

Changing the Humanities/The Humanities Changing

Abstracts

Simon Goldhill (Classics, Cambridge)

Disciplinary History: Innovation and Conservatism

Classics is a discipline with a history that goes back before the Victorian establishment of disciplinary boundaries, and, as a discipline, has a dominant role in the formation of Western intellectual and cultural tradition. It is thus the best test-case for the dynamics between innovation, continuity and conservatism. It would be easy to show both how classics is stereotyped as conservative: the subject of the British Imperial masters, exclusionary, class-based, and focused on dead white males. It would be equally easy to show how it is the subject of revolution: ‘the French Revolution was enacted in Roman dress’, as Marx observed. When Shelley said ‘We are all Greek’, it was a banner to march under. How, then, to understand the dynamics within such a tradition? And, above all, how to understand the very construction of a notion of tradition?

Alice Jenkins (English, Glasgow)

Cambridge University is ‘the Guardian of the conditions of a Liberal Education’, the great Victorian don William Whewell announced. Like all institutions offering a liberal education, Cambridge’s intention was to inculcate moral and intellectual qualities rather than to teach a useful corpus of knowledge. But the University’s model of ‘liberal education’ during this period was very much at odds with the one that pertained elsewhere in the English educational world, because it prioritised mathematics over classics. The Arts Honours curriculum on offer in Cambridge in the early Victorian period yoked together these two very different disciplines in a controversial system of study which was both attacked and defended on grounds that clearly expressed contemporary politics of knowledge. As the advent of mass access to learning challenged the traditional cultural prestige and the contents of ‘liberal education’, arguments about Cambridge’s unusual disciplinary prioritisation spilled out from University turf wars into national debate. In this paper I shall trace the workings of some of the key ideas which affected the relationship of mathematical to classical and scientific study in mid-nineteenth-century Cambridge, and argue that the controversies that shaped change in the role of mathematics in a Cambridge liberal education made a powerful contribution to national views about the purpose of culture in a modern state.

John Forrester (History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge)

The idea of a moral science, State Funding and Teutonophobia: the creation of the humanities in early twentieth-century Cambridge

Created as the twin of the Natural Sciences Tripos in mid-Victorian Cambridge, the long goodbye of the Moral Sciences Tripos was the seed-bed of the humanities – History, the Literatures, Psychology, Economics, Philosophy and Anthropology. However, it was the

advent of State funding and the opportunity to come out from under ‘the alien yoke of Teutonic Philology’ (Willey) that exacerbated disciplinary Balkanization in the Fens in the early twentieth century. Is there a moral to be drawn from this story – or is it just a fable?

Homi K. Bhabha (English, Harvard)

The Humanities and the Anxiety of Violence

Reflecting on the participation of the educated, middle classes in the genocide in Rwanda, Jean-Baptiste Munyankore, a school teacher, said: ‘These learned people were calm, and they rolled up their sleeves to get firm grip on the machete. So for people like me who have taught the Humanities their life long, criminals such as these are a terrible mystery.’ What role have the Humanities played in helping us to explore and explain conditions of violence? What forms of ‘righteous indignation’ drive intellectuals to make a truce with violence? Can there be an ethics of violence with a humanist face? I will be considering the thinkers who have addressed these issues (Sorel, Fanon, Sartre, Arendt, Levinas, Agamben) in the context of the Humanities as a pedagogical practice.

Raymond Geuss (Philosophy, Cambridge)

Philosophy, Origins, and the Humanities

In the first part of the 20th century some theorists attempted to give a rationale for the Humanities as they were then constituted by referring to some theory of universal human needs. Theories of this kind are potentially very misleading. Whatever the truth about human needs, general theories about such needs do not usually operate at the right level and are not informative about the actual structuring of disciplines, which is better studied historically. This topic is discussed with reference to some examples from the history of philosophy.

Mary Beard (Classics, Cambridge)

Blood for the ghosts?

This paper explores how we tell the history of the humanities -- or, more precisely, how scholars in the humanities choose to construct the genealogy of their own disciplines. It aims to expose the self-serving myths of heroic and radical innovation which underpin our disciplinary histories, and to reflect on why we invest in those myth so unreflectively. This will raise the perilous question of academic reputation and status (both contemporary and posthumous), and prompt a brief look at innovation and reaction in modern scholarship and pedagogy. In short, what counts as ‘success’ in the humanities? And how do we know?

