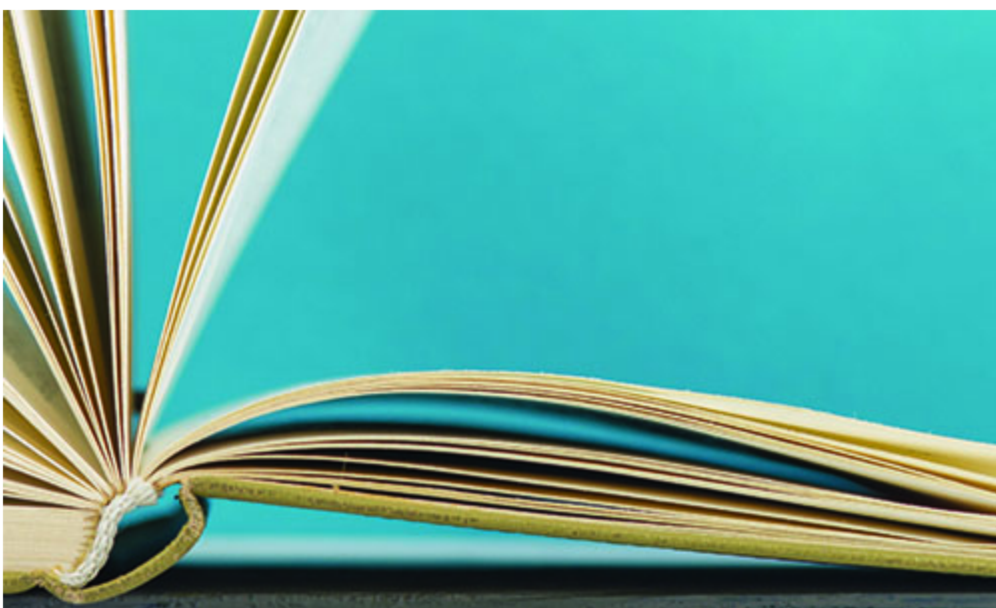
aaup.org

A Dissenting View from the Humanities on the AAUP's Statement on Knowledge

By Judith Butler

28-35 minutes



The AAUP is surely right to seek to develop a position on knowledge that would be strong enough to counter contemporary attacks on facts, disciplines, and the institutional structures and aims of the university. And yet, the question remains open: Is there a single paradigm of knowledge within the university, and is that what we need to defend ourselves against such attacks? If there are many forms of knowledge and some of them compete with one another, would it be right to say that they are all equally and rightly understood as forms of expertise? The attack on public education, on the value of a university education, and the separate attacks on the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, take different forms. To answer them, we need to confer among ourselves on the right strategy and the appropriate clarification of the aims that guide our various academic practices. The effort to establish a single conception of knowledge, or to provide a crisp summary of all that we do, would invariably privilege the hard sciences and sideline the humanities and the arts. This is especially true when knowledge is defined as a kind of expertise.

In a time in which public education must struggle to establish itself as a public good, it is incumbent upon faculty to clarify in what senses higher education is a value in our public worlds and why it should be supported. The answer provided by the recent AAUP statement *In*

Defense of Knowledge and Higher Education is that disciplines provide this value since they "produce and transmit the knowledge that sustains American democracy." They are based on methods that produce knowledge communicated by those who are experts in those methods, and this produces generations of well-informed citizens who advance society on the basis of such knowledge. Such an argument sounds partially right, but it in turn relies on a notion of progress that is hardly explained, and given that experts have surely led us astray (experts in neoliberalism, technologies of indefinite detention, nuclear war), we would have to know which version of expert knowledge is advanced and judge whether its advancement is really a public good. Since we need to know and evaluate the direction and aim of such an "advancement," we would have to rely on those humanistic disciplines explicitly devoted to critically interrogating the problem of value, justification, and the various senses of the public good.

