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# Humanities: an Unfinished Project

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**M**y good high school friend decided to be a doctor rather early, already in elementary school. When we would meet at the university, which was not happening all that often, he liked to compare our professions (even though we were just beginning to practice them), wondering loudly why anyone would choose something as trifling as literature if one could do something useful, for instance, treat people. Such reasoning seemed cheap to me back then (my decisions are better by virtue of being mine), logically feeble (and what if everyone became a doctor?) and unjust (does this mean that what I like to do in my life is pointless?) but today I see that the argument about the usefulness of applied sciences and the uselessness of the humanities goes beyond theoretical deliberations, and is more than a question of idiosyncratic choices, touching instead upon crucial public issues, as I presume.

The heat of the debate on several issues concerning the humanities (whether they should be financially supported or left to die out<sup>1</sup>, whether they should broaden

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1 Sadly, this debate is not as fervent in Poland as it is in the U.S. where it takes many forms. Recent books by Nussbaum, Menand, Taylor, Fish (referenced further in this text) concern the university but their reflection focuses on the humanities.

their scope or narrow it down, whether they have applications in real life or not) shows that the crux of the problem lies not in the difference between natural sciences and the humanities (establishing it is the favorite pursuit of taxonomic minds) or their true nature (the pastime of theoreticians who perused dictionaries when they grew up) but in the question whether they have a social goal to achieve today, or not. In other words, the question is if and where one can find for them an external justification. As Louis Menand rightly observes in his recent book, *The Marketplace of Ideas*<sup>2</sup> the problem emerged more or less two decades ago when the humanities were affected by the “crisis of institutional legitimation”<sup>3</sup> – or, to put it in simpler terms, when those outside the universities began to wonder what it is that the scholars in humanities actually do and whether their work has any social justification, and whether it is possible that the university professors, above all those who have a steady job, lead comfortable lives – especially in the West – cultivating a profession, or rather a hobby, useless to everyone except them.

The most common view (once formulated clumsily but hurtfully by my friend, a student of medicine) assumes that the humanities have no justification at all as they do not create anything, do not produce any goods, and as such should not be supported by the state (the representative of the tax payers) or private sponsors, who should rather spend their money on the development of sciences useful to everyone: medical sciences that may produce a cure to terminal diseases or a pill for longevity, engineering sciences whose inventions will enable us to lead comfortable lives, economic sciences whose theories will contribute to a better distribution of the acquired wealth so that the rich are not getting poorer and that the poor are getting richer, and all other sciences that will make human life more efficient. From this point of view the humanities do not improve anything, but – on the contrary – make thinking about a better life much harder, weakening the common sense that knows how things should look and be. Studies of the Italian sonnet find no application outside of Italian studies, scholarship on Polish Enlightenment novel are of interest to maybe a dozen people in the world (speaking optimistically), and arguments on the logical status of fictional sentences take place in low-circulation journals of logic. There is no chance for the humanities to have the kind of clout that the biological, technological, or computer sciences do, and so a serious question arises whether the humanities can be justified in any way, or perhaps: can the humanities find any justification

2 Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas. Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010).

3 Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*, 61.

outside the university walls, or even inside them, in the eyes of increasingly mercantile administrators deciding about university budgets. It is not the question about what the humanities really are but whether they still have any mission to fulfill.

The debate on the issue is, as we all know, heated and has been going on for a long time. From several important voices I have selected four that I find most distinctive, in order to formulate, among this polyphony, my own proposals.

