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## **Humanities in Modern Society**

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Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen!

First of all I would like to thank you for the honour of being invited to hold a lecture here at your distinguished university.

My topic today is the question what humanities can contribute to coping with the challenges of modern society. Since I have been a Professor of literary studies before I assumed charges of the president of Freie Universität, I am very interested in understanding the targets and tasks of humanities nowadays. To ask about the function of humanities in modern society first and foremost includes the question for what sake we can use their knowledge and their competencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That also implies the reflection on the general issues of research in modern society.

I have divided my lecture into four parts. 1st: Curiosity and Enlightenment. 2nd: Memory and Tradition as Processes of Selection 3rd: Orientation by Understanding Meaning 4th: Bridging Cultures

### 1. Curiosity and Enlightenment

Scientific curiosity is a core quality of modern research. It can appear in three different types or forms. In the sense of a habitus or an intellectual attitude, it marks a specific position in relation to the objects of scientific analysis. Curiosity constitutes the point of departure which is essential for intellectual reflection in general. As a comprehensive prerequisite of research, curiosity enables us to go beyond limits, to discover new fields, and to extend the lines of thought that are subjected to conventions and formal regulations. Curiosity encourages human beings to ask questions, to be open minded, to overcome obstacles and to pave ways for the future. It enables the human intellect in finding new solutions beyond methodological constraints. Indeed, there are many other qualities required for research, such as persistence and patience, assiduity and flexibility. But without curiosity, no one would be able to pursue a scientific project and to identify the major issues for intellectual activities and ambitions.

Curiosity is required for research - this seems to be a commonplace. But in fact, it was not accepted as a general premise for science at any time. In Europe, there were ages when curiosity was condemned and banned by the church. It was considered as a sin, a product of demons and devils, an evil impulse of a cold intellect, not promoted by the will of god. To understand nature and nature's law should be the privilege of the creator himself. It was the effect of the European enlightenment that curiosity would not only be accepted but demanded by the society as an indispensable asset of general importance. German Philosopher Hans Blumenberg has elaborated this aspect in "The Legitimacy of the Modern Age" (first published 1966, in four volumes 1985). Blumenberg demonstrates that curiosity, which substitutes secularisation as a 'concept of historical unjustness', is a category, supporting the process of cognition since the medieval ages. Blumenberg illustrates this making reference to religious metaphors that are transformed under the conduct of curiosity. In such a case, oblivion is an important premise for the process, which gives meaning to the metaphor. Previous meanings will be forgotten because new functions are claimed by an intellectual curiosity which has to be considered as a dominating force within the process of modernization.<sup>ii</sup> Interpreting this process by analysing the history of metaphors with regard to their organization of knowledge helps to "remember oblivion", as David Adams has argued trenchantly.

Since the Enlightenment established scientific curiosity as a preeminent intellectual attitude fostering research and providing support for any kind of understanding of nature, our intellectual discourses gained a multitude of perspectives and positions. Curiosity, as an instrument of reflection and analysis, is the prerequisite of science in a modern sense. One might criticise the enlightenment from different points of view, as we have done in Europe. But as a matter of fact, there is no alternative to enlightenment when it comes to research, since science in general is very much dependent on curiosity. Humanities can make us aware of the fact that this has not been the case in each age. We need humanities to learn that our intellectual attitudes are a result of a historical process that we cannot ignore when we pursue our intellectual ambitions in the framework of a modern society.

## 2. Memory and Tradition as Processes of Selection

This leads me to another aspect. Humanities usually scrutinize the cultural and historical heritage of mankind. Humanistic studies make us aware of the fact that we are part of a conceptual history designing our minds. They do not offer plain solutions to our scientific problems. It is their specific contribution to research to uncover the historical sources of our thoughts and to explain where our most recent theories originate from.

Historical perspectives, marked by humanities, are interconnected with the concept of tradition. Tradition is usually functionalized as a model that enables human memory to collect and bundle knowledge that would otherwise fade into the stream of history. With respect to this purpose, tradition must shape structures that control the dynamic evolution of topics, methods, and skills. Such a goal cannot be accomplished without the opposite operation, the selection of the multitude which has emerged within the horizon of our intellectual world. Since tradition aims at the regulation of knowledge, it needs a structuring impulse that brings about the organisation of epistemic order. However, this organisation will not work unless there is the possibility to select, divide or disperse discrete elements of knowledge. Oblivion is an important premise for the above-mentioned operations enabling tradition; it opens a way to the hierarchical structuring of knowledge by identifying elements that are not worthy of preservation. Tradition thus shapes ranked orders important for any kind of differentiation as it is required by epistemic standards of reflexion. It is obvious that this rule-governed proceeding depends on historical conditions and framings determining the aims tradition must attain. All these objectives are fulfilled by the methods, applied in humanistic disciplines. Literary studies, linguistics, philosophy and history operate with methodological techniques which define themselves with respect to the selection of resources of historical knowledge. They all comprise a joint method in aiming at the constitution of historical memory by tracing back their knowledge to the ways of tradition.