How do we then proceed in showing the importance of the humanities and their modes of knowing and thinking for public life when STEM paradigms and market values have become the dominant ways that value is determined in higher education? We can strain to tie ourselves to the fate of the STEM fields or seek to show that our PhDs do, in fact, get jobs, but those strategies justify the humanities by relying on the assumed justification of other fields and disciplines. We would still have to answer the question of what value there is, for instance, in learning how to interpret a complex social organization of life in a specific time and place that may seem remote from our current lives, or learning a classical language that is no longer spoken. Or what about learning how to make and justify judgments about moral values or deciding on which interpretation among many is appropriate for understanding a historical document, a literary text, a painting, a digital image, or a film? These latter all involve modes of critical inquiry that are informed less by expertise than by schools of criticism and theory as well as practices of reading that have been refined and contested in the course of many decades. No one is called an "expert" in these domains, and if they were, it would be considered a laughable or arrogant appropriation from the domain of science and law to the field of the humanities, betraying an erroneous understanding of what the humanities do. Indeed, a student who simply "applied" a method to a literary text in an expert way would be faulted with a lack of critical attention or imagination. Literary schools, whether new historicism, deconstruction, or new materialist approaches (to name but a few), are not steady-state paradigms that are applied to their objects. In fact, the objects sometimes resist, interrupt, and reorient the guiding presumptions of an inquiry, and excellent scholars can end up with opposing views on how best to grasp a cultural work—and that disagreement is a sign of the field's intellectual vibrancy.

If we fear that such a description of academic life will give rise to charges of relativism, we should be prepared with a strong rejoinder. In the humanities, the text or the object, or a certain constellation of both, continues to ground competing interpretations, but the text or object does not on its own answer the question of which interpretation is most persuasive or, indeed, most interesting. It neither coughs up a criterion nor enunciates a set of rules by which it ought to be approached. The encounter is more complicated, and neither is it a merely subjective matter, depending as it does on the question posed to the object and what the

reading or interpretation can illuminate. Are there experts at illumination? Is there a way to measure the intensity of illumination? Needless to say, there is no available calculus for measuring the intensity of that kind of illumination. Only a dogmatic few would argue that only one school of thought suffices as the paradigm and the only "method" for literary and cultural studies. For the most part, literary approaches are formulated in anticipation of their critics and, depending on the criticism, are revised or discarded over time. This open-ended process is generally favored over forms of dogmatism that claim only one right way exists.

There are surely debates about how literary texts should be read in light of history, economics, slavery, violence, utopian projects, scientific vocabulary, and discovery, and debates continue about what should be included in the curriculum and whether we should be concerned with distinctions among writing, representation, and literature. Some will argue that literary studies should remain devoted to the specificity of literature at the expense of all extradisciplinary references, but others understand that social and historical forms of power and life pervade the literary text and warrant a cross-disciplinary reading. Although competing critics usually rely on plot and language to establish the common textual referents, some literary works have no plot, or are waged against the very idea of plot, and the language of a text can be tracked in many directions—narrative, figural, and historical, to name a few. And, of course, even where there is a plot, critics can argue about the part that is most important and spar over the interpretation. Shakespeare scholarship is a rich case in point. Much depends on what questions are brought to the text, and increasingly those questions are drawn from the public world, social and legal history, economics, and anthropology. The text becomes organized anew by virtue of the questions to which the text is asked to respond, and the text in turn can change the question as one reads along, especially in the context of a classroom devoted to discussion. To understand how that works, we need an account of how reading practices attend to form, but even then it would surely be neither a method nor a kind of expertise. Only in its most ossified form, the stage that heralds its passing away, does a literary or critical form of thought become a kind of expertise or a method that is applied to a text on the model of the cookie-cutter. What brings a discipline or field alive is precisely the moment when the metal on the instrument is wrecked and reformed by virtue of the obstinate character of its object, of what cannot be thought inside the prevailing frame. At such points, method is ruined, and critical thinking begins.

