

A New Field: *History of Humanities*

Rens Bod
Julia Kursell
Jaap Maat
Thijs Weststeijn

These are exciting times for the humanities. The impressive corpus of knowledge that the humanities have discovered, created, and cultivated over many centuries is available for the benefit of more people than ever and evolving rapidly. Fresh perspectives open up as digital tools enable researchers to explore questions that not long ago were beyond their reach and even their imagination. Novel fields of research deal with phenomena emerging in a globalizing culture, enabling us to make sense of the way in which new media affect our lives. Cross-fertilization between disciplines leads to newly developed methods and results, such as the complex chemical analysis of the materials of ancient artworks, yielding data that were unavailable to both artists and their publics at the time of production, or neuroscientific experiments shedding new light on our capacity for producing and appreciating music.

At the same time, there is a sense of gloom, perhaps even crisis, among those who are convinced that the humanities are valuable, precious, indispensable. The number of students taking humanities courses declines, and humanities departments at universities worldwide are subject to severe budget cuts or abolition altogether. In a period in which the academic world is plagued by governments insisting on measurable results for the sake of short-term financial profit, the humanities seem most vulnerable.

We present the first issue of *History of Humanities* with feelings of anticipation. Our journal is meant to stand for the fact that scholarly practices of a type today labeled “humanities” have been an essential part of the process of knowledge making ever since human inquisitiveness sought to enhance our understanding of the world and ourselves. This long history has been studied in fruitful and illuminating ways, but the focus has been on either the natural sciences or on single disciplines within the humanities, such as history writing and linguistics. The fundamental contribution of the humanities to the intricate web of knowledge that scholars, thinkers, and researchers have spun in the course of several millennia has thus been poorly recog-

History of Humanities, Volume 1, Number 1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/685056>

© 2016 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 2379-3163/2016/0101-0001\$10.00

1

nized and is consequently undervalued. We intend to redress the imbalance in the historiography of the search for knowledge that mankind has been engaged in for so long. A more balanced picture, we believe, will show that the ways we arrive at knowledge are complex, varied, and unpredictable and often involve the transmission of methods and insights from one field of investigation to another.

The humanities have always been strong in reflecting on their own history and have sometimes even defined themselves as primarily concerned with the history and historicity of human endeavors. However, our motive for starting a journal devoted to the history of the humanities is not nostalgia. Instead we see a potential for a large community of scholars and researchers to make their cause more tangible through reflecting on their own history in a new constellation. We invite contributions on as many aspects of the history of the humanities as possible. Authors can discuss the histories of the study of the visual and literary arts, of language and music, of thinking, and of the past, to name but several central subjects. These studies stretch from ancient times up to the present, and they can be found in different regions across the globe.

A platform of this sort is called for in view of both the positive and negative trends in today's humanities, and we hope that it will strengthen the voice of the humanities in the academic discourse at large. First attempts to bring together historians of the humanities took shape as a series of four conferences, "The Making of the Humanities," in Amsterdam (2008, 2010) and Rome (2012, 2014). This is now followed by a series of annual meetings that will take place in Baltimore (2016), Oxford (2017), and Beijing (2018). Having published *The Making of the Humanities*, a trilogy of selected papers from the first conferences, we decided as a next step to found *History of Humanities*.¹ We have witnessed how scholars worldwide are forming a vibrant community of historians of humanities, a process that recently resulted in the founding of the Society for the History of the Humanities.²

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "HUMANITIES"? TOWARD A DEFINITION

It is probably impossible to give a definition of the term *humanities* that would cover a category of practices, or objects of study, that remains fixed throughout all periods of intellectual activity across the world. In the European tradition alone, classifications of

1. *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 1, *Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); vol. 2, *From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); and vol. 3, *The Modern Humanities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

