

Does the Decline of the Humanities Track the Decline in Civil Society?

MARGARET FERGUSON, DAVID SIMPSON, ANDREA ROSS,
ANDREW MAJESKE



Figure 1: This picture was taken by NASJ Editor Andrew Majeske at approximately 7.30 pm on January 11, 2020 at the MLA Annual Convention in Seattle, Washington, 15 minutes into the session. The special panel was entitled "The Future of the Humanities" and included very prominent speakers.

*The following conversation took place on January 28, 2022 in Davis California between Margaret Ferguson, David Simpson, Andrea Ross and the interviewer, NASJ editor Andrew Majeske (AM). Margaret Ferguson (MF), Professor Emerita at UC Davis, is author of *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender and Empire in Early Modern England and France*, as well as other books and numerous articles. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, she is past president of the Modern Language Association, and she was co-editor for the 6th*

and most recent edition of the Norton Anthology of Poetry. Margie's husband, David Simpson (DS), Professor Emeritus at UC Davis, retired from there as G. B. Needham Endowed Chair in English. He also is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as a former Guggenheim Fellow, and is a past president of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association. He is author of many books, most recently of *States of Terror: History, Theory, Literature* (U of Chicago P 2019), and *Engaging Violence: Civility and the Reach of Literature*, forthcoming later this year from Stanford UP. Andrea Ross (AR) is the author of *Unnatural Selection: A Memoir of Adoption and Wilderness* and teaches in UC Davis' University Writing Program.

[Editorial Note: This conversation has been edited. The full version can be accessed [here](#).]

I

Andrew Majeske: Margie, I contacted you a while ago when I was contemplating a fairly narrow interview addressing the future of the humanities. This “conversation” with both you and David will be much more wide-ranging, but I suspect we will actually address that narrower topic from various directions. To get us started, I wanted to mention that you drew my attention to our local newspaper last week, in which your photo appeared at a voting rights demonstration, and that photo was in close proximity on the page to a letter to the editor I had published on a climate change topic. We all seem to be doing things to try to help address the situation in the world, in our country. But what ultimately are we aiming at? What are we progressing towards? I'm really struggling with the idea of progress right now. There's scientific progress leading towards controlling and harnessing nature. Many point towards some political and social progress, at least on the left, a progress that leads toward what I describe as the universally peaceful and prosperous society of free and equal people. Does that goal seem right to you?

Margaret Ferguson: I think one reason why I demurred at first is that I'm skeptical right now about the very idea of progress, although I would certainly agree with your general description of our political goal. To restate slightly, however, I dearly wish I knew how we could move peacefully toward a society in which all people were free, equal, and had the material support for a good life. In my

view, that would inevitably mean that there would be a much more equitable distribution than there is today of what some but not all of us perceive as a finite set of the material goods that we need to sustain our lives and those who come after us—as well as the other living creatures with which we share the planet. So long as a powerful fraction of the world’s human population chooses to see our material resources as potentially *infinite* and as including an imagined ability to expand our environment by colonizing other planets when we have spoiled or used up what this one supplies, we will continue to be governed by an ideology of progress that tolerates, indeed arguably thrives on, enormous inequities in material well-being among the peoples of the world as well as among the people who live in a given nation state, often without much political representation.

The flaw at the heart of what I see as the ideology of progress is dramatized in a film that David and I were recently watching called Wild River. Directed by Elia Kazan in 1960, the film centers on how the federally owned Tennessee Valley Authority—operated today, against Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s initial vision for utility companies serving the public good—as a private, for-profit company—fulfilled its plans to build a flood-controlling and hydro-electricity generating dam in a very poor region of Tennessee. The film shows most people accepting the government’s modest compensation for their homes and the argument that people will all be better off with the dam in place; but one old woman refuses to leave the island where she has lived all her life. The brash young TVA official (played by Montgomery Clift) eventually persuades the Black workers on the old woman’s island to leave for better paying jobs (the local white farmers are enraged by the liberal idea of a rise in wages). In the end, the old woman is forced to leave too, with her heartbreak—followed soon by death—sentimentally offset by Montgomery Clift’s romance with her granddaughter. The film suggests that there is a human cost to “progress” but offers no political counter to the inevitability of modernization. The TVA supported unionization and the use of fertilizers for better crop yields. In many ways, its ideas inspired those of the so-called Green Revolution that faculty members in the School of Agriculture at our home institution, University of California at Davis, helped to develop and also helped to export to Mexico and other places around the world during the 1960s. As someone who has talked to colleagues about some of the unintended but bad consequences of what looked like great progress in the use of nitrogen-based fertilizers, pesticides, and the replacement of traditional seeds and practices of crop rotation with high-

yield monocultures, I feel that experts in first-world countries are rightly debating how to go forward with more humility, and greater awareness of the earth's limited fresh water supplies, than many of the scientists associated with the Green Revolution displayed.

I think that questioning the idea of progress in the spheres of science and politics has been a large but necessary setback, in psychological terms, for liberals like me who were formed intellectually in the 1960s. Progressive politics depends on hope for productive improvement in the human condition. But maybe a better term for the experience of questioning the possibility of progress would be a necessary *reset*, that is, a recognition of the critical need for a kind of change that couldn't be encompassed by nineteenth-century or even mid and late twentieth-century notions of progress. We glimpsed the possibility of meaningful social change that would have brought a check to carbon-fuel greed when Al Gore ran for President, though it's important to remember that he didn't run as the environmentalist he later became. Nonetheless, there's no question that his and his party's policies on energy and social welfare would have been radically different from those of George W. Bush and his party. The fact that the outcome of that election was decided by a 5-4 vote of the Supreme Court continues to threaten my faith in political actions of the kind you began by mentioning, Andy. I'm sorry to be starting out on such a gloomy note.

David Simpson: Yes, I agree. Short-term disasters and long-term disasters seem to be the choice we have, and it's not necessarily one or the other. The short-term disaster is the imminent loss of democracy. And the long-term disaster is the death of the planet, or at least the human part of it. And I think the academy [the higher-education community] is coping in its traditionally thoughtful way with both. I mean it. Although I think, funnily enough, the long-term is easier to command intellectually than the short-term. I've puzzled long and hard about what makes Donald Trump viable and I still don't have an answer. I've read a lot about it by people who think they have an answer, but I'm not convinced by them either. Something is going on that I don't understand. And I find that very threatening. As an analytical person and a professional intellectual, it's my job to know these things. I don't, and I find this very scary. Though it doesn't make me lose faith in teaching and writing, because I think in some ways what we do becomes more important as more and more information goes around the educational system rather than through it. It is not helpful to look at institutions like the university as only and always simple replicators of dominant ideologies, which a certain subsection of leftists thought that universities were doing. We

who teach and write can still offer a plausible alternative to those ideologies, and I think that's got to be really worked, worked over and cherished and preserved and developed. We give the kind of information that isn't given by social media, by Facebook and Twitter, and the radio talk shows so many people listen to...

MF: They have such outsized power...

DS: And I think, insofar as education can do anything, it's probably being done. The concern is that the schooling system isn't enough. And that's what's depressing to me.

MF: I think we can still model slow reading, slow thinking, and, in that sense, counter the kind of bilious, quick response typical of some social media and talk show exchanges. I don't know how your son is dealing with this, Andy, but my twin daughters already seem to be skeptical about Twitter, and Instagram, partly because they don't have time to be curating their personas in the way that they did as teenagers. They're now in their mid-20s. But I feel that the kinds of things that I want to teach my students, and continue to teach former students and others even in retirement, include strategies for communicating about our modes of thinking as citizens, as members of a body politic who should be able to discuss issues of basic concern to us all such as our rights to vote, to have housing, to have enough to eat, and to have access to healthcare. And I think that despite my very great dismay about the phenomenon of Trump and his continuing popularity, and about the citizens and legislators who seem to believe that the Biden victory was a fraud despite the many court cases that said it was not. Nonetheless, there were more people who exercised their right to vote in Georgia in 2020 than there ever had been before: Secretary of State Brian Kemp, who earned Trump's ire for not overturning the state's election results, announced that Georgia "set an all-time record in number of votes cast" with over 4 million votes. So even as I fear that Republican efforts to maintain their power as a minority party may succeed, by their new state laws designed to narrow the franchise, I still have hopes, and am willing to work for, grass roots groups that attempt to register new voters. In 2020, I spent a good deal of time making calls for groups inspired by Stacy Abrams' attempts to contact people of color who want to vote but may have been dropped from the rolls. But how I correlate what I do as an individual political activist with what I do as a member of an academic institution is a puzzle.

AM: Can I follow up on a couple of things? I am going to jump around a bit, but so much is implied in what you were saying. The first is, what to teach and how, in this moment when we seem to be moving in the direction of plural truths, and where each person in some sense defines truth for themselves, and also decides for themselves how to be and become authentic as an individual. I'm doing a deep dive into Hannah Arendt right now, and in her view you enter the public space and debate it out, each person defending and advocating for their own viewpoint. It's going to be messy, she acknowledges, but get used to it. You can't and shouldn't expect clean solutions in liberal democracy. But I just don't see Arendt's suggested way of proceeding working in the age of social media.

