



## **A bright/bleak future for the humanities and social sciences**

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The future for the humanities and social sciences is both bright *and* bleak.

It is bright because today's societies require the kind of knowledge and understanding that the humanities and social sciences have to offer. Take the accelerating pace of technological progress and its effect on, for instance, health care; anything but a mere technical topic. For instance: should everyone have access to new, but very expensive treatments? If yes, how can we afford this? If no, how to decide who gets treated? What is ethical, or legal? Would high levels of health-inequality influence how our democracy functions? What does history teach us here? Researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds increasingly find each other and work together to address such vexing questions.

A project I'm involved in, for example, examines the debate about European integration in which protagonists of an EU that concentrates on free markets and trade are pitted against those who consider the EU viable only if its social policies are extended. To further this debate scientifically and societally, a multidisciplinary group of researchers work on a series of fundamental questions. For example: what are the normative underpinnings of social justice in the EU? How has the relationship between free markets and social protection developed historically? What is the politics behind it? And how is the relationship shaped legally?

Working and exchanging views with researchers from different disciplines, such as in this project, but also in my own VIDI-project on HIGH-RISK POLITICS and at meetings of The Young Academy of the KNAW, has always been highly inspirational and rewarding for me. Such cooperation has become much easier, not least because of technological developments. In this sense, the times for scholars in the humanities and social sciences *are* fortuitous. Add to this the unbelievable increase in all sorts of data – from digitalized ancient manuscripts to politicians' tweets –, and new or drastically improved ways to examine these data, and we have an exciting future in which to address countless novel research questions.

At the same time, the future for the humanities and social sciences is bleak. In 2015, the Japanese minister of education for instance ordered 60 national universities 'to abolish organisations [in the humanities and/or social sciences] or to convert them to serve areas that *better meet society's needs*'.<sup>i</sup> 26 universities initially obliged by stating they would either close their faculties or scale them back. After critique, the Japanese government softened its stance. While closure was no longer required, the humanities and social sciences were not safe either.<sup>ii</sup> Also in 2015, the US federal budget for the social sciences was cut by 45%, despite an overall increase in this budget. And the National Science Foundation decided to fund research in political science – my core discipline – only if it benefits national security or economic interests.<sup>iii</sup> Closer to home, the new cabinet will examine more strictly teaching program's effectiveness [*doelmatigheid*] to cut back ± €180, which mainly influences programs in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>iv</sup>

Key political figures and funding agencies thus seem to consider the humanities and social sciences – at least partly – dispensable. Is it possible to turn these tides?

Honestly, I don't know. We know from motivated reasoning, a theory from psychology, that when people have formed a belief – like the humanities and social sciences being dispensable –, changing it is hard. People take in information fitting this belief, while ignoring conflicting information. Changing a belief is hard, but it is not im-

possible. People will adjust their belief when the evidence against it becomes overwhelming. So, let's work on that. This means that we need to think of ways to better demonstrate the relevance of findings in the humanities and social sciences, be they of a more curiosity-driven nature or a more applied one. And to place on people's radar the importance of the fundamental questions these domains can ask and answer. For this, we need to join forces and work together; even more than we do already. We need to help each other to flourish, both in multidisciplinary projects and in mono-disciplinary ones. We need to synergize.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/social-sciences-and-humanities-faculties-close-japan-after-ministerial-intervention> (6 November 2017, emphasis in quote added).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160122155338974> (13 November 2017).

<sup>iii</sup> See e.g., <http://www.cossa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Volume-32-Issue-6.pdf> (13 November 2017). See for a discussion e.g. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/10/why-congress-should-not-cut-funding-to-the-social-sciences/?utm\\_term=.a13ab9e82b00](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/10/why-congress-should-not-cut-funding-to-the-social-sciences/?utm_term=.a13ab9e82b00) (6 November 2017).

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.scienceguide.nl/201710/rutte-iii-houdt-vast-aan-prestatiebekostiging.aspx> (9 November 2017).