2. See <http://historyofhumanities.org/>.

fields and disciplines have been many and diverse. Activities that may in hindsight be seen as belonging to a single discipline have migrated between categories. Aristotle's distinction between his *Organon* (works on logic), on the one hand, and the theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, on the other, existed alongside categorizations motivated by pedagogy, such as the Hellenistic *enkyklios paideia* and the late Roman *artes liberales*. A key moment as far as terminology is concerned was Coluccio Salutati's (1331–1406) defense of the *studia humanitatis* as a coherent and independent field: the secular study of grammar, rhetoric, poetics, history, and moral philosophy, complementary to the *studia divinitatis*, or Biblical scholarship. When fifteenth-century Italian universities adopted the curriculum of the *studia humanitatis*, its supporters were called *umanisti*, giving rise to the terms *humanist* and, later, *humanism*.³

It is an open question whether or not the humanities as a whole can be distinguished from other groups of disciplines, such as the natural or the social sciences, on the basis of a specific method or object of study. A strong conceptual division between a science of the human and a science of nature dates back at least to Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) *Scienza Nuova* of 1725. In the late nineteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) authoritatively distinguished the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) from the sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) with regard both to the methods and to the objects studied. Rather than explaining (*erklären*) the world in terms of countable and measurable regularities, the humanities attempt to understand (*verstehen*) the intentions of historical actors; the specific objects investigated by the humanities are “the expressions of the human mind.”⁴ Over the twentieth century, other categories were introduced in addition to the humanities and the sciences, in particular the social sciences (or human sciences), which study human behavior in its social context. While these divisions are not stable, Dilthey's definition covers by and large the disciplines that are today referred to by the term *humanities* at continental European universities, including in languages other than German or English—for example, *scienze umanistiche* in Italian, *humanités* in French, *humaniora* in the Dutch and Scandinavian languages, and *gumanitarnyje nauki* in Russian.

If we move outside Europe, the picture obviously becomes more complicated. It has been argued that Islamic scholarship formed the basis for the *studia humanitatis*: the *studia adabiya* included grammar and lexicography, poetry, rhetoric, history, and

3. For the history of the word *humanist*, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance,” *Byzantion* 17 (1944–45): 346–74.

4. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883), 29.

moral philosophy.⁵ But China, for one, presents a different picture: the “six arts” that Confucius identified with genteel education were rites and rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and writing, and mathematics (or prediction). Another ancient Chinese practice, to treat literature, philosophy, and history (the triad *wen-shi-zhe*) as one body of knowledge, was revived in the nineteenth century under the header of *guoxue* (national studies). *Guoxue* was intended as a counterweight to the term *renwen*, a calque of the Japanese denomination for the Western category “humanities” (as different from the social and natural sciences). In fact, however, *renwen*—the term still used today—was a retranslation, since the Japanese compound was originally derived from the Chinese *Book of Changes*.⁶

Looking at the term *humanities* from a systematic perspective, we encounter yet another challenge. Although (and because) the journal aims at the broadest possible audience in its endeavor to contribute to a new field, it appears in a single language. Choosing English as the lingua franca entails many risks, some of which have become apparent in this first issue. In modern English, for one, the division between the humanities and the sciences is emphasized by the terminology itself. Yet in many other languages there is a single term, such as *Wissenschaft* in German, *scienza* in Italian, or *nauka* in Russian, that denotes the study of both the natural and the human world. In German and Italian, *Literaturwissenschaft* and *scienza della letteratura* are common terms. The emphasis in English on the difference between humanities and sciences suggests that methods do not easily migrate between these spheres of knowledge. This may be partly responsible for the tendency of English-speaking scholarship to associate the humanities with historical approaches, rather than analytical ones that study their objects independently of the historical and cultural background. By contrast, the humanities outside the United States and Britain have frequently depended on analytical, nonhistorical methods: famous examples include the Vienna School of art history, Russian formalism, and French structuralism.