### Compensation

I will begin with the oldest among the views of interest to me, formulated by Odo Marquard in 1985. In the speech entitled “On the Unavoidability of the Human Sciences”<sup>4</sup> he posits that the more modern the modern world becomes, the more unavoidable the humanities become. Why? Because modernization of the world – here Marquard clearly supports Max Weber’s thesis about the disenchantment of the modern world – means, among others, that the humanities become increasingly unnecessary as a result of the expansion of natural sciences. The experiment supersedes the narrative, Marquard says, which results in life that is impoverished, more technical and shallow, less connected to the individual experience. This is why human sciences, pushed back to the margin, should fulfill a compensatory function toward the neutralization of our historical (that is – also individual) experience resulting from the expansion of the experimental sciences and the homogenization and globalization of this experience that blur its unique character. According to Marquard, we are human more as a consequence of tradition and history, that we belong to, than of modernization that is supposed to liberate us from this particularism. In other words, our particularity means that our life is woven out of individual, idiosyncratic convictions, strongly rooted in the historical experience whose uniqueness is viewed by natural sciences, keeping pace with modernization, as a complication in the scientific conquest of reality. But, as Marquard rightly stresses, human sciences are not opposed to modernization as such. If they are to compensate for that which is degraded as a consequence of the ascendancy of the scientific worldview, they also enable further modernization. To make this possible, the humanities must again make closer to man that which has become removed from him. Reclaim what has been alienated. This should be made possible through the art of interpretation, in other words, hermeneutics, seen not as a theory of understanding, as Dilthey would have it, but as the art of telling stories.

4 Odo Marquard, “On the Unavoidability of the Human Sciences”, in *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

For human beings *are* their stories. But stories have to be told. This is what the human sciences do: they compensate for the damage done by modernization by telling stories. And the more things are objectified, the more, in compensation, stories have to be told. Otherwise humans die of narrative atrophy<sup>5</sup>.

This leads Marquard to the following conclusions. Atrophy of narration results in the liquidation of diverse points of view and raises one of them, the narration of the unbound progress of the human kind, above all others. By eliminating all opposing stories, opposing points of view, it also causes ambiguity to become the basis for the interpretation of reality. Marquard views the birth of the humanities as a reaction to the traumatic experience of religious wars always sparked by the argument over the interpretations of the Holy Scripture. The humanities, by introducing to our historical experience the category of ambiguity (or: by showing that our historical experience cannot be unambiguous especially if it is historical), soothe the trauma of the early modernity that leads to never-ending arguments over what reality really means. If being human entails being interwoven into many different stories whose meaning can be read in several different ways, then, Marquard says, the mission of the humanities is to multiply the stories about human experience and to interpret them in various ways.

### Democracy

In *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*<sup>6</sup>, Martha C. Nussbaum argues that contemporary democracy needs citizens equipped with three basic traits: “the ability to think critically”, “the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a «citizen of the world»” and “the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person”<sup>7</sup>. These three basic abilities, necessary for the success of contemporary and future democracy, must be taught by the modern university, mainly at arts and humanities departments. When she speaks of “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world

5 Marquard, “On the Unavoidability”, 98.

6 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

7 Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 7.

we live in”<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum mentions “the spirit of humanities”. If democracy, she argues, demanded such traits since the day of Socrates (although, naturally, it did not necessarily realize them) and those traits constitute the teaching basis in the humanities, then clearly human studies have a strictly political dimension and all politicians who fail to see their significance in the lives of democratic societies are shortsighted (or suicidal). Nussbaum essentially repeats Marquard’s argumentation, except that instead of modernization she speaks of the neoliberalization of contemporary society concentrated only on increasing the GDP (of course, it is easy to prove that the neoliberal narrative is one of the most important modern narrations). She asks: “What will we have, if these trends continue? Nations of technically trained people who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations”<sup>9</sup>. Human sciences should prepare the coming generations to think about themselves and about the others (empathy), about what is and what could be (imagination) as well as about how it is (common sense) and how it could be (criticism). In this sense, they should also compensate for the damages caused by the greedy capitalism.

