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THE NON-UTILITARIAN NATURE OF THE HUMANITIES

To champion humanism or human studies is a tough job these days. Civilization today is uncongenial towards them, and they attract little attention from the general public. To speak up for human studies today is tantamount to championing a receding world, a world somewhat out-of-date, yet there is good reason for taking up such defense. Such defense attempts are in fact being made, and an array of arguments are brought up. It is not for me to repeat the arguments in favor, but at least one of many misperceptions that tend to obfuscate discussions of the meaning of human science has to be pointed out. Human studies just do not yield to common appraisal criteria. Attitudes, developments, aspirations, as well as doctrines, are usually all appraised from the social utility angle. The point is, however, that human studies (as indeed all theoretical science) as they are conceived and developed establish their validity with a view to things other than utility.

First, what is the meaning of social utility? This is an ideological term, a category straight out of the vocabulary of newspeak, as Professor Michał Głowiński might want to put it. Utility was a topic of discourse for times immemorial, but social utility was talked mainly by positivists, by Bentham, Mill, Comte, with Marxism producing a dogmatic version of the term that lingers on in many scholarly minds to this day, the current unfashionableness of Marxism notwithstanding. This notion implies a special kind of valuation. Value pertains to society, not to the individual. An individual is nothing, an abstraction, as Comte put it: the community alone counts, its interests are all-important, and it is fitting for all to succumb to society's demands. The circumstance that the community is represented by a group, a state, a government, an organization, by political parties or by one party, affects that argument in no way. The point of it is that the individual is to surrender in his or her thought and action.

So whatever you might wish to call useful has to serve the good of community. It is the community that decides, appraises, demands, always with a view to its own interests. The community disposes of the means, and since it pays the piper, it calls the tune. This is the state of things, and this is what makes me apprehensive.

For it should be realized that behind the notion of utility lurks instrumentalism. Useful is what lets me achieve my aim, which makes it a means to an end. That useful something, accordingly, has no value by its own merit but only by a subordinate relation to others, something that shall be judged for its usefulness and effectiveness. Hence flow two serious consequences for culture. Never had we come as close to viewing man as an instrument, and never had we treated science as instrumentally, as now.

True, social objectives may be many and different, as indeed they used to be in the past: noble as well as shallow, yet at least for the past two centuries societies have yearned to be well-governed as well as well-off. Idealists warning that affluence and social organization should be means towards an end, namely building complete humanity and culture, are not heeded. In the world today, that means has turned into an end in itself. The world has shaken off those idealistic pipe-dreams, fond and respectful as it is of concrete things. No one is listening to warnings any more, oblivious of the fact that warnings against instrumentalism were called way back in the 19th-century. It is amazing how far-sighted some of those old whistle-blowers were, and how strongly their warnings obtain to this day. Renan, for one, pointed out that the masses, epitomized by his citizen Kaliban, detested philosophy, because they did not understand it, and sought to pull art down to their own tastes destroying whatever was original and above mediocrity. The same Kaliban was suspicious of men of learning, especially of theorists, because knowledge that did not instantly lead up to production seemed futile play to him. Wrote Renan,

“The mindless crowd, ignorant of the essence of things, will only take notice of immediate results science can produce. They will fell a tree, just to get to its fruits faster. [...] The crowd can only use things. They want everything right now.”¹

In a technocratic materialistic world that citizen Kaliban haunts us at all time, seeking as he is the productive alone, a reproducing man and a producing science, as the only thing he really deems important. Incredibly, this particular point brings closely together two doctrines that are at each other's extremes, namely laissez-faire economics and Marxism. Hardly anyone would use terms like “base” or “superstructure” now, yet a deeply rooted perception pins society's hopes on the base alone, and if it turns a hopeful eye to the superstructure then only to the extent the superstructure serves the base. We probably do not realize how deeply that particular mode of thinking has pervaded our politics, or indeed that we keep moving amid such categories.

What is essentially important is *praxis*, so the only kind of knowledge to support is knowledge the *praxis* is governed by. Not thinking is important, but action; not pondering, but doing things. Thinking has no autonomous value: it exists only for action to materialize, and to be effective.

¹ E. Renan, *Questions contemporaines*, in: E. Renan, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1947, vol. 1, p. 71 [retranslated from Polish].

Now I have no doubt that this instrumental perception of man is one of the worst failures of European culture. The individual, a person's dignity, a person's uniqueness, is no longer valued. All is being done these days to erase in the individual anything that is out of the ordinary, anything that does not fit into social norm. That is the drift of work of all kinds of educational institutions, above all the mass media. As Bergson had it, society is keen to tame individuals, to make them as similar to itself as possible. That ideal sameness was brought to caricature in socialist countries that were out on a systematic destruction of humanist culture standards, liquidating the intellectual elites, legitimizing all kinds of appetites of the masses. Nowhere has culture probably been subjected to worse barbarous oppression, its impact visible in different walks of life today.

