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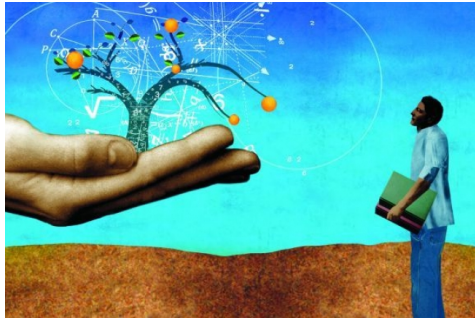
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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

How a New Field Could Help Save the Humanities



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle Review

By Rens Bod | FEBRUARY 19, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM

Unlike the history of science, the history of the humanities is not an academic discipline. This is surprising — humanists are among the most historically minded scholars. How can it be that humanists care about the history of everything except about their own? The situation is of course more subtle: There is

historiography of philology, of history writing, of religious studies, of art history, of musicology, of literary studies, and more, but what is missing is an academic discipline that explores the history of the humanities together. For the "humanities" to be more than just an umbrella term, this bewildering gap in intellectual history must be remedied.

The development of the discipline of history of science (itself, of course, a humanities discipline) helps clarify the gap. Since the publication of William Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* in 1837, there has been a steady stream of books on the general history of science. But it is only in the early 20th century, after George Sarton founded the first (and still primary) history-of-science journal, *Isis*, and the History of Science Society was established, that a distinct academic discipline emerged in the United States.

Early history of science focused on physics, but it also connected with the other sciences, especially astronomy, chemistry, and biology. It hailed the great scientific discoveries and turning points, offering natural science as a genuine example of human progress. While this kind of "Whig interpretation of history" is seen today as a scholarly vice, these narratives brought about an unprecedented public awareness of science and its role in society. They supplied major discoveries with an immense public attention and helped figures like Galileo, Newton, and Darwin become part of our cultural DNA.

All this focus on scientific achievements and discoveries came with a cost for the humanities. Humanists were not prepared to talk about the "great discoveries" in their fields, and many rejected such a notion as meaningless for the humanities altogether. Highly influential was the philosophical distinction between the sciences and the humanities introduced by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey in the late 19th century: While the sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) aimed at explaining the world, the humanities

(*Geisteswissenschaften*) focused on understanding the world. According to Dilthey, humanists would be failing if they observed, measured, or hunted for apparent regularities. What they should be doing is searching for the motives and intentions of humans in their historical context. Dilthey's ideas were further developed by Rickert, Cassirer, and Gadamer, and they gained wide currency when Western-style curricula were introduced around the globe.

In the later 20th and early 21st century, the humanities were mainly promoted — and more often defended — by emphasizing their importance for historical and social consciousness (Edward Said), critical thinking (Stanley Fish) and democratic citizenship (Martha Nussbaum). Searching for laws and regularities became highly suspicious, and "grand narratives" were

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rejected. It became common wisdom that the humanities do not deal with solving concrete problems and do not produce discoveries. Instead, the humanities were taken to deal with value, interpretation, and finding meaning.

While the latter is definitely true, the exclusive focus on value, interpretation, and meaning provides a caricature of the humanities that is as biased as the triumphalist view of science. A closer look at the general history of the humanities shows that besides demonstrating value and interpretation, humanists have also tried to solve many concrete problems: the problem of reconstructing a text from extant copies, of comparing different art works or literary works to figure out the origin and author, of determining whether a tale about the past is trustworthy, of finding general principles underlying different languages. In all these activities, humanists sometimes make discoveries, some of which have applications for entirely different fields. These discoveries are too often erroneously credited to the sciences.

Take one from the ancient humanities, Panini's insight from about 500 BC that Sanskrit was based on very precise rules, a so-called grammar. This discovery not only changed our perspective on language, it also contributed to the development of the first computer-programming languages.

Or take the 15th-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, who discovered that the Donation of Constantine was a fake. Suddenly the papal claim to worldly power appeared to be based on fiction. When, in the 17th century, the French religion scholar Joseph Scaliger discovered that there had been Egyptian kings living before what was then taken to be the date of the creation of the earth, it initiated a debate that resulted in a secular worldview where citizens, not theologians, had the last word.

