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Humanities Manifesto / Anti-Manifesto

~ Dedicated to Dada ~
To launch a manifesto you have to want: A.B. & C., and fulminate against 1, 2, & 3

The humanities are in [crisis](#)!

1. **Conceiving Crisis: It's All in Our Heads!** Today's tendency to host conferences, colloquia, public roundtables or edit collaborative volumes on the crisis in, and how we can radicalize, the humanities and subvert mechanistic modes of assessment and promotion, funded by leading universities and supported such that their organization and outputs can be counted towards their host and participating academics' professional development, negates the very idea of resistance to (re)new(ed) radicalism that we seek to confront. The inauguration of institutional Centers and Clusters for innovation marks an immediate blow, says the optimist, for anyone who claims that original thinking is no longer possible within the academy. Academia – including science – exists as a singular sort of institution whereby participation is predicated on *dissent*. There is no crisis of concepts; that there is apparently a crisis is only a conceptual problem on the part of those who cannot think beyond rhetorical posturing. Only if demand for radicalism is radical (and it is not), are the humanities in crisis. I therefore want, (a): **no perceived necessity of an academic manifesto!**

2. **Our Intellect is Thoroughly Institutionalized!** That a fall in funding or a widely believed reduction in student numbers is conceived as a crisis for the continuation of our *discipline* of (dissenting) humanistic-critical thought, on the other hand, is an indication that we can no longer think outside of bureaucratic or capitalist worldviews. Why should our ideas automatically gain currency, says the idealist, and if they are financially supported by the establishment or condoned by existing methods of social and political organization – are they really radical? Can terms not be coined, theses formed, arguments constructed in external spaces which only later become incorporated into, or named as, the University? To purportedly think radically within a context where conference proposals are reviewed and selected according to existing, normative academic prejudices, in a fashion that will hopefully be impactful and consequently increase our professional standing, is but to affirm, says the cynic, the very bureaucratic and capitalist pressures which are – as we perceive them – exerted upon us. Publications in the humanities are sustained by [those](#) who went off the rails of tenure track. Thus I wish for, (b): **a non-academic manifesto!**

3. **No to More Nuance!** 1 *versus* 2 is such a simplistic opposition. It should surely be intricate. After theory, we call for nuance in order to attend to a political, historical, textual, philosophical, ethical, religious, racial, sexual or gendered particularity that is overlooked or positively excluded by a totalizing trajectory or glib generalization. But nuance is nowadays, and always has been, also (mis-)appropriated by the skeptic in order to debunk any attempt to re-think something anew (and, worse, she proclaims to uphold an unquestioned scholarly *Gold Standard* in the process.) The humanities must once again become a site of heady system-building and beautiful *poiesis* if it is to avoid the bean-counting, book-keeping ideal of steady – if also preferably speedy – scholarship that is said to be enforced upon it by Scientism, which is allegedly the product of bureaucracy and capitalism. Thereby I conclude with a manifesto for (c): **more conflict and bombastic concepts! Explosive intellectualism! Satirical shrapnel and artistic fragments!**

The point of my manifesto is satirical, to be sure, but it also has a serious side. The Call for Papers seemed to me to be aporetic *a priori*.

I do not think that the abstract *purpose* of the humanities has changed in recent years, so it is not in crisis. Let us take literary scholarship as an example. Pragmatically, we could say that literature departments exist because people like reading, and they enjoy talking about reading with each other. This happens both outside and inside the academy, but the academy offers the opportunity to do it as a full-time occupation, and to a more intensive degree than via book groups, say. This is an argument Adam Gopnik advances in the *New Yorker*. If this seems a simplistic line of thinking, we could express the grounds for literary study more theoretically. Niels Werber proposes that literary scholarship is an autonomous sub-system of academia that is itself an autonomous system of society, with its own form of communication.[1] Neither of these approaches, we should note, offer *necessary* grounds for academic analysis; few (if any) university subjects are truly necessary in our already-advanced culture. The supposedly necessary reasons that tend to be given for a subject in and of itself are contrived, including lines such as "no one has said X before, looked at X before, or everyone has previously overlooked X". These justifications are not necessary, but they are interesting and as valid as any other academic pursuit. In Werber's terms, the *function* of literary study is to discuss the function of literature, in all its varieties and controversies, just as the function of cultural studies, for instance, is to debate the function of culture in a closed language removed from everyday types of communication that is also, of course, contingent on society as a whole. The contingent factors are not the functions of disciplines. The function of scholarship differs from its *applicable uses* and *dissemination*, both of which are incidental.

