

ON THE HUMANITIES FOR THE HUMANITIES

Kirtiklis, Kęstas, ir Gedutis, Aldis. *Tarp vertės ir poveikio: apie tikrą ir tariamą humanitarinių mokslų krizę ir jos įveikos būdus* [*Between Value and Impact: On the Real and the Imaginary Crisis in the Humanities and the Ways to Overcome It*]. Vilnius: Jonas ir Jokūbas, 2020, 375 p.¹

*Might it be that society hasn't lost interest in the humanities, but Lithuania's humanities are not able to respond to it?*²

As the monograph that raises the question of the value and impact of the humanities, trying to get a meta-glance on this seemingly confined field, at first it does not seem to get out of this confinement. To some extent it recalls this usual isolation and self-centered approach, so commonly criticized as being stuck in an ivory tower. Might this book be read by general society? Will it have societal impact? Does it have value? Humanities' scholars complain that nobody is interested in their work, but might it be that they are simply not interesting? These are not only questions raised by this book, but also questions worth asking about that book itself.

¹ Interesting note on the role of language, both of the monograph (Lithuanian) and this review (English) – it illustrates perfectly the contemporary tension of the humanities in the context of reception and research evaluation. It is usual in the humanities, as compared with other academic disciplines, to publish in the national language or a language other than English. The monograph follows this tradition, the grounding of which might be partly explained using the arguments of Lithuanian humanities' scholars described in the monograph: that is, first, the humanities are national in essence, because they deal with language and culture, very local phenomena, impossible to generalize internationally (a statement with which, it might be argued, the authors of the monograph would not fully agree, basing much of their analysis on internationally oriented literature), and second, the main audience, probably, are Lithuanian humanities scholars. And then, entering international discussion, both because of an international audience interested in this kind of material and research evaluation challenges forcing to publish internationally (that is usually equated to “in English”), comes this review, creating an ironic situation of communication.

² Galgi visuomenė humanitarinio intereso nėra praradusi ir tik Lietuvos humanitariniai mokslai nėra pajėgūs jo atliepti? (p. 187).

This monograph is interesting. The authors already have experience and published material in the philosophy of science and on the value of the humanities, not to mention a decent amount of presentations for various audiences in the humanities and social sciences. They already have captured the attention of fellow academics, mine too. But I have to admit – I am not capable of looking at it from the perspective of an outsider, as a representative of the lay public. My insights are based on the experience of being a part (or at least a close neighbor) of this ivory tower of academics in the social sciences and the humanities. And this is also the basis of the perception that this monograph is interesting, especially if the reader such as me comes from discourse analysis and the sociology of science.

That's also the reason why the authors seem to me (the first critical point) to withhold their own clear position in these wars of value and impact. They elaborate a bit on that in their introduction (see the chapter called "Instead of the introduction. Wondering about the humanities" ["Vietoje įvado. Nuostaba dėl humanitarinių mokslų"]) and their conclusions (see the chapter "Instead of conclusions. Instead of a manifesto" ["Vietoje išvadų. Vietoje manifesto"]) and have shown it in their critical rhetoric towards the Lithuanian humanities in their public presentations, carefully stating in one of them that yes, we are a part of this world of Lithuania's humanities. But which part? Clearly not the dominant one. But while certain hidden positions might be captured in their writing, the authors manage to get away as neutral observers, as if this book were not a part of the whole debate on value and impact.

It is.

The monograph's worth comes not so much from the arguments for the value of the humanities (they can be found both in 4.4 chapter of the book "The value of the humanities: looking for the 'sixth' argument" [Humanitarinių mokslų vertė: "šeštojo" argumento paieškos] and in the English summary on pp. 368-369, and might be useful for those in the humanities who want to have a list to feel more self-confident) or from proposals in the area of impact, but from the possibility to see the *discourse* of the academic humanities community – that's what might spark the interest of fellow academics specializing in issues of sociology and philosophy of science or higher education studies.

