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Genealogies of the Humanities: A Vision for the Field

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ABSTRACT

What are the humanities? As essentialist answers to this question are losing credibility, historians may help elucidate what the humanities are by offering genealogical accounts of how the ideals, practices, and institutions currently known as the humanities have come into being. This article points out why such a genealogical project is important and how it might serve as a collective aspiration for the emerging field of the history of the humanities. Specifically, the essay describes the project as driven by a commitment to unraveling multilayered legacies and path-dependent trajectories. Instead of offering unifying accounts, genealogists are attentive to diversity, disagreement, and change over time. Consequently, genealogies are well suited to explain why the humanities are made up of sometimes contradictory ideas and practices, while looking differently in Cairo or Buenos Aires than in Paris or New York.

Until recently, my courses in the history of the humanities were structured chronologically. I took my students on a journey from Renaissance humanism via German *Geisteswissenschaften* to the post–World War II humanities. I noticed, however, that most students did not relate easily to *studia humanitatis* or philological learning in the early modern period. Their enthusiasm became palpable only when our readings began to touch on themes that they could recognize as relevant today: the nature-culture dualism, the othering of the Orient, or an overwhelmingly masculine research culture. By way of experiment, therefore, I restructured my courses. Instead of starting in a distant past, I began by inviting my students to look around. What do humanities scholars at our campus do? What questions do they ask and what methods

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do they use? What are they excited about and what do they fear? In response to these questions, the students quickly became engrossed in animated classroom debates about posthumanism and postcritique. More importantly, they began to see why it makes sense to delve into *studia humanitatis* and biblical philology. To understand why non-human agency has become a subject of much controversy, they need to know what humanism is and why a tradition that was once cutting-edge and liberating could come to be seen as hampering adjustment to the Anthropocene. Likewise, to grasp why postcritique elicits emotional responses, students need some understanding of critique in its many variations—not only Judith Butler, Fredric Jameson, and the Frankfurt School but also the unsettling practices of historical and philological criticism in an age when Homer and the Bible enjoyed canonical status. What had seemed like a far-removed past in my previous courses now emerged as a crucial background for understanding the present-day humanities.

I start with this vignette because it captures what I see as a key task for historians of the humanities. I see the history of the humanities as a genealogical project, committed to unraveling and explaining where the practices, institutions, discourses, and ideals that we call “humanities” have come from. Historians of the humanities try to make current practices, controversies, and institutional arrangements intelligible by tracing their roots and evolution over time. They treat them, not as incarnations of some timeless ideal, but as products of path-dependent historical factors, subject to variation and change. This historicizing agenda in turn enables historians of the humanities to bring current debates on the nature of the humanities to a higher plane. At a time when essentialist answers to the question “What are the humanities?” are losing credibility, historians of the humanities can step in with historical accounts of how the humanities came into being, taking on different forms in different times and places. Also, by depicting the humanities as a cluster of historically grown traditions that inevitably contain both inspiring and disturbing elements, historians of the humanities can add depth and nuance to moral debates about the “colonial foundations” or “democratic value” of the humanities.

In the pages that follow, I will unpack these arguments in three steps: (1) Why are historians of the humanities well positioned to contribute to “humanist metadiscourse”? (2) What are genealogies of the humanities? (3) What would such genealogies demand from historians?

WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

“Humanist metadiscourse” is Eric Hayot’s term for a burgeoning genre of reflections on the nature, identity, tasks, values, and benefits of the humanities.¹ Much of this discourse is

1. Hayot, *Humanist Reason*, 14–15.

apologetic in the sense that it aims to defend the humanities in an age of declining enrollment and dwindling public support. Even more characteristic, however, is its search for unique selling points. Some authors believe that the humanities distinguish themselves from other academic pursuits through the kind of knowledge they produce (an epistemological argument that goes back to nineteenth-century neo-Kantianism).² Others argue that humanities courses stimulate students' democratic attitudes, as the empathy required for understanding a novel is central to the project of questioning, listening, and deliberating known as democracy.³ Different as these arguments may be, what they have in common is that they reduce the humanities to a single idea, a single cognitive good, or a single model of socialization. We may call them essentialist to the extent that they try to present this single idea as the core of the humanities.⁴

