Was there ever Not a Crisis in the Humanities?

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Rumours have it that there is a crisis in the Humanities. That news is not new. According to one tract, there are four reasons for it:

1. The classics are edited badly.
2. Scholars promise too much, and then cannot live up to the expectations.
3. Scholars quarrel too much, and thereby give the Humanities a bad name.
4. There is no money in it.

That is what theologist and journalist Jean le Clerc, one of the most prominent voices in the Republic of Letters of his day, wrote in 1699 in the first volume of his *Parrhesiana.* Especially point 4 still rings familiar.

The most recent episode in that crisis seems to have taken place last year, as a wave of student protests washed over Canada, the Netherlands and the UK opposing budget cuts, college fee rises and staff and student disempowerment especially in the non-STEM disciplines. No one complained about bad editions of the classics, but everyone involved seemed to agree that the university was not living up to its promises and instead leaving staff and students in the cold. One widely shared article compared academia to a Ponzi scheme, since it asks students to bury themselves in debt with the promise of jobs that they will rarely get, and if so only after years in graduate and post-doc limbo. If devoting your life to learning becomes like borrowing money from the mob, then something has gone gravely wrong indeed.

But in between 1699 and 2015, there have been some other crises in the Humanities as well. The Jesuits were expulsed and their colleges closed. The National Convention effectively rendered all French universities obsolete in 1791. The Republic of Letters disappeared, or diluted, or imploded, or at any rate ceased to be the vibrant network of exchange that it was in the Early Modern age. Half the German universities perished between 1795 and 1818. The 1930s and 40s were not a particularly good time for the peaceful study of arts and letters either. And yet, *we still exist.* Somehow, amidst eternally recurrent crisis, the Humanities continue to expand and multiply. When Jean le Clerc wrote, there were approx. 1,200 active scholars around Europe; in 2015, that was less than the number of people defending a PhD in the Humanities in France, Germany, or the UK in one year. Maybe are troubles would be worse if the Humanities were *not* in crisis.

The exponential expansion is not all that surprising really, since the Humanities deal with things that bear meaning. Books, texts, images, languages, political events, more of that ilk. And those things just keep on growing. You don't really need to do anything to watch new history, new texts, new images appear. And to preserve some of that, you need people to interpret, describe, and classify it. So there will always be a task for humanities scholars as store-keepers of things that bear meaning. That store-keeping role, for that matter, was described 250 years ago already in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie,* article ÉRUDITION.

The problem with that role is, much as we'd like to, you can't store everything. The complaint that has been issued against the Humanities at least since 1637 is that the critical study of old texts and artifacts is a dusty affair and always lags behind events. Most often, this is true. Stores gather dust; descriptions always lag behind events. All that accumulation of texts, artifacts and descriptions of texts and artifacts makes little sense if it doesn't lead to new ideas, or doesn't come with a good case for why this is relevant. There is a kind of cycle of diminishing returns to the store-keeper conception of the Humanities: new insights lead to new accumulations, but as the new material heaps up it also adds less and less relevance, and dissatisfaction with that situation leads to new critical insight which also sends some of the old data to the dustbin. *Undsoweiter.*

Against complaints of dustiness, it helps to emphasize that sometimes those critical insights from the Humanities have had impact in the real world. The Reformation was the direct offspring of humanism and text criticism. Modern bureaucracy was invented by 15th-century humanists. So was secondary education. Almost all great Enlightenment thinkers were at least part-time historians and articulated their ideas through historical works, if they did not draw them from historical studies. The great political ideologies that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution – liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, radicalism, and after that, socialism – are at least linked to historical and philological studies. This is not necessarily the nicest argument for the Humanities imaginable, because anyone who has opinions hates at least one or two of the above, but you can hardly dismiss them as irrelevant.

Another complaint against the Humanities is that they are not proper sciences. As statisticians tend to say: "anecdote is not the singular of data". Defenders of the Humanities, faced with this complaint, sometimes feel the need to appeal to some 'hermeneutic method' purportedly invented around 1800. There are two reasons why this is a bad strategy. The first is that the 'hermeneutic tradition' was not a tradition before Hanns-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* of 1960, and in spite of its claim to open-mindedness, Gadamer's notion of hermeneutics is inextricably linked up with an ink-black Heideggerian conservatism. The second is that reading a few old books from the period around 1800 teaches you differently, because those books are filled with terms like hypothesis, anomaly, conjecture, inference, *raissonnement.* Edward Gibbon even formulated something dangerously close to Popper's falsification criterion in an essay he wrote at age 21, when he described the task of the 'true critic' as 'daring to sacrifice your most audacious hypothesis'.

According to a somewhat narrow-minded definition of 'science' the Humanities indeed can't be proper sciences, since we're dealing with things that bear meaning. And you can't measure meaning. So you have to work with functionally vague concepts rather than with decontextualized units and measures, just as you do in everyday language. This doesn't mean that we stop formulating hypotheses or drawing conclusions. Rather, it means that what we do in the Humanities is essentially *argumentative,* more so than in the exact science, since an argument is something that you can disagree with. The problem with functionally vague concepts is that you constantly need to disambiguate them, and that you can't build long chains of inference with them, because the vagueness increases at every step. The product of vagueness and vagueness is more vagueness.

For the same reason, there is no point in a self-conception of the Humanities that makes a virtue out of finding ever new interpretations. The more interpretations you give, the harder they can be

distinguished from one another. If you have a dozen interpretations, that is half a dozen too many. The question not: how could you *also* look at it, but: why is that insight relevant?

Thus, there is no way of creating meaning, in the semantic sense, without making things matter. Meaning requires argumentation in order to make it explicit, and argumentation requires motivation. That motivation, ultimately, cannot rely on some notion of self-formation, edification, or *Bildung.* Not because becoming a fuller, better informed person is not a legitimate ideal – it is – but because there is no way of getting rid of the *better-than-thou* once you instrumentalize it in this way. You can only make things matter if you come up with something significantly new, instead of congratulating yourself on your critical spirit and your deep hermeneutic understanding. All the same, the motivation of what we say also demands that we do not remain silent about our ideals. It's just that those ideals are not rock bottom; nobody cares how *gebildet,* or critical, or *engagé* you are. What is needed is something of 'the old made new': new old facts mixed with interesting new ideas.

There is another important task for the Humanities there, next to describing and conserving. It's not about interpretation but about argumentation. Once you've stopped being interesting you've basically stopped reasoning. So the real game is about clarifying concepts and introducing new ideas. About explaining why something matters without chewing out second-hand chewing gum. And that will always be a problematic affair. In that regard, 'crisis' is the normal condition in the Humanities, and it will not go away. So maybe we should learn to love the monster and embrace that condition. Which is not to say that we should cheerfully embark on an academic Ponzi scheme.