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The Humanities in the Eyes of the Humanists – From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day

Abstract
This article aims to trace the transformation, which the term “humanities” (“human sciences”) was subject to from the early modern era to modern times. Its scope is limited to an indication of some of the key turning points in the history of understanding of the humanities by the humanists themselves, and to an identification of key categories that define the humanities (they include: paideia, studia humanitatis, république des lettres, and Bildung). The arguments contained herein are to serve rather as a voice, a contribution to the debate over the “crisis of the humanities”, which has been conducted more and more intensively for at least several decades.

Keywords:
humanities, humanitas, studia humanitatis, paideia, Bildung, république des lettres

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to trace the transformation, which the term “humanities” (“human sciences”) was subject to from the early modern era to modern times. Naturally, due to the limited volume of a scientific article, this aim can be achieved here in the form of an outline. Its scope will therefore be limited to an indication of some of the key turning points in the history of understanding of the humanities by the humanists themselves, and to an identification of key categories that define the humanities (they include: paideia, studia humanitatis, république des lettres, and Bildung). I accept the assumption by which the humanities can be described in line with the concept of the longue durée proposed by representatives of the Annales school (Burke, 1990). It means that I will aim to demonstrate the endurance of the characteristics defining the humanities in the period from the Renaissance to (at least) the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas the nature of the argument presented in the article should be described as an attempt to outline the history of ideas, or rather the intellectual history of the humanities (Mandelbaum, 1965).

This article is not, however, purely descriptive, historical. The arguments contained herein are to serve rather as a voice, a contribution to the debate over the “crisis of the humanities”, which has been conducted more and more intensively for at least several decades (Brzeziński, 2002; Reinalter, Eder, 2011; Jay, 2014). To start with, I assume firstly that (1) the humanities from the second half of the twentieth century has undergone and still undergoes a number of changes (definitional, institutional, and substantive), and these changes are faster and more intense than in earlier periods of its development. Secondly, I accept that (2) changes in the shape and the nature of the humanities are related to a broader horizon of social transformations (economic and political ones), and should be regarded in such a perspective. Thirdly and finally, (3) I recognize the truth in the argumentation that the social transformations (assumption 2) have affected and continue to affect the transformation of the humanities (assumption 1) in a negative way, and cause a crisis of the humanities (more or less permanent). In this article, therefore, I accept the arguments proposed by, among others, Martin Heidegger (1977), Odo Marquard (1994), the representatives of the Frankfurt School (Adorno,

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2 The potential social (and cultural) history of the humanities would be most interesting, and in every respect a useful endeavour, but in this article I am not going to undertake such a task.

3 I deliberately do not touch upon, for example, the issue of the relationship between the humanities and the social sciences. The subject of the social sciences would make text too large.

4 This assumption is so obvious, at least on the basis of the humanities and social sciences, as to make it even trivial, but it is worth to reiterate it, at least pro forma.
Horkheimer), and in more recent times, for example: Richard Rorty (1999), Martha Nussbaum (2010), and Anthony Kronman (2008).

Therefore, the article does not contain a diachronic description of the history of the humanities in the last five hundred years; neither is it an analysis of relations between the humanities and the political and economic transformation, nor is it a complete argument devoted to the “crisis of the humanities”. Each of such research tasks deserves a separate discussion, and each of them would exceed numerously the volume of a standard article. This text is rather an attempt to identify several key concepts which determined the nature, objectives, functions and status of the humanities since the early modern times.

I share the belief that an understanding of what the humanities are today and what kind of difficulties they encounter, is impossible, or at least considerably more difficult, without the knowledge of their past. The humanities did not appear out of nowhere, yesterday or fifty years ago. I claim that a lot of criticism and objections formulated against them, most of which concern their “inadequacy”, “lack of practical applications”, or simply “lack of profitability” (Fish, 2008; Brzeziński, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010), stems from a misunderstanding (on the part of the parties formulating such objections) of the nature of the humanities, which in turn stems from ignorance of their past.

2. THE ANTIQUE ROOTS OF THE RENAISSANCE HUMANISTIC STUDIES

The concept of the humanities is derived from the Latin term humanitas, and its brief analysis will introduce my comments on humanists’ notions of the humanities in the last five years. A review of the origins and the semantic range of the term may have quite a significant impact on the understanding of the nature of the humanities as such, even today. The term humanitas was often used by Cicero – considered the actual creator as well as the theorist of the Roman “humanities”. In his letters, speeches and theoretical essays humanitas occurs 299 times, out of 463 instances of the word in all of the preserved Latin works originating in the classical period (Mayer, 1951). A slightly earlier than Cicero’s use of the term humanitas appears in the (formerly attributed to this thinker and politician) Rhetorica ad Herennium (approx. 86–82 BCE), as well as in Cesar’s Commentarii de bello gallico, although Cesar uses it (“cultus atque humanitas”) in the meaning closer to “civilisation”. Humanitas also appears repeatedly in the writings of such authors as Seneca the Younger, Pliny the Elder, Gellius.
The Latin humanitas has a number of meanings, the most important of include: “1. human nature, humanity; 2. nobility of customs, culture, civilization; 3. humanness to someone, kindness, gentleness; 4. education, manners, cultivation, refinement, aesthetic taste” (Pawlak, 2010, p. 168). In order to move closer towards the modern and contemporary understanding of “the humanities” (suggested by the 4th meaning), the interpretation of this Roman idea requires two conceptual additions. The first, a closer and philologically more direct one is the concept of studia humanitatis, the second one – an older Greek concept paideia (παιδεία).

