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## ‘It’s Literacy, Stupid!’: Declining the Humanities in National Research Foundation (NRF) Research Policy

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### Abstract

This article examines the role and place of the skills of advanced cultural literacy in NRF policy and argues that there is no role or place for them in current policy formulations. Through a brief analysis of the work of Goody and Gellner, the paper argues that this gap in policy ignores the necessary and crucial force that the skills of advanced literacy are widely acknowledged to have in the function and constitution of modern states and their economies. Ignoring this, the NRF jeopardises its mission to support social development and economic growth in South Africa. The paper further argues that the current structure of selective support for research in the humanities is likely to have the perhaps unintended consequence of their destruction in global competitive terms due to the penalisation of core disciplinary research activity and the consequent erosion of disciplinary reproduction. All in all, current NRF policy towards the humanities appears as a declining of the humanities, in all senses of the term. To which this paper responds, troping Bill Clinton’s favoured slogan, ‘It’s literacy, stupid!’

### Résumé

Dans cet article, on examine le rôle et la place des compétences en connaissances culturelles poussées dans la politique de la NRF et on soutient qu’il n’existe ni rôle ni place pour elles dans les politiques actuelles formulées. Par le biais d’une brève analyse des travaux de Goody et Gellner, cette étude soutient que ce vide en matière d’orientation ignore la force nécessaire et fondamentale que l’on reconnaît largement aux compétences en connaissances poussées dans la fonction et la constitution des

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États modernes et de leur économie. En ignorant cela, la NRF compromet sa mission d'appui au développement social et à la croissance économique en Afrique du Sud. L'étude soutient par ailleurs que la structure actuelle de l'appui sélectif à la recherche dans le domaine des humanités est susceptible d'avoir pour conséquence peut-être involontaire leur destruction sur le plan de la concurrence mondiale en raison de la pénalisation de l'activité de recherche fondamentale et de l'érosion de la reproduction qui en résulte. Tout compte fait, la politique actuelle de la NRF à l'égard des humanités apparaît comme un affaiblissement, dans toute l'acceptation du terme. Une situation à laquelle l'étude répond en utilisant le slogan préféré de Bill Clinton, «C'est de l'instruction, idiot».

This paper is given in memory of Bill Readings, an old friend and colleague from days in Geneva, who died tragically young in a freak airplane accident in 1994. It is intended as a reminder of his impressive work, *The University in Ruins* (1996), one to which this collection of essays, partly emanating from a workshop in October 2005 on 'The Future of the University in South Africa' at the University of South Africa (UNISA), is surely indebted. At the same time, and since the first parts of Readings' book appeared in the *Oxford Literary Review* (Readings 1995) just a decade ago, I would also like to take the opportunity to honour the work of that journal, as it brought the neoliberal assault on higher education into focus at a relatively early stage in its development. That the terms of this assault now pass as common sense in higher education policy around the world is, I believe, something to be both deplored and actively resisted.<sup>1</sup> It may be that the ending of apartheid in South Africa gives some material ground for successful resistance to this new common sense. Certainly, as shall be discussed below, higher education policy in South Africa since 1994 does appear to be divided between the purely instrumental goals increasingly being defined globally as the be-all and end-all of education, and the broader emancipatory goals which make their formal appearance in local policy, as if the idea of democracy in South Africa has yet to be quite as fully emptied of its participatory elements as elsewhere.

The title of the essay, 'It's literacy, stupid!', is intended to convey some of the frustration that the humanities community—all those working in the disciplines of the arts and humanities from art history to philosophy, through classics to modern languages—in South Africa feels in relation to current funding structures at the National Research Foundation (NRF). At the same time, its textual or intertextual purpose is to refer back to, revisit and revise, Bill Clinton's highly successful sound-bite slogan, 'It's the economy, stupid!'<sup>2</sup>

Clinton's point was that the Republican Party was taking for granted something that the Democrats would foreground and pay closer attention to if elected, i.e. the performance of the U.S. economy. The economy was central to the

lives of ordinary U.S. citizens in ways that Republicans had lost touch with. The republicans were complacent about the economy not because they thought it unimportant, but rather because they took its performance, or what they could get out of it for themselves, for granted.<sup>3</sup> It is the fact of taking something for granted precisely because it is so fundamental that interests me here, and my argument starts by substituting ‘literacy’ for the ‘economy’ of Clinton’s formulation.

