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European Humanities and Global Challenges — A View Towards 2060[+]

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May I first say a warm thank you to the organisers of this important conference for inviting me and thereby offering me the opportunity to learn how the humanities are developing in East Asia.

I have the year 2060 in the title because I want to talk about some of the challenges for the next generation of humanists whom we are training now and who will make their biggest impact on society in 30 to 50 years time. It will be a world much different from the one we know. Many of the changes we cannot predict but three main changes in demography, climate, and information are inevitable. I would hold therefore that teaching and research in the humanities today anywhere in the world need to somehow reflect these grand challenges of the 21st century. I shall be offering a distinctly European perspective in the hope of promoting a global dialogue.

Demographic Change

Let me take as point of departure how current undergraduates may experience change in the course of their career. From a European perspective, demographic changes will see Europe's share of the global population change from being a fifth of the world's population in 1960 to about 7% by 2060. At the same time Europe's population will be rapidly aging. These changes present huge challenges to European self-perception and innovation, which will become an important part of the humanities agenda. This is bad news for Europe's global influence—it gets smaller. It is also good news because it means that our congestion problems will be relatively small—we

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may preserve the rural and urban qualities that will be under tremendous pressure in many other regions of the world. Europeans will be old people. Wonderful as long as the old ones take care of themselves, difficult when we are poor and need help. With a declining population, we need robots or immigrants to do the job. In universities and the global world of learning, the legacy of European humanities will be questioned for its relevance to a world, which is 93% non-European. In sum then, Europe may become smaller and older, protect some qualities of life that will come under threat elsewhere, and Europe will be needing immigrants.

In view of these prospects, I would argue that European humanities need to globalise—we must embrace these predictions of the future in terms of the questions we deal with and the training we provide for our undergraduates who will inherit the planet as the next generation of leaders, experts and teachers. My sense is that we do not do a good job at present. These predictions are known and yet they are not reflected in the way we teach history, literature and philosophy or other humanities disciplines. There are many reasons but one is certainly that European humanities are still in a cocoon of European or Anglo-American thought. We need to step up the dialogue with other continents dramatically. We need to welcome hundreds of scholars from Asia, Africa, Latin America to learn from and exchange pathways of the humanities.

Climate

Climate next: Environmental change will change the world we live in over the next few decades. While climate change may be denied by sceptics today, there is no doubt that forces of demographics and economics alone will put the planet under severe stress in coming decades. We live in a time when we need to come to terms with perhaps the biggest challenge of the humanities and indeed the human race ever.

I am talking therefore about the need for a new Environmental or indeed Anthropocene Humanities: which steps up to the challenge that the future of the planet is determined by ourselves, by our actions, by our behaviour as consumers and as citizens, taking up the particular suggestion recently advanced by Paul Crutzen, and other environmental scientists, that we have now entered a new planetary geological age, that of the "Anthropocene".[1] All the individual choices we make sum up to a behavioural aggregate, which is bad for the planet and for ourselves. Global changes are known—we can measure and discuss differences of degree, but the big challenges are known. What we do not know is how we should be able to change direction. Enlightenment is not enough. It is extremely difficult for humans to change behaviour, even though we know the negative consequences of unchanged behavior, just think of tobacco smoking, HIV, or CO^2 load. How can research help us survive as a species? Anthropocene humanities must therefore soon be a core part of a humanities curriculum.

Anthropocene Humanities must help us understand how and why we choose and act like we do. Research in environmental history is obviously relevant in this regard, but many other humanities disciplines can make important contributions. There is a need for research on how we model and narrate environmental change, how different languages and cultures perceive challenges, there is a need for studies of climate representations, a need to rethink philosophical and ethical questions about the commitment of living generations to future generations, etc.

1 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'," *IGBP Newsletter*, 41 (May, 2000), pp. 17-18.

The agenda for Anthropocene Humanities must investigate how we may enhance and intensify work on how directionality could be articulated, democratically pursued and implemented by new technologies, medical knowledge, economic paradigms, and forms of social organization.