The term studia humanitatis appears several times in Cicero’s works (mainly in the speech Pro Archia poeta) and is related to a specific program, or at least a teaching postulate directed at artes sermonicales, the art of words, i.e., poetics and rhetoric. According to W. Schadewaldt (1973), this is the way Cicero overcomes the conflict between (moral) philosophy and rhetoric (and sophistry), which was most conspicuous in the earlier Greek culture: “Cicero found in the humanitas a paramount concept, combining philosophy and rhetoric, which were in an intransigent dispute in the Greek world (...). It was only in the humanitas Romana form that the Greek, anthropological concept of culture became a timeless tradition and pillar of our Western civilization” (Schadewaldt, pp. 60–62).

Roman, Ciceronian humanitas and studia humanitatis were a result of translation, adaptation and elaboration of the Greek term paideia, translated into Latin as philanthropia, rather concerning the ethical values (virtus), as well as the humanitas, coupled with the intellectual values (doctrina). I will continue to study the intellectual aspect, therefore, I omit the arguments concerning the origin, meaning and the development of the concept of philanthropy (cf. Sinko, 1960; Chadwick, 1994). The idea of paideia appears in Greek literature in the works of Aeschylus, later in Aristophanes and Thucydides, and stands for comprehensive education (though rather understood as the German “Bildung”, the Polish “wykształcenie”, than just “instruction”, “education”), whose aim is to be shape the righteous, virtuous (arete) polis citizen. Given the nature of my subsequent arguments, I would like already at this point to strongly emphasize that paideia (and later the Roman studia humanitatis) was aimed not only at the “inculcation of knowledge”, but above all at equipping a young man with a set of traits along with Aristotelian dispositions, hexis (Markowski, 2011, p. 27), making him a rightful citizen. The leading Greek philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle sought the meaning of paideia in ethical values, although the emphasis on the acquisition and development of virtues (arete) was an expression of desire to supplement earlier postulates of physical (gymnastics) and aesthetic education (in the modern sense of the word).
Although not all modern scholars (e.g. Giustiniani, 1985) accept the identicalness of the Greek *paideia* and the Roman *humanitas* (even some Roman writers, for example Gellius, did not see them as identical), nevertheless, the relation between these two concepts is so strong and clear that together they can be regarded as the conceptual foundation of modern and contemporary humanities.

The revival of the idea of *studia humanitatis* is due to early Renaissance writers⁵ – they themselves ascribed it primarily to Petrarch, who, in 1333, copied and popularized Cicero’s *Pro Archia* speech, which I mentioned above. Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni (1369/1370–1444) claimed that this way Petrarch brought about the restoration of the idea of *studia humanitatis*: “(... quae iam extincta errat, reparavit”. In fact Bruni himself, as well as other Florentine humanists of that time, including Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), and especially the Neoplatonists: Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), recalled the ancient idea of *humanitas*, developed and propagated it in early modern Europe. Leonardo Bruni in the treatise *De studiis et litteris* formulated the following *studia humanitatis* programme: “Let your study be twofold, first in the skill of letters (*litterarum peritia*), not the vulgar and common kind, but one which is more diligent and penetrating, and in this I very much want you to excel; and second in the knowledge of those things which pertain to life and moral character (*mores*). Those two are therefore called the humanities (*studia humanitatis*), because they perfect and adorn a human being” (Bruni, 1912, p. 7). From that moment, the term “humanities”, in the form of the Renaissance “humanism”, begins to bear a closer resemblance to its contemporary meaning, by means of directly linking it to didactic and educational institutions and programmes. Whereas the term “humanist”, meaning person who practice *studia humanitatis*, appears approx. in 1480 (Kristeller, 1985).

One of the most important determinants of the Renaissance idea of *studia humanitatis*, which distinguished it from medieval models of (university) teaching, was a kind of reform of the approach to traditional *artes liberales*: with respect to the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, logic) it was postulated (1) to focus on the first two (grammar and rhetoric), (2) to reduce (or even remove) the role of logic (dialectics), and above all – to include poetry and history into the curriculum. According to Juliusz Domański, “humanists’ efforts aimed at restitution of poetry and historiography as the material developing other abilities than those which speculative philosophy and logic relied on. It was necessary to find arguments for the usefulness of didactic and educational poetry and history, and the humanists

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⁵ Although one might as well say: late medieval.
found them and used them to build their curricula and their model of culture, which opposed (…) the scholastic model” (Domański, 1999, p. 7). As a result, the Renaissance humanistic studies programme included: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy (Kristeller, 1985). The latter element, i.e., moral philosophy, should be considered as another, particularly important element of humanistic postulates: the traditional division into *trivium* and *quadrivium* was questioned and these disciplines of the humanities were henceforth to constitute a legitimacy for conducting advanced philosophical and even theological research. In the words of Paul Kristeller, one of the greatest experts on Renaissance humanism, “since the mid-sixteenth century, the impact of the humanities has expanded beyond the confines of the *studia humanitatis* and covered all areas of Renaissance culture, including philosophy and various sciences. It happened not only because of the recognized status of the humanities, but also because virtually every scholar, before earning a university degree in any other field, received an education in the humanities” (1985, p. 28). Humanists therefore were entering an area previously dominated by scholasticism – bringing it to an end. This trend is expressed most fully in the ideal of *homo universalis*: a universal man was to combine theoretical and practical knowledge, *techne* and *poesis*, simultaneously be an artist, a scientist, a moraliser. Plato and Aristotle were, in eyes of the Renaissance people, the most perfect examples of this ideal, and Leonardo da Vinci was considered a “universal man” of early modernity.

