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The Humanities as a Public Good and the Need for Developing Accountability Strategies

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Abstract: The present political and economic context of the humanities is more demanding than ever in regards to its justification, social impact and evaluation of research activities. These processes call for an updated understanding of the situation and a prudent counter-strategy that, in a best-case scenario, could result in appreciation opportunities that have thus far been neglected. This article contributes to a differentiation of these grand challenges at three levels: (1) Improved understanding of the policy agenda: The humanities, like other research disciplines, still have to map the full picture of all opportunities in funding policies. The EU's framework programs could be one example of a funding system that contains inclusive mechanisms that have not yet been fully discovered. (2) Research management in the humanities: To benefit the most from those identified inclusive mechanisms, the humanistic disciplines have to develop better and more sophisticated research management tools for their projects and improve their strategic planning and capacity. (3) The humanities as public good: The humanities represent one of the greatest cultural resources of humankind. The task is to make this as explicit and clear as possible to the general public through the explanatory power of the main categories, including recognition, judgment, experience, wisdom and common sense, which mirror some of the most important historical and cultural experiences of human history.

Keywords: the humanities; public good; European Union research policy; research management; accountability; complex systems; impact; innovation

1. Introduction: Understanding the Research Policy Agenda

The remarkable change in national and international research policy during the last two decades is emblematic of the pressure for modernization and reorganization of the public sector in European welfare states. The significant changes in research policy are not only a matter of internal processes in the field of research, but are transformations, due to the need to justify public expenses and to develop corresponding measurements and indicators for performance and output from what, according to this logic, is perceived as an investment. This has been the case across different public institutions in the area of health, education, culture and research. The introduction of market-like mechanisms in the public system has to some degree blurred the sense and understanding of the essence of the public sector and the value of a public good. The problem is that market-like mechanisms tend to undermine a broader understanding of the discussion of public good issues, *i.e.*, the organization of the society as a whole, which openly includes much more than just economic measures, for example judicial and moral questions.

This landslide is not only founded in economic reasons. The overall societal and cultural democratization of the communication between citizens and between citizens and public institutions since the 1960s has created a situation in which transparency is required and decisions and priorities have to be explained much more openly in public. Expectations from citizens have risen substantially. However, the actual implementation of the market analogy, with the exchange of commodities and services, has been a guiding principle for this modernization, most likely because the market-model has the advantage of appearing neutral: it allocates resources according to the preferences of the citizens. This follows from representative democracy, which has, over a long period, launched a seemingly more direct form of democracy and, thereby, changed the mentalities and expectations for the justifications that follow the logic of the market.

The reason for initially pointing out the driving force behind the present research policy at both national and international levels is that this can be reduced, as is often done, to a matter of opinion of a specific government, party or minister. Furthermore, the economic crisis has made it even more compelling for political decision makers to combine research investments with expectations of new jobs, growth and better employment. The research policies express nothing less than a change in the power structure and rationale in the modern state. This process is often described as a centralization of power, which is the way it sometimes appears when different policy areas are more strictly controlled and exposed to demands for performance. However, by the same right, it could be seen as a delegation of tasks from the political level to various public institutions—a delegation or decentralization of the required justification of the allocation of public means.

From this pragmatic viewpoint, the challenge is to provide a qualified interpretation and understanding of the reality of the research policy and to locate, despite all legitimate criticism, the structural openings of the system, which are not obvious at first glance. It might seem like a defensive and vague objective, but the first goal must be to avoid any unnecessary self-marginalization of the humanities. This work of interpretation is a task in itself, and the result is certainly not always identical with the many immediate experiences of frustration with the system. By “structural openings”, I am referring to real and objective funding and support opportunities, which sometimes seem to surprise researchers and directors of research in the humanities fields. The mapping of structural openings could, for example, be based on close readings of texts and policy documents, work experience with and

understanding of larger and more international research applications, as well as participation in the constitution of international consortia and networks. The following mentions a few examples and dimensions in the European Union research system, demonstrating not yet fully discovered and exploited opportunities for the humanities. This article focuses on the need for an understanding of the trends and structure of international research funding policies, especially as it is formulated in the official documents (white papers) from the European Commission, and the concrete implementation of the principles in the consecutive EU framework programs. A better understanding is needed to uncover the not yet fully exploited opportunities that the humanities could benefit from in terms of funding, international collaboration and participation in cross-disciplinary projects. An important tool in this “translation” of the overall structural opportunities into successful research projects is research management at the institutional level, including a type of management that provides professional framework conditions to work with relevant funding schemes and specific calls in work programs. The final and most important step is the creation of original research projects designed by leading researchers.