Teachers and researchers in the humanities at South African universities now find themselves in a situation in which the fundamental social force of literacy has somehow become invisible, and literacy is ruled *hors de calcul* by policy makers and their apparatchiks in the structures of higher education. If, in the terminology of orthodox Marxism, it is the economic base that works as the fundamental structuring agent of the social totality, then for academics in the humanities and the social sciences, it is the literacy base that acts as the structuring agent of the educational totality. Literacy, and perhaps above all, the advanced forms of literacy made available in the humanities, constitutes the very ground of educational possibility, the substance of both efficient and reflexive communication as well as a significant element in critical and creative thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it is surely not the case that literacy is actually considered unimportant in South Africa. Indeed, there are several government campaigns under way for improving basic literacy. But what it is sadly true to say is that the social force of literacy—what it does in and for a society—seems to have become invisible as far as policy makers in higher education are concerned, and as far as NRF research support goes. Let me be clear: it is not that literacy is considered unimportant, in some argued and coherent fashion; it is rather that it is not considered at all. It is at some level taken for granted, just as we tend to take for granted the air that we breathe, and just as Clinton believed the Republicans were taking the economy for granted.

Before proceeding, let me clarify that the literacy in my title is intended to have a narrower sense than the usual one. The aim of this essay is not to address the very serious issues arising what we might call primary literacy, the acquisition of the ability to read and write at basic levels of communicative competence, literacy as it is or should be taught at primary and secondary school levels. That is a topic better addressed by others, alongside the important question and implications of national language policies (see Alexander this volume). The literacy in my title is shorthand for what I refer to elsewhere as advanced or critical literacy.<sup>5</sup> This is a literacy that, to borrow Raymond Williams’s terms, ‘calls the bluff of authority, since it is a condition of all its practical work that it questions sources, closely examines offered authenticities,

reads contextually and comparatively, identifies conventions to determine meanings' (Williams 1984:276).

It is surely in terms of this 'calling the bluff of authority' that the different disciplines in the humanities have something in common with each other, despite the differences in the bodies of knowledge and scholarship they draw upon, and the respective focal points of their mode of enquiry.

For each discipline in the humanities tends to privilege one or more of the three essential dimensions of humanist enquiry: the theoretical, the historical, and the textual. Philosophy, for instance, privileges theoretical and conceptual understanding, tending in general to an extraordinarily detailed logical assessment of the arguments of philosophers, though often at the expense of the historical understanding of embodied argument. History, in turn, places its emphasis on the subtleties of historical and contextual understanding, though sometimes at the expense of detailed theoretical and textual analysis. While the disciplines of language and literary studies, in their precise attention, tended in their foundational moments to ignore historical and theoretical questions.<sup>6</sup> Each discipline pays attention, with its specific gravity of emphasis, to the depth, complexity and richness of human sense-making, but for each discipline it is that sense-making—the understanding and representation of the world, the understanding through representation of the world—that is central.

In terms of skills rather than contents, the different disciplines in the humanities place different emphases on the arts of decoding or interpreting human communications in historical, theoretical and textual terms. Yet, it may well be that the real impact of the great wave of theory that hit the humanities in the seventies has meant, even in and through the polarisations it created, far greater attention to the common ground beneath the often opposing standpoints of theory, history and textuality. Critical literacy is the name I give to the general project standing as it were behind or within the different disciplines as their common ground. I believe that this common ground forms the best basis for a defence of the humanities in the situation of their active decline, by which I mean the decline imposed by higher education policy in general, and the support policy of the NRF in particular.

This may sound somewhat abstract; so I want to give this idea of critical literacy some definition through the practical consideration of a particular example. What is critical literacy like in practice? What can it yield? What can it add to our understanding of, and practice in, the world?