Nor have I any doubt that a technocratic approach to thinking erodes that particular sense of thinking that European culture has championed since Aristotle. It was none less than Aristotle, of course, who spoke of the highest kind of knowledge, one pursuing neither happiness nor the necessities of life, of theoretical knowledge containing more wisdom in it than all productive sciences between them.

"Of the sciences, also, that which is desirable on its own account and for the sake of knowing it is more of the nature of Wisdom than that which is desirable on account of its results."²

He also remarked that only knowledge that exists for its own sake is the most divine, and "the most divine science is also most honorable [...]. All the sciences, indeed, are more necessary than this, but none is better."³

Modern civilization has departed from the ideal and the tradition of knowledge that spawned culture. People prefer not to remember these days that theoretical disciplines, and with them the humanities, used to be appreciated not by their supposed usefulness but as a token of the human mind's natural propensity to knowledge. A reversal of values has come about. Because both natural science and social science can be used secondarily in practical activities, they should be subordinated to practice to serve it. That reversal has now reached a point beyond which we are ready to subordinate all knowledge to it. We have vested all our faith in the technocratic and scientific civilization, and we surrender to its demands. The humanities, however, continue to stand up to that pressure, and they cannot do otherwise, lest they stop being themselves.

Now let me say what the humanities actually are, and what their proper place is on the map of all sciences. I have no intention to come up with yet another classification of sciences, as even 19th-century scholars were fervently fond of doing. I only want to warn against throwing in one basket disciplines

² Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book I Part 2, quoted from W. D. Ross' translation in The Internet Classics Archive by Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>).

³ Ibid.

that may differ from one another substantially by the points of their pursuits. The humanities are often taken to include political economy, say, or various specific lines of economic studies, including the very important study of demography; further disciplines often subsumed under the humanities heading include legal studies, political science, or sociology. Yet all those disciplines tend to focus on social phenomena, and thus on society as such, on its organization, functioning, development etc. A few domains of history, which has been developing a sociological bent, fall in that category too. Remarkably, if you try to find out which lines of historical study are practiced most commonly nowadays you will end up with economic history, the history of great social movements including liberation movements, revolutionary movements, history of law, history of the state, etc. All those disciplines, unquestionably important as they are, were able to develop their own research methodologies and theoretical foundations in a short time, so now they generally fit in the current model of science. More importantly, they find practical uses in different situations, which earns them a reputation of being indispensable to society and so makes them respectable and respected.

That kind of disciplines should actually be called social disciplines rather than human disciplines. Human sciences, not to be confused with social sciences, include as before philosophy, language studies, literary theory, literary history, theory and history of the arts, and of culture, several domains of history itself, etc. Their proper study is man, but not as an organism, a physical body, or a social body, and not as a representative of a species, a race, a nation, a class, but as man as such, as a creative individual, as a thinking and creating being, as someone who is unique in his or her work, ingenuity, and destiny. Germans have a good word for that specific subject of study of the humanities, *Geist*. It stands for man's spiritual life devoid of any idealistic or religious connotation, life which is hugely diversified in its contents. A researcher in the humanities, then, will direct his or her attention not to what is typical or mass-scale, but to what is individual and original; not to what is common, but above all to what bursts the confines of commonness or what begins to shape the world by its innovative drive to leave it as something different from what it used to be. This line between social sciences and human sciences is, of course, neither a sharp nor a radical distinction, because no systematization ever is. Think of the many disciplines straddling the fence between different domains. To the humanities, however, man is always going to be their supreme value, and it they base their subsistence on the principle that knowledge that yields self-awareness is one of the noblest kinds of knowledge there are. Precisely that pursuit of know-then-thyself knowledge of man can be viewed not only as the origin of human studies but indeed as much more than that, as a pre-phenomenon of culture, to use a term of Husserl's, a pre-phenomenon of scientific Europe. By asking the question about oneself one changes man's very mode of being. The human being no longer subsists

in the finiteness of the physical body and its material surroundings, stepping over the bounds of material reality and heading to infinity.

It was that pervasive want, the natural drive, to self-awareness and to self-creation, that gave rise to our spiritual culture. It is pervasively humanistic in its origins. However, as the circle of human knowledge was broadening and human perception became increasingly science-oriented, opinions began to be voiced that perhaps the science of man should look for its foundations in nature, or in society. Human science became increasingly sociological and naturalistic in its character, so what used to be a means to the end of knowledge itself became the end, with the original end sinking into oblivion. Is it at all surprising, then, that some people think of the humanities as a luxury, for it has no practical meaning? An analysis of a work by Kant, or of a novel by Joyce, of the structure of a work of literature or a Bach fugue, a scrutiny of the intricacies of medieval Latin or Romanesque architecture, of Bosch's visions of hell or the impressionists' plays with light – none of these can be put to any use in social organization or material production. Why should anyone take that kind of studies seriously, to finance them on equal footing with other sciences?