### Stimulation

If Nussbaum believes that philosophy should precede democracy, Richard Rorty believes the exact opposite. His thesis about the priority of democracy over philosophy<sup>10</sup> leads to another one: about the superiority of solidarity over objectivity. In *Solidarity or Objectivity?* published first in 1985, Rorty outlines the following alternative: “There are two principal ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give sense to those lives”<sup>11</sup>. The first one is by telling stories about the ways people relate to the community they belong to – this community may be actual (family, culture, society etc.), actual but distant in time (tradition), or just imagined (literary characters, cultural symbols etc.) The second way is about describing oneself in relation to nonhuman reality. Nonhuman reality is a kind of “reality” unmediated by human perception or a reference to what other people said about it. Rorty calls the first way “a desire for solidarity” (the basis for democracy) and the second one – “a desire for objectivity” (the basis for philosophy).

8 Ibid., 7.

9 Ibid., 142.

10 Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy”, in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 175-196.

11 Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity”, in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1. 21-34. 21.

The desire for objectivity makes the subject continuously move beyond his or her own historical entanglements while the desire for solidarity – on the contrary – strengthens the sense of belonging to a historical or only imagined though well-established (in his or her opinion) community.

Rorty complements this useful dichotomy with another, equally important one. He opens *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing*, one of his most famous essays, by contrasting two different ways of talking about physics, morality and philosophy. One of them assumes that we want to know “what things really are”, to reach for a hidden content covered by numerous prejudices and convictions. Rorty calls this approach “vertical” and sums it up as a “relationship between representations and what is represented”<sup>12</sup>. The second approach has a much humbler goal: it wants to understand how people have so far subordinated the world using various tools in order to – perhaps – draw a lesson from this. This approach is called “horizontal” and it is a way of re-interpreting the already existing interpretations. There are different preliminary assumptions behind these two ways. The first one – vertical, metaphysical, realistic – assumes the existence beyond the network of changing appearances that we ourselves produce of an independent being that we should strive for, that we should recognize and whose parameters we should relate. The second – horizontal, historical, nominalist – does not care about that which exists beyond our empirical life, in other words, beyond language.

Bearing all that in mind, we can now move on to the humanities. These would be located, of course, on the horizontal, nominalist, democratic, historical and communal side, against all philosophical longings for the truth about what the world would look like if we went beyond confusing, individual points of view. Due to this fact Rorty presents an interesting vision of the humanistic intellectual in a short but substantial essay from 1989, entitled *The Humanistic Intellectual. Eleven Theses*. He believes we should not focus so much on the common features of various departments within the humanities but rather on the difference between the humanities and the natural or social sciences. We should not (by induction) search for the essence of the humanities, since the true line of division runs across the “disciplinary matrices” which “divides people busy conforming to well-understood criteria for making contributions to knowledge from people trying to expand their own moral imaginations”<sup>13</sup>. The same line divides the expert or the specialist

12 Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing. An Essay on Derrida”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press: 1982), 90-109, 92.

13 Richard Rorty, “The Humanistic Intellectual. Eleven Theses”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999). 127-130, 127.

focused on meticulously following the scientific protocol, convinced that only methodical activity may lead to establishing an objective truth, from the intellectual who does not believe in the objective, ahistorical root of the truth. An intellectual is defined here not as someone who takes part in the public debate presenting definite truths but as someone who reads various books not to be restricted to a single, reduced and inept jargon. An intellectual is opposed to the idea of expertise if the latter is to be understood as the use of language worked out by a particular discipline. An intellectual is not a specialist (and a specialist is not an intellectual), as the dream of a closed dictionary that motivates the actions of the specialist is in direct opposition to the intellectual's dream of endless broadening of the boundaries of one's existence with the help of new languages. Someone who dreams of reading all books from one discipline inhabits a different world from someone who dreams of reading as many various books as possible. The first one wants to close the circle of knowledge and seal it, the other – to open and poke holes in it. The specialist believes that all books in his or her discipline create a set that faithfully represents reality as their idea of their discipline (as well as the idea of any other specialist) is built upon the notion of adequacy. The intellectual supports no other discipline than the discipline of thinking in specific, highly concretized circumstances of life. The main goal and desire of the intellectual is to deregulate the dictionary of his or her own discipline and at the same time (this equation is important here) to broaden the limits of his or her own existence by other possibilities of being.