Not surprisingly, the example I wish to use, and whose analysis will provide a guiding thread for this essay, is a single statement regarding the role and function of the NRF. I select it because it is in a simple and obvious sense a

founding formulation, and one that contains or expresses that ‘declining of the humanities’ that forms the theme of this article. Through a process of critical analysis, my aim is to analyze the received ideas that are, in my view, distorting the mission of the NRF, and leading to a consequent attitude of disdain towards the humanities in general.

I choose a founding formulation in a literal sense.<sup>7</sup> The statement is taken from the Bill for the Establishment of a National Research Foundation promulgated in 1997. The importance of a founding formulation is to be understood rather like taking the first step with your partner in a formal dance routine: if you get the first step wrong, it is difficult to ever recover your balance. The formulation reads as follows: ‘It is generally accepted that the capacity of a country in science and technology is directly related to its potential for development and progress and for promoting the quality of life of its people’ (quoted in Higgins 2000:117).

An active reading of this statement, one that ‘calls the bluff’ of its authoritativeness, necessarily engages the three dimensions of textuality, theory and history that together constitute the practice of critical literacy and of a critical literacy in action.

### **Textual matters**

First, the textual level. On the closer examination that textual analysis allows, a whole range of questions begins to undermine or unthread what on the surface and at first reading may appear (and that is the point of all representation) a relatively unproblematic statement. The textual surface becomes a screen whose surface conceals—but the wager of textual analysis is that the subsequent contours and unevenness of the textual surface then draw attention to—the problems and contradictions animating that surface. At every moment, in such formulations as this one from the NRF founding statement, what is absent can still be perceived as a pressure that makes the apparently solid surface of the statement shimmer and, on close analysis, lose its apparent substantiality. The textual matters because of its inescapable interweaving of presence and absence, of representation and elision.

For the textual analyst, adverbs are always important.<sup>8</sup> To write that something is ‘generally accepted’ has a very different dynamic to the idea that something is unanimously accepted. For the adjective ‘generally’ works in reality to signal though elide the existence of a body of particular opinion that does not share the general view, even though that particular opinion may not be represented in the presentation of what is ‘generally accepted’. Though wishing to give the impression of consensus, the phrase in fact points to or indicates an underlying concern about a lack of unanimity around the central assertion, the

concern that generates the use of 'generally'. On closer reading, in other words, the suspicion is raised that for something to be generally accepted means that what is generally accepted by some is specifically rejected by others, though these others are absented and silenced in and by the formulation.

The point of such nitpicking at the textual level, even operating through the analysis of just this one phrase, is that it then opens up the given text to extra-textual considerations, and in this case, asking just what disagreements are being covered over in the phrase 'generally accepted'. The phrase points in fact to the existence of some central contradictions that were at work in the formation of higher education policy in the post-1994 period. These contradictions came through in what was generally regarded as the uneasy marriage of two vocabularies and ideas of the social uses of higher education. The clash was between a narrowly instrumental view, emphasizing the 'potential for development and progress' in terms of the economy, and the broader culturalist view, emphasizing the need for the building of critical intellectual skills, particularly in a society still marked by the divisions of decades of apartheid (Gumpert 2000; Higgins 1998).

In the instrumentalist view, which on the balance and in practice tends to dominate the implementation of policy, higher education, according to the *Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, needs to, 'address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy' (Department of Education 1997:1). From this perspective, education and higher education needs to be carefully controlled and directed, and tailored to the dynamics of the economy. Education is seen as playing a largely instrumental role, one subordinated to the state's interpretation of economic needs. Yet, at the same time and differing in this from the dominant neoliberal view of higher education across most of the world, South African policy also placed significant emphasis on the importance of critical and analytical skills to a healthy society.<sup>9</sup> This comes through in higher education policy as a repeated acknowledgement of the values of 'critical citizenship', described in the *Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* as 'the socialization of enlightened, responsive and constructively critical citizens' (Department of Education 1997:1). As I argue elsewhere, the *Programme* as a whole simply juxtaposes these two elements without acknowledging that there might be a strain or tension between them, much less admitting that they may well be incommensurate (Higgins 1998). How have these strains worked in practice?