Essentialist accounts do not fare well these days. If Martha Nussbaum points to the morally edifying power of the humanities, scholars are quick to respond that the humanities do not have a monopoly on cultivating democratic attitudes.⁵ Similarly, if Wim Drees defines the humanities as "academic disciplines in which humans seek understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in," critics immediately object that this imposes a forced coherence on a diversity of fields, while ignoring that many of the social sciences also fit the definition.⁶ These criticisms are not always fair, given that exercises in ideal-typical model building by definition abstract from empirical data.⁷ Nonetheless, there are reasons why essentialist accounts provoke irritated responses, perhaps today even more than before. In recent decades, the humanities have expanded enormously in terms of fields and approaches. As a result, their questions, methods, and attitudes have become so varied as to defy easy unification. Also, there is an increased awareness of "humanities" being a label that can cover different things in different contexts. For instance, what Europeans call *Geisteswissenschaften* only partly overlaps with *humanities* in the United States.⁸ For these and other reasons, it has become difficult to speak in the singular about the "nature" or "idea" of the humanities.⁹

This is where historians of the humanities come in. In the absence of unequivocal definitions, historical accounts of how the "humanities" have come into being are the

2. Van Woudenberg, "Nature of the Humanities."

3. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

4. More nuanced is Foley, *Geography of Insight*.

5. Small, *Value of the Humanities*, 129, 139, 148.

6. Drees, *What Are the Humanities For*, 12; Harrison, "Defining and Defending the Humanities," 680; Ruse, "Willem Drees on the Humanities," 692.

7. A point already made by Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, 7–8.

8. Kraemer, "What Are the Humanities," 29–32, 37–40.

9. During, "Idea of the Humanities."

best available means for understanding what the humanities are. Unlike static definitions, historical narratives allow for variety and change. They can explain why the humanities are so heterogeneous in terms of fields, approaches, methods, and attitudes and why, accordingly, their “value” or “benefit” cannot be captured in a single formula.¹⁰ Historians of the humanities are, in other words, well-equipped to answer that difficult question, “What are the humanities?”

GENEALOGIES OF THE HUMANITIES

What would it mean for historians of the humanities to commit themselves to such a project? I raise this question because scholars have very different reasons for joining the comparative project that is the history of the humanities. Some are driven by a mission to rescue, protect, or reform the humanities as we currently know them. Others welcome the history of the humanities as an alternative to monodisciplinary history writing simply because it allows them to trace their research theme across the borders of a single discipline. Some are cultural historians, sensitive to contexts and allergic to teleology, whereas others identify as critics charged with the task of unmasking injustice and hypocrisy.¹¹ How can an agenda for the field as a whole provide a direction while simultaneously maintaining space for such a diverse lot of scholars?

“Genealogies of the humanities” may serve as a banner under which many can unite, provided that genealogies are not associated too strictly with Friedrich Nietzsche or Michel Foucault. In common parlance, genealogies are stories of descent—family histories, most notably—that unearth the ways in which successive generations have helped bring about a present state of affairs. In this nontechnical sense of the term, we might say that genealogies of the humanities are “histories of the present” that try to illuminate how and why the fields, methods, attitudes, and institutions of our present-day humanities have come into being.

Although this broadly defined notion of genealogy does not require a specific philosophical stance or allegiance, one might argue that Foucault’s genealogical method contains a couple of valuable elements that historians of the humanities may want to take on board (even if they are otherwise justified in believing that the Foucauldian project has had its day).¹² The first and most obvious of these elements is a rejection of “origins” in favor of “descent.”¹³ As any family history researcher knows, there is no point in tracing a line of descent back to Adam and Eve. If anything, genealogies show that family lines

10. As emphasized by Small, *Value of the Humanities*, and Felski, “Introduction.”

11. Paul, “Introduction,” 12–3.

12. See Suzanne Marchand’s contribution to this forum section.

13. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 145–46.

depend on many different people. As such lines tend to multiply and cross in sometimes unexpected ways, they often look like rhizomes more than like linear sequences. By analogy, genealogies of the humanities uncover extended networks of historical roots, none of which qualifies as a unique point of origin.