The matter of the relation of the Renaissance humanities and the tradition of the Church should also be mentioned. Contrary to frequent belief, humanism in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries was not an anti-Church, not to mention anti-Christian, movement, which should also be said about the Renaissance itself. Indeed, there was a strong secular version of it, in the form of the so-called civic humanism (Hankins, 2000) or the “bourgeois” one (Baron, 1955), which formed mainly in Italian republics (e.g., Florence, Venice, Pisa). Humanism, above all, sought to create a synthesis of the ancient and Christian traditions: the former was to somehow enrich and substantiate the latter. A kind of “fracture” of this idea occurred, however, at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, when humanity came into contact with the main wave of the Reformation movement. Only then the so-called distinguished form of Christian humanism (represented by the likes of Erasmus and Thomas More) emerged. Erasmus, particularly in the work under the significant title *Anticiceronianus*, expressed serious doubts concerning the admiration of the ancient culture and argued that “(…) *studia humanitatis* will deserve their name only when they will make a man not only better, but, more importantly, bring him closer to Christ” (Pawlak, 2010, p. 192).
Already Bruni, in his aforementioned treatise, postulated harmony between the “pagan” and the “Christian” theme, yet simultaneously criticized the theologians of his time, looking for role models among the so-called Fathers of the Church, i.e., late antiquity writers. Gradually, the discrepancy between *studia humanitatis* and *studia divinitatis* began to grow. Finally, the counter-reformation movement (with the Society of Jesus at the forefront) absorbed humanism for the benefit of their own education program, which prevailed in many countries in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

3. THE HUMANITIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In the era of the Enlightenment the significance and influence of the *studia humanitatis* category was gradually weakened. It happened under the influence of, among others, a dispute between the “Ancients” (Boileau, Racine) and the “Modern” (Perrault, Corneille) in French literature. Moreover, the previous domination of Latin as the *lingua franca* of intellectuals, which had been closely associated with *humanitas* and an extension of its Roman roots, was weakened by the French language. The third, least perceptible but arguably the most important reason for the disappearance (or at least a substantial transformation) of the Renaissance tradition of *studia humanitatis* is the phenomenon of the formation of a secular culture, as opposed to the earlier domination of the Church, dating back to the Middle Ages, in European political and intellectual life. As mentioned above, Renaissance humanism was based on a synthesis of trends in the Church, the Christian and the antique. Whereas, one of the long-term consequences of the Reformation movement was the advancing separation of secular culture from the ecclesiastic one: the French *philosophes* (including Voltaire, Diderot, d’Alambert, Rousseau) were predominantly hostile, or at least sceptical towards the tradition of the Church (mainly the Roman Catholic Church, but not only). Nevertheless, the Enlightenment upheld one of the very important characteristics of the *humanitas*: it emphasized the versatility of knowledge, with the fullest embodiment of it being the *Great Encyclopedia* project.

The most characteristic formation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ humanities, a kind of essence of the Enlightenment, was the république des lettres (*Republic of Letters, respublica litteraria*). It was an informal, voluntary

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6 And, of course, other social phenomena besides the Reformation, including the emergence of strong states based on absolute monarchy.
transnational association of scholars, often referred to simply as *les philosophes*. In 1664, a French philosopher and historian Pierre Bayle began to publish a magazine entitled “Nouvelles de la République des Lettres” – thus introducing this concept into the French language (formerly functioning in Latin). Membership in the “republic” was not conditional on religion, political beliefs or material status, but only on a passion for knowledge and a proficiency in its practice: “the Republic of Letters was the very centre of the public sphere in which private persons learned to use their reason publicly” (Goodman, 1996, pp. 14–15). The constitutive element maintaining the literary republic were: (1) conversation (Burke, 1993; Craveri, 2005), (2) correspondence, and (3) the press. The scholars debated passionately, not necessarily within the framework of the university: the place where the republic operated most intensively were the so-called salons (literary, philosophical), cafés and the aristocratic, princely and royal courts (though the latter only in case of the “enlightened” monarchs). Salon is a French invention. It was the place where *politesse* was cultivated (a word basically untranslatable into other languages), that is an eloquent, witty discussion largely on literature, philosophy and politics. Salons created an opportunity to exchange views and often served as catalysts of the opposition to the government (secular and spiritual) and to the existing social order; they would also influence the rise and fall of artistic and moral trends. Cafés played a similar role (mainly in the UK), although they were much more egalitarian than the aristocratic salons, which only sporadically operated in middle-class houses. On the other hand, some rulers (e.g., the King of Prussia Frederick II, and the Polish king Stanisław August Poniatowski) hosted groups of scholars and writers on their courts, who were allowed to voice their ideas because of a genuine scientific interest, and also for entertainment, but only as a last resort – in order to improve the state structures.

In addition to conversation, the scholars gathered in the *republic of letters* cultivated the epistolary art. The letter, also as a literary form, allowed for an exchange of views on an international and intercontinental level, therefore, beside the printing press, it is considered the medium which most strongly stimulated the development of modern science, including the humanities in the Western world (Goodman, 1996, p. 19; Burke, 2012). The press played a role in many respects similar to the letter: scientific, literary, or political journals were “open letters”, with the recipients, unlike an addressee of a letter, being numerous (Darnton, 1989).

