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The Humanities in a Time of Turbulence

Abstract

This Briefly Speaking examines the current state of, and perceptions about, the Humanities during a period of polycrisis, identity politics and contesting ontologies. The role of the Humanities in addressing these, while navigating the contradictions, is examined with reference to key studies stemming from the late 2000s. These were the Academy of Science of South Africa's examination of the State of the Humanities in South Africa, and the parallel initiative that resulted in the establishment of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science. The relevance of the Humanities in addressing these contesting currents is discussed.

Keywords: Humanities, liberal arts, polycrisis, renaissance, theory, science, university

Introduction

The Humanities, also commonly known as liberal arts, include the disciplines of literature, philosophy, languages, history and media studies, amongst many others. These disciplines nurture critical thinking as opposed to developing professional, technical and vocational skills. They address the deep philosophical questions that arose during the Renaissance (French for 'rebirth') that spread across Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries, a period that was marked by the revival of classical learning and wisdom. Secular in nature, this conceptual revolution distanced itself from the authority of the Church that had hitherto held sway over traditional society.

The Humanities only came into being around the late 18th and the 19th centuries when abstractions like 'the human', 'society', and 'culture', became conceivable (Foucault, 1982). This was during the Enlightenment, a period which followed the Renaissance, when reason was elevated over superstition, and science over blind faith. The "new philosophical frameworks and ideas made the Humanities *possible*; societal developments made them *desirable*; and eventually, institutional changes made them *real*" (Leezenberg and de Vries, 2017:31). The Humanities offered training of future elites in the best of their cultural heritage in the newly emerging national consolidations. Hence, the modern Humanities in Europe were closely linked to the birth of the modern nation-state.

The knowledge domains of Humanities were enriched by the assimilation of ideas from other geographical regions outside of Europe because they developed during the period of European expeditions of discovery and colonisation. In other words, modern forms of knowledge within the Humanities developed in close interaction with the European colonisation across the world (Leezenberg and de Vries, 2017:31). In fact, the history of the Humanities has always been linked to coded social interventions and contingent historical exigencies shaping those social interventions.

Two to three centuries after occupying centre stage in the world of knowledge generation, learning and scholarship, the Humanities are, in the views of the contemporary public, politicians, academics, and the administrators of higher education, flying into headwinds and rocked by the turbulence of the 21st century. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *University World News*, amongst others, provide detailed accounts of how the headwinds and turbulence manifest in the academy, particularly with regard to the liberal arts or the Humanities. This *Briefly Speaking* piece focuses mainly on two dimensions of the turbulence. First is the politicisation of the Humanities, and second is the devaluation and defunding of the Humanities, with the latter as mainly the effect of the former.

Implicating Theory

Recent years have seen an increasing clamour about the Humanities as the media sites for wokeness of many kinds, and thus as sites promoting 'leftist radicalism' which undermine traditional identitarian practices and discourses. The currently poor reputation of the Humanities has everything to do with the rise of theory or French Theory in the context of ongoing cultural wars and social contestations emerging from the Humanities since the late 1960s. The rise of theory has not only promoted 'left radicalism', but it has also led to the disintegration of the traditional Humanities' knowledge domains into multiplicities of activist or protest areas of study and research such as cultural studies, literary theory, gender studies, sexuality, and postcolonial/decolonial studies, to mention a few. These 'new' areas of study and research are often more popular and often, they overshadow the original Humanities' disciplines.

The increasing influence of theory in the Humanities has been responsible for the emergence of the anti-theory or anti-critique right wing. Therefore, theory has underpinned the new cultural wars that have divided America, and which have since fractured the whole Western world (Vanhoutte 2023:155). It has made the Humanities highly contested disciplines and such contestation, instead of building and rebuilding the Humanities further, have proved to be destructive. As Shumway eloquently expresses it:

> Another problem for the humanities … in America is that they are no longer entirely apolitical. … the attack on "political correctness" in universities, which the Right initiated in the early 1990s, was undertaken because of the fear of the political impact of the humanities … this right-wing assault on the humanities was partially responsible for the decline in

> prestige of these disciplines and for the cuts in public funding to higher education in general (Shumway 2017:8).

