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# RECENT TRENDS IN THE HUMANITIES[1]

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AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES

## I

WE may, if we like, think of all knowledge as assuming the form of a triangle, of which one apex is occupied by the natural and physical sciences, another by the social sciences and the third by the humanities. The natural and physical sciences deal with man's environment, the most remote as well as the most immediate; the social sciences with man in his associations with other men; while the humanities concern themselves with the manifestations of his spiritual existence.

The figure of the triangle is convenient in that it emphasizes the close union of all three fields of study, between which no definite boundaries can be drawn. The natural sciences are complemented by the humanities, and the latter find their extension in the social sciences, which must depend upon them, as well as upon the natural and physical sciences, for fundamental data. For the humanities man is inseparable from his physical environment and from his associations. Not even by ascending into the stratosphere can he escape from either.

The task of the humanities is to recover all that may be recovered of the spiritual experience of mankind, throughout the ages of human history and throughout the entire scene of human activity, and to interpret this experience for the enrichment of life as it must be lived in the present.

The data of the humanities are all the manifestations of the spiritual life of man, expressed in spoken or written language, or in artistic, musical or other action. Their methods are historical and descriptive; whether they are true sciences or whether they are something less and at the same time something more does not greatly matter. Their validity depends upon the selection, critical study and appraisal of their

[1] Address of the retiring vice-president and chairman of Section L—Historical and Philological Sciences, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Boston, December, 1933.

data, and their conclusions are significant in proportion to their bearing upon the needs of human existence, not the least of which is a reliable knowledge of past experience.

It has been customary to refer to the humanities as the historical and philological studies, and to designate their numerous disciplines by such terms as cultural anthropology, linguistics, archeology, history, classics, modern languages and literatures, Oriental studies and the history of art and music, etc. To these terms have usually been added those that designate the so-called auxiliary sciences—that is, the specialized skills, such as epigraphy, paleography, diplomatics, ceramics, numismatics, toreutics, etc., that make it possible to read and interpret the remains of civilization. The collective term, humanities, refers, therefore, to a vast and complex group of studies, many of which are highly specialized, but all of which are related by a common ultimate objective—to contribute to the recovery and interpretation of the spiritual experience of mankind.

## II

Thus far, we have endeavored to describe briefly and in general terms the character and scope of the humanities. In that description, however, the conception itself of the humanities that has been taken for granted really represents certain clearly marked trends of recent scholarship.

The first of these is the increasingly clear and general recognition of the ultimate objective of the humanities, as just stated—the recovery and interpretation of the spiritual experience of mankind. Remote as this objective may seem to be from the specialized tasks of many individual scholars, they are, nevertheless, more and more consciously aware of it, and their choice of subjects for investigation is ever more influenced by the desire to relate their work in some significant way to this ultimate purpose.

A second trend is the rapidly increasing range of research in the humanities. The civilizations of India, of the Mediterranean area, of Western Europe and of Europeanized America are seen to be only important fragments or phases of human civilization throughout the world, and scholars are now eagerly recognizing the necessity of studying all the other fragments or phases, wherever they may occur, and also whenever they may have occurred, for the chronological extension of interest is as important as the geographical.

A third trend may be described as an increasing awareness of the close relation of the humanities to the sciences, and of their indebtedness to them, not only for contributory information and active collaboration in many fields of investigation but also for certain fundamental conceptions and for the development of useful methods of research.

Finally, a fourth and most significant trend is the growing realization on the part of most scholars in the humanities that their respective disciplines or fields of study can not be shut off from each other as though in compartments. It is generally recognized that the barriers due to the exigencies of university departmentalization, or to the technical difficulties of the disciplines, are artificial and must be done away with if the humanities are to advance upon a common front and in accordance with anything like a general plan.

## III

From this attempt to indicate certain general trends we may now pass to the consideration of their influence upon the general problems related to the collection and presentation of data, the organization of agencies and implements of research, and the recruitment and distribution of scholarly personnel.

