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**Where do we stand and where do we go?**  
**The humanities and different meanings of relevance and impact**  
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Talking about the impact of the humanities and their relevance to society acquires a special flavour at a moment when the impact of society on the humanities makes itself felt quite dramatically. British universities have already asked their departments for “voluntary disengagement“ (that is newspeak for administering severe funding cuts), and the Austrian Academy fears it may lose up to 150 researchers’ jobs next year if the budget develops as currently planned. No doubt most politicians at the moment would rather close down research institutions than let a major bank collapse, although what our institutions spend is peanuts as compared to losses incurred by a single one of the clever investment schemes that have brought the economy down this year. Still, the humanities always run the danger of being considered a luxury that society allows itself only as long as it can afford it.

But we should look at this also from another angle. Do we really understand what has happened? The current economic crisis goes beyond what economic theory can explain so far, and has raised many questions that reach deep into the domain of the humanities. For instance, attempts to prevent the crisis at some stage they seem to have deepened it because everybody started talking about it, the media spread the panic, and economic rationality in one context turned out to be irrational in other contexts. Since 1929, economists and other scholars have acquired substantial knowledge about economic crises, their dynamic, and how to react to them. But we need more. It may be that from the distance of another 80 years, historians will wonder how little we knew about the things that happened in front of our eyes in 2008, just as we do when we look back to 1929. We need a better in-depth understanding of many things: How do millions of individual decisions affect the economy at large? Why do die-hard investment gurus start losing touch with reality at some point? Why are so many people so easily convinced by the rhetoric of persuasion? How does the impact of economic crises change over the centuries as society becomes more complex? What should the ethics and the rules of the financial sector actually look like, and how could one get people to respect them? How can the shrill competition for our attention in the media be kept from multiplying the damage in times of crisis? In what ways do narratives of crisis

develop, and how do they influence the way people act? These are just some of the questions that hopefully will begin to appear in research funding applications soon. They need a strong input from the humanities, in close cooperation with the social sciences.

Research on all sorts of crises in history may seem a luxury most of the time. But when a crisis comes we may wish we had done more research on the previous ones. Only a few months before 9/11, the Austrian minister of finance doubted that the state should fund oriental studies; now we know why we needed them. Our message about the relevance of the humanities should be: Yes, we have already learnt an enormous amount about the human mind and human actions, and about how they are related to society. But we need to know much more. Where do we go? There are still so many puzzling problems, fascinating challenges and engaging questions out there, some of which we have only learned to face rather recently. That is, and should be, the main driving force behind our research. In this respect, research in the humanities is not fundamentally different from all other scientific fields.

Of course, there are differences, both between science and the humanities and within the humanities. This is already obvious in the terminology. Are the humanities part of the sciences? A historian colleague of mine, a professor in Cambridge, once spent a whole morning on the phone with Brussels to find out whether a certain EU funding call that had been announced for 'science' was also open for humanities applications. Nobody seemed to know. Mostly, we speak of science in the singular, but use the plural for 'the humanities'. This corresponds with the plurality of cultures and approaches in the humanities (but should not make us forget that 'science' is as manifold). Or should we say, the 'arts and humanities'? The *lettere*, letters, as in Italian? *Geistes-* and/or *Kulturwissenschaften*, or, as in the Austrian Academy, die *philosophisch-historischen Wissenschaften*? And which disciplines do the humanities include? "From ancient history and heritage science to modern dance and digital content", as the AHRC website advertises? Do social anthropology, cognitive linguistics, psychology belong to the humanities? Fortunately, these disciplines are represented in the programme of this conference, as they are in the Standing Committee for the Humanities of the ESF.

But the archipelago of the humanities is not only constituted by the variety of its disciplines. Different academic cultures exist within and in between them. Let me take the example of my own discipline, medieval history. It includes a traditional sector devoted to the technicalities of text editions and source criticism, representing an expertise and sophistication essential for the preparation of working tools and research infrastructures for the study of medieval history. The innovative funding scheme NIKE, proposed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), has been developed to cater for these fundamental needs; it is to be hoped that it can be put into practice in times of financial crisis. Surely, some of the long-term edition projects exceed the perspective of any funding agency: One of the principal projects in the field, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, aiming at no less than a complete publication of all sources relevant to medieval German history, has been pursued since the 1820s, and has produced a room full of heavy volumes so far. This is a field badly compatible with current methods of metrics, but as we still frequently use the volumes produced in the 1820s, chances are that the volumes edited now will be valuable at a time when all A-rated journals have long turned to debris. Apart from these so-called auxiliary sciences, there are other approaches: traditional narrative history with a potential for bestsellers; post-modern text critique in creative exchange with related humanities disciplines; social and economic history relying on quantitative methods and sociological models; cultural history related in various ways to the paradigms of interdisciplinary cultural studies; micro-history and regional studies with transdisciplinary perspectives; experimental bricolage curious to create new models, and others. All of them have their jargons, their idiosyncracies, their different networks and publications, their respective strengths and weaknesses, their potential and their limits.

