



Report of the *Third International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities: Towards Cultural Sustainability: the Humanities in a 'Knowledge Society'*

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Humanities Conference Report

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Opening Plenary

The third International Conference in the Humanities opened with a presentation by Tom Nairn who spoke on the contribution of the Humanities to address contemporary change. Tom described a seachange since the 2004 Humanities Conference held in Prato, Italy which has seen an extraordinary imaginative power to reinvent ourselves even though it is difficult to imagine how it will counter neo-liberalism, fundamentalism and ecological destruction.

The metaphor of 'breathable air', drawn from Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* can enable a better grasp on the shape of this seachange in contemporary society and culture. For Gellner, 'industrial man' is a species which can only function in artificially manufactured air. The breathable air of industrialization was, for Gellner, nationalism. This held from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Cold War but now this artificial supply of air is being replaced by another: that of democratization.

The rise of democratization can be explained by analogy with global warming. On the social stage something equivalent to global warming is occurring; what might be called 'democratic warming' which is rapid, erratic, expressed in roundabout and diversion. According to Tom, 'no ruse of reason is at work here'—though it is a welcome and hopeful sign. We are entering the world of 'democratism' in which democracy ceases to be a static process or a family heirloom. On the contrary, it has become something like a necessary condition of global society—part of the air we breathe—no matter how ambiguous and fraught with peril that it may be.

The rise of 'democratic warming' can be linked to the end of the Cold War, which saw the repression of politics. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted, the 1950s and 1960s saw the downgrading of politics and agency. But the world wide triumph of capitalism after 1989, according to Hobsbawm's argument, had seen a process of re-composition. Something wholly unforeseen came about: the capitalist system was now alone; a fact that had previously seemed almost inconceivable. In the 1960s important holdouts of conservatism remained alongside capitalism—organized religion, for example. Now the hold of these has significantly weakened. According to Tom, we live now in with 'much more powerful ideology machines'. This is the air we now breathe and people are choking on it.

Neo-liberalism now finds itself alone. It no longer exists in symbiosis with other structures and ways of life. Market forces are no longer separate from the world that

they are transforming. The response that is taking shape has seen a ground shift evident in an inchoate demand for more and other air to breathe. This response can only be made on ground of internationality. Nationalism is now being succeeded in the sense of being replaced in stages by forces of what has happened in the 1990s and up to the present. Something else is needed to make the air breathable. The only plausible candidate is democracy, or more precisely ‘democratism’.

This process can be seen in the great demonstrations that have succeeded one another since 2003 with the outbreak in the war on Iraq. It is evident in the great wave of changes in Latin America and changes such as the Euro vote—France and Netherlands against the Euro and the abrupt calls for constitutional reform since the 2005 UK election which were partially marginalized by the July bombings.

This wave of change from below is creating a new air of refusal making it possible to say ‘no’ to change. In this respect it is recognizably similarly to late 1960s in the emphasis on participation. This shift is not a new short-cut or formula for the foreseeable transformation; it’s the formation of the necessary condition for global modernity, not the sufficient condition for a short cut to utopia in the same way that fascism and communism were. This is democratic warming: the recognition that there is no tolerable society without this factor being built into it.

In this respect such changes are perfectly compatible with Gellner’s analysis. Democracy in this sense is an unfolding process, not something that solves problems, but rather something that makes problem generally soluble. It is the opposite of what Colin Leys (?) calls ‘thin democracy’—the aim of democratism is the transformation of ‘thin democracy’ into ‘thick democracy’ or ‘participative democracy’. Democratism—the new air—cannot be manufactured by capitalism and can not be imported from older social forms. It can only come from transformation of agency. It is also made possible by the knowledge society and development of new forms of communication. The humanities have a different role in this process than the one assigned to them during the Cold War. The humanities contribute as allies of democratism. The new air is inherently humanity informed and inclined than the air of neo-liberalism.

Juliet Mitchell

Juliet picked up on the notion of ‘thin democracy’ to look at the question of gender and the role of feminism in building democracy. By way of entry, Juliet cited a scene from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* published in 1937. The book is the story of black woman, Janie Stark in Florida recounting her childhood. She had been raised and played with white children. At age six, though, she saw a photo of herself and recognized herself to be black.

This is an iconic image of recognizing race and gender, one that shows a ‘horizontal’ approach to thinking about gender and race, rather than a ‘vertical’ one. In other words, Jamie didn’t think about race and gender in relation to her parents (that is vertically) but rather compared herself to her peers (that is, the ‘horizontal’ relationships).