Do the human studies have a mission to fulfill? They do, Rorty says. It is not the transmission of knowledge (which would turn the intellectual into a specialist) but “stirring the kids up”<sup>14</sup> by “instilling doubt” and “stimulating imagination”<sup>15</sup>. Placing imagination over argumentation and intersubjective knowledge over objective truth allows Rorty to believe that the humanities are a community of people who believe that by reading various books we can “change the way we look at things”<sup>16</sup>. We read, Rorty says, not to broaden our knowledge (so that we now better “how things are”) but “in order to enlarge ourselves by enlarging our sensitivity and our imaginations”<sup>17</sup>.

14 Rorty, “The Humanistic”, 127.

15 Richard Rorty, “Education as Socialization and as Individualization”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 114-126, 118.

16 Richard Rorty, “Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies. Interview by E. Ragg”, in *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself. Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. E. Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 120-147, 122.

17 Rorty, “Worlds or Words Apart?”, 124.



### Autonomous Good

Although Stanley Fish refers to himself as a pragmatist, his views on the humanities differ radically from Rorty's. I will discuss them referring to Fish's *Will the Humanities Save Us?*, two texts published in The Opinion Pages of *The New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> Fish concentrates predominantly on the question of finding an external justification for humanities.

It is quite obvious what justification one cannot rely on. It cannot be argued that arts and humanities can survive on their own basing only on grants and private donations. It cannot be argued that the state's economy will gain anything from a new reading of *Hamlet*. It cannot be argued – well, it can, but with poor results – that a graduate who is well-versed in the history of Byzantine art will attract potential employers (unless the employer happens to be a museum).

Fish goes on to argue against the theses presented in Anthony Kronman's *Education's Eden. Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, where the author discusses the key role of the humanities in overcoming the “crisis of the spirit” brought about – an echo of Marquard – by the expansion of the scientific world view and – an echo of Nussbaum – by careerism. We must, Kronman says, turn to the humanities to “meet the need for meaning in an age of vast but pointless powers”. The task of the humanities is to reveal sense in a world that is devoid of it, create enclaves of sense in the wasteland. Fish completely rejects such reasoning, which means that he also disagrees with Marquard and Nussbaum, even with Rorty. Are human sciences ennobling? If reading literature was an ennobling act, the noblest individuals could be found in the corridors of literary departments, which – obviously – is quite unlikely. Do the humanities save us from the sense of meaninglessness?

The texts Kronman recommends [classical texts of Western civilization] are, as he says, concerned with the meaning of life; those who study them, however, come away not with a life newly made meaningful, but with a disciplinary knowledge newly enlarged.

This is Fish in a nutshell. The humanities do not make life better, do not compensate for anything, do not have any moral nor political mission to fulfill<sup>19</sup>. What do they do then?

18 Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?”, *New York Times* 6 January 2008, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/?_r=0)

19 He presents the same view in *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

They don't do anything, if by "do" is meant bringing about effects in the world. And if they do not bring about effects in the world, they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them.

Fish is very clear. Asked "of what use are the humanities?" he answers: none whatsoever. This is because the humanities are their own good, autonomous and unrelated to any external purpose.

This, of course, had to provoke a heated debate. There are 485 commentaries under Fish's entry, both harshly critical, accusing the author of a lack of faith (in the humanities), and eagerly agreeing with him. Since his opponents were in the majority, the author decided to restate his controversial view in more precise terms (controversial at least in the eyes of the NYT readers)<sup>20</sup>. Firstly, he says, the issue is not whether literature and art can change someone's life but whether university courses on literature and art can do it. If – Fish continues – they cannot (as the only thing that the students should learn is the technique of reading and writing about what they had read), then looking for a justification for the humanities outside the classroom is pointless.

