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Review of What do you think, Mr. Ramirez? The American revolution in education

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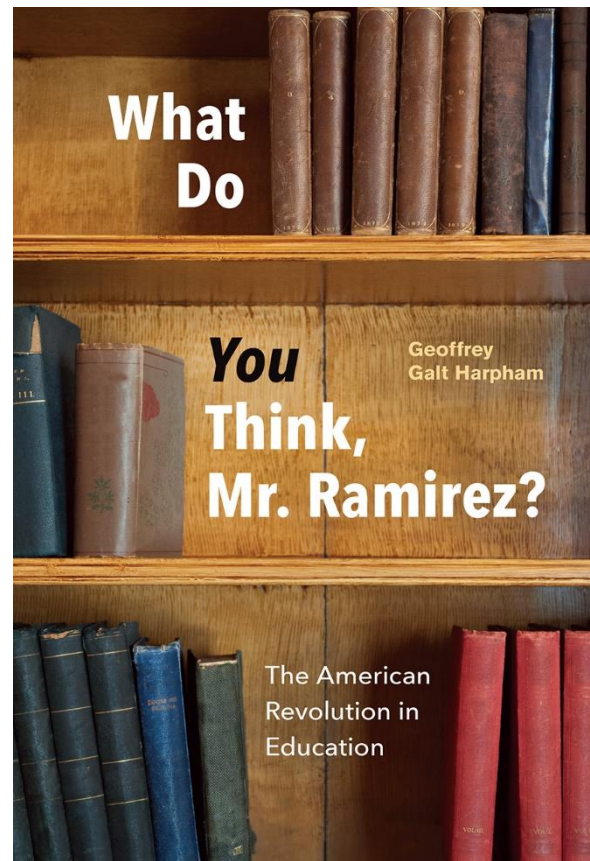
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To fully embrace the eloquently written book, *What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez? The American Revolution in Education*, readers must acquiesce to author Geoffrey Galt Harpham's opening premise that the American system of higher education, specifically general education, is in serious jeopardy. Once the epitome of "self-confidence, success, and public support" (p. 5), the U.S. higher education system, according to author, has atrophied to a mere "ghostly form of distribution requirements" (p. 47).

Certainly, others share his sentiment. In 2015, the American Association of Colleges and Universities called for a re-envisioning of general education (Gaston, 2015). That same year, Harvard, the very birthplace of general education and home to the sacred chronicle of general education, *General Education in a Free Society* (Conant, 1945), published an autopsy of its general education program in the *Crimson* (Aspelund, 2015). Startling when considered in isolation, the postulate of a failing general



education system reaches an alarming, perhaps even a terrifying status as Harpham portrays the precarious status of America's general education system as an imminent threat to the viability of a democratic society.

In a significant portion of the book, Harpham recounts efforts of an influential cast of ideologues who viewed universal, general, and liberal higher education as a means to forestall an emergence of an elitist and potentially tyrannical ruling class as well as create a common American experience and shared heritage. They believed such a system would promote individual self-determination and secure the American version of democracy. Perhaps a bit predictably, yet necessary to Harpham's thesis, the book delineates the influence of people such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams. Likewise, the inclusion of individuals such as John Dewey, James Bryant Conant, Frederick Douglass, and Ralph Waldo Emerson provides few surprises to anyone with a background in American education. However, the author chronicles the contributions of these and other lesser-known individuals with a level of detail certain to enrich any reader's understanding of American general education.

To clarify, Harpham persuasively asserts the general education content best equipped to shoulder the tremendous responsibility of sustaining American democratic ideals are the humanities, specifically English literature. The study of English literature prepares citizenry to not only form opinions but to publically express and ultimately influence the opinion of others. These skills, represent the foundational concepts of the American Revolution including the desire of the founding fathers "to avoid any sense of unanimity, and to erect a permanent law that ensured that the public would remain plural and heterogeneous, with generous provision made for dissenting opinions" (p. 78). Of course, this aspiration requires a populist approach, one in which

exposure to, and interpretation of literature is afforded to the masses.

