

Aesthetic Education and National Progress

[1] The diminution of emphasis on the arts and the humanities and the corresponding increased emphasis on business and STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) has resulted in a normative conception of national progress that excludes aesthetic education. In this essay, I argue that aesthetic educators should challenge the normative understanding of national progress. (In the humanities, aesthetic educators typically are educators of English, foreign languages and literature, philosophy, art history and film studies.) To this end, I call attention to the writings of the French philosopher Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) because in the adaptation of her notion of progress lies possible hope for the future of the humanities and the arts.

[2] In contemporary American society, national progress is more often than not equated with job creation, and job creation is linked to advancement in business and the STEM disciplines. For example, in his 2012 acceptance speech after the national election, President Obama called for the United States to remain the leader in science and technology, and then he exclaimed, “America, I believe we can build on the progress we’ve made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunities and new security for the middle class.”

[3] Lip service is paid to civic responsibility and its role in national progress, while federal and state governments, as well as institutions of higher education, drastically cut budgets and/or entire programs in the humanities and the arts. Aesthetic educators know that these cuts will, in the long term, be devastating to civil society because the humanities and the arts are precisely the programs that convey cultural capital. More precisely, they cultivate in students the critical judgment and the independence of thought needed to be able to make informed decisions about their place in civil society. Given the number of indicators that point to a decline in public and institutional support for the humanities and the arts, however, it has become easy for aesthetic educators to become demoralized, feel irrelevant, and even believe that we, in fact, have little or no role in national progress.

[4] As examples of indicators that point to the increasing irrelevance of the humanities, in FY 2014, the appropriations to both the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were cut by 13 percent from their peak 2010 numbers, while the National Science Foundation (NSF) appropriations increased by almost 4 percent from 2010. Perhaps the 13 percent cut would not have been so shocking if the NEH and NEA allocations did not represent a mere 2 percent of the total NSF allocation. The pill is even harder to swallow when one considers that, in 1979, the NEH and the NEA, respectively, received funding equivalent to approximately 16 percent of the NSF.

[5] Salaries represent a second measure of the diminishing consideration for the humanities and the arts within university structures. The Oklahoma Faculty Survey by Discipline, a study that surveys the salaries of professors at 114 “Research University/Very High Research Activity” institutions, lists average salaries for all ranks of tenure-track faculty in a number of disciplines. According to the 2013-14 study, the average salary of a faculty member in the arts was \$71,463; in English, \$76,627; in philosophy and religious studies, \$81,971; in physical sciences, \$102,636; in engineering, \$114,827; and in business management, \$139,093. While salaries in 2013-14 increased from 2011-12 in the physical science, engineering, and business management, they decreased in the fine arts, English, and philosophy. If markets drive salaries, the arts and the humanities are clearly not high in market demand. This lack of demand for the humanities and the arts is further underscored in Governor Rick Scott's proposal that tuition rates for Florida state universities be frozen for students who major in “strategic areas”. Lizette Alvarez from *the New York Times* states of Scott's proposal, “The message from Tallahassee could not be blunter: Give us engineers, scientists, health care specialists and technology experts. Do not worry so much about historians, philosophers, anthropologists and English majors.” From multiple perspectives, then, we see an explicit shift to STEM disciplines and a discouragement of humanities and arts education, whether in program development, faculty salaries, or student tuitions. Faced with what seems to be such overwhelming confirmation of aesthetic educators' irrelevance to today's understanding of national progress—namely, advancement in business, science and technology—aesthetic educators in the humanities and the arts are struggling to communicate to others outside our field, and to the public at large, our vital role.

[6] As demoralizing as the perceived irrelevance of arts and humanities education may be and as disappointing as our attempts to articulate our relevance have been, we may be able to begin to find hope and purpose in renewed debate around how we think about “progress” and, more precisely, the role of aesthetic education in “progress”. The writings of Germaine de Staël are particularly illuminating because they situate aesthetic education squarely in the progress of the nation and have bearing on the dilemma facing the humanities and the arts today. Her prescient philosophy turns the definition of progress on its head and could give aesthetic educators a powerful tool to fight for the increased relevance and vitality of the humanities and the arts in the broader notion of progress.

[7] Germaine de Staël's notion of progress—namely, the alignment of the perfectibility of the human mind (accretion of knowledge) with the perfectibility of the human species (interplay between individual morality and public morality) —has direct bearing on the difficulties that we as aesthetic educators are having today in articulating our essential role in national progress. Obviously, both types of progress (perfectibility of the human mind and perfectibility of the human species) are essential to the progress of the nation, but Germaine de Staël argues convincingly that they must *align*. Aesthetic educators might thus remind the public that business and the STEM disciplines neither have as their mandate the watchful alignment of individual and public morality (the vector that guarantees freedom and the continual perfecting

of the nation) nor do they have as their directive resistance against dogma. Furthermore, investment in STEM at the expense of the arts and the humanities parallels the Enlightenment's obsession with progress as defined as the conservation and accretion of empirical knowledge and material gain. This obsession, at least in Germaine de Staël's view, contributed to the neglect of the interior moral life of the individual. It, furthermore, diminished emphasis on moral responsibility and independence of judgment, which consequently led to increased partisanship, culminating in the fanaticism of the Reign of Terror. While it is hard to imagine the advent of a Reign of Terror in the United States, it can be argued that obsession with unbridled advancement in science and business at the expense of aesthetic education could lead to the weakening of individual morality—defined by Staël as the devotion to freedom, human rights, and the possibility of collective happiness *for all*.

[8] If Germaine de Staël were alive today, she might argue that the solution to our current humanities and arts crisis is a relatively simple one. First, argue for national progress to be understood as the alignment of the perfectibility of the human mind with the perfectibility of the human species. Scientific advancement at the expense of the watchful alignment of individual and public morality poses a threat to the stability of our nation. Consequently, any call for national progress must include sufficient support of and funding for precisely the disciplines (the humanities and the arts) that have this alignment as their mandate. Secondly, encourage educational models that allow for the combination of a “useful” subject that contributes to a knowledge-based economy and a subject in which they will receive an aesthetic education.