Switching our focus somewhat, is the democracy we are advocating for, and trying to defend, ultimately reliant upon capitalism for its survival? Liberal democracy certainly seems to have grown up together with capitalism, and something about a kind of growth, of progress of this sort, is necessary for both. And if climate change is going to be handled, you can't act along the lines of capitalism as it has developed in its primary form, the answer is not in the direction of continuing to grow, in whatever sense.

DS: Well, the deliberative democracy tradition, which has been alive and well for 30 or 40 years in American political science, has certainly taken a knock. I mean the idea that a few people talking together and articulating their differences, and learning to care for one another, despite the differences, is not really working. Margie, what was the name of that project that we saw featured on *60 Minutes*?

MF: "One Small Step."

DS: Yes, that's it.

MF: It's very germane to your new book on civility.

DS: The man who started Story Corps, which produces the "One Small Step" exchanges, all of which have been archived in the Library of Congress, and a few were turned into videos, is David Isay, and his idea was to get people to talk to one another from different class backgrounds, people who have different political convictions. But in order to make that work, and make it a positive experience, first of all, he made people apply for it. Then he vetted them, and then he

made them agree they wouldn't talk about politics. How could you not get along if you talk about your kids, you talk about gardening, you talk about baseball? We can all do that. But there isn't a forum in which it's possible to engage the political differences that we're living with now. And that is very scary.

MF: Maybe shows like *60 Minutes* are a very formal way of staging such a forum? And I wanted to add that the idea of living productively with plural truths is really a function of what we call modernization, although some ancient philosophers both Greek and Chinese articulated conspicuously non-dogmatic sets of beliefs: Pyrrhonism and Buddhism are examples. But I would say nonetheless that the question of toleration of other belief systems comes to the fore in new ways, historically, during the Protestant Reformation in England and Northern Europe and in the lands in Western Africa and the New World that old world powers were encountering and exploiting from the 1450s onward. Thomas More, Michel de Montaigne, and John Milton are only a few of the early modern thinkers who reflected intensively on questions of toleration, religious and secular both, with Montaigne famously introducing a critical perspective on Europeans by comparing their interpersonal practices with those of indigenous people alleged to be barbarian “cannibals.” It does seem to me that Max Weber was right to posit an important ideological connection between Protestant habits of thought and behavior and those upon which capitalism, in its early modern phrase, relied on: he emphasizes the significance of “delaying” gratification, for instance. His thesis has been widely criticized, but not in ways that make me feel that our modern forms of capitalism can tolerate radical ecology’s call for a lessening of growth in profits or in population. How does Elon Musk live with the idea that the planet’s economic pie is not going to get bigger? He fantasizes about settlements on Mars or elsewhere. And about scientific ways to extend the natural life of humans, or at least of a few rich humans, as the satirical film *Don’t Look Up* suggests in its depiction of a Musk figure’s escape from earth’s extinction-event.

I think that both liberal and conservative political thinking have been premised on the notion of progress and economic growth for a very long time, at least since the 16th or 17th centuries.

AM: And there’s no economic growth without population growth—I mean, I’ve heard it’s very difficult, in the long term at least.

MF: You know, Marx's dream was that there would be more and more work that would not be done by slave labor, by grunt labor, and it would be replaced by technology.

DS: Returning to the question of improving quality of life for people around the world, the idea of a positive technological fix that goes all the way back to William Godwin, and is also articulated by Engels and Marx in the *German Ideology*, is that the access to mechanized assistance would produce a shorter working day and more fishing in the afternoon...

AM: More time to be a critic...

MF: And more time to think...

DS: A number of us actually have achieved that, at the expense of many, many millions more who haven't. Those whose working hours have gotten longer, and are even more poorly paid, and the work they are doing more menial. And, you know, I've had a very good life by working basically with complete Flexi time. I mean, it isn't that I haven't worked hard, but I worked no harder than I wanted to, when I wanted to, most of the time. Obviously, you can't fudge the grading deadlines. But I have an enormous amount of choice about when I do things, or if I do them.

AM: And *what* you choose to do, the things that make you happier presumably...

DS: Yes. And, you know, you were asking about the humanities; I mean, our trade is actually in some part pleasure. And it's not very easy to talk about that kind of pleasure in any new way. I think it's been talked about in very traditional ways, but I think those ways still remain important. One of the ways that people can be persuaded to keep an open mind is through the provision of certain pleasures that they might not otherwise get. Gayatri Spivak has a wonderful phrase in her book, which is mostly quite gloomy about our future, but nonetheless very interesting; the book is called An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization. The phrase she has for our primary task as teachers is "the uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (526).

MF: As one of the goals for every humanities' education.