A more recent humanistic breakthrough is the discovery by the German linguist Franz Bopp that languages in Europe and Asia are related via sound-shift laws. This pointed at a common linguistic origin known as proto-Indo-European, changing our view of the

relationships between peoples. An even more recent breakthrough: the French literary theorist Gérard Genette's distinction between focalization and narration in texts, indicating that no text can be neutral and that words are always colored due to specific language use. This insight has been taken up by the United Nations, in particular by Unesco, to add a range of perspectives in their documents on cultural and educational policy.

These humanistic findings are just the tip of the iceberg. A longer list should also include insights by Chrysippus, Sibawayh, Chen Kui, Ibn Khaldun, De Laet, Lachmann, Propp, Benjamin, Panofsky, Todorov, and many others. Most of us will be acquainted with some of these names, but probably none of us knows all of them. And while the layperson has heard of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin, what of Valla, Bopp, and Panini?

Even humanities scholars are often tongue-tied when asked about the main figures or achievements in the history of the humanities, their choices limited to the fields in which they themselves are active. One does not need to be a historian of science to come up with the main figures in very diverse scientific fields, such as Kepler in astronomy, Newton in physics, Darwin in natural history, Mendeleev in chemistry, and Watson, Crick, and Franklin in genetics. Yet a historian of philology is usually not aware of the main figures in the history of musicology and vice versa.

Of course, the primary goal of writing the history of the humanities does not lie in the creation of awareness about its "heroes." Neither does the value of the humanities lie in its applications or world-changing insights. But it is not wise to discard the main feats of humanists from the past. Some historians of science, like Steven Shapin in his book *Never Pure* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), have suggested that some triumphalism is needed for a discipline to get a foothold, and after this has succeeded, "lowering the tone" can begin. Nevertheless, I believe we can and should avoid embracing this triumphalist approach. We could study the history of the humanities for its own value while at the same time acknowledging the fundamental questions raised and problems solved by humanists in past and present.

The two fields — humanities and science — have never really been separate. Their interactions have been intense and manifold, despite the constitutive distinction made by Dilthey and other philosophers. However, attempts to bring together the sciences and the humanities in educational programs have led to a rather ironic situation: Natural-science students have been offered humanities perspectives thanks to courses in the history of science. Similar courses have given humanities scholars state-of-the-art overviews of science. Ergo, the history of the humanities dropped out of the equation. Modern scholars could possibly unite the history of the humanities and the history of science under the general header of "history of knowledge." But such a step can only be taken if we first emancipate the history of the humanities.

To help emancipate this history, two colleagues and I organized a conference in 2008 on "The Making of the Humanities." Historians from different disciplines were brought together to focus on topics like "History of Methodologies in the Humanities," "The Visual Arts as Liberal Arts," and "Humanities in East and West." Four

subsequent conferences have followed, in Europe, and then, in 2016, at the Johns Hopkins University. The conference series will continue at an annual pace. The first three conferences were turned into open-access edited volumes.

The number of papers began to exceed the size of a single edited volume, and my colleagues and I helped found the journal *History of Humanities* (the first issue appeared last year). Next, we founded a Society for the History of the Humanities and helped create textbooks and monographs to teach the new field.

But the history of the humanities has by no means crystallized in full. Most humanists still remain in the comfort zone of their own field. Few historians of the humanities are prepared to make comparisons between different disciplines let alone between regions and cultures, especially if several different languages are involved. The history of the humanities also suffers from a strong Eurocentric bias. While the term "humanities," as well as "*Geisteswissenschaften*," is Western, the activities of analyzing and interpreting texts, music, languages, art, religions, and the past have originated in different parts of the world. One of the aims of our society is to bring together Africanists, Arabists, Indologists, Sinologists, and others to investigate comparative humanistic practices, and to explore both differences and commonalities.

One thing that has emerged from these comparisons is that, contrary to common wisdom, humanistic knowledge is not merely culture-dependent. It is to a large extent culture-independent — just as has been claimed for the sciences ever since Leibniz. For example, knowledge of philological text reconstruction, of grammar construction methods, and of harmonic analysis techniques was surprisingly similar across different cultures without any contact with one another. The same occurred in the sciences where, for example, knowledge of the functioning of the lever, of Pythagoras' theorem, and of planetary movements was similar in different regions. This is an argument in favor of our long-term goal to come up with a unified history of knowledge.

The history of the humanities is finally being explored on a par with the history of science. But a discipline can only truly flourish and survive if it is taught to the next generation. Thus the most important development has been the creation of full-fledged university courses in the history of the humanities, mainly in Europe. It is time for American universities to catch up.

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