

Essay

## Humanities under Pressure\*

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**Abstract:** The Humanities have a problem with visibility both in the public sphere and in the academic system itself, and they have an organisational problem when compared with other sections of the academic system. They also have a funding problem, particularly in a European context, *i.e.*, in the framework of the European research policy. The topic of this position paper is the essential role of the Humanities when dealing with the European project, the framing of Europe. In this respect, in contrast to the natural and social sciences, the Humanities need specific models of research funding, more individualised and of more interdisciplinary character. Additionally, they may need more multi-national centres for advanced studies on a European level, thus also solving their visibility and organisational problems.

**Keywords:** humanities in Europe; organisational problems; visibility; models of research funding; multi-national centres for advanced studies

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### 1. Introduction: Problems

The humanities have a problem with visibility both in the public sphere and in the academic system itself, and they have an organizational problem when compared with other sections of the academic system. They also have a funding problem, particularly in a European context, *i.e.*, in the framework of European research policy.

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Let me raise at the beginning six critical comments about the inner difficulties faced by the humanities with regard to themselves, which are part of their visibility and organizational problems. My remarks aim to point out the consequences of different research approaches recently developed in response to the challenge to reform academic humanities.

1. A strong *trend toward isolation*. The estrangement that emerged between the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences in the course of the development of modern *academia* repeats itself on a smaller scale between the various disciplines in the humanities. Today, for example, literary studies in France and Germany have developed their own philosophy (for the most part), and linguistics its own literature. Disciplinary self-sufficiency or disciplinary imperialism is spreading when competencies in other disciplinary areas are involved. Despite the interdisciplinary rhetoric, disciplines in the humanities have less and less to say to each other.
2. Together with the trend to extra-disciplinary isolation there is also a trend to *intradisciplinary isolation*. Linguistics dissociates itself from philology, the empirical science of human development from education, literary theory from literary history. What had originally been a common language among disciplines is fading away. Suddenly, Babylon is everywhere in the humanities.
3. Individual disciplines in the humanities are increasingly plagued by *paradigm shifts* (not always sufficiently protected from fashionable trends) or, even more irritating, by simultaneous paradigm shifts. In history such paradigms are, for example, social research and narrativity or, in philosophy, hermeneutics and philosophy of science. Here, too, common conceptions are beginning to disappear. Schools compete with each other over the monopoly of definitions in individual disciplines.
4. With their unfortunate love of their idealistic origins (at least within the tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in Germany) and with their unclear relationship to the natural and social sciences, the humanities are becoming increasingly undefinable. When the disciplines fragment, it is impossible to determine their place within the system of science (which in this case is at least retained as an idea). An indication of the general disorientation visible in this process is the unwelcome proliferation of the “trendy” production of what we call in German *was-ist-und-warum* literature, namely reflections of the various disciplines of the humanities, dealing with their own disputed status. Such a preoccupation with the very purpose of one’s own field is indeed indicative of a crisis concerning the very legitimacy of the research programme. Will the same thing happen to the humanities as happened to the dinosaurs? The Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association alone numbers over 3000 philosophers. One is tempted to say that a handful of them in ancient Greece accomplished more.
5. The humanities are to an increasing extent unable to cope with the fact that they not only *study* culture but are also *part of* culture. The historical dimensions are becoming too large. The result is a loss of effectiveness. Whoever has to constantly deal with giants (in our intellectual culture), becomes either a giant in his own right or a dwarf. In addition to the impending fate of the dinosaurs there is also the misery of the dwarf. Today, the “normal” academic in the humanities is only a weak memory of the scientific ideal represented so impressively in the 18th century, for example, by the “philosophe”.

6. All of this considered, *quality assessment* in the humanities becomes also a difficult enterprise of course. Wherever no common disciplinary guidelines exist, there are also no common standards of assessment.

In my view, the difficulties outlined here are also mirrored in the organizational problem of the humanities. Wherever things drift apart in disciplinary matters, they are unlikely to harmonize in matters of organization. However, that is just what would be necessary in order to speak with one voice of the needs of the humanities to the scientific system, to the public, and to Europe. Let us now explore the other side of the coin.

## 2. Europe and the Humanities

After examining the inward aspect of the difficulties the humanities have with regard to themselves, let us focus on the marginal role played by the humanities in the public space of the European societies and on the reasons for it, as they may appear through the lenses of a conceptual analysis.

Nobody would ask a question like “why are the natural sciences relevant to Europe”, or “why are the social sciences relevant to Europe”. It is obvious that modern society depends on the efficiency of the natural and the social sciences, including political sciences as well as economics and jurisprudence, but does it also depend on the efficiency of the humanities? Many seem to believe that this is not the case, that the world of the humanities is just the academic world, and that their contribution to modern society and its future, compared with the contributions of other disciplines, is negligible, also with respect to the European project, the framing of Europe. Perhaps, with one exception. It is sometimes said that the aim of the humanities is to compensate the damages arising due to technological progress. It should, however, be clear that this is a very restricted view on the humanities and their role in the past and today, particularly with regard to Europe and what the essence of European culture is.

