

RED AND WHITE. DRAFTING A VISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN A NEW CENTURY

Lietuvos humanitarinių mokslų Raudonoji knyga [The Red Book of the Humanities in Lithuania]. Mantas Adomėnas, Vytautas Ališauskas, Rimvydas Petrauskas, Nerija Putinaitė ir Mantas Tamošaitis. Vilnius: Petro ofsetas, 2019, 96 p.

The Red Book of the Humanities in Lithuania is authored by prominent scholars in the Lithuanian humanities: the parliamentarian and classical philologist Mantas Adomėnas, the philosopher and cultural historian Vytautas Ališauskas, the dean of Vilnius University's history faculty and recipient of the 2020 Lithuanian science prize Rimvydas Petrauskas, the cultural historian and former deputy minister of education and science Nerija Putinaitė, and the Vilnius University classical philology student Mantas Tamošaitis. It endeavors to consider the condition of humanities scholarship in Lithuania and its mission in the 21st century in the face of local and global challenges.

By naming the book the way they do the authors ironically associate it with the genre of the white book, inspired by international reflection on the state of the humanities (as exemplified by *The Humanities in Norway*) and also with the uncertainty inherent to scholars in the humanities and arising from the marginalization of the classical humanities in the current academic and social world. A defensive discourse, on the one hand, and projections of a proactive role of the humanities in the contemporary world, on the other, alternate each other throughout this book. The volume consists of considerations about the nature and mission of the humanities; a review of the current situation and of future challenges; an evaluation of the role of the humanities in education and culture; and practical recommendations.

In line with tradition, the authors stress the otherness of the humanities among other academic disciplines and emphasize their concentration on the creation and interpretation of human meanings. The humanities appear to be the furthest away from the experimental natural sciences and the social sciences using quantitative

methods. In view of their multiple perspectives and their evaluative and normative nature they get close to the practice of the arts and culture without losing the qualities of logicity, justification, verification, and falsification required of sciences. According to the authors, the humanities are oriented toward the process, the fostering of critical, interpretative discourse rather than the final result; they are based not on the paradigm of “scientific progress” but on the constant reinterpretation of tradition.

It must be acknowledged that such a conception of the humanities does not embrace all the disciplines usually held to belong to the humanities and the arts (fields of research and development [FORD], *Frascati Manual 2015*: 59),¹ but only their speculative nucleus embracing philosophy, history, and the scholarly study of literature, the arts, and religion. Linguistics, archaeology, some theories of literature, and borderfields such as sociology of literature or psychology of art would not fit into this paradigm.

The authors boldly discuss the problematic relationship of the humanities to the field of Lithuanian studies, or of studies of Lithuanian culture. They assert that Lithuanian studies are part of the general field of the humanities, but in Lithuania the humanities are commonly identified with Lithuanian studies. Since scholars of Lithuanian studies have secured for themselves strong legal protection,² the concept of Lithuanian studies is used as a shield for the humanities in general for the purpose of getting the attention of state institutions. This tactic exacts a price not only in terms of risking a politization of the humanities but also of narrowing the horizon of research and reinforcing the insecure situation of the humanities in the local academic ecosystem and their alienation from international academic discourse.

While not denying the importance of the humanities for the national community, the authors throw light on the broader, universal, or fundamental value of the humanities in revealing the world’s human reality as informed by the quest for truth, goodness, and beauty; in creating a democratic political community based on an ever newly interpreted cultural canon and in transmitting its multifarious identity; in generating social solidarity and empathy; and in promoting and fostering society’s power of critical reflection.

It is difficult not to agree with this apologia for the humanities. But an objective appraisal would require recognizing that these social functions are also served by some of the social sciences such as jurisprudence or political science, the practice of art, the media and perhaps above all a broadly conceived institute of education.

¹ In this book the authors cite the older FOS classification.

