

# The Humanities Conference, Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy, 20-23 July 2004

The Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities was run in conjunction with Monash University's Institute for Global Movements at Monash's Centre in Prato, Italy. Over 700 people from around the world gathered for four balmy days in the height of a Tuscan summer in magnificent surroundings provided by Monash University's historic building, which was formerly a private palazzo and subsequently a club for Prato's textile mill owners. The conference was opened by Franca Bimbi, Member for Prato in the Italian Parliament and an academic at the University of Padua, who reminded participants that contemporary processes of globalisation, offer new opportunities for dialogue and diversity as well as risks of cultural standardization, new forms of slavery and new forms of conflict. She called for the conference to develop a manifesto espousing globalization as a multifaceted process combining universalistic meanings and cultural diversity, pointing out that the humanities had long carried such a tradition. This is not the type of conference that develops manifestos, but the sentiment clearly echoed through the following days' proceedings.

Kevin Murphy, a British art historian academic who works on Prato, provided some local context to conference participants. He pointed out that the most important Christian relic in Italy is held in a box in Prato. This is a small piece of cloth which is claimed to have been woven by the Virgin Mary, handed to Saint Thomas upon her assumption, and brought to Prato by a local merchant. This relic is especially significant here because Prato is Italy's textile manufacturing capital. It has been the central element in establishing local identity and in affirming its autonomy from rival cities. Huge number of people came to see the relic in the middle ages, and the square outside the church which houses it was enlarged to accommodate huge crowds, and the church features an external pulpit for this purpose. Three keys are required to open the box that contains the relic, one of which is held by the church, and two of which are held by the local council. Prato's identity has long centred around its relationship with neighbouring Florence, which has ruled Prato since the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Jack Goody, Mary Kalantzis and David Christian all focused on the profound impact of changing modes of communication on social life and identity. Jack Goody has set out to rethink the humanities, and the world, in terms of modes of communication rather than modes of production, which questions the traditional distinction between technology and culture in the humanities. This distinction does not stand up anthropologically, primarily because language is *the* primary technology of the intellect – we think through the words/tools we have invented. The term 'humanities' is centrally concerned with language, as it is derived from the Latin humanistic studies in the middle ages, which referred to the study of rhetoric. During the Renaissance, 'humanism' became applied to the study of Latin and Greek. This purely Western phenomenon claimed universality. Goody went on to discuss the origins of spoken and written language. Early languages were logographic, pictographic, giving way to a syllabic script about 1500 BC with Greek. This was more abstract than creating but more efficient, needs less memory work. There are 3000 pictographic characters in a Chinese secondary school text; a syllabic system requires around 250 characters needed; there are only 25 characters needed in the Greek alphabet. The Greeks alphabet copied syllabic characters from Persians, and consonantal alphabets such as Hebrew had been around for a long time, back to Mesopotamia and Egypt. Logographic scripts are considered less efficient by many Western humanists, but they make minimal literacy more easily attainable. Because the characters are not phonetic, people can communicate with icons

even if they do not speak the same language. The Chinese empire has always been held together by the script, not by the spoken language, similarly to our use of the number system in many languages. The world could better communicate by all learning Chinese characters and continuing to use their own language, rather than all learning English. Writing changed the storage system for culture, no longer confined to memory or face-to-face communication, and no longer subject to forgetting in the same way. Encyclopaedias of knowledge appeared in China and Europe, and archives were able to be held in libraries.

The development of writing profoundly affected the way we think, and listing, categorization and classification became increasingly important with literacy. The next major change was the advent of the printing press. In China happened 1500 years before Gutenberg, mainly for reproducing prayers, paper money. Printing reduced the cost of books, thus widening access to information. Paper was essential, and Chinese established water-powered paper mills at the birth of the Common Era. The libraries of the Arabic world were enormous up to the renaissance, with 400,000 volumes held in some Islamic libraries as against 600 in the largest European. This was partly due to the availability of paper in the East, and reliance on animal skins to make parchment in Europe, requiring a dozen skins. In Europe paper was first made in Italy in 1200s, until the advent of the printing press, at which time paper mills developed rapidly. Islam did not take up the printing press, instead continuing to rely on armies of scribes, one of the reasons they fell behind in intellectual production. Europe leapfrogged the Islamic world, which had been way ahead up until the development of the press. The first copy of the Koran to be printed was made in Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, for use by travelling merchants. Daily newspapers had existed for centuries before they developed in the Islamic world.

