

# Review of: "The Countertextual Peripeteias of the Contemporary Humanities as a Political Challenge"

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## REVIEW OF

The Countertextual Peripeteias of the Contemporary

Humanities as a Political Challenge,

by Daniel Roland Sobota

To address humanities nowadays, in an era dominated by the universalized principle and value of profit is already a gesture deviating from the main-stream taken for granted beliefs and by the same token a sign of concerns for broader issues which transcend the topic discussed in the article itself.

In spite of the totalizing effects of neo-liberal regimes governing the very possibilities and conditions of the choice, process, evaluation and distribution of knowledge production and its acknowledgment, visible in all spheres of contemporary societies, there are still voices drawing intellectual and social attention to the realm of humanities. The fact that specifically the relation of humanities to nowadays' society has been discussed, accompanied by an explicit attitude of concerns and appeal for change, speaks for itself – to mention just a few examples: Aldama, 2008: *Why the humanities matter: A common sense approach*; Donoghue, 2008: *The last professors: the corporate university and the fate of humanities*; Nussbaum, 2010: *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*; Pohoryles, R. J. & Schadauer, A. (2009). What future for the European social sciences and humanities; Veninga, 1999: *The humanities and the civic imagination*. It would be appropriate in this context to refer to Husserl's diagnosis of the 1930s elaborated in his *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Husserl understood the crisis of sciences, inspite of technical progress, as an expression of the "radikalen Lebenskrise des europäischen Menschentums". (radical life crisis of European humanity).

Sobota also discusses the humanities in a broader context, viewing their internal changes in the last decades in a key of political challenge. He stated: "The aim of the article is an attempt at a philosophical recognition of the sense of changes that have been taking place in the contemporary humanities for several decades, as well as their political and institutional consequences." (p. 1) The main institution Sobota has in mind is university, i.e. position of the humanities at the university. He reminded that the very emergence of *studium humanitatis* is linked to the establishment of universities: "The

growth of medieval cathedral schools and the emergence of universities was an institutional affirmation of man as a subject and object of the humanities” (p.4).

While references to some historical social processes are invoked for the explanation of the emergence of *studium humanitatis*, such references are mostly missing when it comes to current turns in humanities, which are the main topic in Sobota’s article. The author admitted in general terms: “The humanities seen in a narrower sense are constituted by their positive turn towards writing and a negative turn against certain experiences, which now are returning as extensions. Or to put it another way: the rise and development of the humanities in a narrower sense compromised some experiences from which the humanities in a broader sense drew abundantly, and which now crop up and bend the main line of development in the humanities understood narrowly. Countertextuality implies precisely this clash of the broader and the narrower perspective of the humanities.” (p.6)

Thus, the changes Sobota analyses belong to a general, essential re-orientation in the humanities, to shifts in their primary subject-matter and consequently in the ways how they understand human world. His focus is on a specific reorientation of this kind, namely a countertextual shift, which implies a quite radical reorientation, given the fact that writing and texts have played the most decisive role in the long history of humanities and in the history in general. The author himself argues: “the countertextual peripeteias discussed here reach the very foundation of the contemporary humanities” (p.12). Indeed, it could be reasonably claimed that the countertextual turn is the most radical change in the humanities. It implies no less radical changes beyond the realm of humanities or scientific world in general and has implication for position of human beings in societal and historical worlds.

As the changes in the humanities are conceptualized as turns and returns, an extensive analysis of these concepts is offered at the beginning of the article. Beyond their descriptive function, their normative function is explicitly stated. Obviously, as human affairs have an evaluative dimension, concepts interpreting human affairs within humanities, but also beyond them, necessarily fulfill normative function – even if that function is not always recognized, but works mostly latently. A critical reflection is certainly obliged to explicate its own normative assumptions, but also to reveal the hidden, normatively laden assumptions in materials it reflects upon.

Given the importance of the normative dimension in human conceptual and practical affairs, it would be good to elaborate on it a bit. An anthropological foundation for evaluative essence of human beings was elaborated by Charles Taylor, who in 1980s argued that it is exactly the inherently evaluative dimension of human activities that defines specificity of human beings. He differentiates between weak and strong evaluation, the latter being an evaluation of the worth of our desires, motives, not just of outcomes:

this capacity to evaluate desires is bound up with our power of self-evaluation, which in turn is an essential feature of the mode of agency we recognize as human. But I believe we can come closer to defining what is involved in this mode of agency if we make a further distinction, between two broad kinds of evaluation of desire. In the first case, which we may call weak evaluation, we are concerned with outcomes; in the second, strong evaluation, with the quality of our motivation. For what is important is that strong evaluation is concerned with the qualitative *worth* of different desires (Taylor, 1985, p. 16).