All of this should not be taken to mean, as it was by some, that I am attacking the humanities or denigrating them or declaring them worthless. I am saying that the value of the humanities cannot be validated by some measure external to the obsessions that lead some (like me) to devote their working lives to them – measures like increased economic productivity or the fashioning of an informed citizen, or the sharpening of moral perceptions, or the lessening of prejudice and discrimination.

What is the use of the humanities according to Fish? There are two: studying literature and art allows for "moments of aesthetic wonder", and also gives hope that there are people in the world, maybe not far away, who can talk about something other than football at dinner.

This both is and is not a joke. The humanities, according to Fish, are a certain interpretative community that communicates using the same language, shares the same convictions about literature and art, and can express them using a similar idiom, but do not relate anything that literature and art have to offer, to the world directed by any kind of purposefulness. This community is based on the Kantian division of the faculties of judgment and defines the exceptionality of the humanities by appealing to the disinterested judgment

20 Stanley Fish "The Uses of Humanities: Part Two" 13. 01.2008, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/the-uses-of-the-humanities-part-two/>

of taste that – in Kant – excludes the application of moral categories relating to the practical reality. Fish seems to combine two Kantian faculties of the mind – speculative reason and aesthetic taste – with one goal, excluding morality: the humanities are to provide us with tools that will enable us to discuss things that are important to us and to those who are similar to us. Although Fish does not say this openly, he would probably say that the humanities need to be supported “because they simply do” as they are “their own good”. Needless to say, this argument is rarely used in the ongoing debate on the state of contemporary humanities, particularly by those who paid for their education.

### Legitimization

I agree with Nussbaum and Rorty (and I disagree with Fish): the humanities have a political significance. Not in the narrow sense but in the broadest one possible. The effects of studying the humanities are of consequence to the community where the studies are undertaken, regardless of the opinion of rectors, directors and ministers from various universities, departments of education, ministries, parties and cabinets. The problem lies in the difficulty of revealing the interdependency of the humanities and politics, and then justifying this connection. On the other hand, however, I also agree with Fish who leads a very intensive media campaign against turning university classrooms into cells of political propaganda. I will return to this point later on, after I attempt to explain how I understand the relationship of politics and the humanities.

As we all know, in the neoliberal society focused on maximizing profit, the university is a gain-producing factory. Money is invested mostly in scientific disciplines – abbreviated to bio-techno-info – that promise a quick return of the investment with a high rate of profit. On the “market of ideas”, as the field of university education has come to be described, those ideas win whose market application brings highest profits and that are easiest to program and control; among the losing ideas are the one whose chances to be “implemented” (a term also used in the social realism of the 70s), in other words, applied in various branches of economy, cannot be justified by anyone. The crisis of the humanities, resulting mostly from the state or private institutions cutting the expenses for their development, is in fact a crisis of legitimization, that is, the ability to convince the majority (the society and the politicians that represent it) by the minority (the academia within the humanities)<sup>21</sup>.

21 I would like to emphasize this point strongly: the crisis of legitimization is not a real event but a rhetorical or discursive one. The issue boils down not to how things are now but how they could change if the methods of argumentation changed. In fact, this is the crux of the mat-

In a neoliberal society, whether Polish or American, it is impossible to find a justification for anything that does not increase profits, and consequently it is impossible to justify the necessity for the protection of the humanities by assigning to them the status of a disinterested search for truth as it is most commonly done. It is impossible because their disinterestedness is a category rejected by the neoliberal society: what does not serve the social interest – in other words – does not increase profit (because that is how social interest is defined), will not find support in such a society. One cannot convince anyone to anything if the two sides use different languages. An agreement simply cannot be reached here, which can be clearly seen from the hopeless ruffling of feathers in the humanities, their representatives surprised that no one wants to finance their research on the medieval syntax of lost texts or the 18th century ode or elegy or what not. Neoliberal society has no wish to spend public money on useless things and it is right, except its being right (in accordance with the rules of neoliberal economy) opposes the argument of the humanities, based on entirely different principles that here – by definition – are on a losing position.