Second, genealogies are historicist insofar as they historicize all universals.¹⁴ Instead of adopting timeless definitions of the “humanities,” the “comparative method,” “historical criticism,” or “objectivity,” genealogical accounts subject such categories to historical scrutiny by asking: What did they mean? To whom? For what reason? And how did they change over time? (As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison remind us: “It is not always the same kind of ethos, or the same kind of self, that is involved: both have histories.”)¹⁵

From this it follows, third, that genealogies can never be smooth narratives, with all the tensions and inconsistencies ironed out. On the contrary, genealogists are attentive to moments of conflict or force fields in which competing methods, personae, or teaching styles vied for hegemony. Precisely to the extent that they want to trace where current differences and disagreements come from, they have to delve into controversies, abandoned paradigms, and forgotten approaches. If anything, the history of the humanities is a means of “teaching the conflicts.”¹⁶

Fourth, as Foucault never tired of repeating, “genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary.” It requires “relentless erudition,” “knowledge of details,” and “a vast accumulation of source material.”¹⁷ This implies that the genealogical project leaves plenty of room for detailed case studies, in the best tradition of the history of scholarship.¹⁸ Not every article has to take its point of departure in the present-day humanities. Writing a history of the present is an objective of the field as a whole, not of each and every publication. One only hopes that accumulating historical material is not an end in itself but rather a means to refine our understanding of where the humanities come from.

Finally, should genealogies of the humanities be critical in the sense of challenging conventions and unsettling certainties? Although Foucault would have answered this question in the affirmative, Bernard Williams argues that genealogies can also be “vindicatory” in the sense of strengthening one’s commitments.¹⁹ Given that the history of the humanities is a heterogeneous field, it seems important to allow for both kinds of

14. Bevir, “What Is Genealogy,” 266–8.

15. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 40.

16. Graff, “Teach the Conflicts.”

17. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139, 140.

18. As in Blair and Popper, *New Horizons in Early Modern Scholarship*.

19. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 36, 283 n. 19. Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, is a nice example of such a vindicatory genealogy.

genealogy.²⁰ There must be room for critical histories, intent on uncovering the “inhumanities” of the humanities, but also for studies that point out why scholars across the centuries have recognized the importance of preserving texts and writing commentaries on them.²¹

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

What, then, do genealogies of the humanities look like in practice? What sort of research and teaching activities would contribute to such a project? Within the parameters just outlined, there is room for a wide range of questions and approaches. This is of course deliberate: no vision for the field as a whole will have any chance of finding support if it asks practitioners to adopt a single methodology or devote themselves to questions that are not theirs. Unlike, say, a book proposal, which should be specific about questions, sources, and methods, an agenda for the field as a whole must be integrative—that is, able to accommodate a range of existing lines of research and capable of explaining how all this work contributes to a greater good. If, as I have argued, that greater good is a historical answer to the question as to what the humanities are, what are historians of the humanities expected to do in practice?

As long as they keep an eye on the field’s genealogical ambition, historians should be encouraged to continue what they have recently begun doing—exploring the multifaceted history of the humanities—especially insofar as such research opens up new perspectives on things that we modern scholars often take for granted. We need histories of abstract categories like “crisis,” which have been accompanying the humanities ever since the nineteenth century, but also of concrete scholarly tools like the footnote and the index.²² There is much to learn from comparative research on knowledge classification systems but also from quantitative studies of faculty employment and student enrolment.²³ The present condition of the humanities can be illuminated with studies on institutions that are still familiar to us—libraries, journals, learned societies—but also with analyses of why we no longer revere the classics or believe that reading Cicero is a proper means of cultivating the soul.