It was a paradox that Marxists took a favorable view of human studies, even though the humanities did not fit in their science-adulating model of science. But Marxists knew only too well that the humanities had a capacity for arousing human self-awareness, so they promptly tried to take advantage of that feature harnessing human science to serve their project of creating a new man. The effects of their labors are well known. Human science was depraved, subjugated to ideology, and in a deft manner too, by putting the "scientific" method of historical materialism onto it. That particular brand of human science, which uncovered social determinants of cultural developments, disclosing class and historical causes of one class and one party, could count on support. A next paradox was that the sociological method, if not treated narrowly as Marxists wanted it, turned out to be fertile in many an endeavor and capable of casting new light on some phenomena of human creativeness. Sociology of science, of literature, of the arts, any of that can be viewed as a brainchild of that intellectual current. That was how disciplines fitting in the borderland between social and human science were born. Some of them were hybrid entities, but that is another matter. The fact remains that they attracted researchers' attention. However, a different point should be made in this connection. That obstinate striving to impart a sociological bent to the humanities, even though hardly anyone believes that spiritual phenomena are subject to social determinants, betokened a desire to put each and every discipline on an empirical base, and so to make it a science. A drive towards a "scientific" brand of the humanities ensued, that would be practiced using methods appropriate to it. Now what kind of science is one that prefers to adduce reasons rather than supply evidence; to interpret phenomena rather than state facts; to describe events and understand them, rather than explain them completely

away; a science that contents itself with uncovering singularities and relative structural regularities, while failing to acknowledge the idea of a necessary law?

I am not going to discuss at length the “scientification” of the humanities and their proper methods, or attempts to build explanations in them by invoking biology, geography, sociology or psychology. Reductions such as those, despite the enormous effort put in them, ultimately produced meager results. Many volumes were produced to discuss that issue, and we now know that none of those disciplines can provide any relevant *explicandum* to account for the origins of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* or a Shakespearean tragedy. As Leszek Kołakowski put it,

“whatever can be presented quantitative terms in historical study – demography, prices, production, numbers of copies of books printed, numbers of people who have seen a particular stage production, frequency of occurrence of such or other words, or even the popularity of certain beliefs or ideals – all that lies beyond the ends we pursue trying to explain even one creative act in the history of culture.”⁴

And on,

“Should anyone hold that overall animal instincts provide a sufficient explanation of the whole human civilization, it would be perfectly illegitimate to ask why no cow has yet written the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, or built the Milan cathedral.”⁵

To recapitulate, if you hold that science makes sense insofar as that by studying certain phenomena it provides society with a possibility to take control of them and so to put them to definite uses by identifying the right methods or tools, then the humanities does not make sense. Human studies serve no such end. But they do have value in themselves, just as other theoretical disciplines do, as evidence of a very human desire to gain knowledge. The humanities, for one, seek a particular kind of knowledge, man’s knowledge of oneself. The humanities are essentially the exercise of thinking about human thinking, about man’s creative powers finding their embodiment in man’s works. This realization is more than enough to recognize the importance and essence of the humanities. As humans, we understand that perfectly.

If society fails to see the value of man and human cognition, if it is reluctant to defend those values – because it is society that ought to be in a subservient position towards those values, and not conversely – then we are in for a murky future. At this point one should perhaps say a couple of words on the issue of humanism as an attitude and as a program. A humanist – be it a farmer, an engineer, a naturalist, a practical person, a theorist – is as a rule

⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony* (Can the Devil be Saved?), London 1982, p. 70 [retranslated].

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76 [retranslated].

expected to see man as an autonomous value; the oldest adage reflecting that says nothing human is alien to me.

A humanist, however, is more than that, as he also asks the question what it means to be man; and in seeking an answer to that question he finds humanist knowledge to be his natural nourishment. It prevents the humanist from shutting him or herself in the confines of professional pursuits, satisfying a desire to get knowledge, and furnishing a chance to deepen it. Humanists of different epochs always were intellectual elites thanks to their horizons of thought and the breadth of their vision. As an elite they were able to rise above boundaries and various particular interests, and they were elites not just intellectual but on that respected moral values as well. The very notion of humanism holds something else in it, a challenge. A humanist wants man to be truly human, not to waste his or her human traits, nor to renege on it. It is also common knowledge that no cultural reproduction would be possible without elites, no cultural tradition or cultural identity would develop. The masses, of course, are not particularly fond of elites. I do not want to ring Cassandra tones, yet there overwhelming evidence that a technocratic world devoid of humanist values and humanist knowledge that cultivates and nurtures such values is obviously is bound to produce narrowed-down horizons, shallow immediate interests, a stripped-down language, uniform low life tastes, a standardized imagination, etc. We are on a road bound for times when a state-of-the-art printing industry will merely reproduce comic strips, video technology will help us watch brainless films and snuff movies, and our first-rate transports will ship bootleg booze and illegal drugs. If we abandon ourselves to teachings about social utility and listen to voices delimiting boundaries for the community, our culture may lose its humanist trait, a token of distinction that makes it valuable. That is a frightening vision, one pointed out as a danger already by Husserl, a vision of mankind inhabiting with its science and technology ruins of thinking of man, like monkeys in the temples of Angkor.