Thus, enter the protagonist named in the book's title, Mr. Ramirez. Ramirez, a fictional immigrant student studying at a fictional community college, enrolls in a literature class in order to fulfill his general education requirements. At one point in this class, the professor asks him the meaning of a Shakespearian sonnet. To be exact, his instructor asks Ramirez, "What do *you* think?" (p. 3). The question awakens within Ramirez the realizations of his capability to not only form an individual opinion, but that his opinions are of sufficient value to share with others. This awareness changes the life trajectory of Ramirez who goes on to become a comparative literature professor.

Harpham contends this same question embodies great significance for the American society. According to Harpham, the question represents an educational philosophy with national implications for the United States – the nuanced and critical intersection of literary criticism with the formation of opinion. The potential impact of students who can skillfully explain and defend their interpretation of complex literary texts reaches far beyond a myopic ability to affect opinions of fellow students. Within this confluence, the analysis of commonly studied classics, such as Shakespeare and the Great Books, advances the capacity of the American citizenry to judge, evaluate, and interpret the sacrosanct United States Constitution. Equally important, citizens learn "to argue for their interpretation in public discourse" (p. 108).

The ability to interpret the grandiose text of the Constitution, as well as the appreciation and expectation that all and anyone can form opinions and publically challenge existing interpretations of the venerated document, nourishes a participatory democracy. In Harpham's words,

"Slaves, women, workers, religious groups, gun rights advocates, abortion

opponents, political advocacy groups, and other aggrieved parties have come before the courts seeking to persuade the justices to see what they see, reading the Constitution as if it were the expression of their commitments and desires. Their occasional success in doing so proves that the Constitution is as flexible as it is unchanging. Indeed, the very fixity of the Constitution has enabled it to be reimagined and repossessed by a people who read in its lofty and unchanging generalities an abiding assurance of the legitimacy of their own struggles against hierarchy, power, privilege, and the consensus of the moment.” (p. 97).

Readers may pause and wonder what prioritizes English over other disciplines within the humanities, which also involves interpretation and public discourse. In the final section of the book, Harpham evinces the predominant role of English by paying particular homage to a modernized approach to literary criticism advanced by Ivor Armstrong Richards. Although an Englishman who taught at Cambridge, Richards wielded enormous influence and transformed literary criticism in the United States. According to Richards, actualizing the poignant civic benefits of a populace capable of interpreting great literary works required deliberate pedagogical methods. Methods that were best taught by university professors.

American New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom democratized Richards’ literary criticism, particularly as it pertained to poetry. For Ransom, the interpretation of poetry protracted beyond Richards’ methodical and confined discernment of a poem through isolated analysis of the text. Rather, interpretation of a poem demanded an understanding of the poet who wrote it. Thus, literary criticism required more than a professor to teach students a scientific method

of poetry analysis. It also called for “insight into the human condition, human achievement, and human frailty” (p. 143) and this involved a “rude and patchy business that could be done, if not always done well, by anyone” (pp. 145-146).

What might Mr. Ramirez think of Harpham’s latest work? As an established academic, an older Ramirez would likely appreciate the masterfully written text as well as Harpham’s thoroughly researched and thoughtfully constructed arguments. Presumably, an emeritus professor such as Ramirez would concur that centering general education in the humanities and specifically entrusting English professors with the responsibility of preparing the masses for engagement within a civil democratic society remains the best hope reviving and enlivening general education.

Harpham’s audience for this book is likely his academic colleagues such as the fictive Mr. Ramirez. However, the older Ramirez and other academics may not be the people most in need of this message. Arguably, it is the masses on the periphery of academia as well as the undergraduate students symbolized by a younger Ramirez for whom this message is essential. Harpham’s book can achieve its full impact, its revolutionary potential, only if it reaches those outside of academia, those skeptical of general education’s importance and ready to conduct its post-mortem. Unfortunately, people outside of academia may perceive the book as yet another grandiloquent, pedantic thesis, disconnected from the very populace Harpham heralds as the champion of democratic discourse. As such, those in higher education must do everything possible to translate Harpham’s compelling message to those beyond the ivory towers of the academy because in an era of deep ideological division, America desperately needs its citizenry to reimagine and repossess the Constitution and revive productive and civil public discourse.

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About the Reviewer

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