2. Inclusive Definitions

Innovation, growth and impact are the key words in many documents, funding programs and guidelines, as well as the speeches of politicians and civil servants presenting new research programs. The concepts can sometimes sound empty, because of their frequent repetition, though this is clearly not always a fair conclusion based on the original semantics in the policy papers. What, from an immediate point of view, seems a narrow focus on growth alone can miss some important dimensions. A concrete example of a structural opening that could easily be lost in the reading of a white paper concerns growth: whereas, on the one hand, the European Commission maintains growth as the overall goal, on the other hand, the Commission includes and takes into account the reverse side of the technological progress through the number of modifying categories added to the growth concept, such as “inclusive”, “smart” and “sustainable” [1]. They are important modifications and additions, because they represent a potentially more reflexive concept of growth, which integrates other aspects and stimulates a growth concept with a normative dimension. Growth in this sense includes also the cost of growth; it internalizes the externalities [2]. To some degree, it is up to the research system to benefit from such a structural opening. Another example could be the innovation concept, which, in several reports, also includes non-technological innovations [3].

Impact, which, with an important nuance, is referred to as “expected impact” in the European research applications, thereby signaling a calculated risk without guarantee, is another concept that, to some degree, has the same unreleased potential. One of the results of an assessment of the Fourth and Fifth Framework Programmes was the recognition that some research projects by their nature were important not necessarily because of an “actual effect”, but as basic research oriented towards a “potential effect”. Some projects were able to demonstrate the creation of jobs and new patents; others had the quality of changing mentalities and increasing the affinity for finding alternative solutions [4]. The report concludes with a recommendation to include indicators for the measurement of the potential effects as valid arguments in applications. This broadening of the “impact” concept shows at least the potential learning processes of the system and the ability to add more complicated dimensions to the more instrumental features of the concept.

3. Inclusive Programs

In the Seventh Framework Programme (2007–2013), and even more so in Horizon 2020 (2014–2020)—both main research programs of the European Union—research is deeply integrated with innovation, as well as the application of results to societal challenges. At the same time, both programs distinguish themselves with a strategy approach that, at a funding scheme level, often functions on a bottom-up model. Even though innovation shares the headline with research, the majority of specific programs are based on research ideas and projects defined independently by the researcher. The chosen topic expresses a strategic objective, but does not predetermine what kind of project or method works best to fulfill the purpose. The Marie Curie funding scheme is a program for individual researchers defined solely by the researchers' own research interests. Its purpose is to contribute to the construction of a European research area, *i.e.*, an internal market for researchers. As an example, consider that the specific wording in call texts in the societal challenges program has become broader and “less prescriptive” ([5], p. 15) and the wording of expected impact has also become more open. This does not necessarily make it easier to write a qualified and competitive application, but it makes the program more inclusive in relation to the specific qualities of the humanities. These often overlooked characteristics in the wordings of the call texts, briefly mentioned here, can be interpreted as small signs of the research system's ability to reflect upon its own limitations. This is not to say that it does not need help from outside. Ironically, since the humanities, which are often automatically marginalized in comparison to the “hard” sciences, can offer sophisticated models for cultural and historical contextualization and self-reflection, they potentially fit nicely into some of the most advanced parts of the program logic.

The modernization of the research agenda also contains features that are less sophisticated and admittedly do not display the same structural openings or inclusivity. In an important white paper from the European Commission in the preparation process to Horizon 2020, the modernization of higher education in European [6] university policy is reduced to employability, with economic growth and innovation as the main drivers of the development. It is a very informative document in terms of highlighting how relatively unintegrated the relationship between policy objectives and research objectives are imagined:

Yet curricula are often slow to respond to changing needs in the wider economy, and fail to anticipate or help shape the careers of tomorrow; graduates struggle to find quality employment in line with their studies. Involving employers and labor market institutions in the design and delivery of programs, supporting staff exchanges and including practical experience in courses can help attune curricula to current and emerging labor market needs and foster employability and entrepreneurship ([6], pp. 4–5).

The critical point is not even that it is problematic to use university education in such an instrumental way. Even if you agree with the white paper's line of thinking about university education, you could have good reasons to disagree with the chosen means.

The rhetoric of those documents is based on the assumed correlation between research and innovation, which is disputed and not entirely substantiated evidentially. Even so, sympathetic attempts to find solutions for societal problems in publicly financed research cannot compensate for a lack of actual

knowledge about the learning and innovation processes [7]. In this part of the European innovation agenda, one could at least question the quality of the instrumental thinking and the risk of losing very important cultural heritage from a unique European tradition. The risk is that the introduction of non-academic criteria in the evaluation process ([8], p. 162) has a counter-productive effect on the research system that prevents the university system from adjusting itself to better ways of modernization. The ultimate failure would be if a lack of self-reflection in the research policy system at the international level were to cause a similar lack of self-reflection in the research system in the shape of blind adjustments to the demands of the growth-oriented research policy.