The Humanities have come to be – and are seen to be – sites of ideological contestation and, within the institutions of higher education, hosting them is equated with hosting hotbeds of political activism (Frassinelli, 2019). Of late, in the case of the USA, protests against racism and genocide have been prevalent, while here in South Africa, between 2015 and 2019, the various #[Enter]MustFall movements ('Rhodes', 'Fees', and 'Science') enacted a kind of popular revolution against perceived institutionalised racism in society with its after-echoes in politics and the economic prospects of students. The comprehensive studies on the MustFall movements at the time and how they manifested in the lived experiences of South African students (Langa, 2017; and Luescher et al., 2022) have dubbed these movements the rebellion of the poor.

Although there was also a #ScienceMustFall movement, this did not so much arise from within the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. It was also not necessarily focused on anything specific about these disciplines, but rather, it was aimed at science as a cultural coding of Western episteme, and thus one facet of decolonial discourse (UCT Scientist, 2016). As explained by Harris (2021), the "science must fall" slogan held that scientific thinking was incongruent with African indigenous belief systems. As an alleged cultural imposition, the movement demanded the eradication of science along with other foreign symbols and practices.

The upshot of these developments is that identity politics now rage across the social spectrum inflecting all public (and private) discourses. Consequently, issues of the intersection of race, class, gender, as well as linguistic and socio-economic background have become co-constitutive factors in the shaping of public and political discourses, much as they also shape academic discussion. This explains the dramatic emergence-and-resurgence of emphases on postcolonial discourses and decoloniality in academic praxis across a wide array of disciplines, from the Humanities to some of the abstract sciences like mathematics (the latter as attempts to respond to the #ScienceMustFall debates) (Van den Heever, 2016:247).

Defunding and gutting Humanities programmes in institutions of higher education is one way of curbing the revolutionary climate. This is indeed now occurring in America under the second Trump presidency (Douglass, 2024; see also Greenfield, 2023). It was also the experience of some South African universities during the early 2000s when different Humanities departments were collapsed into schools headed by appointed directors who in essence were, or are, administrators. The imperatives for this kind of restructuring were justified as financial, administrative and managerial and as a way of reorganising internal university power relations as institutions now engaged in social redress following the end of apartheid.

The poor reputation of the Humanities resulting from the political contestations erupting from within a liberal arts context described above feeds into the continuing devaluation and defunding of the Humanities. On the other hand, there has been

a popular emphasis on promoting the then better state subsidised STEM disciplines, along with commercial and professional subjects and vocational qualifications. The two conjoining trajectories have been extensively documented for the North American and British contexts with the consequences of the gutting of liberal arts programmes, defunding of disciplines and terminating non-profitable courses and programmes, cutting staff, and generally promoting a shift towards vocational programmes. The situation in North America, in particular, is aptly described by Carlson and Laff (2025) who write that:

> … popular media accounts are rife with stories about the poor job prospects for "useless" majors in French and philosophy, and college leaders and public figures believe that literature and art history are mainly for wealthy students. The numbers are dramatic, …

Similar trends can be observed in South African universities. Here, however, they are not commented on so publicly, though such negative perceptions were found to be invalid by the ASSAf (2011) report that is discussed below. The many rationalisations of programme offerings and courses, the termination of disciplines and departments (or the collapse of the remnants of disciplines into federal schools with reduced staffing) largely fly under the radar. For example, the University of KwaZulu-Natal effected major administrative savings during the 1990s by merging the previously separate Departments of Spanish, Italian, German and Hebrew under the auspices of a single structure, renamed as Europe Studies. Similarly, cultural and media studies were sometimes claimed by literature and language departments, which appropriated them as topics rather than subjects, thereby delinking them from their political economic and sociological origins (for a detailed analysis of how broad campus rationalisation occurred at Walter Sisulu University see Magadana, 2023).

