

## **ESF Humanities Spring 2007**

Young Researchers Forum “Disciplines and Borders:  
Humanities research in an age of interdisciplinarity”

ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)





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The European Science Foundation (ESF) was established in 1974 to create a common European platform for cross-border cooperation in all aspects of scientific research.

With its emphasis on a multidisciplinary and pan-European approach, the Foundation provides the leadership necessary to open new frontiers in European science.

Its activities include providing science policy advice (Science Strategy); stimulating cooperation between researchers and organisations to explore new directions (Science Synergy); and the administration of externally funded programmes (Science Management). These take place in the following areas: Physical and engineering sciences; Medical sciences; Life, earth and environmental sciences; Humanities; Social sciences; Polar; Marine; Space; Radio astronomy frequencies; Nuclear physics.

Headquartered in Strasbourg with offices in Brussels, the ESF's membership comprises 75 national funding agencies, research performing agencies and academies from 30 European countries.

The Foundation's independence allows the ESF to objectively represent the priorities of all these members.

Cover picture:

**World Map Mosaic at Vasco de Gama Monument**

View from the *Monument to the Discoveries* to the world map mosaic at the Vasco da Gama monument in Belem, Lisbon.

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# Introduction

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The Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH) is dedicated to supporting and strengthening Humanities research in Europe, focusing simultaneously on issues of relevance to science and society. SCH has recently produced its own Position Paper which emphasises the role of Humanities in the panorama of sciences and outlining the role of SCH in Europe. But the Committee also strongly believes in the constant revision and rejuvenation of ideas and approaches which is the hallmark of that set of disciplines that make up European Humanities.

This is why, in May 2007, SCH convened a three-day-workshop near Lisbon, inviting 21 young scholars from across Europe and across many fields of the Humanities and neighbouring areas of research, to debate, under the title “Disciplines and Borders: Humanities research in an age of interdisciplinarity”, the future of the Humanities. All 21 young scholars had been selected in a continent-wide competition, in which they had to show that they could develop perspectives for the Humanities at large, beyond their fields of special expertise. The group was enriched by the truly global background of participants, all of whom have very international CVs to show, and many of whom had often spent years in universities outside Europe. A list of the scholars, and their affiliation at the time of the event, can be found at the end of the document.

Senior colleagues introduced plenary debates: Professor Wim P. Blockmans (NIAS-Wassenaar/NL), Professor Jose Luis Cardoso (ISEG-Lisbon/PT), Professor Peter Davidhazi (Hungarian Academy of Sciences; Budapest/HU, Chair), Professor Peter Golding (Loughborough/UK), Professor Gisli Pálsson (Reykjavik/IS), Professor Nuria Sebastian Galles (Barcelona/ES), and Professor Sigrid Weigel (ZfL-Berlin/DE; apologies). A keynote lecture given at the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon allowed participants to catch a glimpse of the secular tradition of scholarly communication across scientific borders.

Working groups composed exclusively of young scholars then addressed three clusters of issues under the heading “Europeanisation, internationalisation, globalization”; “Humanities between explaining and predicting”; and “New forms of interdisciplinarity”.

This document is therefore the independent product of this group of young scholars. If on the one hand it is a synthesis of many, often different, positions, it also shows the willingness and ability of the individuals gathered to jointly articulate requirements and visions – for the future of the Humanities and for their successful contribution to debates in science and society. The document does not, necessarily, reflect the views of SCH, but its acknowledgement of the transformative power of Humanities research and the clear statement about a bright future for the Humanities is shared by the Committee.

Gretty M. Mirdal

*Chair of the Standing Committee for the Humanities*

# *In varietate concordia*

## A Manifesto for the Humanities in Europe

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### 1. The purpose of the manifesto

This manifesto is written at a particular moment in time when we are experiencing the impact of decisive scientific and social transformations. However, we are also witnessing the persistence of older conflicts and inequalities. The humanities, together with other sciences and society at large, provide the necessary expertise to analyse, understand and tackle these problems.

The purpose of this manifesto is to outline a new direction for the humanities in Europe. The manifesto is an invitation to join the humanities in the journey of opening up a new realm of possibilities and to utilise the potential that humanities can offer to scholarship and society at large. It is particularly important at this time that the humanities should not just contribute to or collaborate with research agendas set by other sciences, but that they should also play a central role in defining and shaping them.