Lack of critical self-reflection is no minor failure in a research system, because it ultimately relates to the legitimacy of the funding system seen from the perspective of the participants. After all, not only are the researchers competing with each other for funding, but the different funding schemes and funding mechanisms compete to attract the best researchers. The capacity to attract the best researchers is a kind of quality assurance for the funding model.

4. Strategic Planning and Research Management

It is difficult to imagine up-to-date and competitive research management that does not have access to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and structures of contemporary funding politics and the research policy agenda at the international level. However, the bare observation of the opportunities and inclusive mechanism is not in itself sufficient to release this as a practical advantage. This requires an organizational effort ¹ and clarification of a whole portfolio of management factors: competence to structure collective projects; building of support units to deal with the requirements in different funding schemes and internal quality assurance in general; knowledge of the demands for accountability (innovation, impact, *etc.*); development of the researcher role; strategic partnerships with other institutions; international lobbyism; and outreach activities. All of those parameters are vital parts of strategic planning and internal organization concerning the research that should be solved in order to be able to benefit from the inclusive features briefly indicated in the above. The understanding of the structure of the policy system should be transformed into a rational self-organization of the universities.

Strategic planning or strategic intelligence are keywords in research management. These terms have become popular in many respects, and sometimes, one can get the impression that the concept “strategic” just means some general thought about the future of an organization. This is not necessarily strategic thinking in a binding sense of the word. A thought-through strategy—strategic planning—could easily promote blue-sky research activities, but the strategy to secure this effect would not in itself be a blue-sky activity.

A strategy that deserves this name is embedded in already established strategies at the highest possible level. It is based on evidence and empirical data, state-of-the-art research in the given field and on an identification of neglected opportunities. It deals with issues related to the changing of mentalities and culture; it uses foresight tools, the involvement of stakeholders of the specific scientific field and employs a professional set-up of the future of the organization. A real strategy is both pragmatically embedded in the established strategic thinking in the prominent international institutions and a qualified

¹ An example of this effort both to understand and reform the structures of the classic university is the detailed analysis presented in a manifest written by a group of professors at Humboldt University ([9], pp. 325–54).

and creative response, which opens up further possibilities. A strategic international player is both pragmatic in relation to established agendas and a visionary in relation to its own potential.

The development of ideas should be connected to evidence-based policy development at an international level and in institutionalized agendas, and this is exactly why, independent of personal opinions and different assessments, policy documents represent a political reality and, therefore, a hub for the allocation of resources, however one-dimensional they may seem. Hopefully, any university organization will have a more prudent and visionary idea than the white paper on higher education criticized above, but still not without a deep understanding of the background and arguments behind this specific document.

Despite the magnitude and complexity of the challenges that modern research institutions are currently facing, there are no external barriers that prevent the following examples: the recruitment of either a European or non-European researcher through a European mobility fellowship; the building up of networks to create a consortium for larger collaborative projects; the identification of funding opportunities for research infrastructure and, thereby, for secure access to relevant archives and data; or relinquishing priority to resources directed towards specific research areas. Unfortunately, the humanities have a proven record of imagined external barriers that are simply not there or which are in fact there, but exactly in the same way in which they are there for all other research disciplines. To not make use of these opportunities would mean to act like the protagonist of Franz Kafka's story "Before the Law", waiting in front of a gate his whole life only to realize on his deathbed (for the first time) that nobody has prevented him from entering.

One of the most interesting developments in research policy that illustrates the growing importance of and the need for research management is the tendency towards "more elitist arenas of research funding" ([8], p. 176). Obvious examples of this are the European Research Council [10] and different kinds of models of national centers of excellence [11,12]. In all cases, funding is targeted at high-performing and ambitious researchers with an international profile. Some key professors receive such generous funding that they are able to make strategic decisions and reach some degree of independence from their host institution. Some of the most prestigious funding schemes are, in principle and legally speaking, individual, though the grant is at the same time large enough to finance a small- or medium-sized research organization.

The idea behind those funding schemes is to change the culture, mentality and behavior in a larger research group that works on the same long-term research plan. The principal investigator is put in the position of research director more directly than traditional research leaders in the universities. The funding schemes thereby fund research in a way that promotes research management and the different interpretation and translation aspects between the systems mentioned previously.