DS: It's what every literature teacher wants to do, but Spivak and we are also very aware of all the ways in which that's going to become harder and harder.

MF: But let's think a little bit more specifically about capitalism. Because it seems to me that what our colleagues are calling "extraction capitalism" is at the center of debates about what can be done, if anything, about the processes we've set in motion for making our environment unlivable for us as a species and for many other creatures as well. There have been a whole series of essays in The New Yorker; one is by Joshua Yaffa, about permafrost, and what's happened to it. I mean, things that ecological activists have been defining as irreversible changes since the 80s. A lot of it has to do, as David said earlier, with short-term and long-term and how we try to adjudicate between panic and postponing until some future time. But I do think that projects like Hannah Nicole Jones's The 1619 Project...

AM: I would love your opinion about this.

MF: Obviously it's causing a huge backlash at the level that Republicans have been extremely good at since 2010, especially in taking over school boards and City Councils, and thereby banning books from elementary, middle, and high school libraries and English curricula.

Andrea Ross: The banning of Maus this week in that Tennessee school district.

MF: Yes! That's right. And, you know, many other books are getting banned, books that my children read in the Davis schools, because these books make some white people feel uncomfortable, or the parents project that feeling onto their children. That part of it is really just mind boggling to me because you can't have a functioning democracy without people who think that you should read even about experiences of people who are unlike you and whose experiences might well make you think in new perhaps uncomfortable ways about your own life. And it does seem to me that the reaction against The 1619 Project is a threat to our democracy. But I think books like Saidiya Hartman's Lose Your Mother, and other works of Afro-pessimism I know, make it clear that what we call capitalism couldn't have begun to occur without the conquest of the New World and the simultaneous evisceration of Africa. That evisceration occurred, of course, in part through African participation in selling family members. As Hartman says, it's not as if there is inno-

cence; but there is a huge asymmetry among countries and peoples who profited from the slave trade—and those who were enslaved or, if they remained in Africa, saw the whole country's maps drawn in ways that reflected the extraction of its human and natural resources. In short, as Hartman insists, there are some people who got richer than others, and there were people who were enslaved in still hard-to-imagine numbers, and via a type of chattel slavery that we hadn't seen in history before.

DS: Margie, you and I have talked about this, and I've gotten to a stage where, and I don't mean this aggressively Andy, where when I hear the word capitalism, I start to go to sleep.

MF: I don't, I wake up!

DS: I've thought about capitalism so hard for so many years. I don't think we have an easy conceptual mechanism for making the term readily intelligible to people in a way that is anything other than sloganeering. But as humanities teachers, as literature teachers, what we do have available is a commitment to what I take to be "fact," that unfashionable word. Our American literature chronicles a long history of violence and brutality, which people have written about. Leslie Fiedler wrote about it in the 50s during the Cold War, the height of the Cold War, and Ronald Takaki wrote about it, and now Nicole Hannah Jones and others have reemphasized it and it's now being heard by a lot of people for the first time. That's part and parcel of what makes capitalism work.

MF: I don't think Hannah Nicole Jones is claiming to see it for the first time.

DS: No, not at all, but I the media has caught her up as if this these things are being said for the first time. And they're not, it's just that nobody was listening before, or not enough people were listening in the right way. But you know, the opposite of pleasure is, is unpleasure and cruelty. And we have a long history of unpleasure, and it's all in the American novel.

MF: And in poetry.

DS: Right. And, that's one way to get to people who perhaps are not able to grasp what capitalism may or may not be about, and after all, most economic theorists don't even agree about what it is. It is a structure, not an entity. What we can talk about is what happens to Black people, what happens to indigenous Americans, what happens to working class women, all of those things. It's right there on the page in these books, and I think that what people do with that is something that you probably shouldn't try to control, at least I don't feel I should. But I absolutely think they should think about it.

AG: With respect to *The 1619 Project*, I'm thinking again of the future of the humanities, but also the bigger problem of education. Do we need to incorporate or somehow reanimate what used to be a fairly standard civics component in education, teaching everyone how to function in a democracy? And if the humanities are to have a viable future, do they have to connect themselves closely to such a move?

DS: Oh, I have a little speech for you on that subject.

AM: I'd really like to hear it.

DS: I have just finished composing a book on the relationship between violence, civility and literature. And I've been thinking about civility for a long time, in fact, since the 1990s, when it was the chicken soup of political discourse after the collapse of the Russian Empire. And everybody thought civil society was the way to go. And everybody thought that the root of civil society was civility, people being nice to each other. There's a whole history to civility, and the debate continues today. You can open the *New York Times*, I guarantee you, and once a month there'll be something in there about how we don't have any civility anymore. The education into civility was largely founded through literary reading in the 16th century, and beyond into the 18th century, through an expanded notion of *belles lettres*, which included philosophy and criticism and history...