Mary Kalantzis focused on historical changes in the means of production of meaning, and in particular on three modes of communication that characterise oral cultures, writing, and the newer electronic production of meaning. Mary discussed how writing had displaced oral cultures, steadily reducing the number of spoken languages for thousands of years. These 'first languages' began to be lost in the face of the earliest written languages, including Greek and Hebrew. First languages share four common features, she observed:

- Their diversity. There may have been as many as 10,000 languages at 15,000 years BCE, assuming that the average size of an oral language group is around 1000 people.
- The extent of divergence between and within first languages. There was extensive contact between first languages and multilateralism was common very specific to place and group identification.
- Synaesthetic overlay of word, image, gesture, sound and space.
- Their dynamism. They are in a state of relatively rapid and constant change.

Early literate languages developed alongside agriculture in a range of places at a similar time in history. There are some common features:

- More commonalities between literate languages
- More internally consistency
- Different senses are separated out
- More stable, less able to adapt

A series of technological transformations in the Twentieth Century in the production and reproduction of meaning have transformed language. Photography, cinema began to overlay image and written text, a new form of synaesthesia, image, text and sound are more easily overlaid. Small cultures are now more possible, Kalantzis argued, allowing for new forms of multilingualism.

Juliet Mitchell observed that trauma studies have proliferated in the USA, the powerhouse of the humanities, as the humanities and humanism have become increasingly vulnerable. Was the holocaust so inhuman an event that the humanities became preoccupied with the failure of humanism? The importance of trauma has struck her from her work on siblings and in this paper she seeks to draw on the relationship between the primary trauma caused by the experience of replacement by a younger sibling and subsequent traumas, which in many cases are a replaying of this experience. She wants to understand hysteria as a response to trauma, as it has been in the past. She noted the difference between identification with trauma and memorialisation of trauma. Identification leads to repetition, and there is too much of this, whereas memorialisation, the symbolic representation of trauma, allows one to overcome the initial trauma and move on. In Israel, for example, the trauma of the Holocaust has not been overcome, but is still exercising its influence over contemporary political life. Sibling and kinship relationships are the primary models for interpersonal and social relations and we need to understand how these shape our subsequent social and political engagements. In poor countries children are often raising each other and siblings are increasingly important, in the rich countries there are few children and an absence of siblings.

Sergio Bologna took the conference in a different direction, focusing on the role of the humanities in knowledge societies, and in particular in Italian industry. He reminded the audience that management theorist Peter Drucker, who first used the term 'knowledge worker', was educated in the German liberal arts tradition. The new economy of the 1990s 'information society' gave rise to a greater emphasis on knowledge workers. Many knowledge workers have moved from being employees to self-employed, with different views of work, skills and professional relationships. The typical knowledge worker is a freelancer. The condition of knowledge as commodity is completely different from the understanding of knowledge dominant in the university. Because knowledge workers are not included in union or business groups, they have limited bargaining power, and consequently Italian governments have not developed policies to adequately tap the potential contribution of knowledge workers, instead shoring up the rigidities of employment in government and medium and large firms. The market requires codified knowledge, leaving little room for creativity and innovation. Education, therefore, needs to provide resources for graduates to live, work in increasingly fluid environments and citizenship.

Mick Dodson reflected that Aboriginal people in Australia have an ambivalent relationship with the humanities. The political freedoms and rights that the humanities had helped to popularise were not granted to indigenous people. Scholars theorized the noble savage, which also did no great service to indigenous peoples. The current Australian government, he argued, has launched an assault on indigenous peoples that is the most intense assault since British colonization and the rights of indigenous people in Australia have been disregarded. Quoting his brother Pat Dodson, he claimed that to Aboriginal people 'the talk of extinguishing native title' sounds very much like talk of 'extinguishing natives'. Prime Minister John Howard has refused to engage in reconciliation, demonstrating a deep-seated disrespect for indigenous people. His decision to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission reveals a profound disrespect towards indigenous peoples. Howard argues that recognizing indigenous rights is a challenge to mainstream Australian society. This is a return to classical assimilation policy, setting indigenous people outside of the mainstream, suggesting that Australian society is under attack from its own fringes. Most indigenous leaders reject both radical self-determination and assimilation policies, instead working towards a balance between autonomy and integration. One of the core issues here is how we should look back on the history of Australia, with Howard caricaturing intellectual critique in the humanities that is sympathetic towards Aboriginal people as a 'black armband view of history'.

