

The Future of the Humanities

I

The humanities form a relatively small part of the modern research university, but they bulk very large in all discussions about the ‘idea’ or the ‘future’ of universities. This may not simply be because those who dilate on these matters are drawn disproportionately from humanities disciplines. It may in part be because the discourse about the humanities has become a locus – and in some respects a placeholder – for wider anxieties about the changing relations between culture and democracy, between society and economy. These anxieties have real objects as well as, like all anxieties, their exaggerated or phantasmatic features, but in these brief remarks I do not wish to encourage this only partly conscious use of the category of ‘the humanities’ as a way of addressing these wider issues, not least because it tends to make so much of the discourse about the humanities simultaneously too defensive and too pious. Instead, I just want briefly to register some cautions and then to offer one or two informed guesses about what our crystal ball may suggest in regard to the future of these disciplines.

Almost any event or discussion with ‘the humanities’ in its title risks seeming both predictable and depressing. Predictable because we suspect that, after running through various travails and accusations, the humanities will by the end emerge in their full redemptive glory as the indispensable means of living a satisfactory human life (and as the grand and pious adjectives pile up it becomes hard to suppress a yawn). And depressing because, despite the inevitable arrival of the ‘deepest human values’ cavalry to save the day at the end, the story along the

way is always one of being beleaguered and besieged, involving a tone that varies somewhere between the self-justifying and the complaining.

Since I don’t wish to encourage this tone, I shall take a rather quizzical look at both the activity of ‘justifying’ and the category of ‘the humanities’ in an attempt to scrub away some of the congealed abstractions. I’ll then quickly suggest one or two ways of engaging in this public discourse that are less defensive and more specific. Obviously, the greater part of my own direct experience relates to the situation in Britain, and I am certainly not presuming that this applies in any simple way to the very different public cultures and the much more diverse higher education systems in the rest of the world. But there are some trends and elements here which, if not strictly speaking global, are already common to Britain and the United States and may soon be coming to many countries of continental Europe.

Let me begin with a very obvious point about justification. The activity of justifying something is highly context-dependent. It depends, first, on the kind of criticism or scepticism that is being responded to or at least anticipated; and, second, it always depends upon being able to establish some commonality of values somewhere, some bridgehead in even the most hostile critic’s assumptions, if the attempt at justification is to gain any purchase at all. For these reasons, it doesn’t seem to me very helpful to try to develop some all-purpose justification couched in highly abstract terms: it may be better to think of particular forms of resistance we want to overcome on the part of particular publics (often in comparison to particular other preferred activities or purposes), and this means that the form and argumentative strategy of our exercises in characterization and persuasion need to be tailored accordingly. The relevant publics, as we know, include various categories – legislators, parents, foundation administrators, journalists, schoolchildren, colleagues, donors, government officials, students, taxpayers and so on – and of course any actual individual may belong to more than one of these categories.

Quite a lot of the well-meaning statements that are issued about the humanities tend to reduce to a series of abstract nouns, in which ‘imagination’, ‘empathy’ and the other usual suspects invariably figure. Justification at this level of abstraction can have its uses, especially if it has been preceded by some much more detailed and nuanced characterizations, but one obvious weakness of this strategy is that it is fatally easy for any interlocutors to enthusiastically endorse these large-sounding claims while not actually being persuaded about, or conceding anything to, the more local or institutional or financial case that the claims are meant to support. Another, perhaps slightly less obvious weakness, is that such high-flown claims don’t seem to entail the array of often knotty, detailed and usually empirical enquiries that make up the actual practices of our various disciplines. The most elevated claims for the humanities end up sounding as though their goals could be met if everyone would just read *The Odyssey* and *King Lear* with an open heart.

This is one of the places where the logic of justification can lead us astray. There is a tendency for defenders of universities in general and the humanities in particular to want to present them as contributing to every approved social good. This seems to me a mistake both as a matter of fact and as a matter of tactics. We may certainly hope that in helping to extend cultural understanding we are broadening, not narrowing, human sympathies, but there may be no *necessary* connection in either direction. Almost all arguments that seem to suggest that scholarship, science or culture turn their practitioners into ‘better people’ are awkwardly vulnerable to obvious counter-examples – just think of the inhabitants of any departmental corridor. The fact that someone can make a dazzling breakthrough in the understanding of human behaviour while at the same time behaving abominably in other aspects of life and holding deplorable political views may make us uncomfortable, but it is a combination that universities have to live with because such extension of understanding is their primary activity, not the manufacturing of right-mindedness. The disciplined free play of the mind over a

given topic that is at the heart of scholarly and scientific enquiry is principally an intellectual achievement, not a moral one, at least not directly.

