

Pluralities, Memories, Translations: Remarks on European Cultures of Knowledge in the Humanities

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The task of our session is to discuss diversity and common grounds. We want to reflect on the benefits but also on the risks and costs of plurality in the Social Science and Humanities (SSH). In my contribution, I want to focus on what ‘diversity’ or ‘plurality’ mean in this context: Firstly, what kind of diversity is relevant in the discussion of the SSH, and secondly, how can the SSH themselves contribute to understand this diversity?

Putting the question this way implies that we understand diversity less as an external condition to the scientific nature of SSH, but ascribe an epistemic relevance to it, which means, that the specific knowledge of SSH is tied to diversity more substantially than one might assume, and that SSH have specific resources to conceive and communicate diversity. I stress “communication”. For we all tend to lament that practice in the SSH is usually measured by the yardstick of natural sciences, and viewed as a deviation only from their standards. However, neither is this lament very productive nor does it suffice to claim that SSH are different, be it more critical or more sophisticated – this argument all too easily falls back to a plea for a certain niche, a reservation, a room of protection where some precious belongings of culture or of politics have to be guarded against the evil surroundings of technology and neoliberalism. Against this essentially defensive thread of argument, it is necessary to communicate the strength, usefulness and actual necessity of SSH more clearly, a strength that is essentially founded in their diversity.

Let me take a historical detour which hopefully allows for a fresh look on the present time. The detour leads to a field in which I work: The situation in the Humanities at the beginning of the 20th century, especially in Germany. As you may know, the epistemic situation around 1900 was complex: Among other factors, the progress of the natural sciences forced other disciplines to reflect and reposition themselves. In Germany, the conception of the humanities as ‘Geisteswissenschaften’ became an important, and indeed internationally influential model. At the same time, the emergence or redefinition of social sciences transformed the field of knowledge as well. This resulted in a highly diverse and dynamic situation that might not be completely different from our own today. In retrospect it is of course much easier to see the limitations and biases of another position, e.g. that the idea of ‘Geisteswissenschaften’ implied an almost ontological difference between nature and the human spirit, which was all

too easy to criticize, or that it often went along with a specific cultural and even political conservatism which viewed human culture as fundamentally challenged by modernity. We should therefore be well aware if and how much we might have inherited from the former essentialism or the latter conservative and elitist stance, and if we really want that.

But we can also take another perspective and stress the productive elements in such a constellation. It was especially a strong interconnectedness of different disciplines and forms of knowledge. For example, what later became the social sciences, especially sociology, had a complicated genealogy which blends Marxist political economy, history (with a prominent place for the history of religion), and cultural criticism – i.e. exactly those discourses that were often eliminated or excluded during the subsequent formation of the discipline. Similarly, other fields of the humanities became productive by the transfer of methods and concepts, for example when the introduction of formalist methods transformed literary theory and art history. What happened was not merely an ongoing differentiation of different disciplines, as the textbook histories tell us in retrospect. Rather, there was a strong interchange going on, and an epistemic unrest that became highly productive.

This is probably most evident in authors which are difficult to classify in disciplinary terms, such as Ernst Cassirer, who moved from a philosophical background towards the history of culture, or Aby Warburg, who opened up art history for anthropology and other disciplines, or Georg Simmel, who took an even more radical trajectory between philosophy, sociology, cultural criticism and art theory. Other names, like Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, could be added. These figures have become what Foucault calls founders of discursivity not by their personal genius alone but by their specific position within their epistemic field, which was characterized by diversity and unrest, i.e. by a complex set of different approaches and disciplines, and by and a fundamental uneasiness with the current division of the field e.g. by the distinction between nature and spirit or by that between literary history and history proper.

Here, diversity proved fruitful in bringing forth new forms of knowledge – amongst them a kind of knowledge for which diversity has become an essential epistemic quality. This new form of knowledge differs significantly from disciplinary knowledge or from any conception of a unified science. In Germany, the term ‘Kulturwissenschaften’ serves as a sort of generic category for these new forms of knowledge, but it is indicative that Kulturwissenschaften has never become a proper discipline nor been regarded as a super-paradigm, as an integrated form of study of everything that is cultural. Rather it aims to transport a knowledge that is no longer disciplinary but not yet systematic. While transgressing disciplinary boundaries, it does

not omit them; instead it is constituted by the diverse transfers of specific concepts of one discipline and discourse into another. An example for such a transfer would be when ideas of 'style', originally developed in art history, were used in literary criticism. Or else when in political theory an idea of 'life,' which emerged both in history, (namely biography) and biology, was transferred to the theory of culture. This also includes the transfer between specific national traditions, as when Henri Bergson's reflections on life were taken up by Simmel. These highly hybrid discourses conceive their object as hybrid too, 'culture' being comprehended not as a new super object but as a complex overlapping of different styles, languages, and memories, without which we can understand neither the societal order nor the production of knowledge.

This specific example, despite its limitations, reveals something about the productivity of the SSH until this day. Today, too, the most urgent questions lie more often than not beyond the scope of a single discipline. Obviously, the need to overcome disciplinary boundaries bears several risks, such as a ubiquitous rhetoric of 'transgression', or the fad of ever new 'turns', as well as an excess of self reflection and self critique which finally loses its object out of sight. Nonetheless, it bears the potential of creative new thinking which will cut across disciplinary boundaries as well as across national traditions.