David Christian, who teaches 'Big History', aims to help students cross divides between disciplines, and in particular between History and the sciences. Sciences have given us an unprecedented grip on nature due to their protocols for testing information, and for weeding out unreliable information. Empirical historical research, he believes, has many of the same features. The second feature of a science, the development of grand unified theories, failed in History in the nineteenth century. Some argue that this is due to a difference between different types of reality, between social and natural life. Christian argues that there ought to be an epistemological continuum between the natural and social sciences. There have been many efforts to find the 'bridge' between the sciences and humanities, such as E.O. Wilson's crude sociobiology. Christian argues that we shouldn't try to expand Darwinian science into History, but to develop a new paradigm. Shared learning is a unique characteristic of humans, not shared by other species. A capacity to communicate that is dramatically more powerful than other species. Learning can be stored and communicated, so that we adapt collectively to our environments. The collective store is culture, and history is the study of collective learning. Collective learning is rapid, accelerating, autocatalytic, and improvements in mode of communication are of strategic significance to the species. His 'Big History' approach is an effort to develop unified accounts of this collective memory.

Krishnan Kumar also argued that the humanities and social sciences belong together, but that we need different tools to understand the social and natural world, due to the role of meaning and subjective interpretation in the human world which is not an issue for the natural sciences. History has the capacity to be a unifying principle in the humanities, but it has been too territorial in the past, and too dismissive of other disciplines. The idea of a unified canon is very difficult to sustain and we should not try to bring it back. Individual disciplines do have a canon which unites it, and all that sociologists have in common is a familiarity with Marx, Weber and Durkheim. It is important to the community of scholars that there are shared rituals and a sense of founders. We should think of the humanities not as the moral sciences or the human sciences, but the historical sciences in that they all seek to understand changes in human behaviour in time. Marx provides a valuable model for the historical understanding of all things. Historical understanding is central to nationalism, however legitimate such histories may be considered by academics. It is too easy to dismiss the mainstream understandings of national history, but it is not enough to dismiss these as myth. Scholars should try to understand why such understandings are successful and what purposes they serve.

Tom Nairn asked whether humanism is a viable alternative to the dominance of neoconservative culture in the 1990s? His paper seeks to contribute to a humanistic revision of history by drawing on the work of Georg Henry Von Reight, a Finn of Scottish background. From 1960s to 1990s Von Reight wrote on philosophy, and his most important work was a lecture on the humanities he gave at the University of Kansas in 1977. What counts most about humanism according to Von Reight is its 'fighting attitude to life'. It is not a collection of wimpish attitudes, but an upheaval against the key authorities of the times. At the time Von Reight used humanism to oppose the cold war orthodoxies of Right and Left. He opposed economic determinism, instead emphasizing human agency as fundamental to language and social action. In the beginning was not the word, according to Von Reight, it was the meaningful deed. Nairn reflected in closing that science was originally based in the humanities, but the conceptual poverty of contemporary technoscience has led it to dehumanize social life.

Throughout the conference there was considerable amount of reflection on the perceived devaluing of the humanities in universities and other institutions. Lamenting the privileging of scientific and vocational knowledge over humanistic understanding, many speakers restated the familiar appeals that the humanities should be valued more than they currently appear to be. The

humanities, many speakers asserted, are key contributors to the ‘cultural enrichment’ of the nation, and in the development of ‘critical reasoning’. Fifteen years ago, the Australian scholar Ian Hunter observed wryly that, ‘Academics who put the notions of culture and disinterestedness through the critical shredder in the 1960s have recently been rummaging through the scraps in an attempt to reassemble them’. By thrashing out these core issues – the relationship of the humanities to cultural globalisation, to science and to the market – this conference is becoming a key forum in which humanities scholars explore ways to assert the social relevance of their disciplines in ways that avoid both technocratic instrumentalism and dreamy romanticism.

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