

What Are We Fighting For? Humanities and the Legacy of Exclusion

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In her novel *Memories of a Pure Spring*, Vietnamese novelist Duong Thu Huong tells of a group of actors and artists in postwar Vietnam, living their lives after the war with the US on the one hand, and the camps of re-education on the other, camps that sent many thousands of Vietnamese to spend months or years under subhuman conditions, in order to learn how to live as socialists. Duong Thu Huong, one of the most prominent and certainly one of the most brilliant authors of the post-war generation in Vietnam, explores all aspects of life in a country that has suffered one of the bloodiest and most brutal wars in recent history, in this work, as well as in her famous breakthrough, *Novel without a name*. It took me a long time, in reading her novels, to note that she never depicts the presence of Americans, she barely even mentions them; in fact, it was only when she did that I discovered this omission, which of course corresponds to the lack of believable images of the Vietnamese in most American films and books that have been released. However, in Huong's novel, the refusal to mention the Americans carries a weight; it is loaded with a meaning that is missing in the American failure to reckon with the Other. The silence of the Vietnamese novel is powerful; the silence of the American film is cynical. A Vietnamese author has no obligation to depict Americans, not even in writing about the war. An American, however, does. Why, then, is this so difficult?

The state of postcolonialism is often described as an eruption of the Other in Western culture, in the face of which the West is trying to protect itself through borders and limits. In reality though it is not the relation to the Other that is problematic. It is the relation to one's own.

As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, the postcolonial condition can above all be defined through the erection of borders that, on the African continent primarily, but also in Asia, must be considered a form of allegories; these borders are only fictional, they have been drawn straight on a

map without any consideration to cultures, languages or people. Europeans have forcefully transposed their own order, and their own need of borders on cultures where such a need has not existed beforehand. Of course the reason for this is political and economic, caused by the need for economic power and control. But at the same time the postcolonial condition means that the Europeans themselves and the West on the whole, has had to submit to such a fictionalized form of setting borders. The nationalism of the 19th century has brought with it profound changes not only on the political map but also in the interiority of the life of the European. It has meant that the development of the Europeans themselves, from having been a people submitted to states, have become a people submitted to nations. This means, I personally think, that the nation became an object, directing the desire of the European. The nation is not just a state or a function, and it is not just a contract or an agreement. The nation is an object forming a fantasmatic undercurrent from the 19th century and onwards, well into the contemporary consciousness of today.

The humanities themselves have an uneasy relation to this object. Although they claim independence from political or economic interest, many disciplines are blind to their own contingent history and creation in close relation to nation building or social engineering: art history, literary history, history, philosophy etcetera all share this blindness to a greater or lesser extent. It is no coincidence that the humanities in Sweden are so weak in recruiting students and scholars from other ethnic origins to the field. If the humanities are to be vitalized, the imaginary universe created around this elusive object of the nation must be broken down — not just in the name of political or ethical reason, but rather because the humanities themselves need to question their own *raison d'être*, and understand the historical premises of their function. As it is now, a lot of work in the humanities is dedicated to the reproduction of certain ideological presumptions which started with the service of the discipline in the name of the nation. The humanities have, historically, been deft at excluding and selecting so that only a certain kind of knowledge has been produced. As it were, the academy, with its hierarchies and its old patriarchal system of promoting the individual “genius”, is still pursuing a pattern of exclusion and selection it appears to have difficulties breaking away from.

It is with this background in mind that I would like to say something about a possible future for the humanities. The debate over the humanities seems to have produced two camps: on the one hand, there are those who argue that the humanities might well attempt to make themselves useful in a

way that they have not needed to in the tradition of the academy. Humanists should be working across the borders of the fields of the social sciences and the natural sciences, they should cooperate with the arts and the world of business in order to strengthen not only society with their own capacity, but also their own place within society. On the other hand, there are those siding with the argument that the humanities should be valued for their own sake; that humanists can never be burdened with the demand that their work should be useful in the derogatory sense of the world, neither in relation to other fields nor in society. From this point of view, the use of the humanities lies in their independence in relation to economic or social interest. We need the humanities because of their unconditioned search for something true and authentic concerning the human condition.

However, I would like to question the presumption that there is such a thing as a study that is free and independent, or that it is possible to pursue the production of knowledge beyond economic or political interests. If the humanities is supposedly about humans and their artefacts, as is often claimed, does it not rely on a definition of “the human”, which, in itself, is ideological and thereby also prone to be used by economic and political interests?

Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition* as well as in her book on totalitarianism, has shown that humanity can never be essentialized. We can, however, talk about what is not human, which, at a certain moment in time, was life outside of the state or nation, or life of the refugee:

...the calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality of the law and freedom of opinion/.../ but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them.¹

Even a slave has a place in society; the slave therefore surpasses the condition of the refugee, who on the contrary represents “the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.”² The condition of the refugee has proven that the assumption that human rights have the capacity to protect humans in an abstract state as “human” is wrong: “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.”³ What is lost by the ex-

¹ Arendt Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: Harvest, 1973, p 295-296

² Arendt 1973, p 297.