In a recent survey of the implementation of this policy, Gibbon and Kabaki note, 'By 1998, the emphasis had decisively shifted from demands for

democratization to demands for efficiency and effectiveness' (2002:217). All in all, they conclude that the 'democratic phase' has been superseded by the 'managerial phase' (216). It is the consequent emphasis on the instrumental definition of higher educational goals that then leads to a focus on science and technology that marginalizes the humanities and makes for the virtual invisibility of literacy and high literacy that we have seen.<sup>10</sup>

What is missing from the rhetorical consensus generated by the NRF's 'generally accepted' is then precisely the voicing of the cultural that would insist on the cultural as a constitutive force in any reasonable account of social development and progress. What is absent from or made invisible by this formulation is, of course, the role and function of literacy in helping to constitute and sustain the workings and exchanges of any complex society.

At this point, textual analysis calls for some consideration, necessarily both historical and theoretical, of the role and function of literacies in the formation and development of complex societies. Any such consideration suggests the real strangeness and short-sightedness of this taking-for-granted of literacy in any higher education policy concerned with the promotion of social and economic development. For, even at the most basic level, is it not overwhelmingly obvious that the general ability to read and write is the *sine qua non* of any form of education, and even education in any particular branch of 'science and technology'? Indeed, it should not be forgotten that the invention of writing, the currency of literacy, deserves credit as one of the primary technological inventions of the human species, perhaps surpassing in its far-reaching effects that of any other single invention. Writing, in cultural historian Jack Goody's words, is the 'technology of the intellect' *par excellence* (1986:167).

### **The social force of literacy**

Goody's *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1986) is just one of a whole block of work that argues for the recognition of the constitutive force of writing on the emergence of modern societies.<sup>11</sup> In a striking study that succinctly examines comparative European and African data from ancient Egypt to the present day, Goody argues, 'Whatever form one chooses [and the study deals with religion, the economy, law and the state] organization and behaviour are significantly influenced by the use of writing' (1986:119-20).

Writing for Goody is a 'technology of the intellect', a primal technology in the sense that it both enables and compels new forms of social co-operation and productivity. For Goody, the fact that the emergence of the single state and an overall pantheon of Gods in pre-Christian Egypt coincides with the appearance of writing is no accident. Only the forms of social collaboration

and documentation that writing allows permit such unitary formations, bringing together large groups of people into a single state and faith, as well as an organised system of economic exchange (Goody 1986:65).

Writing also provides the central force and substance of the administrative, that constitutive element in state formation so privileged in Max Weber's account of modern society. All in all, as Goody emphasizes, and interestingly in line with some of Michel Foucault's analyses,<sup>12</sup> that the 'increase in knowledge by the state represented an increase in the power to govern; as in both India and Africa knowledge meant governability; and both entailed the extensive use of the written word (Goody 1986:116).

In conclusion, Goody argues for fuller recognition of the social force of literacy, and how it took 'some 5000 years to expand the ability to read and write throughout the social system, to make it an instrument of democracy, of popular power, of the masses' (1986: 121).<sup>13</sup>

At the very least, we can say that an awareness of this long history of the social force of literacy appears to be entirely absent from the NRF's perspectives on the humanities (Pattison 1982). If the theoretical place of literacy is, as Goody suggests, so important as the 'technology of the intellect', what can account for its absence in policy and research support initiatives? How can such monumental blindness or oversight be possible?

Some explanation may be found through an engagement with the historical dimension of these arguments and in an analysis of the received ideas and formulations which appear to be behind or at work in NRF thinking. My suggestion here is that much of current South African policy regarding the humanities appears to be in thrall to a phrase, and that phrase is C.P. Snow's coinage in the late 1950s, the 'two cultures'.<sup>14</sup>

### **The history of a received idea**

Let us begin with a quotation or call to order from a scholarly book called *Crisis in the Humanities* (1965). The humanities, writes their editor, need very urgently to 'adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology' (Plumb 1965:5). Familiar enough? The quotation might well serve as the *mot d'ordre* of very many discussions of higher education policy in present day South Africa. Yet, the quotation comes from a book published all of forty years ago, and edited by the historian J.H. Plumb from the papers presented at a conference of the same name. The conference was called in response to, and in amplification of, a lecture given in Cambridge on May 7, 1959, where novelist, former scientist and political administrator Snow launched a phrase and an argument that continues to resound today: 'two cultures'. The lecture seemed to identify a crisis around directions in higher education and

research that we are repeating, in the full sense of the phrase that those who do not know their history are always in danger of repeating it.

