Glenn C. Altschuler, Contributor Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies and Dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions at Cornell University

W(h)ither the Humanities?

06/27/2017 07:30 am ET


Although they make lots of mistakes, economists are in demand. By contrast, the humanities are in deep trouble. In 2014, President Obama opined that folks can make “a lot more with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” A year later, Jeb Bush acknowledged that liberal arts is “a great thing,” only to remind potential philosophy majors to “realize you’re going to be working at Chick fil-A.”

More and more college students seem to agree. In the late 1960s, almost twenty percent of recipients of bachelor’s degrees majored in a humanities discipline; in 2010, the figure was 8 percent. Little wonder that many taxpayers and state legislators have concluded that philosophy, literature, linguistics, history, art history, anthropology, and gender studies are luxuries we can no longer afford.

In Cents and Sensibility, Gary Morson, a professor of Slavic languages and literature at Northwestern University, and Morton Schapiro, a professor of economics and the president of Northwestern, maintain that humanistic disciplines contribute essential ingredients (the role of contingency and context and the limitations of abstract one-size-fits-all models) to studies of human behavior and the complex challenges of our time. In this book, Morson and Schapiro identify concrete ways in which economists studying higher education, the family, and the development of poor countries can benefit from three fundamental humanistic capabilities: “an appreciation of people as inherently cultural; stories as an essential form of explanation; and ethics in all its irreducible complexity.”

Cents and Sensibility offers one argument, among many, on behalf of the humanities. Their argument is often, but not always persuasive. That said, the authors’ call for a dialogue between economists and humanists is welcome. Their indictment of humanists for being “spectacularly inept” and “clueless” in making the case for their disciplines is urgently necessary. As is their claim that quantitative rigor and focus on policy can – and should – be supplemented with “the empathy, judgment and wisdom that defines the humanities at their best.”

The authors use fresh and fascinating examples to bolster the oft-repeated claim that ethical considerations should be incorporated into the analysis of economists and policy makers. To bolster the standing of their institutions in the highly influential national rankings of colleges and institutions, Morson and Schapiro point out, some administrators cross ethical lines. To increase
the “yield” (the percentage of accepted students who matriculate), they reject excellent students who they have reason to believe will go elsewhere. They count students who send in a postcard expressing interest (but don’t submit essays and recommendations) as “applicants.” They ignore the standardized test scores of international students in English, but include scores in mathematics. They cook the books about the percentage of alumni who make an annual gift to their alma mater. Worst of all, Morson and Schapiro report that rating agencies do not fact-check the data provided by colleges and universities.

*Cents and Sensibility* also documents the failure of rational choice and behavioral economists and psychologists to consider the culture, traditions, and values of the people they are investigating. Although cultural evidence cannot be quantified, Morson and Schapiro show how it helps explain why such a small percentage of African-American students with high grade point averages and test scores do not attend selective colleges and universities (even when they are offered financial aid).

While acknowledging that income and family backgrounds are important variables in predicting decisions about marriage, divorce, and family planning, the authors make a compelling case that social and cultural context matters as well.

In important respects, *Cents and Sensibility* reminds us of the capaciousness of the humanities. A recent study, the authors reveal, found that readers of fiction did better on tests measuring empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence. One reason, Morson and Schapiro suggest, is that fiction, more than real life, connects inner states to outward behavior, and encourages “intimacy” between characters and readers.

In other ways, however, *Cents and Sensibility* provides a rather narrow view of the humanities. Although Morson and Schapiro put culture front and center, they barely mention the discipline of history. They limit their discussion of literature to realistic novels. They do not emphasize sufficiently the unique capacity of the humanities to teach students how to analyze texts, conduct research, and write clear and persuasive essays.

Despite these caveats, *Cents and Sensibility* sends a powerful – and timely – message. The humanities, the authors conclude, “if humanists will only believe in them, have a critical role to play in education,” nurturing in students of all ages truths about human beings other disciplines have not attained, a respect for diverse points of view, culture, and ethics, and “an escape from the prison house of self, limitations of time and place.”

The humanities are in danger. Americans inside and outside the academy need to act before it’s too late.