This distinction is helpful for the topic of the advertised conference: the (alleged) crisis in humanities subjects and how we can innovate within them. Because while the purpose of the humanities has not changed, their institutional environments, outputs and the practices demanded of them have changed considerably. These incidental factors have become a primary (cause for) concern. Undergraduate student numbers aside, there are more applicants for academic positions, more governmental or corporate pressures to measure achievement and more scholarly publishing houses or platforms looking for copy than ever before. As a result, our conception of academic work has inevitably become more mechanistic, which in the Call For Papers was conceived as *scientist* and is popularly considered increasingly *bureaucratic*, or even *capitalist*. I don't believe that anyone goes into academia in order to publish the most REFable research outputs: every academic I have ever met is interested in what they write about. But for some, what Werber calls *Leistungen* begin to encroach on what they conceive as the *Funktion* of their research. This is inevitable, and arguably understandable, as they proceed in today's academy, wanting to make sure they get a job, make tenure and contribute to a viable department. In short, they want to have a career comparable to their non-academic peers. Academics also operate within society, so many will desire financial wellbeing and what society considers to be "career success". This phenomenon, too, has always been the case, though the hoops through which we have to jump as professional scholars have never been so numerous.

The problem, as I see it, is not with what the humanities subjects *are*, but with their *regulative conditions* – conditions to which we can object on institutional, national and international levels. And it is right that we do so. It is also true that a threat to the *humanities* as a whole is something new, rather than individual, disciplinary skirmishes: Charles Firth wrote his history *Modern*

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[1] Niels Werber, 'Es gibt keine Literatur - ohne Literaturwissenschaft', in Walter Delabar and Anne Bentfeld (eds.), *Perspektiven der Germanistik. Neueste Ansichten zu einem Alten Problem* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), pp. 176-94.

Languages at Oxford, 1724-1929 in part as a response to university in-fighting.[2] After professorships had at last been endowed and scholarships set up for the study of Modern Languages at tertiary level, the University's Ashmolean museum was preventing the building of adequate lecture theatres. Were Classics the threat to Modern Languages today! But let us not confuse these practical problems of the past and present with the idea that the humanities are presently without an abstract purpose.

It can *feel* as if we, as academics in the humanities, no longer have a purpose, though, particularly if we have begun along the road of hitting quantitative target after target, only to become alienated. In addition, therefore, there is a crisis of the humanities that is a crisis of self-understanding. How can we rectify this or reinvent ourselves; how can we innovate? This is an individual decision.

If we accept that the cores of subjects in the humanities are not intellectually impoverished, then the task that remains is practical, political activism against particular employment terms, assessment criteria, and so on. If, however, we think that the humanities require a bigger conceptual shake-up, then that must be taken at a potentially personal cost. In the <u>*Times Higher Education*</u>, Rebecca Braun likens research-active academics to entrepreneurs. But surely this metaphor is only tenable if the academic takes a risk. Those who publish lots of REFable pieces, establish cross-institutional networks and secure soft monies from multiple funding bodies deserve our professional recognition. Yet they are not necessarily *entrepreneurs.* They are clearly akin to organisational leaders, perhaps even CEOs, but they are like entrepreneurs only if they put their own reputation on the line and really staked their financial security to get where they are. Only the academic *avant-garde* is in this sense entrepreneurial, for better or worse. Mikhail Epstein says in his <u>manifesto</u> that the humanities should be *transformative.* Some such transformational academics achieved a professorship as a result of their labours; others had to turn their backs on a professorial career. Compare the cases of Kittler and Benjamin, or the postgraduate in Berkeley who wrote a two-sentence, thesis-length work that is to remain in the stacks of the university library, unread, for evermore. (You've never heard of it? Exactly.)

I suggest that there are two types of innovation. One is more conformist and the other is potentially transformative, as well as potentially catastrophic. Neither sort of innovation is currently under greater conceptual threat than it has been in previous decades, and the path we choose for our own work depends on our personality and the way in which we want to lead our lives, not the consequences of a conference. My point here is again twofold. First, an event that talks about transformative humanities within the setting of that conventional, respected academic practice – the conference – proves that, as <u>Bruno Latour</u> laments, what was once *avant-garde* criticism (e.g. constructivism) has now become commonplace. It is no longer radical. But precisely such conventionalism opens a space for a new *avant-garde*, because the radical depends dialectically on the conventional. So my second point is this: conference discussions can help us develop our own radical agendas, by virtue of being a bastion of conventionalism. Or more prosaically, they might assist us in forming campaign networks for practical issues.

However, we err if we think that we should be able to be transformatively radical from a position of writing with ring-fenced public money, job security and with the guaranteed return on our efforts of academic titles. That is a misunderstanding of what motivates radicalism: risk. Not everyone is prepared to take risks, and if they were, well, there would be no radicalism. For those who do embrace intellectual, actual risk, the rewards might be life-affirming, posthumous – or might never materialize.

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[2] C.H. First, *Modern Languages at Oxford, 1724-1929* (London: Oxford University Press/Humphrey Milford, 1929).