The data of the humanities, that is, the materials upon which research in those fields must be based, have been enormously increased. Materials long concealed have been brought to light; others, long known but neglected, are found to have a hitherto unsuspected significance, while still others are being daily brought into being by the very processes of human existence. Thus excavations in nearly all parts of the ancient world and in many regions of the new have turned up millions of objects in stone, pottery, metal, fabric, wood, basketry, etc., which bear evidence to the state of human culture in different places and at different times. Written documents of all sorts have been brought to light, including inscriptions on stone, on clay tablets or on bone, and writings on papyri and parchment, and these have made it possible to reconstruct not only the outline but also many details of the history of the civilizations whose remains are thus recovered. The successors, through the centuries, of such materials as those described include the codices of the Middle Ages, the earliest books produced from type and the subsequent flood of printed materials of every conceivable sort.

To written documents must be added the records of artistic activities, such as miniatures, paintings, frescoes, mosaics, sculpture and architectural monuments, and of musical activities, such as scores and instruments. And now, in these later times, we have photographic records of man in motion and phonographic recordings of his utterances in speech and song.

In the presence of this constantly increasing accumulation of data the scholar finds his task of selecting for study and interpretation what is pertinent to his inquiry one of almost insurmountable difficulty

without extensive preliminary labors of organization, classification, inventory and description.

Such labors result in the formation of museum and library collections and in the compilation of catalogues, bibliographies, dictionaries, corpora and other indispensable aids to the selection and use of materials. Such a tool, for example, as the great Assyro-Babylonian dictionary now under construction at the Oriental Institute is designed to assist in recovering many centuries of some of the earliest civilized experience of mankind, and is quite comparable to such a scientific instrument as the 200-inch telescope now in building, which is to enable us to penetrate a few million light-years further into outer space. With so much to be done, scholars have a livelier realization than ever before of the importance, when deciding upon the preparation of implements of research—whether bibliographies, dictionaries, corpora, concordances or other—of selecting those that are most urgently needed and from the use of which significant results may be expected.

Not only, however, must scholars provide themselves with the necessary implements—they must also train themselves in special techniques and skills and resort to special devices. The multiplication and refinements of such techniques and skills is characteristic of humanistic research of the present day. Archeology, for example, with the aid of geology and paleontology and geography, has developed a technique of excavation by means of surveys, soundings and trenches that is as different from the crude methods of the last century as modern cranial surgery is from the trepanning of the Stone Age. The deciphering of glyphs, of cuneiform and of all forms of ancient inscriptions and writings has made necessary the skills of glyphology, epigraphy and paleography, while the study of ancient paintings, ceramics, medals, coins and other ornamented metals has resulted in the development of still other skills appropriate to their respective tasks.

Heavy linguistic demands are also made. In addition to the usual Latin and the—unfortunately—less usual Greek, and, of course, the Western European languages, the humanities require Slavic and Celtic, the Semitic languages—especially Arabic—the Indic and Iranian languages, and, during the last decade, the languages of the Far East—Chinese and Japanese. Only as a group of workers acquires competence in one or another of these linguistic domains can any original study be carried on in their respective fields.

The objective study of language, as such, commonly designated by the term linguistics, has further requirements of its own, involving a thorough knowledge of phonetics as well as a high degree of ear training with the ability to distinguish the slightest variations of tone or pitch.

The study of ancient texts has necessitated an elaborate technique of textual criticism in order that copies of a common text or variations from it may be identified and traced to their sources. Only in this way can the authenticity of documents, or the lack of it, be determined, as well as the extent to which the different versions circulated.

The scholar must also have recourse to many practical devices that were unknown or not used until recent years. With the aid of chemistry, materials may be analyzed, superior layers of paint or ink may be removed, revealing the lower strata, ancient writings may be restored, while, by means of x-rays, the technique of painters in building up their effects of color and tone may be discovered. The camera has come into general use for the rapid making of accurate copies of all kinds of documents and is the constant companion of the archeologist, historian and paleographer. Modern electrical recording apparatus makes it possible for the student of linguistics or folk-lore or music to collect and preserve for comparative study material of a particularly ephemeral sort, while the motion picture camera preserves the details of folk dances and ceremonial observances. The archeologist now makes his preliminary reconnaissance by airplane, by which means he is able to perceive sites or the significant grouping and relations of sites and monuments, which he would discover only accidentally, or after prolonged exertion, by more pedestrian methods.