Turning to the category of ‘the humanities’ itself, my first caution is to suggest that we must be careful that by focusing on this category we don’t inadvertently reinstate some version of the supposed ‘two cultures’ divide. Great swathes of work in all disciplines are broadly analytical and factual in similar ways, where standards of accuracy, rigour and evidence are closely related. What all the disciplines share is at least as important as what differentiates them, and they all have much to gain by articulating their common interest in the university as an enterprise devoted principally to the extension and deepening of human understanding.

Secondly, there are many purposes for which we do better to speak of individual disciplines rather than use the category of ‘the humanities’. The latter is chiefly an organizational or classifying term, and that is, of course, one reason why it may be a mistake to be too essentialist about it. We should certainly not speak as though it were a timeless category. Not only is it a term that did not come into general currency in its modern sense until the mid-twentieth century, but it did so largely by way of reaction to the imperial claims of the scientific positivism of that period as supposedly embodied in the natural and the social sciences. Perhaps it has never quite shaken off the aura of conservatism and defensiveness that was inherited from these origins, and it seems to me important not to endorse either of those associations. I should just add that although the term has been well established in Britain for some decades, it is fair to say that the discourse about ‘the humanities’ has had, and continues to have, a particularly intimate connection with the characteristically American conception of the ‘liberal arts’ education made up of elective courses, and I’ll come back to this close identification with undergraduate teaching in a moment.

Thirdly, another way in which treating ‘the humanities’ as a single intellectual enterprise risks misleading us is that it almost

always ends up focusing on 'the great books', and usually, therefore, reducing our diverse disciplines to the study of a few classics of literature and philosophy. But even in literature and philosophy, and still more in other fields, most scholars most of the time are not reading the great books but are engaging in some much more analytical or empirical enquiries concentrated on particular times and places, and our account of humanities disciplines should reflect this.

Even then, however, constantly emphasizing the category of 'the humanities' tends to operate at too high a level of abstraction, flattening out the distinctiveness of individual disciplines and losing what may be most impressive and persuasive about a good piece of work in ancient history or renaissance musicology or nineteenth-century Russian literature and so on. Individual disciplines, after all, are not merely accidents of institutional history: there are long and rich cultural traditions behind thinking about literature or religion or art and so on, and we need to harness the strength of those traditions to support the standing of the current forms of these enquiries. So, as a matter of tactics, it can often be more productive to try to illustrate what is valuable about work in, say, metaphysics in its terms, and in literary criticism in its terms, and in social history in its terms and so on. This should also help us to avoid making exaggerated claims for the moral benefits of studying these disciplines. So, instead of digging ourselves in behind a stockade of over-ambitious claims couched at too high a level of abstraction and delivered in a tone of defensiveness, it is usually better, when identifying the character and role of these enterprises, to start from some of the facts of our actual practice in our particular, diverse disciplines and work up from there.

Let me make two more positive points in this connection. First, as scholars, we do perhaps need to make a greater effort to try to provide politicians, officials, journalists, administrators and other public figures with a usable set of descriptions of what we do. In market democracies such as ours, politicians are acutely conscious of the kinds of justification for public

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expenditure which it believes the electorate will find acceptable. At present, the received wisdom in the policy-making world is that the only criterion with undisputed legitimacy across the board is that of contributing to economic prosperity. This situation is potentially unfavourable to the humanities in various ways, but one less obvious danger arises if we allow an external vocabulary of *justification* to come to provide an internal criterion of *quality*. Indeed, if research in the humanities is valuable to society, as I certainly believe it is, it makes its contribution by extending and deepening our understanding of human activities across times and cultures, and if we divert our energies from doing that to the highest possible standard in order to meet a perceived short-term requirement to contribute economic impact, then we shall in fact be *lessening* the social contribution of scholarly research. And the more we acquiesce in these crude measures of social and economic impact, the more such categories colonize our minds. One of the depressing features of the debate in Britain is how academics have internalized the language of contribution to economic growth as the defining purpose.

My second point is that alarmism, defensiveness and the alienation of public support are closely related. There are, as I've said, many publics, and we should not underestimate the level of interest in and enthusiasm for work in humanities disciplines in various quarters of society. Among several of these publics there is an instinctive recognition that unfettered intellectual enquiry is central to what universities are about, and that therefore there is, potentially, a much greater reservoir of interest in, and latent appreciation of, the work of universities than the narrow and instrumental official discourse about 'economic growth' ever succeeds in tapping into. Moreover, when so many people are already interested in questions about literature and history, philosophy and religion, art and music, it should not be impossible to persuade them of the value of developing more systematic understanding in these areas. The best work in the humanities disciplines does this brilliantly and we should not

sell such work short by misrepresenting it as an indirect way of developing commercially useful skills.