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7 The participation in the “salon” life became, in France and later in most European countries, an indicator of belonging to the nobility, instead of the former determinant – the armed struggle (it resulted from the centralization of states based on absolute monarchy). More on salons and their social function has been written by Benedetta Craveri (2005).
The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also a period in which the stage of intellectual life of Europe was entered by a new actor: the natural sciences (although they were not yet called this way). The scientific revolution begun by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo continued and achieved success expressed in the creation of new, independent scientific disciplines: medicine\(^8\) (Jenner, Bell), physics (Newton, Franklin, Volta) and astronomy (Halley, Herschel), chemistry (Lavoisier), biology (Buffon). It should be noted that these two domains of theoretical knowledge, which until the mid-nineteenth century began to be viewed as separate and called “natural sciences” and “the humanities”, remained basically inseparable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What they had in common, and also what distinguished them from the Renaissance humanism, was a critical or even a negative attitude towards the scholastic tradition of the Church. However, the domains of “nature” and “society” (or rather, as it was then called, “humanity”, *l’Humanité*) were not contraposed to each other, and in this sense the *humanitas* tradition was continued during the Enlightenment.

In parallel to the process of the formation of the secular humanities, an equally important process of its “scientification” was taking place. So far, antique and Renaissance understanding of *studia humanitatis* allowed for a very broad interpretation of the concept of *humanitas*, which still contained a strongly marked ethical aspect: humanism was not only an educational proposition – in today’s sense of the term – but mostly an attitude, a worldview postulating achieving the fullness of humanity by improving the soul, the body, and the mind in accordance with the Renaissance idea of *homo universalis*. As we have seen, the early modern understanding of the humanities referred to the ancient traditions, Roman and Greek, strongly enough that *humanitas* was still synonymous with *philanthropy*. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the topic of ethics continues to be raised and considered, but the postulate of shaping the mind (intellect) comes to the fore at the expense of the postulate of shaping the soul, whereas the postulate of shaping the body basically disappears. The Enlightenment ideal of a humanist gradually becomes the ideal of “an intellectual”, a polyhistor, represented by

\[^8\] Medicine should be regarded as the first of the natural sciences which in the early modern period (XV–XVI century) started to become separate from the influence of Church doctrine. Autopsies conducted by Leonardo, Vesalius’ anatomic boards or Harvey’s cardiological experiments were one of the consequences of the obsession with the human body, characteristic of the Renaissance humanists. The sixteenth century, and even more so the seventeenth century, were in fact “the age of medicine”: anatomical theatres and public dissections (*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt) define the nature of this era just as much as Michelangelo’s most “anatomical” frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.
a long line of thinkers from Descartes, Hume, and Voltaire, to Kant and Hegel. Whereas the semantic range of humanitas undergoes a significant division (though not a simple reduction): the “humanism” emerges, humanismus, understood as a secular worldview, synonymous with philanthropy (thus humanism is understood today). However, thereby a specifically scientific, theoretical, speculative character of the humanities emerges and, during the nineteenth century, obtains autonomy as a science of “the humanities”.

This does not in any way mean that the ethical or worldview element was then displaced from the humanities – on the contrary. I assume that it is this axiological element, sustained, but also transformed since antiquity, which is one of the definitional features of the humanities. The humanities differ from the natural sciences in such a way, that in the case of the former ones the so-called cognitive interests remain, at least declaratively, in close relationship with the social interests, including ethical, and also political ones. Heinrich Rickert in this context used the term Wertbeziehung, “a reference to the value”, which will be discussed in the next section of the article.

4. BILDUNG AND THE GERMAN HUMANITIES

The axiological dimension of the humanities, emphasized here by me, gained its complete dimension in the early nineteenth century, owing to the German scholars, and due to the German Humboldtian type of university, with the idea of Bildung. Germany in the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century remained (with few exceptions) on the sidelines of European intellectual life – in that period, admittedly, there was a group of outstanding German musicians, but philosophy, history, and natural sciences of the Enlightenment were dominated by the French and, to a lesser extent, the British. However, the second half of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century were, especially in the humanities, marked with an overwhelming dominance of

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9 That type of the Enlightenment polyhistor demonstrates the unity, or at least the proximity, of humanities and natural sciences present at the time: Pascal, as a religious thinker, is also a mathematician and an outstanding physicist; Descartes is the author of works on geometry (and an amateur anatomist); the works of Kant include treatises devoted to the formation of planets (i.e., the theory of Kant–Laplace). Hegel, perhaps the last of the great minds of Europe, attempted to embrace with his system the whole of human knowledge, including natural science, although it should be admitted that his arguments on, e.g., geology, are of low merit.

10 Bach and his sons, Buxtehude, Schütz, Telemann, Gluck, etc.
German scientists. It was them (namely Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Dilthey) who led to the methodological independence of the humanities, to their full “methodological self-awareness”. How did this happen?

At the end of the eighteenth century, the representatives of the German Enlightenment – especially Goethe, Lichtenberg, Schiller, and Wieland – are influenced by the traditionally understood humanism, seen as a method of self-improvement and acquiring comprehensive knowledge of the world. However, they introduce two new and important forms of humanistic education: Bildungsroman, “novel of formation” (e.g., Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship by Goethe), and promoting the practice of young people going on an educational journey, mainly to Italy (Goethe’s stay in Italy, in the years 1786 to 1788, is the best example, and later, until the mid-nineteenth century, it was replicated by young people from other European countries). All this, however, remained outside the scientific, academic humanities, although it must be emphasized that the slightly later German institutionalized humanities eagerly drew upon those patterns.