The most interesting discoveries about this discourse in my opinion are the following:

1. The crisis in the humanities is not universal; representatives of some countries' humanities fields do not perceive it (for example, those in Australia, Japan, and Germany), as this is clearly summarized on pp. 92-93.
2. Great attention in Lithuanian humanities' discourse is devoted to the goal of stability of the nation-state, especially stressing the nationalistic aspect both from a cultural and a political perspective.

3. An interesting distinction is made between concepts of value and impact that enables a much deeper interpretation and understanding of the humanities' position within society without narrowing it to the concepts defined by science policy.
4. Quite interesting is the stress on communication vs. worth/value/impact issues at the end of the monograph stating that one of the main problems in (Lithuania's) humanities is that humanities scholars are timid and do not know how to communicate with the contemporary world (p. 333) and that the solution here would be that well-known activity in the humanities called translation—not only to and from foreign languages, but from the humanities' language to a language that people from other fields and general society would understand.
5. There are differences between Lithuanian and Anglo-Saxon³ discussions of the value of the humanities. The book starts with the puzzling observation that there was no reception of Martha Nussbaum's manifesto "Not for Profit" in the Lithuanian humanities' field: are Lithuanian and international discourses on the situation of the humanities that different? It seems that yes, they are. To stress a few aspects of the Lithuanian humanities' discourse:
 - almost no attention is paid to current social challenges such as migration, new technologies, or the rise of populism in the world's democracies;
 - there's not so much about democracy as about the protection of the national state;
 - there's very small concern with impact (this might be because of the general non-existence in Lithuanian academy of impact discourse that has pushed its way through research evaluation in UK and other countries where societal impact criteria were actively introduced).

The book is relatively easy and interesting to read, especially after rather technical summaries of definitions of the humanities. It is a necessary part, without a doubt, but it would be a bit more intriguing with a social-constructionist approach without taking the "humanities" as an object in reality and/or an administrative classification, but more as a phenomenon in discourse – how it is defined by the authors they discuss. For example, consider the concept of the *Numanities*⁴, which was left out of the monograph – aren't these the main object of the critique of such

³ Anglo-Saxon because most of the analysis is based on English-language literature; thus it would be too loose just to say "foreign." Maybe international? The authors themselves agree with this limitation and try to cover it (a bit superficially, but it's enough to get some general picture of the variety) in Chapter 3.

⁴ In the monograph p. 40: *Numanities* as the new humanities, "applying new methods and / or interdisciplinary approaches while solving contemporary problems of society and sciences". [*Numanities – tai naujų metodų ir / ar tarpdisciplininių priėgų taikymas sprendžiant aktualias visuomenės ir mokslų problemas.*"]

important figures in discourse as Donald Trump? If it is an important part of the “crisis in the humanities” discourse, it does not matter if it matches the “real” definition of the humanities.

The first dimension of the critique is about the methodological approach. This kind of analysis is very common in the humanities, and very hard to tolerate from the perspective of the social sciences. So, you’ve read some books, pamphlets, and articles, and have sat down and extracted the main points with your “logical intuition”? No no no, that’s not how it’s done. Oh, yes, unless you come from philosophy.

So as a sociologist, for starters, I want more numbers. If you say there are fewer students and fewer study programmes, and there’s less funding, please provide figures. How many students do the humanities get nowadays? How many institutes and full-time staff do the humanities have and how did that change? How many euros are distributed for research in the humanities as compared with other disciplines? How many books and journal articles do they publish in the humanities?