The agenda must also embrace the fact that Western thought is repeatedly confronted with internal limits defined by institutional and philosophical constraints, while non-Western traditions remain embedded within national or cultural confines that often do not offer universalistic responses to environmental action.

Common to us all, Eastern and Western humanities, is that many of the problems we are confronted with are variants of the Prisoners's Dilemma: we would all benefit from collaborating towards the common good, but in an era of weak global politics, cultural distrust and imbalanced communication the defector is likely to get away with cheating. We know that the only solution to overcome the PD game problem is mutual trust. In a world of a vast, distributed PD game, the good guys will limit emissions etc, the poor guys will ask for acceptance that they pollute for a time, and the bad guys will pay lip service and get away with not changing their ways (and of course it is not always clear who are the good/bad/poor guys). Anthropocene Humanities should help us understand how and why we choose and act like we do. The humanities must play a key role in communication, translation and building trust.

The Constructive Role of Humanities

Colleagues in the sciences often look to the humanities—and the arts disciplines especially—for help with communicating science findings. While arts certainly may help communicate science findings, and humanities disciplines such as media studies certainly may help us understand how and why communication works, I believe that the humanities have an independent role for understanding, adapting to and mitigating climate change.

The humanities may inform us when and how environmental problems have been mitigated or solved by individual and common action and what have been the interpretive grammars of purpose, significance, and meaning. We know that intellectual and cultural enlightenment is not enough to change human behavior and that it is extremely difficult for humans to change repetitive actions or preferences even when we know the negative consequences of unchanged behavior. The challenge to the humanities would, therefore, be: can the interpretive investments, research paradigms, disciplinary histories, and aesthetic traditions of the humanities help us effect fundamental orders of social and cultural change in a moment of climate crisis? We need to understand human behaviour, management, motivation, intention and desire, and this understanding needs to inform society. Research questions must be addressed at the individual, institutional, and social levels: How do individuals take on board and respond to calls for change in individual behaviour? How may social innovation help redress institutionally ingrained patterns? How do societies cope with and develop resilient responses to threats of crisis and collapse?

Some colleagues argue that the role of the humanities is not to contribute to the construction of the world, but rather that our role is to be a critical voice against the established. They will leave it to natural and engineering sciences to describe and construct the world, and will instead take the position as critics: while the natural science's role is to lay brick upon brick of the scientific building, it is the humanistic role to demolish the building. The postmodern historian Ankersmit says squarely that the historian is not committed to the truth, but solely to narrative

power.[2]

It's a radical position, which I reject. We cannot renounce the reference to reality and truth without giving up our academic position. But I do recognize that post-modern thinkers have played a positive role by demolishing positivist innocence and naivety. The last twenty years of rapid development of narrative style and experience universes would be unthinkable without post-modern thought and its influence on everyday thinking.

In the 21st century our thinking is characterized by design rather than tradition, we are no longer so much preoccupied with how the world is, but with how we can create something entirely new and unbound. The linguistic turn was therefore one of the humanistic world's most important discoveries in the last generation. The problem is that the humanities in the postmodernist interpretation may turn entirely self-reflecting. When a researcher looks at surroundings, the researcher may look really only at his or her reflection. Research may be a question only of how I choose to look at the world, how the world is reflected in me, or how I can look deeper into myself.

Instead of just being critical of this development of the humanities and harking back to positivist epistemology, we must recognize that there is no turning back. We all acknowledge that we humans have no other tool than language to comprehend the reality that is around us. The only thing we have as researchers are sensations and perceptions, empirical data and models, whether we are researching nanoparticle or dance. In this way both science and the humanities have taken the linguistic turn.

Can the Humanities Change the World?