However, I think the lessons we could learn from that situation are even more specific. If the example helps us to understand our own situation, it in fact indicates a specific potential of the SSH, namely the historical one. Using an historical example is to claim that it is useful and perhaps necessary to take a historical detour to understand the present. As with so many other things, we can never truly understand the actual situation of SSH without taking into account their genealogy, which is always multilayered or diverse. Any notion that would ignore this dimension and focus merely on the current situation would render both contemporary issues and future challenges of SSH not only less complex and lacking in depth but would indeed produce a distorted and highly problematic picture of the situation.

I consider it a distinct strength of SSH and the humanities in particular to take into account the historical dimension. It goes without saying that this reaches far beyond its own history but concerns the world around us, too. The current crisis of Europe is not only an economic one and not even merely a crisis of political representation but it involves culture, and culture involves history, namely the diverse histories that are often obscured by 'the' (one and only) European history. To understand our current situation and the actual challenges we are facing, a historic perspective is not only an additional value, something nice to have, but it is

essential. This however, does not imply that it is an easy one to obtain. As we all know, historical conceptions tend to become problematic: be it that they end up in reductive great narratives, be it that they become text book histories, or the highly fragmented knowledge of specialists. Even historical knowledge for its own sake, necessary as it may be, might be considered as not the most important task of the humanities. This really important task consists in *connecting* the memory of the past with the present, in developing *critical* genealogies, in elucidating the actual situation and its critical moments by referencing its specific history. For these critical moments – the moments of disorientation, but also of potential action, the true challenges of today – cannot be grasped if one is solely focused on the future or exclusively thinks along the lines of the already established. What they necessitate is an active and creative memory. Therefore, questions of cultural conflicts, of political representations in today's media age, or cultural memory in a pluricultural world should be seen as societal challenges precisely because they cut across established boundaries of disciplines. In these fields, the SSH should develop approaches which combine historically oriented research with different strands of recent theory.

Combining different approaches, drawing comparisons, even using an historical example as I did always implies certain procedures that make things comparable, namely procedures of *translation*. Translation, I would claim, is the second potential specific to the SSH and to humanities in particular. As in language, translation is much more than the instrumental function of carrying the message from a to b; it is, to the contrary, a fundamentally productive, creative process. It happens continually in our practice, and it is quite different from the also widespread, meta-discursive reflection mentioned above: In translating, we are not speaking about something, we essentially work on the ground, trying to understand what someone else is doing or saying; it is object oriented and relational at the same time. Again, the question of translation here transcends the specific problem of the humanities towards more general and more political questions. If we accept the premise that our societies are based on knowledge, it is essential to translate that knowledge but also to understand what translation is and how it works.

As I tried to show, the diversity of different approaches of SSH is essentially not an additive diversity nor a systematic coherence, but rather a diversity of translation in which different discourses interact in a productive way. This, as I think, still has a high potential: Especially if cross-disciplinary approaches should surpass mere self-reflective discourses towards object-oriented research, we should rather foster these efforts of translation than to look for a new

meta-language, a new integrated approach, which all too often prove to be short lived fashions. If we take the concreteness of translation serious, this might even have institutional consequences: It would imply that bottom up programs are not only necessary to counteract the negative effect of bureaucracy, but also for epistemic reasons implied in SSHs culture of knowledge, which continues to focus on the specific even though it reaches beyond specific disciplines and discourses. Legitimate as the quest for new standards and networks might be, we should also sustain alternative approaches, e.g. of creating cooperation between different peripheries.

Naturally. the cooperation needed today also includes cooperating with the natural sciences, since the true societal challenges tend to blur the distinction between natural sciences and humanities. And if such a cooperation is meant to be truly dialogic, perspectives from the SSH should not be considered as a kind of ‘superadded value’ to research that is basically technology-driven. Instead, it should be considered an essential element. Thus the part of SSH should not limited to the effects or the implementation of new technologies but they should constitute an integrative part of the research design itself, e.g. taking the cultural implications of key concepts such as “heredity” or “life and death” into account. This form of cooperation – a cooperation on an equal footing – is truly intricate and laborious. It involves a lot of translation. I would consider it useful to create special programs to foster this specific form of cooperation.

Diversity and common grounds – I have argued that SSH is not only a varied bunch of different disciplines and discourses, but is determined by an inherent diversity which results diachronically from the complex memory of the disciplines in question, and synchronically from the numerous translations which organize their interchange. This implies, as I said, the transgression of disciplines, but not necessarily their abolition, and not even the development of a common idiom, but rather a development of new modes of organizing the archive of the discipline and of new modes of communication. The new program of Horizon 2020 can foster this process, and it could do so especially if it (1) acknowledges the fundamental contribution of SSH to societal challenges; (2) acknowledges its specificity, e.g. by paying special attention to epistemic modes such as translation and memory; and (3) seeks to foster object-oriented cross disciplinary work between equal partners, not just within SSH but also between SSH and the Natural Sciences.