In view of the enlarged domain of the humanities and of the enormous multiplication of their data, as well as of the need for better implementation and for the acquirement of special techniques and skills, it is not surprising to observe that changes in the organization of scholarship are taking place and that new agencies are being created in order to deal with problems that become increasingly complicated and difficult. We have already referred to the breaking down of the barriers between the different fields, a process that is reflected in the tendency towards the federation of existing groups, on an international as well as on a national scale. Thus, late in the nineteenth century the International Association of Academies was organized (succeeded after the war by the International Academic Union), while corresponding national federations have been set up in many countries—in the United States the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. This trend toward union is also strikingly illustrated by the recent organization in certain American universities of general divisions of humanities, in which the hitherto isolated departments are brought

into intimate association and collaboration in undertakings of common interest. Other illustrations are found in the organization of such societies as the Linguistic Society of America, which draws from the traditional language groups—classics, romance, Germanic, Semitic, etc.—as well as from anthropology, those who are devoted to the comparative study of human speech and to the effort to discover the processes of its development.

Another recently organized society, the Mediaeval Academy of America, draws scholars from the fields of history, philology and literature, art, philosophy, economics, political science and law for the purpose of focussing the interests and methods of their respective disciplines upon the problems of a single period of Western civilization—the Middle Ages.

Special agencies, to carry on investigations in certain fields or areas, have also been created. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago is described by its creator and director, Professor Breasted, as "essentially an organized endeavor to recover the lost story of the rise of man by salvaging the surviving evidence on a more comprehensive scale than has hitherto been possible, and thus, by analysis and synthesis, building up an account of human development on a broader basis than has hitherto been available." The Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington has explored foreign depositories of archives and manuscripts for materials relating to American history and, more recently, is engaged in recovering the history of the rise of Mayan civilization in Central America. The American Schools at Athens, Rome, Baghdad and Jerusalem not only conduct investigations in their respective areas (the school at Athens being engaged in the excavation of the Athenian agora or marketplace), but also receive and direct the training of young scholars. The Byzantine Institute has just completed uncovering some of the Christian mosaics of Sancta Sophia in Istanbul. The Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology is publishing a comprehensive historical account of Persian art, has collected materials for a photographic survey of Persian Islamic architecture, and, two years ago, organized the sensational Exposition of Persian Art in London. A Center for Far Eastern Studies is being set up in the Library of Congress, and the Harvard-Yenching Institute is training students and undertaking research in the field of sinology. The Folger Shakespeare Library of Washington houses the largest collection of Shakesperiana ever brought together, and has a program of research which includes the preparation of a definitive text. This enumeration is by no means complete, and includes only American agencies, but it serves to illustrate the comprehensive character of humanistic interests and the many directions in which they are active.

One of the principal problems of the humanities, especially in America, is to develop a personnel adequate in numbers and training for work in all the fields. The difficulty of acquiring the necessary skills, such as command of other languages than English and those of Western Europe, and the exigencies of university instruction with heavy demands in certain well-known fields (as English and Romance) and lesser or almost negligible demands in others (as Greek, Sanskrit, musicology, etc.) subject the recruitment of new personnel and the application of scholarly effort to fields where it is most needed to other considerations than the advancement of knowledge.

Efforts to improve this situation occupy the attention of the humanities at the present time. Fellowships may help to attract younger scholars into unworked fields; grants in aid of research may help to keep them there; effective planning may set on foot important activities that will give the exploitation of those fields a larger part in the general scheme.

## IV

To recite the principal activities of present humanistic scholarship, or even its most important achievements of recent years, is not within the scope of this consideration of general trends. Nevertheless, some mention should be made of a selected few in order to illustrate and give point to this discussion.

In any such enumeration, the first place should undoubtedly be given to the intensive study of the beginnings of civilization in the Eastern Hemisphere which has resulted in establishing the land bridge between the continents of Africa and Eurasia and its adjacent areas, as the region where mankind first emerged from savagery and from which the impulses of civilization radiated westward through the Mediterranean area and eastward toward India and China. Excavations, with their resulting discoveries of innumerable objects and of vast quantities of written materials, have made it possible to reconstruct in considerable detail and with a high degree of reliability the most ancient life of the Near East. Of equal interest is the concerted attack now being made upon the problem of the rise of civilization in the western world. Here, again, a land bridge between two continents, with the areas at either end, is found to be the scene of such beginnings. The forest-buried Mayan cities of Yucatan and Honduras are yielding an abundance of materials, and far more are still to be recovered. The study of these remains promises to give us eventually a satisfactory picture of the earliest and independent civilization of the New World.