Humanities scholars do not always enjoy a good reputation among funding agencies. I have repeatedly heard the melodramatic story about the difference between natural scientists and humanities people when a project application fails: natural scientists have just one thought, how can I get this project through after all, and they work night and day to make their application better; whereas humanities scholars weep, retire to some dark corner and complain that the procedure has been unfair. Or, that the humanities lack a proper application culture, scholars are often incapable of writing a well-structured project application. Are humanities scholars conservative, complacent, slow to conform to the changes in society and too obsessed with the long-gone social prestige

of the academic? Perhaps as far as such stereotypes correspond with reality in other cases, about foreigners, rockstars, used cars salesmen or EU bureaucrats. We'll have to live with humanities-bashing, even by some humanities scholars themselves. But the percentage of humanities projects funded in open calls usually corresponds to the application rate, and many humanities scholars are very successful in presenting their results to a general public, to give just two examples to the contrary. We should not take myths about the humanities too seriously, but should also take care not to conform to them.

It is true, the role of the humanities in society has changed. The study "Empfehlungen zur Entwicklung und Förderung der Geisteswissenschaften in Deutschland" published by the Wissenschaftsrat in 2006 has argued that the general perception of the relevance of the humanities historically has been linked to one dominant goal in society.<sup>1</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was the construction of national identities, from the 1920 onwards the apology or critique of totalitarian ideologies, and after 1945, the democratisation of western societies. But since the 1980s, there has been no central task any more. For the quality of research and the self-reflection of its role in society, this has been a liberation. We now think much more about the history of our disciplines and the political undercurrents involved. But outside perceptions of the significance of the humanities have suffered as a consequence. This does not mean that humanities research goes unnoticed. Books, documentaries, exhibitions, new finds often attract enormous attention. But typically, the cultural distance between scholarship and society, between research and popular knowledge is much smaller than in the natural sciences. History, literary studies, or psychology are more accessible than nano sciences or molecular biology. This makes them attractive, but it may also obscure the scholarly character of our disciplines. The media further encourage the illusion that anybody can do history or psychology; and they produce forms of infotainment that threaten to create wrong, and sometimes even dangerous, views about society. One recent example is the interest in conspiracy theories exploited and expanded by Dan Brown's best-sellers. All of this means that a fundamental task of the humanities today is not only to produce knowledge, but also to survey, control and criticize knowledge produced outside the field of scholarship – which is not exactly a popular role.

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<sup>1</sup> Empfehlungen zur Entwicklung und Förderung der Geisteswissenschaften in Deutschland, Wissenschaftsrat, Köln 2005/06.

Another contested social role of the humanities (and the social sciences) is the autonomous and critical reflection of society. Here again, the media and politics do not fully use that potential; the role and choice of ‘experts’ does not facilitate the input of scholarly knowledge in political decisions. Private consultancy firms, who usually operate outside the standards of quality assessment so firmly imposed on the humanities, have gained more credibility with politicians than scholars have, possibly because they use the same superficial rhetoric as the politicians do. How should the humanities deal with the situation? Certainly, we could do more to offer strategic advice on many matters. But we also need to be careful to keep a certain distance. When Umberto Eco was invited to join a high-level group to discuss measures after the banlieue riots in France, he wrote back saying: Our role as scholars is not to help you politicians to solve problems, that is your task; our role is to create problems, that is, to make society realise that there is a problem in the first place. We may not agree that it should be one or the other, and the humanities have a lot to contribute to the study of migrations and integration. But we should also regain sufficient autonomy for critique that is essential for the balanced development of today’s fast-moving societies. It is easier for most ‘hard’ sciences to play an instrumental role and fulfill the expectations of society; the humanities should be careful not to be instrumentalized. That creates a necessary tension between the humanities and society. The message that we deliver often is that common-sense knowledge or political programmes underrate the complexity of the issue; but this message has to compete for public attention against popular simplifications, consultancy companies eager to sell streamlined solutions and bullet-point media messages.