The common pressure is that behind the desire to change and adapt the structures of education and higher education in such a way as to recognize the fact that future economic power and development are largely in the hands of science and technology. Snow was very worried, in his own time, by the fact that Britain was in danger of falling behind in the struggle to develop the economy through science and technology, and that the education system was doing little to train the scientists and technologists who would be the source of future economic development and social well-being. 'Our population is small', he writes, 'by the side of either the USA or the USSR. Roughly if we compare like with like, and put scientists and engineers together, we are training at a professional level per head of the population one Englishman to every one and half Americans to every two and a half Russians' (Snow 2000:36).

As with policy makers in South Africa today, Snow was motivated by a powerful sense of urgency regarding the shape and structure of education and higher education in the country. Like most thinking in South Africa today, Snow saw education in science and technology as providing the key to the economic development and well-being of the nation, and urged the need for a conversation between two cultures—the scientific and the humanist—which had so given up the habit of conversation that the gap between them seemed to threaten to become unbridgeable. Snow writes, 'Closing the gap between our cultures is a necessity in the most abstract intellectual sense, as well as in the most practical' (2000:50). He urges, 'When the two senses have grown apart, then no society is going to be able to think with wisdom' (ibid.).

Despite all his emphasis on the need for conversation and exchange, even a cursory reading shows how Snow now represented the two sides in this potential conversation in ways that made true conversation, an exchange and discussion between equals, all but impossible. Consciously or unconsciously, Snow revealed himself a prey to his own received ideas in ways that precluded a truly critical frame of mind.

In brief, for Snow, science good while humanities bad. Snow's scientists have a lot to pat themselves on the back for, while humanists would be better off staying entirely silent in the conversation. Scientists are represented as natural optimists, and this is the product of their almost always successful problem-solving and the natural linkage between theory and practice. Scientists are less complacent than other social groups, and in the face of social problems they 'are inclined to be impatient to see if something can be done; and inclined to think that it can be done, until it's proved otherwise. That is their real optimism, and it's an optimism that the rest of us badly need' (Snow 2000:7). All in

all, scientists have their own culture, their characteristic ways of thinking, analysing and acting, and scientific culture ‘contains a great deal of argument, usually much more rigorous, and almost always at a higher conceptual level, than literary persons’ arguments – even though the scientists do cheerfully use words in sense which literary persons don’t recognize, the senses are exact ones...’ (Snow 2000:12). And of particular though belated interest to South Africa, scientists ‘are [even] freer than most people from racial feeling; their own culture is in its human relations a democratic one’ (48).

On the other side stand, or perhaps ‘squirm’ would be a better descriptive term, from Snow’s point of view, the humanists and intellectuals, with the ‘literary intellectuals’ coming under particular attack. For Snow, as one section heading has it, intellectuals are ‘natural Luddites’, looking back to a Golden Age before industry with longing, and ignoring the bitter realities of a world without science. Discretely, in an interesting rhetorical tactic which seeks to preserve the reader’s sense of Snow’s lack of bias, the most savage characterisation is delegated to an unknown fellow scientist, a ‘scientist of distinction’, who simply asks: ‘[W]eren’t they [the literary intellectuals] not only politically silly, but politically wicked? Didn’t the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much nearer?’ (Snow 2000:7). Damaging words, and perhaps especially so in the immediate post-war period. Snow gives no counter-response, stating that he won’t attempt to ‘defend the indefensible’ (7). Despite Snow’s attempts at maintaining some sort of balance, his hostility and aggression towards humanist culture comes through very strongly indeed. He states that ‘the highly-educated members of the non-scientific culture couldn’t cope with the simplest concepts of pure science: it is unexpected, but they would be even less happy with applied science’ (30); ‘I would bet that out of men getting firsts in arts subjects at Cambridge this year, not one in ten could give the loosest analysis of the human organization which it [button making] needs’ (30). The famous equation of having read a Shakespeare play or Dickens novel with knowing and understanding the second law of thermodynamics just about sums it up: a more or less total contempt for the professional knowledge and understanding of non-scientific disciplines. Commenting from the cultural distance of New York on the heat that characterised the Cambridge debate between Snow and Leavis, Lionel Trilling politely remarked that Snow’s writing revealed an ‘extreme antagonism’ towards literature, despite his claims, which help to authorise his lecture as a whole, to have a foot in both camps (Trilling 1967[1962]:138; see also Leavis 1972).