Quentin Skinner (History, Queen Mary, University of London)

From Ideas to Ideologies: Reflections on the 'Cambridge School' of Intellectual History

I will begin by focusing on the traditional tendency of intellectual historians to focus on a canon of purportedly classic texts. These were the texts, we used to be told, in which the key conceptual issues that still need to be considered were most illuminatingly discussed. The canonical texts were therefore treated as if they were addressing our questions, and were valued for their capacity to answer them. This approach has recently been challenged by the view that, if we wish to understand the individual texts that go to make up the canon, we need to situate them within the different societies in and for which they were originally written. This shift towards treating the history of ideas essentially as a history of ideologies has been criticised, however, for robbing the history of its philosophical point, reducing a subject of substantive philosophical value to mere antiquarianism. My talk will examine a number of ways in which this challenge has been met, and will end by considering various ways in which it may be possible to sustain and improve the dialogue between intellectual history and the current concerns of intellectual life.

Marilyn Strathern (University of Cambridge)

Innovation or replication? Crossing and criss-crossing in social science

What does it mean to find echoes of an innovatory moment in the past, or a discipline's cutting edge in another's worn down tool, or people in different fields quite unknown to one another following a similar intellectual trajectory over the same three or four years? A short case study of what looks uncannily like 'independent invention' is prefaced by reflections on replicatory practice in the social sciences. Some US sociological theorising on the workings of fractal distinctions within disciplines, specifically across many foundational arguments in social science, finds a counterpart in UK anthropological theorising on scale and replication in social phenomena at large. The conjunction is amusing; it could well be instructive. In any event, there is a challenge here to comparisons across disciplines.

Don Randel (President, Andrew W Mellon Foundation)

Selling the Humanities

When we lament the state of the humanities in our time, we sometimes give in to the, as it were, enemy by attempting to sell our activity in their terms: contributions to the gross domestic product or the national defense and the like. Such contributions no doubt exist. But our deeper concern is not captured by such instrumental arguments. In this we have something important in common with the most thoughtful scientists, and we should find better ways of engaging them and others across a broad front in pursuing our common hopes.

Roger Parker (Music, King's College London)
Should We Forget About (Musical) Form?

This paper was sparked off by the recent symposium on Form in the UC Press interdisciplinary journal *Representations* (104, Fall 2008). As the various contributions there make clear, the lure of abstract formal models has been felt in many humanistic disciplines, and in a bewildering number of ways. Musicology, often thought a somewhat belated discipline, can probably lay claim to the most long-lived and thoroughgoing formal fascination. Should we, can we, now attempt an act of forgetting?

Michael Wood (English, Princeton)
Film and the Art of Forgetting

I will begin with Benjamin's notion that 'It is in film that the work of art is more susceptible to becoming worn out', and ask about the ways of reading we have developed for dealing with this wear and tear (and of course the more familiar strategies we have developed for refusing to acknowledge that there is any such wear and tear). I will also explore what reading film can tell us about reading in other areas of the humanities, from literature and history to photography and painting. Can Barthes's brilliant insights about a 'third meaning' and a 'punctum' be sustained and made a little less schematic, a little less dependent on the official, academic interpretations they are in flight from? My suggestion will be that a certain practice of forgetting might allow us to remember differently.

Haun Saussy (Comparative Literature, Yale)
Explaining vs. Understanding: A Distinction Under Changing Conditions

When Wilhelm Dilthey in 1883 proposed that the *Geisteswissenschaften*-- the human sciences or the disciplines of the mind, as opposed to the natural sciences-- were based on the understanding of meanings, rather than on explanation by reference to prior causes, he was, like all of us, working within a context of assumptions. Behind Dilthey's argument of the non-reducibility of human sciences to natural sciences stood a number of conceptual articulations, some of which have inevitably shifted in the intervening hundred and forty-five years. The paper will first propose a historical reconstruction of certain elements of the mental landscape that made Dilthey's distinction plausible, and then assess how some of those elements (free will, the self-knowledge of historical actors, the relation of language and thought, the structures of media and communication) look today; the result will be a reframing of a distinction that has served reasonably well as a defence of humanistic endeavour, but must adapt to changing conditions. Some of these conditions are intellectual, some technological, some social.

Sarah Kay (French & Italian, Princeton)
Outside National Frames (The Troubadours and the Mediterranean)

What is the relation between shifts in scale between disciplines and the scale of research projects, and how do these shifts relate to changes in departmental structure? Is there a link between contemporary interest in cosmopolitanism and post-colonialism, and the

shrinking or combining of departments based on national languages? In common with many researchers in medieval studies, I find myself venturing outside my field of French into Italian and even Spanish literature, and exploring the Mediterranean dimension of the Middle Ages; my interest in the troubadours is fuelled by the fact that their language - Occitan -- was an international language of literature but never a national language. I trace how their poetry was disseminated in Catalonia, Sardinia, Sicily, and the Veneto, via the medium of quotation. Transmitted in para-academic modes that are edgily close to Latin, yet at the same time resolutely vernacular and secular, these fragments of troubadour poetry raise interesting questions about knowledge and the status of language.