In Defense of Critical Inquiry

If we fear that talk of interpretation or reading will make us into targets for the right-wing attack on education, our fears may be ill-founded. After all, if the fear belied by right-wing attacks such as those espoused by Betsy DeVos is that we *indoctrinate* our students, then it will not do to argue, as the AAUP's statement on knowledge unfortunately does, that faculty are experts whose task it is to *inculcate* our students with the knowledge we have mastered. Inculcation is but one rather old and contested form of hierarchical pedagogy. Indeed, the idea that knowledge is produced by methods known and communicated best by experts draws inadvertently on the Methodist origins of *method*, the ministerial practice of inculcating parishioners with the general rule of discipleship. In the case of Methodism, that rule would be

to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Although that legacy would please some Christian skeptics, it should not be the task of universities to produce disciples (which is why some of us never teach our own work). That idea of discipleship is, in fact, the basic fear of those who claim that university professors tell students what to think, thus acting like a church and so displacing the proper role of the church in their eyes.

The strongest argument against the charge of indoctrination is *critical inquiry*—the examination of prejudices that guide our thinking, the development of modes of interpretation and judgment that allow us, for instance, to discern whether a work of art powerfully tells us about our world or whether a government acts in a just and legitimate way. Those are but two different kinds of judgment, but neither depends on expertise, understood as the simple transmission and application of a method that is analytically separable from a set of objects and their assembled formation as a field. If we insist that experts in the humanities, for instance, produce knowledge through "methods" and this knowledge is understood to be relayed or transferred through a pedagogical practice conceived as a delivery vehicle to those seeking to gain expertise, then teaching material becomes a unilateral imposition on students rather than an occasion for fostering their critical capacities for thinking, interpreting, and judging. Is pedagogy as delivery vehicle or transfer protocol really a fair and valuable way to think about what happens in the classroom, in mentoring, and in the cultivation of a new generation of scholars, researchers, and teachers who bring value to the public world?

The same issue emerges in relation to science and scientific practice. If we seek to know how scientific research is organized, whether its hypotheses sometimes prejudge its findings, or whether its paradigms depend upon the formation of consensus among communities of researchers who represent expertise in the field at a given historical time, then we are asking a sociological and historical question with scientific consequences. We are also asking how historically established paradigms of knowledge can, and do, suppress critical or dissenting views. We can end the debate by saying that all scientific methods are already established, that they were never historical, but that would entail a willful disregard of major shifts in the fields of both genetics and environmental science over the last several decades. The advancement of knowledge thus sometimes involves calling established methods into question, and this often happens by way of interdisciplinary encounters that grasp a field of objects, an established body of facts, in new, more capacious, and more illuminating ways. In fact, the field of science studies seeks to think critically and historically about the concepts and objects that scientific practice tends to take for granted, very often calling upon other disciplines to reflect upon the workings of its own. As an interdisciplinary field, it takes a critical approach to method as its proper object, but it has no single method. If some then say it should be disqualified as knowledge, we have living proof of the power dynamics at work in policing the terms of expertise. Surely any university should offer courses that critically reflect on various methods and their objects of inquiry. To do that, a university must value critical reflection. But where is meta-reflection or critical inquiry in the model of knowledge proposed by the AAUP statement on knowledge? Where in this definition of knowledge is interdisciplinarity and its power to remap the

disciplines? Where are the arts and the humanities?