Feminism has made an important contribution to thinking horizontally in so far as it emphasizes ‘side relations’—peers, family, siblings—rather than vertical relations of descent. In this, and the notion of democratism, Feminism and other similar movements introduced something new to how we understand the world in so far as people did not look to their parents in understanding their social world, but to their peers.

One example of this change is demographic changes, particularly the transition to non-reproductive societies; that is societies in which people not reproducing their populations. This is linked to the fact that people do not grow up to be mothers and fathers, which is a move away from vertical structures. This transition is not uniform; it is the wealthier countries that are not reproducing.

Similarly, the backlash against feminism is always in terms of vertical thinking about reproduction. The difference of the ‘essential difference’ between men and women reproduction is claimed to be source of all other difference. However, it ought to be noted that this idea of the ‘essential difference’ as based on a narrow, vertical model of reproduction. The point here is not that that reproduction is unimportant, but rather that the over emphasis on the vertical model of reproduction too narrow.

One example of the narrowness of vertical perspectives is contemporary changes in childcare around the world, particularly ‘child childcare’ where children are cared for by other children. UNICEF deplores child childcare which, to some extent at least, is quite right since it is associated with poverty. Specifically, if child childcare disadvantages girls more since it is girls who usually end up looking after children. Juliet suggested that the concern here is on child-headed households.

However, looked at in more horizontal terms, it is possible to see child childcare in more positive terms. In particular, child childcare demonstrates that gender difference is not an irreducible difference. There is, after all, only minimal difference between boys and girls. It is how one interprets the difference that is important. Children learn to be children as social beings, in part at least, through childcare. In the west, we have lost child childcare; children do not tend to take care of children in many advanced societies. In poorer societies, though, both sexes look after children, without stigma. It is a given that that boys and girls alike look after helpless children. In advanced societies, children do not take role in caring for children. We have not thought about factoring this into our models of reproduction and child rearing. Our models need to take into account human caring rather than simply about reproduction in the demographic transition.

Jack Goody

Bill Cope introduced Jack Goody and announced that he had just received a letter to say that he has been knighted. Jack’s keynote address was drawn from his new book *The Theft of History* and, in a sense, drew together the themes introduced by Tom (democracy) and Juliet’s analysis of the limits of the focus on ‘vertical’ analyses of social relations.

Jack began by saying that he’d recently visited a Department of Cultural Studies in a university in Turkey. The Department included comparative literature, which seemed

mainly concerned with French philosophers. However few seemed to know much about Arabic poets, suggesting that the humanities seemed to be non-comparative in this way. The humanities are dominated by European—Greek and Latin learning, in particular. Going back to the Renaissance, to the 1600s and what was happening in Europe, there has been a tendency to ignore what was happening in non-European societies.

This point is well illustrated by the recent history of medicine, which has excluded the great Arabic philosophers. Yet Islamic civilization had its own developments in medicine. When drawing direct lines back to antiquity there has been a tendency to exclude what was happening in Middle East and Asia. A similar blindness can be noted with regards to politics. For example, annual elections of leaders occurred in Carthage showing that democracy is not a purely European notion. On the contrary, it is part of the Asiatic tradition as well. Many early societies had highly democratic systems, for example—direct elections and so on. It is therefore a myth to think that the West got democracy from the Greeks while Asia was embroiled in despotism. Such ways of thinking are perpetrated by both the Weberian and Marxist traditions. A myth is erected due to a concentration on the classic tradition. In short, a whole line of historical thought that excludes the rest of the world.

Any society with writing could go back to earliest sources and find Renaissances. The ‘Europeanisation’ of these things creates a straightforward tradition from Rome to the present.

A number of the implications flowed from this blindness. Citing his own work as an example, Jack explained that when he wrote his first piece on literacy, he had emphasized the role of the Greek alphabet in initiating an ancient tradition. However, he didn’t pay attention to the fact that the alphabet was a Phoenician tradition. The Hebrew bible, for example, was written without vowel sounds.

More generally, this focus leads to a distorted idea of ancient civilizations. The great problem of emphasizing the Greeks is that they left a great deal of literature. Yet the works of the Carthaginians rival those of ancient Greece and Rome yet were destroyed. However, because we don’t have the Carthaginian’s literature, we tend to think of them in a quite different way to those civilizations whose literary records have come down to us.

Patrick Baert

Patrick Baert explored the relevance of American pragmatism to the philosophy of social science, through a discussion of the question of why should we study the social world? He was specifically interested in the influence of pragmatism on the social sciences, particularly the work of Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein. The philosophy of social science reflects on the kinds of methods at work in the social sciences.