However, the turning point for the German humanities, and consequently, for the global humanities, was the French Revolution\textsuperscript{11} and the resulting Napoleonic wars. Prussia and other German states were humiliated by Napoleon in 1806, not only in the military and purely political dimension, but also in terms of the worldview. Under the influence of these events, the German national consciousness started to emerge (which is not the subject of this argument, though) along with a number of artistic, intellectual and scientific initiatives aiming to create a separate, German “cultural way”, able to resist the domination of the French culture. Of course, I omit the political and economic aspects of this phenomenon. In 1813, at the time the ongoing war against the Napoleonic France, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte ostentatiously interrupted his lectures and began to call young people to take up armed combat. It was the most direct demonstration of such tendency, however, there also were more subtle examples, e.g., the theory of the origin of language and its impact on the social reality, proposed by Johann Gottfried Herder as an alternative and a challenge to the Enlightenment – therefore French, universalist and ahistorical linguistic concept. However, the establishment of the university in Berlin, in 1809\textsuperscript{12}, at the request of Wilhelm von Humboldt and according to his design, was an especially important event.

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\textsuperscript{11} Regardless of the extreme – negative or positive – assessment of the French Revolution, it was in every respect a groundbreaking event for the European social reality in general.

\textsuperscript{12} In fact, the teaching and research activity commenced at the university a year later.
The confrontation with French culture also lay at the root of the idea of Humboldtian University. The revolution led to a complete transformation of the education system in France – in 1794, the famous École Polytechnique was established, and École Normale Supérieure a year later, whose main task was to school the political elite. Napoleon as a dictator did not care for humanists – he needed efficient admirers, clerks and engineers, therefore French universities and polytechnics became highly practical for many years to come. Humboldt, to the contrary, intended to create an educational system based on the ideals of ancient studia humanitatis, but significantly enlarged and transformed into a particular, German ideal of Bildung.

Bildung is another key term, after paideia, humanitas and république des lettres, for understanding the essence of the humanities. First of all, Bildung is not a synonym of “education” and cannot be reduced to it. In the German language, the equivalent of the English word “education” is basically unused, Bildung is the word which serves the purpose, along with related words, for example: the allgemeinbildung adjective – “general forming”. I deliberately try to outline here, and even exacerbate later, the opposition between “education” and “Bildung”; it is because I assume that the latter is the basis of the humanities – there are no humanities without this particular worldview form deriving from the Roman humanitas. The same principle applies to the Polish distinction between the word “education” and “forming” ("kształcenie"), where the latter is (although not literally) the equivalent of the German “Bildung”. The aim of the humanities – at least in the dimension of teaching and learning – is not just the transfer of information (education), but also shaping attitudes towards values (forming). Achieving practical objectives (technical and operational) is not one of such aims. The lack of understanding of this fundamental difference leads, in my opinion, to the formulation of a series of unfair allegations against the humanities, and to a crisis. I will return to this issue later.

The education reform proposed and implemented by Humboldt included many solutions used today and treated as obvious, e.g., the division of education levels (primary, secondary and higher) or the introduction of the academic/school year. Humboldt considered mathematics, philology and philosophy to be elementary disciplines of knowledge for each stage of education, and it should be noted that

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13 Thus, during the Revolution and First Empire so many outstanding representatives of natural sciences and mathematics worked in France (Laplace, Monge, Carnot, Ampère, Lamarck, Berthollet, et al.). Similarly outstanding representatives of the humanities were to be in France no sooner than in times of Durkheim, Michelet and Renan, and even then the country went a slightly different path, in the form of the “social sciences” proposed by Comte.
the last two fall within the scope of classical humanities. Of course, Humboldt did not invent and nor did he introduce all these reforms by himself. The group of the Northern European education reformers also included, among others, the distinguished educators Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Johann Vollbending, as well as already cited Johann G. Fichte, the first rector of the Berlin university, who happened to argue with Humboldt in regard to determining the extent to which the state should have an impact on the activities of the university. Fichte advocated state intervention, while Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher were strongly opposed to the idea.14

The paramount category, bringing together all the elements of Humboldtian university, was Bildung. The term itself was introduced into German (or rather the althochdeutsch at the time) by the Rhein mystic master Eckhart (Meister Eckhart) in the fourteenth century. Interestingly, there is no clear equivalent in English: most often translated as “self-formation”, “self-perfection”, or “self-cultivation” (Bohlin, 2008). Henrik Bohlin tries to define Bildung as “(...a word which in its most literal sense means formation, but which here refers more specifically to formation or cultivation, in education or otherwise, of human moral virtues and other capacities” (2008, p. 3). It is difficult to ascertain a clear semantic boundary between “Bildung” and “education”. Perhaps “education” has a broader scope and stands for any process of learning and teaching, whereas “Bildung” also includes (1) a strong moral and worldview element and (2) is clearly related to the European (or at least continental) tradition of the humanities. According to Humboldt, it means “(...) the highest and most harmonious development of Man’s powers to a complete and consistent whole” (1993, p. 10). In one of his early essays (from the years 1793 to 1794), he describes education as “the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay, (...) the interplay between his [man’s] receptivity and his self-activity” (2000, pp. 58–60). A similar, though more abstract concept of education was also presented by Georg W.F. Hegel.