This kind of funding contributes to the concept that continuing modernization of research management in universities should also have a pioneering function. In recent years, in the long aftermath of the financial crises, it has become clear that the opportunities and the prospects of employees in every organization depend on management's skills. In a way, globalization could be defined as a competition between management qualities among competing organizations. It is hard not to imagine that the result will be a larger demand for leadership with a superior understanding and interpretation of the context of the research system. It is also reasonable to assume that in the research field, the best researchers will look more critically for the best research management and the best research managers will prefer to work

with the best researchers and that this competition in itself promotes the modernization of the university sector.²

5. The Place and Value of the Humanities

The most common phrase for the creation of knowledge in many research policies is “knowledge production” or similar phrases reflecting the process of turning ideas into products. Yet, the production metaphor is the first barrier that must be defeated. In the natural sciences and technology, it is an appropriate concept, because something hitherto unknown for mankind is added to our common knowledge. However, such accumulating and expanding forms of knowledge do not characterize the humanities. They represent a resource deeply integrated in human history. Some of the most important insights are already uncovered in ancient literature and philosophy and then again rediscovered during the centuries. In this sense, the humanities are non-productive.³

If some critical voices, partly for good reasons, fear unjust and inappropriate measurements and indicators for qualified and outstanding research in the humanities, the analysis sketched out above focuses on the risk that the humanities, due to ignorance, becomes its own enemy by neglecting to professionalize some important skills that in no way are in opposition to qualified humanistic research. No matter how well or badly contemporary research policy communicates with the core values of the humanities, any responsible research organization covering the disciplines of culture, literature, language, history, *etc.*, has to redeem the structural openings in the research policy system, as well as provide qualified criticism of the shortcomings of the funding policies. The challenge of the humanities as primarily a public good dealing especially with European cultural history is to enter into a pragmatic dialogue with the dominant tendencies of the politically framed conditions for research activities. The humanities should not escape this ongoing negotiation process.

It is likely that the demand for impact assessment, research management and an interdisciplinary approach in and of itself leads to a more explicit research culture. Being able to explain your professional knowledge is the first elementary step in any collaboration. The demand for effect, collaboration and management is, at the same time, an expression of a much deeper structure of detailed justification, which modern funding systems require of the research results, as well as regarding the labor process itself. When working across borders in larger research societies, things have to be more transparent and comparable, not least of which is being evaluated in a fair and non-discriminatory way. Before the globalization process, national funding policies could have taken certain local contexts for granted as common knowledge. However, the irony of being more explicit and more transparent rests on the fact that, by definition, it also increases the amount of exchanged information. Therefore, what in reality is a more transparent, explicit and predictable system appears to the individual researcher as a more complicated and even impenetrable system.

² An interesting additional dimension to this increasing competition is that the funding programs themselves are also under pressure for attracting the best researcher to obtain legitimacy in the eyes of the research environment ([13], p. 24).

³ As a part of the initial mapping and clarification of the opportunities of the humanities in the European research policy, a great number of reports from the European Commission and advisory boards have been published during the years. A couple of examples are [14,15].

The American sociologist, Richard Sennett, who has investigated the changes of institutions and the labor market in recent decades, summarizes the way that new institutional regimes are accentuated in order to break down rooted, unconscious habits. The newest technology eliminates silent reciprocal understanding and creates new explicit and self-problematizing knowledge ([16,17]).⁴ Silent knowledge becomes explicit and thereby common knowledge. As in the short description of the wave of new public management, there is a clear democratic aspect encapsulated in the development.

The following can in no way replace or substitute the overall need for such an exercise of making the humanities more explicit in a larger context. Concepts, like human experience, wisdom, common sense, mutual recognition, judgment, prudence, ethics and tragedy, all reflect the human ambition of acting in a collective, institutional and common context in the best possible way, trying to adjust common institutions from learning processes, but also the experience of failing on a regular basis. The concepts mentioned all describe the challenges of how to take into account different and sometimes contradictory considerations, how to choose and prioritize and the occasional catastrophic outcome of even the best and well-meaning intentions. They refer to the notions of the subjects, the political decision maker and the judge and to their effort to foster qualified decisions and choices at an intersubjective level by building communities that are able and willing to learn from their earlier mistakes.

Exactly because the humanities are non-productive, in the strictest sense, they are able to function as a mirror for human practice, and they therefore have the capacity to stimulate human reflection over possible alternative actions and decisions in a given situation. Even though the humanities are not productive, they are certainly proactive. As Svend Erik Larsen remarks while introducing the collection of position papers “No Future without Humanities: Literary Perspectives” in this issue: “The historicity that allowed modern Humanities to come into being also gave Humanities the task of redefining itself in response to the historically developed challenges of the human life world, as well as within the theoretical and analytical insights produced by the various disciplinary practices themselves.”