The theoretical backbone of pragmatism can be summarized by the following three ideas.

Firstly, pragmatists are skeptical of transcendental forms of inquiry; that is, those who seek atemporal foundations for social science which is the idea that we can step outside of history. Pragmatists argue that this is not possible. Pragmatists argue that

people can never escape the conceptual system to which they belong, although this does not mean that knowledge is subjective since this would assume knowledge does not adhere to reality.

Secondly, pragmatists are skeptical about what is called 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Dewey). This is the idea that knowledge is about mirroring a world 'out there'. For pragmatists, reality is not already made and waiting to be discovered. Rather, it is always being made. As such, knowledge is more active way of coping with the world.

Thirdly, pragmatists hold that knowledge involves 'cognitive interests'. To explain: there are a number of goals that we can aim at. For example, we can aim at understanding, critique, self-emancipation or self-understanding. Pragmatists hold that none of these cognitive interests are prior to others. For pragmatists one should however seek new forms of knowledge aimed at specific goals.

Relating American pragmatism to the philosophy of the social sciences, if pragmatism is taken seriously, one can not take seriously the transcendental view of social science exemplified by Popper and realists. Such people are searching for the deep structures of social science. For the pragmatists, there is no unity among the natural scientific disciplines. Biology, for example operates quite differently from physics. The idea that there is a unity across the natural sciences is very problematic. The closer we look the less clear are the boundaries between science and non-science. Even within one discipline, there is no single within social science except perhaps very bland and uninteresting ones.

Secondly, if pragmatism is taken seriously, one should treat naturalist models for social science with a fair degree of scepticism. Naturalism posits the unity of the natural and social sciences. If there is no single method then there is no unity. May be we should decide what kinds of objectives that we want and decide the kind of social science we do.

Thirdly, taking the pragmatist approach, one ought to treat the representational view of knowledge—the idea that the aim of social science is mapping the social world—with scepticism. The representational view of knowledge leads to the belief that we need to transcend divisions to macro and micro and structure and agency to get complete mapping. This, however, this is an impossible enterprise. It makes more sense to see knowledge as active as a way of bringing things about.

The final implication of the pragmatist perspective is that if we take are to take a particular cognitive interest seriously we should take self-reflection seriously. We should assess and reassess knowledge. Knowledge, on this view is like a conversation. Much can be gained from actively pursuing dialogue, not with the pursuit of universal theories but rather to recognize other traditions. On this view, then, research is not about getting the picture right or complete, but shedding new light on what has been studied.

Ted Honderich

Ted Honderich began with the question of whether philosophy should constrain itself somehow in thinking about big questions, such as questions of right and wrong; questions such as Palestine, 9/11, the Iraq war, and the London Bombings on 7/7. Of course historians, philosophers, political journalists, partisans, all have a role to play in questions of right and wrong. However 'analytic philosophy' has a special relationship to such question. Analytic philosophy is distinguished by a form of logic which strives for clarity of analysis, consistency and validity and completeness. While historians and others also strive for these, they can not do it with the single mindedness of the analytic philosopher.

An example is the Israel–Palestine conflict. In beginning his analysis, Ted drew three distinctions between Zionism, neo-Zionism and historical Zionism. Zionism refers to the justification and defence of Israel in its 1948 borders more or less; neo-Zionism to the justification and defence of the expansion of Israel beyond its 1948 borders and historical Zionism, which refers to the development to some extent to establish a Jewish state in Palestine

The UN Security Council condemned Israel's neo-Zionism. Such condemnation is usually vetoed by the US. UN resolutions can not decide the question of right and wrong. The legal does, however, slide over into the moral. While doctrines of Human Rights, for example the UN Declaration of Human Rights, can be of some help here, it depends on what human rights are. One way of thinking of human rights is in terms of moral rights. An example of moral rights is education—children have a moral right to education, for example. Moral rights are such that it is a) right that the claimant enjoys the right and that b) what is gotten is right. Moral rights, which includes human rights, inevitably conflict.

Democracy is a good example. Democracy is often recommended on the grounds of the freedom entailed by it, namely the freedom to vote. The view here is that more views makes for better decisions. Yet this only follows if people have an equal say. However, we live in 'hierarchic democracies' where this is not the case. How much freedom I have depends on how much freedom you have. If you have a gun, for example, then my freedom is severely curtailed.