³ Arendt 1973, p 299.

cluded is not primarily the freedom offered by the state of sovereignty. The threat of exclusion outside of a state brings with it a loss of humanity:

If a human being loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and the inalienable rights of man, fall in to exactly the same situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided. In this case the opposite is actually true. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man.⁴

Displaced to a position outside of the state or nation, man loses not only his rights but also his humanity. Loss of humanity is not something that takes place despite of the invention of human rights; the very notion of a human being deprived of humanity is something that human rights has helped produce. In the Germany of the 30s the Jewish population was deprived of citizenship so that it was also possible to haunt and annihilate them. People deprived of citizenship, declared as pariahs to the nation, were exposed, beyond their identity as citizens, as “naked”, as human beings that were not fully recognized as such. Ideologies of nationalism, in conjunction with what is to be valued as human, have reduced the human who is “just” life to naked life, to ethnic or biological difference: the Jew is just a Jew, the black man is just a black man, and a woman is just a woman. If modern biopolitics aims to control human life, this is a consequence of the idea of “the human” displacing both the public space and plurality as the focus of politics.

Now the question is, to what extent do the humanities include and exclude through their very dependence on the nation, just as in the way that Arendt describes the human rights as the end result of an exclusionary power? How powerful is the capacity of the humanities to make visible or invisible, to erase or create? If the humanities are to revitalize themselves, and to make themselves relevant for the future, one factor must be to shred the legacy of nation building. In the end, such riddance will also undermine the very essentializing of “the human” which in itself is a historical artefact.

The humanities have a history that could be told through a variety of versions in all the countries of modern Europe, a history about national academies in the 18th century, about Geists and spirits in the 19th century, about a will to discover the language and the culture of one’s own nation in the 20th century and a will to protect the language and culture of one’s own nation in the era of globalization. However, if we take a discipline such as

⁴ Arendt 1973, p 300.

literature, for instance, there is another aspect of its becoming that may be tied to a certain community, and that community is not necessarily to be submitted to the nation. Literature, as well as art, history and so on, takes part in the way we perceive ourselves, not just as individuals of a certain nation but as participants of a public space. It is in the context that literature becomes meaningful – as Habermas has shown in his history of the public space; it is through the very language used in discussing the intimate aspects of literature, in discussing emotions, relations and so on, that the public space in the modern sense has taken shape. Rather than being regarded as the heritage of a certain language or nation, the history of literature may well be regarded through the history of public spaces and the forms of mediation that belong to them.

Hannah Arendt, still to be counted as the most important philosopher of the public space, has idealized *polis* as a retrospective vision of political freedom. The most important aspect of public space however is its aspect of plurality; the very existence of public space makes possible the capacity to think and act in the place of the Other. This is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. The useful intellectual or artistic product has not arisen as a reflection over the self. It arises as a consequence of a dialectics through the self and the community to which the self is directed. In this way, judgment, thinking, acting, creating and writing will be dependent on public space. Our thought cannot direct itself. It is the expected communication with others that makes us think.

With this in mind, I think we have to re-think the foundation of the humanities, and attempt to replace that elusive object of the nation as the object directing the desire of the scholar, with that of the public space. Public space is already present in our way of thinking and acting, and public space is not the same as the nation. As famously indicated in *The Human Condition*, “the polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.”⁵ But in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we are shown that there are certain conditions under which public space is foreclosed. The condition of the refugee, or enforced exile, is a symptom of

⁵ Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p 198.

such a foreclosure. In a world where the nation state has overtaken the responsibility for the rights of the individual, the refugee has become an exception that points to the great problem of modernity: how are we to define a community? When we discuss the future of the humanities I think this is the crucial question: where do we come from when we are speaking, and who are we addressing? What is the legacy of the community we belong to, and in what way does it limit our search for knowledge?

Personally, I think that the way forward for the humanities is in close relation to the arts. The arts are of a particular interest when it comes to creating spaces of participation that are public spaces, although of a different kind than those that we relate to political debates. Art is often created in assuming that we share a certain unspoken knowledge as members of a society in a certain time. Art, however, helps reformulate the conditions of such knowledge rather than reproduce them. One concrete example is the way in which many artists question or undermine national identity as a given in a community. Yinka Shonibare's dance show, about the murder of the Swedish King Gustav III in African clothes, for example, uses the idea of national identity, only to make it visible or undermine it as fictitious (thus could use the same freedom, and redress the presumptions concerning the expectations of the community towards which he is working. A great deal could be gained).

Today art and science are facing each other as two opposing fields. I think, however, that there is every reason to work towards a much closer relationship with the practice of the arts. The debate of the humanities has, for a long time, been concerned with its theories. In what way, however, are we to consider its practices? Research in the arts is not scholarship in the traditional sense, and challenges the academy in claiming to produce a knowledge that is not possible to verify or scrutinize in the same way as a piece of scholarship. Instead, it mirrors a process that can be both considered creating knowledge and a form that belongs to that knowledge. It is, then, examining the very process of creating knowledge. The humanities has everything to win by cooperating in this approach, working together with art institutes and artists of various kinds in discussing how practice and theory could be brought together. If we dare experiment with the way we produce knowledge as well as with the way we present it, it can only help to show that the humanities, in the end, are not conservative and fearful, but vital and flexible. I would also argue that the humanities, rather than reproducing the ideologies concerning the kind of national communities that lies at the root of their emergence, must look towards the kind of

communities that art is looking towards: communities shaped in and through various forms of public space. As Arendt has shown, public space is not the same as the state or the nation, it is a community arising and perhaps dying through other conditions. In making visible what we do, we submit to a completely different kind of test than the endless kind of scholarly scrutiny that is part of our work now. I would then argue that the humanities, rather than attempting to study a preconceived notion of what is human and the artefacts of humanity, and thereby taking part in the reproduction of the kinds of exclusions and limitations that such preconceived notions bring with them, must participate in the very creation of the human condition and human life, undermining any attempt to define “the human”. It is a creation and recreation that is endless.