

PROUD AND USELESS?
THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

Public perception of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) as a significant component of higher education is in decline, with funding of SSH research increasingly hard to secure. Recent high profile initiatives to counter this trend—such as the Vilnius Declaration—attempt to revitalize ‘soft sciences’ via indirect references to the framework of the Enlightenment: what is allegedly at stake is the betterment of society, or at least the alleviation of societies’ ills. However, in this paper we argue that such moves are counterproductive, as they marginalize SSH even further and reduce them to ‘maidservants’ of science and technology. Instead of trying to secure a place at the table of research grants, social science and humanities should re-think and re-classify their methods and disciplines. Given the current demarcation between SSH and natural and technical sciences as a cultural and historical construct, curricula should focus on alternative methods of organizing knowledge. Taking a clue from Emerging-Field Projects such as ELINAS at the University of Erlangen Nuernberg, the faculties of Humanities, Social Science, Medicine, Natural Science, and Engineering—among others—should design joint degrees. Those degrees should start at the undergraduate level in order to guaranty the dissemination of fundamental knowledge in these fields, and to provide a steady stream of capable students for graduate and postgraduate studies. Ideally, the artificial gulf between SSH and Natural Science would already be abandoned in primary and secondary education. In this paper, we are particularly interested in the historical and philosophical underpinnings of this possible paradigm change, which is increasingly being enforced by Natural Science’s success. Ironically, it appears that the hard sciences stimulate a renewed interest in the complex relationship between man, nature, and manmade artifacts, yet in doing so challenge SSH with problems whose discussion have traditionally been associated with Philosophy. In order to illustrate this point, our argument will particularly refer to ethics and aesthetics.

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