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HERRENHAUSEN SYMPOSIUM
HERRENHAUSEN PALACE, HANOVER

SUMMARY

“Positioning the Humanities in the 2020s”

Since the turn of the millennium the humanities as well as Geisteswissenschaften and cultural studies all over the world are facing a multitude of challenges: On the one hand, they are coming under increasing pressure to produce “utilizable knowledge”, which obviously puts them at a disadvantage in the competitive science system. On the other hand, a new source of political pressure is emerging from different forms of religious and national fundamentalisms which attempt to limit the freedom of research and teaching in the humanities. In view of these developments, it is all the more surprising that since the debate on the approach of cultural studies in the 1990s there has been no discussion between the disciplines and across disciplinary boundaries concerning the contemporary self-image projected by the humanities and cultural studies. How do they see their role in academia and society?

A Herrenhausen Symposium with the title “Positioning the Humanities in the 2020s”, which was jointly organized by the Volkswagen Foundation and the German U15 association of leading research universities, sought to remedy this state of affairs. Around 150 international academics from all disciplines discussed the reorientation of the humanities today. As the environmental historian FRANK UEKÖTTER (Birmingham) pointedly put it, “It's time to get real,” and the art historian BEATE SÖNTGEN (Lüneburg) in her closing statement underscored the conference’s “political significance”.

The opening keynote was given by the American-Indian “humanist” HOMI K. BHABA (Cambridge) under the heading “The Task of the Humanities: Bringing Hannah Arendt Home to Hanover”. Bhabha focused his reflections on this German-Jewish philosopher’s thesis that communication, i.e. “finding the right word at the right moment¹,” is in itself a form of action. This maxim combines “intellectual exercise” with “ethical action” and is obligatory for the humanities. Bhabha believes the right basic

¹ Hannah Arendt “The Human Condition” / “Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben” (1960).

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attitude is for the individual humanist to take the standpoint of the other. In this point, too, Bhabha drew on Arendt and her linking of Dilthey's approach to ethical positions. In her essay "Eichmann in Jerusalem" Arendt wrote of the SS-Obersturmbannführer: "The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that [his] inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think; namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else." Bhabha concluded: "I am concerned with the activity of alterity – the two-in-one – from thinking humanistically and acting ethically." Today, more than 70 years after the end of the Nazi era, the idea of mankind is once again under threat. Bhabha referred to politicians from Trump to Modi, Putin, Orban and Xi and "[their] rhetorical instances of the barbarism of populist nationalism." The concept of citizenship – civil society – is at stake. But the humanities do not stand for political activism: "The humanities engage with the 'deep' histories of shifting relations between cultural expression, historical transition, and political transformation."

Critical analysis of the current situation and its implications for the humanities also determined further lectures at the Herrenhausen Symposium. For instance, the lecture given by IAN BAUCOM (Charlottesville), Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. After a march of right-wing groups escalated in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017 and a young woman was killed, Baucom sees the university as being called upon to react to the "state of democratic urgency" in the country. The project "Charlottesville University" is about finding a new language with the aim of giving space to justice and contributing towards strengthening the identity of society. To this end, the university must engage in dialogue with all sides of society and reach beyond ideological barriers. The power of the university is to oppose authoritarian power. PREMESH LALU (Western Cape) also wanted to reinvigorate the university as an idea. But the reality looks different, and this is due to neoliberalism which reduces people to homo oeconomicus and causes a "de-subjectivation" of society. STEFAN HELGESSON (Stockholm) criticized the acceleration and simplification of contemporary society and, as a literary scholar, attacked monolingualism in particular as "hyper-concentration." Helgesson, who is currently writing the "World Literatures Report", argued against the dominance of English referring to Erich Auerbach: If everyone were to speak the same language, "the idea of world literature would be realized and destroyed at the same time²." The colloquial, national, and native language ("vernacular"), on the other hand, is productive and lively.

In order to take on such present day challenges, however, the humanities – so the self-critical objection – would first have to subject themselves to change: The historian BERNHARD JUSSEN (Frankfurt) reproached the humanities for continuing to live in the 19th century in their self-organization – out of a kind of preservation of vested

² Erich Auerbach, *Philologie der Weltliteratur*, 1952.

