nussbaum>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha\\_Nussbaum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Nussbaum)

[http://www.uchicago.edu/features/20100628\\_nussbaum.shtml](http://www.uchicago.edu/features/20100628_nussbaum.shtml)

In this book Nussbaum makes a strong case for the importance of the liberal arts in education. If the economic pressure of globalization is not kept under control, the end result might be an erosion of our democracies. The book is more a manifesto (178 pages) and not an empirical study. Quantitative data have been omitted.

#### **Chapter I. Silent Crisis**

The motivation for Nussbaum to write this book lies in the world wide crisis “of massive proportions” that Nussbaum sees as damaging for the future of democracy.

While putting an accent on national profits, governments are neglecting the teaching of skills that citizens need to participate in democracy. The humanities and the arts are being cut away. And what we fail to teach pupils is respect and concern for other citizens in a democracy; to think critically, to approach world problems as world citizens. In short: we should ‘produce’ an inclusive type of citizenship instead of educating our children for profit making.

#### **Chapter II. Education for Profit, Education for Democracy**

Nussbaum contradicts the old development model that holds that economic growth will deliver democracy. Her line of thinking is education not as passive absorption of facts and traditions, but to challenge the mind of pupils “to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical”(18).

And since there is world wide more interest in economic growth, education programs in arts and the humanities are cut so that technical aspects get more attention. In order to participate in democracy Nussbaum prefers among others the following abilities for children (25,26):

- To think about political issues
- Recognize equal rights for other people
- Have concern for the lives of others
- Judge political leaders critically
- See the own nation as part of the world

#### **Chapter III. Educating Citizens: The Moral (and Anti-Moral) Emotions**

In this chapter Nussbaum stresses the education of children to be critical and realize the influence of their surrounding (among others peer groups). She remarks that all societies create in- and out-groups; groups that are stigmatized. She notices this also in international politics. The experiments of Milgram (authoritarian figures take responsibility for punishing) illustrate the importance of learning independent critical thinking. The lessons that Nussbaum draws for a healthy democracy are among others (45, 46):

- Students should see the world from the viewpoint of other people
- Teach attitudes that weakness is not shameful and the need for others not unmanly
- Develop the capacity for genuine concern for others
- Fight the thinking to see minorities as ‘lower’
- Promote critical thinking and the raising of a dissenting voice

#### **Chapter IV. Socratic Pedagogy: The Importance of Argument**

In order to promote an unauthoritarian, respectful education Nussbaum suggests the Socratic Pedagogy. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, North America and India thinkers argued against ‘rote learning’ and started experimenting with active and critical participation of children. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Bronson Alcott, Horace Mann, and John Dewey) “Instruction always took the form of questions rather than assertions” (62).

Most influential in this respect was John Dewey because of the connection he made between the Socratic education and democratic citizenship. His goal was the ‘production’ of active democratic citizens. He fought against passivity in education. Pupils should



learn the skills of citizenship. Rabindranath Tagore developed a similar approach in India.

Nussbaum concludes: "Democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting, skills that we all badly need to keep democracies vital, respectful, and accountable". (77)

### **Chapter V. Citizens of the World**

In this chapter the author is pleading for an education of world citizenship. Students should see themselves as members of a heterogeneous society, a heterogeneous world and to understand the history and culture of the group that inhabit it. Young people need to understand how the global economy works, and need to understand the many religions in the world. Important in this respect is that all pupils (in the US) should learn at least one foreign language.

### **Chapter VI. Cultivating Imagination: Literature and the Arts**

Nussbaum's thesis in this chapter is that citizens cannot understand the world by factual knowledge alone. What is also needed is imagination: to see oneself in the shoes of another person. Literature and arts play a key role in acquiring this competence according to Nussbaum. To implement that kind of education it is recommended to change teacher training in the US.

### **Chapter VIII. Democratic Education on the Ropes**

The teaching that Nussbaum proposes is threatened in the US. It costs extra because of small classes, and extra time to discuss and write. The current situation of the economy and finances in the US and elsewhere is pressuring more for economic growth and what education can contribute to that end. As a consequence "Training for citizenship is doing poorly in every nation in the most crucial years of children's lives" (133). This development in the US and in Europe has to do with the tendency to favour testing. And critical thinking and imagining as well as skills for world citizenship are not testable. Exam results ('teaching to the test') have top priority in the (US) educational system. Nussbaum expects president Obama to bring his 'change' slogan in practice. But she has not heard much from him so far. She fears that schools that deliver useful profit-makers instead of thoughtful, critical citizens commit a 'suicide of the soul' (142)

### **Comments**

*Not For Profit* is a highly relevant manifest that warns for the erosion of our democracies. Although the diagnosis of education is very much related to the developments in the USA, similar signs are visible in European countries. Nussbaum's remark about the learning of several languages is typical for the US, where bilingualism is infrequent.

Nussbaum rightly sees the role of education in transferring knowledge, attitudes and skills for participation in democracy as vital. What remains underexposed in her book are the influence of family, peer groups, the neighbourhood, and the media. The foundation for democratic participation should be laid in the early childhood years in the family. The role of schools is important, but research shows that the influence of peer groups and media is great.

It is quite understandable that in a brief manifest not every aspect of Nussbaum's arguments can be underpinned. Since the author makes no distinction between types of secondary schools, it remains to be seen if the suggested literature and arts lessons can be applied in classes of lower vocational schools where the accent is much more on technical training for jobs.

Education for democracy may be in crisis, but that democracy itself is also in crisis is not discussed. See the survey results with respect to the trust of citizens in politics and politicians. Notice the voting behaviour of citizens: the rise of the Tea Party movement in the US and populist movements in Europe and the crisis of several established political parties in some EU-countries.

The risk is real that the less 'hard' subjects, which may be seen (by political decision-makers, but also by pupils and parents) as less relevant for the economy, will lose, or as Nussbaum expects, are cut. However, Nussbaum's presupposition that the humanities contribute little to economic growth is doubtful. On the contrary, creativity, critical thinking and a broad understanding of the world are vital for economic growth.

The development that Nussbaum signals is realistic, also in Europe where because of the economic crisis drastic budget reductions are in progress. Education and culture will not remain out of range. Nussbaum's *Not For Profit* is important for everyone who cares for this world. It is recommended reading for teacher trainers and future teachers. Her publication is an alarm signal, although several EU-countries still have subjects like citizenship (UK), social studies (NL), civic education (politische Bildung) (DE) in the school curricula. In addition to the transfer of knowledge about the functioning of society and democracy, values, attitudes and skills for democratic citizenship are taught there.

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