MF: And the novel...

DS: Yes. And then again through the pedagogy in the 20s and 30s, through the New Criticism. But you have a situation now where civility is being constantly touted as the thing we need at the exact moment when humanities education is having funding taken out from under it. And people need to see that the one has actually sustained the other for a very long time. There's a connection here that we shouldn't lose sight of. If you want a civics education, the English class is the place to go. Not the civics class, actually, not even the political science class, but the English or literature class. Because that's where, as I.A. Richards and others so eloquently said, you can have debates about things that arouse people's passions, without them being real life scenarios, and without them causing any irreversible violence, any loss of life, or anything like that. And that's a tremendously important component of what we do in literature classes, and no one else in the academy does it in quite the same way.

AR: So the literature classroom is the flight simulator.

MF: I love that metaphor! It brings out both the safety of the "simulated" phenomenon and its potential for having real-life effects. I'd carry on the point by saying that that literature classrooms are a major but not the only pedagogical site for the important training in civic debate that I.A. Richards was envisioning (under the rubric of what he called the "pseudo-statements" of poetry and fiction) and that David was just discussing. I think that such training can and does occur in classes that focus on teaching writing and rhetoric, using literary examples or other kinds of cultural documents including films and works of visual art; and it also occurs in history classes in which students debate the merits of multiple narratives about a given historical event. I think humanities classrooms, as well as those in what I'd call the "interpretive social sciences," can help us develop the arts and modes of thinking—and feeling—necessary for working cooperatively to make good flight simulators, as Andrea suggests. And then perhaps to fly better across different parts of the world.

It seems to me that the turn you were mentioning, Andy, towards a pedagogy of personal authentication in the literature and writing studies classroom, invites more discussion. It sometimes happens that the act of sharing and analyzing different kinds of texts brings students to the idea that their personal truths are truth-claims, statements that take certain rhetorical forms and that have to be publicly defended even if the public is a small class (or a small discussion group in a large class: I don't think that serious training in rhetoric, tolerance, and self-awareness happens easily in large groups). Through debate and discussion of

stories and at the same time of what might be called facts—or what others might indeed define as widely-accepted truth claims, some of which have changed over time through the process of paradigm shifting that Thomas Kuhn hypothesizes—we can come to agree that some claims are truer, even if they are rarely absolutely true, than others. I am not a pure relativist: I believe in provisional truths that can be tested and modified both by persuasion and by correlation with what we know of the world outside (and in some sense always beyond) us. Historical narratives about deeply contentious topics such as the U.S. forms of chattel slavery are stories that some people give ear to and some people don't; that's why there's such a debate about *The 1619 Project*. What merits attention in a classroom and what is passed over in silence? I could go through an entire K-12 education in Delaware, Ohio, in the 50s and early 60s, and never hear anything about the Delaware or the Mingo indigenous peoples. There was nothing, they just weren't mentioned. And so, I'm saying that I don't draw a clear line between the teaching of texts that openly reflect on their fictional status, and the teaching of historical narratives where they have to *compete* for readers and for credibility.

AM: Ok, let's take a short break, and consider Margie's insightful analysis.

II

[**Editorial Note:** Much of the second part of the conversation, which ranged widely over a range of contemporary political and social topics, has been edited out. There will be a link to the full version of the conversation should the reader want to consult it. The conversation picks up here with Margaret Ferguson commenting on the need for the teaching of civics and civility in the classroom.]

MF: [My daughter Susana has] given up having final papers for one of her classes, and is instead asking them to do projects that involve communicating with people about Middle Eastern history beyond their normal circle. And in one case, this involved a girl talking to her mother about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her mother was way beyond the circle of people to whom this girl usually talked about politics, and I thought that was such an interesting idea. We retired just before the pandemic so we're watching with admiration at you who are teaching under these difficult conditions; hearing about innovative teaching strategies during the pandemic has given me some hopes that the humanities teachers I know have a certain kind of flexibility and creativity to try—not simply to make a virtue of neces-

sity, but instead to use the occasion to try to do something new even when the students are in Zoom classes. Some of the ways in which the work of teaching has seemed to involve thinking about how your students live. One of our new graduate students who was teaching remotely told me that all but one of her students [had their cameras turned off] on the Zoom, because the teachers are not allowed to look into their students' home spaces. Whereas in my daughter's experience at Smith [College], which has a privileged student body, everybody's cameras are on whether they're in Timbuktu or Vacaville. They all want to be seen. But that's because they have rooms where this can be done. So I think the pandemic teaching protocols are giving humanities educators at a whole range of institutions, privileged and less privileged, some insights which they likely didn't have before into their students' lives. If part of our job is to try to help our students become citizens, and this is how I thought about and practiced my own teaching, then this is a good expansion of professors' experience of communicating with their students.