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interests. He called for further development into “post-eurocentric humanities”. For example, in the history of the “Occident” the contribution of Constantinople was still ignored: “Our problem is the reorganization of the humanities.” The social psychologist SAAFI LAHLOU (London), director of the Institut d’Etudes Avancées in Paris, where he is in contact with many scholars and scientists, took an outside look at the humanities. Three trends have to be taken into account: On the one hand, more and more research funding is being allocated on a competitive basis. In their proposals, scholars of the humanities must therefore make it transparently clear why a particular research project should be financed – intellectual curiosity alone is not enough any more. Secondly, they must take into account the “iconodynamics”: In today’s society, the impression you make is more important than actual facts. This then begs the question of how facts can be convincingly represented. And thirdly, there can be no doubt that “Our planetary house is burning.” Humanities scholars must therefore associate their own research with the major issues of our time. In the ensuing discussion, Bhabha summarized this in the evocative formula: “We are dealing with urgent problems!”

It was a consensus among the conference participants that solutions to today’s major challenges can no longer be found within a single discipline. Philosopher BARRY SMITH (London) saw the humanities poorly positioned in this respect, with the result that more and more original humanities topics such as memory, emotions and social relations would be “occupied” by the natural sciences: There would be “a kind of encroachment”. Humanities disciplines, left to their own resources, would fall behind. Although disciplines were described as necessary because they represented “accumulated knowledge” in a secure infrastructure (LUIZ OSTERBEEK, Tomar), by the same token they also limit the field of vision: “We have been trained in specific silos” (VIBEKE SØRENSEN, Singapore). Another participant pointed out that disciplines are also attacked for being specific manifestations of Western thinking and colonialism, which is why the term “non-disciplinarity” is propagated in Africa. The rigid disciplinary structure is all the more astonishing because a special quality of the humanities is their “integrative capacity” (WILHELM KRULL, Hanover). In addition to “interdisciplinarity” and “transdisciplinarity” (co-organizer HANS-JOCHEN SCHIEWER, Freiburg), interdisciplinary cooperation was also referred to as “cross-disciplinarity” and “post-disciplinarity” (SVERKER SÖRLIN, Stockholm). Examples of this fruitful new cooperation between the humanities and other disciplines dominated the following sections of the Herrenhausen Symposium.

Among these new interdisciplinary fields are the environmental humanities, which were presented in several lectures from different disciplinary perspectives. The historian Uekötter asked pointedly: “Climate change changes everything – except the humanities?” Historians could say a lot about how mankind deals with climate

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change. In addition, the natural sciences were urgently in need of a critical meta-discourse. It was during the discussion of his lecture that Uekötter made the demand mentioned at the beginning: “It’s time to get real!” Media scholar EVI ZEMANEK (Freiburg) agreed with him and saw the contribution of the humanities in the following triad: firstly analysis (of cultural development, forms of resilience, communication crises, etc.), secondly complementing scientific facts and, thirdly, comparative studies. Zemanek pointed out – without mentioning Bruno Latour – that the connection between climate change and war is increasingly being discussed in the environmental humanities. Philosopher GUSTAF ARRHENIUS (Stockholm) from the interdisciplinary Institute for Future Research founded in 1973, presented his project “Climate Ethics”, which i.a. focuses on the development of normative ethics: How can and should future generations be involved in the decisions we make today? A further focus is on climate justice and the question of how this can be translated into a democratic process. ANNA-KATHARINA HORNIDGE (Bremen), an oceanographer and sociologist of science, reported on the importance of her research on the oceans which are on the one hand the central climate regulator and on the other a treasure trove of untapped mineral deposits. Research in this area is not only very costly, but also highly political. Hornidge urged: “We have to reinvent science as a whole.” Whereas the past focus was on promoting linear growth, today it must be on circular growth and the transition from “science” to “anthropo-science”.