In practice, the university activity based on these principles consisted in realizing the postulate of unity of teaching and learning (Einheit von Lehre und Wissenschaft). “This has, according to Humboldt, (...) the good effect that learning becomes more independent from the state, which likes to support immediate needs, not demonstrating too much interest in the basics of science, and thus their devel-

14 Humboldt and Schleiermacher’s view was somewhat close to the idea of the society’s university: the activity of the university was to be financed by the “people” for whom it was supposed to work. In practice, however, the maintenance of the Humboldt-type universities was financed by the state.
development in the future” (Sauerland, 2008, p. 30). Consequently, Humboldt wrote: “the university teacher is therefore no longer a teacher and the student no longer someone merely engaged in the learning process but a person who undertakes his own research, while the professor directs his research and supports him in it” (1906–36, p. 261). Whereas the conditions that foster the activity of the university staff were to be loneliness (today we would rather say, control over one’s own time), freedom and co-operation without a clear goal and coercion.

As it turned out, the Humboldtian type of university was an ideal environment for modern humanities. It is also not surprising that – as already mentioned – the German humanities, anchored in such an institution and referring to the abovementioned ideals, achieved such spectacular success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of course, not all of Humboldt’s and other reformers’ ideas were implemented. Karol Sauerland writes: “(...) it should be emphasized that freedom in teaching and research according to one’s own design were carried out properly only within the Faculty of Philosophy, it was so a much lesser extent at the Law Faculty, and barely a minimum at Medicine, not to mention the Faculty of Theology”, but he also stresses that “the authorities did not return to the former practice of preparing the students to a narrowly understood profession as quickly as possible. The French model, introduced by Napoleon, which consisted mostly of effectiveness, was not introduced either” (p. 33). It was Humboldt’s unquestionable success, and also a trend that led to the full autonomy of the humanities, not only in an institutional but also substantive and methodological regards.

The aim of formation (Bildung) was not to inculcate students with practical knowledge in accordance with an a priori designed, strictly followed curriculum. The Humanities Faculties – philosophical, philological, historical, etc. – were not confused with “vocational schools”; the employees of these departments realised their research and teaching practice at their discretion, not according to arbitrarily designated “syllabi”; the students did not pursue an imposed program, but fitted it to their needs and interests, in cooperation with the lecturers. Schleiermacher expressed doubts as to whether the medical school should form part of Humboldtian University, since its purpose was merely to convey specific skills rather than knowledge (Erkenntnis).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the process of autonomization of the humanities reached its zenith. With a solid institutional grounding, the humanists began to demand methodological autonomy for the humanities, which was expressed with a postulate of making the humanities a “science” equal to the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). Until then, the humanities and natural sciences remained essentially united. The German word Wissenschaft was origi-
nally neutral and meant in general any scientific and theoretical knowledge (as opposed to practical knowledge)\textsuperscript{15}. It was only within the first half of the nineteenth century the distinction between \textit{Geisteswissenschaften} (today’s humanities) and \textit{Naturwissenschaften} was made. It is a pity that modern English is in this respect less flexible and applies the word \textit{science}, in principle, only to the natural sciences.

The natural sciences, also undergoing an extraordinary boom, was then completely dominated by the positivist methodology (naturalistic, essentialist). What is more, in accordance with the postulates formulated by, among others, John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte, the humanities also were to be cultivated according to the same, naturalist rules. Naturalism may be defined, after Roy Bhaskar, as follows: “naturalism may be defined as the thesis that there is (or can be) an essential unity of method between the natural and the social sciences. It must be immediately distinguished from two species of it: reductionism, which asserts that there is an actual identity of subject-matter as well; and scientism, which denies that there are any significant differences in the methods appropriate to studying social and natural objects” (1998, p. 2). In the second half of the nineteenth century, thus understood naturalism-positivism was criticized by the German philosophers and historians, mainly Wilhelm Dilthey, Johann G. Droysen, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Windelband.

Dilthey came up with the postulate of distinguishing the disciplines implementing the function of explaining (\textit{Erklären}), i.e., the natural sciences (\textit{Naturwissenschaften}), from the disciplines implementing the function of understanding (\textit{Verstehen}), which were called – as it was then defined under Hegel’s influence – “the science of the spirit” (\textit{Geisteswissenschaften}), i.e., the humanities or social sciences. Disciplines based on the understanding were to include: history, political economy, the science of law and state, religious studies, literary studies, theory of visual arts and music, philosophy (Dilthey, 2004, p. 20). They were supposed to be linked by a phenomenalistic assumption, according to which the subjects of these disciplines were attainable not as external “facts”, but only through “experience” (i.e., the act of understanding, which in turn is the main subject of hermeneutics). Thus, while in the natural sciences, the facts are established in the process of cognition (consisting in clarification), then in the humanities, according to Dilthey, a “spiritual object” arises as a result of understanding. Today we would say that the subjects of the humanities belong to the socio-cultural reality, not the physical one. The understanding function of science was to enable the “emancipation” of

\textsuperscript{15} This way, for example, the concept was yet used by Fichte, when he wrote his \textit{Wissenschaftslehre} (\textit{The Science of Knowledge}).
the sciences of the spirit and their establishment as a legitimate branch of scientific knowledge, independent of the natural sciences. Analogously, Droysen appealed to distinguish the disciplines of natural science and history.