Since this task is connected to the function of culture, humanities are, in a general sense, cultural studies. As German sociologist Niklas Luhmann defines it, culture generates the varieties of choice between possible issues and patterns of knowledge (a point of view also taken by the Anglo-American cultural studies). It thus inhibits the contingency of free choice by stipulating an epistemic order in a given society. Furthermore it makes tradition an instrument of decision-making, thus guaranteeing sustainability and continuity. Talcott Parsons, who was Luhmann's teacher in the USA in the late 60's, describes a major function of social action in terms of "pattern maintenance". This also concerns the aspect of order because patterns, as Parsons

points out, rule the diversity of elements in a social system. Social action covers the field of organizing variety by setting up formal structures so that its elements can assume shape. Luhmann compares this process to the establishment of a schedule that maintains and develops tradition. As he suggests, tradition fulfills the function of a 'sorting mechanism' selecting from a variety of knowledges and bundling together the materials washed ashore.

Luhmann believes, that oblivion is a constitutive function of social memory. It does not work as an archive recording data but as an instrument of differentiation. Its major task is the selection of facts, figures and impressions which is necessary to set up social order. Luhmann explains that modern society has refined this medium in a process of permanent differentiation. Antique societies already knew the memory system as a magazine for cultural knowledge; modern society, as set up in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, requires the function of differentiation in order to select exuberant information. It is on this basis that Luhmann argues against Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital'. For him, Bourdieu's term is not able to explain the process of selection launched by memory because it covers the function of cumulating materials and elements of knowledge without reflecting the opposite operation of selection. Since cultural tradition is constituted by an impulse that works against the cumulation and emergence of time, it has to be described as a medium for diversification. Rather than adapting the act of selection, Luhmann considers as important operator for tradition, Bourdieu's symbolic capital just reflects the process of aggregating material for the constitution of cultural consciousness.

Oblivion is a function of memory, defined as an element of a social system that differs from other modes of remembrances Referring to Heinz von Förster, Luhmann describes the operations of social memory as a "bifurcation". According to the schedule of bifurcation, memory can process information in two ways. The first delineates a close relation between experience and memory as new information is inserted into the stream of empirical facts and perceptions. The second way is more systematic; memory can adapt new information to a schedule that helps process it. In early modern times, this schedule is given by tradition as a tool for shaping information. It allows collection and structuring of information by eliminating those elements that do not fit into the patterns, stated before. The most prominent pattern, that selects information with the order of tradition, is authority; time, scholarliness, wisdom and religion are all elements grounding this pattern. Tradition is a process of differentia-

tion within established orders that saves information appropriate to authorized, pattern-based forms of knowledge.

If memory conducts knowledge through selection, it must be described as a cultural method of tradition that entails continuity. Luhmann draws a distinction between memory and archive; one makes knowledge available, the other saves it. With respect to this distinction, culture is a form of social memory, giving access to the magazines of general knowledge by selecting its elements. The major aspect of this operation is that culture also differentiates between a given and a possible reality. Cultural observation makes one aware of the contingency which paradoxically steers social order. As far as it demonstrates the varieties of meaning culture deliberately reflects the open structure of any kind of sense. Culture as Luhmann remarks allows insight into the fact that society could also work under different programmes than given by the effective constellation.

According to this hypothesis, tradition fulfills a distinguished function that is undoubtedly essential to the epistemic ground of knowledge. Tradition retains its coherence even under the vibrations of history. For this reason it is an instrument for humanities and their epistemic methods. It is - to echo the American poet Robert Frost - what can't get lost in transformation. Humanities need tradition; they need to know where our history of sciences originates from. The same applies in reverse: Our modern society is depending on a knowledge which gives us a sense for our past. This leads me to my third point of view.

### 3. Orientation by understanding Meaning

Without humanities and the sense for history, scientific activities would be self-referential, circulating in themselves. German philosopher Odo Marquard has defined humanities with regard to their ability of constructing categories as 'origin' and 'historical development'. As Marquard emphasizes, human progression is senseless without knowledge of our origins. No one can plan for the future who does not know where we are coming from. Our heritage is not only a force which shapes our present identity. It is also the precondition of our consciousness as a source of scientific reflection.

There is a unique metaphor which can demonstrate what this definition really means - the famous metaphor of reading in the book of nature. It has a long history, originating from European antiquity, paving its way through the Middle Ages, culminating in European early modernity and refined or even redefined by enlightened philosophy. The metaphor reflects the programme of reading as an act of understanding. It de-

mands to shape this act as an endeavor to exceed the limits of pure hermeneutics. To read the book of nature is not only reading in a common sense of meaning. It includes an approach to comprehension in general. In the Middle Ages, understanding the book of nature was a privilege of the creator - as far as European philosophy was concerned. In the period of Enlightenment, reading in this book required knowledge of its language and offered the perspective of understanding which was available for any scholarly reader. Since the European enlightenment, usage of this metaphor indicates intellectual self-confidence. Thinking and conceptualizing the world as a book presupposes two premises: the conviction that reading can open a universe; and the firm belief that the universe provides success by reading - not by divine conduct, but through intellectual efforts.