Taylor continued: “the capacity for strong evaluation ... is essential to our notion of human subject, that without it an agent would lack a kind of depth we consider essential to humanity, without which we would find human communication impossible (the capacity for which is another essential feature of human agency.” (Taylor, 1985, p. 28)

Obviously, Taylor operated with a strong concept of human subject and his reference to depth as an essential feature of human subjects is indicative of such a strong concept. The question to be raised is: do humanities nowadays still operate with such a strong concept of their subject-matter, i.e. with human subjects and their worlds. To contextualize the question it should be specified that humanities nowadays function under the neo-liberal regime which is oriented toward outcomes only, to use Taylor’s differentiation criterion. There are different tools available to mediate or impose such an orientation. The marginalization of humanities at universities and in public discourses or the imposition of requests and criteria developed in hard sciences as universally applicable to all sciences are consequences of such a pragmatic outcome orientation.

The paper argues against such an orientation and in favor of a turn that would better address complexities and richness of human subjects. Thus, the author himself uses evaluative arguments in justifying the countertextual turn. Understandably, such an evaluative attitude is inherent to any critique and to any justification of a new approach.

However, if this is a necessary condition I wonder if this is a sufficient condition for changes in thoughts or turns to happen. Are thoughts determined by other thoughts only or do we need to include in understanding of their genesis also conditions of the social world? This is especially important when arguing for a countertextual turn, which is the main goal of the author. The author does raise the question: “The question is how these repressed humanistic experiences were able to return in the contemporary humanities and why they have only in recent decades” (p.6). Indeed, why only in recent decades? However, his answer to the question includes references to the “text-loving” poststructuralism and deconstruction. Additionally he mentions modern media of communication and suggests to call our contemporary culture – “a culture of emotions or affect”, expressed in humanities as “the affective turn” (p.11).

The author concludes his article with a plea for a different university, based on countertextual turns, hoping this would lead to a revolution in human life. “At the centre of “university without

condition” so-conceived there would no longer be deconstruction but performance studies. This would in effect lead to the transformation of not only the form of analysis and publishing but also of teaching, as well as the spatial and temporal conditions for the existence of the institutions of knowledge, society, politics and economy – ultimately, then, to a change in “concept of truth and of humanity”.<sup>105</sup> In this way, the turns and returns we have been dealing with can be treated as precursors and the hotbed of a genuine revolution in the way of human life – something that the humanities have always advocated, but which is today eagerly undertaken by the nascent post-humanities. “(p. 18)

There are already some possibilities to check how the countertextual turn can change at least institutions of knowledge, although the author hopes for changes in institutions of economy as well. Having in mind that the birthplace of countertextuality appeared already in 1960s (oral turn.”It represents a convenient point of reference for understanding the

sense of the

other countertextual (re) turns in the humanities", p.7) and tracing the changes in universities since then, it is not difficult to conclude that the development of university is going more and more toward application of corporate logic, not a *communitas* of free imagining humanists. Other spheres of private and social life are also dominated by the corporate logic. To believe that performance studies can change the corporate economic structures is an expression of a humanist credo. But in order to change these powerful hegemonic structures mechanism it is necessary first to properly grasp the social and societal conditions which make them possible and secure their reproduction. Therefore, it would be good to look for deeper causes of such developments, which go beyond humanities and university.

It should be noted that there is a not just a minor tradition of broad socio-historical approaches to knowledge production and consequently history of ideas and more specifically history of science. More than a century ago Emile Durkheim (1912) investigated how societal conditions influence and shape human thought, language, even logic. A bit later Max Scheler (1924) and Karl Mannheim (1929) laid foundation for a new sociological discipline – sociology of knowledge. Before them Karl Marx (1846) and Friedrich Engels developed historical materialism as a world view according to which social existence of human beings determines their consciousness. Critical Theory of Society (Frankfurt School) also argued for a social approach to human affairs. Some more recent approaches include, for example, social or communitarian epistemology (Kusch, 2002), social history of science, and social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966) or Foucault's (1975) archeology of knowledge. By listing Marx and Frankfurt School together with social constructionism I don't suggest to ignore substantial differences among them. My point is rather that insights into social co-construction of ideas and their histories could be developed and were developed under quite different socio-cultural conditions.

Social history of science is an approach developed as a critique of the older tradition of intellectual history only. From that perspective it could be argued that this development is in some sense analogous to the countertextual turn advocated by Sobota.

Having all those previous developments in mind I think that an approach which would include realm beyond the succession of turns would contribute to the strengthening of the arguments provided by the author - even more so as the author argues for a turn which itself goes beyond or counter text. Without the inclusion of the trans-textual referent in the reconstruction of genesis of countertextual turn the very argumentation for it remains internally incoherent or even contradictory. If the countertextual turn is justified with reference to important realms of human life which cannot be reduced to texts, those realms of life are relevant also for the analysis of the countertextual turn itself.

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