² The Third Paragraph of the Law on Science and Studies states that “the state accords strategic priority to Lithuanian research and studies concerned with essential tasks of preserving, strengthening, and developing the national identity. Scholarly and research institutions involved in implementing this priority are held to be engaged in work of strategic importance.”

Even though they distance themselves from questions about the pragmatic value of the humanities, the authors nevertheless respond to the by no means novel effort of grasping the contribution that the humanities make to economics. This involves intellectual property ownership of works of art and science; creative industries; inspirations of the humanities for the purpose of cultural tourism; the teaching of transferable skills in schools; and finally the creation of symbolic value (brands, reputations) and of demand for cultural products. In the authors' view, these practical benefits of the humanities are supplemented by reflection on the limits and the social significance of other scholarly pursuits and by educating an elite class of cultural intellectuals.

In the relevant passages the boundary between sciences (academic disciplines) and social practice is treated very liberally, with the results of the professional activities of creators of art, of cultural workers, and of teachers being counted among the achievements of the humanities, though on a closer look these results are not necessarily connected with the cultivation of the humanities in academia. The economic concept of a value chain might eventually help in more critically assessing the contribution of the humanities properly so-called.

Reviewing the situation of the humanities in Lithuania, the authors call attention to a certain paradox: on the one hand, during the last three decades of national independence, the Lithuanian humanities experienced a real flowering; on the other, they have not quite reached "a high qualitative level of academic interests and standards." In recent years a certain flagging of academic discourse, a regress of university-level studies in humanities has made itself felt, while public space still resounds with claims about the "uselessness" of the humanities.

These obstacles to the development of the humanities are connected in the authors' view to a formalist system of evaluating scientific and scholarly results, in which quantitative criteria allegedly predominate and the international aspect is overemphasized; and to the way scholarly work is financed according to projects, a way that is unsuitable for fundamental works in the humanities; and finally to the exaggerated orientation of the whole policy of research toward economics, which allegedly leaves no space for the natural cultural functions of the humanities.

In such a diagnosis of the condition the humanities find themselves in one might complain of a lack of precision. Without denying the overabundant growth of a bureaucracy of science and the economic approach taken by the official research policy, a question might be raised about the extent of the effect these factors have. The science policy instruments mentioned and a research policy oriented towards technological innovation are not specifically Lithuanian phenomena but are common to many other states as well as international organizations. And yet the quality of the humanities in those states varies quite markedly.

It would be hard to deny that the humanities, or rather Lithuanian studies, occupy a privileged position in the Lithuanian academic world. As the authors themselves note, humanities disciplines are taught, researched, or cultivated in some other way in 14 universities and four colleges, four independent research institutes, 15 state museums, 9 state archives, universities of applied sciences and more than 60 academic and public libraries. Compare that to just three institutes for the social sciences, with the total number of scholars working in these three equal to just one for the humanities.

Is such a broad system of institutions in a relatively small community (according to the authors, with about 500 scholars working full time³ and several tens of mostly non-reviewed and largely non-read academic journals) more conducive to bringing about a variety to discourse in the humanities, or on the contrary to the degradation of quality standards? The authors mention this dilemma without taking a clear position on it.

It should be mentioned that the humanities, the representatives of which make up nearly 15 percent of the national scholarly community and their students account for five percent of all students in Lithuania's institutions of higher education, receive 11 percent of the Lithuanian state budget for scholarly research and experimental development (compared to the social sciences, constituting 22 percent of the community and 43 percent of students, and 15 percent of financing from the state budget)⁴. Research in Lithuanian studies constitutes a large part of the programmatic financing by the *Research Council of Lithuania* in the portion allocated for supporting the social sciences and the humanities.⁵ Isn't this the reason why Lithuanian humanities scholars do not strive to take part in the much more competitive Horizon 2020 calls for proposals by the European Research Council?