AR: And it's another step towards melding civics with the humanities.

MF: Which is a way of thinking about the current moment that counters my tendency to find it breathtakingly depressing...

DS: Many days it is for me.

MF: I was reading the Facebook page of one of our former colleagues here who was a very brilliant theorist. I'm not going to mention his name because he's written a number of books and he's not teaching here anymore. But his Facebook page was about the total demise of civic culture in this moment of post-modernity. So I wrote back to him and said, "Well, what about the optimism of the will? You've got the pessimism of the intellect down pat." He said, "Well, I don't do *those* things." Well, how many of our colleagues are involved politically at the local government or national party level or as participants in grassroots organizations? I don't hold that out as a moral question, just as a question of different kinds of work, and how we write, and who we address when we're writing.

AM: Is this something we should be pushing our students in graduate school to do—to be more engaged in this way?

AR: I want to add to what you just said about the pandemic causing us to have a window into our students' lives; I would take it back even a year earlier than the pandemic to the terrible wildfires near Davis, California in November in 2018. The Camp Fire burned the town of Paradise. All UC Davis classes, including the ones I was teaching, got canceled for a couple of weeks around Thanksgiving. And there was something about getting through the smoke emergency with that group of students that opened up my relationship with them in a way that doesn't usually happen. We were living on the edge of climate disaster together, instead of, well, in the basement of Shields library.

MF: Yes, that's very interesting, Andrea.

[**Editorial Note:** A portion of the conversation that ranged over issues associated with the natural sciences has been edited out here.]

MF: But just to go back to our science colleagues, you can say that more of them need us when they're students, when they're beginning their intellectual formation and could perhaps benefit from more courses in which they were asked to simulate flight, to go back to Andrea's interesting metaphor for what humanities courses do at their best. You can also say that if you are looking at global statistics about university ratings, which I was when I was working for the MLA, the statistics that count do not even include humanities departments.

AM: Right.

MF: Were not even on the radar. Statistics that are used in Singapore, and other places to measure the quality of a country's universities. The humanities don't count very much in that set of tests that is given to 15-year-olds, the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), on which our students do so poorly. We're in the middle of the rankings for the 65 countries in which the tests are given by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—we came in behind Ireland and Poland, quite far below Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea.

DS: The testing system is suspicious...

MF: Well, it is—it measures math, science and what they call “reading,” which does not include what we would call subject-content in humanities or interpretive social science fields, but the question remains, what is our U.S. public educational system, our K-16 system including the fantastic system of almost free community colleges in California, doing? It's not teaching the students necessarily to read. It's not teaching them foreign languages. What is it that we are actually doing?

III

[Editorial note: The conversation picks up in the middle of a discussion about the American anti-vaxxer movement]

AR: I wonder whether anti-vaxxing didn't happen until recently because we all thought that we had to do it. It was never really an option not to get vaccinated, but now suddenly it is.

DS: That's exactly the position the anti-vaxxers are in now—they are told, “you don't have to get vaccinated, but we recommend you do it for everyone's good.”

AR: But I think the new phenomenon is that these adults are saying, “No,” I choose not to be vaccinated. And it's a different equation, a different calculus.

MF: So what has happened to the idea of the common good?

AR: Exactly!

AM: It's atomized ...

DS: What seems to have happened is the displacement of the experience of choice to politically irrelevant and even self-destructive spheres, which actually masks a situation which is that people have no real choice at all about very much in their lives. But if I can choose not to have a vaccine, I can prove my freedom that way...

AM: David this seems like your “Trump moment,” where it's really hard to get your mind around what is going on. But is one piece the problem of not everyone “believing” in the science, the underlying fact that the scientific enterprise, to be supported, needs to promote health and increase longevity? And in the developed West, both of those things have started to stall out, at least longevity has done so in many places, including here in the US. And the promoting and improving health piece is becoming harder to believe in when you have doctors and on YouTube saying they don't believe Dr. Fauci.

MF: There are some incredibly influential doctors out there with very large platforms that have no criteria...

AM: Given all of this, the mantra of just “believing” in science becomes a really tough sell. Arthur C. Clarke, said something like “any sufficiently advanced science,” these CRISPR-based mRNA vaccines for instance, “will appear to the general public as though it is magic.” And when science is unable demonstrably and immediately to deliver magical or miraculous results, when there are hesitations, miscommunications and setbacks, or when a vaccine does not provide bulletproof immunity, rather than a statistically significant reduction in the severity of symptoms, it becomes impossible to get a substantial portion of the population to continue simply “believing” in science.