At least three essential features characterize the place and value of the humanities from the time of their origins:

- Emancipation: One of the most important drivers for the humanities is a specific knowledge interest in clarification and emancipation through reflection: to liberate man from illusions and prejudices and to see the world as it is by means of interpretation, understanding through categories and by asking critical questions. Answers that are taken for granted are challenged by questions.
- Building of political communities: Liberation of man is not only an individual project, but a part of a preoccupation with the nature of the common and public good related to the political sphere and the exchanges of qualified arguments. The constitution of city states raises a whole range of questions about laws and the requested qualities of the statesman.
- Judgment and application of knowledge:⁵ The search for the truth and the good was also followed by the painful experience of the deeper conflicts resulting from building up political city states.

⁴ Both in [16] and in [17], Richard Sennett investigates the development towards the measurement of performance and demand for explicit accountability in public institutions.

⁵ One of the major works in this field is by Hans-Georg Gadamer [18] and investigates fundamental structural challenges. Gadamer states that it is not possible to make a general rule in relation to the right application of a rule. Phenomena, like

Knowledge about the good as such follows a different logic than the question of a good application of knowledge [18]. Questions of the application of knowledge raise concerns about ethics and judgment and the potential tragic outcome of bad choices. This was dealt with intensively and in detail in the Greek tragedies.

This in no way implies that ancient times have the answers to present-day problems, but in as much as the classic texts in philosophy and literature are able to mirror human conditions and fundamental dilemmas, they offer models for very qualified ways of thinking in relation to basic dilemmas [19].

The cultural factor, the intersubjective perception and interpretation of reality, in the shape of history, language, religious notions and different forms of the arts, is perhaps the greatest resource for the explanation and understanding of how societies are constituted. Natural sciences and technologies have a reputation for being hard sciences, and the knowledge of the humanities is often described as soft. The overseen irony is that, in reality, it is quite the opposite. Machines can be changed, natural phenomena manipulated and modified, but culture is not at our disposal in the same direct way, partly because it is something that is not in front of us at a distance, but something we are embedded in and socialized through. Culture is thus not something that we see from within, but a sort of lens through which we see the world. It is much easier to make a political rule in the judicial system than to exercise the right common sense, wisdom and good judgment that is needed to produce actual justice. Francis Fukuyama writes that “policies are much more (...) changeable than cultures” ([20], p. 103).

The many examples of failed nation building in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that even with the most powerful use of military and administrative logistics, cultural factors seem to be the hardest to address effectively. The intersubjective cultural material has its own inertia that makes it real, not in an ontological sense, but real in the minds and behavior of a group of people. Despite the fact that Francis Fukuyama is a political scientist, he is an example of a researcher who has been interested in categories, like recognition, trust and judgment. He demonstrated how relevant they were in the understanding of modern social dynamics and made people more aware of the explanative power of non-material and non-economic concepts in the understanding of contemporary society. An example is his analysis of decentralization as a part of globalization and the need for local good judgment apart from the competitiveness of large companies. To secure flexibility and decision-making capacity, many decisions have to be made with speed and competence far down in the organization ([21], pp. 91–103). The work of the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, could be another example of an interest in how the topics and concepts at the heart of the humanities translate into contributions to modern challenges in the reformations of liberal education and promote a global citizenship (read more in [22–24]).

6. Concluding Remarks: Autonomy Based on Accountability

The structure of this article is grounded in the assumption that the contemporary state of affairs in research policy is much too complex to be changed in any direct way by any research area, regardless of how strong it may be. Moreover, this is only possible if the research area is able to demonstrate and explicate its specific qualities and scientific substance. It is essentially a question of the translation

tactfulness, political leadership and the choice of the means for a specific objective or a judgment in a legal dispute, are dependent on the ability to make judicious use of the relevant knowledge and experience.

between systems with different codes ([25], p. 423). The task at hand is to map the institutionalized codes of the political research system and to combine them with the codes or competences of the research system of the humanities.

The way forward is therefore the suggested two-fold strategy that consists, on the one hand, of a deeper understanding and identification of structural openings and inclusive mechanisms in the research policy system and, on the other hand, the building of a prudent self-organization to benefit from those structural possibilities. Both systems need to have the ability to see the other system from within and itself from without. This is a hermeneutical effort that both systems need to engage in; with such knowledge, they must have the opportunity to stimulate and change the other system from within. From the categories accentuated above, perhaps the humanities may even have the advantage of trying to stimulate the self-reflection of another system by using the identified inclusive mechanisms of the research policy system.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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