Our terminological challenges do not end with this alleged contrast between *sciences* and *humanities*. Another hurdle consists in an ambiguity of the latter term itself. In English, *humanities* can refer both to the study of the products of the human mind and to these products themselves. We do not intend to include historical studies of literature, music, theater, or the visual arts; rather, we aim at the history of the studies

5. George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West: With Special Reference to Scholasticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

6. Hsiung Ping-chen, “The Evolution of Chinese Humanities,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1267–82; Perry Johansson, “Cross-Cultural Epistemology: How European Sinology Became the Bridge to China’s Modern Humanities,” in *The Making of the Humanities*, 3:449–64; and Arif Dirlik, ed., “The National Learning Revival,” special issue of *China Perspectives* 1 (2011).

carried out on literature, music, theater, and the visual arts. This does not mean that we ignore that the arts themselves have often played a role in research and in the acquisition of knowledge.

SCOPE OF THE JOURNAL

No earlier journal has assembled scholarly studies on the history of the humanities disciplines across time and place. We thus believe it is not up to us to formulate rules for good practice in the history of humanities. Some of our contributors will find it legitimate to compare methods or principles stemming from different regions or periods; in the humanities, just as in the sciences, historical actors have applied practices, methods, and principles invented for specific disciplines to problems in other disciplines (sometimes by wilfully ignoring the original historical or religious contexts of these inventions). But other authors in *History of Humanities* may instead wish to highlight cultural incommensurabilities (and identify, for instance, the problems incurred when Western methods have been applied to the study of African literature or Chinese art).⁷

We are aware that referring to the study of music and the study of art in Greek or Chinese antiquity with terms such as *musicology* and *art history* may entail a lapse into Eurocentric presentism in which the past and the foreign are interpreted in terms of current concepts and perspectives. One option is therefore the use of actors' categories, meaning period and local terms, such as *poetics* for the study of poetry and theater in ancient Greece, *grammar* for the Italian humanists' study of language, and *jinshixue* (the study of metal and stone) for tenth-century Chinese antiquarianism.

History of Humanities welcomes contributions that critically engage with the validity of the term *humanities* and its related Eurocentric ideologies as predicated on ancient philology, Renaissance humanism, and the modern humanities faculties at German, French, and English-speaking universities. Yet as universities worldwide have adopted, at least in general terms, the Western model, our focus on the humanities reflects a global state of affairs.⁸ What is more, we feel that the ambition to write comparative historiographies of the humanities is a powerful heuristic that fills a conspicuous lacuna in the history of knowledge.

We welcome articles on topics from all regions and all periods, both before and after the formation of university disciplines and including recently established fields,

7. James Elkins, "Art History as a Global Discipline," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 3–23.

8. See, e.g., the articles on the modern humanities in South Africa (Keith Breckenridge, 1253–66), Mexico (Erica Pani, 1327–42), India (Sanjay Seth, 1354–67), and Russia (Oleg Kharkhordin, 1283–98) in *American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (2015).

such as media studies and digital humanities, as well as discontinued fields, such as antiquarianism. Contributions may highlight the singularity of historical and geographical practices or emphasize parallels and connections between disciplines, periods, and cultures. We also invite historians of the humanities to engage with the history of science, and vice versa. Eventually a case could be made for uniting the history of the humanities and the history of science under the header of “history of knowledge.”⁹ Equally, however, contributors to *History of Humanities* may choose to highlight the specificity of the humanities in regard to the sciences.

History of Humanities also encourages contributions on the political and societal value of the humanities. While actual practices in the humanities and sciences have been quite different from Dilthey’s dichotomy between understanding and explaining, his distinction molded the minds of many, and his interpretative approach may have contributed to the current image problem of the humanities: they are seen as a luxury pastime with little relevance for society and even less for the economy. Our journal welcomes arguments in favor of (or, obviously, against) the value of the humanities, perhaps emphasizing their importance for critical thinking, social responsibility, or democratic citizenship.¹⁰ In this context, our comparative ambitions entail more than simply redressing an imbalance in our knowledge of the “global humanities.” The understanding of how one’s own traditions have been different from, and determined by, outside influences contributes to cultural consciousness. This insight is to be taken to heart by historians of the humanities; as Edward Said (1935–2003) argued, it is their disciplines—the study of languages and civilizations—that have molded the Eurocentric worldview.¹¹

