

A Failed Response?

The Humanities in Transition

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Abstract

This essay discusses the changing role of arts and humanities research and education in the context of continuing transitions in knowledge politics and society at large. It argues that a conflicted history of both expansion and marginalization has conditioned the humanities for reactive critique in ways that limits its influence. This calls for a rearticulation of the role of humanistic knowledge in a time when society's most challenging transitions are connected by their cultural dimension, understood in its most basic sense of the influence on society of human action, communication, cultural routines and value formation. To scale-up the impact of the humanities, and sharpen its knowledge claims, a development towards integrative and plural forms of knowledge environments is suggested.

Keywords knowledge politics, history of humanities, reactive critique, integrative knowledge, institutional plurality

Expansion and marginalization

If we are to grasp the changing role of the arts and humanities in modern universities, it is vital to keep two conflicting stories in

mind. The first is a story of tremendous expansion. Around the turn of the 20th century – a period of great importance to the formation of the academic disciplines that make up the human sciences today – the community of scholars in any scientific area was in most countries no larger than could be gathered in a modestly sized seminar room. The social outlook of the university mirrored this intimacy. This meant, among other things, that academic privileges were literally handed down from father to son, and that the structures of legitimacy for humanistic research and erudition were strongly tied to traditional occupations and elitist institutions.

About a century later, the difference in scale is staggering to say the least. In a country like Sweden, with less than 10 cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants, there are currently more than 30 universities and university colleges. With the dramatic increase in the number of students, especially from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, the social composition of university life also changed. Parallel to the democratization of higher education, there has been a continuous growth in research activities, also in the arts and humanities. From a historian's point of view, there is in fact little reason for lamenting the poverty of the humanities, to the contrary, expansion has been steady and continues to the present day.

These changes in the overall knowledge environments for the humanities in the last century make any comparison difficult if not impossible. In orientation, scale and societal impact, the university of today has very little in common with early 20th century institutions for research and higher education. And yet, current debates on the role of the arts and humanities in universities and society at large continue to be shaped to a large extent by an uncontextualized use of 19th century terms and institutional models. Indeed, this is equally true for much Humboldtian framed debates about academic freedom and critique (Fish 2014) as it is for reactionary lamentations about the long-ago golden age of the humanities (Nordin 2008). In some cases, this reflects an anecdotal approach among academic teachers to their own trade, in others a deeply conflicted nostalgia for pre-democratic values and institutions.¹

The second story is a story about the marginalization of the humanities in relation to other fields of knowledge. For as much as expansion has characterized the development of modern universities, so has differentiation between disciplines. There are many ways

to illustrate how the relative status of the humanities has diminished within European universities. For example, Stefan Collini (2012) points to the shift of orientation in British universities in the 20th century. In the interwar period, about 70-80 % of the students at Cambridge and Oxford took arts and humanities courses, but from mid-century and onwards they became a shrinking minority as other fields expanded at a quicker pace. Crucial was the emergence of new fields in technology and medicine, boosted by new priorities in knowledge policies in the 1950s and 60s. But it was yet another area that was to dominate the university sector in the late 20th and early 21st century as various kinds of business studies became by far the largest area of higher education in British universities.

In many other countries, a similar trend has prevailed. The principal task of 19th-century Swedish universities was the training of priests and civil servants. A century later a completely different knowledge ecology defines the sector with approximately 80 % of its overall resources devoted to science, technology and medicine, 15 % to the social sciences, and 5 % to the humanities. Although these figures are not mirrored in the proportions of the student population – humanities and social sciences programmes continue to host large number of students for a considerably lower cost than other areas – the historical trend is clear.

One of the major factors in turning these hierarchies around has been the academization of vocational education. This did not only change the overall dimension and relative balance between different areas of education and research in 20th-century universities; it affected the epistemic values and everyday culture of these knowledge institutions. In the early period of the modern university, it went without saying that the purpose of incorporating educational areas of a practical orientation into the university model was to make them more “academic”, meaning that they should be influenced by what was considered to be more theoretical studies. Today, these influences go in both directions with impact regimes emerging from areas such as economy and technology drifting into other scientific areas.

