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Special Focus

Traveling Concepts

The Transfer and Translation of Ideas in the Humanities

THEME 1: CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES

# Scientific Quantification of the Humanities as Moral Degradation

# Abstract

The discussion about the crisis in the humanities often tends to blame the growing demand for practicality and profitability in Western society. Marcuse, in his critique of capitalist culture, argues that this demand for practicality is also expressed in the dominance of positivist trends in philosophy and their empirical counterparts in the social sciences. These “scientific” tendencies quantify hitherto qualitative concepts in the humanities, and thus they enable the practical use and application of these sciences in sophisticated processes of oppression. Yoav Rinon also warns us against the quantified science which has come to dominate all realms of thought.

In this paper, I will examine why engagement in the humanities is morally necessary more than ever before. Stephen Greenblatt and Andrew Delbanco argue that the humanities professor is also an educator – a person who sees his role as not only conveying objective knowledge but as overseeing the moral development of his students, especially by cultivating their independent thinking and self-criticism. Martha Nussbaum, one of the world’s leading advocates for the return of humanist education to academia, describes Socratic teaching as promoting democratic attitudes like that everyone has something to contribute to the truth, everyone has a moral obligation to live a life of self-examination, a life of conscious choices, and not to accept authoritative and societal constants. In our current reality, I argue, academia must not be persuasive and decisive; it must invite students to free dialogue, to liberating conversation, to self-realization, to a conversation of understanding and criticism. As philosopher Martin Buber argues – people change and grow only through free dialogue, strong and genuine involvement, and openness the others. Such interaction erases prejudices and personal interests. These types of interactions overcome prejudices and personal interests. Relationships of closeness and connection to the other are a necessary condition for the existence of a free society.

In an era of high accessibility to information, the danger lurking for us as a society is that the flood of messages will be accepted without critical thinking, without filtering and deep dialogue. The information flowing in from all around often gives those who acquire it without an educational process “simulated wisdom,” and in the words of Plato: “They will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.” (Plato’s *Phaedrus*, 275a-b).