

Liberal Arts and Sciences and liberal democracy

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1. A manmade project.

Liberal democracy is a manmade project. It does not appeal to a higher power, such as a God, a messiah, or any other undisputed authority. That is new and unique, and is why Fukuyama characterized liberal democracy as *The End of History*: the evolutionary outcome of centuries of industrial and technological development, of individualization and the emancipation of the citizen. Free citizens themselves are now in charge.

It does mean, though, that this project is never finished. Free citizens are constantly forced to create new anchors, new institutions to hold on. And they did; they managed to devise 'constitutions' that formulated the citizen's freedoms and responsibilities. They also offered tools to help them coexist with people of different opinions and social and cultural backgrounds. And with Montesquieu's *Trias Politica* a certain order and sequence of administrative actions was created that thwarted self-proclaimed messiahs and autocrats in their quest for power.

2. The culture of difference vs the real world

But all that (and much more) doesn't take away from the fact that a liberal democracy demands quite a bit from its citizens. For it needs citizens to be able and willing to not only understand and tolerate differences of opinion, but also sort of appreciate them. It requires serious levels of reasoning and rational thinking among them, the ability to empathize with others, to understand where opinions come from, to recognize one's own limitations and prejudices, and understand that one's own freedom could harm the freedom of others. It also assumes the citizen's ability to consider today's actions in the light of the future and to realize that their actions can and will have "side effects" here and now. And it requires the courage to question taboos and other taken-for-granted beliefs. In fact, the ideal liberal democracy is built on what I have once called *a culture of difference, i.e. the deeply shared belief that differences are the building blocks of modern society*. Such a culture thrives on the ordered confrontation of differences, on debate and discussion, on mutual criticism, opposition and representation.

But we all know that the real world doesn't live up to this lofty ideal. The relatively short history of our liberal democracies is littered with incidents that are more like Hobbes' *homo homini lupus* than manifestations of a *culture of difference*. But instead of dismissing the ideal altogether, we had better think of measures that might bring reality closer to the ideal. There is simply no other option. The question is therefore how the ideal of the liberal democracy can withstand the ever-increasing pressure of technological innovation, industrialization and individualization, notably the very same evolutionary forces that gave us our freedom in the first place.

3. Education for liberal democracy

Education has always been at the heart of measures that try to bring a perceived reality closer to whatever lofty ideals we may have. When confronted with the qualities free citizens are supposed to have, it is clear that they don't come naturally. They have to be learned. As long as we adhere to the liberal democratic ideal, there is no alternative but to invest in an educational system geared towards those qualities. But do we have such a system?

I am afraid we do not. In recent history our educational system has allowed for a growing gap to emerge between two essential components of education: the cognitive and the moral. We even have two distinct words for those two components: training vs upbringing (in Dutch: *onderwijs en opvoeding*). The consequence has been that the 'training' has become a matter of schools and the 'upbringing' a matter of families. Schools (and universities) have been focusing on the cognitive dimension of education and less on its moral aspects, including the qualities that future citizens should possess in a modern democracy. At a time of fundamental changes and cultural variations

in household formation this doesn't fit any more; families need stronger support precisely for this moral component. Therefore, the school system, including universities, should take a greater part of the educational responsibility.

The Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) movement is an attempt at turning the tables. Limiting this 2-pager to the university, the *alma mater*, the introduction of LAS is one of the more important measures to turn its education into a 'maternity ward' of liberal democracy. It is education in its broadest sense, as it combines and integrates both cognitive and moral dimensions. LAS education strives for youngsters to become free, intelligent and responsible citizens, and is therefore the natural and logical platform for a liberal democracy. By combining, or rather integrating, the two components of education, it attempts to raise free and responsible citizens into educated and well-rounded persons. An LAS-university is more than a training institute: it's a democratic microcosm that produces well-rounded academic bachelors who won't lose their critical and responsible sense when they finally end up as doctors, engineers, priests, researchers or businessmen.

4. How does LAS help?

The liberal arts philosophy provides us with a way out of two interrelated problems from which most of our continental universities have suffered for a long time. The first is the (vertical) pillarization of mostly monodisciplinary programmes in universities, which turns out to be completely contrary to the more horizontal *culture of difference* that forms the ideal basis of the liberal democracy. The second problem is that those 'pillars' are not able to adequately achieve the three legitimate objectives of university education.

Let's start with the second problem. Bildung, Research and Professionalism (B, R and P) are usually seen as the three main objectives of any university programme. By having to combine them in one and the same undifferentiated 'pillar', all three are likely to fall short of reaching their goal. That problem was finally solved by the Bologna agreement in 1999, where the 'pillar' was divided into a bachelor's and a master's stage, implying that the first stage would prioritize the broad Bildung aspect and the master's stage be used for either a research track or a vocational/professional track. It is sad, though, that not many universities have seized this opportunity. LAS schools did.

The first problem, the pillarization itself, has been under attack since the 1980s, but was never replaced by a more horizontal or matrix-kind of organizational set-up. University teachers and researchers rather remained in their trenches and whatever attempts at stepping out were – and are – easily dismissed as unscientific. Ironically, they are now being overtaken by AI. By offering a broad academic LAS curriculum in the bachelor's stage, where students combine a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, this problem has been solved – certainly also because it has proven to be a better, broader and more academic basis for either the R- or the P-track at the master's stage.

Personally, I believe that there is a third problem to be solved. The idea of the constant confrontation of differences won't achieve its maximum effectiveness unless students get the chance to get to know their teachers and fellow students as thoroughly as possible, to be able to look them in the eyes and have serious discussions among them. That means that anonymity and distance are detrimental to the intentions of the liberal arts philosophy, and particularly within the bachelor's stage. Therefore, instead of having dozens (or hundreds!) of pillarized disciplinary programmes in our universities (within which students are likely to meet only students like themselves), a set-up of various, preferably international, liberal arts colleges of limited size (around 600 students and a recognizable faculty) would help to fulfil the promises of liberal arts philosophy as well as liberal democracy. Every one of those colleges would represent a 'home' to its students and serve as their *alma mater*. Many people would say that this is way more costly than the current set-up. But I honestly believe it isn't. And anyhow, wasn't it Derek Bok who said: "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance".