



The Humanities and the Dream of America

Geoffrey Galt Harpham

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In this bracing and original book, Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues that today's humanities are an invention of the American academy in the years following World War II, when they were first conceived as an expression of American culture and an instrument of American national interests. The humanities portray a "dream of America" in two senses: they represent an aspiration of Americans since the first days of the Republic for a state so secure and prosperous that people could enjoy and appreciate culture for its own sake; and they embody in academic terms an idealized conception of the American national character. Although they are struggling to retain their status in America, the concept of the humanities has spread to other parts of the world and remains one of America's most distinctive and valuable contributions to higher education.

The Humanities and the Dream of America explores a number of linked problems that have emerged in recent years: the role, at once inspiring and disturbing, played by philology in the formation of the humanities; the reasons for the humanities' perpetual state of "crisis"; the shaping role of philanthropy in the humanities; and the new possibilities for literary study offered by the subject of pleasure. Framed by essays that draw on Harpham's pedagogical experiences abroad and as a lecturer at the U.S. Air Force Academy, as well as his vantage as director of the National Humanities Center, this book provides an essential perspective on the history, ideology, and future of this important topic.

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