DS: That then does bring us back to the role of humanities education, in a compulsory education...You should not be able to dodge this by going and being taught at a fundamentalist school, or some madrassa or synagogue...

AM: Or some special charter school...

DS: This may be where we have to take our stand. Governments have to do that, they have to say that this humanities component is going to be part of your education whether you like it or not.

MF: But if the minority party takes control of all three branches of government, what we're considering as the civic benefits of humanities education starting even in elementary school—the benefits of practicing tolerance, learning about rhetoric, gaining experience from fictional scenarios, thinking about different

beliefs and peoples' different pasts—will be challenged by the America First and Best ideologies that Republicans want to promote through the public educational system, and are already doing in some states by banishing the discussion of any topic that adults imagine could make a child “uncomfortable”...

[**Editorial note:** There is a brief interruption at this point in the conversation while two hummingbirds do battle over a feeder above Margie and David]



Figure 2: The hummingbird feeder mentioned in the text, with one of the hummingbirds carefully watching out for its rival.

MF: David, I really have great hummingbird feeder envy here. I really want to get one of these.

[**Editorial Note:** A portion of the conversation addressing issues relating to the US Supreme Court has been edited out here.]

AM: Is the underlying question here, is there such a thing as the “common good?”

MF: The public education system in California, the visionary “Master Plan” of the 1960s, was developed on this basis...

AR: I think you're right. Elementary school, the model in this country, places heavy emphasis on being a good citizen. We all got graded on “Citizenship.”

MF: Yes, in the public education system. I wonder if the number of children going to private schools including religious ones has increased in this time of political polarization, and especially since 2016?

DS: We live in a culture of rampant and ruthless individualism and entrepreneurship, but if you do a project in school now, you often can't do it on your own. Cooperative learning looks like a great thing, a modeling of a certain kind of citizenship—carrying others with you, and a willingness to deal with people who may be not as smart as you, or vice versa, smarter than you. School is modeling something, and some workplaces do as well. But that's not what this culture operates by. And we're getting schizophrenic, we're getting split messages, the kids are getting split messages.

AR: Right—they are subject to “21st Century Learning,” but, Margie notes, they also learn that they have to be first in all sorts of competitions to get rewards!

DS: When they found their start-up company, it's not going to be “collaborative learning,” it's going to one or two other nerds running things...Nevertheless, we do collaborative learning exercises at the university...

AR: We certainly do in small classes...

DS: But even as it is valuable, it's so important to say, “what are we doing as we do this”?...

AR: And why are we doing it?

DS: Are we really instilling democracy and tolerance and compassion and cooperation? Or are we actually producing a facsimile of a world that you will never see again once you leave this classroom setting? Maybe it's not clearly either/or?

AR: Interesting! I was just thinking about this. We're going back into the classroom in a few days, and I told my students on Zoom that I'm really looking forward to seeing them all—at least seeing the upper half of their faces because we will all be wearing masks. I told them that is how we will take care of each other, how we respect each other. It's how we will function as a little society in our classroom.

MF: Good for you! I'm grateful for it. But you're right that the classroom is modeling a notion of the common good, one that the grading system counters completely.

DS: But the common good is an idea that seems absent from so many tense situations today: who can enforce a mask rule in the mini-society created temporarily by an airplane flight? Even the airline's employees can't always persuade passengers to keep their masks on; and some passengers, who clearly aren't worried about catching COVID, seem unable to imagine giving it to someone else. And as a society, we lack the means to track those who deliberately risk spreading the virus—there's no way to foster personal accountability.

AM: If I can circle back to the common good again for a second. Lincoln said that there is really only a common good when you (the people) have an external threat to unite against. So after September 11, we suddenly had this rally around the flag unity. But this sort of unity or notion of the common good seems very different from the sort required by our progressive goal of a universal society. A common good deriving from a nation-based patriotic unity when under attack, this sort of idea of the common good seems to flow in a different, even directly opposing direction from the idea of a common human good, or common planetary good, if we take global warming as an example. What sort of idea of the common good will help us to get to a goal of the universally peaceful and prosperous society of free and equal people? And what kind of education do we need to nurture such a sense of the common good?

DS: But I think if you rephrase the common good as a highly disputable and difficult concept, rather than as a moral incentive, that's what we as critics can do; such a discussion or debate would help get rid of the coercive moral incentives and acknowledge the idea as itself complicated and flawed and imperfect.