In an earlier statement on the humanities in Europe [1,2], the *Academia Europaea* has stressed the fact that the modern world is, more than ever, a product of human interaction with the natural and social world. Only people well-educated in the core disciplines shaping the modern world, which includes the thoughts and ideologies of mankind, will be able to profit fully from the wealth of human achievements, and be able to grasp in their complexity, and attempt to solve, today’s problems and challenges. For example, the radical political changes we have experienced in Europe, and will continue to experience, necessitate a high degree of intellectual flexibility in its citizens. It is only by understanding other civilizations, countries, and social structures, that a deep unification going far beyond a shared political and economic apparatus may be achieved. Research into the existing social conditions, intellectual histories, and political systems is, in this respect, a prerequisite for reaching such understanding, and hence is a basic condition for the sound development of the European Union with its own identity as a union of enlightened citizens. This is, the statement continues, why the humanities are equally deserving of public support, and why policy should aim at fostering the interest in the humanities just as it should justifiably foster interest in the natural and social sciences. This is, in a way, the easy answer.

At the same time a process were to be undone, in which under the dominance of the modern incantations of globalization, of innovation, of societies of information and knowledge, the humanities have lost their public status, and are furthermore threatened by their marginalization in the systems of

science and research. In the Europe of research, of researchers, the humanities scarcely play a role when compared to the natural and the social sciences. This may be due in main to political and economic priorities. However, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the idea and the reality of the humanities, above all the discrepancy between idea and reality, are also involved. This leads to the more difficult answer.

Notwithstanding the role the humanities themselves play in the process mentioned, the humanities' loss of status reflects a cultural loss in society. The latter—and this holds equally well for European society—no longer understands that all of its work- and life-forms are expressions of a *cultural form of the world* [3]. By cultural form I do not mean that part of an amputated culture that was marked as the territory of the humanities in the framework of the so-called *two-cultures debate*. According to Charles Percy Snow who started this debate, the relations between a scientific and a basically humanistic culture are essentially characterized by mutual ignorance and impoverishment, although the humanities come off significantly worse than the natural sciences in the comparison [4]. Snow says, the natural sciences have “the future in their bones”, the humanities have only the past in mind. The natural sciences are science, weighing and measuring, the humanities are “literature” or learning and remembrance. This, however, is less a description—in some cases it may be true—than a misunderstanding. What we need is a broader concept of culture, a concept that includes the natural sciences, technology and the humanities as its parts, and which reveals itself as the totality of all human labour and forms of life.

In the humanities, one is concerned with this concept, *i.e.*, with the cultural form of the world in general, and with the repeated effort of validating this form. This, again, will not be done along the way of positive knowledge such as the positive sciences provide (in the sense of *dispositional knowledge*) but rather along the lines of *orientational knowledge*. Even if there is no orientational science in the strict sense, there is indeed an orientational task which should also be served by science. That here the humanities are especially called upon lies in the fact that the objects that they study, e.g., historical and literary objects, themselves often have an orientational form. In research in the humanities this form is joined to the cultural form of the world.

A self-validation, which is a culture's living knowledge of itself in the form of a science, is of equal importance to the development and stabilization of modern societies as their scientifically supported technical know-how. The humanistic understanding would not only have to say how the world once *was* before it became the modern world, but also how the modern world *is* as opposed, for instance, to the technological understanding that says what this world *can do*. Without an awareness of what they are, modern societies and the modern world are in danger of losing all orientation in the midst of their overpowering know-how. Therefore, there is indeed a systematic connection between the humanities and orientation without, however, making orientational sciences out of the humanities. On the other hand, this does not mean a thorough-going historization. The reality of the mind is always also its history, but the mind does not “belong” to its history. While the humanities are always also educated knowledge, this does not mean that they are purely educational sciences. Again, the justification of the humanities and their actual tasks could and should consist in a self-validation of modern culture—particularly, in facing the future role of Europe.

Indeed, culture is that form in which the modern world might also preserve, or regain, its *humanity*. Furthermore, it is the most creative form of orientation, of oriented dealings with a common world, of

transformations of the world into *our* world. Where culture fades, our orientations fade, and the modern world loses its human dynamic, the subject loses his freedom of motion and of judgement. So, Leonardo da Vinci was also right with regard to the cultural form of the world: He who is tied to a star, doesn't turn back [5].

Europe's star is its culture—not as a tourist attraction, but in the encompassing sense in which culture is the essence of all life- and work-forms, in which it is a form of the world. This could be a future role of Europe and the humanities in Europe. For when everything is measured only by its economic value, this value itself loses its meaning, or at the least its basis in a frame of reference, for such a frame cannot itself be primarily economic. This is the actual source of so many contemporary debates that have gripped modern society, as well as being what is responsible for so much of the imprecision and superficiality of the modern rhetoric of modernization. Talk of the information society that we have supposedly already become, and of the knowledge society which we are to be, does not change anything, quite aside from the fact that these concepts enchant not the least through their enchanting lack of clarity. This too should call the humanities to action, for, after all, the theory of a knowledge society will surely be a “humanistic” theory.

