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An Introduction

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FORUM: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE HISTORY OF THE HUMANITIES?

Futures of the History of the Humanities: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, scholarly attention has turned to the humanities' collective past with renewed energy and sense of purpose. As a result, a new field of research, the history of the humanities, has crystalized and received broad international attention. In this forum, we take a special interest in the question of where the history of the humanities is heading. And where do we want it to go? In order to fuel discussion, six scholars have been invited to contribute their perspectives on what the future holds for the field. In our introduction, we frame these contributions by outlining the origins, current state, and potential trajectories of the new (or possibly reformed) field of research. Summarizing the ambitions of the field as well as its transdisciplinary links and influences, we reflect on why it has emerged as well as consider the larger implications for the humanities as a whole. It is argued that although the full potential of the history of the humanities is far from being reached, the very concept has functioned as an integrative platform, opening up new lines of inquiry within a larger framework. Nevertheless, as the contributions to this forum collectively make evident, there are also a number of challenges that the history of the humanities will face going forward.

There is a sense of irony to the fact that humanists, of all people, have been comparatively uninterested in writing their own history. Let's be clear, various aspects of the multifaceted history of the humanities—*avant la lettre*—have obviously been explored in innumerable ways and for a long time. As correctly pointed out by Lorraine Daston and Glenn W. Most, the history of the humanities has indeed been researched for centuries.¹

1. Daston and Most, "History of Science and History of Philologies," 385.

True to our nature as humanists, then, we can argue the degree to which the history of the humanities should be presented as a novelty, especially if we keep the large number of forerunning practices and protohistories in mind.² For example, the history of philology and the history of philosophy have been studied since antiquity, and it is certainly true that the history of universities and education in many ways covers the historical developments in the humanities. Yet, these endeavors have not jointly transmuted into a coherent research field, nor have they resulted in any obvious attempt to pool resources or create a university-based discipline centered on the collective history of the humanities. On an aggregate level—that is, beyond individual disciplines, institutions, methodologies, or biographies—the history of the humanities has rarely been the focus of scholarly interest.

There is at least one glaring reason for this omission in historical scholarship worth mentioning at the outset. “The humanities,” as is so often noted, is a difficult umbrella term to handle, historically as well as today. The farther we venture into the past, and the farther we move outside of academic institutions, the more problems of definition are certain to arise. Nevertheless, for a decade or so, attention has clearly turned to the humanities’ collective past, with new energy resulting in the formalization of a new multidisciplinary and international field of research.³

Springing from the Making of the Humanities conference series, starting in Amsterdam in 2008, “a new field” was launched by the Society for the History of the Humanities in the middle of the 2010s.⁴ The conferences and the interest they generated paved the way for the biannual journal *History of Humanities* (2016–) together with creation of courses, workshops, and seminars (e.g., in Amsterdam and Leiden). Yet, history of the humanities as a field cannot be equated solely with these recent initiatives and platforms.⁵ In fact, the very term may come across as slightly vague, as it interchangeably denotes the more specific research program originating in the Netherlands as well as the broader surge in scholarship on the subject with various lineages, noticeably in the United States.⁶

2. Paul, “Introduction.” See also Bod and Kursell, “Introduction,” 338. Previous histories include Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*; Proctor, *Education’s Great Amnesia*.

3. Paul, “Introduction,” 1.

4. Bod et al., “A New Field.”

5. There are of course a number of comparable or adjacent initiatives or journals: for instance, *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (1978), *History of the Human Sciences* (1988), *Revue d’histoire des sciences humaines* (1999), *Serendipities: Journal for the Sociology and History of the Social Sciences* (2016), and, soon, *History of Social Science* (2024–).

6. Recent examples include Adler, *Battle of the Classics*; Hayot, *Humanist Reason*; Reitter and Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis*; Turner, *Philology*.

In this forum, we take a special interest in the question of where history of the humanities, in a broad sense, is heading. And where do we want it to go? Fifteen years after the first conference, the time is ripe to reflect on both the origins and the current state as well as the future direction(s) of the history of the humanities as a new (or at least reformed) field of research. Why is it emerging now? Which lines of inquiry have proven particularly successful so far, and which ones are hitherto underdeveloped? Is it possible to distinguish any theoretical or empirical core? What does the concept “history of humanities” denote and what does it offer scholars that was previously lacking? And finally, how does it relate to the history of science and/or the history of knowledge?

These questions were discussed at a digital symposium organized by Isak Hammar and Hampus Östh Gustafsson at the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK) in December 2021. The lively discussions during that symposium suggest that the full potential of the history of the humanities is far from reached. Three of the speakers—Rens Bod, Suzanne Marchand, and Herman Paul—were therefore invited together with three additional humanities scholars—Kevin Chang, Helen Small, and Sverker Sörlin—to contribute their perspectives to this forum, which examines how the recent upsurge can be interpreted and where the history of the humanities might be heading in the coming years.⁷ Our hope is that others might join our discussion and that the forum will stimulate further reflection on the potential and challenges of the field.