So, there is in a sense a reverse relation between, on the one hand, the expansion of the arts and humanities in the last century and, on the other, their diminishing influence relative to other fields. This is no doubt a crucial dilemma for the humanities and its self-percep-

tions about its role in academia. But the long-term shifts in balance between knowledge bases should also be considered a dilemma for society at large. It is deeply connected with major processes of change in 20th century knowledge politics affecting many different aspects of society; for example the shift in status of the bourgeois professions, such as priests and schoolmasters (with journalists being a more recent example), that were traditionally connected with studies in the humanities.²

The influence of such deep-seated historical patterns is often overlooked in contemporary policy debates on educational matters. In Sweden, the most striking example is the heated debate in the last decades over the failure of the school system. What is missing in the analysis of its roots and causes is an understanding of the long-term rebalancing of the knowledge bases in society, and how this has affected the cultural and social legitimacy of educational institutions. If we are to engage with the fundamental question of how education builds society – taken in the sense that this question was first raised by 19th-century welfare reformers – it is therefore necessary to shift focus from the individual-instrumental emphasis of much current debate to an institutional-infrastructure understanding of knowledge politics.

The limits of reactive critique

How have researchers in the humanities reacted to the continuing rebalancing of society's knowledge bases? In academia there has been three main responses. The first is the *anecdotal* defence of the former glory of the arts and humanities, a position that comes uncomfortably close to pre-democratic nostalgia. The second has been to argue for the *instrumental* value of humanistic knowledge, for example by suggesting that business can not succeed without language skills, or by reframing social and cultural issues in terms of innovation and industry. The third response is to claim the margins as a *political* position, constructing an idealized self-image of the humanities as the last outpost for uncorrupted, free academic thinking. Despite the differences and outright struggles between these three positions, they are, I argue, similar in the sense that they are positions of *reactive critique*, driven by a sense of external pressure and a felt need to defend the legitimacy of humanities research and education.

Obviously, there are some very strong reasons for these worries. With the commercialization of education, an increasing influence of managerial thinking in universities, and the neo-liberal realization of what could once be dismissed as a Gogolian nightmare – a society run by accountants – there are some obvious threats to areas of education with supposedly weak outcomes in short term productivity. In some countries more than others this development has no doubt increased the relative marginalization of the humanities. It is important, however, not to confuse more general political trends in post-1989 Europe – an era that was increasingly characterized by a careless relation to public institutions – and more specific developments in knowledge politics and the history of universities.

But it is a problem that much thinking about the value of humanistic knowledge is stuck in reactive critique precisely at a time when the crisis of neo-liberal governance and short-term instrumentalism in knowledge politics is laid bare. What is needed today is not yet another declaration of the exclusivity of the humanities, or its self-imposed critical mission. More important is to explore the contribution of the humanities to emerging environments and knowledge practices that are involved in breaking some of the barriers of the modern knowledge system by approaching issues of contemporary concern from an integrated perspective, based on shared concepts and themes rather than disciplinary schools and divides. In a time when society's most severe challenges are connected by their cultural dimension – which in this context is taken in its most basic meaning of the impact on society of human action, communication, cultural routines and value formation – the human sciences need to both sharpen and broaden its knowledge claims. But this will not happen in the isolation of disciplines that were formed in the 19th century, shaped by 20th century academic individualism, and that continue to be haunted by the defensiveness of reactive critique.

To scale-up the impact of social and cultural perspectives on contemporary matters of concern, and develop new ideas that correspond to the complexity of global challenges, we need knowledge environments that are integrative and multidisciplinary, of a certain volume and driven by an ethos of collective work and responsibility. It is vital that these environments also engage in combining academic research of the highest standard with a commitment towards reinventing the role of universities in the shaping of

future publics. This means taking a more active part in providing explorative arenas for public debate, knowledge exchange and collaboration not only between academic disciplines but also between universities, cultural institutions, media, other educational institutions and non-governmental organizations.