The history of the Middle Ages has become the

subject of very broad interest and intensive study, in the light of which our conception of that period as a convenient time of transition from the so-called Dark Ages to the Renaissance is undergoing a considerable modification, for we are realizing that the Dark Ages were not dark, except as our knowledge of them was without illumination, and that the Renaissance, except on the calendar, is indistinguishable from the Middle Ages themselves. Scholars in this field have found it essential to restudy the documents on which our knowledge of it is based, not only to test those foundations but as a means of establishing the processes by which tradition, literature, ideas, thought, learning and science were transmitted in constantly changing form from generation to generation and from place to place. This, in turn, has made necessary a new study of the chief vehicles of this transmission of culture—Medieval Latin, Arabic and Hebrew.

Closely related to the study of the Middle Ages is the interest taken in searching for the sources of the ideas that dominated western literature and thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in tracing the changes in the ideas themselves as they influenced and were in turn influenced by the rapidly shifting intellectual styles.

The completion of the great Oxford Dictionary during the last generation has given rise to a marked revival of interest in the English language. Supplementary dictionaries of Middle or Chaucerian English, of Early Modern or Tudor English and of American English have been undertaken by American scholars, who are also devoting much attention to variations of dialect spoken in the United States and Canada. The American Linguistic Atlas, for which a field study of New England speech has been completed, will furnish material of interest not only to students of dialect but to historians and sociologists, as well.

Another linguistic subject to which increasing attention has been given of late years is that of primitive language. This field is so vast and as yet so little worked that no more than a beginning has been made. The interest of American scholars has been directed largely to the languages of the native Americans, and for nearly a decade sustained and systematic efforts have been made to record them for purposes of comparative study. The languages of South America have hardly been touched, and it will be many years before anything like a comprehensive survey of native American linguistic materials is possible. Such a survey is, however, essential to any intensive study of native American culture.

Biography as a form or method of historical research has received marked attention, partly, at least, because of its current popularity, but certainly also because of a conviction that the proper study of mankind is man. The most notable American undertaking in this field is, of course, the Dictionary of American Biography, sponsored by the Council of Learned Societies, now well past its half-way mark.

It is possible only to mention such well-defined interests as that in contemporary history, which comes to the front in an effort to make some diagnosis of the current ills of humanity, or that in so-called cultural history, which represents a reaction from the conventional political history of the nineteenth century. One of the most important and significant of such interests is that in the history of science, shared alike by the scientist and the scholar, as each feels the need to understand the historical background of the extraordinary advance during the last century in scientific research and technology.

Finally, the American scholar, looking beyond the Pacific, is irresistibly attracted by the possibilities of research in the history and civilization of the Far East. The art, literature, philosophy and learning of China and Japan constitute unlimited and almost unexplored fields for fruitful work by generations of scholars. Difficult skills and techniques must be acquired by all who hope to do any original work in these most attractive domains of living languages and studies, but the reward promises to be well worth whatever effort may have to be put forth.

In concluding this brief review, it is not inappropriate to observe that the scholars whose work lies in the fields of the humanities have not shut themselves up in an ivory tower in order to carry on their studies oblivious to what is going on about them. They are aware of the acuteness of the problems that beset humanity to-day, and desire to contribute to their solution. They believe that they have, in troublous times, a special duty to minister to the needs of the world, but they believe that, foremost among those needs, are a true knowledge and a clear understanding of the spiritual experience of mankind. To contribute to this knowledge and to advance this understanding constitute the chief obligations of humanistic scholarship.

# SCIENTIFIC EVENTS

## JUBILEE OF THE ROYAL SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

THE *Proceedings* of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society includes the following account of the history and plans of the society and its journal:

The Royal Scottish Geographical Society was founded on October 28, 1884, and the first issue of the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* appeared in January, 1885. The present issue, therefore, forms the beginning of Volume 50, and the council has considered the occasion suitable