To decide between moral rights, one popular approach after Rawls has been to develop decision procedures, which will decide between conflicting rights in a fair and objective manner. The problem with such approaches, however is that it is a nonsense to think that people choose the decision procedure before you know what it will produce. He argued that no one would choose a decision procedure unless they had a pretty good idea of what it would produce.

Another way in to the question of moral rights based on a common human nature. Human nature can be thought of as composed of fundamental human desires, including: a decent length of life; bodily quality of life (absence of pain etc); freedom and power; the goods of relationships; self and self respect; and culture which includes religion, knowledge and education. A good life is one in which one takes rational steps towards these. However, efforts to achieve these goods should be economic, in so far as they should not cost more than they produce. A bad life, in turn, can be said to be one that denies these great goods.

Applying this to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it would be wrong to think that one could begin with the principle of humanity and deduce a position on Palestine. Rather, it can be suggested that we all converge on something like a principle of humanity.

Ted closed by making a number of propositions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including the defence of Israel on the grounds that the Holocaust made the homeland of the Jewish people a human necessity. It thus followed that Zionism is right and the defence of Israel is quite legitimate. At the same time, he noted that after the 1967 war, the Intafada, the Palestinians fought with such force as to make one realize that they were a people with a claim to their own state. Ted noted in closing that the typical response to such propositions is to be accused from both sides for defending Zionism or, alternatively, for anti-Semitism, for defending the rights of the Palestinians to a homeland. Both positions, he suggested, should be regarded with disdain.

Jeffrey T Schnapp

Jeffrey T Schnapp's address offered a model for rethinking the humanities through the Crowds project that he is currently involved in. Jeffrey suggested that the humanities typically focus on individualized model of knowledge production which are tied to print. They can, in short, be thought of as expression of the 'monastery' mode of production (though the reality the monastery was more complex). The future of humanities training and production requires a shift away from individual production to inter-disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Although everyone likes such ideas he noted that the practitioners within the humanities have been slow to take them up unlike the social sciences.

Another model for thinking about the humanities is in terms of the lab, a concrete example of which is the Stanford Humanities Lab which started work in 2000. The Stanford Humanities Lab functions as network of large-scale, long-term projects. One way of thinking about it, is as a series of Chinese boxes that expand out from managers. The Lab takes proposals and ideas and develop them out from standard ideas of work. It also functions as incubators, nurturing projects along with innovative new forms that move away from print-based bias.

The current work of the Lab includes the development of animating archives, social software and collaborative authoring tools. The focus of the Lab is to move away from the monastery mode of production, towards collaboration and interdisciplinarity work, with the aim, in particular, of drawing younger scholars to the humanities. The Lab also seeks to produce knowledge through hands-on projects, rather than just studying knowledge. Finally, it is concerned with the 'big humanities', drawing on the analogy of 'big science'. The big humanities move away from specialization, though not with the aim of erasing specific expert knowledges but about drawing on them in new ways.

An example of big humanities work is the Crowds Project. This is a long term project that seeks to complex cultural and social history of the rise and fall of the modern crowd. The basis of the project is the fact that crowds are central to modernity and the rise of the social sciences. Crowds were an obsession of the sociologists of the late

1800s and early 1900s. The aim of the Crowds Project is to produce a single work that would provide panorama of the work on crowds. The project will produce a stand-alone book as well as a series of web archives that can continually grow and develop. See: <http://shl.stanford.edu/crowds/>.

Siva Vaidhyanathan

Siva Vaidhyanathan offered a macro version of Jeffrey's notion of the big humanities in science and technology. His aim, specifically, was to grow beyond C.P. Snow description of 'two cultures'. Siva argued that practitioners within the humanities have relegated themselves to a 'heartbreaking fragmentation of the humanities' which threatens the humanities themselves. To ensure the continuing relevance of the humanities, practitioners need to learn co-operation and collaboration. This is particularly pressing in the current cultural and political environment, where the war around truth is being lost to conservatives and standards of truth and evidence would seem not to matter any more. In particular, critical thinking is losing ground. In the United State, for example, some surveys show that more people believe in UFO's than believe in evolution and many people in the US believe that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11. Against such a backdrop, new models of collaboration are needed to give hope to people.

One attempt to further collaboration and co-operation within the humanities is Critical Information Studies. Critical Information Studies aims to provide the intellectual tools and resources to the 'free culture' movement and to partner with activists and hacktivists. The roots of Critical Information Studies lie in the battle over control of information in the academy. This concerns not just copyright but includes efforts to protect local and native cultures. This includes examining trademarks, public semiotics and 'semiotic theft', code and technology and patents. Critical Information Studies is also concerned with getting beyond negative liberty, to look at the capacity to speak and communicate.