However, the monetary expression of that solid financing of the humanities during the last five years is only about 25 million euros per year, and that points to a more fundamental reason for the problems that the humanities face: general financing of the sciences and higher education in Lithuania is woefully low. But this aspect of Lithuanian science policy is something the authors of *The Red Book of the Humanities in Lithuania* stay away from.

They also could have looked more critically at those who “form science policy,” a phantom that justifies the rules by which the humanities are evaluated and

³ The authors are citing figures from 2017 published by the Research Council of Lithuania. For 2018, the Lithuanian Department of Statistics shows 907 contract researchers (including those lacking an academic degree).

⁴ Data derived from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, the Education Administration Management information system and the Budget of the Republic of Lithuania assignments to scientific research, experimental development, and artistic activity in 2018.

⁵ Several years ago it was determined that in the period from 2009 to 2015 research in Lithuanian studies (predominant in the humanities) received 84 percent of the funding from the Lithuanian Research Council allocated for the humanities and social sciences.

that pushes them into a nether region of the academic world allegedly subservient to economics. An influential center of the Lithuanian bureaucracy of science is the Lithuanian Research Council, whose committee for the humanities and social sciences has been led by representatives of the humanities since the council's founding. Throughout its more than ten years of existence this organ of scholars' self-rule hasn't initiated any essential change in the way the humanities are evaluated; on the contrary, it has supported the search for an incremental balance of quantitative and qualitative methods of evaluation as well as the instilling of the principles of peer review and of evaluation by international experts. And Lithuanian universities, enjoying the constitutionally guaranteed security of academic autonomy, find it very difficult to initiate broad programs of interdepartmental studies based on the liberal arts. Hence it might be useful to acknowledge how differences in epistemological attitudes (or in the interests of academic disciplinary groups) lead to the prevalence of rules inconvenient for the classical humanities.

Again looking beyond the confines of the Lithuanian humanities the authors review twelve of the most important future challenges to Western societies for dealing with which a contribution from the humanities is necessary. These challenges are 1. globalization, 2. the fragmentation of communal identity, 3. new global conflicts, 4. structural changes in the human world due to increasing longevity and the changing nature of work and social communication, 5. the fragility of social institutions, 6. the inertia of social mentality, 7. the excessive abundance of information, 8. robotization and artificial intelligence, 9. information wars, 10. fake news, 11. the crisis of democracy, and 12. the withering of civilizational standards.

To meet these challenges the humanities offer the powers of critical reflection, the actualization of the cultural tradition, the ability to initiate an ethical dialogue between different communities, to raise questions concerning the meaning and value of life, concerning truth and human identity, to integrate a world view fractured by surplus information, to fashion a new conception of progress, to suggest new criteria for progress, to increase openness to the unknown. To the wave of new nationalisms the authors oppose the actualization of Lithuanian European identity, charge workers in the humanities with the mission to invest democracy with a new positive meaning and to strengthen the public political and moral space understood in a Western way, and express nostalgia for humanist civilization.

This ambitious program for the role of the humanities naturally raises the question *how* – how when implementing it should programmes of higher education and of general education be constructed? How should the humanities interact with public space, the media, and public policy, and in academic research with disciplines in other fields? For obviously neither the contemporary social environment nor the transformational effect of new technologies present things the humanists

can master by themselves without using the input of social researchers and of technology developers. This *how* question is answered by the authors only in part. In the appropriate sections of the book they reflect on the role of the humanities in Lithuanian schools, but only those providing general education (and not university studies, vocational education and training and continuing education throughout the life cycle); and the way the humanities relate to cultural policy, but not to the media and public governance.