James Chandler (English, Chicago)

Are Humanities Disciplines Progressive?

The two cultures debate raises the question of what assumptions scientists and humanists make when they reflect upon what Francis Bacon called 'the advancement of learning'. In the twentieth century, the question was provocatively broached by I. A. Richards in *Poetry and Science* (1926) and was revisited by scholars such as Northrop Frye, R. S. Crane, and Frederick Pottle. All were interested in what sort of advancement it is given to the humanities to achieve, by comparison with a scientific model of progress. This is the question I would like to pose for our moment. Richards makes an interesting case study in imagining the humanities as progressive for two reasons: first, because he links the disciplinary progress of English with a broader regression of society into the degradations of mass culture; and second, because he turns explicitly to scientific paradigms for a psychological template for his poetry-centred humanities programme. What is the fate of such an ambition today? There are scholars who not only reject any association of the humanities with the natural sciences, but go on to reject the entire effort to carry on the work of the humanities in our universities under the rubric of 'research'. The debate is currently staged over the question of 'digital humanities': can new information technologies advance humanities learning in ways not otherwise provided for?

Stefan Collini (English, Cambridge)

Complex words: history in English literary criticism

A key role in the establishment of 'English' as an academic discipline in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century is normally assigned to those forms of 'practical criticism' or 'close reading' allegedly practised by critics such as Eliot, Richards, Empson, and Leavis in Britain and by 'New Critics' such as Ransom, Tate, Brooks, and Warren in the USA. Subsequent attacks on these styles of criticism have invariably deplored their 'ahistorical' character, their supposedly exclusive focus on 'the words on the page', a critical approach characterised (and often denigrated) as 'formalist'. This paper argues that this charge was always misconceived. The work of these critics was, as all literary criticism inevitably must be, pervasively historical, sometimes in ways that have remained largely unnoticed. This argument is developed via an examination of the work of the figure usually regarded as the most recalcitrantly unhistorical of English critics, William Empson, particularly his bafflingly technical and rebarbative *The Structure of Complex Words*. The paper will go on to suggest that *Complex Words*, contrary to its

textbook reputation, can provide a fruitful model for the kind of semantic archaeology which needs to inform current work on the borders of literary criticism and intellectual history.

Lord Wilson of Dinton (Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge)

Government: a proper subject of study?

Is modern government a proper subject of study? If so, why is it not recognised at Cambridge? If not, why do other universities (such as Oxford, Queen Mary College, or Harvard's Kennedy School of Government) devote so much resource to it? What is the nature of the subject?

Peter Hennessy (History, Queen Mary, University of London)

Horizon Scanning: Whitehall's Holy Grail

From the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the National Security Council of its day in Edwardian Britain, to the establishment of today's FUSION group, Whitehall, embracing the forward-lookers in twenty Government Departments and Agencies, horizon-scanning has been a cherished but never acquired Holy Grail for Ministers, senior officials, the Military, and the Secret World. This paper is a first attempt at the unwritten history of this singular and fragile activity.

Guy Ortolano (History, Virginia)

From The Two Cultures to Breaking Ranks: C. P. Snow and the Cultural Politics of Post-war Liberalism

This paper situates C. P. Snow's argument in *The Two Cultures* within his more general political position, and then follows the fortunes of that position before, during, and after 'The Sixties'. It focuses in particular upon three moments in Snow's professional life: his work as a founding fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge c.1960, his tenure as a junior minister in the Ministry of Technology c.1965, and his non-fiction reviewing for the *Financial Times* during the 1970s. This personal trajectory, in turn, sheds light upon two broader transformations during the two decades following *The Two Cultures*: the shifting priorities of liberals and liberalism, and a shuffling of the political associations of the sciences and the humanities.

David Edgerton (History of Science, Imperial College, University of London)

Snow, Leavis and the History of British Science: from policy to history, and history to policy

As an academic discipline the history of science has often invoked its capacity to 'bridge' the 'two cultures' defined by C.P. Snow. More generally the humanities have been surprisingly receptive to Snow's analysis of Britain. What then are the implications of taking Leavis's critique of Snow seriously? What might the implications be for the humanities, and for policy?