What solutions do we have then? There are a few. The first – lofty – one comes from the rather popular belief that one does not enter a debate with fools and the representatives of humanities should not soil their hands in the public space taken over by politics. The second, more pragmatic although also a pessimistic one, assumes that the war of the humanities and the market is inevitable and already lost by the first, and so we should be glad about having what we do, be thrifty with the scraps from the master's table and simply somehow try save ourselves in the hard times that have come. The third, utopian one, hopes that a wise statesman (Barack Obama, Donald Tusk) will step up as a generous donor whose intelligence and sensitivity will allow them to see the trouble of the humanities and who will let their representatives nurture, for good money, their incomprehensible and rather amusing – at least for everyone else – activities. All three solutions are based on the same premise: the world of politics contradicts the world of the academia. Or, more precisely, that the public space and the

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ter: the crisis of the humanities is a crisis of the means of their justification, in other words, of the institutional word game. Let us change the game and the reality will change. I have devoted to this matter my new book, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* [The Politics of Sensitivity. Introduction to Humanities], to be published as volume no. 100 of the *Horyzonty nowoczesności* [Horizons of modernity] series. I propose there my own vision of the humanities, but I am also fully aware of the insufficiency of this project for as long as it is not supported by other ones bearing similar message. We must enforce a new language of debate about the humanities, different from the language of confrontation with the natural sciences whose domination has put the humanities in insurmountable trouble.

academic space are inevitably divergent and there is no chance for a common ground. This belief becomes very clear when the generous donor (Obama, Tusk) reveals himself to be a simple entrepreneur looking after the interests of the rich or when the minimal external support becomes even more minimal.

### **Politicization Good and Bad**

The situation seems to be completely different when we remove the demarcation line dividing the public and the academic space, politics and the humanities, which is a difficult gesture, especially as the representatives of the humanities themselves are not interested in making it. However, when the boundaries are suspended and the academia begins to use the language of politics, the situation, paradoxically, does not change at all. Politicization of the academy assumes adopting the language of politics within its realm, in other words, adopting the rule of political interestedness normally applied outside. A head of the university who uses the language of neoliberal economy to justify budget cuts (i.e. supporting exact sciences at the cost of the humanities) and a professor who sees in the criticism of his feeble academic achievement an attack on their race or gender identity and demands a condemnation of the racist or sexist critics of his work, both use the same biased, political blackmail: a language that brings immediate advantage and at the same time excludes any discussion. The university head gets an alibi to assign resources in a way that brings profit, the professor keeps a prestigious position protected by the gender or race immunity that no one dares to touch not to be accused of discrimination. Politicization of the academy may – speaking emphatically – put a muzzle on it, or – speaking more euphemistically – restrict the freedom of academic debate that I hold to be the most important element of university culture.

However, the politicization of the academy does not have to entail its becoming partial; the political does not have to be partisan. I assume everything that happens in the public space (*polis*) to be political, and I understand the public sphere not so much as a defined, physical space accessible to everyone (a classical definition of public space such as a city square or park) but as a set of languages (discourses) defining the existence of a certain community. Everything that takes place in the public sphere has a linguistic character (even images in this space have their syntax and semantics) for the existence of the individual within the community is linguistically determined. Each of us uses several languages: we speak differently at home, with our family, differently at work (naturally, sometimes these languages overlap, to the detriment of both), differently on television and at the university. In each of these micro