All in all, as Snow had put it, even more directly, in an article published prior to *Two Cultures*, scientists enjoy a ‘greater “moral health” than “literary

intellectuals” (quoted in Collini 2000:xxvi). From opposing positions like this, the essence of the science or humanities stance, the only dialogue possible is a *dialogue des sourds*, a dialogue of the deaf.

The point of this brief discussion of the damaging dynamics of Snow’s presentation of the ‘two cultures’ is to ask whether or not there exists a similarly (parallel, but not exact) damaging set of oppositions and assumptions at work in our contemporary thinking about ‘science or humanities’ in South Africa. Is such antagonistic opposition what characterizes the current state of things?

My suspicion is that this damaging stereotype of ‘two cultures’ may, like all received ideas, run very deep indeed, and form part and parcel of the common sense or pre-conceptual thinking informing current discussion, specifically in the National Research Foundation and more generally in South African policy.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, much has changed in the state of knowledge and practice since the time of Snow’s lecture. Yet it is the presumption of this paper that one thing that hasn’t changed is the vocabulary – and with that the built-in common sense which informs and indeed precludes discussion.

Why say this? Because the resurgence of the ‘two cultures’ vocabulary in recent discussions and debates centred on some genuine changes and advances in scholarly knowledge and informed public opinion since Snow’s time. While this is not the place or occasion to rehearse the detail of the Sokal Affair, it is perhaps worthwhile to at least point to a number of books which attempt to unwrite some of the changes and developments that have taken place Snow’s *The Two Cultures* argument, largely under the impetus of Thomas Kuhn’s remarkable study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). This study did much, as it were, to level the playing field between the sciences and humanities. A spate of recent studies seem to wish to return us to Snow’s time and to be invested heavily in the kind of narcissistic self-image of the scientist indulged in with such complaisance by Snow himself (see Gross and Levitt 1994; Sokal and Bricmont 1998; Weinberg 1994).

Stefan Collini, in his fine ‘Introduction’ to the latest edition of Snow’s *The Two Cultures* (2000), has summarised much of the distance between Snow and ourselves. While the history and philosophy of science was a minor area of study within philosophy in the ‘fifties, it has since become a substantial discipline in its own right. At the same time, the real practice of science has itself undergone a significant shift away from its old academic definition and location as disinterested enquiry to a place and position in the ‘commercial strategies of drug companies, aerospace industries, and the like’ (Collini 2000: lvi). Indeed, argues Collini, the experience of recent decades has shown that

improving the standards of living in third-world countries rests more on understanding the very complex operation of political and cultural forces at work than on understanding the science involved in the latest technological advance (Collini 2000:lxix).

All in all, he concludes, the ‘notion of the “two cultures” [may be] at best, an irrelevant anachronism’ (liv). Yet, as we have tried to show, an irrelevant anachronism that may still manage, in the form of a received idea, to influence our contemporary analyses and discussions.

My feeling is that only something as large but invisible as a significant preconception or received idea can be behind such a blind spot in current policy.