Commentary on these trends, both overseas and in South Africa, locates such imperatives impacting the Humanities within the context of neoliberalism and the neoliberal university (Shumway, 2017; Hlatshwayo, 2022). Applied as a lens to look at the fortunes of the liberal arts/Humanities, neoliberalism denotes not so much an economic calculus first and foremost, but rather a political ideology of totalising market valuation and commodification of social and cultural relations of interchange. Overlaid on these is the construction of new subjectivities in line with the foregoing culture. Such subjectivities ensue in a new habitus of conceiving reality as transactional and living in accordance with this subjectivity (see also Raschke, 2019).

Framed by this culture, the university is now conceived as a for-profit corporation (Beiter, 2023). As state subsidies decline in real terms, the corporation must increasingly find other sources of income, and even individual academics are now required to raise such resources. This implies the managerialisation of the project of higher education, the prescriptive nature of staff and knowledge production management with its performance management instruments, along with the commercialisation of knowledge outputs. Research publications are regarded as an income stream and academic employment viability is now

measured in terms of cost-to-company. The use of technology as pedagogic replacement also devalues human interaction that used to characterise the Humanities (Hlatshwayo, 2022). In this ideological environment the Humanities are particularly vulnerable, as suggested by Shumway:

> While all of the traditional disciplines of the liberal arts and sciences are devoted to pure rather than applied research, historically the public and politicians have been able to understand better how the natural and some social sciences can lead to practical applications and therefore monetary returns. Because neoliberalism rejects the very idea of "not-for-profit" and insists that all values must be measured by the market, the humanities appear valueless. This has been a problem both for humanities enrolments and for the status of humanities disciplines within the university (Shumway 2017:7–8).

As it is demonstrated below, the policies espoused by ASSAf and DHET run counter to this kind of popular sentiment. The question remains, do these processes affect the Humanities disproportionally? From this brief historical perspective, this *Briefly Speaking* now turns to examine the Humanities in the South African context.

The Humanities in an Essentialist Age

All disciplines, their theories and theorists are always in transit, even if periods, places, or professions sometimes achieve relative stabilisation. This is the very meaning of historicity (Capra, 2004:176). Theories and their associated discourses travel along with their theorists, encountering different historical conjunctures, divergent ways of making sense, and being applied in often novel and unintended ways at their destinations. They leave traces of how academic discourses are originated, manufactured, devolved, appropriated and used and abused, and how they enter popular domains. Following the end of the international academic and cultural boycotts from 1990, South Africans are no longer isolated from global trends; now, what happens here can significantly affect what happens elsewhere, as the global impact of #... MustFall illustrates (see Daniel and Miller, 2024).

The resulting knowledge and disciplinary formations subsist inside historical flows and the events that gave rise to them. They are unable to transcend their worldly and material embeddedness. They lack timeless truth quality and are dependent on the socio-cultural historical contexts and sub-contexts from which they emerged and which they encode (van den Heever, 2022:176). Therefore, theories as the conceptual core of disciplines that enable institutionalised engagement with study fields, are to be understood as speech acts-in-context, they are performatives in contingent contexts.

For many South African students, studying is a practice of 'doing time'. For the first generation of post-apartheid black students, it was the certificate that counted, while for the employers, businesspeople and parents, it was skills delivering income. Yet, the common-sense myth is that the Humanities are of reduced vocational value in comparison to the STEM disciplines. ASSAf (2011),

however, had earlier questioned the perception that the Humanities had lost their purchase in society, business and within the academy.

The ASSAf Consensus Panel on the Future of the Humanities found that Humanities graduates are employable. Moreover, Humanities graduates, if initially slow to settle, tended to secure jobs in the sectors for which they are qualified. Hugely self-reliant, more often than not at the time of the survey, they operated as consultants, being in charge of their own careers. Humanities graduates earned less than engineers did, but they were nevertheless greatly appreciated by scientists and engineers as attested to in their invitations to ASSAf membership.

Furthermore, Humanities scholars think of themselves as a bulwark against capitulation to socially alienating neo-liberal technicist, ahistorical and economistic, Western-led, imperatives mentioned above. The genesis of such procedures can be traced to Frederick W. Taylor's (2011) concept of scientific management that in examining workflows devised strategies for enhancing administrative efficiency in streamlining worker productivity. Spoken of now as Taylorism, the theory is geared to optimising working conditions. Science, harmony, cooperation and the development of each and every person to their greatest efficiency is a Taylorist objective.