spaces the languages are subject to further differentiation: we use a different language talking to our grandmother, a different one when talking to the grandchild, different ones at a conference and in the seminar room. Different language is used when we talk to a colleague about the rector's recent decision, and a different one when asking the rector to finance our research project. The ability of social adaptation relies on the ability to assimilate a foreign language, even if it is a language of everyday clothing or table manners. As can be seen, I understand language in a very broad context, as a set of signs using a syntax readable to others. When Michael Pollan says that "eating is a political act", he means not only that what we eat and how we eat is a testimony to our cultural identity (culture is thoroughly political) but also that a change in the paradigm of nutrition (for instance, reflecting on the life conditions of the farm animals that we eat) contributes to a reshaping of the social imaginarium. Jacques Derrida says that we enter the political each time we open our mouths by which he means that each act of speech is a certain social promise related not so much to the content of the utterance but to the attitude of the speaker (I shall speak the truth, I shall not lie etc.; of course this promise is frequently subject to manipulation possible only because the promise is taken seriously<sup>22</sup>). The sphere of the political is not a struggle of opposing partisan interests (right versus left, republicans versus democrats, liberals versus conservatives) but first and foremost the sphere of the social imaginarium or conceptions of the world that we share or disagree about. These conceptions do not exist hidden in the depths of our minds but are formulated in various languages that we use to define our position in a narrower (family, work) or broader world (continent, world). The fate of more specialized languages, for instance theoretical idioms used for the development of science, is also political. There are no politically neutral languages in the sense that each language, from the one we use to communicate with a baby to the language of nuclear physics, has its social dimension (both of these languages have something in common: they are incomprehensible to outsiders) and each is a different way to tame the world, to tear away another of its shrouds of incomprehensibility. Each is based on different assumptions regarding the nature of the world, the language used to describe this world, and the person using it. Those assumptions resurface in the form of different, finite varieties upon which language users build freely and rather instinctively aggregations

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22 The so-called "Sokal hoax" is the best example of such manipulation. It unfolded after Alan Sokal, a New York physicist, sent to the editors of *Social Text* a fake article entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries. Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", compiled from mismatched pieces of various discourses. See: Editors of "Lingua Franca", *The Sokal Hoax. The Sham that Shook Academy* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska, 2000).

known as community<sup>23</sup>. The difference between a religious community (regardless of its detailed characteristics) and a scientific community is that their language cannot be reconciled (the instances of priests who are also astrophysicists are not a counter-argument: professor Heller uses a different language writing about the Quakers and a different one writing about quarks), similarly as in the case of broad philosophical language where one cannot reconcile the language of analytical and hermeneutic philosophy, and in the realm of culinary language – the language of Polish and Thai cuisine (i.e. the languages by which a Polish and a Thai cook explain the meaning of what they do.) Richard Rorty refers to the languages that we use to explain the world as vocabularies. Since the day Wittgenstein provided serious proof for the lack of existence of private vocabularies (languages), it has been clear that each vocabulary functioning in a given culture has a political meaning, that is, it binds the community together. Philatelists use a different language than the cardiologists but they find a common one when they change the community and together cheer for the same football team. Changes of the local dictionaries are frequent and mean only that our social identities vary and they are determined by various idioms that we adapt for our own use. In fact, no one speaks one language and this multilingualism describes every person who functions in the public sphere. Those who shun it, moving away from a conversation with others toward their own, narrow private space, risk entering a sphere of complete incomprehensibility.

There are, however, attempts to thwart this multilingualism, to prevent the multiplication of incompatible languages in order to prevent the Babelic cataclysm (which, in fact is not a cataclysm but a metaphor of our everyday condition). Their aim is to close the used vocabularies, to declare that they constitute a finite explanation of reality or that they reflect reality in the most adequate way. These attempts are rooted in the primeval dream to return to the time when things were equal to words, when words matched objects perfectly and there was no space of deflection between them. Of course this dream of a perfect language entwining reality inevitably denigrates itself as a language identical to reality stops being a language, that is a tool created by man in order to deal with it somehow. Language is undoubtedly one of the elements of reality but it is not reality in its entirety, neither are our emotions and thoughts. But when language users begin to exclude languages based on other premises, convinced that their own speaks the truth about reality, or