### Conclusion

These are just a few of the textual, theoretical and historical considerations that arise from a careful reading of the National Research Foundation’s founding statement. In conclusion, it is perhaps worth amplifying the central theme of this essay: the constitutive importance of literacy and advanced literacy for the functioning of modern and contemporary societies. I turn to Ernest Gellner’s important work, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), to help frame and present my concluding remarks. ‘The major part of training in industrial society is *generic training*’, he argued,

*generic training*, not specifically connected with the highly specialized professional activity of the person in question, and *preceding* it. Industrial society may by most criteria be the most highly specialized society ever; but its education system is unquestionably the least specialized, the most universally standardized, that has ever existed (Gellner 1997:60).

At the centre of this education is literacy, both in its basic and advanced forms. For the ‘paradigm of work’, observed Gellner in 1983, ‘is no longer ploughing, reaping, thrashing’ (Gellner 1997:64). He states:

Work, in the main, is no longer the manipulation of things, but of meanings. It generally involves exchanging communications with other people... For the first time in human history, *explicit and reasonably precise communication* becomes generally, pervasively used and important (Gellner 1997:64, my emphasis).

Perhaps now, some twenty years after Gellner’s original arguments and at a moment when the information economy is more visible than ever, this emphasis on the social force of communication is all the more true. Certainly, for contemporary political thinkers such as Hardt and Negri (2005), forms of communication stand as a constitutive element of the ‘biopolitical’ in their provocative analysis of emerging global society.<sup>16</sup>

And surely it is by now widely accepted that one of the greatest challenges facing any economy in the twenty-first century is the worldwide information explosion. For business and government to cope with these demands, we will need citizens who are highly skilled and competent in not just paraphrasing and passing on, but in assessing and interpreting vast quantities of information. No parliamentarian, no business person, no administrator needs to be told just how important it is not only to read documentation quickly and to summarize it accurately, but also to assess the information and arguments presented, and then to be able to communicate these to others with appropriate comments. Similarly, no one who practices these skills needs to be told how much value they add (to use the current phrase, itself worthy of analysis). The skills needed to achieve this are those of a critical literacy. The capacity of a country in its critical literacy skills is as directly related to its potential for development and progress as its capacity in science and technology.

All in all, NRF policy with regard to research funding in the humanities has as its perhaps unintentional effect the declining rather than the supporting of the humanities. I make an awkward play on the word declining for two reasons. The first is to refer to the simple fact that most requests for research support from the NRF for the humanities are routinely declined, to such an extent that many colleagues now refuse to take the time necessary to seek NRF support. The NRF does not have the support of the humanities community in South Africa because the humanities community does not feel it has the support of the NRF.

The second reason refers to the funding that may be available in terms of the current policies of selective research support, organised around the exclusionary modes of key themes and areas quite contrary to the substance of academic freedom. Such selective policy must, in the long term, lead to the decline of the humanities, as selective support ultimately leads to the erosion of disciplinary reproduction. In a situation in which only certain aspects of a discipline may attract funding, the discipline as a whole will inevitably crumble.

Current NRF policy towards the humanities takes on the form of a declining of the humanities, in all senses of the term. To which this paper responds, troping Bill Clinton's favoured slogan, 'It's literacy, stupid!'

### Notes

1. In that sense, this paper endorses Miyoshi's recognition that 'administrators seem eager to write off the humanities', and his call for 'a new interventional project with which to combat the corporatization of the university and the