FRAMING THE HISTORY OF THE HUMANITIES

For the sake of clarity, it might make sense to talk about an “Amsterdam school” with a specific vision of how to write (the) history of (the) humanities, characterized by an affinity to history of science and a persistent ambition to focus on transnational comparisons and transcending patterns on a global scale. A milestone in this regard, which set the agenda for the field, was Rens Bod’s comprehensive monograph *A New History of the Humanities* (published in English in 2013). In his contribution to this forum, Bod outlines the process whereby this field materialized and his continuing vision for it. By now, however, it is clear that at the core the history of the humanities is a collective and transdisciplinary enterprise. From an outside view, there is much to suggest that the creation of a stable infrastructure has indeed enabled the various (older and more recent) versions of histories of the humanities to be put into lasting dialogue and that Bod and his Dutch colleagues (among others,

7. We wish to thank the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK), in particular Johan Östling, for generously hosting the symposium. We are also grateful for the presentations given by Östling, Anton Jansson, Kirsti Niskanen, Linus Salö, Tobias Dalberg, and Klara Müller. Sverker Sörlin and Helen Small recently also visited Lund University to give keynote addresses at the European Consortium for Humanities Institutes and Centres (ECHIC) annual conference, “The Many Faces of the Humanities,” organized by Isak Hammar and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa in April 2022.

Julia Kursell, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn) have thereby stimulated energetic discussions on what the humanities are or have been. Even if Bod's ambitions (yet to be fully realized) are not shared by everyone, his work has nonetheless challenged scholars to rethink what they are doing.⁸ To us, it seems that the very concept of "the history of the humanities" has functioned as an integrative platform, thus opening up new lines of inquiry within a larger framework. But it is also worth pointing out that there is still no agreement as to what this framework really is. Finding common denominators among the journal's contributions can be rather difficult, no doubt a result of the inclusive scope.

A quick glance at the contributors of recent issues of *History of Humanities* confirms that the field continues to attract a wide variety of scholars—including, of course, historians (ancient, religious, early modern, cultural, etc.) but also philosophers, philologists, linguists, art historians, and scholars from African studies, media studies, and comparative literature. That is just to name a few. Despite the breadth of the field, however, it is perhaps worth pointing out that there are presently no scholars trained specifically in the history of the humanities. While, arguably, this is about to change, this means that behind any "historian of the humanities" (if the terminology is accepted), there is most likely an alternative scholarly identity. These different backgrounds will continue to influence the field, its methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and overarching research ambitions going forward. The history of the humanities, from this perspective, is a shared venture, a scholarly encampment where scholars from different backgrounds come to engage with a specific but as yet very broad perspective.

The wide-ranging scope of the history of the humanities is further indicated by its complex relationship with history of science, that is, its "older sister discipline," as Suzanne Marchand puts it in her contribution to this forum. Compared with this well-established scholarly discipline, the history of the humanities (or human sciences in a wider sense) has typically been perceived of as something relatively marginal, and the humanities have seldom been included in the scope of the history of science.⁹ The emergence of the history of the humanities can therefore partly be seen as a concerted effort to redress this imbalance. Introducing their ambitions for the history of the humanities as a field in the leading journal for history of science, *Isis*, Bod and Kursell thus argued specifically for "one common, integrated history."¹⁰

8. Bod, *New History of the Humanities*; Nicholls, "What is 'Progress' in the Humanities?" For instance, Bod's approach has been criticized due to the risk of anachronisms as he attempts to trace patterns and present-day disciplinary definitions back over time. See Malcolm, "Masters of What?"

9. Feuerhahn and Orain, "For an Inclusive History of the Humanities and Social Sciences."

10. Bod and Kursell, "Introduction," 338. See also Pickstone, "Toward a History of Western Knowledges."

Together with history of medicine and history of technology, history of science has indeed proven extremely successful, in particular since the “cultural turn” in the 1980s.¹¹ More recently, the history of the social sciences and/or the human sciences has also developed in promising ways, prompting James Turner to liken the history of the humanities to an “infant,” compared with the “toddler” history of the social sciences.¹² Going forward, one may ponder what the relationship with the history of science and the social sciences will mean for the development of the history of the humanities. Will it turn into a “family affair,” or a “sibling rivalry”? Despite the rapid progress, it is evident that the history of the humanities in its current shape still needs to keep developing, particularly in terms of the theoretical and methodological sophistication.¹³ This can certainly be done by drawing inspiration from other historical traditions, but such an endeavor also requires suitable integrative platforms that foster transdisciplinary dialogue.