MF: But it's nonetheless something that one would like to be able to bring up with the non-mask wearer, if there were an opportunity or circumstance that wasn't fraught. Which goes back to that "One Small Step" venture: could you talk about a mask? Maybe you could talk about a novel? We don't have very many of these normal circumstances in which such things can be brought up.

AM: It seems education is the only place where making connections across this divide could happen, where you could compel disparate people to be together, and not talk about politics.

DS: Well, you do talk about politics, but you do it in such a way that there is a slowing down in any enactment of any conclusions you come to. People get all fired up about novels, and whether so and so has a bad character, and whether x is a good poem, and all that, and they fight over it, but fundamentally they're dealing with what Richards calls "pseudo"—by which he means fictive—statements, and if you can remind them of that, it lowers the temperature. And also, I think, obviously, helps the intellectual focus. And because the question of exportation of any of this to the world outside the classroom is always still to be decided; there's never a straightforward move from A to B. For many years, I thought that was teaching's limitation. Now I've come to feel it's the opposite! It's the only thing we've got to stop people pulling guns and killing each other. Now how you handle that in the classroom in Texas, where you've got guns in the classroom, I don't know. Or the parents coming in with their guns...

MF: With "open carry," I'm glad I'm retired.

DS: The most interesting recent resuscitation of civility theory comes from Étienne Balibar, who has this notion of what he calls inconvertible violence. It's very difficult to get straight and he's not entirely clear about it himself, and he says so. But the notion is that you cannot think civility without thinking violence. And in particular, inconvertible violence; that is, a violence that cannot be whisked away, cannot be magicked out of the picture. Civility and violence have gone together since the beginning, as civility becomes a form of oppressing people who are said not to have civil standards.

AM: Part of the Trump problem.

DS: Barbarians are just imaged as rude people.

AM: So called "deplorables."

DS: But that you can finesse, you can say we can accept each other despite that potential incivility, produce it in a marketable form of politeness. But Balibar says no. The violence is inconvertible, there is something there that cannot be thought away, cannot be transformed. And if you forget that, you've missed the point. And that of course, is the history of human cruelty and brutality, and oppression and everything else.

MF: The relation to the barbarians, to the "other."

DS: And so it goes back to what we were saying earlier about civil behavior or civic behavior being a problem and not only an ideal, *because* we don't know what that behavior is. We mostly haven't asked, for instance, an, unemployed black person, or a person in prison, what they would regard as civil behavior from us. That's a real discussion: how to keep an open mind in the face of what seems uncivil.

AM: How do we handle something like the rally in the Davis' Central Park and the march to the police station in the wake of the George Floyd killing? The party line of the speakers there was "no justice, no peace." I don't agree with this, I think rather the opposite, "no peace, no justice," but I didn't challenge it, nor did anyone else at the rally challenge it, and then, after the speeches, I marched through downtown along with everyone else. Do I support this uncivil rallying cry by remaining silent and not challenging it? In those circumstances, the stage is set for incivility, and the rally promoters could feel justified in promoting or condoning violence rather than dialogue.

DS: Civility is what Bentham called a fictitious entity: a word that should only be invoked as an incentive to further and closer specification. I'd say the same for peace, violence, dialogue and so on. And democracy. These words should not be produced to end discussion, but to begin it. What is civil or uncivil, and who makes the call? As I've said, democracy is mostly invoked to stop discussion of bringing about change, as if we have it already and just need to preserve it. It's the same with civility. Insisting on looking harder at these words is what a humanities pedagogy can do. It is important to stop people running away with assumptions about what is good and bad here.

[**Editorial Note:** The concluding segment of the conversation, which addressed the climate change crisis and the political hurdles to addressing it effectively, has been edited out here.]

Works Cited

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Nicole-Jones, Hannah. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. One World, 2021.

Spivack, Gayatri. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard, 2012.

About the Authors

Margaret Ferguson is Professor Emerita at UC Davis, is author of *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender and Empire in Early Modern England and France*, as well as other books and numerous articles. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, she is past president of the Modern Language Association, and she was co-editor for the 6th and most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*.

David Simpson is Professor Emerita at UC Davis, retired from there as G. B. Needham Endowed Chair in English. He also is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as a former Guggenheim Fellow, and is a past president of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association. He is author of many books, most recently of *States of Terror: History, Theory, Literature* (U of Chicago P 2019), and will be forthcoming with *Engaging Violence: Civility and the Reach of Literature*, later this year (Stanford UP).

Andrea Ross is the author of *Unnatural Selection: A Memoir of Adoption and Wilderness* and teaches in UC Davis' University Writing Program.

Andrew Majeske is an NASJ editor, an Associate Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY, New York), and an Adjunct Professor of Law at McGeorge School of Law (University of the Pacific, California).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).