- mind' (Miyoshi 2000:50). For a useful survey of policy in the USA, see Miyoshi 1999 and 2000.
2. The slogan was first recommended by Bill Clinton's aide, James Carville, and figured as one of three focus points on a blackboard in the 1992 campaign headquarters.
  3. The growing awareness of the Republican Party's state of denial with regard to the economy forms a repeated theme in Clinton's own account of the formation of his own key policies. See Clinton 2005.
  4. For a useful general survey, see Barton 1994, while for some interesting and valuable counters to an over-emphasis on traditional forms of literacy, see Street 1993 and, with special reference to South Africa, Prinsloo and Breier 1996.
  5. My own sense of the term is specifically developed around the three dimensions of interpretation: the textual, the historical and the theoretical. See also Freire 1970; Higgins 1992.
  6. With particular regard to the tensions between the analytic and the contextual assessments of political philosophy, see the work of Cambridge school writers such as Skinner 2002 and Forbes 1975; for a classic statement of the usual blindness of historians to textual matters, see White 1973; while for classic statements of the blindness of several generations of literary critics to historical and theoretical questions, see Said 1983; Williams 1975.
  7. For a useful and provocative examination of the structure of founding statements in general, see Derrida 1984.
  8. Not only adverbs, of course. Further critical attention could also be fruitfully paid to the question of the causal direction of the direct relation between science and technology and progress and development; does progress and development enable investment in science and technology, or does investment in science and technology enable progress and development; somewhere, the whole question of the prior 'primitive accumulation' of cultural capital disappears from view, as if the playing fields between first and third world countries were equal; to the question of how much sense it makes for the relations between science and technology and development and progress to be treated as if they were factors that work in isolation from, say questions of biopolitics (the health of a country's citizens and workforce), and politics *tout court* (the political stability of a country, its levels of corruption and nepotism); and the questions raised by the use of 'and' in 'science and technology', is it exclusive, i.e. restricting the field to only those branches of science and technology which work in direct relation to each other, or inclusive, open to all sciences and all technologies, including, according to the definitions of science and technology the humanities and literacy, the 'technology of the intellect', as discussed below.

9. For some usefully brief surveys of global trends in this regard, see Maasen and Cloete (2002), who, in somewhat guarded terms, note that ‘the traditional pact between society and higher education has become problematic’ (2000:16).
10. Thus, for example, the annual HSRC survey of government policy for 2005-2006 has a chapter, ‘The State of Mathematics and Science Education: Schools are not equal’ (Reddy 2006). As Reddy puts it, ‘Mathematics and science are key areas of knowledge and competence for the development of an individual and the social and economic development of South Africa in a globalising world’ (2006:392). Neither the essay nor the volume as a whole had any indexed reference to literacy.
11. Barton sums up the argument succinctly, ‘Literacy arose with the coming of urbanization and more complex forms of social organization’ (Barton 1994:116). See also Goody and Watt 1968; Havelock 1982; McLuhan 1962; Olsen 1988; Ong 1982. And, for a succinct characterization of the political binding force of literacy, see Anderson 1983.
12. See, for instance, Foucault’s definition of his later work as characterised by an interest in ‘governmentality’ meaning ‘the formation of a whole series of specific government apparatuses, and...the development of a whole complex of knowledges’ (Foucault 2002:220).
13. Compare to Williams’s statement that ‘the struggle for literacy was as real a social struggle as any struggle for subsistence or food or shelter’ (Williams 1989:154). See also Higgins (1999: 174-77).
14. The following section draws on material developed for an NRF workshop, ‘The Shifting Boundaries of Knowledge’ held in Cape Town in 2004.
15. For it is certainly correct to say, in terms of more global discussions, that the antagonistic opposition has returned with a vengeance in recent responses to the efforts made since Snow’s time (i.e. post Kuhn through Harding 1993; Latour 2000; and Haraway 1992) to bridge the gaps between the ‘two cultures’ of science and the humanities. As one wounded anthropologist put it, in the wake of the Sokal Affair, ‘Scientists always stomp around meetings talking about “bridging the two-culture gap”, but when scores of people from outside the sciences begin to build just that bridge, they recoil in horror’ (Latour 2000:17).
17. Hardt and Negri present this in terms of a new vocabulary of ‘biopolitical production’. See for instance their statement that ‘we will quickly find today in many respects economic production is at the same time cultural and political. We will argue that the dominant form of contemporary production, which exerts its hegemony over the others, creates “immaterial goods” such as ideas, knowledge, forms of communication, and relationships. In such immaterial labour, production spills over beyond the bounds of the economy traditionally conceived to engage culture, society and politics directly. What is produced in

this case is not just material goods but actual social relationships and forms of life. We will call this kind of production “biopolitical” to highlight how general its products are and how directly it engages social life in its entirety’ (Hardt and Negri 2005:94).

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