Another cross-sectional area that is currently experiencing a renewed popularity is that of medical humanities. KAVITA SIVARAMAKRISHNAN from the Center for History of Public Health and Ethics at Columbia University (New York) reported on “Global Longevity, Chronic Conditions and Fluid Lifecourses” as an agenda for the humanities and social sciences. She addressed the practical problems that must be overcome in this major interdisciplinary project in medicine and the humanities. HSIUNG PING-CHEN (Irvine) presented a whole range of topics that would be suitable for cross-disciplinary discussion at various conferences of the CIPSH (International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences), including culture and behavior, health equity and humanity, arts and gesture in health, etc. Ping-chen introduced the concept of “new humanities” which encompasses the humanities and natural sciences, liberates the humanities from national boundaries and, moreover, opens them to the non-academic public. Barry Smith demonstrated how this might be put into practice, using examples such as the project titled “Art, Simulation, and Surgical Humanities Research”.

The Herrenhausen Symposium identified a third cross-sectional area in the “digital humanities”, where the quality of a paradigm shift was attested. Chair BIRGITTA WOLFF (Frankfurt) posed the central theoretical-methodological question of how digital and “subjective knowledge” could be integrated, and also made the plea “Don’t leave innovation to the engineers!” Not only so as not to miss the boat, but also be-

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cause the humanities, as pointed out by EVA SCHLOTHEUBER (Düsseldorf), must accompany technical development with “digital source criticism”. The critical function of the humanities is particularly important for coping with the future. Schlotheuber focused her lecture on two central problems: the need to develop standards for data quality and to explicitly and transparently formulate the organization of digital knowledge in order to clearly identify reference points and gaps. According to Schlotheuber, the previous systematic and hierarchical order of knowledge, as embodied by the library, is passé. Thus, she indirectly linked her statement to the criticism focusing on the rigid division of disciplines in the humanities.

The musicologist MARTIN ROHRMEIER (Lausanne) used the development of tonality from the 18th to the 20th century to demonstrate how digital humanities could enrich previous research in the humanities: In the past, music history had only been presented using selected examples, while he is able to base his research on a corpus of 20,000 pieces. Computational modeling could optimize research and help to test theoretical concepts. And – most importantly – data could never speak for itself, but would always require “critical reflection, interpretation and contextualization.” The literary scholar and Emily Dickinson specialist MARTHA NELL SMITH (Maryland), in keeping with the Anglo-Saxon concept of “humanities”, described the humanities as vital to survival, especially in the digital age, since they secured humanistic values such as empathy. Without empathy the world would only be inhabited by “monsters”.

A fourth and final area of the new humanities was identified in “design thinking”, and thus in the opening of the humanities to art. BEATE SÖNTGEN described design as a “catalytic mode for communication” between the humanities and art, and therefore as a way to gain access to a canon of knowledge built up in art that is not only rational, but also “embodied”, “sensoric”, “entangled”, and “inclusive.” Söntgen stressed that art as well as the humanities rested on the critical subject as a foundation: “Art is not the other, but different.” By opening up to art, the humanities could regain critical potential and at the same time learn more about the significance of representation. Premesh Lalu added that the Senegalese art philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne uses the African term “ubuntu”, which actually stands for respect, recognition, and human dignity, to describe the common field of art and the humanities.

The media scholar DEBORAH NYANGULU (Münster), who spoke on behalf of the early career researchers, attributed a “culture of truth commitment” to the humanities. And in the name of truth they would have to make themselves heard: “We have to speak truth to power!” Even though certainly not all participants of this exciting event would like to follow her demand, almost all speakers made it clear that the humanities do not exist in a power-free space.

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Especially the project topics of the early career researchers invited to attend with a travel grant showed that their research in the humanities – for example “Reading in the age of Trump” – focuses on reality and society. Deconstructivism, as an approach that has dominated the discussion since the 1990s, is thus likely to have been put aside for good³.

At the event, the various international concepts of the humanities and Geisteswissenschaften converged noticeably. With Homi Bhabha, the participants of this Herrenhausen Symposium understood the task of the humanities as “to express one’s agency in the world.” In future, it will be important to define the new commitment of the humanities to tackling societal issues more precisely.

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³ On the negative consequences of deconstructivism, see the ironically phrased article by philosopher Michael Hampe, “Katerstimmung bei den pubertären Theoretikern. Seitdem die Rechte postfaktisch geworden ist, hat die kulturwissenschaftliche Linke ein echtes Problem“, ZEIT 19th December 2016, cf. <http://www.zeit.de/2016/52/kulturwissenschaft-theorie-die-linke-donald-trump-postfaktisch-rechtspopulismus> [30.9.2019]

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