It is true that European universities have become increasingly involved in community service and a plethora of outreach activities that goes way beyond their duties in education and research (Thrift 2015), although we also need to remark that the relation between universities, civil society and other public institutions are very different in countries like, say, the UK and Sweden – and perhaps increasingly so. But in this context, it is not an expanded *service to the community* as much as a different *sense of society* that I think these more integrative knowledge environments might help to develop. Especially in the arts and humanities there is a rich tradition to fall back upon in opening up the relation between the various contexts of academic knowledge production and its public resonances.

And yet, the power of humanistic knowledge claims has become weaker as academic differentiation has advanced. In a reward system that expects everyone to compete with everyone about everything on all levels, integrative environments need to overcome some of the structural resistance to cross-disciplinary work. In terms of funding and organization, they need to be stable enough to allow for adventurous thinking and scientific risk-taking, and yet more flexible than conventional academic departments. Many examples from around the world testify to an ongoing institutional change in this direction. How can this development be further encouraged and what are its obstacles? What can be expected from different actors in the knowledge system – from universities, funding agencies and policy – and what can be achieved between countries and already existing environments?

Again, I would like to point to the importance of some inherent differences between national knowledge systems. In Sweden, and especially from the perspective of the arts and humanities, one important obstacle to this development lies in the long-term consequences of institutional reform in Swedish universities in the 1950s and early 1960s. At this time, a decisive shift in the organization of the human, social and cultural sciences occurred as a result of a major university reform. For the first time, the social sciences and

the humanities were separated in different faculties. This process of differentiation was rooted in the knowledge politics of the 1950s and meant that the social sciences developed in close relation with the institutions of the emerging welfare state. This involved, among other things, the creation of research institutes with close ties to policy, government agencies and organizations outside the universities, which formed a new and parallel infrastructure for emerging research in the social sciences. It was, to summarize a complex process, the social and natural sciences that became associated with the vision of the role of knowledge in building the future society (Ekström and Sörlin 2012).

The humanities, on the other hand, gradually (if only partly) transformed from its previous role in traditional society as the relative balance and structures of legitimacy changed in the knowledge system. In Sweden, it was in this context of social and organizational reform in the 1950s and early 1960s – and not primarily as an outcome of the 1960s and 1970s radical movements – that the position of the arts and humanities researcher as a critical outsider was conditioned. It deeply affected the research styles and the ways to pose questions and make knowledge claims in the humanities. What would have happened, I find myself asking more and more often, if the separation between the human and social sciences had never occurred? Or, to be more specific, how would the culture of the human and cultural sciences have been different if they had been more widely mobilized in building social and public institutions in post-war society, and thus developed in closer relation to policy and in greater institutional diversity both inside and outside universities?³

The activism of the long-term

What are the visions for the role of knowledge in society today? The late 20th century notion of the “knowledge society” has become irreversibly obsolete. It was formulated in the context of the post-1989 utopianism of Western capitalism, and based on the idea of a world divided in nations competing for economic growth through knowledge investments, and implemented in policies aimed at diminishing the distance between the production of knowledge, on the one hand, and commercialized innovation on the other. One of its more curious manifestations was an abundance of sports metaphors projecting a “race” between scientists and nations for a lim-

ited number of benefits and leading positions. Indeed, this analogy between sports and science was recently invoked by a former Swedish minister of higher education and research who in commenting on a much-publicized case of scientific misconduct at the medical university Karolinska institutet in Stockholm was quoted saying: “You don’t cancel the Olympics only because there are those that cheat.” (www.dn.se 2016-02-18)