In sum, *History of Humanities* offers a stage to different practices and ideals in the humanities, from antiquity to the present and from all regions and cultures. Contributions may individuate singular historical actors or draw overarching parallels and connections; seek out commonalities with the sciences or emphasize the humanities’ special status; and argue for or against their societal value. The journal publishes in-

9. See, e.g., Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Pickstone, “Toward a History of Western Knowledges: Sketching Together the Histories of the Humanities and the Natural Sciences,” in Bod, Maat, and Weststeijn, *Making of the Humanities*, 3:667–85; Rens Bod and Julia Kursell, “Focus: The History of Humanities and the History of Science,” *Isis* 106, no. 2 (2015).

10. See Jörg-Dieter Gauger and Günther Rütter, eds., *Warum die Geisteswissenschaften Zukunft haben!* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007); Jonathan Bate, ed., *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11. Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

dividual research articles, book reviews, and conference reports, with a special Forum section presenting a set of articles devoted to a specific theme.

In the present volume, the first such Forum section explores the contemporary relevance of the dichotomy “monument and document” as formulated by Erwin Panofsky (by John Guillory, with commentaries by John Joseph and Geoffrey Harpham). This is followed by five articles that range from historical overviews to specific case studies. The first analyzes the status of the Chinese tradition of historical writing in the light of recent Western influences, concluding with a programmatic plea for the survival of Chinese scholarly virtues (by Liu Dong, with an introduction by Haun Saussy). The role of mythology in the Northern European humanities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is analyzed from historical and methodological perspectives (by Joep Leerssen). Ferdinand Gregorovius provides a case in point of the importance of legends in historical scholarship (by Maya Maskarinec). The next contribution is a “bio-bibliographical” sketch of the Russian scholar Semen Vengerov, who spent his life compiling such sketches (by Mark Gamsa). Finally, one of the main challenges described above—the relationship between the humanities, human sciences, and natural sciences—is addressed (by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger).

WORKS CITED

- Bate, Jonathan, ed. 2010. *The Public Value of the Humanities*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bod, Rens. 2013. *A New History of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bod, Rens, and Julia Kursell. 2015. “Focus: The History of Humanities and the History of Science.” *Isis* 106, no. 2.
- Bod, Rens, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, eds. 2010–14. *The Making of the Humanities*. 3 vols. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1883. *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Dirlik, Arif, ed. 2011. “The National Learning Revival.” Special issue of *China Perspectives* 1.
- Elkins, James. 2007. “Art History as a Global Discipline.” In *Is Art History Global?*, edited by James Elkins, 3–23. London: Routledge.
- Gauger, Jörg-Dieter, and Günther Rüter, eds. 2007. *Warum die Geisteswissenschaften Zukunft haben!* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Hsiung, Ping-chen. 2015. “The Evolution of Chinese Humanities.” *American Historical Review* 120 (4): 1267–82.
- Johansson, Perry. 2014. “Cross-Cultural Epistemology: How European Sinology Became the Bridge to China’s Modern Humanities.” In *The Modern Humanities*, vol. 3 of *The Making of the Humanities*, edited by Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, 449–64. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kristeller, Paul Oskar. 1944–45. “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance.” *Byzantion* 17:346–74.

- Makdisi, George. 1990. *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West: With Special Reference to Scholasticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pickstone, John. 2014. "Toward a History of Western Knowledges: Sketching Together the Histories of the Humanities and the Natural Sciences." In *The Modern Humanities*, vol. 3 of *The Making of the Humanities*, edited by Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, 267–85. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Said, Edward. 2004. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Small, Helen. 2013. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.