Humanities in Crisis

The ASSAf (2011) research report recognised that the Humanities were in 'crisis', resulting from contemporary overemphasis on science and technology, career pathing, deleterious shareholder interests and financial gain, in the context of a developmental state. Briefly, the ASSAf findings identify the following as among the factors for the crisis in Humanities:

- Declining enrolments, falling graduation rates, decreasing funding.
- STEM disciplines were then better funded to the detriment of the Humanities.
- Intellectual stagnation.
- Lack of international standing, with most studies appearing in local unindexed journals.
- Black scholarship levels, except in Education, was below par.
- Low proportion of academics with doctorates.

To remedy the crisis situation, the ASSAf study recommended the institutionalisation of the Humanities within national science policy to enhance humanisation, social benefit and public welfare. This entailed:

- Revitalisation and better funding Humanities research output internationally published.
- Reproduction of an ageing academic cohort, secured through PhD acquisition.
- Recognition of books as cultural and human assets.
- Integration of the Humanities as a full component of national science policy.
- Accelerated provision of research chairs and centres of excellence.

- Inauguration of a national fund for Humanities research, which resulted in the National Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).
- Exposure of all undergraduate students to the Humanities (ASSAf 2011:14-17).

The Charter for the Humanities and Social Science

The Charter for the Humanities and Social Science (DHET, 2011) was commissioned by the former Minister of Higher Education and Training, to investigate the causal factors for the crisis in the Humanities and Social Sciences and make recommendations on strategies that could be employed to address the crisis. The final report was released shortly after the ASSAf report, and it attracted sustained national media exposure. The ASSAf report, while well-referenced in the scholarly literature, did not obtain such coverage. Yet, the significance of the ASSAf report is that it directly dismissed the popular myths mentioned above that denigrate a Humanities degree *vis-à-vis* employment prospects.

The Charter spoke specially to policymakers. In contrast, the ASSAf study addressed student, parent, employer and Humanities lecturer concerns. The first of its six recommendations was to establish an institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences to serve as a special purpose institution with a mandate to dynamise the Humanities and Social Science. This recommendation was realised with the establishment on 5 December 2013 of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) to serve the purpose of enhancing and supporting the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS); and advising government and civil society on HSS related matters. It does this through its various programmes, including Doctoral Schools, Catalytic Projects, African Pathways Programme, and through supporting the DHET in the implementation of the proposed corrective interventions. It sought to address negative media reporting about the quality of Humanities degrees and alarming levels of plagiarism that tarnished many Universities.

Significantly, the Charter fractured the ideological assumption derived from the Berlin Conference of 'Africa' as a homogeneous, internationally isolated, geo-ethnic entity. It proposed an open-ended definition that tactically located Africa-in-the-World, that is, it did not position Africa against the world as is the common-sense binary, and as codified in some decolonial discourses. The Charter enabled the recognition of the full spectrum of research output and better staff-student ratios. The recognition by the DHET of books and book chapters in addition to peer reviewed scholarly articles was highly beneficial for the Humanities' scholars, whose reputations are assured by their authoring of monographs as is now recognised by the DHET and NIHSS.

The Charter's planning was in the detail, but the budgeting is in the realm of idealism that tests the neoliberal imperatives that are, ironically, pushing the academy in the opposite direction – towards instrumentalism, managerialism and massification. The Charter aimed to elevate South African institutions into the global arena in which Africans will begin to think of their futures, and not just take refuge in imaginaries of the past. The ASSAf report and the Charter, when read *together* provide both

the analysis and the strategy. This contiguity was not pre-planned but emerged organically from two separate initiatives addressing similar questions that arose from the same conjuncture with very little panel member cross over.