At the beginning of the section on the humanities in general education the following fundamental questions are raised: what meanings and contents of culture should the school transmit; how should it form the pupils' capacity to critically analyze and interpret things; and how should the "humanist progress" of the pupils be evaluated? But later critical attention is focused on separate educational subjects, such as history, languages and literatures, the arts, moral education, and others. The critiques are rather superficial, sometimes to the point of stunningly simple-minded generalizations (for example, "the teaching of history nowadays is largely reduced to memorization"). There is no attempt to look at ongoing conceptual discussions about the renewal of current programs of education in Lithuania and their international context. From the perspective of an earlier section about the humanities and global challenges to society it would seem to be necessary to ask what the input of the humanities could and should be to the transformation of the whole system of education as it faces radical technological and social change.⁶

The authors of the Red Book postulate a normative and constitutive role for the humanities in culture: the humanities not only investigate culture as their object and in creating cultural artefacts themselves become part of culture (this seems undeniable) but they also determine the place and value of cultural phenomena in the field of culture; they are a bridge between a changing reality and the field of culture; and they safeguard the autonomy of the cultural field.

The last three claims would probably be disputed by some cultural actors, theorists of culture and "ordinary" citizens. Are cultural values really determined in academic discourse but not in the varied field of social practice (not excluding the humanities but also not limiting oneself to them)? Is the interpretative connection between culture and reality (what is "reality"?) kept up (only) by the academic disciplines, or by cultural criticism, institutions of memory, and artistic creativity as well? How important for determining the limits of the cultural field is scholarly discourse – as opposed to, or in addition to, the attitudes of decision makers and various groups of influencers?

⁶ For example, *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030*, <http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>, *UNESCO Futures of Education*, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/>.

Here again we would appreciate a more precise differentiation of cultural research and reflection from its practice which can and often does take place outside the purview of academic scholarship (it suffices to recall virtual reality, the humanist reflection of which, to put it moderately, is lagging in Lithuania). But without a doubt we can agree that a proactive contribution of the humanist (and social) sciences to culture would be very useful.

The Red Book concludes with nearly 40 practical recommendations devoted to strengthening the community of humanities scholars, the practical applications of the humanities, their infrastructure, their international nature and institutions, their relations with Lithuanian studies, a more ambitious vision for the humanities and their role in schools and cultural policy.

Some of these recommendations are very concrete (to establish the priority of the qualitative evaluation of publications in the humanities, to create motivations for writing critical notices/academic reviews, to legalize museums and libraries as humanities research centers, to assure open access in the internet for scholarly works created using public funds), while some of the others are rather declarative (to support the participation of Lithuanian researchers in international scholarly undertakings, to foster institutional cooperation, to simplify administrative procedures, “to recognize the humanities in legal and other documents,” “to recognize the expertise the humanities can provide for the cultural field”). The effectiveness of these recommendations might have been heightened by a clearer identification of the addressee and their connection with a specific process of scholarly policy.

The Red Book of the Humanities in Lithuania is a meaningful attempt to summarize the current situation of the academic humanities and to look at them in a broader social and cultural context and from a global perspective. It reflects the field of tension in which the human disciplines now find themselves as they collide with the transformations the academic world is undergoing and with society’s global changes. The book also does a good job of covering efforts to reinvigorate the classical roles of the academic humanities in critical intellectual discourse, education, and culture. Less successful is the effort to bring out the opportunities the humanists have for innovative multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary activities, in the course of which they join researchers from other disciplines in creating solutions for concrete social and technological problems.⁷

⁷ For example, efforts to conceptualize the part played by values, identities, metaphors, and narratives in contemporary political processes, see *Understanding our political nature. How to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre. Brussels, 2019; efforts to evaluate comprehensively the effect of radical technologies on future societies, see Linturi, Risto and Osmo Kuusi. *Societal Transformation 2018–2037: 100 anticipated radical technologies, 20 regimes, case Finland. Publication of the Committee for the Future*, 2018, nr. 10. Helsinki, 2019, 197–203.

One would like to hope that in anticipation of Lithuanian parliamentary elections this fall, when it comes to modeling long-term strategies for the development of local and international scholarship and society, this book may become an impulse for the renewal of the humanities in Lithuania.

LITERATURE

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