With that in mind, it was no coincidence that the aforementioned symposium was organized at Lund University. This Swedish site has seen the institutionalization of a research environment in so-called history of knowledge, including a marked interest in the history of the humanities. The history of knowledge has also gained traction on an international level in recent years, and, in this case as well, the Netherlands has been a hub for the new institutional formation.¹⁴ The parallel formation of the history of the humanities and the history of knowledge is in itself well worth reflecting on. The history of the humanities has occasionally been envisioned as part of a more comprehensive endeavor of history writing. Bod, for instance, has suggested that a “tractable notion of the history of knowledge could thus correspond to the history of the (natural and social) sciences and the humanities taken together.”¹⁵

We believe that the ongoing formation of new constellations of fields exploring the history of knowledge and scholarship in a general sense is indicative of a broader move toward new conceptualizations and practices of engaging with intellectual history at a

11. Paul, “Introduction,” 10. For the history of science and the cultural turn, see Poskett, “Retrospect,” 231–32.

12. Turner, *Philology*, xv. “The Future of History of the Human Sciences” was also the explicit theme of a conference and special issue some years ago, indicating its dynamic nature. See Renwick, “The Future of the History of the Human Sciences,” 3–8; and also Smith, “What Is the History of the Human Sciences?,” 3–28. It should be noted that English-language academia tends to separate the humanities and the human sciences (the latter primarily understood as psychological and social sciences).

13. Solleveld, *Transformation of the Humanities*, 12, 47.

14. See, e.g., Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*; Daston, “History of Science and the History of Knowledge”; Dupré and Somsen, “Forum.”

15. Bod, “How to Open Pandora’s Box,” 1.

time characterized by epistemological turmoil.¹⁶ It may in turn stimulate a more thorough engagement with questions about the societal uses and impact of the humanities as well as their political facets, which has not received much attention thus far, despite explicit ambitions to cover such issues.¹⁷ It seems highly relevant to inquire how the humanities have circulated in various societal spheres and transformed through their shifting societal uses.¹⁸ For such purposes, there is, as stated, much to learn from adjacent fields, which have cultivated many fruitful theoretical perspectives and concepts derived from, for example, anthropology or sociology.¹⁹ As the “infant” is now maturing, it is well worth dwelling on the question of why we have seen this formation of a new field right now and what this may tell us about the value of the history of the humanities from a scholarly as well as a societal perspective.

Even if volatile, “the humanities” is indeed a significant term today, not least in the organization and politics of knowledge on a larger scale. As such, the humanities have been the object of numerous political attacks in recent years and in countries around the world. As noted by Herman Paul, it is no coincidence that the new field of research was formed in the 2010s in the Netherlands, where the humanities have long been under political siege. This reflects a recurring pattern over time, as historical and philosophical questions regarding the nature and value of the humanities typically emerge in times when they are put under pressure.²⁰ In that sense, recent developments cannot be fully grasped without relating them to the long and seemingly ever-recurring discussions of the so-called crisis of the humanities.²¹ From this perspective, the writing of the history of the humanities has functioned as a kind of historiographical mobilization in the hope of turning the tide and improving the state of these subjects.²² We would argue that it is necessary to take the self-reflexive urge for assembling and writing histories into account in order to make sense of the formation of the new field.

To be sure, new fields or disciplines sooner or later tend to look back in order to explore—and construct—potential canons and genealogies as part of their consolidation.²³

16. Paul, “Introduction,” 11.

17. Bod et al., “A New Field.”

18. Hammar and Östling “Introduction”; Sörlin, “Humanities of Transformation.”

19. Small explores one such concept in “Wicked Problems.”

20. “Herman Paul Appointed Professor of History of the Humanities,” Leiden University, December 11, 2018, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2018/12/herman-paul-appointed-professor-of-history-of-the-humanities>. See also Small, *Value of the Humanities*.

21. Jay, *Humanities “Crisis”*; Östh Gustafsson, “Humanities in Crisis”; Reitter and Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis*.

22. Östh Gustafsson, “Mobilising the Outsider.”

23. Ekström and Östh Gustafsson, “Introduction,” 10.

Despite the youth of the history of the humanities as a distinctive field, it has already seen a number of attempts to browse back at past parallels and possible lineages.²⁴ Scholarship is arguably always embedded in historical narratives of different sorts, and this includes future imaginaries. So what, then, are the opportunities and challenges that the history of the humanities will face in the near future?²⁵

MOVING FORWARD

As an amalgamated discursive formation, the humanities are fundamentally heterogeneous, housing many different traditions, methodologies, and ambitions. As a result, we should not expect consensus regarding future expectations for the history of the humanities as a field. The entries in this forum showcase a wide array of perspectives, and the authors have been given creative space to explore the potential of the history of the humanities in the ways they find most effective, in some cases on a rather personal note. Representing a broad group of disciplines (linguistics, history, intellectual history, history of science, philology, English literature, environmental humanities), the authors also offer experiences and viewpoints from different national contexts (the Netherlands, the United States, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and Sweden), providing a multifaceted picture of what the history of the humanities may be.