Critical Information Studies is committed to cultural democracy, semiotic democracy and information democracy and political democracy. This is particularly pressing given the questions raised about the management of recent US elections and the use of computerized voting along with the connections between those who produce voting machines and the Bush Administration. Projects for Critical Information Studies include scholarship, criticism, the development and support for the open-access journal movement.

Mary Kalantzis

Mary Kalantzis closed the Conference with a note on ‘strategic optimism. Globalisation and diversity have become two of grounding ideas of our time. There are tensions between these two ideas. For example, globalization is often portrayed as leading to homogenization. Certainly globalization, in certain guises, can contradict diversity, as evidenced by the ubiquity of McDonalds, Microsoft Windows, to the US attacks on Iraq. Nevertheless, while certain forms of globalization can be against diversity, there is reason to suggest that the tide is turning.

To see this, there have been three globalizations. The first globalization saw the spread of human over the globe. The people’s of the first globalization dealt with difference through language. The symbol systems of peoples of first globalization kept remaking the world.

Second globalization was associated with the global spread of farming. This happens independently in five different spaces over a period of 6000 years. Writing also developed in four different places over thousands of years. This created new forms of inequality. The relative simultaneity of these events suggests that people were talking. This second globalization brought not just sameness within groups, but also sameness *across* groups. Technology and farming grows across societies, for example.

Modernity arose near the end of this second globalization. On four new continents, people began to speak European languages. High modernity takes homogenizing and standardizing processes to the extreme. The modern workplace, takes this to the extreme. The Fordist production line was the epitome of such standardization and homogenization.

In education too, the modern learner conceived of as one who quietly and passively receives truth.

Contemporary societies are beginning to do difference differently. For example, in places like East Timor and Bosnia the attempt to replace local powers with strong state has not worked. We have found civil societies which govern themselves. The US—the country that won the second world war and implemented the Marshall Plan—is now finding it impossible to pacify two small countries. In communications, similarly, the internet is not ruled by a state but a global consortium. The preservation of the cultural commons is producing flat economies of scale. In production, crude command structures are being replaced by new forms of entrepreneurialism. Products need to be customized to particular subjectivities. The command society gives way to the society of reflexivity.

These changes suggest that five thousand years after the first globalization, the next globalization may see echoes of the first globalization—a third globalization based around difference and diversity.

TALKING CIRCLES

This year's Humanities Conference saw the introduction of Talking Circles, a new, semi-structured format which asks groups of delegates to develop an agenda for action of where the humanities ought to be headed. The feedback from the Talking Circles suggested that most people were generally happy with the talking circle format and ought to be expanded. Some felt however, that the time allocated for Talking Circles was far too short for the large questions that were being posed. One solution that was proposed was to have fewer streams with greater thematic focus. At the same time, delegates felt that the interdisciplinary nature of the conference was a positive, and that it should be maintained. One suggestion to ensure diversity while have more focus was to have specialists from different perspectives addressing a particular theme.

Three clear themes emerged from the Talking Circles: democracy, the connection between the humanities and the sciences and the importance of fostering interdisciplinary studies within the humanities.

Democracy: Talking Circle participants expressed concerns about the state of and various threats to democracy. Threats include the neo-liberal world view, those who like us to believe that democracy can be delivered to the world's populations on the tail fins of a patriot missile, large corporations (particularly companies such as Microsoft which impose limits on the sharing of information) as well as the corporationization and commodification of the university. In particular, the commodification of knowledge and the corporatization of the university were also seen as key constraints on the realization of a more democratic society.

Participants argued for greater efforts of scholars in the humanities in pursuing and promoting democracy. And not just any sort of democracy, but a thick conception of democracy. Central here were questions of access to knowledge and information and social and political participation.

The Humanities and the Sciences: The connection between the humanities and the sciences was another dominant theme. Particular emphasis was given to the role of technology in reshaping and transforming social life and what it is to be human. Humanities scholars, it was suggested, need to engage with and work with technology.

The importance of interdisciplinary work: On this point, people gave particular emphasis to the interdisciplinary focus of the humanities. A core problem here, however, is how this is to be realized in the present form. In particular, there is often little concrete incentive to engage in inter-disciplinary work. In some cases, scholars in the humanities work against this, by treating inter-disciplinary work as a lesser achievement—particularly in the development of a career—than those who work alone.