Will it also be an *idealistic, Hegelian* theory like the theory of the humanities itself? According to Hegel, the humanities, *i.e.*, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, are instances of the *objective spirit*, in so far as justice, the state and morality form the *Dasein of spirit*. The objective spirit becomes as a result the essence of culture and education. In the eyes of a culture of learning, all sciences are the same. For instance, there are no *merely* cultural sciences as opposed to the natural sciences, as the *Geisteswissenschaften* later come to be misperceived. Learning (*Bildung*) is, in Hegel's view, a concretion of the morals of a rational culture. Only to the extent that the “highest peak of learning of a people” is “to grasp the thought of its life and its condition, the science of its laws, its justice and morals” ([6], p. 101) are the humanities to be accorded a special role. They should understand that which is the *Dasein of spirit*, and is so also in the case of the natural sciences. There is no doubt that this is a high calling, one to which the humanities in their contemporary form can only answer with difficulty.

Even more, according to Hegel and the idealistic theory of the humanities, only the spiritual is the real (das *Wirkliche*) ([7], p. 28). Is that really so? Or is that only an appearance that we lay over things, in order that they may seem less banal? No wonder that the humanities have a hard time making clear that their work is part of the work of the rationality common to all the sciences, and that the natural sciences have trouble seeing their work as the expression of a universal “science of spirit”. In fact, such a characterization does not unite them, but separates them. The myth of two cultures gains ground, despite attempts to bridge the gap [8]. This myth also explains why involitional tendencies take hold in the humanities today, and thereby condemn them to the fate of their marginal role.

At the same time, every new attempt at a systematic foundation of the humanities (from Dilthey through Rickert, from Cassirer up to Gadamer) makes the failure of a truly systematic unity with the other sciences obvious, indeed the failure of their own unity with regard to theories, methods, objects and research interests. The humanities are digging, seen this way, their own scientific grave—all while repeatedly pulling themselves out of it by their own (historical) hair: their philological and historical diligence conceals a systematic deficit, which their own research reveals. That is again one reason why the Anglo-Saxon humanities tradition has an easier time of it. For it largely abstains from theory, at

least from one as wide-ranging as the idealist one. Yet, it may well be just this idealist theory which gives the humanities an essential role in the modern world, namely that of understanding spirit and culture as the essential substance of our world and of our existence. That holds particularly for Europe in light of its cultural strength.

### **3. Concluding Remarks: The Project of a Multi-National Centre for Advanced Studies as a Possible Solution to Problems of Organization, Funding, Visibility**

Traditionally, the humanities have responded mainly to a national culture and identity and because of their position within university systems, have and continue to be organized predominantly on a national basis. In the Europe of today and into the future, what is missing is an institution focussing on the humanities at a multilateral and multidisciplinary European level. Such an institution could help to solve the organizational problem of the humanities and, in connection with that, a funding problem.

If there is a European cultural identity or a project of Europe directed towards such an identity, it cannot easily be built in a top-down fashion responding to national perspectives, but has to emerge “bottom-up” within and through the scholarly and scientific community. What is at stake is an intellectual basis for rationalizing and defining aspects of (European) integration—with respect to such important issues as migration, cooperation, security *etc.* The existence of such a basis would also allow Europe to better clarify its relationship in the global context. Such an approach could be used to define our collective relationships with other countries and cultures—independently from mainstream political interests, but maintaining a correct link with common societal issues. In all these, strategies cannot easily be defined from a “national interest” standpoint. Even when dealing with technological issues, such as for example climate change, energy, food security and supply, health inequalities—the humanities have a significant role to play.

In funding terms, the HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) network has provided funds to trans-European research consortia, and the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, “Horizon 2020”, with nearly €80 billion of funding available (2014–2020), for the first time explicitly includes the humanities—listing funding opportunities for researchers from the humanities together with the socio-economic sciences. The money is there, and the occasion to spend it in a European framework, too. However, it remains to be seen whether the humanities will take this opportunity.

In organizational terms, as already discussed in a meeting between the Academia Europaea and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences on the future of the humanities in 2009: A solution to the humanities’ organizational problems, and problems of its visibility, on a European level could be a *multi-national Centre for Advanced Studies*, financed by European countries or directly by the EU. The Centre should be situated in the proximity of existing centres of excellence. The budget should allow establishing research groups, inside and outside the Centre, and net-working with other European research centres (an alternative option could be: three to five existing institutions cooperate with each other, governed by a sort of supervisory board with strategic tasks). One of the main objectives of the Centre should be graduate teaching and postdoc research. For these reasons too, the proximity to existing centres of excellence would be essential.

Up to now, no national or European institution seems to be interested in such an institutional move—the existing institutions of this kind, centres for advanced studies or other organizations, not, because they are afraid of competition, national or European agencies or foundations not, because they are usually unwilling to assist on an institutional level.

There it is again: the intra- and the extra-disciplinary isolation, the visibility problem and the organizational problem of the humanities. As long as they do not solve these problems, the discussion about the position of the humanities among the sciences and in society will not stop.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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