### 2. Objectives of the humanities in relation to the other sciences and society at large

The humanities, in their distinctive manner, contribute insights into what it means to be ‘human’ and draw attention to the human dimension of societies, for example by studying identities, texts, and languages. Humanities research enables us to engage with issues of complexity peculiar to the human condition. It produces knowledge that is situated within those complex contexts and thus enables us to actively confront these challenges in an informed manner.

Within the natural and technological sciences there is nowadays an increasing need to promote the human subject – and its environment – as a legitimate topic of their research. The humanities provide the expertise to assist with such analyses.

The humanities have contributed to the discursive formation of modern Europe, drawing on intellectual traditions long before the advent of professional university institutions. At the Lisbon forum, however, we strongly agreed that the humanities should not be defined in Eurocentric terms or even claim to represent distinctly European values.

The conceptual architecture of the humanities is an open-ended framework that can be defined around a set of ideas about the fundamental aspects of human life. The humanities have developed distinct traditions and methods, retaining a focus on the study of history, languages, discourses, representations, art and aesthetics, communication and media, heritage, issues of cultural experience and cultural identity.

Considering the nature and objectives of the humanities we identified some major topics that illustrate

the potential of humanities research in relation to the other sciences and society at large. This tentative list is, of course, non-exhaustive and essentially reflects the various backgrounds of the authors of this manifesto:

- Communication practices and their relations with and applications in art, culture and politics;
- Constant change and complexity of cultures, politics, education, economics, and social structures in multilingual contexts;
- Globalisation;
- The North/South divide (including poverty and inequality);
- The consequences and developments of new media and technologies;
- Europe’s Islamic past and its future;
- Global religious resurgence;
- Ageing, dying, and illness as parts of the process of life;
- Impact of scientific developments on individuals and societies;
- The development of common grounds between the social, human, and natural sciences in relevant areas such as consciousness, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, phenomenology, meditation, neuroaesthetics;
- Environmental change and global warming;
- The senses, the body and performativity;
- Cultural heritage;
- Migration.

### 3. What humanities have to offer and obstacles to be overcome

Humanities are ideally placed to bridge the gap that often exists between contemporary scholarship and the cultures at large. They can act as mediators between different parts of societies and explain their relationship with each other. Humanities scholars should not be dissuaded from following a proud tradition of engaging outside the academy. By the topics of research, humanities understand, interpret, explain and connect the past and the present, and envision a better future. Therefore, they enrich human lives, contribute to enhanced understanding of our complex environment and bring about transformative leverage. In this way, they contribute to an advancement of knowledge that links the achievements of natural sciences and technology to society. Thus, humanities research is about generating new knowledge that should be transformative by nature. However, the history of innovation suggests that humanities, as any other science, need to undertake a proportion of “blue sky” research unfettered by the constraints of what is attractive to politicians or the majority view at any given point in time.

The humanities do not shrink from the responsibility to provide vocational qualifications, and indeed – contrary to many prevalent myths – are equipping young people with skills that are highly sought after in the labour market of the knowledge economy.

In a time characterised by increasing internationalisation and globalisation the values of freedom, tolerance, equality and respect for diversity should underlie the ways in which we conduct our research and should guide the research agenda. Humanities research must be a self-reflexive, accountable and ethical practice that recognises the legitimacy of a range of interests, groups and subjects to contest, negotiate and contribute to the knowledge it produces. Humanities research must work towards ethical standards.

The humanities are not immune from the pitfalls of complacency and conservatism. Young scholars in the humanities should engage critically with conventions and unproductive generational divides, emphasizing the nature of reflexive inclusivity.

#### 4. Conditions for success

The success of this manifesto requires the following:

- Humanities scholars should not neglect and should be trained to better recognise and embrace the possibilities of the marketplace of ideas and opportunities, as outlined above;
- An interdisciplinary dialogue between disciplines across national and institutional borders, based on a strong individual competence in one's own discipline as well as a dialogue with society at large;
- The cooperation with the natural, technological and social sciences as critical and equal partners;
- Bridges and collaboration with the media, as well as political and social actors;
- A space for rigorous thought;
- The adoption of a humanities-inclusive language by the European funding bodies;
- In order to conduct humanities research, a network of sources and archives that is easily accessible to an international research community has to be facilitated, strengthened and sustained. This network should enable the humanities to reach a broader audience through new distribution channels; democratise the access to resources for international scholars; and establish an open and free mode of circulation of our research on the internet;
- Integration of methodologies elaborated by formal sciences (e.g. computer simulations, mathematical modelling, risk analysis);
- Re-definition of the specific criteria needed for evaluation of work within the humanities (for instance, considering the long-lasting impact of our work).