A fair counter-point would be: this is not an analysis of the objective situation, we do not claim that, we claim to talk about *discussions* of the humanities, their real or imaginary crisis. That is said on p. 77: “the perception of a potential crisis in the humanities of one or another country says no less than would a summary of empirical facts.” [“<...> galimos krizės suvokimas apie vienos ar kitos pasaulio šalies humanitarinius mokslus pasako ne mažiau nei empirinių faktų sąvadas.”] I agree – this is a very interesting approach. It is what I would call *discourse analysis*. Still, questions from social sciences research do arise: what is the methodology behind that? How did you choose sources to analyze? Why these books and not others? Why these authors and not others? What kind of analytical lense do you apply to analyze them? And again – numbers: how often are certain value arguments mentioned by different scholars and in different disciplines? How many mentions of the humanities are there in the mass media? How many facebook likes do the main figures in the Lithuanian humanities get? How many scholars of the Lithuanian humanities as compared with other disciplines are seen in activities outside the university? Is it (from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives) an issue of the impact of the humanities in particular or of the sciences in general?

Another important omission from the social sciences perspective – social contexts and structures – is that the ideas on the “crisis of the humanities” discussed and analyzed in the monograph seem to occur in a social vacuum. The first mention of social context and formal regulations appears only on p. 57. And as a discourse researcher I simply cannot accept that. What are the positions of thinkers in the humanities to claim what they claim? What are the structural conditions that

enable them to have a voice in this discourse, to be heard? Is it their individual and personal opinions, or is it the discourse they reproduce?

And again, what is the methodological grounding of this discourse analysis? Do you take those texts as objective manifestations of reality, or as expressions of opinion, or as certain social constructions of reality? Additional confusion is caused by one of the statements in the conclusions: "... our lived world is the world of the crisis of the humanities" ["<...> mūsų gyvenamasis pasaulis visgi yra humanitarinių mokslų krizės pasaulis"] (p. 329), as though the authors would claim to have researched the objective situation of the crisis.

And then, this question: so is the crisis real or imaginary? Probably this is not the main question in the monograph (although it is in the title), but you might after all say yes, we do not think that this discourse represents reality and we do not wish to see the reality, we wish to see the discourse. But I wish you would state that clearly, as your methodological position.

Of course, for representatives of the humanities (philosophy) all this critique of their methodological approach might be forgiven. Authors with this monograph "play" in another epistemological tradition than mine and I accept that (they even made a clever choice of reviewers for publication). After looking at their extensive literature list I think their discourse is well covered, the scope of material taken into account is big enough and arguments have quite strong grounding in that material, so this discourse analysis is convincing.

There are many places where a potential reader would want to ask, Why is this or that excluded? Interesting additions and digressions might have been made: from the history of the humanities to ideas from higher education studies about contemporary turmoils; from a sociological structural analysis of humanities institutes to exciting insights that came in presentations of their yet unpublished statements⁵; from specifications of details in the texts of certain authors mentioned to general discoveries in philosophy and sociology of science (for example, where is Thomas Kuhn?). However, the authors of the monograph definitely have a lot more knowledge and have analyzed much more than they provided. Obviously, you cannot put everything in one book. It might be guessed that the orientation towards the most probable audience (scholars in the humanities?) limited the inclusion of some possibly interesting thoughts (especially for those from sociological studies of science). Also this illustrates the huge relevance and potential of the topic analyzed, for you

⁵ One especially interesting part from one public presentation of their analysis was when they asked humanities scholars to write down their answer to the following query: if they had a million euros of research money from the national funding agency, how would they spend it? Their most salient reaction was: how dare you ask this kind of question! We are the humanities, we do not talk about money! While, as the authors of the monograph correctly note, any member of the STEM fields already has a clear answer to this kind of question.

would not want to resist the authors' interpretations and mention all the other possibilities to look at the problem if it weren't interesting and didn't capture attention.

In conclusion, it is mostly a mirror-like book for those who are in the humanities, so it wouldn't be a wonder and a problem if it were read only by those in academia. This monograph definitely joins in, and adds up to, a general discussion of the humanities, value, impact, neoliberalism, and research evaluation; and moves this discussion further at least in the Lithuanian humanities' context. So, answering the question on the impact and value of this monograph I would cite the last words of the monograph itself as a judgment on the impact of the humanities: it makes you think.