II

Looking into my crystal ball, I'd say – first and very obviously – that we should recognize that the future of the humanities disciplines will be at least as much influenced by what goes on outside universities as by what goes on inside them. This is certainly true of the sometimes neglected question of the curriculum in schools: the recent sad history of modern languages in Britain is an obvious illustration of this point, though there are also longer-term cultural explanations for their shrinkage. A more specific worry that we might have in this connection is that students, and eventually scholars, in many of these disciplines are likely to be increasingly recruited from the offspring of the privileged classes. This is already true to a considerable extent of disciplines such as art history and classics, and is becoming true of modern languages. Funding patterns are another kind of external force, and they will surely encourage certain kinds of interdisciplinarity, so we can expect to hear much more in the humanities about connections with, for example, neuroscience or the environmental sciences. Finally, a further force that is at least partly external and that will do much to shape the future of all disciplines, especially as subjects for undergraduate education, is the development of digital technology, whose potential impact on our conception of what is involved in a university education, including in the humanities, we are only just beginning to explore.

Taking a wider perspective still, we shall of course hear more about the need for a global view, though it is important to recognize that the relation of many humanities disciplines to their native cultures will always remain more intimate than for other disciplines. Most work in the natural sciences, and even in many of the social sciences, can be pursued anywhere, and in a global economy it will, by and large, be pursued where funding dictates. But the study and teaching of, say, Swedish history is always

likely to be particularly pursued in Sweden, or Italian literature in Italy and so on. This is a reminder from another angle that these enquiries are more continuous with interests and debates in the wider non-academic culture of which they are a part. The future of, for example, art history will be considerably affected by what happens to galleries and collections, the future of the study of English by what happens to literary publishing and literary journalism and so on. A narrow focus on funding policies for undergraduate education risks losing sight of some of the forces that give these subjects their vitality and wider appeal in particular cultures.

My guess is that in terms of numbers (both of students and staff) and in terms of their influence on decisions about processes and structures, the humanities disciplines are likely to be a still more reduced presence in the major research universities of 2050 and beyond, and will certainly not again have the centrality they had in the middle decades of the twentieth century. But nothing is forever. A hundred and fifty years ago many would have found it unthinkable that classics could ever lose its dominant place in education, and some would have regarded such a prospect as the end of civilization. I don't think we should encourage such apocalyptic or alarmist talk now. Outstanding scholarship in these disciplines will continue to be published (whatever 'published' comes to mean), and there will still be substantial demand for courses in them. We should not regard the mere fact that a smaller *proportion* of students may take courses in the humanities as spelling the end of civilization as we know it. The shifting proportions are, after all, reflective of deeper changes in the character of our societies and the humanities should certainly not be positioned as attempting to resist all such changes.

The contemporary political expression of some of these changes is another matter. At present, we may be witnessing the shift from the university as shaped by the social democratic era to the university as reflecting the era of the politics of market individualism. From the mid-nineteenth through to the late

twentieth century one of the notable achievements of European and European-influenced societies was the way they managed to adapt the attenuated traditions of their few and rather marginal institutions of higher learning to turn them into powerhouses of culture, and the humanities disciplines prospered accordingly. Both aristocratic and social democratic values in turn contributed to this transformation. But from at least the 1980s onwards, other values have been more dominant and are in the process of reshaping universities in their own image. In these circumstances it would be unrealistic to expect the humanities disciplines to be able to continue to benefit from the older kind of deference to the ideals of 'culture'. Debates on the theme of the place (or nature or value or future) of 'the humanities' are one name we give to our anxieties about this transition. For these reasons, whatever we think may be the future of the humanities in practical or institutional terms, the future of debates *about* 'the future of the humanities' looks as bright as ever.

Who Does the University Belong To?

I

It will be clear to everyone, contemplating the start of a new academic year, that the question of the role and future of universities is just at present a matter of unusually vigorous debate, not just in the Netherlands but across Europe as a whole and indeed in many other parts of the world.¹ These debates tend, I think, to take a particular form in those countries – such as the Netherlands and including my own country – where a system of publicly funded higher education has traditionally been combined with a considerable degree of academic autonomy for universities. Although there is much diversity both within and across national systems, there are certain family resemblances among what, simply as a piece of convenient shorthand, we may refer to as the European model of the university, and it is here that questions about public accountability have been posed most pressingly. But just as we should not let our shorthand deceive us into assuming uniformity where there is in fact great diversity, so we should not fall into that kind of temporal parochialism that presumes these questions are unique to the present day. The truth, I shall suggest, is that societies have always wanted their universities to fulfil diverse and not always compatible purposes, and that universities have always been partly responsive to, and partly resistant to, those wider social demands. But although the structure of this dynamic endures, the content changes: just as we no longer regard mastery of Latin and Greek verse-forms

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was given as the Invited Address at the ceremony to mark the opening of the academic year at Leiden University in September 2015.