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Established mechanisms for evaluating research efficacy in other fields cannot be imposed on the humanities which are often, by their very nature, context, language and culture-specific;

- Welcoming attitude and trust of politicians and financial institutions towards long-term research;
- The safeguarding of pluralism, equality, democratic engagement and minority rights must mean that certain types of humanities research need to be supported;
- Recognition of the fact that student numbers are not a universal gauge for the importance of any field.

Considering the contributions, results and the transformative power of the humanities research, as outlined in this manifesto, the crisis metaphor – frequently used in relation to humanities research – seems to be obsolete to the participants of the Humanities Spring 2007. We are marked by the current challenges of eroding funding and shifting politics, including the assessment standards applied to our research. It is our hope, however, that the present manifesto will stimulate further debate and action about the potentials of the humanities, their intellectual, social and political relevance, and their positive impact on the educational system and the broader society. And finally, the quest for recognition and funding is a political issue for which we demand transparency and responsibility of all parties.

# *In varietate concordia*

## A Manifesto for the Humanities in Europe

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### Editors

**Natalia Filatkina**

Germany, University of Trier

**Cristina Sánchez-Carretero**

Spain, CSIC (Spanish National Research Council)

**Emma Tomalin**

United Kingdom, University of Leeds

### Authors

**Esperanza Alfonso**

Spain, Universidad Complutense de Madrid

**Fiona Allon**

Australia, University of Western Sydney/  
Germany, Free University of Berlin

**Monika Baar**

Hungary/United Kingdom, University of Essex

**Sujata Ashwarya Cheema**

India/France, Maison des Provinces de France

**William Gallois**

United Kingdom, University of Roehampton

**Fabian Holt**

Denmark, University of Roskilde

**Philippe Huneman**

France, CNRS/Université Paris I Sorbonne

**Magdalena Hyksová**

Czech Republic, Technical University in Prague

**Susanne Lachenicht**

Germany, Universität Hamburg

**Riccardo Manzotti**

Italy, IULM University

**Isabelle Marcoux**

Canada/France, Université de Nantes

**Vassiliki Papatsiba**

Greece/United Kingdom, University of Oxford

**Anna Piotrowska**

Poland, University of Kraków

**Stéphanie Ruphy**

France, Université Aix-Marseille I

**Sebastian Sethe**

Germany/United Kingdom, University of Sheffield

**Nikolai Vukov**

Bulgaria, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

**Emma Waterton**

United Kingdom, Keele University

**Carsten Wergin**

Germany, University of Bremen

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## **Mission and goals of the ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)**

On behalf of the ESF Member Organisations, the Standing Committee for the Humanities contributes to the development of the ESF science policy agenda and provides expert advice on science policy actions at the European level in the field of its responsibilities. It will work proactively:

- to identify priority research areas for the humanities;
- to advance collaboration and coordination in basic research in the humanities;
- to foster excellent, transnational – and where appropriate – transdisciplinary research;
- to strengthen the voice of the European humanities, and to continue making the case for better conditions for research in the humanities in Europe.

The objective of the SCH's operations is to act as a catalyst for the acquisition of new knowledge, thus enabling its Member Organisations to fund research recognised to be excellent at the European and international levels.

Through a portfolio of funding instruments and other support actions, and in cooperation with the Member Organisations, other European research Funding Organisations and other committees within the ESF, the Standing Committee for the Humanities will work towards its mission by:

- promoting debates on new and developing areas of research and on strategic activities in the humanities, and in other sciences where humanities research is needed;
- creating links between research communities which in the humanities are often fragmented and between research funders;
- planning – and where appropriate managing – collaborative and transdisciplinary research activities in view of the European Research and Higher Education Area;
- strengthening methods for independent and international, high quality peer review in the humanities and in transdisciplinary fields;
- developing means and methods of scientific evaluation, taking into consideration the specific needs of European humanities research;
- supporting practices aimed at advancing European cooperation in basic research (mobility of researchers, free flow of information and ideas, construction, use and quality control of research infrastructures);
- developing closer links with subject associations;
- operating as a clearing house within Europe for information on cooperation and collaboration issues relevant to humanities scholarship.