Dismayed by the attack on facts by Donald Trump and others who dismiss climate change or seek to suppress scientific inquiries that potentially contest the wisdom of contemporary public policy, we are surely right to insist on facts. We may well need to make the case for facts in a world in which they are increasingly denied, but that does not mean that we should construct an ideal of knowledge that installs facts as the basis of all disciplinary work in the academy. What a win for positivism! It is surely but one view to claim that facts are established through "methods" applied by experts distinguished by their schooling in precisely those methods. Philosophically, this view is perhaps closer to Descartes than to either Hume or Kant. Such debates are not possible to settle in short texts such as these, but they should be marked. I would argue that literary and art criticism do not proceed in this way, even though many historiographical and philological facts are important for the kinds of interpretations that emerge within these fields. The point, however, is that the kind of knowledge produced by reading and interpretation of fiction, art, and imaginary worlds is not only or primarily about "facts." A clear distinction must be drawn between a distortion or suppression of scientific findings, such as the denial of climate change, and the unreality of literary fictions or any number of nonmimetic works of art, film, music, and dance. We would be guilty of a dangerous overreaction to the right-wing attack on facts if we decided to base our justification for the humanities on the defense of facts and the return to crude forms of positivism in literary studies. The larger point is that sometimes only imaginary worlds can shed light on history or modes of life, on moral dilemmas and emotional realities, including, for instance, the animate and vocal traces of the history of subjugation in novels by Toni Morrison. They chart human longing and aspiration but also constitute modes of linguistic or representational experimentation that depart from established schools and methods and make their mark by doing so. They leave reality behind on purpose in order to bring to the fore the possibilities of the materials and media through which we generally represent reality.

The AAUP's statement at one point makes the mistake of arguing that what qualifies literary scholarship as knowledge are the facts established about their context or production, thus prizing old-school historicism as the humanities' only way to avoid trafficking in falsehood. This formulation vacates literary form, suggesting that the rest is, well, bunk. It is, of course, reasonable to claim that "to know whether Caliban is Shakespeare's comment on colonization in the Americas, we need to know both the facts of Elizabethan expansion and the history of Elizabethan theater," but do we know how to read Shakespeare once we have that history down? A good reading of Shakespeare's language, or what he does with that history within the terms of his dramatic text, will never emerge on the basis of those historical "facts." If we say that those facts alone make the reading into "knowledge," then we have lost sight of the epistemic value of literary production, more fully undermining the case for the humanities. Pointing out those facts will never be the same as producing a compelling reading, although a reading that makes good use of those facts for clarifying the text will be enriched as a result. For a reading to be literary, one would have to track what the literary figure does in the form of the play and read that in relation to its various contexts, allowing the literary and the historical to

inform each other but also situating the reading in the present, showing why, for instance, we have many reasons to read Shakespeare now (the self-defeating logic of tyranny among them). Although some general guidelines might launch such a study, nothing substitutes for a reading. And a reading that simply follows or applies a method would be quickly dismissed as derivative, obedient, and unthinking. A mindless application of method results in the impoverishment of the humanities. No peer review would accept an expert application of method as sufficient scholarship, since it would rest on a fundamental misconception about the discipline.

The issue of communication is important as well for understanding faculty personnel decisions, because they consider how the transmission of knowledge will take place. Hiring committees ask whether candidates communicate well their area of specialization to nonspecialists and consider what that tells us about how they would teach students who are interested in the field but do not have yet have a background in that area. The "vote" is the judgment not of experts but rather of nonexperts, and what is judged is not only the knowledge that someone has but also the way they can communicate to the nonspecialist and solicit interest in their field. This is one rationale for including the interview, the talk, and guest teaching in classrooms as part of the hiring process. The "transmission" of knowledge requires a practice of pedagogy, a mode of mentoring, and skill at communicating and presenting materials. One does not heave a bucket full of facts to the other side of the room and hope that someone can catch it. The language one uses to talk about a field is itself an act of transmitting the field, so can we understand transmission without language? If one is teaching in translation, or about translation, then transmission is the object of inquiry. In many language and comparative literature programs that depend on translation for their basic texts, the problem of transmission proves to be as complex as it is necessary: Can a text be effectively transmitted from one language to another? What is lost and what is gained as it enters into a foreign language and becomes a foreign text, estranged from its origin? The same can be said about language instruction. What are the conditions and limits of transmissibility? The rules can be communicated in ways that allow for their mechanical reproduction, or they can be learned through practice, coming to life as they are bound up with the life of a language, its daily use. Only some instructors know how to teach rules in that way. Those who teach well do not treat every group of students the same: they adapt the method; they cull some aspect of it and leave the rest behind; they experiment by using several methods in order to find a way to connect and communicate not only the rules of language but the love of language and an appreciation of its specific power to articulate and expand our sense of what we know and how we know.