Different sectors of the humanities have found a wide variety of responses to their situation. As different as their methods and habitus is their place in society. Some scholars go on lonesome quests for the hidden truth while others try to grab the limelight, some feed the media while others are buttressed behind unassailable jargons, some engage in patient groundwork while others make sweeping statements about the big issues. We have to be critical of some of these attitudes, But basically, I think that we need all of these different approaches. Research policy should not attempt to enforce more uniformity here. It is often claimed that the humanities are too compartmentalised

and incapable of building up critical masses (as an Austrian study recently concluded).<sup>2</sup> But I think that the plurality of cultures and the existence of small disciplines are an extraordinary asset and a condition for creativity and innovation. If there is one thing that can kill interesting humanities research, it is an overdose of conformism. Of course all these smaller and bigger worlds should open up, communicate more, and should not drift apart too much. And not all of them will need, or merit, an equal share of research funding. But they should not be centralized or forced to become part of intrusive organisational or thematic structures, as the RFTE study suggests.

The problem in the humanities (and in other disciplines, I may add) is not the multiplicity of research approaches and the ‘small worlds’ in which many of them are located. Rather, it is in the institutional structure of the academic world (and not only the humanities), as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu in his pioneering study, ‘Homo Academicus’, that came out in 1984. He discusses problems of power – who controls the “reproduction du corps” and the access to resources – and problems of “habitus” – deep-rooted mentalities and expectations. The dynamics of the academic world and the needs of research do not always coincide, and there is no easy solution for that (it certainly lies not in concentrating the power in even fewer hands!). In many universities, an equalitarian, anti-elitist mood prevails, which came into being in the 1970s as a reaction to the old system of academic ‘barons’. If we want to understand the impact of research assessment tools, then the important question is how they interact with the academic game. I can only talk about that as an interested observer, in Vienna and elsewhere. For instance, after the evaluation of a history department of a prestigious Italian university (in which I participated) the faculty decided that their research funds should now go to those with the worst evaluation results to enable them to do better next time. In disciplines where ‘feudal’ structures prevail, the ‘barons’ often succeed in gaining control of the assessment tools; they have to conform to some of the requirements, but can use the results to reinforce their power. In more egalitarian institutes, the tendency is to build up informal networks capable of gaining control of hiring processes and the distribution of resources; in this game, those who concentrate on administrative duties may be better off than those who devote their energy to research or better teaching.

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<sup>2</sup> Struktur der Geistes-, Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften in Österreich, Papier des Rats für Forschung und Technologieentwicklung (RFTE), März 2008.

Generally speaking, the introduction of new instruments of assessment and of high-level research funding usually opens up academic power structures by creating new sources of symbolic capital and influence – there is more than one game one can play to succeed. This creates new opportunities because it allows young (and not so young) researchers to try out alternative career paths and become more independent of the small worlds of their field. But in the long run, the new instruments risk to become part of the power structure. And this is where the methods of evaluation come in: the more formal the requirements are, and the fewer criteria we have, the easier it is for main-stream conformists to fulfill the standards. There are many ways to place articles in A-rated journals, get cited or acquire external research grants without necessarily doing excellent research (and this, by the way, is not only true for the humanities).

Of course I have simplified here to make the point; there are many universities which hire excellent humanities scholars, and Vienna generally is doing very well in this regard. But a merely ‘technical’ discussion of the tools of research policy that ignores the social and cultural context of academe is not sufficient. The same tool can have very different impact in different contexts. I am often impressed by the sophistication with which matters of policy are being discussed between professionals of research funding and assessment. What I can contribute here is some experience how these tools work in real life. And, as a historian, I have acquired an acute sense of the distance between rhetoric and reality. Ulrike Felt, professor of science studies at the University of Vienna, has recently carried out fascinating research on the way in which career narratives of young scholars have changed in the course of what I would call the ‘competitive turn’ of science policies.<sup>3</sup> One of her conclusions that I found alarming is that an ‘audit society’ requiring measurable output at every stage encourages conformity and mainstream research and discourages innovation, in spite of all the rhetoric employed to the contrary. Curiosity and fascination are increasingly replaced by the desire to meet formal career standards as the main motivating factor. Is that the impact that our impact assessments have? We should be very careful not to understand scientific production only in terms of deliverables, but rather, leave space for creation and new ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Felt Ulrike, Fochler Maximilian, Müller Ruth (2008): Planning lives in the life sciences: Young researchers’ construction of past and future biographies as a governmentality project; Paper presented at the International Conference, The Politics of Knowing, Prague, 28.-29. 11.2008.