If these examples illustrate the thematic range that historians of the humanities may want to cover, genealogies also need to be written from multiple geographical locations—from Göttingen and Leiden but also from Cape Town and Beijing. Some of the

20. Not to mention other versions of genealogy such as listed in Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 58–86, and Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals*, 146–50.

21. Bridges, “Brief History of the Inhumanities”; Most, *Commentaries*.

22. Reitter and Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis*; Grafton, *Footnote*; Duncan, *Index*.

23. Along the lines of Kraemer, “What Are the Humanities,” and Geiger, “Democracy and Curriculum.”

most interesting transformations of the humanities come into sharper relief when viewed from Calcutta rather than from London. While, for instance, the iconoclastic political implications of historians' archival research are clearly visible in early nineteenth-century Europe, they are even more evident in postcolonial India, among scholars like Jadunath Sarkar, whose quasi-Rankean emphasis on primary source research challenged both imperial British historiography and nationalist history writing in India.²⁴ Likewise, the impact of philanthropic foundations on teaching and research in the humanities is visible in the United States but can be seen with even greater clarity in Istanbul or Ankara, where the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950s spent large sums of money to provide "creative minorities" of young, Western-oriented Turks with American-style humanities education.²⁵

Importantly, while all this requires detailed research, the results of which are likely to appear primarily in specialized journals and academic monographs, the history of the humanities will live up to its task—clarifying what the humanities are—only if at least some of us also try to synthesize research findings into more ambitious narratives about "the origins of the modern humanities." Especially at this level, the genealogical approach proposed in this article can make a positive difference. Genealogies of the humanities can offer much-needed alternatives to essentialist accounts by unearthing different historical layers that make up the legacy that we call the humanities. By drawing attention to a diversity of voices, traditions, and cultures that have contributed to the humanities in their present-day form, genealogies encourage us not to reduce the humanities to what we like or dislike but to face their palimpsestic nature and come to terms with the multiple strands that make up their fabric.

EPILOGUE

One might object: Shouldn't we opt for something simpler? Don't we serve our cause more effectively by telling easily digestible stories about the humanities as a relatively coherent domain with a unique societal mission? Without denying a need for simplification in genres like the op-ed article, I would like to think that it is precisely their commitment to complexity and nuance that allows genealogies as proposed in this article to make valuable interventions in the public domain—not only for the sake of the humanities but more broadly with an eye to the difficult task of appropriating and adapting traditions with which we feel only partly able to identify.

Half a century ago, Cold War apologists wrote triumphant, self-congratulatory histories of democracy. Meanwhile, however, the fragile state of democracy in many countries

24. Chakrabarty, *Calling of History*.

25. Erken, *America and the Making of Modern Turkey*, 117–41.

around the world has caused the tone to change. John Keane, a leading historian of democracy, emphasizes that there have been several forms of democracy, all of which faced problems of their own, and none of which appeared to be immune to decline. Keane writes history, not to vindicate current ideas or practices, but to show that democracy has always been an unfinished project, in need of repair, and vulnerable to more powerful rivals.²⁶ Analogously, we might want to think of the humanities as a contested tradition, existing in multiple forms, full of valuable insights, burdened with problematic legacies, worth continuing in the twenty-first century, and in need of adaptation to a world in which most people are more worried about climate change than about rhyming conventions in Shakespearean English.

This at least is what I hope my students will take away from my courses: that the humanities as they encounter them on campus are multilayered products of centuries of evolution, which are better understood from a genealogical point of view than through simple narratives of progress or decline. Genealogies of what Foucault calls an “unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers” may teach them that the humanities as they currently exist deserve neither full-scale support nor blatant rejection but are served best by scholars that adapt them to new circumstances with all the care and critical acumen that historians of the humanities try to practice in their work.²⁷

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26. Keane, *Life and Death of Democracy*, xxxii.

27. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 146.

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