An Inclusive Humanities

As argued earlier, the post-Cold War conjuncture has turned the Humanities into a commodity measured by student throughput, publication outputs and balancing academic employment in terms of cost-to-company. That is, increasingly, academics are now constituted as individuated cost centres who must 'earn' or 'recover' their own salaries. This model is undoubtedly European, Anglo-American and Taylorist. The Humanities thus remain suspect in the eyes of the newly politically liberated as their 'products' – unlike the STEM disciplines, tend to be intangible, symbolic and explanatory, rather than enabling immediate amortisation (except via the DHET publication incentive, as graduating students take many years). As the ASSAf (2011) report admitted, Humanities graduates take longer to settle into their future careers than do engineers, with the due implications on job security, wealth accumulation and career planning,

In their ungrounded guises the Humanities have largely lost their social relevance, their socially strategic potential and their objective of popular empowerment as they are now taught, especially at undergraduate levels where critical thinking is not easily balanced with practical doing. Postmodernism, properly done, is basically in the business of critique, but to be socially relevant, it needs to admit position, rights and justice.

Certain discursive communities in the Humanities are, however, characterised by what is to the layperson an opaque cant that characterises elusive postmodernist language. This opacity refuses the empirical, is scornful of material realities and of ethical position. Yet these are the very sites for which democracy is constituted.

Humanities that embrace the above-discussed differences would be much more relevant, pro-active and acquisitive, such that:

- This new imaginary would be simultaneously democratising, useful, generating employable (critical) graduates who can navigate neoliberal frameworks productively and efficiently, constituting individuals as responsible citizens no matter their beliefs or perceptions of science.

- It would admit critical and indigenous qualitative methodologies and invest analysis with new, diverse, and pluralistic ways of making sense that are not reduced to essentialist postulates.

- The new imaginary would examine power relations and outcomes of contestations, as a means of equipping graduates with expertise to successfully manoeuvre within institutions for career purposes. It would but also help to shape them towards more democratic and ethical behaviour in the wider society. Such negotiations would take into account the plurality of ontologies and

> identities that now jostle for legitimation and power in multiple post–modern environments.

Such a paradigm has been explored by Harris (2021) who examines the intersection between rationality and power. Epistemic injustice is a currently prevailing topic, while philosophers of science explore new approaches in fields such as the philosophy of medicine and epidemiology. These disciplines, suggests Harris (2021), have made progress towards deepening understanding of African traditions and metaphysical beliefs. This enables professors to bridge the gap with students and other citizens who find science culturally alienating. How to explore philosophical frameworks that can respectfully accommodate African ways of making sense while simultaneously fostering the type of scientific understanding necessary to meet South Africa's developmental goals is the objective.

For the Humanities in general, the new imaginary requires that instead of defending paradigm fundamentalism and Western civilisation (and its Philosophy made possible by the Enlightenment), or other ideological blocs like communism, socialism, or theocracies, that the focus should be on critically engaging these corpuses and building a more inclusive dynamic that responds to the myriad contexts in which the diversity of multicultural generations find themselves.

Conclusion

Conceptual disruptions usually stem from the Humanities, which result in further intellectual instability that affect all disciplines. The resulting instability can be revealing and creative, but also cautioning and misleading, not to mention societally destructive. While the degraded state of the planet is studied by scientists, it is the Humanities that study the scholars, the politicians and the economic planners, whose theories and activities are largely discursively responsible for the polycrises.

In briefly assessing the value of the ASSAf report (2011) and the Charter (DHET, 2011) that implemented new supporting structures for the Humanities, starting 24 years ago, it is concluded that these were both ahead of their times, if out of time with neo-Taylorist pressures on the Humanities, especially in the UK and USA over the past decade. Where the Humanities in those societies have come under relentless critique, devaluation and closures, in South Africa, irrespective of how individual university managements were responding to the moment, ASSAf and DHET were strengthening the Humanities, very consciously promoting the values of inclusion, diversity, academic freedom and public benefit. If nothing else, this is the legacy that needs to be acknowledged in the wider context of the national science value chain and the foresight of its early planners over a two-decade period (see Vaughan 2015). The relative new fields of study that have been spawned out of the Humanities – for example, gender studies, sexuality, cultural studies, class, ethnicity and identity– will always be contested. The issue is how to manage those contestations by protecting the academic rules of engagement and enabling academics themselves to devise due protocols and best practices, which is one of the mandates of ASSAf.

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