If we agree that research should inform action, and that humanities findings may have a role to play, some sceptics may still ask: But have the humanities ever changed anything? Yes, I would maintain that the humanities have been central to articulating and determining long-term human behaviour certainly since Socrates and Confucius. Consider this one example of the role of the humanities during the Cold War. The world of the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by a belief in social engineering both in democratic and communist systems. The Cold War period was convinced of the possibilities of social planning as a result of the cognitive breakthrough for the quantitative social sciences such as sociology and economics. Still, it was beyond comparison a humanities thought product that helped to define and defend the western world during this time, the philosopher Karl Popper's 1945 study of the Open Society and his uncompromising defence of democracy at a time when totalitarian thinking was in sharp focus.[3] Popper's philosophy had a take-up the extent of which we can hardly fathom today because it so radically came to define Western thought and behaviour during the Cold War. In a sense it is still with us today, perhaps most clearly evidenced by the United Nations COP-17 on Climate Change in Durban, South Africa, last year. The clash between the liberal thinking of western countries and the perspective of the newly affluent BRIC countries was evidence that we need a new kind of thinking.

I would call this new way of thinking Anthropocene Humanities, to overcome the differences and create a new consensus for living with environmental change. My suggestion is not to make all humanities a servant of one particular

2 F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994).

3 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

agenda but rather to encourage humanities researchers to grasp the real need for a better understanding of the human in the age of the Anthropocene.

The Second Scientific Revolution

From demographics and climate let me turn to the third big challenge to the humanities, the way in which we do what we do, information and how we handle it. The second scientific revolution caused by the Internet is only now working its way into how we practice the humanities. The use of digital technologies is rapidly changing methods and indeed research questions, yet we are still training most humanities graduates for an analogue world. Do we need a step change in the humanities curriculum?

IT and especially the Internet has accelerated and fundamentally changed the way in which cognition takes place and these changes will only accelerate. The Canadian physicist Michael Nielsen argues in his book from last year *Reinventing Discovery* that the Internet means that we are facing the second scientific revolution: "We are living at the dawn of the most dramatic change in science in more than 300 years. The internet is transforming the nature of our collective intelligence and how we understand the world."[4]

Nielsen does not discuss the web's impact on the humanities, but its significance is, in my opinion at least as large and perhaps in an epistemological sense, much larger. Humanities are still overwhelmingly conceived and practiced as analogue sciences and the full benefits of the digital revolution are still ahead of us. Archives hold an ocean of human knowledge, which is still locked in paper format.

In the 1960s IBM tried to reach a closer understanding of how humanities disciplines contribute to human cognition, especially as concerns the humanities affinity for IBM's engineering world. Therefore, it suggested a ranking by how rigorous the humanist discoveries could be said to be.[5] It was a ranking that reflected the needs of the computer industry to machine code precise information for limited resources of hard disks and bandwidth. Today the IT industry has happily overcome these restrictions to accommodate large text masses. It offers vastly improved opportunities to develop IT-based humanist technologies, and we are certainly only at the threshold of a leap from analogue to digital research methods.

Instead of thinking in two cultures—technology and culture badly set up for each other—we should consider that no culture today comes to us without being digitally disseminated. The last twenty years of IT revolution is being felt everywhere in all disciplines be they Assyriology, numismatics, dramaturgy, literature or language studies.

Humanities research provides content in the form of texts, images, objects to an online world that is ever more hungry for content. Therefore the first step in digital humanities anywhere has been to translate this analogue world onto a digital platform. We now have access to millions of books that no one can ever have time to read or get an overview by reading from cover to cover. Therefore the task is no longer just for the individual researcher to read as much as possible and remember as much as possible using index cards, notes and dog ears. Future humanities research is ex ante digital humanities, and the task is to develop and master as many digital technologies

4 Michael Nielsen, *Reinventing Discovery* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).
5 Edmund A. Bowles (ed.), *Computers in Humanistic Research* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

and search strategies as possible.

The digital revolution is already challenging the school system from the first to last stages. Students are increasingly unable to read long, sustained texts, and when they write, their products are often samples, pieced together by texts from the Internet, instead of original expressions. We may regret this development, but must also take it seriously. The question is how the school system should look after the digital revolution. Until now much of the teaching and examination methods continues in an analogue tradition. The problem is that when students' world is digital there is a mismatch, which leads to declining motivation and poorer outcomes. The current school generation in Europe is perhaps the first of several generations who have worse formal results than the previous one. There is an urgent need for humanities research into how we adjust to a reality that has already occurred.