Significantly, the key terms of concern in the AAUP statement—knowledge, method, facts, and transmission—are all objects of study within the academy, conceived as problems that solicit a wide range of interpretive views and which are hardly settled. If we follow the Socratic mode of inquiry, then we take each term and ask about its meaning, soliciting students for their views and testing those views against standards of consistency and noncontradiction. But in more modern contexts, we undertake a critical inquiry, asking new questions that emerge from our historical situation. For instance, whose knowledge counts as knowledge, and what ways of knowing are generally discounted or devalued (indigenous modes of knowing, popular culture,

dance or film or visual images, not just the forms of criticism that attend to these art forms and modes of cultural production)? How have those criteria changed in time (a historical question), and what kinds of knowing are there that do not regularly count as knowledge (an anthropological question, but also an artistic one)? What kind of knowledge can be transmitted easily, and what kind poses a problem for transmission? What do we mean by transmission? Is it unilateral, automatic, transparent? Through what medium does it take place, and how does that medium both form and limit what we can know? In what sense is film or media a "transmission," and is its "content" really separate from its mode of being transmitted? In a sense, the humanities are equipped to ask critical questions about all of these terms, which does not mean that they dispute their value. Critical thought is not destruction; it is, rather, the opening of the mind to be alert to how our world has been and could be organized, and at what expense—at whose expense. Critical inquiry is not itself a method but a questioning approach that seeks to reflect upon settled methods and to understand forms of knowledge in relation to the social conditions and forms of power they register, reflect, and reformulate. One might respond that only some people are equipped to pose critical questions well, and that they are the "experts" in critical theory or critical thinking. But smart students often take the lead, and those of us who are willing to learn from them experience an important humility that pushes against our expert status. We allow our thinking to become dismantled and reoriented when asked to explain why we proceed in the classroom in the way that we do. That process is hardly graspable within the model of expert knowledge and its transmission.

Keeping the Hard Questions Open

As important as it is to defend the facts of scientific knowledge against those who would deny their validity and use, it is equally important not to extend an easy positivism to the social sciences and the humanities (or indeed to the sciences). If we admit that paradigms shift throughout all these modes of knowledge, that does not mean that all forms of knowledge are equally grounded or that none of them are valid. It means only that we have to ask what, if anything, grounds them, call for a demonstration, and decide the terms of that demonstration. That is the meaning of critique that goes as far back as Kant. Without it, we fall into forms of dogma or radical skepticism. Keeping the hard questions open is part of what we do, and it is arguably the best case against the accusation of both elitism and indoctrination. If this is so, then perhaps we can revisit the question of the relationship between knowledge and democracy. The statement on knowledge rightly reminds us, through citing Thomas Kuhn, that "we do not submit questions of scientific knowledge to a vote" and concludes that "knowledge is not about our political preferences; it is about the nature of the world." It is true that the nature of the world cannot be decided by tallying up preferences, and neither can notions like justice be decided on the basis of what most people think it should be. And yet, democracy does require the voicing of all kinds of opinions, grounded or not, and when the most preposterous of them find their way into the classroom, they have to be discussed and adjudicated. Bad or wrong views become the topics of a critical pedagogical encounter.