The metaphor of the readability of nature describes the program of humanistic studies in a modern world. It reflects options both for hermeneutic activities and historical cognition. Readability of nature means: nature is or can be an object of understanding. But what does this really mean? What does 'understanding' imply with respect to the concept of humanities? First of all: modern humanities consider the book of nature as a book of science. All methods, theories and models of its history are available in this book. Understanding its messages opens our mind toward the multiplicity of versions, which are represented in our world of knowledge. By reading the book of nature aligned with the history of science, humanistic studies demonstrate the plurality of scholarly solutions, the multitude of models and patterns. Second: reading the book of science makes us skeptical toward dogmatism; it invites us to be suspicious when it comes to scientific evidence. This is a major aspect of humanistic studies nowadays. Their historical knowledge makes us self-confident with respect to our intellectual activities. However, it also reinforces our scepticism, our critical reservation towards common solutions and usual methods. Humanities are necessary to safeguard our intellectual independence according to the claims of truth.

Part of this program should be that Humanities teach reading in a broader sense. Reading facilities get lost in postmodern, multimedia societies and cultures. People consume texts within a permanent overflow of information. They have learned to select these information, not to drown in the stream of messages, news, texts of all kind. 250 years from now, even the highly educated read a limited number of texts by permanently repeating the act of reading. Amongst the canonical texts there were the bible, the works of Platon, Augustine, Dante, Descartes. Nowadays the situation is quite different: we read much more texts, but we skim through them. Humanities have to full-

fill an important task by obtaining the aptitude of patient reading. Depth not breadth has to be the the goal: we have to learn to repeat sentences, to find out the deeper sense of a word or a sentence. This is a qualification which will get lost unless humanities take care for it.

#### 4. Bridging Cultures

There are many topics in recent humanities studies which offer strong insight into the relativity of meaning and cultural identity. The entanglement of language and action, the structures of our brain with respect to the processes of human understanding, the origins of our knowledge, the history of cultures - all these fields of research demonstrate that we are ruled by a multitude of social, anthropological, and psychological factors which construct the human being as a patchwork of elements. There is another aspect, juxtaposed with the program of humanistic studies: humanities contribute to a better understanding of cultural differences. They confirm us in respecting foreign traditions, the otherness of nations and people(s). Humanities lay ground to a deeper awareness of ethnological and historical reasons for the heterogeneity of social communities. A core field for this program is the domain of area studies.

Its declared objective is to work towards a shift in the research currently conducted on cultural studies and to achieve this shift by overcoming the theoretical and methodological frameworks deriving from the nation-state perspective. One major aim must thus be to open up the debate by systematically promoting the international dialogue. Another objective will be to create linkages between different knowledge communities. These knowledge communities are not to be understood only geographically. Rather, the objective must be to create linkages between discipline-based and area-oriented knowledge communities, between different research traditions, and between academic research and policy-oriented work. The benefit is evident: area studies strengthen the ties between different communities and offer a broader insight into cultural diversity. Since humanistic studies are interlinked with area studies, they both inspire and influence our knowledge about the enormous richness of cultural forms and patterns.

Ladies and Gentlemen, human endeavours aim to establish forms of civilization which enable us to be safe, to satisfy our needs and to give our lives some meaning. We all know this, but there are important differences, distinguishing people and nations from each other. An eminent task of humanities is to promote our understanding of these differences and to enable us to pay credit to those who are different from ourselves.

What can we learn from these humanistic lessons when it comes to the strategic options of higher education, the governance of universities and the definition of their future goals? First: humanistic studies emphasize that there is no alternative to internationalization. International networks enrich the university's research and teaching through external influence and complementary profiles. International networks facilitate the acquisition of outstanding junior scholars who are essential to secure top-level research in light of demographic trends worldwide. International networks create a globally aware academic community and enable universities to commit themselves to scholarly responsibility, social equality and intellectual freedom. Our overarching strategy aims to ensure self-governance and independence as prerequisites of top-level research. We need more international students to learn from each other. We need outstanding junior researchers to profit from their creativity and serendipity. We need researchers in the best period of their lives. We foster cooperation with extramural partners to develop networks both on a local and an international level. Humanities will both contribute to and participate in this process, since they safeguard the way how knowledge will be conveyed by the society.

Thank you for your attention!

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<sup>i</sup> Hans Blumenberg: *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Erneuerte Ausgabe, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1988, p.20ff. This position is delineated by Elisabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*. Hans Blumenberg and the Treshold to Modernity, Washington 2002, p.61ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Blumenberg (cf. note 38), pp.88f.