The humanistic university programmes are also still predominantly in an analogue world. We do not prepare the next generation of born-digital humanists, who with naturalness exploit the digital opportunities. Instead, the humanistic study is often a schism between young people's digital-social networks and the analogue study chamber. It is no wonder if this schism is experienced by students as anything but a preparation for the work that awaits after graduation.

Translational Humanities

In a world where natural resources are final, and where smart solutions are about overcoming cultural barriers and improve access to digital resources, it is essential that we think of the university in a new way. The university operates today as a framework for specialized knowledge sharing, with a library and administration as the only common facilities. But the centrifugal motion, the creation of ever more specialised disciplines, which was the engine of the first scientific revolution, leaves little space for knowledge sharing. During the second scientific revolution, there is a need for a reconfiguration of science, including the humanities. There is a need to promote radical-interdisciplinary collaboration across traditional faculties.[6]

Radical interdisciplinarity that exceeds faculty boundaries is often praised but rarely practised—and suffers from lack of support. There is little incitement from university managers or politicians to break with traditional patterns and hence we are left in the disciplinary siloes and thought patterns developed with the university of the 19th century.

In sum, these grand challenges to the humanities may be taken to indicate the need to rethink humanities. I suggest that we may learn from the practice of translational medicine to overcome difficulties of disciplinary boundaries and obstacles to application of humanities insights, and that a way forward may be to support what I would call translational humanities.

Translational medicine is the term for the important transformation of health research that occurred around 2000 by an emphasis on shortening the turnover time and reduce transaction costs in the research value chain. There are delays and obstacles at every level from laboratory to hospital bed, from biomedicine and psychology to the patient. This is why translational medicine is about ensuring that basic research and knowledge at each specialized level is translated

6 Poul Holm, Michael Goodsite, Sierd Cloetingh, Bernard Vanheusden, Kathryn Yusoff, Mauro Agnoletti, Moldan Bedřich, Daniel Lang, Rik Leemans, Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, Mercedes Pardo Buendia, Walter Pohl, Andrew Sors and Ruben Zondervan, "Collaboration between the Natural, Social and Human Sciences in Global Change Studies," *Environmental Science and Policy* 2012 (in press).

to the next, and about developing relationships from research labs to hospitals, GPs and ultimately to the patients.[7]

Such a translation dimension is not typical in the humanities. We do not have the financial overheads that can pay the transaction costs. As a humanities scholar you must be both basic scientist and entrepreneur, translator and communicator, activist and lobbyist. If you are not able to play all parts, it is unlikely that your research will have impact.

The challenge for us on the one hand is to defend disciplinary diversity, so we avoid being one-dimensional in our concept of the human—biologists have been good at defending biodiversity, we must be better to speak on behalf of the diversity of human existence. On the other hand, we must become better at articulating our findings, and we must bring our findings into play. We must come up with answers to how we can bring heritage with us into the future, how our research may benefit social cohesion, how we can share knowledge with companies and institutions, and how it helps us live with the challenges of climate and globalization.

Universities and research councils therefore need to think in ways of enhancing both the ability of the humanities to research the Anthropocene and to translate our findings. And we need to increase our ability to put this knowledge at stake in society.

7 Duke Institute for Translational Medicine defines translational research practices in this way: "It is an integrated support structure that provides resources and training and facilitates collaborative research in clinical and translational research. DTMI's mission is to catalyze translation across the continuum of scientific discovery, clinical research, care delivery, and global health. DTMI facilitates team science by joining multidisciplinary investigators and industrial-model project management, while providing investigators easy access to emerging technologies and methodologies." http://www.dukemedicine.org/Initiatives/ClinicalAndTranslationalScience (accessed Jan. 3rd, 2012).