All kinds of opinions are voiced in the classroom. That free marketplace of ideas often bursts through the classroom door, at which point a pedagogical effort has to be made to distinguish

between kinds of viewpoints and to cultivate forms of judgment that allow students better to evaluate the world in which they live and the popular opinions that circulate. Those opinions are not, or should not be, excluded from the classroom; they are, to some extent, the materials that have to be worked on, or through, in the classroom when they emerge. Although the classroom is surely not a place where faculty politics should be instilled in students, it is very often a place where a wide range of political views are voiced and should be addressed in thoughtful ways. If we argue, as the AAUP has done, that the university is disciplinary, and that this distinguishes it from political institutions, then we decide that whole departments and programs within the university do not really belong there. This claim, which willfully misrepresents the contemporary university, gives support to those who would seek to defund the interdisciplinary arts and humanities precisely at a time when those fields are producing some of the best scholarship we have. The claim also overstates the distinction between the university and the political field because it misses the way that politics enters into the classroom and the challenge to pedagogy that most of us are grappling with in our daily lives to cultivate better judgment and clearer insight. It cannot account for striking graduate students or the politics of labor that conditions the contemporary university classroom. If taken seriously, it would undermine the very mandate that has led the AAUP for decades. The distinction between the sphere of the university and that of politics does not hold. If we accept that argument, we deprive ourselves of a way of understanding the contemporary university as a politically controversial institution—suspected of left-wing leanings, defunded by public sources, colonized by grant-rich STEM fields at the expense of the humanities and the arts—and we miss the "fact" that universities can be, and ought to be, the place where a wide range of views can be discussed both within the classroom and extramurally. Indeed, it is the thoughtful and reflective discussion of those views that distinguishes the university from, say, a Twitter storm or an election rally and identifies it as a place where there must be a commitment to difficult dialogues of this kind. And like all dialogues, it has its limits and its conditions but also its value for the public world.

If we then reconsider the contribution of universities to the public good, is it right to separate the public or common good from the field of politics? This seems right only if politics is reduced to partisan affiliation or viewpoint. Politics is the sphere of the public good; it is the activity by which a people come together to debate their values and set a common course for their future. The very meaning of governance is tied up with the public good. Deciding on what counts as a public good is a proper question for both political deliberation and academic debate. It would ideally include another question: Does the representative government provide adequate funding for public educational institutions based on the understanding of knowledge as a public good? Quite apart from transmitting expert knowledge based on methods, the university also contributes to the public good by cultivating the powers of judgment that are necessary for living as a citizen in the public world and helping to decide its future course and basic values. Those include the ability to read texts and images critically, to navigate archives, and to evaluate arguments, propaganda, and government and journalistic documents. Such judgments can also help us decide when to dissent and when to comply, and on what grounds to affirm or contest public policy and even the legitimacy of governments.

"Critical thinking" can never be "inculcated," nor can it be transmitted through a delivery vehicle that simply trucks content from one location to another without regard for how the vehicle affects the content, and vice versa. Inculcation is surely a close relative of indoctrination and the doctrines of repetitive spiritual discipline that, historically considered, inform the discourse on "method," instilling or implanting knowledge in the student as a form of beneficent subjugation. If universities contribute to the public good, as they surely should, then it will be in part by helping through pedagogy to incite students to form viewpoints they can ably defend, to cultivate judgments about the world, to read critically the documents that are presented as authoritative, and to pay attention to the medium and the method through which facts are presented as facts. We do not have to sacrifice the democratic value of critical thought in order to defeat those who dangerously challenge the validity of scientific knowledge. We will not change anyone's views by prying open students' minds and implanting ideas. It is the difficult conversations that change the ideas of experts and nonexperts alike, compelling us to consider ways of knowing and schemes of values we have not considered before. We would have to learn how to listen and be transformed by that listening in order to rise to the pedagogical challenge of these times, to foster critical thought in the face of anti-intellectualism, prejudice, willful distortion, and dogma.

As much as we need to establish the legitimacy of entire bodies of knowledge, we also have to ask what form critical thinking takes now, what kinds of questions must remain open, what new (or old) ways of knowing also deserve a place in the academy. Interdisciplinarity is not the breakdown of the disciplines; it gives the disciplines new life and porous boundaries, relating them to one another under the expanding rubric of the university, allowing for new modes of knowledge more keenly responsive to a changing and imperiled world—critical for our times.

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. They are currently the codirector of the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs and the 2020 president of the Modern Language Association. They represent only their own views in this piece.