

CENTRE FOR THE HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITEIT UTRECHT

THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

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Do the Humanities have a Future?

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Esteemed audience,

Nearly 225 years ago today, the young Friedrich Schiller, the new Professor of History at the university of Jena, held his inaugural lecture. The lecture hall was packed, and on the stairs and in the street, several hundreds of students were fighting to get in. They caused a commotion and it was decided to move the lecture to the largest auditorium of the city, after which Schiller, preceded by a huge procession of audience members, walked to the new hall. To my knowledge, the University of Utrecht has never known such an enthusiastic student audience for an inaugural lecture.

You are all familiar with Schiller as the German poet and playwright, who was also a good friend of Goethe's and who suffered the classic fate of the nineteenth-century poet, death from galloping consumption. Friedrich Schiller was not just anybody. Still, he was not much to look at, his hair was always dishevelled and he usually was sloppily dressed which provoked raised eyebrows in his more serious colleagues. Schiller's unconventional appearance obviously does not explain why the students climbed the street lamps in order to catch a glimpse of his passing by. When Schiller holds his lecture on 26 May 1789, entitled "Why should we study world history today?" he is not yet 30 years old, but he already is a true German superstar. The German youth are wild about his plays and cannot get enough of his poetry.

When, in May 1789, Schiller starts his professorship, 6 weeks before the outbreak of the French Revolution, only a few students have been able to see him in the flesh but they know the work of the wandering, awkward but politically and literarily gifted poet and writer who promises to show them the way to the realm of freedom.

Why do I bother you with this? The reason is simple. Schiller's lecture did not only command interest in his own time, it still has a lot to teach us today. Schiller treats a large issue that still occupies many of us: what is the purpose of the university. This is the very question I want to discuss with you at the end of the first conference day.

In 1789, Schiller divided his jubilant audience in two parts. On the one hand, the university is populated by what he called *Brotgelehrte*, careerists: both students and professors who never doubt what they have to learn or to teach, who are not interested in the question of how their discipline is connected to that of others and who get irritated when such questions are raised. These are people who detest the very idea of extra work. The only thing that matters to them is meeting the requirements with as little effort as possible. And once they have tenure, they are usually dead set against innovation, if only because of the work it entails. In other words, they are unwilling to serve scholarship, they only want to profit by it, in money or in appreciation. They are, as Schiller described them, unquestioning people with a slavish morality, who just happen to have found their way into the realm of freedom.

The opposite of the *Brotgelehrte* is the *philosophische Kopf*, the generous and creative soul, constantly in search of new knowledge. This kind of scholar firstly wishes to understand the world and how the different disciplines studying the world are interconnected, for the relationships between things are the ultimate aim of science. This type of student or professor understands that success in scholarship is rare because we constantly have to find our way out of dead-end roads. The *philosophische Kopf* is magnanimous and can handle criticism because he knows that we are ultimately searching for the truth together. He experiences the company of superior minds as a challenge while it makes the *Brotgelehrte* extremely uncomfortable. Obviously, the *philosophische Kopf* also needs his daily bread, but career and financial gain are not what his position at the university is about. What drives these free spirits is the rare but all-encompassing joy when a scientific problem for one moment seems to have been solved.

Today, Schiller's university is more recognisable than ever and all of you, as you are sitting here, can effortlessly find examples of his academic ideal types. But are they not a symptom of a much larger problem? Ever more often, the public concludes that science is not able to supply clear and unambiguous answers to large social problems. Whether this concerns climate change, the Mexican Flu or the dramatically rising costs of healthcare. Science appears to be unable to supply definitive solutions, but only gives us alternatives. This obstinate practice contrasts strongly with the image of science many prominent scientists, documentary makers and science journalists distribute even today. Take for instance the Antonie van Leeuwenhoek clinic that only this summer, within the framework of a begging campaign, promised (for the umpteenth time, by the way) that cancer would become a chronic disease, if only we kept donating. The science supplements of the newspapers therefore concentrate on the great inventions, but leave the much larger number of flagrant failures systematically underexposed.

More things are amiss. Science appears to be an easy ploy for rapid economic gain and what is worse, it has become completely dependent upon a speculative economy, characterised by rapidly successive bubbles and crashes. Researchers have to involve industrial partners in their work. We call this acquisition of external funding. To become successful at it, we have to play our part in the games of the competitive economy. The top sector policy of the Dutch government is the perverse culmination of this system. Money intended for pure scientific research, managed by NWO, is taken away to be spent in collaboration with businesses for directly applicable knowledge. New research can still be funded, as long as scientists do what the industry demands. Conformism, rivalry, opportunism and lack of flexibility are the characteristics of this system and we effortlessly recognise the mindset of Schiller's *Brotgelehrte*.