So how are we to assess potential and impact of the humanities? I can be brief here, because that is the main topic of this conference.<sup>4</sup> But I would like to make a few of points:

1. There are a number of criteria which any discipline that receives substantial research funding has to meet, and which of course apply to the Humanities as well. The most important ones are: Research has to bring results. These results should be made widely accessible to scholars, and where possible also to a general public. And part of the funding for it has to remain competitive, so as to allow quality-oriented distribution of research money at every stage.
2. Apart from these general parameters, a specific set of criteria has to be employed, not only for each discipline, but sometimes also for single fields and research sub-cultures. Research assessment instruments have to be flexible enough to judge research on its own terms.
3. There are no criteria that can directly measure the quality or the impact of good research. We have to work on the basis of circumstantial evidence, not proof. This may be a controversial statement, but I do think it is fundamental to acknowledge that. Bibliometrics and other assessment tools have made enormous progress over the past years, but they are only indirect ways to assess the quality of the research under scrutiny by quantitative means.
4. In the humanities, we have to work with a wide range of criteria, only part of which are quantitative. Apart from publications and external funding, it should also include international cooperations; incoming and outgoing scholars at the institution; prizes and awards received; creation of junior career opportunities; advisory functions in politics or the media; membership in review panels, boards etc.; the preservation and study of cultural heritage and historical sources; production of data collections, research infrastructures etc.; public lectures and papers; teaching and supervising; organisation of scientific meetings; outreach activities, and other things. Economic impact (as measured, for instance, by the AHRC study on the Polynesian Visual Arts project) should not be a criterium. The Austrian Academy is in the process of compiling a policy paper with an extensive list of criteria for research assessment; disciplinary lists will be established on this basis. The problem is that all these data have to be collected (via a

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<sup>4</sup> See the Feasibility Study: the Evaluation and Benchmarking of Humanities Research in Europe, HERA, main author: Carl Dolan, August 2007; and the report of an ad-hoc committee of the Philosophisch-Historische Klasse der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, June 2008 (accessible under [oaew.ac.at/gema](http://oaew.ac.at/gema)).

research database), and that is more complicated and time-consuming than for just one or two criteria.

5. In many humanities disciplines, publications in peer-reviewed, let alone flagship journals are not the only relevant form of publishing. Books are often more important, but also source editions, thematically focused collaborative volumes or other forms. If humanities publication culture should change according to the natural sciences model, this would be a change to the worse. Work would become more superficial and short-term oriented; and younger scholars would have less opportunities to publish in good journals because the big names would have to move in.

6. How and where to apply metrics is highly problematic. Often, monographs and articles are equally counted as one publication, which distorts their true relationship; rating scales are only a small step forward. We have to see whether better bibliometric solutions for the humanities can be found. In most humanities disciplines, citation indices do not work properly yet (and perhaps never will), and their use can be grossly misleading. Harzing's Publish or Perish currently lists about one tenth of my publications, less than half of my publications in English, and even less of those colleagues who may have cited me. One look at ERIH with its endless lists of journals can demonstrate how difficult it would be to get reliable citation indices in the humanities to work. The question of citation and/or counting/weighing publications also raises a general problem: Should we encourage a maximum amount of publications (by 'smallest publishable unit') or maximum citation impact (which means as few publications with as high impact as possible)? The h-index may help to balance the two criteria, but does not preclude the necessary discussion what is more important in different research cultures.

7. One remark about ERIH. In spite of the critique that it has received, I still think that it is a very valuable instrument which will help to make publishing more transparent. Still, and in spite of all disclaimers, it may create misconceptions which we have to remain cautious about. A problem may arise in review panels with a majority of natural scientist members; as recent experience shows, they tend to regard ERIH as a however rudimentary equivalent of their own system, and use it to eliminate promising humanities scholars who do not have enough ERIH-A journal publications. This is not what ERIH was intended to achieve. We have to be careful not to reduce the great variety of publication forms in the humanities to a one-dimensional black, grey and

white shadow world in which only white survives. Ambitious mimicry to natural sciences standards would create too many misfits in the wide world of the humanities.

8. Peer review remains one of the key procedures of assessment, and should be maintained in spite of its obvious limits (for instance, the better chances for mainstream positions; the subtle influence of networks that cannot be excluded by the best conflict of interest rules; and of course, the enormous strain on the time of the reviewers). Still, good peer review is more accurate than metrics. What one can see at a glance in a colleague's CV and bibliography can never be matched by numbers. But we have to discuss how to improve the procedures, and how to limit the strain on senior researchers' time budgets at the same time. Using metrics in peer review can be an important way to make a reviewer's task easier and more transparent.

What we need is a difficult balancing act: allowing for difference while assessing what is comparable. There can be no innovation without the utmost freedom for research. But maximum freedom requires maximum responsibility. There is a need for relevant humanities research on many urgent questions of today's society, and on a wide range of topics that seem less urgent now. Of course, there will always be good and not-so-good research. Our instruments of quality assessment will have to match some of the complexity of humanities research methods. They should not be conceived as a tool of social engineering, but as an integral part of the broader humanities tradition of self-reflection.