Rickert and Windelband in particular, continuing Dilthey’s proposals, consolidated the anti-naturalistic turn, seeking the specificity and the autonomy of the humanities – with history at the forefront – in the “relation to the value” (*Wertbeziehung*). However, Rickert described the values in an objectivist (universalist) way, as accepted and recognized by all the community, though self-contained and independent of it in cognitive and ontological terms. He sought justification for autonomy and methodological specificity of history in the objective status of the values (and culture itself). On the other hand, Windelband, a representative of the neo-Kantian Baden school, chose a slightly different direction to determine the character of the humanities. In contrast to Dilthey’s phenomenological and psychological criteria, he began by indicating the significant similarity shared by the humanities, maths, and logic: unlike the natural sciences they do not require the knowledge of experimental data, therefore they do not involve the participation of the senses. However, the Diltheyan division was, in his opinion, imperfect as it did not include the case of psychology (the subject of which is, admittedly, a man, yet it draws upon the research methods of the natural sciences). Therefore, Windelband proposed that the criterion should not be the subject, but cognitive objectives and methodology. He performed the division into nomothetic and idiographic sciences, where the former would serve to describe the laws of nature and that which was universal, while the latter – the (social) facts and that which was detailed (Windelband, 1992). The idiographic sciences (identified with Diltheyan humanities) focus on specific subjective phenomena, variable and unique (e.g., historical events); while nomothetic sciences deal with what is repeating, general, predictable, and governed by rules (regularities).

When Windelband presented this proposal during his inauguration at the office of the rector, in 1894, the humanities reached their zenith. Besides Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps no humanist had suspected then that a global crisis was slowly approaching. In a few decades the humanists’ optimism was to be irreversibly compromised: it would turn out that the civilized, rational and progressive *Homo* is able to burn another *Homo* in the oven only because the latter was “different”.
5. CONSEQUENCES AND CONCLUSIONS

Just as the French Revolution earlier, so the Second World War proved to be the turning point for many aspects of the socio-cultural reality in Europe – also for science and the humanities in particular. The German humanities suffered a deep crisis: in the thirties of the twentieth century, many scholars either migrated out of fear of the Nazi authorities’ repression, or (to a lesser or greater degree) supported the Nazi ideology. The first half of the previous century was also the period of the greatest triumphs of natural science, especially physics: it was the era of the atom, aviation and telecommunications. Finally, during this period the clash of great ideological systems took place: fascism and Nazism, communism and liberal democracy, the latter two emerged victorious from this contest, however, consequently the “cold war” began between opposing camps, differing ideologically, politically and economically. These three main factors: (1) the war and the Holocaust with the questionable “achievements” of the Nazis, (2) the spread of technology and the industrialization of everyday life signifying success of the natural sciences, and (3) the influence of powerful ideologies, had a huge impact on the self-awareness of the humanities.

In the middle of the century the impact of these three factors was reflected in, among others, the dramatic question posed by Emmanuel Levinas: how is philosophy possible (or, more broadly, the humanities) after the Holocaust? Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, representatives of the Frankfurt School, recognised the failure of the ideas of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and modernism. Similar, though slightly differently worded, doubts were expressed by Martin Heidegger, who recalled the question asked by the romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin: “what good is a poet at the poor time?” (2004). Heidegger, in the late period of his philosophical activity, also saw the potential risks arising from the twentieth century’s dominant role of technology, which presented a serious threat to culture, art, and philosophy. His view was shared by, e.g., Odo Marquard, Herbert Marcuse, Neil Postman, and Erich Fromm. The problem was sought not so much in the advancement of technology, but mainly in its impact on the social structure, on the aesthetic sensitivity, on the so-called high culture, superseded by mass culture.

With the German humanities in crisis, the French humanists came to the fore once again (in the fifties and sixties), representing new trends: existentialism, personalism, deconstructionism, and widely understood postmodernism. With

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16 Adorno argued, similarly to Levinas, that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Nach Auschwitz noch ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch).
respect to the first two (existentialism and personalism), it is hardly doubtful whether these trends represented (or represent) a continuation and a development of the pre-war humanities. Jean-Paul Sartre stated directly that “existentialism is humanism” (2007).

However, in the case of post-structuralism and postmodernism the matter is not that obvious. It should, therefore, be remembered that at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a division formed between humanism as an ideological trend – generally secular and certainly modernist, and the humanities. Of course, they were not contradictory, but not every man sharing the values of humanism must be a representative of the humanities. The poststructuralists and postmodernists challenged the traditional, modern model of a man as animal rationale. The categories of “human nature”, “progress”, or “objective truth” were called into question or rejected. The principle of the domination of reason (logocentrism) was undermined, the Cartesian psychophysical dualism was discarded, the legitimacy of building Hegelian type of knowledge systems was also questioned. The model of a man – anthropocentric, rationalist and chronically optimistic – became obsolete, though not without resistance. The more modern proposals, such as post-humanism, sealed the fate of the modern vision of Homo.