After the financial, social and political crises of the early 21st century – with European societies being trapped in a self-reinforcing spiral of economic and cultural polarization, and haunted by a growing awareness of the profound challenges of anthropogenic climate change, migration and global conflict – this is no longer a viable language for thinking about the transformative power of knowledge in contemporary societies. Thus, if the knowledge economy discourse still prevails in European research policies, it is yet unable to address the European future. Three aspects are especially important in building an alternative knowledge politics. First, impact definitions need to change from its previous focus on national competitiveness to issues of value creation; second, knowledge policies need to address the balancing of knowledge bases in society from a long-term infrastructural perspective, and focus on institutional reforms that make them interact in novel ways; and third, universities on their hand need to rediscover and explore their role as public institutions, not from the impoverished perspective of accountability, but in ways that reflect their profound importance to the shaping of public culture.

Taken together, this calls for an activism of the long-term. In my mind, this involves thinking about knowledge as infrastructure and universities as public institutions, but it also requires a change of tactics. The emerging vision for a new role of the humanities in the context of integrated research does not benefit from the typical hit and run strategy of humanistic critique. Neither will it evolve through organizational reform only. What is needed is generative not reactive critique, a stay-in-the-debate-attitude towards policy, and, not the least, a richer and more powerful articulation of the contribution of the human and cultural sciences in the move towards integrative knowledge production. Interestingly enough, the arts and humanities have been comparatively successful in documenting ‘societal impact’ in recent evaluations that use narrative

rather than metric tools. With broadening impact definitions, focusing on issues of long-term value creation and the formative role of universities as public institutions, thick descriptions are required to account for the complex ways in which knowledge builds society.

The ongoing rearticulation of the role of the humanities also depends on a consistent commitment to institutional change among groups of researchers that share the view that a certain postdisciplinary dynamic is a defining and productive force in important areas of research and critique.⁴ Too often, calls for interdisciplinarity in universities has been an excuse for downsizing through mergers or organizational reform on administrative grounds. This has created a healthy suspicion among academic teachers of top-down initiatives in this area, and fuelled an already strong and unhealthy protectionism in relation to disciplinary territories. It is vital that academic leaders approach these issues not from the perspective of organizational efficiency but from a careful analysis of the way different knowledge environments work and how they might be developed in the future. This is not a time in which there is one solution for all problems. To the contrary, the very complexity of the ongoing transitions suggests a knowledge politics that mobilize a plurality of institutional forms and the interactions and synergies that emerge between them. New and emergent environments can be thought of as niches, institutional carriers, and integrative spaces of experimentation; the most important change is that universities of a certain scope and scale take a long-term commitment to institutional reform in order to train and enable students and researchers to move between different environments for knowledge production both inside and outside the university.

But I will not end this essay in internal university affairs. What has become more and more the focus of my thinking on these issues is the question of how we may redefine and broaden again the role of universities as public institutions. In a time when new generations in Europe and elsewhere are forced to confront the experience that public rights and values are not to be taken for granted, but that they are the provisional and contingent result of a long and complex history, embedded in institutions that are in constant need of defence and reconstruction, universities should be in the forefront of defining new and emergent publics. This suggests an openness towards various modes of interaction between academic

knowledge environments and other spaces for public thought and action; that is, less of separate spheres and more of integrative efforts – in science as in society at large.

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Notes

- 1 For a useful overview of the history of the debates of the legitimacy of the humanities, see Small (2013).
- 2 These historical developments in Swedish knowledge politics are more fully described in Ekström and Sörlin (2012).
- 3 This difference in the institutional history of the human and social sciences, with the latter developing in closer relation to research and poli-

cy institutes outside universities, is also addressed in a recent report on the current status of the humanities in Norway; see Jordheim and Rem (2014).

- 4 The long-standing relevance of trans-, multi- and postdisciplinarity for humanistic and cultural research and critique is discussed in a growing literature; see, for example, Ekström (2009), Miller (2012), Osborne (2015), Budtz Pedersen, Køppe and Stjernfelt (2015).