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23 For me, personally, me, such a community, in other words, people that I would like to meet at a party, will consist rather of the enthusiasts of Monty Python than Alan Badiou, Seinfeld rather than Žižek, Larry David rather than Leo Strauss. To put it shortly, I prefer the community of comedians to the community of ontologists and political philosophers.

even that it is reality, the politicality of the language reveals itself very clearly. If someone believes that the Bible is a text providing answers to all possible questions, or proves that all metaphysical problems derive from a faulty use of language, or if someone says that Satan or America (or the Great American Satan) are responsible for all that is wrong with the world, they use a language excluding all others that describe the world differently or provide a different explanation. Curiously, in the last case one observes a surprising proximity of two languages one would never expect to be related: the language of radical evangelization and the language of radical left. Radical languages are not very different from one another.

### **Theses, Hypotheses, Prostheses**

Those simple explanations were meant to introduce a few similarly simple theses that form the basis for my *Polityka wrażliwości*, where I argue that the main task of the humanities is to reshape the social imagination, in other words, to influence what and how people think about the world. As it is a task normally ascribed to politics, I attempt to show that the task that the humanities set for themselves is thoroughly political. But it is not the goal of the humanities to convince people to this or other position, to this or other set of convictions. The humanities do not lean toward a particular element of the social imagination. They have an opposite task. The humanities show that there is no single vocabulary to explain the world, there is no single superior ideology (from the left or from the right side, or from the middle, or the polar ends) to rely on, there is no privileged set of symbolic representations more adequate than other sets. The humanities sensitize us to the fact that none of the popular vocabularies is finite and they can always be changed for other ones, more useful to our purposes, better reflecting not the reality (as no language reflects reality better than other ones) but our beliefs, our convictions, our dreams. I agree with Louis Menand who believes that “historical and theoretical knowledge, which is the kind of knowledge that liberal education disseminates”, (which also implies the humanities that lie at the core of liberal education,) reveals “the contingency and constructedness of present arrangements”<sup>24</sup>. The humanities make us aware of the relativity of what we do with the world and in this sense they are closest to ourselves, as fragile and accidental as the institutions we establish. It is also why they could take the place of basic sciences, as they take as their object not this or that (Romantic literature, cubist painting or the complement) but human existence in its diverse, more or less institutionalized manifestations. I say “could” as there is

<sup>24</sup> Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*, 56.



no one extraordinary place from where one should speak with one language about the human existence, because human existence can only be discussed in various ways, using various languages, from various perspectives, within various disciplines. Consequently, the humanities that I am trying to envision here are neither a separate science, nor a separate discipline, not even a meta-discipline and foundation for every other discipline (although such dreams have been resurfacing since their emergence). The humanities are only a certain *critical disposition*, by which I understand what Aristotle referred to as *hexis*, and Bourdieu as *habitus*: an attitude of the individual toward the surrounding world<sup>25</sup>. It is a critical disposition since they put the established vocabularies used by particular disciplines in a state of crisis (i.e. potential transformation), or instill doubt in the purity of each particular vocabulary serving as a basis for the separateness of particular disciplines<sup>26</sup>. The humanities are not an umbrella term for various disciplines (literary studies, philosophy, art history etc.) but their academic framework. This framework may be treated provisionally, as a certain taxonomic practice allowing for an easy structural division of a given institution (human sciences here, natural sciences there, social sciences elsewhere; of course this classical division has long been quite archaic, but that is a different story) but we can also approach the humanities as an unfinished project whose existence is necessary for us to be aware of what we do. Not only in the academia but in every sphere of public life.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

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25 See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *The Rules of Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1996); *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

26 Naturally, what opens here is the vast issue of interdisciplinarity. I am a strong opponent of the interdisciplinary confusion that does more harm than good but I cannot discuss it here in more detail. I have presented my views on the matter, among others, at the conference organized by the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Cracow: Interzones (June 2010).