Are the frequent instances of academic fraud these days merely

accidental? Or are they a symptom of the systematic failure of our universities? Is our goal still science and the exploration of the limits of our knowledge or is our overproduction of research proposals nothing more than a gigantic, but radically faultily adjusted job machine? Why? Because only half of the several thousands of Utrecht post-graduate students (the majority of whom is not working in science but is executing test research on behalf of businesses), can continue as postdoc at best. But after that, we consign them to the dung heap of history because the number of tenure jobs at the university is falling. Why are we being dictated to by university rankings and impact factors of articles? In short, why does the university aim for quantity and not for quality?

Are we not by now entitled to a truly durable university? In its realisation, Schiller's ideal type, the *philosophische Kopf*, can be of help. In the new durable university, good research is not automatically synonymous with many publications. We are no longer trying to get the better of our colleagues with the number of post-graduate students we have successfully supervised. In that university, research is not triggered by economic interests of industrial powers but by social questions to be solved, in service to the community. Most of all, the researchers working there are trained in thinking beyond particular concerns, they are striving to get a grip on the larger picture. Is the fracking expert investigating shale gas drilling but turning his back on its nasty consequences not a *Brotgelehrte* and is the researcher who takes these consequences into account naturally not the *philosophische Kopf*?

We must strive for a university that does not advertise itself as a successful incubator of one-dimensional researchers but as a *civitas academica* where *philosophische Köpfe* are schooled who can function as the core of a highly qualified, mentally flexible and socially useful professional workforce. That also means that education is reinstated in place of honour at the university because we want to educate all-round intellectuals. Moreover, we must be willing to admit that the growth of knowledge does not automatically engender progress but primarily fundamental uncertainty. We do not know what the future will look like. But it is our task to keep trying to shape the future, on the road to Schiller's higher planes of humanity.

Where should this durable university start; history of scientific practice and of philosophy of science are indispensable to its formation. Not only to explain where we have come from and where we are now, but especially to warn future generations of the pitfalls of scientific practice and to make them immune to the myth of the infallible knowledge and the incorruptible high priests accumulating this knowledge. Especially the history of science of the last few decades has made it clear that behind the spotless battlements of this ivory tower, the real world of science look remarkably more disorganised. Among themselves, scientists turn out to disagree strongly about problems and options and they belong to different "camps" or "schools". Scientific practice is eventually nothing more and nothing less than a noisy market place where

obscurity, flagrant mistakes, vulgar quarrels and fraud, but also accident and disappointment induce creativity, innovation and democratic counterpower.

It would be natural to expect the salvation of the future university from the humanities faculty. For one might expect that there, the *philosophische Köpfe* are produced by the dozens. But this is far from true. The humanities faculty has also been corrupted. It is an interesting hypothesis that in the nineteen seventies, corruption started, not only in the sciences and the social sciences, but also here, in the humanities. In any case, from that time on, the academic humanities elite started a remarkable process of societal abdication. In doing so, they actually gave substance to their doubts as regards the national and civic education mission of which they themselves were the product. This mission was the education of teachers, civil servants and intellectuals well-versed in what in the humanities has always been the core of university education: reading, thinking, writing and speaking: to use the classical terms of the trivium: grammar, logic and rhetoric. It may go too far to qualify this abandonment of society as a modern version of Julien Benda's *Trahison des Clercs*, but there are striking similarities. This societal abdication took two forms and together, they have struck at the very roots of the social usefulness of the humanities faculty. For a large part, we have ourselves to blame for the present-day crisis in the humanities. As from the nineteen seventies, more and more voices were raised to say that the teacher's profession should not be considered the graduates' natural destination. Were they not suitable to fulfil all kinds of positions? Those other professional opportunities had always been there, but from now on, it was considered in good taste to paint the teacher's profession as an option for failures and twerps. In the debates surrounding the introduction of the two-tier structure for university education around 1980, this development reached its conclusion and the teacher's profession definitively disappeared from the humanities perspective.

The other manifestation of the societal abdication of the humanities elite is the growing emphasis on research. This process did not only take place in the sciences and social sciences, but also in the humanities. Research was indeed also conducted in the traditional humanities faculty, but it had a closer connection to the individual scholar, and was usually intimately linked to education. Research production was modest. The enormous growth of the scholarly staff in the humanities faculties as a result of the increasing demand for education also automatically led to a **dramatic** growth of research capacity. Both internal university developments and the pressure from new external scientific organisations such as NWO and ZWO ensured that research became ever more encompassing and now completely dominates the life of professors and lecturers. If before they were primarily responsible for education, now the emphasis lies on the supervision of large groups of post-graduate students and postdocs and their prestige is synonymous with the magnitude of this latter task.