That the recent formation of the history of the humanities has been characterized by strong encouragement of global approaches, not least seen in the desire to include the Global South, brings the multiformity of the humanities to the fore. Such an endeavor indeed comes with practical challenges at the present time, for instance, regarding the organization of physical events in the era of climate crisis. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Making of the Humanities conference was held in South Africa, resulting in a special issue of *History of Humanities* with the theme “Decentralizing the Humanities.” The decentralizing ambition clearly stimulates new interpretations of the history of the humanities, challenging what might at first sight appear a universal curriculum or group of disciplines but tends, in fact, to reflect a specific (and partly normative) Western practice of how to study the human being through cultural and historical perspectives.²⁶ With the humanities, as a Western concept, now circulating on a global stage and blending with alternative, local forms of knowledge on sites with very diverse institutional and political conditions, we are likely to see a new “ecosystem” of humanistic inquiry taking shape.²⁷

24. See, e.g., Eskildsen and Bod, “Classics of the Humanities.”

25. See Bod, “Humanities across Time and Space.”

26. Macamo, “Unmaking Africa,” 382. See also Drees, *What Are the Humanities For?*, 11–12.

27. Guyer, “Beyond the Survival of the Global Humanities,” 62.

Although the study of local and national particularities will most certainly remain a cornerstone of the history of the humanities, the infrastructure for global comparative research that is now being established opens up new potential for more comprehensive studies, not least uncovering transnational patterns.²⁸

The challenges of the inclusive scope of the history of the humanities are the focus of the forum's first essay, as Rens Bod provides an analysis of the field in terms of geographical reach and gender diversity. Bod is far from satisfied. A better balance, he argues, would increase quality by helping us tracking hitherto unnoted trends and influences, avoiding biases, and debunking historical myths.

The second essay presents a slightly different vision for the history of the humanities as a field of study. To Herman Paul, it is best described as a genealogical project that seeks to unravel and explain the historical contexts from which the "humanities" have emerged. Embracing the diversity of the humanities, such a collective aspiration would, Paul argues, provide valuable perspectives to debates about, for instance, the colonial foundations or democratic value of the humanities.

In the forum's third contribution, Suzanne Marchand asks what the history of the humanities can and cannot learn from the history of science. From an overview of groundbreaking research by historians of science, Marchand points to both valuable lessons and future challenges. Has discourse analysis, she wonders, run its course? Should we be wary of "overdoing" the history of practices? And are there other scholarly traditions from where to draw inspiration?

In the fourth essay, Kevin Chang approaches current trends of communication and infrastructure in the light of the history of scholarship. New (and future) practices of reading and writing in the digital era will no doubt have consequences for scholars and students in the humanities (and their scholarly identities), who will have to prove themselves multifunctional and flexible in using various media. The move beyond the physical page needs to be done in a sensible way, and, as Chang warns us, current trends toward the digital and global may easily be reversed.

Future challenges and the humanities' capacity to deal with them is further spotlighted in the fifth contribution, in which Helen Small returns to the question of how the humanities are being defended in the public sphere. Looking at one recent addition to "the armory of humanities defense"—the field's capabilities of tackling wicked problems—Small argues that advocates for the humanities need the history of the humanities to provide evidence of how their fields of knowledge have defined and articulated their contributions to society.

28. Bod, *World of Patterns*. See also Denecke, "Comparative Global Humanities Now."

The history of the humanities certainly needs to combine such histories of the not-so-distant past with the *longue durée*. This becomes evident in the forum's final essay by Sverker Sörlin. While Small posits that today's humanists are hard pressed to articulate how they may contribute to solving the planet's most urgent problems such as global warming, sustainability, and political division, Sörlin argues for the increasing value of the humanities and their history in light of these major challenges.²⁹ From personal recollections of the marginal place of the humanities in various large-scale research initiatives, and by using historical examples of polymaths transcending the "two cultures," Sörlin broadens the perspectives and arrives at "the undisputable" significance of a united, integrative humanities in the Anthropocene.

In sum, the global, genealogical, transdisciplinary, technical, societal, and environmental perspectives provided in this forum clearly demonstrate that the study of what it means to be human will not become obsolete, and, as our authors illustrate, that question always remains rooted in the past. From such a perspective, we have no difficulty imagining that future historians of the humanities will remain busy.

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