Are postmodernism and post-structuralism still “the humanities”? I will not attempt to present a definitive answer and justification of the issue at this point, however, I do believe so. If the basic feature of the humanities was to be their subject matter, meaning “human”, then undermining the traditional concept of a man would eliminate these and similar trends from the sphere of humanities. But is truly the subject, the “man”, the distinguishing characteristic of the humanities? I think that – despite appearances – it is not so. After all, “man” is also the subject of natural sciences (medicine, biology, physiology, physical anthropology, etc.). Perhaps a different set of features that define the humanities should be sought. They rather are, in my opinion, the objectives and the postulates than the subject matter. Among the objectives and postulates I would most of all mention the ideal of formation (Bildung), which natural sciences can do without – the humanities cannot. Secondly, the distinguishing feature of the humanities is their social impact, not in their technological and utilitarian dimension. The humanities are alive when they fulfil a formative function (not necessarily ideological). And thirdly, the humanities do not bring similar benefits to those which come from the technology and natural sciences (that is – measurable ones). Therefore, in my opinion, with such assumptions, it is not just existentialism or personalism, but also post-structuralism and postmodernism that may be considered as contemporary trends in the humanities.
However, the views of existentialists, deconstructuralists and other French (and not only) humanists encountered significant, multi-faceted resistance. First, they were accused of “not being scientific”. “This is not science” – this opinion was (and still is) repeated numerous times with reference to Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Ankersmit and many others. The English term science appears to have been appropriated by the natural sciences as though the findings of Dilthey, Win­delband and Rickert suddenly ceased to apply. This demonstrates that very little or nothing remains of the former unity of the natural sciences and the humanities. Indeed, the humanities (including the contemporary ones) are not a science based on physical description, examining the facts that constitute nature and revealing the laws that govern it. Nevertheless, this does not mean it is not science at all. Yet the achievements of contemporary humanists have often been challenged, ridiculed and accused of “inadequacy”. The famous provocation by Alan Sokal, in 1996, was somewhat funny, but it also attested to the harsh arrogance and ignorance on the part of some representatives of the “scientific world” towards humanists, in this case – the postmodernists 17. The very concept of “an intellectual”, being of a French provenance, has de facto been degraded and ridiculed by – however pitiful it may be to acknowledge – the English-speaking scientists. The dominance of the English-speaking countries on the western side of the “Iron Curtain” was disturbingly often expressed in the world of science: the Anglo-Saxon science reduced the arts in continental Europe to a secondary, tertiary role, denying its scientific character, while the Anglo-Saxon model of free market capitalism put its viability into question 18.

Furthermore, the problem of “bad press”, burdening the arts after World War II, has an economic dimension. Since the humanities ceased to be (allegedly) science, then – a thought arises – maybe they do not require the financial and administrative support from public institutions, to such an extent as the solid and predictable natural sciences do. The allegation that the humanities are unscientific has been appended with the charge of inadequacy. The neoliberal doctrine, especially the

17 It is tempting to compare unfairly critical opinions on the humanities with similar views on contemporary art. The works by Malevich, Rothko, and Bacon are often considered “incomprehensible” or “meaningless” (i.e., they are not “real” works of art but “daubery”), although their meaning is quite comprehensible to anyone who has at least basic knowledge of the history of European art.

18 Perhaps in this case the consequences of colonial and post-colonial relations in modern science should be taken into account, especially the relations between the so-called Anglo-Saxon and the mainland sciences. Moreover, the matter of perception of science in the so-called “new Europe” countries could be a very interesting research subject of the discipline.
free market, appears to have very little sympathy for such research activity that does not bring tangible, countable (and computable) benefits.

As I have tried to indicate earlier, however, this objection not only disputes but actually invalidates the whole of the humanities, as their basic, fundamental feature is the detachment from practical, technical and operational benefits. Their task (in the didactic dimension) is not to develop technological benefits, but to form personality and worldview of the involved subjects; similarly (in the dimension of research practices), their goal is not to construct the proverbial “light bulb”, but to understand (Verstehen) the social and historical processes that shape cultural reality. Unfortunately, from the perspective of the natural sciences, such categories as “understanding”, “history”, and “culture” are considered semantically empty and therefore unnecessary, while from the perspective of the free market they are of no particular value. The humanities, however, as Martha Nussbaum writes, are a non-profit venture; or we should rather say the profits coming from the humanities should not be confused with economic or technological profits.

In my view, the crisis of the humanities, whose circumstances I described above in a most summary form, is a result of the lack of understanding. This also applies to the humanists themselves, who often are not able to determine their own identity and, consequently, more or less intentionally forfeit some of its postulates, for example the Humboldtian ideal of the unity of teaching and learning. Then, I think, the humanities deprived of the Bildung function effectively becomes useless – they lose its basis. Whereas the republic of letters changes from an association of scholars into a circle of “officers”, carrying out their futile research, devoid of any impact on the society. Failure to understand the humanities, their goals, strengths and limitations, pertains not only to the humanists themselves, but also (perhaps above all) to scientists from other, non-humanities disciplines, as well as to politicians. And through this they are experiencing a crisis. According to Paul Jay (2014), the contemporary humanities are in such condition, but according to the researcher it is not new nor particularly disturbing. Indeed, he argues that the humanities always were in a state of permanent crisis, which became their peculiar modus vivendi.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the humanities did not appear yesterday, or fifty years ago. They have not always functioned in the same manner – at least since the sixteenth century – but they had, however, a certain set of characteristics defining it. The humanities in the form of studia humanitatis, république des lettres, Bildung, or even the antique paideia, have always been characterized by the fact that “man” has been its subject; many natural sciences also have the same subject. The humanities were characterized by the fact that
they (1) postulated the ideal of education as a comprehensive development of competencies, both social and individual; (2) placed themselves in direct relation with the social reality, i.e., not just describing it, but also influencing it; (3) did not offer practical solutions (technical and utilitarian) nor direct material benefits (economic, financial, technological, etc.). It can be argued whether the humanities are essential for democracy – as Martha Nussbaum suggests, or perhaps the contrary – as postulated by Richard Rorty – democracy is essential for the humanities. I believe that these two values are mutually and inextricably linked, and the crisis of democracy is dependent on the crisis of the humanities.

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