It is rather strange that questions as to the use of all this humanities

research and, more abstractly, as to the amount of research a civilised society actually needs, are hardly ever debated. I will not argue that the research conducted is of low value. On the contrary, I am convinced that the quality of humanities research has increased dramatically in the last decades but that there are in fact no takers for a large part of our research. Obviously, a part of it has a direct societal justification, but there is no natural limit. Why should we want to know – to begin at home – that around 1800, the balance between city and country in the Netherlands shifts to the country and that we can on that basis doubt the generally accepted route to modernity that conversely stresses urbanisation? Does this awareness not force us to a much greater frugality in applying research resources?

The net effect of the above-sketched developments – the discrediting of the teacher's profession and the championing of research – is that the humanities faculties which up to then had fulfilled a central function in society, have since fallen victim to a similar system failure of which the science and social science faculties fell victim, resulting in marginalisation. The number of scholarly publications has become so huge that the pretence that we are keeping up with developments in our field has become hollow by definition. Add to that, the large part of our research results that is only relevant to small groups of colleagues. To cleanse our guilty conscience in this respect, we have given the concept of valorisation a very unsavoury meaning. In our daily practice, what does valorisation actually mean? That we can tell ourselves our research is relevant because we have, after having shamelessly promoted ourselves, been able to shine for a full 2 minutes and 17 seconds with it on a late night talk show? And this while the societal effect of a thorough education in reading, writing, thinking and speaking for future teachers and a highly qualified professional population has a multiplier effect against which a futile appearance on these shows shrinks to insignificance.

Admittedly, the importance of academic education has been emphasised increasingly over the last decade, and we have even developed policy in order to stimulate this. Also the idea of a larger role for the university in the training of teachers has gained some support. But all of this does not amount to more than half-hearted efforts. As long as we keep applying the model of the research university, which even in the United States, where this originally German idea was most successfully implemented, has done so much harm, we continue to force professors and lecturers into an impossible split, the consequences of which are predictable. Whoever wishes to interpret my argument as a plea for the abolition of research has proven himself an unwilling listener. Research remains a crucial task of the university. But it is essential to consider the incredibly hard question of how much humanities research a society needs and more specifically, a plea for reflection on the balance between education and research.

I for one know that the future humanities faculty will be an education faculty or will not be at all. What does that education consist of? It is of little use to formulate peremptory demands for that in 3 minutes. But I am convinced that the triad grammar, logic and rhetoric must form the core of humanities education, although it is wise – also in view of the spectacular developments as regards e-humanities – to add subjects from the quadrivium to that, such as mathematics and even a few new ones such as visual and media skills. But that is not all. The university also supplies education specialised to certain disciplines. For one hundred and fifty years, this was done within the framework of civic education and national consciousness because society was convinced that the mental tool kit of every citizen should be equipped with that. Today, that tool kit should be updated and for my discipline, History, it is not hard to formulate themes to which all colleagues, regardless of their specialisation in time and theme, can contribute: I name a few: globalisation and nation-building, citizenship and democracy, enlightenment and modernity, the tension between nature and culture and the problem of religion and state-building. Any discipline can fill this mental tool kit in its own and yet socially useful way. The question is not whether a fully-fledged humanities faculty can do without Portuguese, Norse or whatever other discipline, but whether it offers sound mental tools, established in and directly ensuing from the acquisition of the academic capacities of the trivium.

If we would arrange the new academic study of humanities according to such a scheme, education would intensify, the teacher's profession would be reinstated as a viable profession for the humanities graduate, academic education and the university professor would again be attributed with the central position they deserve and finally, research would be limited and concentrated in a modest sector of researchers and Research Master Courses selected for their high quality. When all of this is accomplished, there is a fair chance that the humanities will again find their connection to society.

It is too easy to blame the university alone for the problems I have discussed and with that point I want to end. A society that thinks a university is a factory in which the production of ever growing numbers of graduates automatically justifies the ever falling expense price per unit, should not be surprised to have delivered to it, instead of first-rate *philosophische Köpfe*, second-rate *Brotgelehrte*.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are on the verge of great and necessary changes. We do not yet have a blueprint for a new, durable university, but we have sufficient material to start a fruitful discussion about the future. We have work to do.